● WEB EXCLUSIVE
Read your 'Merry Christmas' emails carefully. They may have hidden messages. — *By Rohan Banerjee* **Log on to www.indianexpress.com**

● WORDLY WISE
The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it.
— *Elaine Scarry*

The Indian EXPRESS
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IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Inflation is low, but don't take eye off the ball

INDIA'S HEADLINE inflation rate rose by 0.7 per cent in November. In other words, the overall price level in the economy rose by less than a per cent this November when compared to where it was 12 months ago. By itself, this confirms what the Governor of Reserve Bank said in the recent monetary policy review: That inflation at "a benign 2.2 per cent" (for the full year) and growth at 8.0 per cent in the first half of the current financial year "present a rare goldilocks period" for the economy. While the November number is low, it was a modest increase over the inflation rate in October. But the turnaround is not entirely surprising since inflation hit a record low of 0.3 per cent in October. Nor can the uptick be necessarily called a rebound since the move is too small and that too over just one month.

The low November print has been part of the larger disinflation trend. In October 2024 India's inflation rate was 6.21 per cent; higher than the RBI's comfort zone of 2-6 per cent. But since then, there has been an almost secular decline in the inflation rate — disinflation — barring two instances (August and November) when the inflation rate moved up. The fall has been so substantial that in the second quarter of the current financial year (July, August and September), the average headline inflation for a quarter came in at 1.7 per cent — lower than the RBI's comfort zone. In fact, this is the first time since the adoption of the flexible inflation targeting regime in August 2016 that the lower bound of the RBI's comfort zone has been breached.

Policymakers would do well to keep their eyes peeled for changes in underlying factors that determine headline inflation. There is a difference between headline inflation and core inflation (that is, inflation after the effect of food and fuel items is removed). The bulk of the disinflationary trend is because of a sharp collapse in food prices. Food inflation was almost 10 per cent in October last year but it has been in negative territory since June this year. Since food items account for almost 50 per cent of the weight in calculating retail inflation, the deflation in food prices moves the headline number quite substantially in either direction. If one takes away food prices, core inflation has actually been trending up over the past year and stands at 4.3 per cent — from 0.7 per cent. While gold is a key culprit for this divergence, it underscores how policymakers cannot take their eyes off the ball.

NHRC order on death in custody is welcome

THE NATIONAL Human Rights Commission's (NHRC) directive to the Uttar Pradesh government to pay Rs 10 lakh to the family of a 36-year-old man who died in police custody in 2021 marks a welcome reaffirmation of the inviolability of human dignity and the imperative of accountability. That this order arrives against a backdrop of systemic failures makes it all the more resonant: According to official data, between 2020 and 2022, over 4,400 custodial (judicial and police) deaths were recorded nationwide, with UP accounting for 952 of them. In September 2023, the Gujarat State Law Commission flagged increasing incidents of custodial death in the state as "a matter of great public concern". The Status of Policing in India Report 2025, released in March this year, showed an approval for coercive action among a sizeable percentage of police personnel, based on surveys of 8,276 officers across 17 states/UTs. The NHRC's verdict sends a much-needed, if belated, signal that institutional abdications cannot hide behind bureaucratic obfuscation.

Established in 1993 under the Protection of Human Rights Act, the NHRC was conceived as a bulwark against state excess, mandated to investigate violations and negligence, recommend remedies and shape India's human-rights jurisprudence. For much of its early life, it rose to that promise: Flagging overcrowded and degrading prison conditions, issuing the country's first comprehensive guidelines on extra-judicial killings, defending labour rights, standing with victims of communal violence and pressing for compensation and redress. Over time, however, a growing deference to governments, reluctance to pursue politically sensitive cases and opacity in appointments have gradually underlined the institution's structural weaknesses: Non-binding recommendations and limited enforcement powers, for instance, that had prompted a former chairperson to describe it as a "toothless tiger". In 2024, its accreditation with the UN-recognised Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions was deferred for a second year, citing among other things, a lack of transparency and diversity in its appointments.

A cynical reading will see the NHRC's directive as a symbolic gesture. Yet, it also represents a welcome moment of assertion, and a gesture towards a recovery of purpose. A verdict cannot single-handedly redeem institutional drift, just as compensation cannot restore a life. But such interventions can re-anchor the commission to its primary task: Speaking up for the voiceless, and showing that vigilance matters.

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY

In Trump-MbS bonhomie, Riyadh's win, for Washington an uncertain bet

BERNARD HAYKEL

THE CROWN Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), recently visited Washington, DC, and was granted a state-like reception, complete with a mounted honour guard and a flyover of F-35s and F-15 jets. President Donald Trump publicly exonerated him for the murder of the dissident Jamal Khashoggi, and celebrated the promise of $1 trillion in Saudi investments into the US economy. The visit accomplished several things for each side, some symbolic and others more tangible. While the Saudis appear to have come out ahead in this exchange, MbS's intimate association with President Trump may ultimately prove costly with a future Democratic administration.

The Crown Prince had three objectives. The first was to restore his standing in the United States as a respected international leader and the undisputed ruler of the kingdom. His meetings with President Trump in the Oval Office, over a formal dinner in the White House, and then with congressional and business leaders, journalists, and policy experts all indicate that he has accomplished this. In addition, the respect and prominence he was accorded as Saudi Arabia's *de facto* leader played to Saudi nationalist sensibilities back home.

The second aim was the signing of a strategic defence agreement that promises US protection against external aggressors. The details of this agreement — which falls short of a full treaty — have not been made public, but it appears to include the streamlining of arms exports, joint military training, and US basing access. Riyadh ultimately wants to be recognised as a strategic ally of the United States on par with, say, France or Japan. Security has been a perennial concern for Saudi Arabia, and the kingdom sees the US as the only power able to provide protection against aggressive neighbours like Iran and the Houthis in Yemen. This conviction has been reinforced by the superior performance of US weapons and defence systems (CENTCOM) during the war between Israel and its enemies over the last two years. While the kingdom could not obtain a presidential executive order on security, as Qatar did in September, it did receive considerable symbolic support from Trump, who declared that all US weapons systems were available for purchase, including the F-35 aircraft. Saudi Arabia was also designated a Major Non-NATO Ally. The question of a treaty is tied to normalisation with Israel — something President Trump craves, both to expand the Abraham Accords and to obtain a Nobel Peace Prize. Unfortunately for him, however, Riyadh is unwilling to normalise unless and until Jerusalem provides a credible path to a Palestinian state. This is largely because the tragic situation in Gaza has heightened concerns among ordinary Saudis for the plight of the Palestinians, and MbS cannot ignore that.

MbS's third — and perhaps most important goal — pertains to obtaining access to US artificial intelligence, which he sees as central to the economic diversification and development plan now underway in Saudi Arabia. The two governments signed a strategic AI partnership, allowing for the supply of advanced semiconductors and the development of advanced AI applications and infrastructure to the Kingdom. Most critically, Saudi obtained a permit to import 35,000 advanced chips from NVIDIA for its recently established AI company, Humain. In return, it has promised to limit its relationship with China in this domain and to provide guarantees that it will not allow leaks of this technology to Beijing. Saudi Arabia wants to become a global AI development hub that will generate jobs and new companies, and a position at the cutting edge of technological innovation. To achieve this, it argues that it has several comparative advantages likely to attract US companies to build data centres there. These include the relative abundance of cheap energy from both gas and renewable sources, abundant state-controlled land, a low regulatory environment, inexpensive capital, and rapid centralised permits — all of which are more constrained in Western countries. President Trump is supportive of this goal, just as he has been with a similar ambition pursued by the United Arab Emirates, which also obtained comparable access to US chip technology.

What did the United States obtain in return? First, President Trump secured his headline soundbite that Saudi Arabia is ready to invest $1 trillion in the US economy, confirming his view of MbS as a modern-day Croesus. Upon closer examination, however, all Saudi investments will be tied to the Kingdom's development goals and will not consist of long-term placements in the US. Here is how MbS expressed this: "We're not creating [investment] opportunities to please America [or] please Trump. For example, when you ask about AI and chips, Saudi Arabia has a huge demand, a huge need for computing power. And we're going to spend, in the short term, around $50 billion by buying those semiconductors for our needs in Saudi Arabia..." Second, Saudi Arabia will continue, as it has done for decades, to buy American weapons, but on this visit, there was very little announced in terms of actual sales other than 300 Abrams tanks. Finally, it signed several other agreements: On civilian nuclear energy that may benefit US companies when such power plants are eventually built; and on mining and processing of rare earths that will help diversify the supply chain for these minerals away from China. That the US is attempting to keep Riyadh from establishing closer ties to China can also be considered a success.

This meeting and the agreements signed provide the foundation for a more enduring and structural alliance between the two countries. The fact that these agreements were initiated under President Joe Biden and have now been concluded under Trump indicates that the relationship is valued across the political divide in the United States. The challenge for the Saudis will be to maintain such a consensus about its importance to the US once the Trump era ends.

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

Why is India pursuing FTAs? It's not just economics

MANOJ PANT AND M RAHUL

INDIA NOW appears poised to seal a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Zealand, as talks continue with Oman, Chile, Israel, Canada and others. Why is India pursuing so many agreements? India is signing not only broad regional deals, but also bilaterals with countries already embedded in other regional blocs.

Empirical evidence suggests FTAs rarely create new trade; they tend to formalise existing, substantial bilateral flows. Any FTA creates winners (exporters) and losers (firms competing with cheaper imports). Unless these political forces balance each other, agreements stall or underperform, as happened with the ASEAN FTA. Only when pre-existing trade volumes are large enough to generate both significant support and opposition do these pressures cancel out. If FTAs do not expand trade, why negotiate them?

Increasingly, FTAs are serving as platforms for cooperation in areas the WTO has struggled with, including services, investment, and other WTO-plus commitments. These demand deeper engagement but enable forms of integration that multilateral processes cannot presently deliver.

FTAs have also become tools of foreign policy. In an unstable world, regional and bilateral agreements offer strategic insurance. States increasingly view them as mechanisms to reinforce political alignments rather than merely expand trade. But if preferential trade deals are to achieve even their limited economic purpose, intra-RTA trade (Regional Trade Agreement) should rise relative to global trade. Yet data from agreements concluded more than a decade ago show the opposite.

The authors did some calculations using ITC trade map data for the three RTAs with ASEAN, Korea and Japan, using five-year averages of India's exports to (and imports from) these regions before and after the implementation of agreements. The share of India's total exports (imports) to each of the RTAs relative to the share of India's exports (imports) to the rest of the world remained more or less the same or declined before and after the implementation of agreements. Most deals revolved around commodity trade, where partner tariffs were already low, limiting India's gains. Partner countries often benefited more, sometimes via Chinese goods routed through RTA members, fuelling resistance among the Indian industry. India's comparative advantage in services remained underutilised because ASEAN members resisted meaningful services liberalisation; even today, Singapore is the lone partial exception.

India has now about 18 RTAs/PTAs (Preferential Trade Agreements) in force across Asia, the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa. Yet only eight include services agreements, and only two, South Korea and ASEAN, have end dates for implementation. Even there, movement has been limited. Only South Korea and Singapore show hints of progress in services trade.

Why, then, sign so many? The answer lies largely outside economics. Some RTAs, like ASEAN, were crafted to advance broader strategic objectives of the QUAD (India, the US, Australia and Japan), especially in the Indo-Pacific. India's later agreement with Australia seems similarly driven by political logic rather than prospects of significant economic gain. RTAs with countries like the UAE reflect a clearer services-and-investment rationale. Negotiations with the EU and the UK, long in the pipeline, remain works in progress, and it is too soon to assess gains beyond commodity trade.

Trump's flurry of bilateral FTAs has scrambled global calculations. If the US and China crystallise into a new "G2", what happens to the QUAD, and to the RTAs around it? This uncertainty partly explains India's own burst of agreements with almost every imaginable partner. As geopolitics shifts, the purpose of RTAs is shifting with it: From economic instruments to political safety nets. About time — after a lull, an India-Russia FTA looks increasingly logical. In the emerging world order, RTAs will be driven far more by strategic considerations than economic logic. The MEA, not the Commerce Ministry, is in the driver's seat.

Trump's flurry of bilateral FTAs has scrambled global calculations. If the US and China crystallise into a new 'G2', what happens to the QUAD, and to the RTAs around it? This uncertainty partly explains India's own burst of agreements

Pant is Visiting Professor, Shiv Nadar University and former VC, IIFT and Dean, SIS/JNU. Rahul is Assistant Professor, Institute of Economic Growth

India-Russia ties are on the rise and in decline at the same time

ALEKSEI ZAKHAROV

THE 23RD India-Russia summit held on December 5 was a showcase of contrasts. It looked like an undeniable success, demonstrating the proverbial durability of strategic partnership at a time of global turmoil. One thing, however, was missing: Outcomes. Two new joint ventures in pharmaceuticals and fertiliser supply are significant, as are growing exchanges between media and civil societies. But it is hard to pick out any significant deal. Instead, New Delhi and Moscow opted for low-hanging fruits and ostensibly agreed to leave high-value items for the future.

Is the current dynamic a continuation of the decline in the relationship that has lasted since the early years of the previous decade, or is it a renaissance of the strategic partnership that would probably require further efforts to get back on track? Although the relationship cannot be in decline and on the rise simultaneously, the recent summit provided sufficient evidence for both scenarios.

There is a clear upward trajectory with regular political contact and rekindled interest in expanding economic cooperation, particularly on the Russian side. The latter was on full display during the summit, with a sizeable Russian delegation predominantly comprising top officials from the Russian government's economic bloc and banking officials. While previously India was more of an attraction for national security officials in terms of defence and security cooperation and was rarely heeded by the upper echelons of the Russian financial circles, it is now being rediscovered as a country of economic opportunities and a "safe harbour" for Russian businesses left with no choice but to explore new markets. One such sign is the growing integration in the banking sector. Currently, five Russian banks are operating in India with some of them eyeing expansion by opening new offices. The Russian Central Bank is also set to open a branch in Mumbai in 2026. The rupee-rouble settlement mechanism has ballooned in recent years.

There are several possible reasons for the absence of new defence deals, ranging from the ongoing negotiations requiring coordination of technical and financial details, to a sensitive geopolitical moment necessitating a low profile. Military cooperation is currently placed in a closed box not accessible to the public, and its true nature, like Schrödinger's cat, is hard to determine. The verdict on its potential could be easier to make following the end of the war in Ukraine when the environment might become more conducive to announcements.

The India-Russia relationship is paradoxical. While it is sustainable thanks to long-standing connections in traditional spheres, it is also stagnant since new areas have not been clearly defined. It has withstood the fallout from the war in Ukraine, but has also lost momentum and has encountered additional barriers. Although it has seen a record rise in trade, this has been imbalanced and transactional, and has been entirely a by-product of oil shipments. As the relationship is contingent on many external variables, it will remain in a state of uncertainty.

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The writer is a fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

40 YEARS AGO

December 15, 1985


INDIAN EXPRESS
PM claims response to six-nation call
Beyond War awards presented
Dacoits loot village near Noida
Regionalism can hit Assam, says PM

Rajiv's peace initiative

THE PRIME Minister Rajiv Gandhi said that the six-nation joint initiative for peace had suggested a 12-month moratorium on nuclear testing to the superpowers, as part of an attempt to initiate a worldwide move for disarmament. Participating in a six-nation award-giving ceremony, at which he was one of the recipients for efforts towards achieving world peace and ensuring a world without war, which was telecast worldwide for the first time in history.

Call for quality

THE PRIME Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, urged the Indian consumer to demand quality, for only then will the industry pay attention and improve the standard of goods. It is because the consumer does not demand and takes whatever is given to him that we lack good quality, Gandhi said. Speaking at a function at Maruti Udyog premises at Gurgaon to mark the release of the four-wheel drive, Maruti Gypsy, Gandhi said that people must develop a scientific temper.

Assam elections

THE PRIME minister Rajiv Gandhi expressed the confidence that his party would get a majority in the Assam elections. The Prime Minister, who returned to Guwahati airport after addressing his last election meeting at Mangaldoi, was asked by newsmen about the Congress (I)'s poll prospects. "I am confident my party will win a majority," he told while boarding the plane for Delhi.

Noida village dacoity

A GANG of about 10 dacoits armed with country-made guns and sticks raided and looted at least 10 huts in the fields of Chilla village near Noida. The dacoits who brought ropes with them tied up and beat up at least seven persons, including three women, during their hour-long raid. They escaped with gold jewellery, clothes and cash worth several thousand rupees.

Row over Mamdani gets it wrong. Social democrats are actually good capitalists

DIPANKAR GUPTA

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

WHEN THE New York City mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani confessed that he was a "social democrat," many in Trump's Republican Party saw red, literally. They called the young politician, of mixed Muslim and Hindu heritage, a communist who would grow up and become a Stalin before long. Imaginings took off. New York would become another Moscow! Worse, Fifth Avenue would grow onion domes like the Kremlin!

Such fears are misplaced if we take a look at recent history, say from 1870 onwards — that is, a little more than 150 years ago. Some of the most toasted conservatives of the past, whose crusty trail is sniffed up by the right wing even today, put in place many of the things that Mamdani hopes to do in New York. None of that made these earlier notables leftists. In fact, they are feted today as champions of capitalism.

To assess their legacy, let us wise up on what Mamdani has said so far to make his claim of being a social democrat ring true. The mayor-elect's big-ticket item is "affordability", particularly in connection with housing for the poor in New York City, affectionately called the "Big Apple". That so many cannot get a decent bite of this metaphorical fruit, he argues, is because real estate has been captured by the filthy rich.

Likewise, Mamdani has also voiced concern for the less privileged, small businessperson, such as the ubiquitous neighbourhood grocers. They run "mom and pop stores," as well as street corner bodegas that sell beer and smokes along with sandwiches on the go. The owners of these establishments are often first-generation Americans from countries where the population is predominantly brown, Black or even yellow.

This does not make Mamdani left-wing or anti-capitalist because social democrats are actually good capitalists. To get a handle on this, look at how some famous conservatives of Europe and the US neonlit their names in history. They were not closet communists by a long shot, though they advocated clearly social democratic policies. In fact, they actually saved capitalism from angry unions and reckless robber barons.

Exactly 150 years ago, Benjamin Disraeli, the redoubtable conservative British Prime Minister, initiated a policy called the "Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act." It was now the government's responsibility to prevent landlord exploitation and provide proper housing for the poor. Don't forget, Disraeli championed British imperialism as well.

Disraeli's initiative ran four square counter to Frederick Engels and, in particular, to his oft-quoted work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In this text, Engels, the Marxist, argued that capitalism's rapacity and avarice were fully evident in the way it made the working class live in unhygienic hovels. The only way out, therefore, was a revolution. It was almost as if Disraeli was determined to prove Engels wrong.

About a decade after Disraeli, the "iron man" of Germany, Count Otto von Bismarck, set out to deflate the left wing by introducing a very social democratic "Health and Accident Insurance Act." This policy provided medical insurance and compensation for workplace injuries. The initiative soon grew to include affordable housing for the poor. Ironically, Bismarck's stated enemy then was the German Social Democratic Party.

> Without Disraeli, Bismarck, Churchill or FDR, capitalism may not have done as well as it has today. 'Social Democracy,' Mamdani-style, places him squarely with this select group, and not at all with Stalin

In fact, Bismarck may have been more socialist than Mamdani. Unlike the latter, who has said little about rising health costs, this was the major focus for Bismarck. Like Disraeli before him, the German autocrat too not only preserved capitalism at home, but had extra-territorial ambitions as well. If Disraeli annexed Cyprus and laid claim to the Suez Canal, Bismarck routed France and strove hard to isolate it.

Winston Churchill, another famous conservative and imperialist to boot, delivered a surprisingly fulsome social democratic election manifesto in 1945. It not only resembled Britain's Labour Party handout of that time but even Mamdani's manifesto today. Well before Mamdani, Churchill had promised rent control and vowed that in "the first years of peace, the provision of homes will be the greatest domestic task."

Again, like Bismarck, health was one of Churchill's priority areas, but like Mamdani, childcare too was singled out for special emphasis. Also, Churchill was sympathetic to the "small man in business", just as Mamdani wishes to protect the small corner store owners and bring down their grocery bills. If Churchill's policy were implemented in contemporary Britain, it would help migrants in big cities the most.

After the 1929 Wall Street crash, Franklin D Roosevelt (FDR) became a folk hero for saving capitalism in the US. He addressed affordability by encouraging employment in public works and by promoting the Tennessee Valley Project, which would supply cheap electricity. He also set up the state-run US Housing Authority to provide dwellings for the poor. This made home ownership immediately affordable to many.

In all these instances, established conservatives took clear "social democratic" positions that were definitely not anti-capitalist. If anything, their policies kept capitalism alive by prodding it to shed its earlier plundering instincts. Without Disraeli, Bismarck, Churchill or FDR, capitalism may not have done as well as it has today. "Social Democracy," Mamdani-style, places him squarely with this select group, and not at all with Stalin.

Social democracy enjoys the best of both worlds. It has the social cake and democratically eats it too.

The writer is a sociologist

AI won't replace consultants. It will reorient the profession

AKSHITA AGARWAL

CONSULTING BENDS and adapts with every wave of change. Be it globalisation, digitalisation, or the dot-com disruption, each era has brought new tools and new ways of thinking. The central role of consulting has been helping leaders bring order to complexity and equip them with clarity on choices when the path ahead is uncertain.

Artificial intelligence marks a new turning point. It changes the architecture of how knowledge is built, how decisions are made, and how value is created. This transformation unfolds across four dimensions.

The first change is visible in the value-creation potential for clients. AI and advanced analytics have expanded the boundaries of possibility. A retail company can use algorithms to identify high-value customers, adjust prices dynamically, or support its sales teams through intelligent learning and commercial models. An automotive manufacturer can deploy AI to forecast demand by region, optimise production schedules, and test consumer response to new models long before launch. Going a step further with agentic AI, these multi-step workflows can now be set up with minimal hand-offs. Yet, with abundant data and LLMs, what matters is context: The right mix of market insight, internal metrics, and institutional learnings supplied to the AI. That's why many firms are building RAG (Retrieval-Augmented Generation) systems to feed LLMs curated data at the right time, so outputs stay relevant and grounded. As such, the consultant's task evolves from gathering data to curating context. Clients still need partners who can weigh trade-offs, anticipate risks, and create alignment across an organisation.

The second transformation is unfolding within consulting firms. The rhythm of work is changing. Consultants can now ramp up on unfamiliar industries within hours, begin projects with automated market scans, synthesised research, and first-draft ready hypotheses. Increasingly, consulting firms are developing captive AI models trained on decades of institutional knowledge, case learning, frameworks and methodologies. These internal systems allow consultants to draw from a shared base of wisdom while preserving client confidentiality. The result is more than efficiency. It is a reallocation of time and attention. Consultants spend less effort compiling inputs and more energy engaging with leaders, testing ideas, and guiding decisions. AI enhances capability, but it cannot replace discernment. That is deeply human work.

The third shift belongs to the people entering the profession. The next generation of consultants will work in teams where baseline AI literacy is assumed, but lasting success will depend on skills that machines cannot replicate. Structured problem solving will remain at the core. Equally vital are reasoning and critical-thinking skills, which help consultants question assumptions and validate machine-generated analysis.

Creativity and design thinking will become essential to imagine new solutions. So will resilience and an ownership mindset. The willingness to stay accountable, manage ambiguity, and lead through uncertainty. Strong communication, storytelling, and collaboration skills will differentiate those who can turn ideas into influence. These capabilities become the human edge in a world where AI can analyse but not empathise, compute but not connect.

For professionals moving into consulting from other industries, depth of experience remains invaluable. AI still cannot replicate intuition built over years of navigating markets, customers, and teams. Understanding the pulse of a sector, the timing of an investment cycle, or the subtle shifts in consumer sentiment — these are advantages born of human experience.

The fourth transformation concerns how talent is prepared for this new reality. Business schools, universities, and corporate academies need to evolve from teaching knowledge to teaching ways of thinking. Alongside finance, strategy, and economics must come courses in data interpretation, behavioural science, design thinking, and digital ethics. Learning environments must emphasise experimentation, feedback, and reflection. Students should learn to use AI tools to analyse real-world business, social, or policy problems while also learning to question the limits of those tools.

Consulting has always found its purpose in transition. In India, where economic ambition intersects with institutional complexity, consulting will remain vital — not despite AI, but because of it.

What will endure are the same qualities that have always defined meaningful advice. Curiosity that looks beyond the obvious. Insight that turns data into understanding. Judgment that balances innovation with wisdom. And a human connection that builds the confidence to move forward. They have always mattered. And they always will.

The writer is an associate partner at a global consulting firm

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Messy management

THIS REFERS to the report 'Messi tour Day 1: Chaos as angry fans ransack stadium in Kolkata; organiser held' (*IE*, December 14). The chaotic collapse of Lionel Messi's Kolkata appearance is a sobering reminder that celebrity spectacle without professional planning can quickly turn into a public hazard. Tens of thousands of fans paid exorbitant prices in good faith, only to be denied even a fleeting glimpse of the footballer. What followed — vandalism, pitch invasion and near-panic — was not spontaneous mob behaviour but the predictable outcome of gross mismanagement.

Sanjay Chopra, Punjab

Impeachment move

THIS REFERS to the editorial 'DMK move to impeach HC judge is disquieting' (*IE*, December 13). The proposed move to impeach Madras High Court Justice GR Swaminathan by the DMK by garnering support of 107 Opposition MPs in the parliament is wholly preposterous, unwarranted and constitutionally untenable. A judgment could not be the basis of any such move, however unpalatable or unfavourable it may be to a party to the litigation. It is a crude attempt to browbeat the judges and rob the judiciary of its necessity of being independent of executive as per the basic structure of our Constitution.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

Patel's confession

THIS REFERS to the article, 'How Nehru, not Patel, became India's first PM: the politics behind the 1946 Congress' (*IE*, December 12). The author failed to mention that Patel himself had set the debate to rest in November 1948 by admitting that Nehru had a larger following among the people, while he had the overwhelming support within the organisation. This is well documented by Rajmohan Gandhi's book *The Good Boat: A Portrait of Gandhi*.

Subrata Mukherjee, New Delhi

From Brazil, a lesson on antibiotic use for India

CHANDRA BHUSHAN

I HAVE travelled extensively over the past three decades and never once fallen sick outside India — until my visit to Brazil last month for COP30. A simple viral infection became a mirror, revealing how differently India and Brazil approach antibiotics, and why this difference matters.

In India, like most people, I rely on a familiar ecosystem of doctors, chemists, and well-meaning advisers. For routine illnesses like cough and cold, I consult them, weigh their advice, and take (or avoid) medication accordingly. The advice, however, is predictable. Every viral infection comes with an anti-allergic and an antibiotic.

The justification is always the same: "Take antibiotics to prevent a secondary bacterial infection." It never matters that antibiotics do not treat viruses. Prevention becomes the primary motive.

On my fourth day in Brazil, I fell ill. I followed my usual routine: Steam inhalation, saline gargles and paracetamol. By Day 6, fever and congestion worsened, so I consulted my doctor in India. As expected, he prescribed paracetamol, an anti-allergic, a broad-spectrum antibiotic, throat soothers, vitamins, and a cough suppressant. Armed with the scanned prescription, I went to a chemist.

First, the chemist refused to accept my Indian prescription. Brazilian law requires a local doctor's prescription. Second, he separated what he could sell without a prescription — lozenges, vitamins, paracetamol — from what he could not (antibiotics). Third, he directed me to a 24×7 government urgent-care centre.

The centre was spotless, efficient, and welcoming. Though I spoke only English and the staff only Portuguese, a translation app bridged the gap. There was no consultation fee. The doctor examined me thoroughly. I showed him the Indian prescription. He glanced at it politely and set it aside.

"You have a viral infection," he said. "It will resolve on its own in 10–12 days."

His prescription was astonishingly simple: Paracetamol for high fever, a throat lozenge, and a saline nasal rinse. No antibiotics. No anti-allergic. When I mentioned my sputum had turned yellowish-green — often treated as a bacterial infection sign in India — he smiled gently. "That is a myth. Viral infections can also produce coloured sputum."

I returned to India still mildly symptomatic. Out of curiosity, I got a sputum culture done. After three days, the report showed moderate bacterial growth. My Indian doctor immediately advised antibiotics. The Brazilian doctor, however, responded: "This does not require antibiotics. Minor bacterial growth often resolves naturally."

> In many parts of the world, antibiotics are used as a curative medicine. In India, they are used preventively, routinely prescribed for viral infections that the body can handle. This misuse is a key reason India is now the epicentre of the global antimicrobial resistance (AMR) crisis

I chose to trust him. Thirteen days after falling sick, I recovered.

I share this not to criticise Indian doctors, but to highlight a systemic failure. In many parts of the world, antibiotics are used as a curative medicine. In India, they are used preventively, routinely prescribed for viral infections that the body can handle. This misuse is a key reason India is now the epicentre of the global antimicrobial resistance (AMR) crisis.

This is not solely due to human misuse. Antibiotics are also pumped into poultry and livestock as growth promoters. Drug-resistant bacteria travel from farms to food to humans. The result? As my own test report showed, we are walking reservoirs of resistant bacteria. When we eventually contract a serious infection — one that truly requires antibiotics — we may find our options limited or ineffective.

The tragedy is that we already know what to do. In 2016-17, the central government convened a committee to develop the National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (NAP-AMR). I was a member of that committee. We created a multi-sectoral plan for 2017-2021, spanning human health, agriculture and environmental waste. A revised plan for 2025-2029 was released in November 2025.

Yet, the first plan largely remained on paper. Implementation was hampered by weak regulation, inadequate surveillance and a healthcare culture that favours quick fixes over medical discipline.

The real difference between India and countries like Brazil is not medical expertise but the strict enforcement of a policy. It is the refusal to prescribe and sell antibiotics unless absolutely necessary. My Brazilian doctor summed it up best: "Use antibiotics when they are needed, not when you are worried."

Chandra Bhushan is CEO, iFOREST

'Eko' is storytelling that plays with the rules

KUNAL RAY

WHEN I went to see the Malayalam film *Eko* at a Pune theatre, it repeatedly reminded me that there is no substitute for competent storytelling in cinema. *Eko* doesn't feature big stars. Instead, it is supported by a wonderful ensemble cast, with the promising young actor Sandeep Pradeep playing an important role. The biggest asset of the film is the story and the way it has been told. Unique experiments with narrative are one of the hallmarks of new-age Malayalam cinema, endearing these films to a pan-India audience at a time when mainstream Hindi cinema is significantly diminished on that front.

What is the film about, you wonder? *Eko* makes the answer to such a question difficult owing to the nature of its storytelling — layered, languid and taking time to unravel. Throughout the first half, you are left thinking where it might lead to. It takes us back in time exploring Kerala's maritime relations with Malaysia and evokes local legends and the lush geography of the state. The latter is not a prop but a supporting character in the story. Understanding it is integral to the film. And yet, you are still left waiting for an event to occur around which the film may pivot. However, *Eko* defies all such expectations. It can be categorised as a thriller which doesn't sound, act or feel like one.

A large part of the film revolves around the disappearance of Kuriyachan, a trader of sorts, lover of dogs and alleged doer of many dubious deeds. But as an audience you feel that there's more to the film than just that one event. It is an interesting way to craft a thriller where you see the genre being gradually stripped of its conventions. The film is not just trying to solve the case of Kuriyachan's disappearance, there are tangled histories of the region and other characters equally important to the plot. It would be unfair not to mention the incredible collaboration between the film's director Dinjith Ayyathan and writer-cinematographer Bahul Ramesh, who had also made the excellent *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024).

> What is the film about, you wonder? 'Eko' makes the answer to such a question difficult owing to the nature of its storytelling — layered, languid and taking time to unravel. Throughout the first half, you are left thinking where it might lead to

One could argue that *Eko* begins to unravel after the interval. But even if the puzzle of the disappearance gets solved, there are numerous questions about various characters, their motivations, and backstories that run through your head. You realise these are worthy questions too, that perhaps the lack of clarity is intentional. The film is over but it hasn't left you. In this age of shrinking attention spans, isn't that an admirable achievement?

Eko features an ending the audience is unprepared for. The expectations of retributive justice remain at bay. I wasn't even sure it was over until the lights came on. There are many instances when *Eko* catches you off guard, restoring the joy of being surprised by cinema. That is the triumph of its storytelling and that too in a mainstream format.

The writer teaches literature and film at FLAME University, Pune

A TWO-PRONGED STRATEGY IS BEING CONSIDERED

Budget may unveil next round of public sector bank reforms

Prasanta Sahu
New Delhi, December 14

Multiple merger combinations are under examination, though no specific banks have been identified yet, sources said. The Budget 2026-27 is expected to offer policy direction on the future course, they said

THE GOVERNMENT is considering a two-pronged strategy to further consolidate public sector banks (PSBs) — merging smaller lenders to create scale and gradually diluting its ownership closer to 51 per cent to enable the banks to raise growth capital independently.

According to sources familiar with the discussions on the matter, this mix of consolidation and calibrated dilution of government's stake is essential to build banks capable of funding the expanding credit needs of a fast-growing economy.

In the next consolidation cycle, the focus is expected to be on the five smallest PSBs by asset size, which may be merged with mid-sized banks to make them more comparable with the country's larger state-run lenders. State Bank of India (SBI), which is already far ahead of other PSBs in terms of size and reach of operations after absorbing its associate banks, is unlikely to be part of the new round of consolidation.

Multiple merger combinations are under examination, though no specific banks have been identified yet, the sources said. The Union Budget 2026-27 is expected to offer policy direction on the future course of PSB reforms, they said.

Lessons from earlier consolidation exercises are shaping the current thinking. The previous mergers, particularly those executed in 2019-20, were far from smooth, marked by IT integration challenges, branch overlaps and staff rationalisation issues. In several cases, banks with similar regional footprints were merged, resulting in duplicated branch networks and employee redeployment problems.

Industry watchers argue that future mergers should be designed to avoid combining banks headquartered in the same region, thereby minimising operational disruption. The merger of Oriental Bank of Commerce with Punjab National Bank – both with a strong northern India presence – is often cited as an example of how overlapping geographies intensified integration challenges.

Alongside consolidation, officials believe reforms must address capital constraints faced by PSBs. One proposal gaining traction is to raise the foreign direct investment (FDI) limit in PSBs from the current 20 per cent to as much as 49 per cent, allowing these banks to tap long-term global capital. In contrast, private sector banks are permitted up to 74 per cent foreign ownership.

However, ownership limits alone may not be enough to attract serious investors. While shareholders in private banks can exercise voting rights of up to 26 per cent, investors in PSBs are restricted to just 10 per cent voting power, even if they hold a 20 per cent equity stake. This imbalance has discouraged large institutional and strategic investors from acquiring meaningful stakes in state-owned lenders. That explains why foreign holding in India's largest bank, SBI, is just 10.64 per cent now, and it is even less than 1 per cent in smaller PSBs.

Officials argue that FDI limits and voting rights in PSBs should be aligned more closely with those in private banks, while still ensuring government ownership of at least 51 per cent. Such alignment, they believe, would make PSBs more attractive to patient, long-term investors without compromising public control.

The reforms debate extends beyond PSBs. Raising voting rights in private banks is a long-standing demand from promoters and institutional investors. The voting rights cap in private banks was last raised from 10 per cent to 26 per cent through the Banking Laws (Amendment) Act, 2012. Both the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the government have historically opposed removing the cap altogether, citing concerns over governance, public trust and concentration of ownership.

Yet, large domestic and foreign investors argue that the disconnect between economic ownership and voting power discourages capital infusion. Any change, however, is likely to be cautious and incremental.

The renewed push for reform comes after a six-year pause in consolidation and reflects the government's ambition to create two Indian banks capable of entering the global top 20 by assets.

Officials are working on a reform roadmap that could be executed between 2026 and 2028.

As of March 2025, SBI remains the clear leader with assets of Rs 66.76 lakh crore, followed by Punjab National Bank (Rs 18.18 lakh crore), Bank of Baroda (Rs 17.81 lakh crore), Canara Bank (Rs 16.83 lakh crore) and Union Bank of India (Rs 15 lakh crore).

At the smaller end are Central Bank of India, Indian Overseas Bank, Bank of Maharashtra, UCO Bank and Punjab & Sind Bank—widely seen as early-phase merger candidates. The approach could eventually bring down the number of PSBs from the current 12 to three or four large institutions. FE

After September debut, Mizoram's new rail link transports its first automobiles to the state capital

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, December 14

A Maruti Suzuki vehicle being unloaded at the Sairang Railway Station in Mizoram.

THE RAIL link connecting Mizoram's capital Aizawl to the Indian Railways network for the first time has successfully carried an automobile (car) rake to the region. The Ministry of Railways on Sunday said a total of 119 Maruti Suzuki cars were transported to Sairang Railway Station, located about 20 km from the state capital, from Changsari near Guwahati in Assam.

The station became operational after Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the ambitious 51.38-km Bairabi-Sairang line on September 13, 2025.

The transportation of cars is part of Indian Railways' initiative to diversify its freight basket, which currently relies largely on bulk goods, and to support the lowering of carbon emissions in the automobile sector.

The Bairabi–Sairang line was one of the most difficult railway projects, as the track traverses the fragile mountains of the northeastern state.

The freight operation on the line started soon after the inauguration. On September 14, 2025, 21 cement wagons were sent from Assam to Aizawl, marking the first freight movement on the line.

The Railways said that since then, the route has transported essential goods such as cement, construction materials, automobiles, sand, and stone chips.

The first parcel consignment from Sairang was booked on September 19, 2025, when Anthurium flowers were transported to Anand Vihar Terminal via a parcel van attached to the Sairang–Anand Vihar Terminal Rajdhani Express.

Between 17 September and 12 December 2025, a total of 17 freight rakes were handled on the ambitious line, said the Railways. Apart from the freight trains, there are three passenger trains — Sairang-Anand Vihar Terminal Rajdhani Express, Sairang-Guwahati Mizoram Express, and Sairang-Kolkata Express — currently running from Aizawl with more than 100 per cent occupancy.

According to the Railways Ministry data, the share of passenger vehicles dispatched by the Indian Railways has increased to more than 20 per cent of the total car production in the country in FY25, a significant increase from 1.7 per cent share in FY15.

A total of 10.41 lakh cars were dispatched by the Indian Railways in different parts of the country in 2024-25 (FY25), which is expected to increase to nearly 15 lakh in FY26. The total car loading in railways stood at 9.69 lakh in FY24, 7.70 lakh in FY23, 4.91 lakh in FY22, 3.98 lakh in FY21 and 3.09 lakh cars in FY20.

Maruti Suzuki accounts for the largest share of total car loading by railways, followed by Hyundai in second place and Tata Motors in third. Nearly 50 per cent of all cars transported by Indian Railways are from Maruti Suzuki.

To encourage the car manufacturers to transport their vehicles via Railways, the Automobile Freight Train Operator (AFTO) scheme has been liberalised. Under this initiative, the registration fee for AFT operators has been done away with. Earlier, the fee was Rs 5 crore, which has now been reduced to zero. Along with this, the minimum number of rakes required for transportation has been relaxed from three to one.

Almost 80 per cent of the cars transported by Railways are meant for domestic sales. There are a total of 133 railway sidings in the country where cars are loaded and unloaded.

E. EXPLAINED

Railways diversifying its freight basket

The transportation of automobiles is part of Indian Railways' effort to diversify its freight basket, which currently depends largely on bulk goods, while also supporting reduction in carbon emissions.

FMCG growth slips in November, but value growth in rural gallops

Viveat Susan Pinto
Mumbai, December 14

INDIA'S FAST-MOVING consumer goods (FMCG) market has slipped in November due to price cuts triggered by the GST rate changes. All-India value growth stood at 4.4 per cent for November 2025, below October's 6.8 per cent, data shared by retail intelligence platform Bizom shows.

Bizom does not provide volume growth figures. It tracks value growth across FMCG categories.

Rural value growth, according to Bizom, was ahead of overall FMCG growth at 5.7 per cent for November. But the gap between urban and rural value growth is once again widening, raising concerns about a stable recovery in urban areas. Urban value growth stood at 2.5 per cent for November, after reporting a sharp rebound of 6.3 per cent in October. Last month, rural value growth was 7.1 per cent.

"The post-Diwali period in November does tend to show some weakness in demand. But this year the value growth numbers in November are depressed because the GST-induced lower-priced products have landed in stores," Harshit Bora, analytics head, Bizom, said.

Bora said that the domestic FMCG market, especially in urban areas, may take a month to fully stabilise before showing a consistent performance in terms of growth rates. This point has been made by most other FMCG executives who point that the recovery in urban areas will be gradual.

"Inflation has begun to stabilise in the second half of the ongoing fiscal. It is softening gradually. Alongside this, the last Union Budget made important changes to income tax, which released a significant amount of money into the hands of consumers. I see consumers having the means to fulfil their aspirations. This positive trend in FMCG will continue into the second half of the current fiscal," Manish Tiwary, CMD, Nestle India, said.

Tiwary also pointed to double-digit value growth that the food category is seeing, as lower GST rates trigger a virtuous circle of growth in the segment. This is visible in Bizom data, with packaged food seeing a value growth of 13.6 per cent year-on-year in November after reporting a weak 2.7 per cent growth rate in October. This is due to lower product prices that has prompted a shift from unbranded to branded products, Bora said.

Executives such as Nikhil Sharma, MD, Perfetti Van Mella India, also see competition growing in foods, as smaller, but organised players benefit from GST tailwinds, much like larger players have.

"Lower GST will help smaller players to expand because their innovation and freight costs will reduce. Going forward, we expect competition to intensify in confectionary," he said.

According to Bizom, categories such as chocolates and confectionary, beverages and dairy products reported a year-on-year value growth of 2.3 per cent, 4.8 per cent and 5.9 per cent each in November, which is a mixed performance for these segments versus previous months. While the growth rate in beverages has rebounded in November after reporting a decline in October due to unseasonal rains, dairy products and chocolates and confectionary growth rates have slowed in November versus October. Last month, chocolates and confectionery reported a growth of 10.1 per cent, while dairy products grew 18.6 per cent versus the year-ago period, Bizom said. FE

• ALL-INDIA VALUE GROWTH SLOWED TO 4.4%

RURAL VALUE growth, according to retail intelligence platform Bizom, was ahead of overall FMCG growth at 5.7 per cent for November

URBAN VALUE growth stood at 2.5 per cent for November, after reporting a sharp rebound of 6.3 per cent in October

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WHILE THE growth rate in beverages has rebounded in November after reporting a decline in October due to unseasonal rains, dairy products and chocolates and confectionary growth rates have slowed in November versus October

BUDGET 2026-27

CII suggests reforms, higher capex to sustain growth

New Delhi: The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has proposed a comprehensive set of reforms for the forthcoming Union Budget 2026-27 to drive sustained investment growth spanning public, private, and foreign investments and maintain India's momentum as one of the world's fastest-growing major economies.

CII suggested increasing central capital expenditure by 12 per cent and capex support to states by 10 per cent in FY27; launching a Rs 150 lakh crore National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) 2.0 for 2026-32; offering incremental tax credits or compliance relaxations for firms achieving significant new investment, production, or tax contribution milestones; and establishing an NRI Investment Promotion Fund. It also called for reinstating accelerated depreciation benefits to further incentivise fresh capital expenditure and technology upgrades, particularly for MSMEs and manufacturing industries, provided the measure is structured to stimulate modernisation without triggering Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT) obligations. PTI

Govt identifies 300 items to bridge Russia trade gap

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, December 14

FILE

AS INDIA and Russia pursue a $100 billion bilateral trade target by 2030 and seek to make exchanges more balanced, the government has identified about 300 products across sectors such as engineering, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and agriculture to help bridge the gap between current trade levels and the five-year target.

Total trade between India and Russia stood at $68.6 billion in 2024–25, of which India's oil imports accounted for $56.8 billion. India's exports were $4.8 billion, while imports reached $63.8 billion. The surge in oil imports following the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been largely driven by geopolitical factors.

"India's share in Russia's import basket remains modest around 2.3 per cent yet the complementarity between India's global export strengths and Russia's demand profile offers significant headroom. Engineering goods, pharma, chemicals, and farm sectors are natural fits for expansion," officials said.

High-potential products have been identified by analysing complementary trade baskets, mapping India's supply capabilities against Russia's demand.

"The identified opportunity basket spans 300 products, for which India's exports to Russia total $1.7 billion, compared to $37.4 billion overall import of these products by Russia. This stark disparity demonstrates the substantial complementary export space India can target," the officials added. Agriculture and allied sectors show particularly strong promise. Engineering goods present one of the widest gaps and Chemicals and plastics show a similar pattern. FE

Foreign investors pull out Rs 17,955 cr from equities so far in Dec

New Delhi: Foreign investors pulled out Rs 17,955 crore ($2 billion) from Indian equities in the first two weeks of this month, taking the total outflow to Rs 1.6 lakh crore ($18.4 billion) in 2025.

This sharp withdrawal follows a net outflow of Rs 3,765 crore in November, extending the pressure on domestic equity markets.

The current trend comes after a brief pause in October, when Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) infused Rs 14,610 crore, snapping a three-month streak of heavy withdrawals. FPIs sold equities worth Rs 23,885 crore in September, Rs 34,990 crore in August, and Rs 17,700 crore in July. According to data from the National Securities Depository Ltd (NSDL), FPIs withdrew a net Rs 17,955 crore from Indian equities between December 1-12.

Market experts attributed this sustained outflow to several factors including sharp depreciation of the rupee and rich Indian valuations. PTI

• DELAYED EMPLOYMENT, INFLATION AND OTHER DATA WILL GIVE A LONG-ANTICIPATED VIEW OF THE US ECONOMY

Global investors wait for delayed 'shutdown' data

Reuters
New York, December 14

Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. AP

A HOST of delayed employment, inflation and other data in the coming week will give a long-anticipated view of the US economy that could help guide markets into year-end. US stocks pulled back to end the week, after the benchmark S&P 500 had ended on Thursday at a record closing high. Back-to-back disappointing quarterly reports from Oracle and Broadcom, two signature stocks in the artificial intelligence trade that has propelled markets this year, weighed down the heavyweight technology sector.

The upcoming data is especially critical because investors and the Federal Reserve have been navigating with little certainty since a 43-day federal government shutdown postponed key reports.

The US jobs report for November is due on Tuesday, while the monthly consumer price index, which is closely watched for inflation trends, is out on Thursday. "There has been a lack of clarity for investors," said Jim Baird, chief investment officer with Plante Moran Financial Advisors. "Strong corporate earnings certainly helped to support the markets. The Fed and anticipated rate cuts helped to provide a little bit of a boost. But now it's time to turn our attention back to the underlying economy and what path we're on." A divided Fed cut interest rates by a quarter percentage point on Wednesday for a third-straight meeting as it seeks to shore up a weakening labour market. But the central bank signaled borrowing costs are unlikely to drop further in the near term as it awaits more economic clarity.

"Because of the government shutdown and the catch-up schedule, we have essentially three months of both labour and inflation data coming out between the December and January Fed meetings," said David Seif, chief economist for developed markets at Nomura.

US payrolls are expected to have climbed by a tepid 35,000 in November, according to a *Reuters* poll. Fed Chair Jerome Powell on Wednesday said while payrolls have been averaging an increase of 40,000 per month since April, the Fed thinks those numbers are overstated and could instead be an average loss of 20,000 per month.

"If we start getting negative prints around jobs, you can't avoid the recession discussion," said Marvin Loh, senior global macro strategist at State Street.

The monthly CPI data comes as inflation has continued to run above the Fed's target, which could complicate any further Fed easing if inflation does not cool. Three policymakers dissented from the decision to lower rates, including two who argued rates should have been left unchanged.

"We continue to expect further cuts in January and April, but if the labour market stabilises, then future cuts may not come until inflation decelerates," Morgan Stanley economists said in a note on Thursday.

A report on retail sales is among the other releases next week that will help provide more insight into economic growth. Micron Technology's quarterly report on Wednesday also could draw added scrutiny following the AI turbulence this week. The S&P 500 is up 16 per cent so far in 2025, pushing its gain during the bull market that began in October 2022 to 90 per cent. December is traditionally a positive month for stocks.

However, investors could seek to lock in year-to-date profits, bringing selling pressure. The approaching holidays also stand to reduce trading volumes, which can lead to exaggerated asset-price moves. "For the most part, it's been a very, very good year for risk assets," Loh said.

"If you get some shaky numbers or you don't get a resounding reason to add risk, it could add volatility in the market just because of the thinner markets."

• BRIEFLY

GOVERNMENT HAS INFORMED PARLIAMENT

Banks advised to link MSME loans to external benchmark by RBI

New Delhi: With a view to improve monetary policy transmission, banks have been advised by the RBI to link loans to MSMEs to an external benchmark, the government has informed Parliament. The reset clause for loans has been reduced to three months under the external benchmark system. Further, to make the benefit of external benchmark-based interest regime available to existing borrowers, banks have been advised to provide a switchover option as per mutually agreed terms. Moreover, the government implements Quality Control Orders with exemptions and relaxations for MSMEs to ensure no disruption of domestic production, Minister of State for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Shobha Karandlaje in a written reply in the Lok Sabha. PTI

SBI aims to double YONO app users: Setty

New Delhi: State Bank of India Chairman C S Setty has said that the bank is targeting to double its YONO app user base to 20 crore over the next two years with the launch of a new version on Monday. YONO 2.0 is a significant upgrade, offering a better experience for customers and full fledged features will be rolled out over 6-8 months, he said. PTI

'India strong champion for tax transparency'

New Delhi: India is a "strong champion" in implementing transparency measures against offshore tax evasion and its recent campaign asking taxpayers to correctly report their undisclosed foreign assets has led to disclosure of properties worth more than Rs 29,000 crore, Head of the OECD Secretariat Zayda Manatta said. PTI

• GLOBAL

Beyond big sales: Divergences in the US-Saudi defence ties

BASHIR ALI ABBAS

EARLIER THIS month, the United States cleared $1.4 billion in military sales to Saudi Arabia, including $500 million to train the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF). This was the first American foreign military sales (FMS) package to the Kingdom since it was designated a Major Non-NATO Ally during Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's landmark visit to the White House in late November.

That visit had also yielded Trump's authorisation to sell F-35 fighter jets to Saudi, a Strategic Defense Agreement to facilitate more military sales, and other agreements.

While the US remains Saudi Arabia's biggest defence partner, the Crown Prince's visit only speaks to the new transactional nature of their relationship, rather than a fresh realignment in strategic needs. In fact, the US-Saudi defence relationship has, in recent times, diverged on multiple accounts.

Riyadh's newer partnerships

Since MBS took over in 2017, one of his key priorities has been aN overhaul of Saudi Arabia's fledgling military-industrial complex. For one of the world's largest defence spenders, the lion's share of the Saudi defence budget has always been devoted to importing foreign equipment — 75% in 2024, for instance. A key pillar of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 is to achieve 50% localisation for military spending. Last month, the Kingdom announced that it had reached the 25% mark.

Second, despite its expenditure, the Saudi military has arguably never been seen as self-sufficient. Riyadh has consistently sought a mutual defence arrangement with Washington. The need to shore up external support has been exacerbated by Israel's demonstrable ability to unilaterally change the region's security landscape, alongside the historic Iranian threat.

US President Trump and Saudi Crown Prince MBS in Washington. THE NYT

However, this has not been forthcoming from the Trump White House, and has catalysed Riyadh's efforts to diversify its defence relationships. Saudi Arabia has especially invested in developing ties with China. It is the largest destination of Saudi crude exports, the largest source of Saudi imports, as well as the leading investor in Vision 2030 projects. But in the short term, Beijing is unlikely to replace Washington's military heft.

Riyadh has thus engaged Pakistan to formalise a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA). This SMDA is more about transferring Pakistani military learnings and leveraging their historic relationship to aid indigenous capacity building.

Washington's discomfort

The Trump administration's guiding star for most bilateral defence agreements has been the need to promote military sales and create more jobs for the US defense industry. Saudi Arabia has readily matched American needs, even committing to increasing investment in the US to $1 trillion. In return, Washington has committed to selling more arms, especially as part of their May agreement worth $142 billion.

However, apart from the complete lack of specifics, the corollary is that Washington will not take on greater responsibility that demands an increased American military footprint in the region. Meanwhile, the Saudi refusal to commit to normalisation of ties with Israel is especially important to Trump. It's a crucial missing piece in the Abraham Accords (Arab-Israel normalisation agreements) jigsaw, which the US President views as a personal project.

Naturally, this was reportedly the primary bone of contention during MBS's Washington visit. For Riyadh, both Israel's refusal to commit to a time-bound framework for recognising a Palestinian state, as well as Washington's reluctance to commit to mutual defence, significantly reduce its incentives to normalise ties with Israel. Lastly, Saudi's growing closeness with China may have implications for its partnership with the US. While Trump did announce the possible sale of F35 fighters to Saudi Arabia, note that the UAE had also secured a similar commitment from the first Trump administration, but the deal ultimately succumbed to US intelligence concerns.

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• ECONOMY

New Insurance Bill: Major reforms it seeks to bring

While several key changes have been incorporated, many crucial industry demands, like a composite licence, have been left out or diluted.

GEORGE MATHEW

THE UNION Cabinet on Friday approved the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill, 2025, clearing the way for its introduction in Parliament to revamp India's insurance framework.

The Bill proposes sweeping changes to the Insurance Act, 1938, the Life Insurance Corporation Act, 1956, and the IRDAI Act, 1999, with the stated aim of modernisation, wider coverage and stronger regulatory oversight.

However, the final draft reflects a mix of hits and misses. While several long-awaited changes, like 100% FDI have been incorporated, other crucial industry demands like a composite licence have been left out or diluted, leaving stakeholders divided on the overall impact.

What is in the Bill

100% FDI: The amendment will raise the Foreign Direct Investment limit in Indian insurance companies from 74% to 100 %. This will help in attracting stable and sustainable investment, facilitate technology transfer, enhance insurance penetration and social protection, and help achieve the goal of 'Insurance for All by 2047'. India has about 70 insurers, while the world has close to 10,000. Even if a small share of them chooses to participate in India, the capital coming in is expected to be very large.

"Opening the sector fully to global capital sends a strong signal of confidence in India's insurance market and regulatory maturity. This reform will enable insurers to access long-term capital, advanced risk-management expertise, global best practices and cutting-edge technology, critical ingredients for expanding insurance coverage, improving product innovation and strengthening claims and service capabilities across the country," said Narendra Bharindwal, President, Insurance Brokers Association of India (IBAI).

Sharad Mathur, MD and CEO, Universal Sompo General Insurance, said increasing the FDI limit to 100% can serve as a strong catalyst for the insurance sector. "Greater capital inflows will enable insurers to expand their business, strengthen balance sheets, and invest in advanced risk-assessment models and more efficient claims-management systems," he said.

SOPS FOR FOREIGN REINSURERS: The requirement of Net Owned Funds (includes equity capital, free reserves, balance in share premium account and capital reserves representing surplus) for foreign reinsurers is proposed to be reduced from Rs 5,000 crore to Rs 1,000 crore to facilitate entry of more re-insurers, building greater reinsurance capacities in the country. This has been a long-standing demand of global reinsurance companies. This easing of norms is intended to draw smaller and new-age reinsurers to India, broadening competition in a segment currently dominated by the public sector GIC Re.

MORE POWERS FOR IRDAI: In a significant step toward strengthening policyholder protection, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) is set to receive enhanced enforcement powers, including the authority to disgorge wrongful gains made by insurers or intermediaries. This brings IRDAI's punitive capabilities closer to that of SEBI, which has the power to recover illegally earned profits from violators.

To further streamline industry operations and ensure uninterrupted service for policyholders, the Bill proposes a one-time registration system for insurance intermediaries, removing the need for repeated approvals. In another move aimed at easing business processes, the threshold for requiring IRDAI's approval for the transfer of paid-up equity capital in insurance companies will be raised from 1% to 5%.

A formal standard operating procedure (SOP) for regulation-making will be incorporated into the Act, ensuring a more structured and predictable rule-making process. Additionally, the Bill introduces clear criteria for levying penalties.

MORE POWERS FOR LIC: Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) is being given greater operational freedom. The Bill proposes to empower LIC to set up new zonal offices without requiring prior government approvals, enabling faster expansion, improved administrative efficiency, and better regional oversight.

Additionally, the LIC will be allowed to restructure and align its overseas operations in line with the laws and regulatory norms of the countries in which it operates. This flexibility will help LIC adapt more quickly to foreign compliance requirements, strengthen its global presence, and reduce delays caused by navigating multiple layers of approval back home.

What is not likely to feature in the Bill

COMPOSITE LICENCE: One of the most notable omissions likely in the Bill is the absence of provisions for composite licences, a long-awaited reform that many insurers had strongly advocated. Under the existing Insurance Act, 1938, insurers are confined to rigid silos: life insurers can only offer life policies, while general insurers are barred from entering the life segment.

A composite licence would fundamentally reshape this landscape and enable insurers to design integrated, bundled offerings: for example, combining life insurance, health coverage, and general insurance products into a single package.

Had the government permitted composite licensing, several major players were poised to enter or expand into new lines of business, spurring fresh competition and innovation.

REDUCED CAPITAL NORMS AND NEW ENTRANTS: Another key omission likely is the proposal to lower minimum capital requirements for new insurers. Currently, the law mandates a minimum paid-up capital of Rs 100 crore for insurers and Rs 200 crore for reinsurers, which have been criticised as being too high and prohibitive, especially for regional or niche players looking to enter the market. A reduction in capital requirements would have opened the doors for new entrants that could target underserved segments, particularly rural markets, informal sector workers, micro-businesses, gig workers, and low-income households, where insurance penetration remains abysmally low.

The sector could also have seen a surge in specialised insurers, such as health-only or micro-insurance companies, creating more competition, product diversity, and consumer choice.

Many other proposals missing

The original Insurance Amendment Bill, which was prepared two years ago, had provisions for distributing other financial products like mutual funds, loans and credit cards, creating new revenue streams and offering integrated solutions and reduced capital requirements.

It also proposed more flexibility in revising investment norms in line with market needs, potentially improving returns for policyholders.

Besides, it also proposed permission for individual insurance agents to sell policies of multiple companies, eliminating the existing restriction that limits them to one life and one general insurer.

The Bill is also likely to be silent on the long-awaited proposal to allow large corporations to establish captive insurance entities. Captive insurers — wholly owned insurance subsidiaries created to insure the risks of their parent companies — are widely used globally by major corporations to manage complex exposures, lower insurance costs, and exert greater control over underwriting and claims.

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• **The hiked FDI limit**

THERE IS little doubt that raising the FDI limit to 100% marks a decisive step toward globalising India's insurance sector.

THE REFORM is expected to draw larger pools of foreign capital, spur product innovation, and intensify competition in underwriting, risk management, and customer experience.

CRUCIALLY, IT will also bring access to global best practices — from sophisticated underwriting models and digital claims platforms to advanced risk-assessment tools — enhancing the industry's resilience and service quality.

TOGETHER, THESE shifts lay the groundwork for a more customer-centric and technologically robust insurance ecosystem.

Sitharaman had announced the FDI hike in the insurance sector earlier this year. EXPRESS

Key Point

The Bill is likely to be silent on the long-awaited proposal to allow large firms to establish captive insurance entities.

•

Captive insurers — wholly owned insurance subsidiaries created to insure risks of parent companies — are widely used to manage complex exposures, lower insurance costs, and control underwriting and claims.

• LAW

Concerns around Karnataka's expansive Bill to tackle hate speech

Apurva Vishwanath
New Delhi, December 14

THE KARNATAKA government on Wednesday tabled in the Legislative Assembly a first-of-its-kind legislation to tackle hate speech. The Karnataka Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill, 2025 states that its objective is to "curb and prevent dissemination, publication or promotion of hate speech" and provide adequate compensation to the injured victims.

The Bill also empowers the government to take down online content deemed as hate speech.

Broad definition

The Bill seeks to define hate crime as "communication of hate speech" which includes "any expression which is made, published, or circulated, in words either spoken or written or by signs or by visible representations or through electronic communication or otherwise, in public view, with an intention to cause injury, disharmony or feelings of enmity or hatred or ill-will against person alive or dead, class or group of persons or community, to meet any prejudicial interest."

The law further defines "prejudicial interest" to include bias on the grounds of religion, race, caste or community; sex, gender, sexual orientation, place of birth, residence, language, disability, or tribe. It exempts "bona fide artistic creativity, performance or other form of expression," "any academic or scientific inquiry; fair and accurate reporting or commentary", or proselytisation.

This definition is broader than the clutch of provisions that are currently invoked to tackle hate speech in the absence of a specific provision. These include Section 299 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (outrage religious feelings) and Section 298 (damage or defilement of a place of worship).

In law, overbroad definitions that seek to regulate fundamental freedoms can often result in their arbitrary application and misuse. The police, who apply this law at the first instance, should be able to decipher illegality from a valid expression of free speech. Vague definitions also have a chilling effect on citizens as a whole.

Government's takedown powers

The Bill extends fresh powers to the state government to block or remove "hate crime materials." A designated officer shall have the power to direct any service provider, intermediaries, person or entity to remove the materials from its domain, including electronic media. The process to challenge such blocking orders is bureaucratic and often involves affected individuals going to court. Generally, the 2009 Information Technology Rules provide guidelines for when the government decides to prohibit content.

Significantly, the Bill seeks to punish organisations and institutions collectively for "hate crimes." Here, institutions are loosely defined as "association of persons whether registered or not". The provision carves out an important exception that no person will be punished if he proves that the offence was committed without his knowledge, or that he had exercised all due diligence to prevent the commission of such offence. However, this shifts the onus of having to prove one's innocence to the accused.

Greater punishment

The Karnataka Bill states that a hate crime shall be punished with a mandatory minimum imprisonment of one year, which may extend to seven years, along with a fine of Rs 50,000. For subsequent offences, the punishment shall not be less than two years, which may extend to 10 years, with a fine of one lakh rupees.

The BNS provisions that are invoked for hate speech cases do not carry a sentence of more than three years in jail. The enhanced punishment in this Bill matters, since the Supreme Court has, in several rulings, underlined the "bail, not jail," adage for offences which carry a sentence of less than seven years.

A set of directions on a liberal scheme for bail to protect procedural fairness is known as the Arnesh Kumar guidelines, which other states have also attempted to circumvent. The Assam government has been invoking the law on sedition Section 152 of the BNS, which pertains to "acts endangering the sovereignty unity and integrity of India", a charge similar to "sedition" under the earlier Indian Penal Code (IPC) to target alleged "hate speech."

The key question is whether a new, additional law would be effective in combating hate speech.

The Supreme Court's recent interventions have mostly been around the institution of cases.

In 2022, a Bench of Justices KM Joseph and Hrishikesh Roy observed that a "climate of hate prevails in the country" and directed the police chiefs of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand to take *suo motu* action against hate speech cases without waiting for formal complaints. The issue flagged in these cases was whether state governments were coloured in how they applied the law in specific cases, and not that the existing laws were inadequate.

Key changes

• The definition of hate speech under the new Bill is broader than the provisions previously invoked to deal with hate speech cases.

• The quantum of punishment is also greater compared with the earlier provisions. Subsequent offences can invite imprisonment extending up to 10 years.

• ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

How AI tool developed with Microsoft is helping Maharashtra police solve crime

Ankita Deshkar
Nagpur, December 14

MICROSOFT CHAIRMAN and CEO Satya Nadella on Friday announced the statewide rollout of its AI-powered investigation platform for the Maharashtra Police, extending next-generation cybercrime tools to all 1,100 police stations across the state. The platform, called MahaCrimeOS AI, was developed jointly with the Maharashtra government and its specialised AI policing initiative, MARVEL (Maharashtra Research and Vigilance for Enhanced Law Enforcement).

What is MahaCrimeOS AI?

Since April this year, police personnel in Nagpur Rural have been using MahaCrimeOS AI, a customised crime-investigation system built with Microsoft Foundry. It helps officers process complaints faster, analyse complex data, and follow investigative procedures more efficiently, capabilities that are essential in cybercrime cases.

MARVEL was created in 2024 for integrating advanced technology into policing. The Maharashtra government and Microsoft have signed an MoU to establish three AI Centres of Excellence. As a part of this initiative, MARVEL has worked to adapt CrimeOS AI, developed by CyberEye, a Microsoft AI partner, to finetune it for compliance with state investigation protocols and further configure it in Marathi for easy adoption across the force.

MahaCrimeOS AI ingests complaints in any format, such as PDFs, audio, handwritten notes or images, and then uses multimodal intelligence to extract critical information in any language. The system adapts investigation paths, automates analysis, and profiles persons of interest with speed and efficiency.

How does MahaCrimeOS AI work?

Speaking to *The Indian Express*, Harssh Poddar, Superintendent of Police (Nagpur Rural) and *ex officio* director and CEO of MARVEL said, "The platform takes over several routine administrative tasks, which helps officers focus more on solving crimes and assisting victims. When an investigator logs in, they see a clear dashboard of all their active cases, any new updates, and pending actions."

In Nagpur Rural, 127 officers have already been trained to use the system, and it has been used in 261 cases so far. In one notable case, a bank clerk from Saoner in Nagpur district was cheated of Rs 38 lakh. Using MahaCrimeOS AI, officers analysed telecom data and collected open-source intelligence to identify the accused, who were eventually traced to Nashik and a city in Gujarat and were arrested.

One of the most important features of MahaCrimeOS AI is its ability to read a Marathi FIR and automatically generate a detailed investigation plan. The system prepares this plan using Maharashtra Police protocols and guidelines issued by the High Court and Supreme Court for each type of crime.

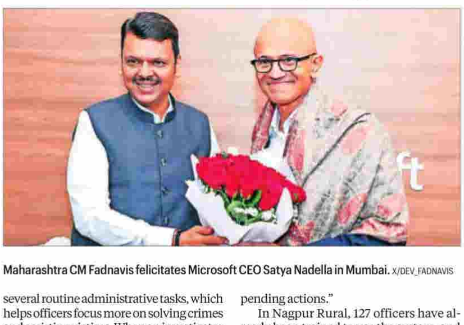
Poddar explained that earlier, in complex cases such as narcotics, cybercrime, crimes against women or financial fraud, investigating officers often had to wait for senior officials to review files and provide instructions. With the AI copilot, an investigation plan is generated immediately, guiding officers on the next steps, such as which statements to record, which bank accounts to freeze and what social media profiles to examine.

The platform also analyses telecom data and identifies interlinkages within it, which is crucial for complex crimes. It can gather open-source intelligence for undetected cases by tracing phone numbers across social media platforms and e-commerce websites, helping officers find more information about suspects.

It is also capable of preparing time-stamped, date-wise case diaries for submission in court, and it incorporates best practices from judicial guidelines into investigation plans.

By automating time-consuming tasks and speeding up investigation planning, MahaCrimeOS AI shortens the overall investigation period.

The system has currently been built for four complex crime categories, namely narcotics, cybercrime, crimes against women, and financial fraud, but new models are being developed to expand its use to other kinds of crimes as well.



Maharashtra CM Fadnavis felicitates Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella in Mumbai. X/DEV_FADNAVIS

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NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

JUSTICE BR GAVAI

Justice Bhushan Ramkrishna Gavai, who recently retired as the 52nd Chief Justice of India (CJI), left a lasting imprint on the country's judicial landscape through some landmark judgements. Only the second Dalit to hold the post of CJI, his ruling calling for extending the creamy layer principle to SC reservations, came under much debate and discussion. His brief but eventful tenure as CJI offers interesting insights into judicial conduct. As the judiciary's role as constitutional guardian keeps expanding, his opinions will continue to matter

ON JUDGEMENTS BEING OVERRULED

There is no question of finality to judgements. The framers of the Constitution said that it should not be a static document. It has to be organic, evolving and developing

ON JUDICIAL FAVOURITISM

If somebody is related to a judge, that cannot act as a disqualification. We set a higher standard for such candidates. Neither did I participate in the proceedings of the enquiry nor was I part of the resolution

'Scrutiny should not affect judges. They are answerable to their conscience... not whether people will like their decision'

BR Gavai, former Chief Justice of India, on laying clear guidelines on bulldozer justice, relaxing the firecracker ban in the Capital and how there can never be a government veto in judicial appointments. The conversation was moderated by Ananthakrishnan G, Senior Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express*

BR Gavai, former Chief Justice of India (right) in conversation with Ananthakrishnan G, Senior Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express* RENUKA PURI

Ananthakrishnan G: How do you think the three institutions — Executive, Legislature and Judiciary — are trying to protect the Constitution and democracy today?

In April, one of the constitutional functionaries (former VP Jagdeep Dhankar) was saying that 'Parliament is supreme and not the courts.' I had said in many of my speeches that it is only the Constitution which is supreme and all three wings work under the Constitution.

Ananthakrishnan G: Could you tell us a bit about your growing-up years?

I come from humble beginnings. When I was born in 1960, my father had already devoted himself to the cause of the development of the downtrodden. He was associated with Dr Ambedkar. At that time, our financial condition was not that good. I started my schooling at a municipal school in a semi-slum area in Amravati. After that he was elected in 1964 to the Legislative Council, and in 1968, he became the Deputy Chairman. Thereafter, we shifted to Mumbai and I could get a better education. I completed law from Amaravati University and started practising initially in Mumbai and then shifted to Nagpur.

Ananthakrishnan G: Recently, some Benches said that there is no finality to Supreme Court (SC) judgements if one keeps on overruling them.

There is no question of finality to judgements. The framers of the Constitution said that it should not be a static document. It has to be organic, evolving and developing. One of the first judgements the SC delivered in the case Sankari Prasad Singh Deo vs Union of India and State of Bihar, the then Chief Justice HJ Kania said that the Constitution has to change itself to the situations as demanded by the socio-economic changes. Therefore, the law has been evolving and developing. The dissent of the '70s has now become the majority's views. Right from 1950 in the case of Sankari Prasad, then subsequently in the case of Sajjan Singh vs State of Rajasthan (1965), the law that was laid down was that Parliament has the authority to amend any part of the Constitution, including any fundamental rights... Thereafter, in the Golaknath case, the 11-judge bench held that the powers of the Parliament to amend the Constitution are restricted and it cannot be in a manner that will take away or breach fundamental rights. Subsequently in Kesavananda Bharati vs State of Kerala (1973), when a 13-judge bench was divided, where six said that Parliament's powers to amend the Constitution are unlimited while the other six said that the Parliament's powers are limited and that they cannot amend the Constitution where it breaches the fundamental rights, it was the 13th judge, Justice HR Khanna's view that led to the Basic Structure Doctrine ruling that Parliament can amend the Constitution but cannot alter its fundamental, unamenable core, like democracy, secularism, and judicial independence. So the law has to evolve. The judges are only human beings. If an earlier judgment is found to be not in accordance with the law, there is nothing wrong in laying down the new law... It is nothing to be touchy about.

Vikas Pathak: About your judgement on bulldozer justice, are you satisfied with how things have panned out? Is the Executive sometimes still acting without due process?

We have laid down clear guidelines in that judgement about the procedure that needs to be followed if the Executive wants to go for demolition. If the Executive does not conform to it, it is clearly contempt of court. We had also laid down that if any officer violates the order, he/she would be personally held guilty of contempt and the government needed to reconstruct the demolished house and recover it from the salary of the officers.

Vikas Pathak: About the sub-classification of SCs and STs: you were part of the bench that reversed EV Chinnaiah's position. Before Chinnaiah, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana tried it. There was a lot of criticism and people said that it divides Dalits as a political entity while those in favour said that it deepened the representation. How do you look at that position today?

In Andhra Pradesh, a major part of the reservations provided for SCs was taken away only by one or two castes. In Punjab, the two castes were not at all being represented in the SCs. We have now completed over 75 years of freedom. The affirmative action or reservation is one of the facets of Article 14 which was developed through the case of NM Thomas vs State of Kerala (1976). It was held that equality does not mean equal treatment to everyone. Equality means equal treatment to those who are equal and in the real sense it would mean giving unequal treatment to unequals.

The concept of affirmative action was that if somebody is already at 10 km, (and) due to social handicap, social backwardness, a person is at 0 km, then in order to provide him (latter) a speedier way, he is given a bicycle to reach the mark of 10 km. And once he reaches that 10 km, then he should equate himself with those already there. But what has happened over the past 75 years is that only certain castes reap the benefits. I have been very widely criticised for my judgement even from my own community. But a judgement has to be written as per the law and the Constitution. I also introduced the concept of creamy layer (for SCs). I was criticised that I was a Governor's son and despite that, I took advantage of the reservation. Those allegations were made without reading the constitutional provisions. The Constitution does not provide reservation to any constitutional post.

Vikas Pathak: Could you elaborate on upholding the demonetisation judgement? It was criticised in terms of policy including by former PM and economist Dr Manmohan Singh.

The law is well settled in policy matters unless the policy is found to be palpably arbitrary, manifestly illegal or mala fide. So the scope of interference by courts was very limited. We found that there were no issues with the law. When you are scrutinising the policy with regard to economic matters, the scope is still narrowed. But it was decided purely on the questions of law, not on individual perceptions. And it was decided by a bench and the decision was 4:1.

Vineet Bhalla: In one particular case, you wrote a letter to one of the judges and then the judge said in the court that 'because of the letter from the CJI, I am changing my judgement'. There have been criticisms of forum shopping and about lack of finality of SC's judgements and that Article 141 is being weakened.

As for the first incident, it was an internal communication between the CJI and the concerned judge. Both the judges are constitutional functionaries. As the Chief Justice of India, you are not only first among the equals, but also the head of the judiciary in the country. I personally felt that it was my duty to protect the dignity, honour of the High Court judges, and therefore, it was only an internal communication. As far as the two judgments that you are referring to, when they came up for review, the judge had already retired, so there was only one judge. As CJI, you also have a responsibility to see that the law is settled. In the first matter, the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) was enacted in 2016. So from 2016 onwards, the law has consistently progressed. The wisdom of the Committee of Creditors (CoC) cannot be questioned, is the law which has been held right from the Swiss Ribbons case... So, if there are two conflicting judgments of equal strength, then it is more appropriate that the matter has to be heard by a three-judge bench. In a similar matter, in one court, you may get relief, in the other, you may not get relief. But as far as the final hearing matters and the laying down of the law is concerned, there has to be consistency...We have to adapt to the changing circumstances. No doubt that the law has to be consistent. But if the situation is demanding, the law has to be changed.

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Vineet Bhalla: While you filled up many seats in High Courts, there were questions about some appointments made to the Bombay High Court. Three judges were supposedly close to you. Another was a former spokesperson of the BJP. Also, Collegium resolutions would mention the reasons behind transfers and appointments. Why has that stopped?

While making an appointment or transfer, we take various factors into consideration. Inputs from the government, the IB, the Law and Justice Department, then the chief ministers and governors are considered. Normally, two-thirds of the candidates are appointed from lawyers. So after the tentative observations, we get that for reason A or B, the person is not suitable. But putting that in the public domain — would it not amount to condemning somebody publicly? It may affect their practice. In order to bring greater transparency, during Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna's period, we introduced the system of interaction with the candidates.

As far as the two candidates close to me are concerned, one was distantly related, and the other was my chamber junior. If somebody is related to a judge, that cannot act as a disqualification if he is otherwise eligible. We set a higher standard for such candidates. Neither did I participate in the proceedings of the enquiry nor was I part of the resolution. As far as the spokesperson of BJP is concerned, just because you have a political background, it cannot be a ground for disqualification. I also have a political background. My father was a leader of the Republican Party of India (RPI). He was closely associated with Congress. I don't think that in my 22 years of judicial career, my political ideology has affected my decision-making.

ON GOVERNMENT'S PUSH FOR NJAC

'The collegium system has worked well. With regard to the allegations of lack of transparency, we have tried to introduce interaction with the candidates. It is not as if the government views are totally neglected'

Ashish Shaji: Looking back at the shoe-throwing incident, when the highest court of the country can be attacked for expressing a view, how do you think a judge in the trial court passes judgments without fear?

This is not a norm. The litigants respect the institution and this was an aberration.

Shyamlal Yadav: What do you think of the representation of SCs/STs in the higher judiciary? Also, is reservation not able to play any role in eliminating caste discrimination?

The zone of consideration from where we get the candidates is limited. From the marginal communities, women have started practising in the higher courts. Out of the 96 appointments made during my period, there is a substantial representation for SCs and OBCs. We were also able to get some ST and nomadic tribe candidates appointed besides substantial representation to women. As and when the zone of consideration becomes wider and more candidates are available, the representation would be more. As long as there is politics, the caste system will remain.

Aakash Joshi: In the polarised times of today, when the perception of the court's role as a guarantor of rights is less, how do you see the role of the higher judiciary, both in terms of being more scrutinised as well as having more responsibility?

Scrutiny should not affect the judges. They are answerable to their conscience. They have to decide as per the law, the Constitution. They are not supposed to decide on the basis of whether people will like their decision or not. Judges are watchdogs of the Constitution. They are expected to protect the rights of the citizens. Whenever the question of liberty came and whenever the misuse of the agencies was being done for political reasons, I have always frowned upon such things.

Monojit Majumdar: Where do you see the position on NJAC because the government is quite certain to make another push for it?

The collegium system has worked well. With regard to the allegations of lack of transparency, we have tried to introduce certain new things. We interact with the candidates. It is not as if the government views are totally neglected. Even after we recommend a name, if the government has concerns, we take those into consideration. As to what lies in the future, I cannot say.

Raj Kamal Jha: In the NJAC debate, how confident are you that there will never be a government veto in judicial appointments?

There can't be. One of the basic structures of the Constitution — apart from the separation of three wings — is also the independence of the judiciary. If you go through the Constitution, Dr Ambedkar had emphasised that the judiciary has to be independent. So I don't think that any such absolute thing would be permissible.

Raj Kamal Jha: When you have a strong government in terms of numbers, the Opposition often complains there are no strong checks and balances. Does a weak Opposition put the judiciary in a tighter spot than if there were a stronger Opposition?

I personally don't think so. The judiciary has been discharging its duties, whether the Opposition is strong or not. A judge has to be independent. It is not necessary that every judgment he writes has to be against the government. The judges decide in accordance with the cases, in accordance with the law as they perceive and the Constitution. The right to liberty is stronger than the restrictions which are put in the statutes on the grant of bail. And personal liberty cannot be compromised... there shouldn't be punishment without the trial. Whether the government is majoritarian or not, we decide in accordance with the law.

Monojit Majumdar: Regarding allegations of corruption or the errant behaviour of judges, there is impeachment or nothing. Do you think it is time to consider some other mechanism?

It can't be on the judicial side because impeachment has been provided in the Constitution to ensure independence of the judiciary. But if Parliament finds that this is not sufficient, it's always permissible to amend the Constitution.

Amaal Sheikh: You were in the bench that relaxed the firecracker ban in Delhi. Do you think the order overlooked the reality of pollution?

The court has been monitoring the issue for more than a decade. A three-judge bench in 2020, after considering all the aspects and reports, had permitted the use of crackers. Then a year later, the two-judge bench imposed a total ban. I always believe that when we pass the orders, the orders should also be practical. I live in the Lutyens' zone, so when there was a total ban, I could hear the noise of the crackers. So, this time when the government of India and the Union of India requested the court that at least on a trial basis, it should be permitted, we permitted for a window of two days. We also directed that a study should be done of the AQI levels.

Aakash Joshi: What are your thoughts on post-retirement posts for judges. Does it raise some doubt about the motive of a judgement?

It depends upon individual perception. I was very clear from day one from the day I took oath as a judge of the SC that I will not be accepting any post-retirement assignment from the government.

Shalini Langer: An egregious example of bail being denied for long periods without hearing would be the Umar Khalid case. Do you think in some cases denial of bail has itself become a punishment?

There is a law I have laid down in the case of one of the politicians from Delhi. It is a detailed judgement which is law of the land unless it is reversed by a larger bench. But where individual cases are concerned, I can't comment because they are pending before the SC.

Time to pause

The RBI should wait to see the impact of lower interest rates on demand

Retail inflation in November 2025 came in at its second-lowest level, of 0.7%, ever recorded in this series of data, following up on October, which saw the lowest-ever rate of inflation. There are a few different takeaways from this data. The first is that the statistical base effects resulting in such abnormally low inflation levels will soon wane. For example, inflation in October and November 2024 was 6.2% and 5.5%, respectively. Since then, however, it slid steadily every month to reach 1.6% in July 2025. This, in essence, means that the statistical high base effect keeping inflation down will wear off between now and July 2026. The other factor to keep in mind is how skewed the current Consumer Price Index (CPI) is. The food and beverages category accounts for nearly 46% of the weightage in the index, which means that whatever happens to that category has an inordinately high impact on the overall inflation rate. For example, food prices contracted 2.8% in November 2025, dragging down the entire index. However, this contraction in food prices was statistical, since it was on a high base of 8.2% in November last year. The next year is likely to see a radically different inflation number. The government is expected to release the new series of the CPI in the first quarter of 2026-27. This new series will update the base year to 2024 from the earlier highly outdated 2012. The weightages will also be rejigged to better represent the consumption behaviour of Indians, which means food will not play such an overwhelming role in determining the inflation rate. Finally, the new base year will also mean statistical base effects will be addressed.

That said, the current inflation data is what the Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has to go on. In its December 2025 meeting, the MPC decided to cut interest rates by 25 basis points to 5.25%. The MPC will meet again in February 2026. Despite its prediction that economic growth is going to slow in the second half of the year, the MPC should nevertheless pause its rate cuts in February. Over 2025, it has cut rates by 125 basis points, the most significant such cuts since 2019. It should now wait to see whether these lower rates do spur demand and investment as they percolate through the system. The second reason in favour of a pause is that Budget 2026 would have just been passed, and so the MPC should allow the impact of fiscal policy be felt before further tweaking India's monetary policy. Finally, the MPC should take time to study the new CPI series, when it comes, to see how rate cuts might impact the new index and its redistributed weights.

An anomaly

The Centre must make burnt-area estimates of stubble public

In a statement to Parliament, the Environment Ministry said that Punjab and Haryana had collectively reduced "fire incidences" by 90% in 2025 compared to 2022. This is in reference to the burning of farm stubble, a traditional shortcut to quickly shed fields of paddy remnants and prepare them for a second crop – in this case, wheat – but that has in the last decade and a half been linked to spikes in air pollution in October-November in Delhi and surrounding cities.

As part of steps to address this, the Centre and the State governments have been employing a carrot-and-stick approach – fining farmers but, simultaneously, also providing subsidised farm equipment, combined harvesters and tractors as well as incentivising them to collect stubble and sell them to thermal plants for co-firing. There is little direct evidence to show that these measures have reduced the contribution of stubble burning to Delhi's post-monsoon air quality. That would require using mass-spectrograph measures to analyse the chemical make-up of pollutants over time and trace the weightage of stubble burning. That analysis is unavailable and so the government has been using proxies such as counting whether the number of active fires visible by satellites have been declining to evaluate this metric. Since 2020 there has been a decline in fires in Punjab and Haryana, prompting the government to take credit. It turns out that this was a pyrrhic victory. When images from a different satellite were used to compute another parameter called 'burnt area' – the actual land area that had been burned – the reduction was a more gradual 30%: from about 31,500 square kilometres in 2022 to 19,700 sq.km in 2025 (as of November 25, this year), an independent research outfit has found. Using data from another set of satellites called Meteosat, unambiguous evidence emerged that farm fires had shifted towards the evening. Unlike the other satellites, which orbit the poles, this one is 'geostationary', meaning it continuously looks at the same spot. The Centre has been using fire count-reduction based on polar-satellite data, which passes through India between 10 a.m. and 1.30 p.m. Since 2022, reports had been emerging that farmers had shifted their burning towards evening precisely to avoid detection by these satellites. The Supreme Court of India, when apprised of this in 2024, had expressly told Environment Ministry bodies to ascertain 'burnt area' to gauge stubble burning trends. Moreover, given that satellites have different resolution powers, there is no knowing what the true count of fires is at present. The Centre, however, has still not made year-wise burnt-area estimates public. Being disingenuous with data will only accelerate the erosion of public confidence in the government's claim on tackling air pollution. The Centre must immediately move to address this.

Courts must protect, not regulate free speech

Kaleeswaram Raj

is a lawyer at the Supreme Court of India

Thulasi K. Raj

is a lawyer at the Supreme Court of India

Freedom of speech is vital for any democracy. The suspect for any attack on the right to free speech is usually the executive or the legislature. However, the proceedings of the Supreme Court of India, in *Ranveer Allahbadia vs Union of India* and other cases have raised the worry that the potential risks of endangering speech could emerge from the Court itself. On November 27, 2025, the Court said that self-styled bodies are insufficient for regulation of online content and suggested the creation of neutral, autonomous bodies. It also suggested that the Government publish the draft regulatory guidelines and invite comments.

Existing laws and regulation

In India, the existing laws already regulate various aspects of speech. Section 67 of the Information Technology Act and Sections 294, 295 and 296 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) penalise obscenity. On online regulation in particular, Sections 66 of the Information Technology Act prohibits computer-related offences such as hacking and 66E of the Act prohibits publishing personal images of others. Section 66F of the same Act penalises cyber terrorism. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules were also promulgated in 2021 though they are criticised for their overreaching interference and penal provisions.

Under these rules, there is already an oversight mechanism by the Centre. These rules also impose prior restraint. To illustrate, as per clause II (c) under the appendix of the Rules, a publisher should take " due caution and discretion" while dealing with "activities, beliefs, practices or views of any racial or religious group". Despite the existence of these and other provisions, any attempt at further regulating the right to freedom of speech and expression must be subject to critical analysis, especially when it comes from the Court.

The first concern is about the nature of the case under consideration. The Bench was dealing with a plea challenging the First Information Reports at the instance of persons who are accused of improper or obscene content. The question of online content regulation was not originally the subject matter of such a case.

However, in the earlier proceedings on March 3, 2025, the Court said that it would "extend the scope" of the case to examine the question of what regulatory measures are required to prevent broadcasting which are "offensive to well-known moral standards of our society". This expansion is problematic at the outset. Identifying the problems of content and regulation is something that falls in the legislative domain. In Common Cause vs Union of India (2008), the Court cautioned itself: "Apart from the doctrine of separation of powers, courts must realize that there are many problems before the country which courts cannot solve, however much they may like to." When the Court takes on this task, it is limited by inherent institutional barriers, including that of technical expertise in the field of online media regulation. The Court's obstinacy for regulations in the field also would be vitiated by the same limitations.

> Any attempt at further regulating the right to freedom of speech and expression must be scrutinised, especially when it comes from the top court

The second is about the thin line between regulation and unlawful restraint. A five judge Bench of the Court in *Sahara India Real Estate Corp. Ltd.& Ors. vs Securities & Exch. Board Of India & Anr.*, (2012) had considered in detail the question whether regulation of media content is desirable. Being conscious of the dangers of blanket prohibition, the Court held that pre-censorship of the media must be avoided at all costs. In the context of court reporting, it was held that the postponement orders directed at the media must be done only as a last resort and must satisfy a high threshold of reasonableness.

An outline in the Constitution

Also, the grounds based on which the right to free speech can be restricted are laid down by the Constitution in Article 19(2). This consists of interests of sovereignty, security of the state, public order, defamation and others expressly enumerated. The Court itself, speaking through a five judge Bench in *Kaushal Kishor* (2023) held that additional restrictions beyond what is expressly laid down in Article 19(2) could not be imposed. It was categorically held: "The grounds lined up in Article 19(2) for restricting the right to free speech are exhaustive. Under the guise of invoking other fundamental rights or under the guise of two fundamental rights staking a competing claim against each other, additional restrictions not found in Article 19(2) cannot be imposed on the exercise of the right conferred by Article 19(1)(a) upon any individual."

It is interesting to note that on previous occasions, the Court has effectively restrained itself from venturing into blanket prohibitory measures. In *Adarsh Co-operative Housing Society Ltd. vs Union of India and Others* (2018), when a suggestion was made by a counsel urging the court to direct the film-makers to add a disclaimer before the movie, the Court repelled it.

It said that it is for the Censor Board and not for the Court to decide it, and even the Censor Board could decide it only after hearing the producer or the director of the movie.

Validity of the laws are to be determined by the Court as the constitutional umpire. During the Constituent Assembly debates, Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava said that "the Supreme Court should ultimately be the arbiter and should have the final say" in situations of challenging the restrictions on freedom, by saying whether "the restrictions put are reasonable" (Constituent Assembly Debates. December 1, 1948). This is the scheme of Article 19 of the Constitution as well. Therefore, constitutional propriety demands that the Court abstains not only from the process of law making but also from the deliberation on the requirement for a law touching the citizen's freedom.

The case abroad

The Court's persuasive demand for further stringent laws in a tricky area could instigate prior censorship or statutory gag. Almost all the major democracies across the world focus on removal of offensive content and penalisation in case of breaching the order for removal of content. The Digital Services Act, 2022 promulgated by the European Union prescribes content removal protocols. The Network Enforcement Act, 2017 in Germany ensures prompt action on harmful content, without adversely impacting free speech. The Online Safety Act, 2023 of the United Kingdom focuses on removal of harmful content and imposing a fine in case of breach. The Online Safety Act, 2021 in Australia imposes a fine on non-compliance with regulation. Unlike these practices in democracies, countries such as China and Russia are invoking draconian laws to restrict online content. Surveillance and pre-censorship also dominate the online content regulation in these jurisdictions. Sadly, even some of the democracies which transform into autocracies also follow suit. David Landau and Rosalind Dixon, in a research paper, demonstrated that "would- be authoritarians at times seek to capture courts and deploy them in abusive ways as part of a broader project of democratic erosion...." (Abusive Judicial Review: Courts Against Democracy, 53 UC Davis Law Review 1313 (2020).

When the Court repeatedly asks for stringent laws to regulate Internet content and when the Centre readily agrees, it is a serious concern in terms of a citizen's freedom. Author Salman Rushdie, when censored, has put it succinctly – "Free Speech is the whole thing, the whole ball game. Free speech is life itself ."

The right moment to boost India-Ethiopia ties

Gurjit Singh

is an author and a former Ambassador to Ethiopia and the African Union

Ethiopia, with a population of around 109 million (2024) and as one of Africa's fastest-growing economies, is of growing strategic and economic interest to major partners, including India. Its substantial manufacturing base, large domestic market, and geographic position in the Horn of Africa make it one of the continent's pivotal states.

Despite internal challenges, Ethiopia continues to be viewed as a regional anchor of stability with an effective military, and a central role in the evolving politics of a subregion marked by conflict. It is also the headquarters of the African Union and a potential renewable-energy powerhouse, especially in hydropower, positioning it to become an important regional energy exporter.

Although landlocked, Ethiopia has traditionally relied on Djibouti for access to the Red Sea. Recent efforts to diversify access through Somaliland and Eritrea underline its desire to secure strategic autonomy in trade and logistics. Politically, the country is emerging from the traumas of civil conflict and is attempting to build a new national consensus. This regeneration provides an important window for enhancing India-Ethiopia engagement across multiple domains.

Deep ties with India

India's relationship with Ethiopia has deep and long-standing roots. For more than a century, Indian teachers and university professors have formed the backbone of Ethiopia's education system, shaping generations of students and earning enormous respect. Although the number of Indian teachers has declined, Ethiopia's interest in educational collaboration remains high. Ethiopia was the pilot country for the Pan-African e-Network project in 2007 and has maintained long-term cooperation with IIT Delhi for tele-education, demonstrating strong receptivity to modern educational technologies.

Today, Ethiopia sends one of the highest numbers of African students to India, often through government-funded programmes. Remarkably, it has the largest number of PhD students from Africa studying in India. Ethiopia also successfully used graduates from the Pan-African e-Network's Master's programmes to help staff newly opened universities and academic departments.

Expanding this education partnership – through digital learning, vocational training, university linkages and new scholarship frameworks – remains one of the most promising avenues for bilateral cooperation.

> With Ethiopia attempting to build a new national consensus, its engagement with India can be developed across multiple domains

Investment and defence cooperation

Indian investment in Ethiopia is another pillar of the partnership. Indian businesses first ventured into Ethiopia in the 1950s, but the real surge came after India extended major lines of credit beginning in 2006. These catalysed a wave of private investment that surpassed $4 billion. Ethiopian leaders continue to acknowledge the positive developmental impact of Indian investors, particularly at a time when International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionalities require the country to mobilise new capital. While earlier investments focused heavily on agriculture, many investors withdrew due to taxation and operational issues.

Today, the most promising opportunities lie in mining – especially gold, critical minerals, and rare earth elements – which is an area where Ethiopia has vast but underexplored potential. The Indian Embassy's recent comprehensive mining survey identifies key opportunities while noting regulatory, infrastructural, and logistics constraints that must be addressed. If India can work with Ethiopia to commission and operate selected mines, this could help secure supplies for India's fast-growing renewable energy, battery, and semiconductor sectors. Mining cooperation could become a core element of a strategic economic partnership.

Defence cooperation is another promising frontier. Ethiopia was one of the first foreign countries to receive Indian military assistance, beginning with the establishment of the Harar Military Academy in 1956. Since 2009, Indian defence teams have supported the training of Ethiopian forces. After years of demanding internal deployments and operations in Somalia, the Ethiopian military requires fresh training and modern equipment to replace aging Soviet-era systems. India, with its competitively priced and battle-tested platforms, is well placed to become a key supplier.

A new MoU on defence cooperation and the first meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee held this year provide an institutional framework for expanding training, capacity building, and defence exports. Ethiopia, which has responsibly repaid earlier Indian lines of credit under the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS) programme, could be considered for new defence-related lines of credit within IMF guidelines.

Potential for a new phase

As both countries enter new phases of development, and with Ethiopia now a member of BRICS, the moment is ripe to redefine the partnership. Ethiopian officials repeatedly express strong interest in attracting Indian investment, especially in pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, light manufacturing and mining.

India could help by updating bilateral agreements such as the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) and the Bilateral Investment Treaty to support private-sector engagement. Ethiopia, in turn, needs to address long-standing investor concerns related to foreign exchange availability, taxation, approvals, and consistency of regulations. The 2,500-strong and influential Indian diaspora, represented through the India Business Forum, continues to highlight foreign exchange accessibility as a key bottleneck.

At the multilateral level, expanding cooperation through BRICS, G-20 platforms, and South-South frameworks strengthens political convergence. Demonstrating success stories of Indian investment within Ethiopia and across Africa could help both countries build wider regional partnerships. Under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Ethiopian-based Indian companies can now access East African and continental markets more easily, making Ethiopia an attractive hub for Indian enterprises. In a rapidly changing global economy – marked by tightening regulations in the United States and European Union and uncertainty around arrangements such as African Growth and Opportunity Act – India's duty-free tariff preference scheme for Ethiopian exports remains important. Ethiopia can leverage this preferential access by welcoming more Indian investors, including in export-oriented manufacturing with buy-back arrangements.

Overall, the prospects for India-Ethiopia relations are bright. With renewed political will, targeted reforms, and strategic alignment, the partnership can evolve into one of the most dynamic and mutually beneficial relationships between India and Africa in the coming decade.

The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali at Johannesburg during the G-20 summit has catalysed the relationship again.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Kerala results

The results of the 2025 Kerala local body polls indicate the desire of the people of Kerala for change (Front page, December 14). It is remarkable that the Bharatiya Janata Party, largely driven by its religious ideology, has made an impact in the State. It would be interesting to see how the party evolves in the Assembly election and has a presence in the State's politics.

Upadhyayula Ramalakshmi,
Visakhapatnam

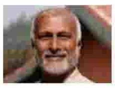
All the tall talk of development alone will not suffice as the people expected much more from the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government. There are several factors that had a role in the LDF's drubbing which includes the financial crunch due to lopsided priorities and the woes of farmers and government staff. In a nutshell, the people of Kerala have served a strong warning to the government to mend its ways.

Balakrishna Menon M.K.,
Tattamangalam, Palakkad, Kerala

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

A people-led climate intelligence movement

Supriya Sahu
Additional Chief Secretary, Environment, Climate Change and Forests Department, Government of Tamil Nadu



Pratim Roy
Co-founder of Keystone Foundation and a rural development expert and ecologist

Tabinda Bashir
Advisor, Climate Change and Energy - Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, U.K. Government

Globally, monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) systems have become central to climate transparency. Under the Paris Agreement, countries must track emissions, adaptation progress, and climate finance to show movement towards their Nationally Determined Contributions. COP30 reinforced this through the Global Implementation Tracker, the Belém Mission to 1.5°C, and voluntary indicators for the Global Goal on Adaptation.

India aligns with this direction, emphasising that stronger domestic MRV is essential both for transparency and for unlocking climate finance, while also underscoring that developing countries need substantial financial and technical support to build such systems. Also, climate finance must not only increase in scale but also shift power downwards to frontline communities like the Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. These communities who observe climate change daily and bear its greatest impacts must lead monitoring efforts, govern funds, and access resources that support local adaptation and environmental stewardship.

Yet, MRV systems still rely heavily on remote sensing, administrative datasets, and external expertise, leaving little room for community-generated insights. It is in this context that Tamil Nadu's community-based environmental MRV (CbMRV) initiative becomes relevant. It makes community-generated environmental intelligence a formal part of climate governance.

The CbMRV model

Across Tamil Nadu, climate change is reshaping daily life: in Erode, farmers describe rains collapsing into short, intense bursts, and increasing heat waves; along the Cuddalore coast, salinity is moving inland and shifting tides are affecting fish catch; and in the Nilgiris, tribal foragers report thinning forest moisture and erratic flowering cycles. These signals emerge first at the smallest ecological scales, yet policymaking relies on coarse datasets as climate intelligence has rarely been produced locally.

A new community-driven MRV framework is bringing real-time, village-scale environmental data into Tamil Nadu's climate governance system

CbMRV was created to change exactly that. It enables villages to generate systematic, science-ready environmental data. It weaves traditional ecological knowledge with field-based monitoring of rainfall, temperature, soil and water health, biodiversity, fish catch, cropping patterns, livelihoods, and even carbon stocks and emissions. This evidence is integrated into a digital dashboard that informs decision-making across village, district and State levels. CbMRV thus reframes governance as a partnership between communities and institutions, rather than a top-down exercise.

The initiative began in 2023 under the UK PACT programme, which enabled Tamil Nadu to pilot a community-based MRV system that could support just transition goals. In collaboration with Keystone Foundation and other scientific partners, three ecologically distinct landscapes were selected: Aracode in the Nilgiris (mountain forests), Vellode in Erode (agriculture and wetlands), and Killai in Cuddalore (mangroves and coastal fisheries).

In these locations, communities contributed generational knowledge that shaped the indicators, monitoring protocols and digital tools that now underpin CbMRV. Carbon feasibility studies were conducted in parallel to assess how reliable village-scale data could support future community-centred carbon projects. In less than three years, each pilot village has developed into a functional environmental knowledge hub, with trained monitors, field instruments and digital systems capable of generating real-time data.

Community climate stewards

A defining achievement of the initiative is the emergence of 35 key community stakeholders (KCS) – farmers, fishers, women, youth, elders, and tribal knowledge-holders – who now serve as first community climate stewards. They collect and interpret environmental data, and can identify trends, work with local institutions, and help translate information into daily decisions in the near future.

CbMRV is also reshaping how data flows through governance systems. At the panchayat level, it can complement Gram Panchayat Development Plans and programmes such as the Climate Resilient Village, strengthening vulnerability assessments, crop diversification decisions, and natural resource management. At the block and district levels, village-scale evidence can support watershed development, agricultural advisories, and disaster preparedness. At the State level, CbMRV can enhance the evidence base for the Tamil Nadu Climate Tracker, the State Action Plan on Climate Change, the Green Tamil Nadu Mission, coastal adaptation programmes and climate investment pathways under the Tamil Nadu Green Climate Company.

A key aim is long-term institutionalisation and the creation of a permanent green workforce. Training modules, applications, field protocols and dashboards developed under CbMRV are being proposed for integration into community colleges, Industrial Training Institutes, forestry and agricultural institutions, Panchayat Raj training centres, and State skill development programmes. With sustained support, community monitors can maintain long-term environmental baselines and eventually replicate the system across wider geographies.

When the tools of science are shared rather than concentrated, and when governance grows from the ground up, climate action becomes both more democratic and more resilient.

An unprecedented situation in Maharashtra

For the first time, there was no LOP in both Houses during the winter session

DATAPOINT

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
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The week-long winter session of the Maharashtra Legislature concluded on December 14 in Nagpur. For the first time in the history of the State, there was no Leader of the Opposition (LOP) in both the Houses. The 10% seat strength is not a rule, but a convention for a party to be formally recognised as the official Opposition party and to have a LOP. The Congress has 10% seats in the Upper House. As the ruling dispensation overlooks precedents and the Opposition fails to put together a united front, a key question arises: is the appointment of an LOP a democratic necessity or the Speaker's discretion?

"In a democracy, the Opposition is not only tolerated as constitutional, but must be maintained because it is indispensable. The best servants of the people, like the best valets, must whisper unpleasant truths in the master's ear," police commentator Walter Lippmann said in an essay, The Indispensable Opposition, in 1939.

In Maharashtra, the Opposition has been rallying against the government to seek the LOP position since last year in the Legislative Assembly, and over the last few months in the Legislative Council. During the winter session of the Assembly, the State witnessed an unprecedented situation for the first time since its formation in 1960: both Houses did not have an LOP.

The last Opposition leader in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly was Vijay Waddettiwar from the Congress. His term expired on November 26, 2024. In the Legislative Council, the term of Shiv Sena UBT leader Ambadas Danve as LOP ended on August 29, 2025. Maharashtra's legislative history shows that a LOP has, until now, generally been appointed without much delay.

Under the Leaders of Opposition in Maharashtra Legislature Salaries and Allowances Act, 1978, "The 'Leader of Opposition' in relation to either House of the State Legislature, means that member of the State Legislative Assembly or the State Legislative Council, as the case may be, who is for the time being the Leader in that House of the party in opposition to the State Government having the greatest numerical strength and recognised as such by the Speaker of the Assembly or the Chairman of the Council, as the case may be."

Last year, when the Speaker did not appoint an LOP after Mr. Waddettiwar's term ended, Shiv Sena UBT leader and contender for the post, Bhaskar Jadhav, wrote a letter to the Legislature Secretariat seeking in writing the rules and laws under which the appointment is made. In reply, Subhash Nalawade, Deputy Secretary of the Maharashtra Legislature Secretariat, said on December 9, 2024, "There is no specific provision for the choice of the Opposition Leader in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Rules. The honourable Speaker takes this decision after taking into consideration the prevalent parliamentary conventions and precedence." Political scientist Suhas Palshikar observed that precedents, convention, and goodwill play an important role during proceedings.

While the 10% majority is a convention, it has been overlooked in the past. In 1962, the Congress had a brute majority of 215 in a House of 264 seats. The single largest Opposition party was the Peasants and Workers Party of India, with 15 seats. Opposition parties then came together to form the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, which was granted the status of the official Opposition party and Krishnarao Dhulap was declared the LOP. Similar instances occurred in 1967 and 1972 as well.

This time, not only has the State's legislative precedent been overlooked, but the Opposition parties too have failed to come together to stake claim to the position. In the 2024 Assembly elections, the Shiv Sena UBT secured 20 seats, the Congress 16, and the NCP SP 10. But the letter for the LOP position has been given only by the Shiv Sena UBT. The current strength of the Legislative Assembly is 288.

In the upper House, the Congress has 10% of the total seats. It submitted a letter proposing the name of Bunty Patil for the position, on September 2. In a House of 78, the Congress has 8 MLCs, Shiv Sena UBT 5, and the NCP SP 2.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis has maintained that it is the discretion of the Speaker and the Chairperson of both the Houses to take the decision. Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar said that the Opposition party staking claim to the position should have 10% seats in the House.

Are methane emissions in India being missed?

Satellites show that emissions at key sites can be up to 10 times higher than estimates

DATA POINT

Suyash Nandgaonkar

What fuels landfill fires and is 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide over a 20-year period? The answer is methane. While it is an excellent fuel for kitchen stoves, CNG vehicles, and power plants, it is also busy burning the planet. Methane is generated naturally by decomposing organic matter. The same prehistoric processes that created natural gas reserves are now at work within landfills. Managing methane means not just cleaner cities but also a significant step toward our climate ambitions.

Around 15% of India's methane emissions are from the waste sector. Unlike the agriculture or energy sectors, which require complex, long-term reforms, waste management offers immediate gains through targeted action. Crucially, the policy frameworks and incentives are already in place through national programmes such as the Swachh Bharat Mission.

Targeted action is only possible if we know exactly where the hotspots are, but tracking an invisible gas is difficult. Historically, we have relied on models that estimate emissions by tracking incoming waste volumes and applying baseline assumptions. However, this approach depends on accurate, recurring data, which is often scarce in developing countries. Because such data are aggregated at the regional or national levels and updated infrequently, it makes pinpointing individual sources nearly impossible.

The alternative is physical monitoring, which is even more challenging in the Indian context. Ground-level detection requires expensive equipment, regular maintenance, and constant oversight, making it logistically and technically difficult to scale.

As technology advances, satellites are stepping into this gap. This data broadly fall into two categories: regional measurements that monitor methane over a few kilometers (frequent and useful for national trends), and fine-resolution detection that can pinpoint hotspots down to a few square meters (critical for targeted action).

Satellite data

India has already taken the first steps toward this opportunity. Last year, a paper published by scientists from ISRO quantified anthropogenic methane emissions across the country using satellite data that was acquired in 2023. Based on these measurements, the study identified major dumpsites in Pirana (Ahmedabad), Deonar and Kanjurmarg (Mumbai), and a sewage outlet as significant emitters. The National Green Tribunal took these findings further, establishing a committee to conduct ground investigations at the flagged sites.

Over the past few years, multiple new satellite missions have emerged, such as CarbonMapper's Tanager and the Space Research Organisation Netherlands (SRON) projects. These satellites provide public data covering major landfills across the country, including Ghazipur and Okhla in Delhi, Jawaharnagar in Hyderabad, and Dhapa in Kolkata. Platforms such as ClimateTRACE and WasteMap collate this global monitoring data, combining it with baseline statistics for advanced modeling. These newer models refine traditional calculations by integrating real-time satellite observations and updating landfill-specific estimates to reflect reality.

Globally, satellite surveys estimate that actual landfill emissions can exceed model-based predictions by around 1.8 times. In India, city-level comparisons are difficult due to a lack of granular data on waste characteristics. Consequently, we must rely on State-level estimates from 2018 for sector-wise breakdowns, as newer public data have not yet been compiled. This discrepancy between advanced satellite observations and older State models highlights a critical information gap: we currently cannot agree on the true scale of the numbers or the location of the hotspots.

The landfill at Bhalswa in northwest Delhi FILE PHOTO: SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Differing data

Take Delhi as an example: its 2018 emissions inventory estimates 1.07 million tons of CO_2 equivalent annually from the entire solid waste sector. Recent satellite observations, however, estimate emissions from just Ghazipur and Bhalswa alone to be between 0.85 and 0.96 million tons – almost as much as the sector's entire theoretical footprint. In Mumbai, the data offer a different perspective. While calculations suggest that the Kanjurmarg landfill accounts for 11% of the city's waste emissions, an expected number given its engineered design. However, satellite data show it to be emitting 1.05 million tons. This is almost 10 times the model's estimate and approximately half of the entire State's solid waste emissions. A similar discrepancy emerges in Ahmedabad: while Gujarat estimates 0.73 million tons for the entire sector, satellite observations show the Pirana landfill alone emitting between 0.60 and 0.81 million tons.

These are not just numbers. They indicate potential leakages, accelerated methane generation, or opportunities to refine our engineered systems.. Critically, these are hazards we never tackled simply because we did not know they existed. Now, we can not only gauge the magnitude of the problem but, in the case of large landfills, also pinpoint the exact source of the leaks, allowing for precise, targeted solutions.

By making data the backbone of our waste policy, we can turn one of our biggest environmental challenges into our smartest climate solution

Of course, these observations come with limitations. Cloud interference and complex weather dynamics mean that satellite data cannot fulfil its potential in isolation. Urban local bodies must complement these findings with ground-level insights, a step that is especially critical for the massive, unwieldy landfills of our metro cities. The real breakthrough lies in linking satellite detection with ground-level action.

Feedback loop

When satellites detect a methane hotspot, ground teams can immediately investigate the cause – whether it is poor waste coverage, a gas collection failure, or illegal dumping. This creates a powerful feedback loop: space-based detection guides targeted ground interventions, while ground data validate and improve satellite accuracy. Integrating other data sources beyond just methane monitoring can further enhance the efficiency of this loop.

At open dumpsites such as Ghazipur, recording dumping and reclamation patterns provides critical insight into how human activity drives methane generation. Meanwhile, at engineered landfills such as Jawaharnagar and Kanjurmarg, infrastructure data on existing gas collection systems can help pinpoint leaks and identify hidden hotspots. Cities such as Bengaluru, with their advanced waste management systems, are well-positioned to integrate these datasets to increase transparency.

To address this, we need coordinated action on three critical fronts: expanding satellite monitoring to cover all major waste sites, establishing on-ground validation systems in metro cities, and creating standardised data-sharing protocols between urban local bodies and oversight agencies.

Currently, urban local bodies operate in silos, separate from the State Pollution Control Boards that oversee them. This disconnect hinders coordinated action on methane reduction. However, the revised municipal waste guidelines already envision a centralised data portal for bulk waste management, handling the wet waste that is the primary source of untreated methane. This portal could be expanded to connect with a standardised nationwide dataset for tracking emissions. Regional bodies such as the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) in the NCR can oversee this monitoring, while the Swachh Bharat Mission can integrate methane targets, aligning them with other central schemes.

This integrated approach delivers multiple co-benefits that make the investment worthwhile. Methane's potential as a fuel is already recognised in policy. Just recently, Indore has utilised the Gobardhan scheme to set up a Bio-CNG plant from its waste.

This strategy creates a powerful ecosystem: satellites detect hotspots, ground teams investigate and fix leaks, and standardised data sharing ensures insights reach decision-makers instantly. What is needed now is coordinated implementation across these three fronts. By making data the backbone of our waste policy, we can turn one of our biggest environmental challenges into our smartest climate solution.

Suyash Nandgaonkar is a Senior Research and Policy Associate at the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (EPIC India)

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 15, 1975

Equipment to fight fire: T. Nadu proposal

New Delhi, Dec. 14: The need for taller ladders, hydraulic platforms and other sophisticated equipment for fire-fighting in skyscraper buildings has been highlighted by the Tamil Nadu Government in its note to the 18th meeting of the Standing Fire Advisory Committee to be held in Lucknow on Dec. 13.

Pointing out the difficult task faced by the fire services in Madras when the multi-storeyed building of the Life Insurance Corporation caught fire, the Tamil Nadu Government has proposed that such equipment should be bought by the Centre and supplied to the States.

In the State Government's view, the fire services should also be equipped with helicopters to cope with emergencies like rescue during the floods and fires in unapproachable places. In normal times, such aircraft could be loaned to the Agricultural Department.

The State Government has also suggested the replacement of mobile tank units of less than 4,500 litres capacity and fire tender with diesel engine driven appliances of higher capacity.

The Orissa Government has proposed the issue of licences by the Centre to the States for importing rescue equipment, especially rescue gear, which were not available indigenously.

These and other suggestions have already been considered by the Directorate-General for Civil Defence and would come up at the Lucknow meeting. The Deputy Home Minister, Mr. F.H. Mohsin, would preside over the deliberations.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 15, 1925

The Ceylon Boat Mail

The Ceylon Boat Mail arrived in Madras-Egmore to-day about four and a half hours late owing to transhipment of passengers on way. The mail was crowded with passengers, both in the upper classes and in the 3rd class. Through postal mails due to arrive in Madras to-day have also arrived by the mail. With regard to the through postal mails that ought to have arrived in Madras yesterday and the day before it is understood that on those days, owing to the breaches, they were sent back to Ceylon from Dhanushkodi to be brought via Tuticorin and they will be arriving shortly.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The growth in India's gems, jewellery exports in November

19.64 In per cent. India's gems and jewellery exports grew 19.64% to $2.5 billion in November compared to the same month last year. The overall exports of gems and jewellery were flat at $18.86 billion during the April-November period. PTI

Persons killed in a shooting attack on Sydney's Bondi Beach

11 Two gunmen shot dead at least 11 people on Sunday during a Jewish holiday celebration at Sydney's Bondi Beach, Australian authorities said, declaring it a terrorist attack. One gunman was fatally shot by police, and the second was arrested. The suspect was in critical condition. AP

Turnout recorded in Telangana's Gram Panchayat elections

85.86 In per cent. Over 85% of eligible voters exercised their franchise in the second phase of the gram panchayat elections in Telangana on Sunday. The elections concluded peacefully, and the counting of votes was underway. PTI

Foreigners still in detention since scam centre crackdown

1,655 Myanmar appealed to the international community to take back hundreds of foreigners who have been detained in a crackdown on scam centres in the Kayin state. While most have been deported, 1,655 are still in detention. PTI

Magnitude of the earthquake in Nepal's Manang district

4.7 A mild earthquake shook the Manang district of Gandaki province in central Nepal. There was no immediate news of damage from the earthquake area. The epicentre of the 4.7 magnitude quake was recorded at Thoche in Manang district at 12.54 pm. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Why are OBC lists in Bengal being scrutinised?

Why have communities, mainly Muslim, been recommended to be excluded from West Bengal's Central list of Other Backward Classes? What has the National Commission for Backward Classes said? Is there a clash between the current stance of the NCBC and the erstwhile NCBC of 2011?

EXPLAINER

Abhinay Lakshman

The story so far:

The National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) has recommended the exclusion of 35 communities, mostly Muslim, from West Bengal's Central list of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This information was revealed in the winter session of Parliament this year by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, which added that this advice was tendered by the Commission in January this year. This has come just months before West Bengal is set to vote in its next Assembly election in 2026. Moreover, the Supreme Court is in the middle of hearing pleas related to the manner in which certain communities were added to the State's OBC lists. It remains to be seen if the Union government will initiate steps to act on the Commission's recommendation.

Which communities have been excluded?

Officials of the NCBC have told *The Hindu* that the communities recommended by it for exclusion are part of a batch of communities that were added to the Central OBC list of West Bengal in 2014, just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections that year. "These are part of the Muslim communities that were added suspiciously. Maybe one or two of the communities recommended for exclusion are non-Muslim," said Hansraj Gangaram Ahir, under whose chairmanship the recommendation was made.

The batch of communities the NCBC is referring to is a set of 37 communities that were added to West Bengal's Central OBC list in early 2014, based on its own 2011 recommendation. The State Commission for Backward Classes had, in November 2010, studied 46 castes and communities, concluding that they qualify as socially and educationally backward classes who are under-represented in services. These groups were added to the State OBC list.

By 2011, the request from West Bengal to include these communities in the Central OBC list was examined by the erstwhile National Commission for Backward Classes, headed by Justice M. N. Rao. This NCBC recommended that 37 of these communities be included in the Central OBC list. 35 of them were Muslim communities that were thought to have converted from "lower Hindu castes". Most of the members of these communities worked as manual labourers, rickshaw pullers, bidi rollers, barbers, agricultural labourers, tailors, etc. The only non-Muslim groups were the Devanga and Gangot communities.

Why were they included initially?

At the time of recommending the inclusion of these communities in the Central OBC list of West Bengal, the erstwhile NCBC relied wholly on the findings of the State Commission for Backward Classes, based on which the State had also included them in the State OBC lists.

In discussing each of the communities' justification for inclusion, the Commission, at the time, concluded that they were all socially backward in terms of how they were treated in society, educationally backward in terms of school admissions and drop-out rates, and economically backwards in terms of being landless, or working menial jobs, or being stuck to specific caste/community professions. In nearly all of the cases, the commission mentioned their lack of representation in the services. With regard to some of the Muslim communities, the NCBC said that their professions, such as barbers, were historically associated with being performed by "lower castes" and hence, these communities faced discrimination from both Muslims and Hindus in society, which was leading to their social, educational, and economic backwardness. Similarly, the Commission noted in some cases that the communities' Hindu counterparts in other States had already been classified as OBCs or, in some cases, Scheduled Castes (SCs). And in some other cases, the Commission said the communities were treated "like Scheduled Castes" in their new faith of Islam, with evidence of them being asked to hold Namaz separately.

The NCBC's recommendations to include these communities happened in the backdrop of government-commissioned reports such as the Sachar Committee Report of 2006 and the Ranganath Mishra Committee Report of 2007, which had looked at the marginalisation of Muslims in India and the socio-educational and economic status of historically Dalit communities that had converted to Islam or Christianity, respectively.

The Sachar Committee Report had compared the marginalisation of Muslims in India to that of the SC communities, whereas the Ranganath Mishra Committee had studied them as Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, concluding that Dalit communities continued to face a caste barrier post conversion of faith, advocating de-linking the SC classification from a religion test.

Changing lists: Hansraj Gangaram Ahir in 2018. FILE PHOTO

Why are they now being excluded?

Now, nearly 15 years after the NCBC made these recommendations, the Commission, under the chairmanship of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Hansraj Gangaram Ahir, has changed its reasoning and asked that they be removed from the Central OBC list. This recommendation is a culmination of the efforts Mr. Ahir has made since he took charge of the Commission in 2022.

In February 2023, before Mr. Ahir had a Vice-Chair or any Members on his Commission, the NCBC undertook a study visit to West Bengal and began scrutinising the OBC list. Weeks after this study visit, Mr. Ahir told a press conference in New Delhi that there was "something wrong" with the State's OBC lists, raising suspicion over the "high number of Muslim communities" in them. That year, the NCBC had also begun taking note of the Muslim communities in the OBC list of Karnataka.

This information was soon used by the BJP in its political rhetoric, accusing the Opposition of Muslim-appeasement at the cost of other communities in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. By May 2024, the Calcutta High Court had struck down the inclusion of a large number of communities from the OBC lists, largely Muslim. In that judgment, the High Court had concluded that religion had been the "sole criterion for declaring these communities as OBC". It had found the "selection of 77 classes of Muslims as backwards an affront to the Muslim community as a whole". The High Court judgment had impacted five lakh OBC certificates issued in the State since 2010.

But with the Supreme Court also hearing the matter, it stayed the High Court's order. However, the NCBC proceeded with its scrutiny of the State's Central OBC list, arguing that many of the State OBC communities found suspicious were common with a batch of communities added to the Central list in 2014. By January 2025, the NCBC, led by Mr. Ahir, recommended that 35 of the 37 communities added in 2014 be excluded from the Central OBC list of West Bengal. In December this year, he finished his tenure as NCBC Chair.

How had the erstwhile NCBC responded?

The issue now raised by the NCBC – of whether certain OBC classifications were made based on religion over backwardness – had been placed before the erstwhile Commission in 2011 as well. At the time of recommending the inclusion in 2011, the NCBC had first considered objections that this was a political request intended to benefit only Muslims.

In the first few pages of its advice, the Commission dismissed these objections raised by advocate Kartik Chandra Kapas, also then Eastern Zone Chairman of the National Union for Backward Classes, SC, ST, and Minorities. It had said at the time that these allegations were being made for publicity, adding, "We do not find any political angle in the action of the State government."

The NCBC had further made it a point to stress that these communities had been found socially and educationally backwards with very little representation in the services by the State Commission, and that this conclusion had been accepted by the State government as well. It had thus concluded that the NCBC "cannot take up an independent survey" to determine communities' backwardness because such an inquiry had already been conducted.

In the advice it tendered to the Central government at the time, the NCBC relied on the conclusions of the State Commission for Backward Classes. While in the case of the Devanga and Gangot communities, the NCBC advice mentioned their numbers in the population, school drop-out rates, income, etc., for most of the other communities, its advice referred to their backwardness without providing data for these socio-economic indicators.

While hearing this matter in December 2024, the Supreme Court of India had asked the State government for quantifiable data to show these communities' backwardness, in terms of lack of representation in public employment, and on social and economic backwardness.

What next?

While the NCBC recommendation has been sent to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, no decision appears to have been taken by the Union government on whether to move ahead with amending the OBC lists.

Sources have told *The Hindu* that the NCBC, under the chairmanship of Mr. Ahir, has sent advice on inclusion and exclusion in the OBC lists of eight other States to the Ministry.

But hereon, unlike in 2014, the procedure now requires that any changes to Central OBC lists be brought through Parliament for notification by the President of India.

This is owing to the Constitution (102nd) Amendment Act, brought in by the first Narendra Modi-led government in 2018, which gave constitutional status to the NCBC and specified the role of Parliament and the President in identifying socially and educationally backward classes. In 2014, the law on identifying OBCs gave the executive power to notify lists based on the NCBC's recommendation.

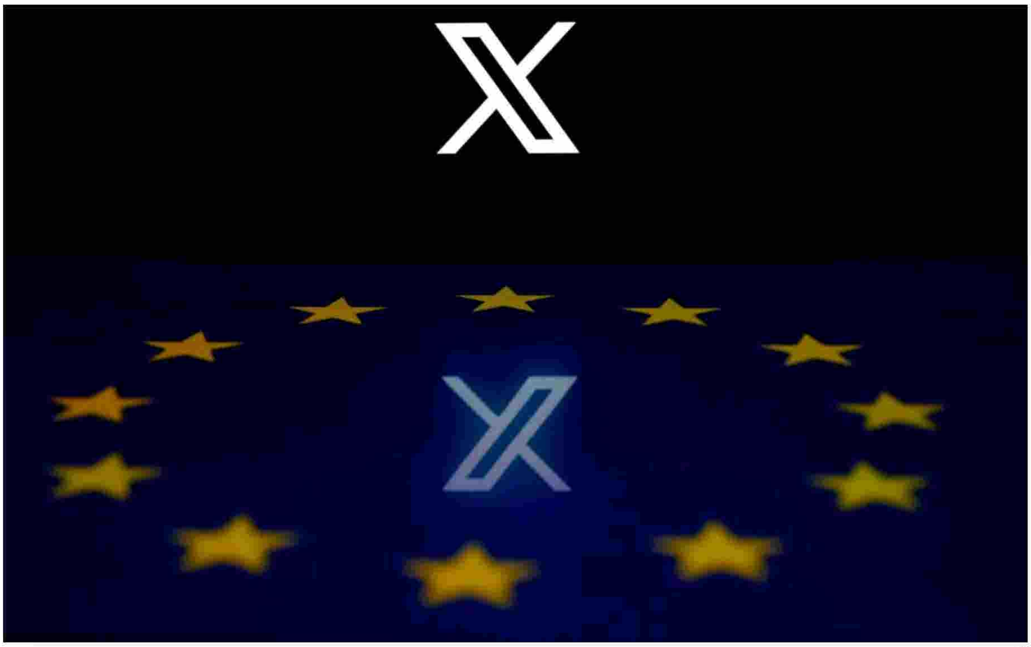
THE GIST

The National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) has recommended the exclusion of 35 communities, mostly Muslim, from West Bengal's Central list of Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Officials of the NCBC have told *The Hindu* that the communities recommended by it for exclusion are part of a batch of communities that were added to the Central OBC list of West Bengal in 2014, just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections that year.

While the NCBC recommendation has been sent to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, no decision appears to have been taken by the Union government on whether to move ahead with amending the OBC lists.

CACHE



AFP

Why was Elon Musk's X platform fined $140 million by the EU?

X, formerly Twitter, was fined by the European Commission for breaching its transparency obligations under the Digital Services Act. At the heart of the matter is X's controversial blue check mark system, which the Commission said 'deceives users'

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:
On December 6, Tesla CEO Elon Musk used his social media platform X to call for an end to the European Union, posting, "The EU should be abolished and sovereignty returned to individual countries, so that governments can better represent their people". His outburst was trigged by a 120 million euro (around $140 million) fine slapped by the European Commission against X a day earlier, marking the first non-compliance decision under the bloc's landmark tech regulation.

Why was Elon Musk's X fined?
X, formerly Twitter, was fined by the European Commission for breaching its transparency obligations under the Digital Services Act (DSA). The EU regulator opened formal proceedings on December 18, 2023 in order to evaluate whether X disseminated illegal information and whether it could effectively combat the manipulation of information. The investigation is ongoing, but the European Commission has fined X over platform-specific features and policies that violate its DSA.

"Deceiving users with blue checkmarks, obscuring information on ads and shutting out researchers have no place online in the EU. The DSA protects users. The DSA gives researchers the way to uncover potential threats. The DSA restores trust in the online environment," said Henna Virkkunen, Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy, in an official press release. She added this was the DSA's first non-compliance decision, with X being held responsible for undermining users' rights and evading accountability.

What did the EU investigation find?
At the heart of the matter is X's controversial blue check mark system. Before Elon Musk bought Twitter in 2022, the social media platform assigned blue check marks to notable individuals such as government officials, celebrities, and journalists after inspecting their account credentials, to help others verify these vetted account handles on sight.

However, Mr. Musk has always criticised this legacy check mark system. After he bought Twitter in October 2022 for $44 billion, the billionaire made the iconic verification symbol a product that anyone could buy. This led to a surge in account impersonation, as users ranging from pranksters to crypto scammers bought the blue tick mark to make themselves look more legitimate. In fact, even members of the Taliban temporarily had blue check marks. As confusion spread, X began deploying a mix of check marks – gold, blue, grey, and company logo-based ones – to differentiate verified users from unverified ones. These categories tended to overlap.

However, this resulted in even more confusion, a view which the European Commission shared. It stated that X's blue check mark for so-called verified accounts "deceives users".

Apart from the blue verification check mark issue, the European Commission pointed to X's advertisement repository, which it said did not meet the transparency and accessibility requirements of the DSA. Furthermore, the regulator said that X failed to meet its DSA obligations to give researchers access to the platform's public data.

These two points are linked, as the regulator pointed out that X's design made it difficult for researchers to identify who was paying for certain advertisements running on X, and whether there were any risks associated with the ads. The regulator also cited excessive processing delays. "The fine issued today was calculated taking into account the nature of these infringements, their gravity in terms of affected EU users, and their duration," said the European Commission.

The regulator added X had 60 working days to inform it about measures it was taking to fix the deceptive use of blue checkmarks, and 90 working days to submit an action plan to handle issues relating to its advertising repository and researchers' access to public data.

What was Elon Musk's reaction?
Since December 6, Elon Musk has both posted and re-shared multiple comments, memes, and infographics insulting the European Union and calling for it to be broken up. "The EU Commission should be disbanded in favor of an elected body and the EU President should be directly elected. The current system is rule by bureaucracy, not democracy," he posted on December 10. Mr. Musk also reshared a post criticising the EU for not fining Meta on similar grounds, since the WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook-parent also has a paid blue check mark verification system. Furthermore, X executive Nikita Bier claimed that the regulator had violated platform rules while announcing its fine against X, and said that its ad account was terminated as a result.

U.S. President Donald Trump also reacted to the news of the X fine, calling it "nasty" and noting that "Europe is going in some bad directions". He added that it had to be "careful" but clarified that Mr. Musk did not ask him to intervene in the matter. Trump administration officials including Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President J.D. Vance both criticised the move as well. U.S. Ambassador to the EU, Andrew Puzder, slammed "EU regulatory overreach targeting American innovation" and said that the Trump administration would "challenge burdensome regulations that target US companies abroad."

Mr. Musk claimed that the EU imposed the "crazy fine" on both X and him personally, suggesting that he might in turn respond not just to the EU but also individual regulators.

It is not yet clear if he intends to formally pursue legal action.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

With the IPL mini auction set to take place on December 16, a look at the most expensive buys across all auctions since 2008

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
Which legend fetched the highest price of $1.5 million in the inaugural auction?

QUESTION 2
Apart from Andrew Flintoff, which England player was bought for a then record-breaking $1.55 million in 2009?

QUESTION 3
Which Indian, who had tasted success in the inaugural edition and would go on to win more titles, was bought in 2012 for $2 million?

QUESTION 4
For which player did Rising Pune Supergiant and Rajasthan Royals pay the maximum in 2017 and 2018 respectively?

QUESTION 5
Name the only South African who has the distinction of being the most expensive buy at an auction and which franchise bought him?

QUESTION 6
Who was the biggest winner in the last auction to be held in an Indian city? Name the city as well.

Visual question:
He was the joint biggest buy in 2010. Name him and the franchise that purchased him.
FILE PHOTO

Questions and Answers to the December 12 edition of the daily quiz: 1. The producer of the only Hollywood film in which superstar Rajinikanth acted. **Ans: Ashok Amritraj**
2. The heroine in *Gair Kanooni*, and *Bhagwan Dada*. **Ans: Sridevi**
3. This film marked the 100th milestone in Rajinikanth's career. **Ans: *Sri Raghavendrar***
4. Name the heroine who has acted in the highest number of films with Rajinikanth. **Ans: Sri Priya**
5. The connection Rajinikanth has with the 1981 film *Tik Tik Tik*, directed by Bharathiraja. **Ans: Latha Rajnikanth sang the song "Netru Indha Neram"**
6. Name the first film of Rajinikanth produced under the AVM Productions banner, and name the producer. **Ans: *Muratu Kalai*; AVM Saravanan**
Visual: This Rajinikanth starrer is regarded as a major turning point in his acting career. **Ans: *Mullum Malarum***
Early Birds: Siddhartha Viswanathan| C. Saravanan| Gaurav Deshmukh| Sadhan Panda

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

He was laid up for a week due to the flu

She had to go under the knife in the very same week as her birthday. She is doing better now

S. Upendran

"I haven't seen your friend Vivek in a while. Is he busy travelling?"

"I'm sure he wishes he were. Unfortunately, poor Vivek is laid up again. He had a bad...."

"Laid up? Does it mean he's not well?"

"When you say that someone is laid up, you mean he's not doing well. It suggests that the individual is confined to bed."

"Because he is ill or has injured his foot or something?"

"It could be anything. The important thing is that he's forced to spend most of his time in bed – whether he likes it or not. Here's an example. Savithri was laid up for nearly a week with a bad case of cold and cough."

"My manager was laid up for a month with a serious back problem."

"That's a good example! When I was laid up, my friends brought me meals every day."

"What happened to Vivek? What is he laid up with?"

"Oh, you know Vivek. A very rash driver. He had a nasty fall on his motorcycle. He..."

"The fall happened more than a month ago! Don't tell me he still hasn't recovered!"

"He recovered from that fall all right. This accident happened a few days ago."

"Somebody should take away the bike from the guy. Was it serious?"

"He was pretty badly bruised from head to foot. Luckily, he didn't have to go under the knife."

"Lucky not to go under the knife? Does it mean to have surgery?"

"Very good! That's exactly what it means. When you go under the knife, you're operated on."

"So, the patient is literally lying under the knife the surgeon or doctor is holding!"

"Exactly! During a routine check-up, the doctors found several blockages in Nalini's heart. Looks like she'll be going under the knife this weekend."

"Really? What really scares me is in many surgeries the patient is conscious while he is under the knife."

"I know! It happened to my father when he was under the knife for a minor hernia surgery. He could hear everything the doctors were saying."

"Any idea how long Nalini will be under the knife?"

"The doctor said anywhere between four to five hours. She should be up and about in a matter of a few weeks."

"Up and about? Doesn't it mean to feel well enough to do things you want to?"

"When you're up and about after a surgery, it means you're no longer laid up. You're able to get out of bed, and do the things that need to be done – without straining yourself too much."

upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Beatific:
experiencing or bestowing celestial joy; marked by utter benignity; resembling or befitting an angel or saint

Synonyms: angelic, saintly

Usage: *He smiled one of his beatific smiles and left.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/beatificpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /bɪəˈtɪfɪk/

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

thehindubusinessline.
MONDAY - DECEMBER 15, 2025

Fraught with risk

Expanding the investment basket for NPS is a bad idea

With its assets scaling up from ₹1 lakh crore to over ₹15 lakh crore in the last ten years, the National Pension System (NPS) needs to change with the times and tap into a wider canvas of investing opportunities. This is probably why the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) has announced significant changes to the investment guidelines for NPS managers.

Through a circular effective last week, PFRDA has allowed NPS fund managers to invest in a range of new vehicles ranging from Real Estate Infrastructure Trusts (REITs) and Infrastructure Investment Trusts (InvITs) to gold and silver funds and Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs) under its mainstream categories. Some of these can add to subscriber returns or provide diversification; however some add complexity and risk. Under the corporate bond allocations (asset choice C for subscribers), NPS fund managers will now be allowed to invest in bonds of REITs, InvITs, asset-backed securities, municipal bonds, AT-1 bonds and category 1 and 2 debt-oriented AIFs. While some of these vehicles, such as bonds from REITs and InvITs can deliver higher returns without excessive risk, asset-backed securities and municipal bonds come with a sizeable dose of risk. Debt-oriented AIFs typically invest in unlisted bonds from private entities, which carry both default and liquidity risks. The circular does impose sub-limits to contain risks.

However, whether such instruments ought to figure at all in retirement portfolios requires thought. It is with good reason that the Securities and Exchange Board of India keeps retail investors out of AIFs and AT1 bonds, by setting a ₹1 crore ticket size. Under the equity portion of the NPS (asset choice E), fund managers can now explore the top 250 stocks by market capitalisation instead of the top 200, REITs, category 1 and 2 AIFs and gold and silver exchange traded funds, apart from Initial Public Offers and Offers for Sale. While broadening the investment universe to top 250 stocks or REITs is in order, it is difficult to fathom why gold and silver ETFs should be squeezed into the equity allocations of subscribers. Allowing NPS managers to dabble in IPOs and OFS at a time when the primary market is super-heated, seems unnecessary. Earlier, such risky products were parked in a separate 'Alternatives' option of the NPS. Subscribers could opt out of them in toto. Now, by sweeping them under the mainstream equity and corporate bond categories, the choice seems to lie with fund managers.

Overall, these changes add complexity to the simple architecture of the NPS which has worked well for subscribers so far. While opening up NPS to new market opportunities, PFRDA must guard against replicating the mutual fund industry's complex template. NPS caters to a less affluent population than mutual funds and is meant for retirement security. There is also a need to invest in awareness campaigns about the NPS structure, so that subscribers make the right asset and manager choices in their retirement journey.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
EUROPE

Pete Hegseth's Zombie Reaganism

You almost have to admire Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth taking the stage at the Ronald Reagan presidential library and immediately opening fire. "Most who invoke Ronald Reagan's name today, especially self-styled Republican hawks, are not much like Ronald Reagan," he said. "Donald Trump is the true and rightful heir of Ronald Reagan." Who says the Gipper is irrelevant in Republican politics? Mr. Hegseth aimed to locate the Trump project in Reagan's mantra of peace through strength, and their slogans are the same. But Reagan's success is worth recalling as Mr. Hegseth accuses others of besmirching the 40th President's legacy. Reagan rebuilt the U.S. military but also took political risk to negotiate with communists to win the Cold War, and Mr. Hegseth says Trump is rerunning that playbook. (NEW YORK, DECEMBER 13)

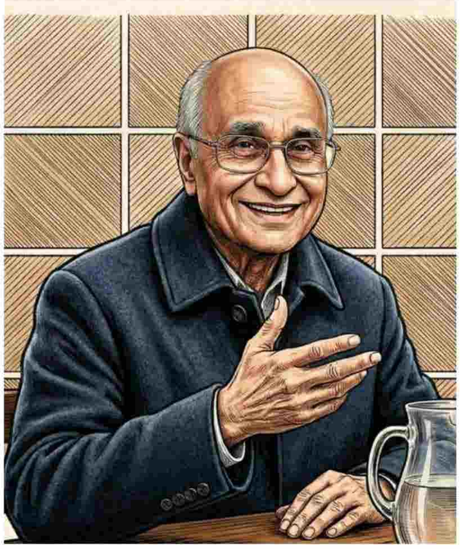
CHINADAILY

Asia-Pacific community with a shared future

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Informal Senior Officials' Meeting that took place in Shenzhen last week approved a Chinese proposal to set openness, innovation and cooperation as the three priorities for the APEC "China Year", and "Building an Asia-Pacific Community to Prosper Together" as its theme. The expectations surrounding the APEC "China Year" reflect not only confidence in China's hosting capabilities, but also a shared hope among member economies that it can inject fresh momentum into the regional cooperation mechanism. Amdist weak global recovery, rising protectionism and fragmented supply chains, the Asia-Pacific's ability to remain a region of development has acquired added significance. (BEIJING, DECEMBER 14)

LINE & LENGTH.

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN



J Krishnamurti, an intellectual nationalist

He reminded us of India's pre-1947 economists who did seminal work but of whom most people are quite unaware

Most economists don't blow their own trumpets. They choose to go gently into the night. One such was J Krishnamurti, or Kicchu as he was affectionately called by everyone. He passed away in his sleep on December 5. He had been very ill for a few years. He was 84.

Having finished his PhD, he was a tutor at the Delhi School of Economics when I was a student there in the early 1970s. Later he became a Reader there and taught for about ten years. He also worked as a consultant to various international institutions as well as the Planning Commission.

He lived in Geneva after 1998 where he worked for the ILO for about two decades. His focus was on labour and employment.

I met him earlier this year and asked what I could do for him. "Send, or bring, some properly *kaaram* (chilli hot) *podis* (powders)", he said. Sadly, he has gone before I could take some for him.

Krishnamurti was from a very distinguished family. His sister was married to K Subrahmanyam, the civil servant-turned-strategic thinker. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the economic historian and S Jaishankar, the diplomat-turned-politician, who also has a PhD, are his nephews. Another nephew was in the IAS.

Krishnamurti was what one may call an 'intellectual nationalist' as opposed to the garden variety nationalists that keep saying silly things about India's past.

And as a nationalist who lay great store on ideas, he was hugely irritated by how the West had captured economics. Eventually he wrote a book about pre-1947 Indian economics and economists. It's called, in a typically understated way, *Towards Development Economics: Indian Contributions to Growth, 1900-1945*.

And as a nationalist who lay great store on ideas, he was hugely irritated by how the West had captured economics. Eventually he wrote a book about pre-1947 Indian economics and economists

THE PIONEERS

The question he asked was if India had any economists before it became independent. And he soon hit upon a treasure trove. There were several and they did seminal work.

Krishnamurti compiled a set of 13 papers written by Indian economists between 1900 and 1945 covering monetary and fiscal policy, protection, employment and labour market conditions, credit systems, industry, rural economy, women in development, macroeconomic policy and environmental economics.

I met him when the book was published. "It's a personal voyage", he said. "I'm an Indian economist. But I had to find out, when did this business start? And I find that more than 80 years ago there were Indian economists being trained in Cambridge and other places doing extraordinary work of whom most people today are quite unaware."

In 1923, there were 170 or so listed members of the Indian Economic Association. Many wrote prolifically. There are some extraordinarily insightful and analytical papers in the Association's journal, Krishnamurti said. "Indian economists were analysing social tensions from the economic standpoint."

When the World Bank published '*Pioneers in Development*', edited by Gerald Meier, it omitted these Indian economists. It was exactly the sort of intellectual arrogance that Krishnamurti exposed.

Few people know that BR Ambedkar, to start with, was an economist. His paper on the consolidation of land holdings was written in 1918, before he took his degree in law a decade later. He had written that consolidation and other such measures would not work because pressure on land was such that it would keep getting split up. His argument, still valid, was that the only way to deal with it was to get people jobs in non-agriculture areas.

The definition of surplus labour given in the 1950s and 1960s was Ambedkar's. He never got the credit for this.

Then there was the redoubtable Sir Manohar Lal who had taught Rajendra Prasad and Radhakamal Mukherjee at Calcutta University. He was a favourite student of Alfred Marshall at Cambridge and the two had a prolonged exchange over the desirability of protectionism in India. And this was during the first decade of the 20th century. Krishnamurti has written an entire paper on Manohar Lal. It contains dozens of forgotten details.

We have also forgotten CN Vakil who wrote a paper called 'Economic basis of communal tensions in India'; it is a pioneering effort. And guess who chaired Vakil's public lecture? Mohammad Ali Jinnah. What he told the gathering is lost to posterity but Vakil was clear: preferential treatment to some groups leads to communal violence.

Another major thinker in the mid-1930s was Gyanchand who had no faith in trickle-down.

It was not until the 1960s that mainstream Western economists started talking about this.

Then there was Radhakamal Mukherjee. He said, nearly a hundred years ago, that there had to be a balance between population, land and water. It is called sustainable development today.

This is just a very small sample of the sort of thing Krishnamurti put together in his edited book. And he thus put his finger on a major problem in economics.

The BJP would do well to lionise these economists instead of presenting speculation as science and improvisation as technology. That's just embarrassing.

Wealth tax: Is it the solution or the problem?

Debt-ridden France is mulling wealth tax on the ultra rich. That the rich may shift to tax havens shouldn't stall the move

Rohini Rangachari Karnik

President Macron has been pushing for much needed pension reforms in France but this has led to continued political unrest. The push to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 by constitutional means, bypassing parliamentary debate, sparked accusations of authoritarianism and triggered strikes across sectors and mass demonstrations, particularly in 2019, 2020 and 2023. More recently, the *bloquons tout* (block everything) movement organised shutdowns of highways, transport and city centres. Anger over social inequality, cost of living and perceived government distance from day-to-day realities, has ignited unrest, especially among youth and minority communities.

Why is France trying to enact pension reforms? Very simply, fiscal prudence. France's budget deficit last year was 5.8 per cent of GDP, the largest level since World War II and well above the 3 per cent limit required from members of the Eurozone. Second, France's ageing population is living longer. This is putting added pressure on fiscal finances on top of an already slow-growing economy with its pension payouts. According to Eurostat data, France spends the third most on pensions as a proportion of its economic output (nearly 14 per cent of its GDP) compared to the other 27 European Union countries.

Apart from pension reforms to generate revenue, France is discussing the imposition of a wealth tax, which is already being implemented in Spain, Norway and Switzerland. In Spain, the wealth tax, introduced in 1978, is levied on Spanish tax residents' worldwide net assets and on Spanish non-resident goods and rights that are located in Spain. There was considerable political opposition to the imposition of Spain's wealth tax. Predictably, responses to the imposition of this tax have been tax avoidance, evasion and the creation of holding companies in low tax jurisdictions such as Luxembourg.

HUGE REVENUE MOBILISER

Yet, the wealth tax enjoys popular support due to its ability to raise large amounts of revenue, discourage hoarding and boost economic growth by redistributing wealth. There is, however, the risk that the wealthy will relocate their assets, i.e., vote with their feet, to tax havens or they will simply evade tax.

It is in this context that France has been debating the Zucman tax in the Assemblé Nationale since October 24 this year in the French 2026 budget. Named after Gabriel Zucman, a French economist known for his expertise on tax havens and economic inequality, the Zucman draft tax law proposes a minimal annual tax of 2 per cent on individual wealth exceeding $1 billion. It targets approximately 3,000 billionaires globally.

Commissioned by Brazil's Presidency of the G20 in June 2024, Zucman details a blueprint for a minimum tax on ultra-high-net-worth individuals. The report states that, ultra-high-net-worth individuals tend to pay less tax relative to their income than other social groups. This regressivity stems from the failure of income taxes — which in principle constitute the main instrument of tax progressivity — to effectively tax ultra-high-net-worth individuals. This failure deprives governments of substantial amounts of tax revenues.

POPULAR SUPPORT. For wealth tax

Supporters of the draft law adopted by the Assemblé Nationale in February 2025 view it as a measure of tax equity and advocate it as France's solution to the debt crisis. Its opponents argue that Zucman's wealth tax cannot save France from itself. The bill's critics argue that the tax on households with a net worth of more than $1 billion will contribute to tax flight and curb investment and risk-taking for businesses. Predictably, the draft bill was rejected by the Senate in June.

Though the French Prime Minister could have invoked Article 49.3 of the French Constitution, which allows the Assemblé Nationale to pass a bill without a vote, he chose not to. If a bill is passed without a vote but is unpopular enough, Members of Parliament can table a no-confidence motion within 24 hours. If a majority vote is obtained, the bill is rejected and the government is overthrown. The non-invocation of Article 49.3 is symptomatic of the French Governments reactive policy shift that aims to find a middle-path to its bold reform proposals. Public forms and consultations have been allowed. This policy shift is, however, seen as temporary and limited in scope.

Maybe it is time that we move beyond the pretence that taxing the capital of the wealthy is unfeasible merely because they will relocate to offshore havens such as the Cayman Islands. The political economy of income transfers differs markedly from that of taxation: voters don't mind supporting proposals for higher transfers, yet demonstrate considerable hesitation when it comes to paying taxes. Understanding this aspect will be crucial to passing the wealth tax.

The writer teaches French at the Alliance française de Delhi. She holds a Masters in European Business Law from the Institut de Recherches Europe-Asie, Université d'Aix-Marseille III

BELOW THE LINE

Name game

The renaming of MGNREGA to Pujya Bapu Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Yojna has mystified political observers, outraged the Congress and spurred waves of mirth and satire on social media. Exactly why 'Pujya Bapu' was preferred over 'Mahatma Gandhi' is not known. Some in social media are speculating that it might be a reference to a spiritual guru in Gujarat. Congress MP Rajiv Shukla pointed out that a lot of people in Gujarat are referred to as 'Bapu' whereas there is only one 'Mahatma Gandhi'; Priyanka Gandhi questioned the need for the new name. "It is Mahatma Gandhi, where's the need for renaming, not to mention the additional waste of resources that accompanies a change in name," she said. TMC MP Sagarika Ghose informed the title 'Mahatma' was bestowed on Gandhi by Rabindranath Tagore. She concluded, therefore, the decision to rename is "an insult to Bengal".

Not involving AI

Open AI has just launched its first integrated brand campaign for ChatGPT. But here is the interesting thing — there is no AI involved in the making of the film, which tells the story of a young woman prepping for a job interview. At a time when even Coca-Cola is turning to AI for its annual year-end holiday ad, one wonders why an AI film chose to be traditional!

Football fever

What if they charged a million rupees for a picture with Messi? Football fans in Hyderabad haven't lost sleep when organisers held a private meeting with Messi, where organisers charged ₹10 lakh to get a photo with the football legend. As many as 60 die-hard fans registered for a photo-op with the legend at the Meet-and-Greet programme organised at the Falaknuma Palace. Undeterred, thousands of fans of the G.O.A.T. quickly turned to AI chatbots such as Gemini AI to create images of him with them and post them on social media. Some even created videos as if they had an interaction, and played, with him.

Overall, Messi's Hyderabad trip turned out to be fun-filled and left both the Government, the police and fans heaving a sigh of relief, particularly after the Kolkata fiasco that left a bad taste.

Discord over Unity Mall?

A proposed ₹193 crore 'Unity Mall' in Mysuru — similar to Dilli Haat in the national capital — to showcase artisanal products under the Centre's 'One District, One Product' scheme has run into rough weather. The Rajmata of the erstwhile ruling family of Mysuru, Pramoda Devi Wodeyar, moved the Karnataka High Court and got a stay on the Centre's proposed construction of the mall claiming that the land on which it was being built belonged to the royal family.

What is interesting though is that the mall was being built under the guidance and supervision of her adopted son Yaduveer Wodeyar, the BJP MP from Mysuru. The MP who had inspected the construction site had even given a early 2027 deadline for the completion of the mall. Now citizens are wondering whether all is well between mother and son; or whether is there something deeper to the whole issue. **Our Bureaus**

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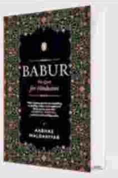
Babur, busting the myths

The Moghul age was a not a golden, tolerant one

BOOK REVIEW.

Uday Balakrishnan



Title: Babur - The Quest for Hindustan
Author: Aabhas Maldahiyar
Publisher: Vintage - Penguin India
Price: ₹1,299

The Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan, in *The Uses and Abuses of History*, notes how Russians wryly observe that "we live in a country with an unpredictable past." How well that applies to India. Our history — especially of nearly a millennium of Islamic rule — is deeply contested: seen by some as culturally enriching and by many others as a civilisational affliction. Aabhas Maldahiyar's *Babur — The Quest for Hindustan* is a case in point, positioned squarely within this dispute.

Maldahiyar's book seeks to shatter the prevailing myth of Babur as a benign, cultured poet and a lover of gardens and melons, asserting instead that he was a brutal Islamic fundamentalist. The book is deeply researched and relies on verifiable, credible archival records, drawing on primary sources such as Babur's autobiography *Babarnama* and Abul Fazal ibn Mubarak's historical-biography of Akbar, *Akbarnama*, to argue that the Moghul Empire was a destructive force led by a bloodthirsty and murderous lineage. As such, Maldahiyar's book goes far beyond being just an account of Babur's life.

A core goal of Maldahiyar's work is to challenge the long-perpetuated idea that the Moghul empire was a profoundly syncretic, all-inclusive state. The author argues that the Moghul empire was narrow-minded, exclusive, and violent, highlighting that the administrative language remained Persian. This failure to fully integrate with the Indian populace stands in sharp contrast to how the Mongols in China under Kublai Khan successfully adapted to local culture.

The book dismantles the popular narrative of Akbar as a great secular force, citing the horrific 1568 destruction of Chittorgarh and the killing of 30,000 defending Rajputs, an act Akbar himself termed a *jihad* against infidels. This underpins Maldahiyar's broader thesis: that the Moghuls were hardly concerned about India, but rather vainly lusted for lost territories in Central Asia, confirming the empire's identity as fundamentally Timurid.

Maldahiyar then challenges the traditional view of Aurangzeb as the sole intolerant outlier. This common perception is one that Maldahiyar vigorously disputes.

The book makes the sensational claim that the Babri Masjid, demolished in 1992, was never built by Babur but came up later under Aurangzeb's watch, reinforcing his reputation as a fundamentalist Muslim who destroyed Hinduism's holiest shrines in Banares and Mathura, and by implication the original Ram Mandir in Ayodhya as well.

To support his assertions of Moghul brutality, Maldahiyar also draws on established historians. In this respect, he is not charting entirely new territory. Indeed, by viewing the Moghul ascendency in the context of Islamic conquests, one recalls the medieval polymath Al Biruni's centuries-old expose of their cruel and violent character.

What Maldahiyar fails to acknowledge is the fact that the Moghul Empire successfully united much of India and introduced splendid administrative and record-keeping systems. Moreover, given its Islamic character, the Moghuls did not attempt to convert all Indians to Islam. To their credit, they allowed Hinduism to continue and Sikhism to endure, despite Jahangir torturing and executing Guru Arjan Singh and Aurangzeb killing Guru Tegh Bahadur.

Maldahiyar's book serves as a stark corrective to the notion of a uniformly tolerant Moghul golden age commencing with Babur's conquest of India. Maldahiyar's book constitutes a rich feed for our polarised times. If only for its sheer force in demanding that our understanding of the Moghul Empire must fully factor in its exclusive and violent nature, the book is important and deserves to be read.

The reviewer teaches at IISc Bengaluru

Breaching Apple's walled garden

This book misunderstands the problem it is documenting but describes well the drama behind platform policies

BOOK REVIEW.

N Chandrasekhar Ramanujan

Platform achieves dominance. Platform integrates its own service. Platform restricts competitors from accessing the same distribution channel. Apple did it with the App Store and payment systems. Google did it with Play Store. Now Meta is doing it with WhatsApp and AI chatbots.

The script doesn't change. The actors do. A new computing paradigm emerges. A platform achieves dominance. The platform starts extracting rent from everyone who depends on it. Developers and regulators fight back. The fight takes a decade. By the time anyone wins, the next platform is already building the next walled garden.

Tim Higgins's *iWar* is the definitive chronicle of the previous iteration: Apple's App Store versus everyone paying the 30 per cent tax to access a billion iPhone users. Excellent journalism — that fundamentally misunderstands the problem it is documenting.

The narrative centres on Tim Sweeney's calculated assault on Apple's walled garden. In 2020, his 'Project Liberty' bypassed Apple's payment system, got *Fortnite* kicked off the App Store, and triggered a legal battle lasting five years and costing over a billion dollars.

Higgins reconstructs this with impressive access. Internal emails show Google panicking, offering Epic $208 million to prevent "contagion." Court documents reveal Phil Schiller warning colleagues their workarounds wouldn't fly with the judge — ignored. The book builds to the April 2025 contempt ruling: Apple had "willfully" defied orders, one executive "outright lied under oath", Cook was called out by name. A federal judge referred Apple executives for possible criminal prosecution — the system saying "you lied to us".

Cook's response to the contempt finding? "We're going to appeal." That's the whole strategy. Delay, appeal, delay, appeal. The system rewards it.

Since publication, the dominoes keep falling. The Ninth Circuit denied Apple's stay. Google lost its appeal and settled. Australia ruled against both companies — the first contested application of their 2017 competition law reforms. And in October, OpenAI announced its own app store, with Altman confirming monetisation would be "part of the platform's long-term model." They've watched this whole fight and learned — probably how to extract without triggering the same backlash.

The cycle is already beginning again. Meta's WhatsApp move is just the latest iteration.

Higgins frames all this as interpersonal drama — Schiller, the true believer, defending Jobs' legacy, Cook, the cautious operator, Sweeney the iconoclast. Great characters. Compelling narrative. But swap out every executive in this story and you'd get the same outcome.

COLLECTIVE IRRATIONALITY

Your average product manager at Google isn't sitting there thinking "let's build a monopoly". She's thinking "I need this app on my platform to hit my growth target". Apple's finance team calculating the 27 per cent external commission wasn't executing a conspiracy — they were minimising revenue impact while technically complying with a court order. Nobody is coordinating. Nobody needs to. The incentive structure does the coordinating for them.

Thousands of individual actors, each locally optimising, producing a global outcome that none of them specifically intended. Extraction doesn't require a villain — just a system where every rational micro-decision nudges towards the same macro-equilibrium.

Title: iWar
Author: Tim Higgins
Publisher: HarperCollins, 2025
Price: ₹999

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Higgins is the author of Power Play (about the rise of Tesla). A frequent CNBC contributor, he covers Silicon Valley for the Wall Street Journal

Multi-sided marketplaces with asymmetric power do this reliably. The platform sits in the middle, both sides need it more than it needs any individual participant, and the screws tighten incrementally because each turn is locally rational. By the time anyone notices the pattern, it's already the industry standard.

By the time you've proven Apple violated antitrust law, a thousand product managers at 10 other platforms have already made the same locally-rational decisions producing the same globally-suboptimal outcomes. Punishing Tim Cook doesn't change the feedback loop that created the behaviour. We keep bringing 20th century tools to 21st century fights.

There's also something genuinely new here that the book documents without fully grasping.

When Apple booted *Fortnite*, Epic didn't just file a lawsuit — it launched #FreeFortnite, an in-game event encouraging players to spam Apple's social media, flood regulatory hearings, and treat the corporate dispute as a personal grievance.

They created the 'Tart Tycoon' skin — an apple-headed villain in a suit — so players could literally wear their contempt for Apple while playing. Millions of teenagers became an unpaid lobbying army, their parasocial relationship with a video game weaponised for litigation support.

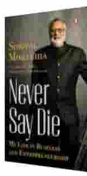
And the book never mentions that Epic is also a platform.

The book ends with Sweeney hiking through an open forest after his legal victory, free of walled gardens. Poetic, but hollow.

iWar is essential reading for everyone involved in platform policy — not for its answers, but for its detailed documentation of what the current system produces. The journalism is excellent. The framework is missing. Higgins describes the symptoms exhaustively while misdiagnosing the disease.

The reviewer is a product designer and researcher working in the tech sector

NEW READS.

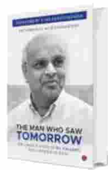


Title: Never Say Die: My Life in Business and Entrepreneurship

Author: Shripal Morakhia

Publisher: Penguin Viking

The book's title is not just a motto for investor and entrepreneur, Shripal Morakhia. But a way of life



Title: The Man Who Saw Tomorrow

Authors: Pattabhi Ram, Sudhakar Rao

Publisher: Rupa Publications

The story of how NJ Yasaswy built institutions brick by brick and how he inspired ordinary people to achieve extraordinary goals

Title: OHARI: A novel

Author: KL Mohana Varma

Translator: Ministhy S

Publisher: Harper Perennial India

The most admired financial thriller ever to be written in Malayalam and winner of the 1993 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 15, 2005

SC allows NTC mills, buyers to submit development plans

The Supreme Court has permitted five NTC Mills and developers, who had purchased land belonging to these mills in Mumbai, to submit development plans for seeking environmental clearance. The court passed this interim order against a Bombay High Court judgment scrapping the ₹20,000-crore project to develop land belonging to 58 sick textile mills located in Mumbai.

Panel asks Govt not to tax ECS payments by companies

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance has suggested that the Government should make it clear in unambiguous terms in the income-tax framework that payments made by businesses through the electronic clearance systems (ECS) should be a permissible mode of payment and no portion of such payments should be brought to tax.

WTO meet: Stalemate on farm, export subsidies continues

The sixth ministerial conference of the WTO limped forward with few signs of finalising the Doha Development Round. The key issue remains farm and export subsidies of the developed countries to which the developing countries are opposed and have linked it to discussions on industrial tariffs and services.

Short take

Nutrition-rich food needs the right incentives

Deepak Chamola
Mohit Sharma

The shift from food deficit to food surplus raises a vital question: why does nutrition remain a low priority in India's food systems? For decades, the Public Distribution System (PDS) has been an important instrument for ensuring food security. Over the years, excessive dependence on rice and wheat has reduced dietary diversity in India. Pulses, millets, vegetables, and oilseeds, the true pillars of nutrition, were pushed to the margins. Central schemes like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-Day Meals, and POSHAN Abhiyaan were well-intentioned but achieved limited impact due to constraints in implementation and service quality. The result is a paradoxical India where the same household may have a child suffering from malnutrition and an adult struggling with obesity.

The market has aggravated this concern. Ultra-processed foods which are loaded with sugar, salt, and fat are cheaper and easier to find than nutritious alternatives.

When pasta takes the place of makhana, or packaged juice replaces fresh fruit, we slowly move away from the path of good nutrition.

The first step is ensuring the availability of accurate information. Consumers need to understand what they are eating, in simple language. Clear front-of-pack labels that highlight sugar, salt, and fat levels are not optional; they are essential. QR codes and digital tools can provide transparency, helping citizens trace where their food comes from and how it was produced. Nutrition education should be included in school textbooks, classroom discussions, and project activities. The departments of health, education, and agriculture must work together to raise awareness among the masses.

The second step is incentives. Today, fried snacks often enjoy same taxes as nutrient-rich millet products. Nutrient density in food items could serve as a criterion for taxation.

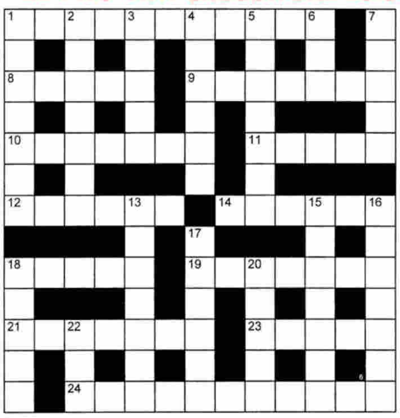
At the same time, public procurement can be used to reset supply and demand. School meals and ration shops can be filled with pulses, vegetables, and locally grown millets. That simple shift would ripple through farms, markets, and homes alike.

The third step is building a common language of sustainability. There should be proper emphasis on the locally grown and healthier products.

On a positive note, with rising disposable incomes, milk and vegetables are slowly replacing cereals in Indian diets. Organic food markets are booming, driven by urban elites who want healthier options. But unless this wave spreads beyond the privileged few, India risks creating a two-tier food system, one for the health-conscious and another for the vulnerable majority.

Chamola is Advisor, GIZ GmbH, New Delhi, and Sharma is Assistant Professor,, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Samastipur, Bihar. Views are personal

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2845



EASY

ACROSS

1. Spring- or high pool apparatus (6-5)
8. Wave of fear (5)
9. Worked up, agitated (7)
10. Put it to one (7)
11. Scent (5)
12. In a certain manner (6)
14. Lesser paths (6)
18. Take out again (subscription) (5)
19. Gun-holder (7)
21. Straw hats (7)
23. Feeling of offence, anger (5)
24. Faculty of discriminating (11)

DOWN

1. Removes from high office (7)
2. Pickling medium (7)
3. Wall recess (5)
4. Air taken in (6)
5. Small Mediterranean fish (7)
6. Very small spot (3)
7. Still, fizzy drink (5)
13. Unruly, ungoverned (7)
15. Old furniture item (7)
16. Old wind instrument (7)
17. Sexually virtuous (6)
18. Redbreast (5)
20. Plant with flowers on long spikes (5)
22. Conjunction (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Taking the plunge with the directors found at poolside (6-5)
8. An entry in half the picket that causes widespread alarm (5)
9. Divorcee named as co-respondent gets in a state about it (7)
10. Lead one to suppose start of gore can be created with gusset (7)
11. In our situation, a party may be detected by nose (5)
12. With no uncertainty there's American backing to count on (6)
14. Presumably not paths highwaymen trod (6)
18. Renovate campanile last constructed by Wren (5)
19. Vacation, in short, for almost a term : pack rod in it (7)
21. Straws for eights and their like (7)
23. Fit one out incorrectly to create feeling of annoyance (5)
24. Manage to see people finish art with sense of good taste (11)

DOWN

1. Attests how one gets rid of one in high station (7)
2. Nursery head-case needed it with brown paper (7)
3. Father leaves 8 and he finds space for himself (5)
4. A very little air to be distributed in the bar (6)
5. New York made havoc with it, which is fishy (7)
6. Part of the eye, one is told, on the which to be prompt (3)
7. Cried out for scrumpy (5)
13. Unruly minor holding boring instrument (7)
15. Quite an adjustment needed to make it old and rare (7)
16. Present a different sort of belly-creeper (7)
17. She-cat might have been unsullied (6)
18. Round this nursery murder victim there's a petition (5)
20. Flower I pull up endlessly before season ends (5)
22. What's more, it comes after ampers in shortened form (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2844

ACROSS 1. Satin 4. Erratic 8. Accreditation 10. Limbo 11. Nark 12. Lift 16. Tiara 17. Thunder-clouds 19. Respond 20. Cones

DOWN 1. Station-master 2. Tic 3. Needle 4. Enigma 5. Reason 6. Trickling 7. Conductresses 9. Curlicues 13. Studio 14. Hatred 15. Garlic 18. Urn

Economy

MONDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2025

IN THE NEWS

GEMS, JEWELLERY EXPORTS UP 20% TO $2.5 BN IN NOV

INDIA'S GEMS AND jewellery exports grew 19.64% to $2.5 billion in November compared to the same month last year, as per the Gem and Jewellery Export Promotion Council. Total exports stood at $2.1 billion during the same period last year.

IFFCO EYES 10% GROWTH IN FY26 PROFIT

Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative MD KJ Patel has projected a 10% net profit growth for FY26, even as the cooperative grapples with sluggish domestic adoption of its flagship nano fertilisers and intensifies farmer training programmes to unlock their potentials.

ECL aims to meet 58 MT output, may close 6 mines

EASTERN COALFIELDS (ECL) is confident of achieving its 58-million-tonne coal production target in the current financial year and returning to profit, even as it prepares to close six loss-making underground mines to address high legacy costs, Chairman and Managing Director Satish Jha said.

Nearly 4 GW of solar capacity in Rajasthan hit

NEARLY 4,300 MW OF solar power capacity in Rajasthan faces complete daytime curtailment due to inadequate transmission infrastructure, putting projects worth about ₹20,000 crore at risk, industry sources said.

Parl recommends easing coal mining clearances

A PARLIAMENTARY PANEL has suggested simplifying the policy and standardised protocols for allowing underground coal mining, saying that the complex clearance process, similar to large open-cast mines, leads to delays in projects that have low environmental impact.

—AGENCIES

BOTH COUNTRIES AIM TO LIFT BILATERAL TRADE TO $100 BN BY 2030

Govt identifies 300 items to bridge Russia trade gap

● New Delhi makes up 2.3% of Moscow's imports

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, December 14

AT A GLANCE

- India exports just **$4.8 bn** vs **$63.8 bn** in imports
- Engineering, pharma, chemicals, agriculture show biggest gaps

Pharma exports
$546 mn vs **$9.7 bn**
Russian demand

- Cracking market access could lift exports seven times
- Electronics and textiles currently have market shares below 1%

AS INDIA AND RUSSIA pursue a $100 billion bilateral trade target by 2030 and seek to make exchanges more balanced, the government has identified about 300 products across sectors such as engineering, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and agriculture to help bridge the gap between current trade levels and the five-year target.

Total trade between India and Russia stood at $68.6 billion in 2024–25, of which India's oil imports accounted for $56.8 billion. India's exports were $4.8 billion, while imports reached $63.8 billion. The surge in oil imports following the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been largely driven by geopolitical factors.

"India's share in Russia's import basket remains modest around 2.3% yet the complementarity between India's global export strengths and Russia's demand profile offers significant headroom. Engineering goods, pharma, chemicals, and farm sectors are natural fits for expansion," officials said.

High-potential products have been identified by analysing complementary trade baskets, mapping India's supply capabilities against Russia's demand. "The identified opportunity basket spans 300 products, for which India's exports to Russia total $ 1.7 billion, compared to $ 37.4 billion overall import of these products by Russia. This stark disparity demonstrates the substantial complementary export space India can target," the officials added.

Agriculture and allied sectors show particularly strong promise. India currently exports about $452 million of agricultural products to Russia, against Moscow's global import demand of $3.9 billion. Engineering goods present one of the widest gaps, with India exporting $90 million while Russia imports $2.7 billion. Chemicals and plastics show a similar pattern, with Indian exports of $135 million against Russian imports of $2.06 billion.

Pharmaceutical products are another area of strong potential. India supplies about $546 million worth of pharmaceutical items products, while Russia's total pharma import bill stands at $9.7 billion, making generic medicines and active pharmaceutical ingredients key growth levers.

Electronics and textiles currently have market shares below 1%, but demand remains sizeable, offering scope for expansion if supported by stronger distribution networks. A study by the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said India could lift its exports to Russia sevenfold—to $35 billion from about $5 billion—if it cracks market access in food, pharmas, textiles and machinery.

Trade imbalance slows down rupee oil payouts

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, December 14

QUICK TAKES

- Govt backs rupee settlements as official policy
- Calls to diversify crude sources & find new international partners

- RBI allows Vostro accounts to ease INR trade with partner countries.
- Over reliance on any one region may threaten energy security

OIL COMPANIES IN India are increasingly engaging with suppliers to negotiate crude oil settlements in Indian rupees (INR), but foreign suppliers remain hesitant to accept the currency, citing trade imbalances, according to the ministry of petroleum and natural gas.

The ministry's statement comes in response to a parliamentary committee recommendation advocating for the settlement of crude oil imports in rupees to conserve the country's foreign exchange reserves.

The committee said that it found lack of momentum in settlement of crude oil import bills in Indian rupee and recommended the oil ministry to take up the issue with the ministry of finance and Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for removing bottlenecks in settlement of crude oil import bills in Indian rupee and promote the same.

It noted in its report that the RBI introduced additional arrangements for invoicing, payment, and settlement of exports/imports in INR. Authorised Dealer (AD) banks in India are permitted to open Rupee Vostro accounts for correspondent banks in partner trading countries, subject to RBI approval.

"The promotion of Indian rupee in settlement of crude oil bills is not a mere dream but it is a policy of the Government of India and it is incumbent on all the government agencies to make all out effort for successful implementation of the policy," the committee said. It reiterated its recommendation that the petroleum ministry take up the issue with the finance ministry and RBI to accelerate rupee-based settlements.

It also said that over dependence of the country and oil PSUs on any one region for crude oil and gas supplies can impact energy security of the country which entails getting uninterrupted supplies of crude oil and gas at reasonable prices to support the rapidly growing economy of the country.

The committee recommended that the petroleum ministry take concrete steps to diversify crude oil and gas import sources by exploring new international partners.

Maharashtra under fiscal pressure, admits Fadnavis

● Claims state will become India's first $1-trillion economy by '30

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, December 14

CHIEF MINISTER DEVENDRA Fadnavis on Sunday acknowledged the state treasury is under financial pressure, but asserted Maharashtra continues to meet all key parameters of a strong and stable economy.

Responding to several issues raised by legislators on the last day of the Winter session of the assembly, Fadnavis rejected allegations that the state's finances are weakening.

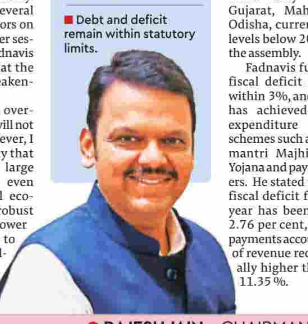
"We do not have an overflowing treasury, and I will not claim that we do. However, I can state with certainty that among the country's large states, Maharashtra even today qualifies on all economic indicators of a robust economy," he told the lower House while replying to the debate on the final-week resolution.

Fadnavis expressed confidence that Maharashtra would become India's first $1trillion state economy between 2029 and 2030, attributing this to long-term planning and fiscal discipline.

The government has prepared a vision document outlining a roadmap for a developed Maharashtra by 2047, with milestones set for 2030, 2035 and 2047, he pointed out.

ALL IS WELL

- State meets key metrics of a robust economy.
- Debt and deficit remain within statutory limits.



Attributing fiscal figures to official estimates, Fadnavis said states are permitted by the Reserve Bank of India and the FRBM (Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act) framework to borrow up to 25 per cent of their gross state domestic product.

"Maharashtra's borrowing, based on the 2025-26 budget estimates and loans raised so far, stands at 18.87% of GSDP, well below the permissible limit. Only three states, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Odisha, currently have debt levels below 20%," he said in the assembly.

Fadnavis further said the fiscal deficit must be kept within 3%, and Maharashtra has achieved this despite expenditure on welfare schemes such as the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana and payments to farmers. He stated that the state's fiscal deficit for the current year has been restricted to 2.76 per cent, while interest payments account for 11.53% of revenue receipts, marginally higher than last year's 11.35 %.

Four CMs, 100 CEOs to attend WEF annual meet

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, December 14

FOUR CHIEF MINISTERS, including Devendra Fadnavis of Maharashtra and N Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh, will join more than 100 CEOs from India at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting next month. Several union ministers are also expected to attend the five-day annual meeting from January 19-23, 2026, which will host a record number of nearly 3,000 global leaders from close to 130 countries, including around 60 heads of state.

Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh chief ministers will be joined by A Revanth Reddy of Telangana and Mohan Yadav from Madhya Pradesh.

Besides these four states, a few more, including Uttar Pradesh, are expected to have a significant presence in Davos during the WEF Annual Meeting 2026, which will be held under the theme of 'a spirit of dialogue'.

The names of union ministers scheduled to attend the meeting are expected to be announced soon.

CBDT intensifies action against fake deduction claims

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, December 14

UNDER THE LENS

- Dubious charity donation claims under probe
- Authorities flag fund routing, hawala, fake CSR
- CBDT sharpens analytics to detect risky 80G, 80GGC claims

THE CENTRAL BOARD of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has intensified its crackdown on bogus tax deductions and exemptions by deploying a data-driven compliance strategy, with a special focus on fake donation claims made by taxpayers.

Under this initiative, dubious claims of donations to political parties and charitable trusts have come under scrutiny, prompting many taxpayers to revise their income tax returns.

According to an official statement, the CBDT has taken action against several intermediaries found to be filing income tax returns with incorrect and fraudulent claims on a commission basis. Investigations revealed that some intermediaries had built extensive agent networks across India to facilitate false deductions and exemptions under the Income Tax Act, 1961.

A significant portion of these bogus claims related to donations made to Registered Unrecognised Political Parties (RUPPs) and certain charitable institutions. Evidence gathered during enforcement actions showed that many RUPPs were non-operational, non-filers, and inactive at their registered addresses, yet were being misused to issue fake donation receipts.

These entities were allegedly acting as conduits for routing funds, hawala transactions and even cross-border remittances. Follow-up searches conducted by the tax department also unearthed incriminating evidence of bogus corporate social responsibility (CSR) claims by companies.

To address this issue proactively, the CBDT has strengthened its data analytics capabilities to identify high-risk behaviour patterns at an early stage. One such pattern relates to deductions claimed under Sections 80G and 80GGC of the IT Act. Data analysis indicated that several taxpayers either donated to suspicious entities or failed to provide adequate information.

Copper industry flags cheap imports

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, December 14

CHEAP IMPORTS OF copper under multiple free trade agreements are "severely damaging" Indian manufacturing, industry body IPCPA said and sought immediate government interventions in the form of a safeguard duty and quantitative restrictions on inbound shipments from overseas.

According to the Indian Primary Copper Producers Association (IPCPA), a surge in zero-duty copper imports is eroding the country's domestic smelting and downstream manufacturing sector, even as over ₹20,000 crore has been invested in recent years to achieve self-sufficiency.

"Zero-duty imports from FTA partners are severely damaging Indian smelting and refining," the ICPA said, and demanded that a 3% safeguard duty should be imposed on copper imports of certain categories, irrespective of the FTA status.

It also raised concerns about the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), under which customs duties on copper wire rods have fallen to one per cent in FY26, and the levy is expected to be fully eliminated by FY27.

The problem worsened due to an inflated tariff rate quota of 85,000 tonnes per annum.

● **RAJESH JAIN**, CHAIRMAN, CII NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON BIOTECHNOLOGY

'Pvt investment in biopharma needs govt risk-sharing'

India's bioeconomy has expanded more than sixteen-fold over the past decade, rising from $10 billion to more than $165 billion in 2024, and is projected to exceed $300 billion by 2030. Biopharma accounts for over 35% of the total, with companies increasingly focusing on biologics, biosimilars and cell and gene therapies, alongside traditional vaccines—a segment where India remains a global leader. **Rajesh Jain**, *chairman of the CII National Committee on Biotechnology and chairman and MD of Panacea Biotec, speaks to* **Manu Kaushik** *about the weak private investment in biopharma R&D, emerging innovations, and the impact of a depreciating rupee. Excerpts:*

Q&A

Private-sector investment in biotech R&D has historically lagged government funding. What enabling factors are needed to catalyse private investment?

The issue is straightforward. Companies that can invest will do so from their own balance sheets. The real question is how to encourage companies that are already investing in R&D to step up their spending.

This is where government involvement becomes critical. R&D investments do not always yield results, and companies are unlikely to commit billions of dollars unless they have some assurance that a portion of that investment can be recovered. One solution could be consortium-based models, where industry, government and academia pool resources to drive innovation.

These efforts can take decades to bear fruit, which means sustained investment from like-minded companies in areas with national and global relevance. Expecting every company to independently invest heavily in R&D is simply unrealistic.

Biopharma manufacturing is heavily skewed toward vaccines. Do you see other segments gaining share?

These segments are very different. Vaccines will continue to grow because they are essential for protecting newborns, children and adults. However, in developing countries, awareness around adult vaccination is low, and people are often unwilling to pay for it.

Government investment in immunisation awareness is also inadequate. Prices are controlled, and individuals are reluctant to invest in preventive healthcare. When governments step back, UN agencies and non-profits step in, procuring vaccines and distributing them free of cost. As a result, the vaccine segment will continue to expand at a relatively fast pace.

What about innovation within vaccines?

Innovation is happening, but not at the pace seen in pharmaceuticals. Developing a new vaccine typically takes around 10 years.

GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN IMMUNISATION AWARENESS IS ALSO INADEQUATE. PRICES ARE CONTROLLED, AND INDIVIDUALS ARE RELUCTANT TO INVEST IN PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE

India imports a significant share of biopharma raw materials while exporting vaccines. How will a weaker rupee impact the sector?

In the near term—over the next year—the rupee may remain volatile and biased toward depreciation. But over a one- to two-year horizon, it should stabilise as the economy strengthens. That said, a weaker rupee is broadly positive for the biotech sector because exports exceed imports. For vaccine manufacturers, nearly 90% of production is exported. Imports typically account for about 25% of revenues and are largely internally hedged.

Biotech logistics infrastructure is widely seen as underdeveloped. What's holding it back?

Only a handful of companies are truly purpose-driven. Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech operate largely on internal capital. Panacea Biotec is the only publicly listed biotech company in this space. For many others, the economics do not add up. Promoters are reluctant to invest in areas with uncertain returns and prefer businesses that can deliver faster revenue growth. Upgrading logistics requires replacing existing infrastructure, which generates no immediate revenue and involves waiting several years for returns.

Biotech startups have surged, crossing 10,000 in recent years. What's driving this growth?

A significant amount of capital flowed into startups over the past four to five years. However, many hit a funding wall once they reach more advanced stages. Typically, startups receive ?4–5 million through government schemes, allowing them to reach early milestones. But they often stall at the pre-clinical or Phase I trial stage, where funding requirements increase sharply. That kind of risk capital is currently scarce in India.

The startup boom is also a result of the government distributing small amounts of seed capital across a large number of entities, which has helped expand the ecosystem but not necessarily sustain it.

The BioE3 policy approved last year proposes biomanufacturing hubs and biofoundries. What progress has been made?

Several initiatives are embedded in the policy, but implementation will take time. Proposals have been floated by state governments, and the process is still at an early stage.

(*For full interview, log on www.financialexpress.com*)

Personal Finance

MONDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2025

ON INVESTING
Santosh Joseph, CEO, Germinate Investor

The resilience in equity flows is the strongest signal that retail participation and long-term investing habits are only getting stronger

Go for aggressive hybrid funds for low volatility

THEY SCORE OVER DIVERSIFIED LARGE-CAP FUNDS IN RISK-ADJUSTED RETURNS

SAIKAT NEOGI

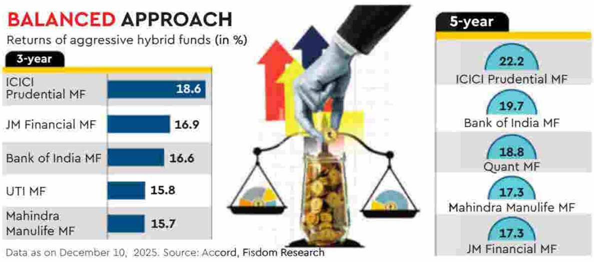
INDIVIDUALS SEEKING MODERATE risk and smoother returns should consider aggressive hybrid funds. These funds capture gains from both equity market recovery and debt market appreciation, making a compelling choice for investors.

These funds have an equity allocation ranging between 65% to 80% and debt having between 20% to 35%. The debt component of these funds becomes particularly advantageous during a rate-cut cycle.

As bond prices generally rise when interest rates fall, the debt portion stands to benefit through capital gains, apart from regular interest income.

The aggressive hybrid funds category has generated returns of 15% over a five-year period as compared with 15.5% for large-cap funds. The performance gap remains relatively modest—indicating that aggressive hybrids have managed to deliver competitive long-term returns despite their more conservative structure.

Nehal Mota, co-founder and CEO, Finnovate, a wealth advisory firm, says aggressive hybrid funds allow fund managers to tweak the portfolio between equity and debt to ensure best risk-adjusted returns. "If you consider risk-adjusted returns, then clearly, aggressive hybrids score over diversified large-cap funds," she says.



Data as on December 10, 2025. Source: Accord, Fisdom Research

Rebalance portfolio

In aggressive hybrid funds, the rebalancing can be opportunity-driven or valuation-driven. Fund managers will allocate more to equities if valuations are low and growth prospects for corporate earnings are bright. Similarly, they will enhance allocation to long-duration debt if interest rates are expected to fall.

Fund managers may also use cash positions, modify the duration or credit mix within debt, or selectively add or remove stocks to maintain the target allocation. This active and systematic rebalancing helps maintain the fund's risk–return profile and reduces volatility for investors.

Nirav Karkera, head, Research, Fisdom, says individuals must maintain a minimum investment horizon of at least 3 years in aggressive hybrid funds. "This will allow the equity component to deliver meaningful growth while the debt portion helps cushion short-term market fluctuations," he says.

What to factor in

Before investing in aggressive hybrid funds, investors should evaluate the proportion of equity and debt to ensure it aligns with their risk profile and investment goals. They should also review the fund's historical performance across market cycles, its expense ratio, and portfolio consistency.

"It is important to assess the quality and credit risk of the debt portfolio, as well as the fund manager's investment and rebalancing strategy," says Swapnil Aggarwal, director, VSRK Capital.

Investors must check returns of aggressive hybrid funds over longer time frames of five and 10 years and focus on the rolling consistency of returns.

YOUR MONEY: FLIGHT CANCELLATIONS

Travel insurance pays for non-refundable expenses

MEET KAPADIA

THE WIDESPREAD DISRUPTIONS due to Indigo's flight cancellations had left thousands of travellers stranded. For them the challenges stretched far beyond a cancelled flight.

Many missed onward journeys, hotel nights, pre-booked sightseeing, and even international connections. Many had to rebook at significantly higher fares. Even with refunds, the financial impact extended much wider than just the ticket price.

What airlines cover

DGCA rules lay down clear guidelines to protect passengers. If an airline cancels a flight and does not inform travellers at least 24 hours in advance, it must offer a full refund or an alternate flight. There are fixed compensation slabs depending on flight duration. In cases of long delays, the airline must provide meals, refreshments, or accommodation when required. If a connecting flight booked on the same ticket is missed due to delay or cancellation, the airline must assist.

However, airline obligations stop at direct disruptions. They rarely cover the larger financial consequences. They do not reimburse travellers for missed events, non-refundable hotels, separate connecting flights, additional transport, or last-minute fare hikes. Many passengers discovered this when refunds did not come close to covering the real cost of disrupted travel plans.

Travel insurance is the real safety net

A comprehensive travel insurance covers flight delays, flight cancellations, trip delays, trip cancellations, missed connections, and even flight diversions. These benefits extend to non-refundable expenses that airlines typically do not cover.

There is also growing interest in cancel for any reason add-ons. These allow travellers to cancel their tickets for personal or unforeseen reasons and still recover a portion of their costs. In uncertain times, this flexibility has become extremely valuable.

The recent disruptions have made it evident that even large and reputable airlines can face sudden operational stress. A travel insurance plan ensures that the consequences of such breakdowns are not borne entirely by the traveller.

Lessons for travellers

The recent crisis has shown that even the biggest airlines can face sudden breakdowns due to regulatory shifts, crew shortages, or operational pressures. Travel insurance is no longer just an optional add-on. It is a modern essential and a practical safeguard against unexpected disruptions.

As India's travel volumes grow, travellers who combine flight bookings with comprehensive protection will always be better prepared for uncertainty. The past few weeks have reinforced that this awareness is not just useful but necessary for every traveller in the country.

The writer is head, Travel Insurance, Policybazaar.com

RETURNS BAROMETER

SPECIAL FIXED DEPOSITS

Laddering helps in special deposits

Many public sector banks are offering higher rates for special fixed deposits. Depositors can lock-in for longer tenures to earn higher returns. However, premature withdrawal is not possible.

Company name	Interest rates (%)	Applicable tenure
Bank of Baroda	6.60	444 days
Bank of India	6.70	450 days
Bank of Maharashtra	6.60	500 days
Central Bank of India	6.50	2222 days; 3333 days
Indian Bank	6.60	444 days
Indian Overseas Bank	6.70	444 days
Punjab National Bank	6.50	390 days
Punjab & Sind Bank	6.60	444 days
State Bank of India	6.60	444 days
Union Bank of India	6.30	400 days

Source: Paisabazaar.com

SMART MONEY

MUTUAL FUND

Tata MF launches index fund

TATA ASSET MANAGEMENT has launched multi-cap consumption index fund, offering investors diversified exposure across large-, mid-, and small-cap consumption names through a single product. The Tata BSE Multicap Consumption 50:30:20 Index Fund, an open-ended scheme, is designed to replicate and track the BSE Multicap Consumption 50:30:20 Index (TRI), providing a mix of potential stability and growth in India's evolving consumption story. Subscription to the new fund offer will close on December 23, 2025.

LIFE INSURANCE

Consumption fund from Bajaj Life

BAJAJ LIFE INSURANCE has launched Bajaj Life India Consumption Fund, designed to help investors participate in India's fast-expanding consumption economy. The fund will invest in companies that stand to benefit from rising household incomes, increasing urbanisation, rapid digital adoption and the growing aspirations of Indian consumers across sectors.

The fund will be available under Bajaj Life's unit-linked insurance plans. It follows a multi-stage investment approach across large, mid and emerging companies in sectors such as retail, consumer goods, automotive, healthcare, telecom, consumer services, hospitality and lifestyle products.

Explainer

Recent duty trends in India

HISTORICALLY, INDIA'S TARIFF structure has been complex, with multiple rates and a high duty structure, especially for agriculture. The past five years reflect largely steady rates, with peak rates remaining unchanged for most products. The duties in agriculture have been as high as 120% for certain dry fruits, while essentials (fruits and vegetables) attract up to 100% customs duty. This is meant to protect rural livelihoods largely dependent on agriculture. So import duties on such goods may stay high.

Besides these, high tariffs in some sectors are meant to incentivise and/or protect domestic industry and promote local manufacturing. The Centre is also likely to introduce production-linked incentive schemes in some of these sectors, including toys and footwear, to incentivise local manufacturing. As such, the import duty structure is likely to remain high. According to the Global Trade Research Initiative, India's simple average tariff fell from 31.8% in 2001 to 14.5% by 2006 and then slowly to 13.4% by 2016. A short phase of tariff escalation saw the average climb to 17% by 2023 (weighted average 12%). The simple average is now about 16%; for agri-products, it is still above 36% (weighted rate 64%).

CUSTOMS DUTIES

Why an overhaul is on the card for customs

India's customs policy is at an inflection point. Long referred to as a high-tariff jurisdiction, the country is now balancing its protectionist measures with the objective of integration in global value chain. ***Krishan Arora*** explains what to expect from the govt and the likely reforms

16% INDIA'S CURRENT SIMPLE AVERAGE TARIFF, ACCORDING TO THE GLOBAL TRADE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

THE PROPOSED INTEGRATION OF CUSTOMS SYSTEM IS GOING TO BE THE NEXT BIG REFORM IN SEVERAL YEARS

120% DUTIES HAVE BEEN SEEN IN CASE OF DRY FRUITS; & 100% FOR FRUITS AND VEGGIES

What is the govt doing to rationalise duty structure?

IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a clear shift towards simplification and rationalisation of duty structures. Several notifications have been pruned and combined into one notification or rescinded. The tariff now mostly reflects effective duty rate, except where conditional exemptions apply, reducing the administrative burden of referring to multiple notifications. Also, the rationalisation has been undertaken from the perspective of keeping duty rates low for inputs and components and high for finished goods to promote domestic manufacturing. Duty cuts can be expected in automobile, white goods, medical devices, and semiconductor, however only on the inputs and key components that are not available in India. India's tariff policy plays an important role in the manufacturing sector's growth and having an average peak rate may be a deterrent at this point of time.

Agri-sector is the most protected

Non-agriculture products

Basic customs duty rate (%)	
Vehicles	70
Parts of vehicles	10-20
Toys	70
Part of toys	20
Footwear	20
Parts of footwear	20

Agriculture products

Basic customs duty rate (%)	
Dairy produce	60
Fresh vegetables	100
Fresh fruits	50
Dry fruits	120
Wheat	100
Rice	80

What to expect in Budget, FTA angle

OTHER THAN DUTY rate changes, following reforms may be brought in to smooth customs processes for industry: Integration of different customs platforms into one unified system; and suitable amendments in customs law for time-bound closure of Special Valuation Branch assessments and applicability of limitation period from the date of filing customs entry.

The government is aggressive in signing new free trade agreements (FTAs) (US, European Union, Canada, etc.) as well as re-negotiating existing FTAs that have a significant trade imbalance (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). The government appears to be clear in its objective to forego limited customs revenue (currently at 6% of total revenues) to obtain market access in the major global economies. While this will lead to loss of customs revenues, there is a likelihood of substantial increase in exports and consequent foreign exchange earnings. A well negotiated FTA will contribute to India's growth story. Benefit appears be much larger than foregone duty revenues.

Next big reform on govt agenda

THE PROPOSED INTEGRATION of customs system is going to be the next big reform in years. While the government has largely digitalised processes, having different platforms has caused administrative challenges for businesses. One unified customs system is expected to smooth paperless data submission, further easing the clearance process (subject to risk management system flagging) and reduced dwell time. This is also aligned with India's overall commitment to WTO's trade facilitation agreement. Trade competitiveness and revenue dynamics might be reshaped in the coming years. The government has expressed its intent to overhaul the customs systems, and India is up for systemic as well as dynamic changes in customs processes and procedures.

The author is Partner & Leader, Indirect Tax, India Investment Advisory, Grant Thornton Bharat

With inputs from Karan Kakkar and Ravi Jain, respectively Partner and Director, India Investment Advisory, Grant Thornton Bharat

Opinion

MONDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2025

COLLABORATIVE GROWTH

Union minister Jitendra Singh

India stands at the threshold of a deep-tech transformation powered by a confident, ambitious private sector. If we move forward with courage, conviction, and trust, this will become a win-win model for industry, society, and the nation

A bridge still too far

Time frame to ink an interim deal on Indo-US trade is only extending

ON THE FACE of it, the prospects for sealing a bilateral trade with the US, after five rounds of negotiations, do appear propitious. President Donald Trump, who has been signalling that it is imminent, is in regular touch with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A team from Washington led by Deputy US Trade Representative Rick Switzer was in New Delhi to assess progress. Switzer's boss, Jamieson Greer, has indicated that India has given its best offer for a deal. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal rightly responded that if they are happy, they should be signing on the dotted line. Alas, this is not happening. The time frames are only extending, with the government's chief economic advisor stating that it is likely by March 2026. The warrant for scepticism is that scarcely a day passes without fresh developments that make it highly uncertain. Responding to pressure from the US farm lobby, Trump has threatened fresh tariffs on Indian premium basmati rice, citing concerns over dumping. Mexico has also slapped tariffs of 5% to 50% on various Asian countries, including India, possibly at the US's urging.

All these developments add a layer of uncertainty to the putative trade deal, which according to observers is mostly done and awaits Trump's nod. Talks have progressed well at the negotiator level, and the issues left to be discussed are now few in number. Why then is the deadline shifting from autumn to the future amidst indications that the negotiation process is progressing on two parallel tracks according to India's commerce secretary, Rajesh Agrawal? The first track is to secure a framework trade deal that addresses the reciprocal tariff challenge that Indian exporters currently face—hopefully by the end of this year—that will feed into the second track of the longer-term interim bilateral trade agreement being negotiated. The US President has slapped a 25% reciprocal tariff on India's goods to the US plus an additional penalty of 25% for purchases of Russian oil that funds its war in Ukraine. India is focused on getting the US to first roll back the tariffs of 50% to much lower levels—below the 19-20% for competitors like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Bangladesh—and then fleshing out a mutually beneficial interim trade deal.

Given the various imponderables—including dealing with a highly unpredictable US President—India's stance on the Indo-US trade deal has been pragmatic. Goyal has stated that a deal is done when both sides stand to benefit and that we should never negotiate with deadlines or hard stops. India, for its part, is significantly reducing its reliance on Russian oil and stepping up purchases from the US. Given its relatively low per capita income, India realises that it still needs to keep reasonable levies even as it is willing to lower the overall level of its tariffs under US pressure.

India has been willing to accommodate the US's requests on specific industrial commodities but has held firm on its agricultural red lines—especially lowering duties on genetically modified maize and soya bean which are not allowed under our regulations. Greer told the US Senate Appropriations Committee that India has been quite forward-leaning but a "tough nut to crack". Even if the time frames are extending, India needs to hold firm and safeguard its national interests rather than succumb to US pressure to clinch a one-sided trade deal.

Warner Bros. bidders are having a rough time

THE DUELLING SUITORS for Warner Bros. Discovery have had a rough week. Will this rule out an auction? Don't count on it.

Netflix's shares have slid further, to sit nearly 25% below where they were before its interest in Warner emerged. Oracle, the source of wealth for the rival party, the Ellison family, tumbled to take its peak-to-trough fall to nearly 40%. The hits are worth roughly $100 billion and $360 billion respectively.

For now, Netflix leads having secured the backing of Warner's board to buy the company for $27.75 a share in cash and stock, after the cable business is separated next year. Estimates for the value of that legacy broadcast arm that Warner shareholders will vary markedly. Some analysts put it at slightly more than $2 per Warner share. On that view, the full Netflix offer is worth $30 per share, or about $78 billion, before taking into account the risks around antitrust clearance.

Paramount Skydance, backed by Oracle Co-Founder Larry Ellison and led by his son David, this week bid to buy Warner outright for $30 a share in cash. Some Warner shareholders cheered this simpler pitch. But the Ellisons still need to persuade the target's board to scrap the Netflix agreement before signing a new deal with them. Until that happens, Netflix doesn't strictly need to respond.

When the Ellisons made their offer privately last week, they said the terms weren't best and final. So an auction seems more than plausible.

The plunging shares of Netflix and Oracle matter in varying degrees to both sides. The Netflix offer's stock component is small and partly adjusts for changes in the bidder's own stock price. Hence, the implied value of the offer is down less than 1% since being made despite a 9% fall in the streaming giant's shares. Nor is Netflix reliant on issuing stock to sweeten the terms. As *Bloomberg Intelligence* says, Netflix could raise its bid with additional debt while maintaining a strong credit rating. It has barely any leverage today.

CHRIS HUGHES

Bloomberg

A price hike does risk pushing net debt above the psychological pain barrier of three times profit (measured by earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation). But that wouldn't hurt for long. Rising revenue, profit, and cash flow would help bring the leverage ratio back down.

One possible glitch for Netflix is the uncertainty over the value of that declining cable business, known as Global Networks. Paramount says it's only worth $1 per Warner share based on a 4.5 times multiple of expected Ebitda in the 12 months from October 2026. Global Networks will carry heavy debts, so small changes in its overall value disproportionately affect the per-share value. Its peer AMC Networks trades on a five-times forward multiple. Warner shareholders will hope Global Networks could command something like that.

As for the Ellisons, they say they have "backstopped" $41 billion of equity to support the transaction alongside private equity firm RedBird Capital Partners. That's important in guaranteeing the finance if there's a hitch with the money coming from the other equity partners, who comprise sovereign funds from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi plus Jared Kushner's Affinity Partners.

Paramount has preempted concerns about West Asian states owning a big slice of culturally and democratically important US media and news assets. The wealth funds' equity carries no voting or governance rights. Paramount says in filings that this renders the transaction immune to CFIUS security scrutiny on foreign investments.

But if the structure becomes a political obstacle, the Ellisons' backstop will be crucial. Larry Ellison's net wealth fell $25 billion on Thursday. It was still $258 billion, way more than what's needed here. He still needs to write a huge personal check, which means cashing in liquid assets. It's hard to believe he couldn't, with such resources. And yet the solidity of Paramount's financing was subject to much back-and-forth in engagement with Warner before Netflix got its deal. It's a concern for the target.

Maybe at the margins the huge value destruction suffered by both suitors will dampen animal spirits. From the outside, one can only conclude that the volatility in Oracle stock obviously doesn't help and will likely matter to Warner. As for Netflix, this deal stands to change its profile from a lowly leveraged dependable tech stock into a very different animal. The drop in its share price doesn't stop it sweetening its bid, but it does scream out the question of whether it should.

GI STRATEGY

IT REVEALS GLOBAL APPETITE FOR INDIAN DESIGNS—AND INDIA'S FAILURE TO MONETISE THEM

When Prada prices our heritage

AJAY SRIVASTAVA

Founder, Global Trade Research Initiative

WHEN LUXURY ITALIAN fashion house Prada showcased sandals resembling Kolhapuri chappals in its Spring/Summer 2026 men's collection—selling them as luxury items without acknowledging their Indian origin or the artisans behind them—it triggered a swift backlash in India, including legal notices, social media outrage, and a public interest case. Although Prada denied violating Geographical Indication (GI) rules, it later explored working with Indian artisans.

The controversy sparked a debate over foreign brands using India's heritage and GI products, but it reveals a bigger issue: While Indian designs inspire global luxury markets, India rarely captures the premium value they generate.

GIs are meant to prevent precisely this. A GI certifies that a product originates in a specific place and derives its distinctive qualities, reputation, or characteristics from that geography. Climate, soil, traditional knowledge, and local craftsmanship all play a role.

GIs cover agricultural products, food items, natural goods, and manufactured products. In theory, they protect authenticity and ensure that value accrues to local producers. In practice, India's GI system remains under-leveraged.

India today has around 650 registered GI products, a sharp increase since Darjeeling tea became the country's first GI-tagged product in 2004-05. Yet the global comparison is sobering. The European Union has more than 3,400 GI registrations, spanning food, wine, and spirits, while China leads the world with over 7,200 GI products.

More importantly, these regions have succeeded in turning GIs into global premium brands. Champagne alone accounted for about €7 billion within France's exports in 2024. Tequila has become synonymous with Mexico, and Roquefort cheese commands global recognition and price premiums.

India's GI list is rich and diverse. Darjeeling tea is globally known for its muscatel flavour. Kanchipuram and Mysore silks are celebrated for craftsmanship and purity. Kashmiri saffron is prized as the world's most expensive spice. Basmati rice enjoys a premium reputation for aroma and taste. Tirupati laddus carry religious and cultural exclusivity. Odisha's rasagola reflects regional culinary excellence. These products carry deep cultural meaning and offer income opportunities for rural communities. Yet, most remain trapped in niche markets—under-branded and underpriced.

> Not all GI products can or should be global stars. India should classify its GIs into three categories based on growth potential

The problem is not quantity but positioning. Indian GIs often lack global brand recognition, consistent quality control, and professional marketing. Many are sold as commodities rather than heritage products. Quality varies across producers, traceability is weak, and packaging rarely signals premium value.

Unlike France or Italy, where GI consortia tightly manage standards and storytelling, India's GI ecosystem is fragmented. As a result, Indian GIs inspire global designers and chefs, but the premium is captured elsewhere.

The Indian government recognises this gap. The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade has taken steps to promote GI products through international fairs, branding initiatives, quality upgrades, and legal protection. E-commerce platforms are increasingly seen as channels to reach global consumers directly. These efforts are necessary but insufficient.

What India needs is a shift in mindset—from protecting GIs as legal certificates to building them as global brands.

First, India must impose strict quality control and traceability systems aligned with international standards. Premium markets pay for consistency and authenticity. Without reliable certification and enforcement, GI tags lose credibility abroad.

Second, export visibility must improve. Creating dedicated 10-digit Harmonised System (HS) codes for GI products would help generate accurate trade data. Today, only a few GIs such as Darjeeling tea and Basmati rice have clear HS codes. For most others, the absence of data makes it impossible to assess export performance or design targeted strategies.

Third, branding must be intentional. Each high-potential GI needs a clear global narrative—origin, history, craft, and use—tailored to specific markets. Champagne did not become premium by accident; it was marketed relentlessly as heritage in a bottle. Top Indian GIs require similar storytelling, supported by modern packaging and certification marks that signal authenticity to foreign consumers. Digital platforms can accelerate this process by allowing artisans and producer groups to connect directly with global buyers.

Fourth, partnerships matter. Government agencies, industry bodies, exporters, and farmer producer organisations must work together, not in silos. India's fragmented artisan base needs institutional support to negotiate with global brands rather than merely inspire them.

Finally, realism is essential. Not all GI products can or should be global stars. India should classify its GIs into three categories based on growth potential. The top tier—products with clear global appeal—should receive the bulk of branding budgets, export facilitation, and policy attention. Others may remain regionally important but need different strategies. Focus, not dilution, will drive results.

The Prada-Kolhapuri episode should be seen not as a loss but as a wake-up call. It revealed global appetite for Indian designs—and India's failure to monetise them. As global consumers increasingly seek authentic, traceable, and heritage-rich products, India has a rare opportunity.

By repositioning its GI products from niche curiosities to premium global brands, India can generate higher incomes for artisans, preserve cultural heritage, and claim its rightful place in the global value chain. The world already values Indian tradition. India must now learn to price it.

The persisting Indo-China border challenge

HARSH V PANT
KALPIT A MANKIKAR

Respectively Vice-President for Studies and Fellow, China Studies, ORF

Beijing's recent posture is signalling that a buoyed China sees no reason to divorce its strategic posture from its economic one

REPORTS THAT AN Indian woman was harassed and detained for 18 hours while transiting through China recently has sparked off a political storm. The woman from Arunachal Pradesh was reportedly asked to "apply for a Chinese passport" by officials at Shanghai airport during a layover. The Chinese officials' contention was that the Indian passport of the flyer from Arunachal was not valid since the Indian state was a part of China. The woman also disclosed that she did not have any issue while her travel through China in October 2024.

The Ministry of External Affairs took issued a strong demarche to China. The government asserted that Arunachal Pradesh is a part of India, and that its residents are entitled to travel on Indian passports. This action has been followed up with the government asking Chinese authorities to give assurances that Indian nationals will not be selectively targeted while they travel or transit through China. Short of an adverse travel advisory, the government has cautioned Indian nationals travelling through the mainland to exercise "discretion". A question on this issue posed by an Indian journalist in Beijing to a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson has revealed Beijing's mind. The spokesperson reiterated that "Arunachal Pradesh" had been illegally established by India, and that the territory had not been recognised by China. The spokesperson referred to Arunachal Pradesh as "Zangnan" or south Tibet. When an Indian TV anchor brought this issue to the attention of the Chinese ambassador in India, Xu Feihong, the latter endorsed the Chinese spokesperson's stand. The envoy highlighted the issue of the contentious border, and the need for a solution in the form of a mutually agreeable boundary. Pakistan too has weighed in and supported China.

The woman's mistreatment in Shanghai has exposed the fault lines in India-China relations. Since China tried to change the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 2020, India's response was that it would not be business as usual. Cultural, educational, and business cooperation became a casualty of the military coercion, and visas for journalists were revoked. Beijing's rejoinder to these actions was that the border issue should be put in its "rightful place", meaning that people-to-people connection should not be contingent upon the border situation.

> The strain following the Shanghai airport incident comes at a time when New Delhi is mulling over reviewing the relaxation of investment controls

Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping's meeting in October 2024 during the BRICS summit in Russia, both nations embarked upon a path of cautious normalisation. By agreeing to patrolling arrangements along the LAC, Beijing tacitly admitted to trying to change the facts on the ground through military coercion. The accord reached with China in October 2024 fulfilled an important aim—getting Indian troops to again patrol the relevant points, and resuming pasture grazing. With patrolling resuming along the LAC, it provided a convenient segue into taking people-centric steps to stabilise the relationship. This premise resulted in the resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage, the visa regime being liberalised, direct flights resuming between Indian and Chinese cities, and exchanges between news organisations and think tanks. In fact, this year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations, and both sides had resolved to prioritise efforts through public diplomacy to restore mutual trust. Yet a single incident has cast a dark shadow on the India-China dynamics. This time around, in a seeming volte-face from its previous position, it is the Chinese that have brought forth the primacy of the border, which they all along insisted should be put in its rightful place.

While some commentators in India have sought to pin the blame on zealous immigration officials in China, and view this as a localised problem, there is a discernable pattern to this sudden shift in the Chinese position. Things have come to a head between Beijing and Tokyo after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi merely expressed her nation's standard position that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would mean an existential crisis, and that its self-defence forces would have to intervene. Takaichi's statement during a parliamentary debate has sparked off a crisis between the two nations. China's wolf-warriors are back with one diplomat threatening to "cut off the dirty neck". Chinese nationals were told to avoid going to Japan, which led to an estimated 500,000 flight tickets being cancelled. China has reinstated a ban on Japanese seafood imports.

The war of words has resulted in Xi's call with US President Donald Trump, where he aired his grievances about Tokyo and Taipei. In turn, Trump reportedly told Takaichi to avoid needling Beijing over Taipei. Trump cosying up to Xi could be motivated by his eagerness to reach a trade deal with China, for which he has even dangled the prospect of a "G2" compact. Washington's overtures for a détente with Beijing perhaps explain China's sudden belligerence in territorial disputes with neighbours India and Japan. Additionally, the National Security Strategy of Trump 2.0 delineates the Western hemisphere as a vital interest, and in this pivot to its neighbourhood China may see a shrinking role of the US on the world stage. This may have emboldened Beijing to probe around and carve out its own "backyard".

The strain following the Shanghai airport incident comes at a time when New Delhi is mulling over reviewing the relaxation of investment controls, specifically Press Note 3, which had been brought in to regulate capital inflows from nations that share a land border with India. China's renewed vigour in using economic coercion in territorial spats will indubitably shape India's approach as it seeks new terms of economic engagement. Beijing's recent posture is signalling that a buoyed China sees no reason to divorce its strategic posture from its economic one.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The tariff trap

Apropos of "The future of Trump tariffs" (*FE*, December 13), trade policy under President Donald Trump has shifted from rules-based multilateralism to blunt unilateral pressure. The selective use of tariffs may have delivered short-term leverage, but it has also weakened trust in global trade norms. While consumer price inflation has remained modest so far, the wider costs—uncertainty in supply chains, politicised market access, and retaliatory risks—are harder to measure. The European Union's reluctant accommodation and China's targeted retaliation show that power asymmetry drives outcomes. For trading nations such as India, this volatility demands caution rather than alignment. A durable solution lies in restoring predictable rules, strengthening dispute resolution, and limiting the use of tariffs as political tools. Trade stability, not tactical wins, ultimately serves global growth best.

—SM Jeeva, Chennai

A social media ban

In Australia, social media has been strictly banned for children under 16 years of age. This decision reflects the Australian government's far-sighted vision for the safety and well-being of the younger generation. Such an initiative deserves appreciation from nations across the world, as it will significantly help in reducing anxiety and mental pressure among children and encourage the development of creative and independent thinking. Moreover, this step serves as an important lesson for other countries to carefully examine the impact of social media on their own younger generations and to take responsible measures for their protection.

—Md Imtiaz, Darbhanga

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Nuclear energy for growth

Sustaining a vibrant enabling environment is the key

Cabinet clearance for the Atomic Energy Bill marks a significant step in India's nuclear-energy programme. The Bill, to be introduced in the current session of Parliament, reportedly seeks to enable the private sector's participation in operating nuclear-power plants for the first time and address the issue of liability. The Bill, labelled Sustainable Harnessing of Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India, or SHANTI, which is likely to amend the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage (CLND) Act, 2010, attempts to bridge regulatory gaps and create an enabling legal framework for the flow of private, especially foreign, investment in the sector — up to 49 per cent. The strategy is to enable the expansion of nuclear power at scale and create a reliable low-carbon alternative to India's overwhelming dependence on coal, which renewable-energy technologies cannot sustainably achieve at the present moment.

To move closer to net-zero goals, India is betting big on small modular reactors (SMRs), which generate up to 300 Mw and are easier, cheaper, and faster to install than traditional large reactors. The government has announced a Nuclear Energy Mission for research & development on SMRs at an outlay of ₹20,000 crore. The mission has targeted at least five SMRs to be operationalised by 2033. Greater cooperation with Russia, the terms of which were concluded during President Vladimir Putin's recent visit, is a vital element of this strategy, given that country's significant expertise in this field. India's nuclear ambitions are understandably expansive and meeting them will require a sustained focus to create a vibrant enabling environment for private players.

Finance could be one challenge. India's goal is to boost its installed nuclear-power capacity to 100 Gw from the current 8.8 Gw by 2047. According to a power-ministry report, this scale-up would require $214 billion of cumulative capital. Accessing relatively low-cost finance, therefore, would be vital. The Department of Economic Affairs, under the finance ministry, had earlier proposed including nuclear energy in its climate-finance taxonomy. But it is unclear whether domestic finance would be sufficient to achieve the scale the government is hoping to achieve. Globally, there is considerable ambivalence on nuclear finance, with regions and even institutions within them varying in their approach to include nuclear energy in green taxonomies. Many large American financial players, for instance, exclude nuclear power from green taxonomies, whereas the European Union and China allow it with conditions such as waste disposal and safety protocols.

Amendment to the nuclear-liability law, which extended compensation liabilities to victims of nuclear accidents to suppliers as well as operators, will also be important. This single clause has been cited as a deterrent by some of the largest manufacturers of foreign reactors such as America's Westinghouse and France's EDF from participating in India's nuclear programme. The sector will closely watch how India addresses this issue. Although nuclear power is considered one of the safest sources of energy, accidents, Chernobyl or Fukushima, can have far more catastrophic long-term impacts than conventional industrial disasters. In India, the long-drawn fallout from the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal is seared in public memory. Managing public perception and implementing workable compensation mechanisms would, therefore, be as critical as accessing technology and finance.

Copyright protection

Better framework is needed for AI training

In a recent working-paper on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and copyright, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade has proposed a hybrid statutory licensing model that would let AI developers use any lawfully accessed copyrighted content for training but only after paying royalties once their models become commercial. Under this proposal, AI developers will receive an automatic licence to use all lawfully accessed copyrighted works without prior permission or individual deals. A central government-appointed body will collect and distribute these royalties while a separate committee will set rates, subject to judicial review.

This body will set and collect royalties from AI companies, distributing proceeds among copyright holders. Coverage under this system will extend to unorganised sectors. Ratesetting will be through consultation with government officers, legal experts, financial experts, emerging technology specialists, and AI developers. Creators will not have an opt-out or the right to refuse use of their work for AI training. The paper also rejects mandatory disclosure of training datasets — a safeguard widely adopted in other jurisdictions. If adopted, this system would make India a global outlier in terms of AI copyright regulation. The paper has drawn criticism on different grounds from stakeholders, including tech companies and lobbies such as Nasscom, and from content creators and publishers. Most stakeholders support opt-out mechanisms for content creators. Tech companies and lobbies call enforced royalties a "tax on innovation". Meanwhile, content creators also fear undervaluation of premium content. Moreover, this process could lead to a situation where the owners of copyright for global content will be reluctant to license their copyright into India for fear of their content being forcibly inducted for training. This could have adverse long-term consequences with Indians not having access to premium content with negative implications for higher education among other things.

This paper comes at a time when there are disputes in multiple jurisdictions between AI companies and owners of copyright. Disputes between India's news publishers and global AI firms have also escalated with multiple media organisations accusing tech companies of using their copyrighted articles to train their large language models without permission, payment, or licensing. The paper appears to be well intentioned in certain respects in that it will not allow AI companies to train their models on copyrighted content for free, warning that this approach will erode incentives for human creativity and distort the value chain. But a model of forced licensing with royalties set by the government is not an ideal approach. Legislation must protect copyright for content creators and owners, but it must also be aligned with international trends. A legally acceptable system for remuneration for copyright holders is needed. Instead of forced licensing and setting copyright rates of payment, another way forward could be to lay out a legal framework where content copyright is protected with suggested model contracts that allow AI companies and content creators to negotiate their own rates. This would be a more pragmatic approach.

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

A Goldilocks 2026

A recovery in cyclical demand and structural reforms can sustain the solid growth-benign inflation mix

The year 2025 has been a challenging one for India. Real gross domestic product (GDP) growth was above expectations and the inflation rate was below the target. But beneath the surface, there was more turbulence. At 50 per cent, India was singled out for American tariffs, domestic consumption softened, slowing nominal GDP growth weighed on revenues, large outflows in foreign-portfolio equity and a delay in the United States (US) trade deal have sustained the currency weakness, and the AI (artificial intelligence) exuberance has bypassed India. All considered, the economy has navigated this turbulence well, due to prudent macro policy choices, and the outlook for 2026 depends on five key questions.

Is improvement in cyclical growth likely?

Growth is important not only in itself but also because of its spillover effects on fiscal finances and in attracting more capital inflows. After a challenging 2025, we expect India's cyclical growth to improve in 2026, supported by multiple factors.

SONAL VARMA

Globally, we expect the AI-led investment boom and more supportive monetary and fiscal policies to set the stage for a strong 2026, led by the US and Europe. Domestically, low inflation is likely to remain a tailwind, boosting household real disposable incomes and supporting both consumption demand and corporate profitability. Unlike last year, when tight macro policies were a restraint on growth, the lagged effects of prior policy easing — repo rate cuts, liquidity, and credit easing — should boost growth. A likely trade deal with the US that lowers tariffs on Indian exports from 50 per cent to 20 per cent will also be a positive.

The government this year announced rationalisation in goods and services tax (GST) and labour-market reforms. More reforms are likely, focusing on improving the ease of doing business, further liberalisation in foreign direct investment, privatisation, deregulation, and factor-market reforms. India's share in global smartphone export continues to rise, and a broadening of the production-linked incentive scheme to other low-tech manufacturing sectors like toys, furniture, and footwear should be the next step.

Overall, we forecast real GDP growth at around 7 per cent year-on-year (Y-o-Y) in 2026, with likely improvement in urban discretionary demand and real estate investment.

Is the disinflation just cyclical or also structural?

It is a bit of both. Cyclically, the benign inflation rate reflects positive supply shocks in food, low commodity costs, moderating wage growth, and the transmission of GST cuts to prices.

But the inflation decline is also structural. Our analysis shows that the trend in the consumer price index has moderated from around 6 per cent in 2022 to 3.4 per cent in November 2025. This is due to a lower food-inflation rate and a sharp moderation in the super core inflation trend from 5.0-5.5 per cent over the last decade to 3.2 per cent now. Ongoing efficiency and productivity gains from infrastructure investment, increased digital transactions, the anchoring of inflation expectations, proactive supply-side food management, and increased competition from Chinese imports have all contributed to this trend.

Unlike food and fuel, where there is a risk of a trend reversal, the drop in the super core trend should be more sustainable. We expect the inflation rate to average 3.6 per cent in 2026, up from 2.2 per cent in 2025, marking two consecutive years below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) 4 per cent target.

Is the RBI's ratecutting cycle over?

Fundamentally, low inflation will likely persist longer, a weak currency is not a threat to the inflation mandate, real rates remain elevated, and there is still some economic slack. So, there is scope for some further easing, but having cut the repo rate by 125 basis points this year, the RBI has the flexibility to go slow from here. The terminal repo rate is likely to settle lower than the current 5.25 per cent, and a low-rate regime appears sustainable. Transmission will need a greater push as forex intervention and a higher currency leakage drain liquidity in the banking system, so more open-market bond purchases will be necessary. Finally, the flexible inflation-targeting framework is up for review after March 2026, and a renewal of the existing framework would be seen as positive.

When will external pressures ease?

A negative balance of payments has been a pressure point this year, especially since September. With exports hit by tariffs, sticky imports, and large portfolio equity outflows, funding the current-account deficit has been challenging. With a US trade deal still elusive, these pressures may sustain in the very near term.

However, the external sector looks fundamentally healthy, and currency concerns should be a passing phase. The rupee has depreciated on a real effective exchange rate, which should help stabilise the current account by restraining imports and boosting exports. A weak currency also tends to attract more remittances. Export of services remains on a structural uptrend. On the capital account, improved domestic growth should attract portfolio equity inflows, and India's entry into the Bloomberg Global Aggregate Index could also lead to large bond inflows next year. Expectations of a trade deal are low, so any announcement would be a positive surprise.

Is the best phase of fiscal consolidation behind us?

Our estimates show a potential revenue shortfall of around ₹1.3 trillion in FY26, but this is likely to be covered by expenditure compression in H2FY26, since the government remains committed to its fiscal-deficit target of 4.4 per cent of GDP in FY26.

Starting in FY27, the central government will transition from setting fiscal-deficit targets to a debt-targeting framework, with the aim to lower central-government debt from around 56 per cent of GDP in FY26 to about 50 per cent (plus or minus 1 per cent) by FY31. The absence of a deficit target has increased uncertainty, as investors have become accustomed to the fiscal deficit being an anchor, whereas debt-to-GDP is not entirely in the government's control. While the government can lower the primary deficit, debt sustainability also depends on the extent to which nominal GDP growth exceeds the nominal interest rate. We believe the government will persist with fiscal consolidation during this transition, albeit perhaps more gradually.

Wrapping up

Overall, 2025 has been a challenging year for India, but the economy has managed to absorb these shocks well, via a focus on boosting domestic demand and a push towards diversifying exports. As past policy easing boosts cyclical demand and structural reforms boost productivity and investment, the Goldilocks mix of solid growth and benign inflation can sustain in 2026.

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

India's equity: Update your beliefs

India's stock market wears an air of resilience. Since the Covid-19 pandemic trough, the benchmark indices — the Nifty 50 and the Sensex — have repeatedly scaled new highs, buoyed up by domestic inflows, a swelling army of retail investors, and a compelling narrative of long-term growth.

Yet, as the indices recently edged past their records, a curious disquiet set in. Many investors found their portfolios stubbornly in the red. Social media buzzed with perplexity. How could markets be at all-time highs while portfolios languished? There are vexing questions around the disconnect between Nifty returns and portfolio returns, between economic growth and earnings growth, and finally, between earnings growth and market returns, and the divergence between them.

IRRATIONAL CHOICE

DEBASHIS BASU

Nifty returns vs portfolio returns

The Nifty is a club of giants — banks, financiers, software firms, pharmaceuticals, consumer staples, and commodity producers. These are mature, relatively stable businesses. They were never the principal beneficiaries of the recent investment frenzy. The great bull run of 2023 and 2024 was driven instead by small and mid-sized firms riding a wave of government capital expenditure (capex) — railways, roads, urban transport, defence, water, power, and green energy. Those companies soared, and retail portfolios rose with them.

Since early last year, however, this massive government spending has slowed. It was blamed first on the general elections, and then on the monsoon. Later, geopolitical issues took centre stage — from United States (US) President Donald Trump's tariffs to tensions with Pakistan — before the monsoon was blamed again. Hundreds of companies that had been flying high on government capex have since stagnated or fallen. These are the stocks that dominate retail portfolios. The Nifty, by contrast, barely noticed this and was unaffected. With the exception of Larsen & Toubro, few Nifty heavyweights are direct capex plays. Having risen less during the boom, they corrected less during the slowdown. Comparing the Nifty with a retail portfolio, then, is to mistake apples for oranges.

Economy vs earnings

A second puzzle is the divergence between India's nominal gross domestic product (GDP) growth and Nifty earnings. India's GDP has expanded at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of about 10 per cent since 2008. The common belief is that Nifty companies should grow their sales and earnings faster than GDP because these firms are among the country's largest, benefiting from economies of scale and market dominance. Yet, a recently released study by Motilal Oswal shows that Nifty earnings per share grew at a CAGR of just 8 per cent between 2008 and 2025. Why the disconnect? For starters, it was imported from the US, where around 70 per cent of GDP comes from consumption and most of that consumption flows into listed companies as sales. In India, consumption accounts for roughly 62 per cent of GDP, and a much smaller share flows into listed consumer companies.

Capex further weakens the link. GDP is boosted by investment booms that barely touch Nifty firms. India has experienced this twice in the past two decades. The first was in the period before and after the global financial crisis in 2008. Under two Congress-led regimes, there was a capex boom, but hardly any Nifty companies benefited. Indeed, much of it involved large-scale plunder by crony capitalists and bankers. The second boom was government-led capex between 2022 and 2024, which directly benefited smaller companies but not Nifty constituents, as I have noted earlier.

GDP growth and corporate earnings can diverge for other reasons as well. One is playing out in China, which has relied on ferocious competition to build immense manufacturing capacity. This has benefited the country but not its companies, many of which operate on wafer-thin margins. That is why China's stock market scarcely reflects its impressive economic growth. Before China, other Asian economies — South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan — experienced periods of rapid growth in the latter half of the 20th century, yet earnings growth failed to keep pace.

Earnings vs market returns

The third belief is that higher growth in earnings will automatically translate into higher market returns. This is the most fallacious of the three because it assumes that starting and ending valuations do not matter, only earnings do. If starting valuations are low and exit valuations are high, returns will be strong, irrespective of modest earnings growth. At the depth of a bear market in October 2008, the Nifty stood at around 2,500. By early 2020, it had climbed to roughly 12,000 — an annualised return of 15-16 per cent, excluding dividends — despite earnings growth of just 7 per cent during that period. The reverse is equally true. Starting at high valuations and exiting at lower ones lead to wealth destruction. Taiwan recorded GDP growth of over 5 per cent a year between 1990 and 2008. Yet its stock market fell by almost 50 per cent over the same period, undone by valuation compression. Japan's Nikkei delivered negative returns for 34 years from the 1989 peak.

The past three decades have been punctuated by recurring enthusiasm about structural change, new missions, policies, and grand projects. For all the exuberance surrounding India's stock market and economy, the ultimate outcome for investors has been rather pedestrian. The chief culprit is poor earnings growth — a variable that no amount of storytelling can obscure. Corporate profits, once expected to sprint on the back of reforms, consolidation, and formalisation, have instead only trudged ahead. That leaves only one other lever to boost returns: Low valuations. Yet even the bulls concede that valuations are not low today. The math is unforgiving. Without stronger profits or cheaper prices, storytelling fails. Will investors update their beliefs?

The author is editor of www.moneylife.in and a trustee of the Moneylife Foundation; @Moneylifers

The downside of a caste census

BOOK REVIEW

ADITI PHADNIS

What should we do with caste? Annihilate it, says Anand Teltumbde echoing B R Ambedkar, not count it, because if we start on that exercise we will be doing it till kingdom come. The net effect of a caste census, he argues, will be no better than the decennial census, launched in 1871 and formalised in 1881, (and the ones that followed) which only strengthened caste, transforming social affiliations into rigid and state-recognised categories, enabling a "segmental control of society".

In April 2025, the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs approved the enumeration of caste in the decennial census to be carried out in 2026-27. For most observers of Indian politics, this was equivalent to an exclamation mark: Because prior to this both Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had been vocal in their opposition to a caste census. In the 2024 election campaign, Mr Modi had denounced the push to count the Indian people according to their caste, pronouncing that for him there were only four big castes: Women, youth, farmers, and the poor. The complete story of how that change of heart came about is yet to be told: Maybe it was the political pressure of the caste survey undertaken by Bihar (where an election was due — and the BJP was and continues to be a partner in power) and Karnataka.

Whatever the reasons, the author argues that caste census will become a means of division and will act to reinforce, not annihilate, caste. He says when India gained independence, power merely passed from one set of rulers to another — from the British to the native elites. They retained the same state apparatus, the same administrative processes, even the same personnel. They framed a new Constitution that in essence, continued the colonial one. They proclaimed India a republic, a welfare state, a pro-people democracy — but nothing of substance changed beyond the rhetoric. Not much more should be expected from the current caste census either.

In support of his arguments, he cites scholarship spanning history, sociology, anthropology and political economy. Anthropologist Nicholas Dirks said caste must be understood not merely as a religious institution but as a political and social formation rooted in local contexts. Brahminism was not the sole point of origin of caste. If it had been, revolts like the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism would have upended caste: They did not. The advent of Islam and the Sufi and Bhakti movements challenged priestly mediation, and had the ring of credibility as many Sufi and Bhakti thought leaders came from the same discriminated background. But Mr Teltumbde argues the sects that arose from these movements over time absorbed the same social hierarchies. And while he does not agree that the British "invented" caste, he believes "the colonial state transformed India into textualized, measurable and governable entity". The British-ordered census hardened fluid social relationships. This one will do the same.

The Congress's rejection of the recommendations of the Kaka Kalelkar Commission report and later, the V P Singh government's adoption of the Mandal Commission report, the rise of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the effect this had on the politics of BJP are also dissected with authority and in detail. The author says reservation as a matter of right has lost its salience. He suggests that universalising "the foundations of capacity building while retaining existing reservation schemes as a pragmatic step open for future review" is a better way forward.

However, the sections on enumeration and why the exercise itself will change nothing are the backbone of the book. The author argues that if equality is the aim, the caste census will never deliver it. "On the contrary, it risks unleashing caste turbulence, as history shows, which will likely outweigh potential gains many times over". His argument is "if caste census data is used merely to juggle quotas, placate castes and reinforce numerical formulas, it could reproduce the very inequalities it promises to correct".

The Caste Con Census
by Anand Teltumbde
Published by Navayana Books
243 pages ₹499

Not all scholars agree. The basic argument is: If we don't even know how many are discriminated against, how can we possibly correct the discrimination? Besides, caste cannot be seen as the burden only of India's lower castes — Dalits and Adivasis – but a fuller, more inclusive picture where everyone must answer the question of their caste.

But Mr Teltumbde is wary of this logic. Data is subject to interpretation. If upper castes simply refuse to be counted and economically weaker sections (EWS) become an acceptable category for reservations for upper castes including Brahmins according to the 103rd constitutional amendment (2019), then does enumeration and data even mean anything in terms of justice?

This book is an impressive and scholarly account of caste and other fractures in Indian society. Those who want to understand contemporary Indian politics will find it riveting reading.

GUEST COLUMN

SAMIR OJHA

Time right for banks to star in the M&A story

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) draft guidelines on financing mergers and acquisitions (M&As) signal that these are no more episodic but have become a strategic lever for growth, enabling companies to acquire technology, enter new markets and strengthen themselves against competition.

Traditionally, acquisition financing has relied on offshore borrowing, private credit funds or internal corporate reserves. While this allowed firms to pursue deals, it also meant domestic banks remained passive observers. The historical reason for barring banks from this business was that deposit-taking institutions should not bear equity-linked risks. This stance sought to prevent excessive leverage and preserve systemic stability.

As a result, capital needs were primarily met by alternative investors: Private equity (PE), alternate investment funds or structured credit players. Such prudence was justified in an era when governance and disclosure standards were evolving. However, with stronger balance sheets, more-disciplined leverage and enhanced risk-assessment frameworks, the time is opportune for banks to participate — selectively and prudently — in the M&A story.

M&A transactions (excluding PEs) worth about $24 billion were announced in the first half of 2025, with full-year activity likely to cross $50 billion. Over the past three years, annual deal values have averaged $48-50 billion. By enabling participation in well-structured, risk-mitigated transactions, the draft guidelines could open a new market for banks worth an estimated $10-15 billion annually. Around 35-40 per cent of M&As are bankable under conventional credit criteria. For banks, the reform

THE CENTRAL BANK'S PROPOSALS COULD OPEN A NEW MARKET FOR BANKS WORTH $10-15 BN ANNUALLY. IT EXPANDS BANKS' PRODUCT SUITE AND DEEPENS CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS BEYOND WORKING CAPITAL

expands their product suite and deepens client relationships beyond working capital. For companies, it could enhance transaction certainty and reduce dependence on costlier, offshore, or unregulated funding sources.

The guidelines allow banks to finance up to 70 per cent of the target value, requiring a minimum 30 per cent equity contribution from the acquirer and a post-deal leverage ceiling of 3:1. Credit is to be secured, primarily through pledged shares of the target entity, supplemented by additional collateral, if needed. Further, aggregate bank exposure to acquisition finance cannot exceed 10 per cent of Tier-I capital and must also fit within the broader 20 per cent direct and 40 per cent overall capital market exposure ceilings. Collectively, these provisions reflect an attempt to balance market development with credit discipline.

While this is progressive and comprehensive, certain aspects require calibration. The scope limitation to listed entities, for instance, could exclude a large cohort of profitable, well-governed unlisted firms, particularly in the mid-market and family-run business segments. Allowing participation for unlisted companies via special purpose vehicles could broaden the framework's reach.

A tiered approach could help. Banks in the United Kingdom can extend leveraged acquisition finance to both listed and private companies, provided enhanced due diligence, cash-flow assessment, and covenant monitoring are in place. US and European banks routinely provide leveraged loans under supervisory frameworks that balance credit opportunity with systemic oversight.

Similarly, the 3:1 leverage cap, while sensible in most scenarios, may warrant contextual flexibility — particularly for high-cashflow or distressed asset transactions, where leverage sustainability can be objectively assessed. Global precedent again supports this: Many regulators adopt differentiated thresholds based on sectoral risk or deal structure, rather than a single static ratio.

On collateral, an over-reliance on pledged target shares may not always offer adequate coverage. Including acquirer assets, corporate guarantees, or tangible security could strengthen recovery prospects. The European Union's leveraged lending guidelines promote a diversified collateral base to mitigate volatility in equity valuations. The RBI may also, over time, consider adjusting the Tier-I exposure ceiling for banks with stronger governance. Clarifying the definition of "own funds", especially regarding promoter resources or hybrid instruments — could further improve consistency across institutions.

The writer is partner, Investment Banking Advisory, EY India

Fintechs hold steady in changing terrain

Unsecured credit business grows despite a shift in dynamics, reports **Raghu Mohan**

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Personal loans given by fintechs continue to grow. Data from the Fintech Association for Consumer Empowerment (FACE) shows an expansion both in scale and value in the first half of FY26 over the same period in FY25. Volumes grew to 6.4 million (accounts) from 5.9 million; value was up at ₹97,381 crore (₹78,084 crore); ticket sizes were higher at ₹15,177 (₹13,327).

The catalysts are "the positive regulatory landscape and digital public infrastructure. And that digital-first shadow banks have scaled credit and sustained growth by providing faster, cheaper and better customised loans," according to Sugandh Saxena, chief executive officer (CEO) of FACE. The chief of the country's first self-regulatory organisation for fintechs feels the importance of this space will get bigger down the line. She cites the 'National Strategy for Financial Inclusion for 2025-30' report released earlier this month. It recognised the role of small-value loans: "To strengthen financial resilience of people, suitable and fair credit products with easier documentation process and quick disbursals should be launched, especially for small-ticket loans."

Funding declines

But there also appears to be a marked shift in the unsecured credit business dynamics. Take the matter of funding.

Data from Tracxn Technologies — a data intelligence platform for private market research — show fintechs' equity funding continues to fall. A sum of $1.6 billion was raised in the first nine months of calendar year 2025, a drop of 17 per cent and 20 per cent compared to the $1.9 billion in the same period of CY2024 and $2 billion in CY2023.

At the systemic level, Mint Road's hiking of risk weighting on unsecured lending in November 2023 — personal loans and credit cards — is said to have played a part in this. And its commentary in the Financial Stability report of June 2025 on retail lending was not rosy. "Even as unsecured retail lending has moderated — it forms 25 per cent of retail loans and 8.3 per cent of gross advances — its asset quality has relatively weakened compared to the overall retail portfolio — gross non-performing asset ratio at 1.8 per cent vis-à-vis 1.2 per cent in March 2025." If banks with a larger share of the better-rated customers were in a twist, it stood to reason that fintechs — which cater to the new-to-credit with thin-file credit histories — could only have fared worse.

But since then, the plot appears to have changed in the unsecured segment. Swaminathan J, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) deputy governor, said in a post-policy press conference that overall retail loans have not shown any deterioration in asset quality; that growth in the unsecured retail has moderated significantly. Unsecured retail loans account for less than 25 per cent of the overall retail book of the banking sector. As a percentage of the entire banking system's credit, it is about 7-8 per cent. This, then, is the larger setting.

Back to fintechs. If their exposure in this segment is buoyant, despite an equity crunch, it is because they are moving away from equity-funded balance-sheet lending toward asset-light, partnership-driven, capital-efficient models. "Co-lending has grown significantly in the last couple of years, with banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) taking 80 per cent of the loan and the balance being funded by fintech, limiting their capital requirements," says Rohan Lakhaiyar, partner (financial services-risk) at Grant Thornton Bharat.

More business

Then, as Ranvir Singh, founder and CEO of Kissht, put it, "Banks and NBFCs have gone slow in this segment (unsecured lending). This has opened more business for us." But what he adds may be an early indicator of what's in store. "We have already seen a great deal of benefit from the account aggregator (AA) system. As it scales, it will help in underwriting and attract high quality customers."

AAs are Mint Road-regulated NBFCs that act as a secure intermediary facilitating consent-based sharing of financial data between institutions. If you as a customer are to sign up, lenders get to have more visibility and target you with offerings.

Nikhil Kurhe, cofounder and CEO of Finarkein, points out: "We are anyway seeing movement of customers from legacy-regulated entities (REs) to fintechs. I feel when the AA system gets scaled up, we will see such movements happening both ways. And this may not be limited to unsecured loans alone." There is a turn in sentiment at larger traditional organisations to now understand their prime customers better. "The consequence here will be tougher competition for fintechs to further differentiate their product offering as large banks will catch up on the personalisation curve."

What comes through is as follows: The gap — be it in underwriting credit or targeting customers between legacy RBI REs and fintech — is narrowing. If this holds up, the fintech funding winter may soon be over for better players. And there will be more co-lending. But fintechs will also have to tighten the game. As Saxena says, "the new success metrics demand not only safer, more sustainable credit with customer protection at the forefront, but also more impactful credit that demonstrates improvements in customer well-being and resilience." This requires integration with real sectors and economic value chains through collaboration to serve customers and small businesses more effectively in their progress.

The unsecured credit story is changing fast.

DIGITAL-FIRST SHADOW BANKS HAVE SCALED CREDIT BY PROVIDING FASTER, CHEAPER LOANS

SUGANDH SAXENA
CEO, FACE

BANKS AND NBFCs HAVE GONE SLOW IN UNSECURED LENDING. THAT HAS OPENED MORE BUSINESS FOR US

RANVIR SINGH
Founder & CEO, Kissht

WE ARE SEEING THE MOVEMENT OF CUSTOMERS FROM LEGACY-REGULATED ENTITIES TO FINTECHs

NIKHIL KURHE
Cofounder & CEO, Finarkein

CO-LENDING HAS GROWN WITH BANKS AND NBFCs TAKING 80% OF THE LOANS. FINTECHs FUND THE BALANCE

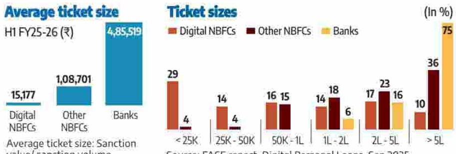
ROHAN LAKHAIYAR
Partner (financial services, risk), Grant Thornton Bharat

Personal loan snapshot

H1 FY25-26 sanctions	Volume (mn)	Value (₹ trn)	Avg sanction value per loan (₹)	Share in volume (%)	Share in value (%)
Digital NBFCs	64	0.97	15,177	80	19
Other NBFCs	10	1.08	108,701	12	21
Banks	6	3.09	485,519	8	60
Total	80	5.14	63,866	100	100

Source: FACE report, Digital Personal Loans, Sep 2025

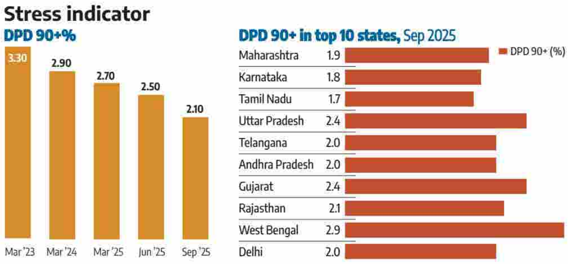
Finance overview



Average ticket size: Sanction value/ sanction volume

Source: FACE report, Digital Personal Loans, Sep 2025

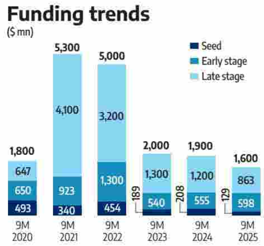
Stress indicator



DPD 90+ %: Loan outstanding (90 to 180 days past due) / Loan outstanding (0 to 180 DPD)
Based on sanction value in H1 FY25-26

Source: FACE report, Digital Personal Loans, Sep 2025

Funding trends



Seed, early stage, late Stage, total funding
Source: Tracxn, India Fintech Report

MFIs remain in pain even as green shoots appear

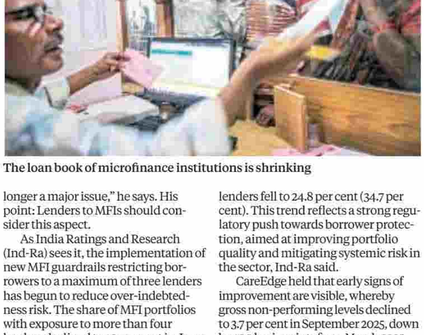
ABHIJIT LELE

Microfinance institutions (MFIs) are in a spot of bother: A continuous shrinking of their loan book and liquidity support from lenders. The fallout: The sixth consecutive quarterly decline in their portfolio to ₹1.31 trillion as of September 2025, from ₹1.6 trillion in March 2024 with about half a million customers getting pushed out of the ambit of these entities, according to data provided by Microfinance Institutions Network (MFIN).

The situation is similar for the microfinance sector level across banks and small finance banks (SFBs).

"It is ironic as the portfolio-at-risk (31-90 days past due) has improved to 1.09 per cent and 98 per cent of clients are within the guardrails, showcasing disciplined underwriting in the sector," laments Alok Misra, chief executive officer (CEO) and director, MFIN.

According to Jiji Mammen, executive director and CEO of Sa-Dhan, MFIs are now in a much better position and many of the issues plaguing the sector in recent times have been addressed. "As a result, over-leverage and lending concerns have been corrected to a great extent and are no longer a major issue," he says. His point: Lenders to MFIs should consider this aspect.



The loan book of microfinance institutions is shrinking

As India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra) sees it, the implementation of new MFI guardrails restricting borrowers to a maximum of three lenders has begun to reduce over-indebtedness risk. The share of MFI portfolios with exposure to more than four lenders declined to 10 per cent in June 2025 (from 19.2 per cent in June 2024), while accounts with more than three lenders fell to 24.8 per cent (34.7 per cent). This trend reflects a strong regulatory push towards borrower protection, aimed at improving portfolio quality and mitigating systemic risk in the sector, Ind-Ra said.

CareEdge held that early signs of improvement are visible, whereby gross non-performing levels declined to 3.7 per cent in September 2025, down by 100 basis points from March 2025, aided by write-offs and cautious lending. "However, profitability remains under pressure due to elevated credit costs, interest reversals, and higher operating expenses," it said.

A senior risk-management executive with an MFI pointed out that besides doors being shut on genuine clients, some borrowers in joint liability groups who have the ability to repay are also holding back in honouring their commitments. This is due to fears that MFIs may not give a fresh loan after repayment. This raises the risk of an uptick in stressed loans, though it may not be substantial.

The worst may not be over. With state elections next year — when political parties typically throw fiscal caution to the winds while promising freebies — MFIs fear their impact on credit discipline and have raised the issue of loan waivers with Mint Road and North Block. Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal go to polls in 2026.

Again, it is not just MFIs, but banks — both universal and SFBs (which fund MFIs and also directly give microfinance loans) — which have turned cautious. They have turned away many eligible borrowers to protect their asset quality profile. So, the tally of people pushed out from the ambit of MFIs (and formal finance) may be bigger than the five million put by MFIN.

Articulating the stand as a lender to NBFC-MFIs, C S Setty, chairman of State Bank of India, told *Business Standard*: "We have never shied away from lending to NBFCs. We are the largest lenders to NBFCs. And incidentally, the largest portfolio for single sector exposure is NBFCs. We have never denied credit to an MFI which is deserving."

Matters could improve if the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) were to give Section 8 companies, or not-for-profit entities, involved in microfinance access to credit information companies (CIC). Under the CIC (Regulation) Act (2005), only RBI-regulated entities are allowed to hook into credit bureaus — that is sharing data with and accessing it from them.

MFIs not only feel there has been an improvement in the business, but hope of a change in approach given that a credit guarantee scheme (the demand is for ₹20,000 crore) for the sector is in the works. While the scheme may indeed be helpful, Misra is sceptical of it becoming operational in the near term, given the Finance Ministry's preoccupation with the Budget-making exercise for FY27.

After So Many Years, Still Riding the Waves

Airtel's wealth creation reflects sector's growth

Bharti Airtel is star of the bourses, having created the most wealth for its investors over the last 5 yrs, the 30th annual wealth creation study by Motilal Oswal Financial Services shows. The company has successfully negotiated the shifting telecom landscape, which required GoI to hand out a lifeline to a once-struggling industry. It has, along with Reliance Jio, accomplished one of the fastest 5G network rollouts. The backbone over which India's digital revolution is unfolding has turned into a money-spinner. Bruising price wars and eye-popping spectrum prices are behind the industry, although it still has issues over how much revenue it needs to share with GoI. Airtel has been running the telecom marathon since it was opened to private companies, and it is heartening to see its stamina is intact decades after tumultuous beginnings.

The next three entries in the list of top wealth creators are banks and credit companies — ICICI Bank, SBI and Bajaj Finance — that have gained from the post-pandemic recovery of consumption, which has propelled the economy to world-beating growth. Indian banking has also witnessed tumult over the last decade as it cleaned up a mountain of bad debt. The industry has emerged vastly stronger from the process and is ideally placed to feed consumer credit as an emerging middle class buys everything from mobiles to cars. India's financial supermarkets are also teeming with customers for services like insurance and mutual funds. This should keep banks at the top of the wealth creator league tables for quite a bit longer.

An honourable mention goes to PSUs Hindustan Aeronautics, Rail Vikas Nigam and Bharat Dynamics, which have delivered consistent and sprightly returns to investors. The public sector is spearheading GoI's massive capex push to build infrastructure and substitute defence imports. India is likely to maintain its pace of building ports, roads, railway networks and airports. This should prop up public-sector market capitalisation.

How to Make a Bakra Out of a G.O.A.T.

The contrast could not be starker. On Saturday evening, after Leo Messi entered Hyderabad's Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium as part of a 3-day, 4-city private, ticketed greet'n'wave India tour, everything went off pleasantly as planned. A few hours before in Kolkata, though, the same PoA quickly went balls up. At Yuva Bharati Krirangan, a select few were allowed to ring-fence the Argentine out of view of the majority in the stands. The result was unmitigated disaster. Irate spectators in 'cheaper seats', unable to see their hero for which they had paid 'good money', went bonkers, going on a property-destroying spree. Messi cut short his programme and left in some 20 mins.

Hyderabad and Mumbai on Sunday smoothly conducted their 'parasocial shows', in which a connection was created between all attending paying Messi fans and Messi, who had been paid a fee for turning up. Kolkata, on the other hand, hosted a Ponzi scheme that went bust in full view. This VIP culture at its cringe-worthiest isn't the best advertisement for future Bengal Global Business Summits.

You don't have to be a Thomas Piketty to see what went wrong in Kolkata — and didn't in Hyderabad and Mumbai, and shouldn't in Delhi today. Like inequality of wealth, inequality of access to a celeb via one's ability to spend is a fact of life. But when this inequality is allowed to be visibly extreme, with people who were expecting their money's worth finding their money to be worthless, the transactional/social contract snaps, and mayhem is liable to follow. In Kolkata, with the organisers-authorities nexus letting its favoured ones 'hijack' Messi at the cost of thousands, mayhem did follow. Thereby proving that service, like law, is only as good as it's executed.

JUST IN JEST

There's definitely something about us and the definite article

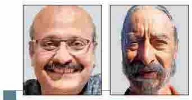
Our Funny Anarchic Ways With the The

India has given the world yoga, zero and vimanas, airworthiness of the last being something Indians managed to lose, allowing the Wright Brothers to rediscover it much later. But Indic civilisation's most enduring gift to English is the anarchic redistribution of the definite article. We add 'the' — the very 'the' — where none is needed, and delete it where it's gasping for relevance. Thus, 'the Shah Rukh is coming' sounds perfectly natural, while 'I will meet you at house' finds itself perfectly 'at the home'.

English itself is also complicit. It allows inanities like '*the* hoi polloi', where 'hoi' already means 'the' in Greek, making this concoction mean 'the the crowd', much like 'the al-Qaeda' where 'al' already is 'the' in Arabic. Now, imagine if we applied this logic elsewhere: *the* ATM, *the* parliament, *the* biryani.... Oh wait — we already do. And then comes the oddity of 'beating retreat', a military ceremony that thinks it's too disciplined for grammar. Indians, naturally, adore it. It validates our instinct to treat 'the' like wearing no helmet while riding a bike, and incessant honking in 'No horn' zones. The Indian English article is the linguistic version of the Cheshire Cat that disappears and appears at whim. But as he says in Alice in Wonderland, 'I am not crazy; my reality is just different from yours.' An end, not 'the' one.

Successful aviation systems align revenue potential, cost structures and policy objectives

More Than a Wing & Prayer



Amit Kapoor & Pradeep Puri

Flight of stares

India's aviation paradox is well established. Since liberalisation, passenger volumes have expanded rapidly, particularly after the advent of low-cost carriers in the early 2000s. Traffic growth accelerated post-2004, peaked just before the pandemic and collapsed during Covid, mirroring global trends. But what distinguishes India is not volatility in demand but chronic financial fragility.

In the US, repeated bankruptcies and a merger wave (Delta-Northwest, United-Continental, American-US Airways) produced a 'Big Four' system in which four carriers account for three-fourths to four-fifths of domestic capacity, reinforcing capacity discipline and stronger unit economics.

For Emirates and Singapore Airlines, success rests on ecosystems designed for profitability — where fuel, infrastructure, labour and capital policy reinforce revenue rather than undermine it

Europe has converged on a different equilibrium: intense competition led by large low-cost groups (Ryanair, easyJet, Wizz Air) keeps short-haul pricing competitive, while airline exits have remained a recurring feature.

Empirical evidence from India's airlines confirms that the problem at home is structural, rather than episodic. Using size-neutral performance measures, such as unit revenue and unit expenditure per km, 2007 data show that the average carrier spends slightly more per km than it earns.

Inflation-adjusted figures indicate mean unit revenue of about ₹24.9 bn per km, compared with mean unit expenditure of ₹25.1 bn per km. The gap is small in absolute terms, but persistent over time, implying chronic margin pressure rather than isolated managerial failure. Crucially, this relationship holds even before shocks such as global financial crisis and Covid, suggesting that Indian aviation's fragility is embedded in its revenue structure, not merely the product of adverse cycles.

Indian domestic aviation is among the most price-sensitive markets globally. Political scrutiny of fares, public hostility to price increases and periodic intervention through fare caps have combined to anchor ticket prices well below global averages. By contrast, fuel, aircraft leases and maintenance remain dollar-linked, exposing airlines to currency depreciation without commensurate pricing flexibility.

Aviation turbine fuel (ATF) in India is benchmarked to international price indices, such as Mean of Platts Arab Gulf (MoPAG), but layered with additional fiscal burdens. Central excise duties of about 11%, combined with state-level VAT that averages 13-14% on a blended basis, raise effective ATF prices by around 24% above benchmark levels.

Unlike in many international markets, where fuel taxation is minimal or embedded within integrated aviation ecosystems, this structure amplifies price volatility rather than merely raising costs. Given the political sensitivity of fares and limited pricing power, airlines are rarely able to pass these fluctuations through to passengers.

This asymmetry has predictable consequences. Airlines expand aggressively to achieve scale, only to discover that scale without yield amplifies losses.

▶ Prior to its collapse, Jet Airways' international operations, where margins were higher, were cross-subsidised by a domestic network that consistently underperformed.

▶ Kingfisher's premium aspirations collapsed under a cost base unsupported by domestic revenue.

▶ Go First entered with thin capital buffers and failed at the first serious shock.

Such outcomes are not uniquely Indian, but India magnifies them. In the Gulf, airlines such as Emirates and Qatar Airways operate within ecosystems explicitly designed to support long-haul profitability: fuel pricing, airport infra, labour flexibility and bilateral access reinforce each other. In Singapore, the state plays an enabling rather than extractive role.

Singapore Airlines is commercially governed, capitalised for cyclicality and anchored at a globally efficient hub. These airlines are not immune to losses, but they are rarely existentially fragile. India's ecosystem, by contrast, has encouraged growth while systematically under-pricing sustainability.

IndiGo's success is often invoked as proof that Indian aviation works. A more precise reading is that IndiGo represents the most efficient adaptation to a constrained system.

Its operating model — high aircraft utilisation, standardised fleets, disciplined cost control and strong load factors — was appropriate. IndiGo aligned tightly with India's low-yield environment and executed with consistency. When competitors exited, IndiGo absorbed demand because it had the operational capacity and financial discipline.

Yet, the balance-sheet structure underpinning this efficiency is revealing. Indian airlines rely heavily on operating leases: at IndiGo, for instance, around 80% of the fleet is operated under operating leases, with aircraft returned to lessors.

India has liberalised entry but not revenue. It has expanded access but not resilience

By contrast, airlines such as Southwest and Ryanair have owned between 80% and nearly 100% of their fleets, giving them tangible assets that can be monetised through sales or sale-leasebacks during downturns. Efficiency in India's case delivered scale and speed, but it did not deliver resilience.

Revenue consequences of this structure are visible in unit metrics. IndiGo's revenue per available seat km (RASK) is about ₹4.90. Comparable figures are materially higher elsewhere: around ₹8.20 at Southwest Airlines, ₹8.90 at Qantas, ₹11.20 at Delta Air Lines, and roughly ₹6.90 at Singapore Airlines.

Even airlines known for operational efficiency rather than yield maximisation operate within far wider revenue envelopes. IndiGo's performance, by contrast, reflects the narrow monetisation space imposed by India's fare-sensitive, price-constrained market.

The global lesson is not that India should replicate Singapore or the Gulf. Geography, income levels and state capacity differ materially. The lesson is more subtle: successful aviation systems align revenue potential, cost structures and policy objectives.

In the US, consolidation raised yields and restored profitability. In Europe, persistent yield compression has led to chronic airline churn. In the Gulf and Singapore, aviation is treated as strategic infra, with policy coherence across fuel, airports, labour and capital. India sits uneasily between these models. It has liberalised entry but not revenue. It has expanded access but not resilience. It has celebrated passenger growth while tolerating balance-sheet weakness.

The present disruption should be read as a warning, not an anomaly. It signals that India's aviation system is operating close to its structural limits. Productivity gains alone, however impressive, cannot indefinitely compensate for weak revenue fundamentals.

Kapoor is chair, and Puri is fellow, Institute for Competitiveness. Inputs from Meenakshi Ajith

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was Trump with a wall,
Who said, 'H-1Bs must seriously fall.'
So, Amazon USA fled,
Google packed code instead,
Microsoft arrived and said, 'Namaste, y'all.'

•••

LOW WATER PRESSURE

Per-capita freshwater availability is declining, underscoring a deepening global water problem. Renewable water resources represent the long term average annual flow of rivers (surface water) and the recharge of aquifers (groundwater) generated by a country's precipitation. That is, the water available for the population and productive activities in a country. At the per capita level, global freshwater availability in 2022 was estimated at 5326 m³ per capita, a 7% decrease compared to 2015 levels. Regions such as Northern Africa, Southern Asia and Western Asia have the lowest freshwater resources per capita...

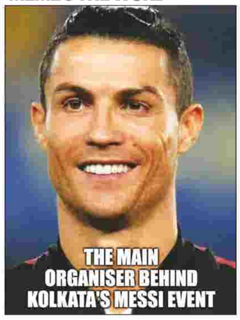
Total renewable water resources per capita (m³/inhab/year)^

		2015	2022
Regions	Oceania	40,586	36,591
	LatAm & Carib.*	22,374	21,200
	Northern America	15,650	14,898
	Europe	9,107	9,073
	South-eastern Asia	8,142	7,637
	Central Asia	3,282	2,883
	Eastern Asia	2,085	2,049
	Western Asia	1,406	1,252
	Southern Asia	1,325	1,226
	Sub-Saharan Africa	3,908	3,264
	Northern Africa	642	565
	WORLD	**5,719**	**5,326**
Select countries	Brazil	42,876	41,116
	Russia	31,144	31,086
	US	9,410	8,986
	Japan	3,378	3,440
	China	1,989	1,950
	Germany	1,876	1,831
	India	**1,439**	**1,341**
	South Africa	905	823

Source: AQUASTAT water data snapshot 2025 ■ ^Estimate; *Latin America and the Caribbean

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN

MEME'S THE WORD



India's Sad Selfie-Goal

Saurav Chatterjee

This was an accident waiting to happen. Lionel Messi is one of the biggest names in world sport, arguably more worshipped in South Asia than anywhere else on the planet. When I first heard that he was coming to India for a multi-city tour that had little to do with football, I immediately spotted multiple red flags.

Many friends reached out to me, asking if I could help them secure tickets, or arrange a close-up meeting with Messi in Kolkata. I told them straight-up that I didn't believe in this venture and wanted no association with it, even in the smallest way. Over the past decade, global icons who have visited India — Tiger Woods, Rory McIlroy, Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic — came either to ply their trade (golf and tennis), or to participate in non-ticketed events (such as Pelé's or Maradona's tour of India).

Selling tickets to let ordinary fans catch a glimpse of a hero from 200 yards away feels fundamentally wrong. Treating a legendary sportsman like a commodity insults both the legend and spirit of sport itself.

There is nothing inherently wrong with inviting Messi to promote a brand, product or celebration. But turning his brief appearance into a ticketed spectacle — with tiered pricing for 'selfies;, 'handshakes' and 'close-up views' — reduces a global icon to a quick money-making opportunity. The fact that different 'rates' were advertised for these fleeting interactions signals that profit, not fan engagement, was the primary motive.

What is equally surprising is that Messi's team agreed to this arrangement without conducting thorough due diligence on the event's structure. By contrast, Cristiano Ronaldo's team, known for its meticulous professionalism, would have scrutinised every detail of what was being promised to the Portuguese star. The lack of such scrutiny in Messi's case raises questions about who truly benefits from these commercial exploits.

It was horrifying to see prominent members of the Indian sporting media actively promoting the 'concert' — as many of them called it — and defending the ticketed format. The organiser appears to have leveraged connections in the right places to secure sponsorships and official permissions, effectively turning a sponsored appearance into a paid-entry showcase. Even as the Messi event went without any hitch in Hyderabad on Saturday and in Mumbai on Sunday, with a tryst scheduled in Delhi today, this commodification of a football legend feels in poor taste at best, and exploitative at worst.

Timing makes the situation even more unfortunate. Indian football is currently in a standstill. Indian Super League (ISL) is on indefinite hold. Professional players, including national team members, are uncertain about when their next pay cheque will arrive. Yet, sponsors, broadcasters and fans are lining up to pay premium prices for a brief glimpse of a global superstar.

Such episodes risk pushing India down the pecking order of destinations that global icons consider worthy of visitation. Future legitimate initiatives — whether genuine football clinics or charitable events — may be viewed with suspicion. Many legends may hesitate before setting foot on Indian soil.

History offers a cautionary tale. Years ago, former international stars, Brazil's Dunga, and Colombia's Carlos Valderrama and René Higuita, came to Kolkata for a football match organised by the same individual. They refused to come out after halftime until outstanding payments were settled — a episode that left a bitter aftertaste.

That organiser has since forged new alliances and appears to have forgotten those past indiscretions. But the damage to India's reputation lingers. When sport and sportspersons are disrespected — treated as mere marketing tools, rather than revered athletes — karma has a way of catching up. The bite can be severe, and recovery may take a lifetime.

While it is natural for fans to want proximity to icons like Messi, commercialising his presence in such a crass manner undermines both the integrity of sport and India's standing on the global stage. A more respectful, non-ticketed approach would have preserved the dignity of the legend.

Khela hobey na

Though I, like so many other followers of Indian sport, would have been delighted if even a fraction of the money spent to bring Messi to the country was diverted towards the grassroots development of the Beautiful Game.

The writer is director, Best of You Sports, a Madrid-based football agency

MELODY FOR MONDAY

99 Luftballons

Nena

'99 Luftballons' — 'Neunundneunzig Luftballons' in the original song, and '99 Red Balloons' in its English version — from West German band Nena's 1983 eponymous debut album, remains one of the most exhilarating paradoxes in pop history: a song born of Cold War anxiety that somehow radiates pure joy.

From its opening synth riff, the track bursts into colour like, well, balloons against a grey sky, transforming a bleak landscape into something buoyant and playful.

The German lyrics sketch a scenario of misunderstanding and militaristic overreaction: 99 balloons are mistaken for UFOs, causing a military general to send pilots to investigate, with matters ending in a cataclysmic war, and '99 Jahre Krieg ließen keinen Platz für Sieger' (99 years of war left no room for victors). How many cautionary tales can you dance to?

This anti-war anthem's delivery is bright and urgent, and demands you to perk up. Its pop hook and chorus, with its soaring melody, are infectious. '99...' is a reminder that joy can be subversively pacifist — as if frontwoman Nena is saying: Yes, the world may be grey. But here is melody that refuses to bow to despair.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Nothingness And Fullness

NARAYANI GANESH

Can you do nothing or think nothing? Yes, if you live in a vacuum. Interestingly, vast tracts of emptiness lie between clusters of galaxies that occupy roughly 70% of outer space, according to cosmologists. Michael Vogeley and his team at Drexel University, Philadelphia, presented 'DeepVoid', a cosmic void detector that 'employs AI to wade through the flood of galaxy data from telescopes and chart the tracts of cosmic nothingness'. Mapping the empty space between galaxies will inform how and why it keeps stretching evermore.

Can something come out of nothing? Very unlikely. Because voids are more than nothing, explains Miguel Aragon-Calvo, Public University of Mexico, 'even voids have a very rich structure, with a whole cosmic web inside, made of filaments of matter and with their own mini-voids'. Why we think they are voids is because within the so-called voids, 'matter is so sparse that it does not appear in images taken with our current best telescopes. Computer simulations, however, suggest that these desolate regions of the cosmos contain some matter and a few galaxies, strung together in a wispy lace.'

In Indic philosophy, shunyata refers to the 'lack of inherent existence in all phenomena'. That is, things are empty of inherent existence because they are interdependent and constantly changing. A verse in the Upanishad says: 'All this is full./ All that is full./ From fullness, fullness comes./ When fullness is taken from fullness./ Fullness still remains.' So, there is no such thing called nothing.

Chat Room

Lionel, Richie A Sad Combo

Apropos the news report, 'Messi. Mania. Mayhem' (Dec 14), what was meant to be a landmark moment for Indian football turned into a sobering lesson in administrative negligence. In a city that prides itself on its deep love for the game, the spectacle was overshadowed by glaring lapses: unrestricted access to the field, inadequate crowd segregation and, most critically, the absence of a well-defined movement and security plan for the sport's biggest icon. The scenes evoked Kolkata's darker sporting memories of the 1996 Cricket World Cup semi-final at the Eden Gardens and the 1980 Derby stampede that claimed 16 lives. Organisers need to be held responsible and future events must be planned professionally.

Gregory Fernandes
Mumbai

Break Disconnect With New Reality

This refers to 'Not Yet a Right to Disconnect, But Not Wrong' by Prachi Verma (Dec 14). The debate captures a quiet shift in India's work culture, where productivity is no longer measured only by logged hours. The Bill may not yet promise a legal right, but it questions the 'always-on' habit that blurs personal time and fuels burnout, especially among young professionals. Experiments with hybrid models show trust and flexibility can coexist with accountability. A light-touch framework, backed by transparent workplace policies and dialogue, could balance employee well-being with business realities.

A Myilsami
Coimbatore

When Principle Isn't Principal

Apropos the Edit, 'How to Deal with US-Pak Arms Biradari' (Dec 13), the US has demonstrated that Western powers cannot be relied upon as consistent and principled allies. Washington's long-standing narrative of India as a strategic partner, rooted in shared democratic values and mutual trust over the past 2 decades, has been rendered hollow by the abrupt policy reversals of the Trump administration. Renewed defence cooperation with Pakistan, including military aid and arms upgrades, expose US foreign policy that's driven more by expediency than values. India must strengthen its military preparedness, economic resilience and independent diplomacy.

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"ET Wealth taught readers to play both pace and spin in financial literacy, turning novices into century-scoring investors."

the market crash was seen as a 'once-in-a-lifetime sale' by young professionals. The result: India saw a record number of demat account openings, jumping from 4.1 crore in March 2020 to 20.2 crore in July 2025, as per SBI Securities and *The Economic Times*.

It's not just the investing options that have altered, but also the financial attitudes of every generation, be it goal formation, spending habits or sourcing information, not all of which have been for the better. On the 15th anniversary of *ET Wealth*, we provide a snapshot of the various financial changes each of these generations has undergone since 2010.

THE SAVERS

This was the generation of nation-builders that learnt to thrive in scarcity. They optimised the meagre resources and investment opportunities through discipline and diligence. So they squirelled away every rupee, focused on essential expenses, saved for basic financial goals, and hoped that pensions and children would take care of their retirement.

"My only goals were buying a house and educating/marrying my child. There was absolutely no wasteful expenditure," says Udoy Choudhury, 73, a retired school teacher from Kolkata. Like most people during his time, he invested in fixed deposits and traditional insurance plans, even as he bought a house and gold jewellery. Also, like many others, his financial advisers comprised an insurance agent friend, the local bank manager and his peers.

"They mostly picked instruments that other people were investing in because these felt safer," says Dinesh Rohira, CEO, *5nance.com*. "Unlike Gen Z, which has easy access to an excess of investing information, and wants instant returns, this generation was more content with stable, long-term investments and returns, perhaps because the survivor instinct was at play," he adds.

By 2010, they were approaching retirement and the retiral benefits were parked mostly in Post Office small savings schemes. However, in the 15 years since then, these debt schemes have been rocked by falling interest rates. "They are struggling with reinvestment risk as fixed income rates fluctuate, but capital protection is still a priority and they have very low equity exposure," says Shinghal.

Most have found it difficult to make the transition to the risk of equity and have resisted initiation into the unfamiliar digitised world. "The fear has been extreme on both fronts. My father has refused to invest in the market and didn't want me to do it either. He never even used the ATM to withdraw money, while my mother has started making UPI payments only in the past year or so," says 29-year-old Ekta Radadia, who has 70% of her portfolio in equity and is willing to explore riskier options.

Spending on self is still considered an extravagance by this generation. "All her life, my mother refused to spend even ₹10 on herself, and if I buy her clothes, she refuses to wear them because they are new," says Radadia, who thinks the big change in her generation is the willingness to spend on themselves.

While life insurance was bought as an investment, health insurance was seen as an unnecessary expense. "Insurance was viewed as a tax-saving tool or a money-back policy, which meant these people were often underinsured, relying on savings for health emergencies," says Shinghal. This has changed a little after Covid-19, but most still prefer to maintain buffers or rely on the group health plans of their children's employers.

THE ADAPTERS

These are the Sandwich generations that have been shaped by a staggering range of financial and technological changes. And they have adapted without flinching.

Unlike their parents, they were no longer in the survivor mode and earned well enough, but parental sacrifices meant they were obliged to take care of both the previous and the next generations. As young earners in 2010, lack of awareness about investment choices meant these were shaped by parental preferences.

"I had seen my father investing in fixed deposits and, at one time, he had 7-8 LIC policies. So, I also invested in these. It was only later when I learnt more about personal financethat I realised these were endowment and money-back plans. After I found out more about mutual funds, I started investing in these via SIPs in 2017. Now I also invest in the NPS, " says 39-year-old Arup Choudhury.

The Indian growth story that unfolded in the next 15 years, opening up investment options and allowing ease

Three generations, Three money mindsets

	THE SAVERS Baby Boomers (in 70s)	THE ADAPTERS Gen X + Gen Y (30-60 years)	THE SPENDERS Gen Z (in 20s)
Investing attitude	Extremely conservative & risk-averse. Focused on debt.	Risk appetite grew. Started investing in the market.	High risk appetite. Focused on equity and risky instruments.
Investing instruments	FDs, LIC policies (endowment/ money-back plans), physical gold, real estate, Post Office schemes	Stocks, mutual funds, traditional plans, Ulips, PF, PPF, NPS	Stocks, F&O, crypto, REITs, InvITs, alternative investment funds
Saving / spending habits	Saved as much as possible; spending was minimal, especially on self.	Save first (aligned to goals), but also spend on self. Started online transactions.	Spend more, save less. Tech-driven mobile/online transactions.
Loans & credit	Loans were a strict no-no.	Took loans for buying houses, cars. Careful credit card spend.	Loans/credit, BNPL schemes for travel, personal consumption.
Financial goals	• Buying a house. • Kids' education and marriages. • Building a legacy for kids.	• Kids' foreign education. • Retirement. • Upgrading lifestyle.	• Early retirement (by 40). • Foreign travel. • Funding hobbies/ startups.
Insurance	Underinsured via traditional life plans. Corpus for health emergencies.	Started buying term plans. Bought basic, small health insurance plans.	Buying bigger, more comprehensive health plans at an early age.
Source of financial advice	Parents, LIC agents, colleagues or friends, bank managers.	News & media, personal research, wealth advisers.	Social media finfluencers (YouTube, Instagram, Reddit), news & media, personal research.

Salonee Sanghvi
42 years, *Mumbai*

Investment portfolio
60% equity with 90% in stocks **+ 20%** real estate **+ 10%** gold **+ 10%** debt

Financial goals
- Financial freedom (FIRE) (*recently met*)
- Buying a house (*goal met*)
- Travel & food (*ongoing*)

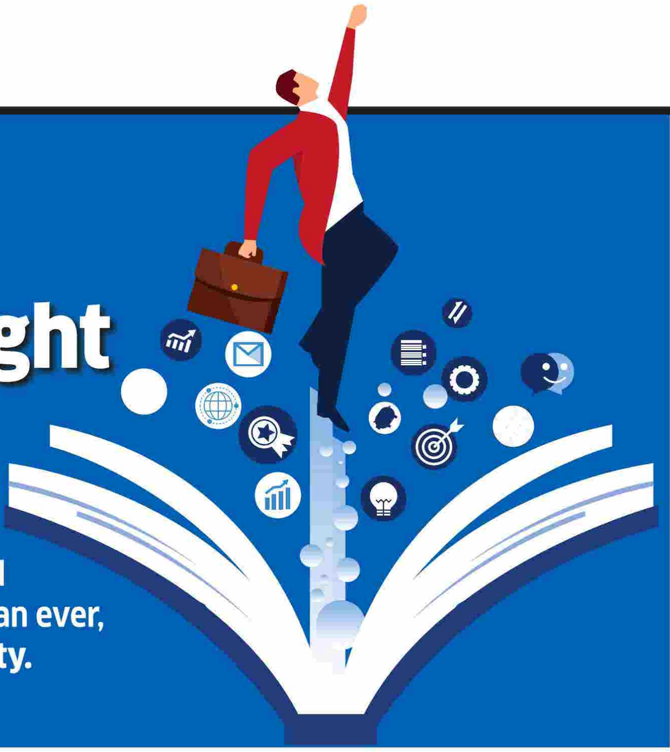
Insurance
₹50 lakh health cover

Source of financial advice
Personal research

"It's very important to have a very high saving rate if one wants to achieve financial freedom."

What 15 years taught me about careers

Adaptability, judgment and ownership matter more than ever, says **Devashish Chakravarty.**


GETTYIMAGES

Fifteen years ago, when I wrote my first career column for *ET Wealth*, the average workplace looked mostly stable, pretty predictable, almost familiar. In 2010, a 'startup' was a fancy word, a 'unicorn' was a mythical creature, and 'gig work' and 'side hustles' did not exist. What existed were gentle moving campus placements, information technology companies and BPOs hiring by bus-loads, job descriptions that stayed stable and the belief that if you simply do good work you would make steady annual progress.

Landscape in motion

In 2010, technology was a useful tool like an Excel sheet and not a co-worker like today's artificial intelligence (AI). Over the years, the familiar workplace disappeared and a new market emerged that is faster, fluid, and less forgiving. It is also full of opportunities that no generation could have imagined. Across thousands of conversations with job seekers, creative professionals, hiring managers, startup founders, students and mid-career professionals, one fact emerged: careers evolved because people evolved, when the world left them no choice. Here are the vital changes that the last 15 years revealed about work, workers and staying relevant.

Stability an illusion

The world changed faster than predicted. Career stability crumbled as new disruptions appeared like waves in a high tide. The post-2008 financial slowdown gave way to the startup boom up to 2015. Then, the economic shock of demonetisation was followed by ultra-cheap internet and app-based behaviour till 2020. Followed by the pandemic, hybrid work and now AI at scale. Each wave changed the job market: like voice-based call centre jobs declined and a gig workforce emerged in ride-hailing and delivery platforms. Professionals were forced to move across functions, employers and geographies and five-year job tenures dropped to two years. The straight up career ladder dissolved into a fluid lattice of sideways moves, temporary projects and a portfolio style career. Professionals adapted better than they first thought they would and adaptability became the defining skill of the times.

The adaptive professional

Previously, mastery meant long experience in one domain. Today, no domain survives that long. The World Economic Forum predicts that by 2030, 70% of the skills used in most jobs will change. Unsurprisingly, job-oriented social networking platform LinkedIn found that the rate of adding new skills has increased sharply. Professionals who thrived during this period, instead of sinking, were those who learnt to adjust quickly to changing expectations. They changed roles, learned adjacent skills, tried new tools early and remained hireable when their industry evolved faster than their job description. Thus, adaptability became the new career horoscope, predicting your future better than your tenure or degrees.

Technology didn't kill jobs

Technology became the biggest disrupter in the last decade and half. It did not kill your job as every doomsayer predicted, but it changed the way work happened and took over some tasks. You moved from offices to hybrid, emails chains to cloud-based workflows, fixed tasks to automated routines and human-only to human-plus-AI collaboration. Technology did not replace but magnified both individual strengths and irrelevance. Judgment, empathy, persuasion, creativity, and leadership grew in importance as automation increased. Professionals who used technology to multiply their impact moved ahead.

Mindset over resumes

Over fifteen years, "culture fit" started to matter along with curriculum vitae as hiring decisions became more psychological than procedural. Apart from résumés, employers started prioritising your learning mindset, your maturity in collaboration, initiative, and ability to handle ambiguity. The bar for communication went up and working across functions became the norm. Promotions stopped rewarding years spent and started investing in future potential. So managers began promoting people who took initiative, thought beyond their roles and showed leadership before they got the title. "Are you ready" mattered as much as "how much experience".

Jobseeking: proactive & stressed

The job seeker in 2010 simply lined up for campus placement or found opportunities on a handful of job portals. Physical networking was an awkward dance and personal branding was unheard of. Today's serious jobseekers start off early with updated online profiles, direct messages to recruiters, a vast LinkedIn network and research into employer values. They are more aware, and better packaged. At the same time, they are stressed out from the pressure of "comparison". Constant visibility into every person's achievements creates unrealistic social timelines and bad short-term career decisions. Those who succeeded were the ones who shut out the noise and focused on long-term fit instead of reacting to every story.

Mid-career reinvention

Fifteen years ago, shifting careers mid-way was called extremely risky. Now, it is seen as normal—sometimes forced and sometimes the smartest move available. Meanwhile industries changed how they work, roles transformed and new functions emerged whether data analytics or AI operations. An engineer and a mid-career operations manager became product managers and colleagues in the same team. People who reinvented did three things differently: they recognised stagnation before a crisis, used transferable strengths to find an adjacent career path, and tested new roles before committing. Reinvention no more signals instability. It signals a maturity to adapt ahead of disruption.

Agency, not employment

Maybe the biggest shift has been in defining how do you earn money, at what speed and who decides? Fifteen years ago, the way to earn was to find a job and to rely on the employer's promotion ladder. That game is over. No institution guarantees job security now, let alone growth. You want higher income? Find bigger roles inside or earn money from your side hustle tuition outside. Want wealth? Learn to invest money or take up startup roles with employee stock ownership plans. Career security and future proofing your money now comes from your agency, not your employment.

What hasn't changed, what won't change

1 OUTCOMES GET REWARDS

Across 15 years of career writing and 30 years of changing titles, tools, and trends, there was one constant truth: the world rewards only outcomes, not effort, nor intent. Whether they used Excel in 2010 or AI in 2025, professionals who delivered measurable results moved ahead of the merely loud or busy ones.

2 TRUST IS CAREER CURRENCY

Job markets rise and fall, industries change, technologies are replaced, but your job security hinges on "trust". Clients stay with people they trust. Your managers promote the person they trust, which means that your reputation as a reliable person is bigger than any degree or skill.

3 POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTION

Networking moved from alumni meets to LinkedIn, but relationships remain the master key for opening doors. Mentorship, referrals, and genuine goodwill brought the best opportunities. Your career will grow through your generosity, conversations, and ability to connect meaningfully.

4 LEARNING AS LEVERAGE

Professional curiosity and continuous learning are not buzzwords. Those who make it their business to know what's happening, embrace new ways of working, and stay updated remain relevant and ahead of volatile markets. Tools may change but your learner's mindset doesn't.

5 OWNERSHIP PREDICTS TRAJECTORY

Career success came faster to those who relied on themselves, not to those who waited for management or the market to expand their role. To move ahead, track your achievements, seek feedback, create opportunities, and take initiative at work. Taking ownership is your timeless principle for long-term success.

THE WRITER IS FOUNDER OF SALARYNEXT.COM, A JOB LOSS ASSURANCE FIRM, AND AUTHOR OF *GET HIRED IN 30 DAYS*.

CONTRAPUNTO

I've loved Messi since 2007…'mohabbat hai'…In 2026, we'll get the World Cup again. Argentina will be champion…

A FAN IN KOLKATA

Stealing The Ball

Messi reception in Kolkata reminded the nation that VIP culture is very much alive, and kicking the masses

In Sept, French president Macron was stuck on an NYC street closed for Trump's passage. He did what would be quite unthinkable for an Indian neta – walking 30 minutes to reach his embassy. That's because the West got over its VIP hang-ups long ago. Ireland's new president Catherine Connolly cycles to work. The night when Swedish PM Olof Palme was killed on a Stockholm road in 1986, he was walking home with his wife after a movie.

But India is different, as Kolkata was reminded on Saturday when it held its breath to see football great Messi, in person, at Salt Lake Stadium. Messi came, but hoi polloi, who had paid up to ₹12,000 at the counter – and reportedly up to ₹3L in black – couldn't get a glimpse because he was shanghaied by VIPs.

A flash release of the collective breath after 23 minutes wrecked the stadium, and made Messi and the VIPs scramble to safety.

The scene recalled an SC bench's question: "From where did we get this culture?" The court was hearing one of the many challenges to India's VIP culture, exemplified those days by red beacons. It said terms like "high dignitary" were "anathema to the notion of a republic". Almost 12 years later, nothing has changed. You can buy a 'VIP' number for your car – a Haryana man bid ₹1.2cr recently. You can get VIP darshan at temples. People die in ambulances, waiting for VIP cavalcades to pass. We know that some trains are faster only because they've been made more equal than others. Using the same template, Delhi govt is considering 'tatkal' property registrations for a fee, when the normal waiting time is 2-3 weeks. Essentially, with the right contacts, or cash, you can jump the queue in everything from school admissions to last rites.

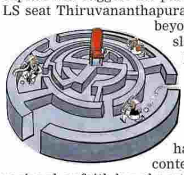
In a market economy, which India chose to be over 30 years ago, customer is king. But at Salt Lake Stadium on Saturday, paying customers at a commercial event were denied the 'service' while the privileged walked away with it. It was a triumph of feudalism over market.

Fading Red

NDA winning Kerala state capital muni signals there are takers for third front in Left's last state

Nothing screamed anti-incumbency more than the results of Kerala's local body elections. Pinarayi-led LDF, 10 years in govt, and having lorded over local bodies for decades, was turfed out by main opposition Congress-led UDF. But it is in losing the state capital municipal corporation – held by LDF for 45 years – that the election really turned heads. NDA trounced the Left in Thiruvananthapuram, winning 50 of 101 wards, against LDF's 29 and UDF's 19.

In last year's Lok Sabha election, BJP's Rajeev Chandrasekhar lost to four-time MP Shashi Tharoor in Thiruvananthapuram by a mere 1.7% votes. Even with the caveat that LS dynamics cannot be conflated with factors that win civic polls, fact is optics of BJP's capital win suggest the party will be looking to make gains in LS seat Thiruvananthapuram's seven assembly segments, and beyond, in the 140-seat legislative polls slated months away. The 2021 assembly poll tally was LDF 99, UDF 41. NDA won Thrissur.



Opposition UDF would have been even more upbeat over its local body victories had NDA not emerged as a third front. Kerala has mostly been bipolar coalition contests. Smaller, personality-led, hyper-regional or faith-based parties have switched sides in the past. So, a third front makes the going that much more jittery for all parties. Pinarayi has long made India's only Left-governed state into a showcase for personality-led politics. Losing Kerala will push Left parties, no matter their presence by way of vote shares, further to the margins everywhere. Welfare-based electoral politics and 'social justice' are everyone's baby today.

Of course, in these local polls, Thrissur also showed the risk of reading into results of one election the potential outcomes of another. Suresh Gopi, BJP's sole parliamentarian, from Thrissur, had no impact on these civic polls. What no party, however, will want in the assembly elections, is a blown-up version of Thrissur's local poll results from 2020. That year, BJP won six seats, LDF and UDF 24 each. The tie-breaker became mayor. Entry of 'kingmaker politics' can change Kerala's politics for good. And for bad.

Crème de la crème

Some winter skins meet snail mucin, others wish to

Anil Abraham

Winter had suddenly made a friendly special appearance in the neighbourhood and my skin was feeling dry. I decided to explore Kamala's dressing table to see what I could find to help my parched face, chapped lips, and cracked heels. I was met with a baffling array of creams and lotions and gels and serums that were slightly more confusing than Trump's tariffs. I tentatively picked a tiny tub of pink slop. It was labelled snail mucin and smelt like a slice of heaven. The second jar had a longer and more chemically confusing name – hyaluronic acid.

I decided to ask ChatGPT for help and it invaded my aging mind with detailed discourses on how I should layer products. Apparently if I put sunscreen before moisturiser, we would have a solar eclipse. And I needed to gently dab the creams upwards with my ring finger, failing which the Russia-Ukraine conflict would rapidly escalate into World War III. There were creams with far-fetched fruit from every part of the world, which promised to raise your jowls while simultaneously making you a kind and compassionate person.

There was a cream for the under-eye region and yet another soufflé for the décolletage. There was a hand cream and a foot cream and a body lotion, which had to be applied within two minutes after towelling, while singing the missing stanzas of Vande Mataram. I looked into the mirror like Narcissus and generously slathered on several potions that promised to transport me instantly from Indian class skin to Korean glass skin. Beauty and the Beast were both within me – I just needed to join the creamy layer.

I remembered the simpler skincare routine of my childhood, which involved generous dollops of coconut oil before a Sunday bath, then an all-purpose Boroline or cold cream for every body part that needed pampering. But in a world where filter kaapi had progressed to affogato or some other affected expensive upmarket beverage, simple was passé. Kamala walked in to see me grinning like the Cheshire cat that got the cream. "Your metaphors are as mixed as your mind," she hissed as she picked up all her precious potions and transferred them to the locker. Only the crème de la crème can afford a peaches and cream complexion apparently. The rest of us have to manage with occasional skinny-dipping.

A Requiem For Goa

A reckless state govt is squandering Goa's beauty, turning it all into realty. Violations across sectors, rampant construction, and hafta culture are killing a land locals are fighting to save

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A welcome vibe, a local charm, a homely feel…quaint villages, beaches, rivers, hills and romance with nature, where life comes alive among the sun, sand and sea. Goa is all of this and a sum total of more than this. It also is content in being *susegad*. But beneath this veneer lies an unease as neon lights blind the verdant green and highrises dwarf heritage buildings.

It is Goans' nonchalant attitude, what the world calls *susegad,* and misconstrues as indolence, that makes people believe that anything is possible in Goa.

Today, Goa is seeing a huge shift in demography as lands are being converted and sold to "outsiders". There is anger and fear that the very characteristics that gave Goa its identity – its language and culture – may be under threat. Violations across sectors have become norm rather than exception.

From politicians to administrators, from IAS and IPS officers to mamlatdars and panchayats, the common thread binding them together is 'hafta culture'. Whether it is land conversion or illegally running a nightclub, whether it is taxi mafia or environmental degradation, there is a price for everything. There's nothing money can't buy. At least one corruption case has been filed per day against govt employees and public representatives, on average, with the vigilance directorate over the last five years – 2,741 corruption complaints since March 2020. Except for a handful that have been acted upon, the rest remain on paper.

So, after the fire at Birch by Romeo Lane that snuffed out 25 innocent lives, stories of rampant violations and illegalities came as no surprise. It was always more a question of 'when' rather than 'how' the disaster would happen. Widespread violations significantly impacted governance and environment.

Goa's environment is under threat. The state's beaches, once untouched, are now lined with trash and debris, once-clear waters polluted with sewage and industrial waste. The natural beauty that draws tourists is being eroded. CAG slammed Goa Coastal Zone Management Authority (GCZMA) for clearing projects without verification of potential ecological risks and without ensuring mandatory documents. This is what benefitted places like Birch.

With tourist footfall of over 1cr annually, compared with the 16L resident population, tourists outnumber residents by over 6:1. In the absence of adequate infra, tourism has become a bane, leading to degradation of tourist experience.

Roadsides piled with garbage, overflowing bins and plastic choking beaches and mangroves, aren't just health hazards but impact the state's image. Goa generates 46% more garbage per capita annually than the rest of India. Its capital Panaji is drowning in its own waste. From 52,500kg of waste generated daily in 2024 to 54,000kg per day this year, it has seen

an alarming increase of 1,500kg per day.

In the race to position itself as tourism capital, and in the garb of 'ease of business', Goa opened its doors without accountability, permanently damaging its fragile coastal ecosystem and marginalising local communities. Registered hotels saw exponential growth – from 3,000 in 2022 to 9,000 in 2024. But were all these hotels legal is anyone's guess.

Behind this romanticised growth story is unbridled land conversion. Farmlands and eco-sensitive spots were turned into farmhouses, gated villas and condominiums, nightclubs and social hotspots. In two decades, Goa has seen its sown area decline from 1.69L hectares in 2004 to 1.45L ha in 2024.

To fast-track conversion of vast tracts of orchards, paddy fields and natural cover for real estate, state govt amended the town and country planning (TCP) Act. It first introduced Section 17(2), and when faced with legal challenges, it brought in Section 39A. As a result, 26.5L sqm was converted under Section 17(2), while Section 39A has seen 20L sqm already converted, and 59L sqm in the pipeline for conversion.

Hills like Reis Magos are being carved out for luxury villas bypassing mandated procedures, while trees at Salvador do Mundo are being felled for expressway projects without prior consultation. Blatant violations have reached such a stage that even heritage sites are not left out. In the garb of repairing a dilapidated coconut shed, a bungalow has been constructed in the buffer zone of the Unesco heritage site at Old Goa, home to Basilica and Se Cathedral. These aren't isolated incidents, but symptoms of unplanned development throwing regulation to the winds.

Courts have been active, striking down one rule after the other, and a raft of PILs is still pending before them to protect Goa, but that hasn't deterred govt from continuing to allow sale of its hills and ecologically sensitive land. Official figures tabled in Rajya Sabha show, on average, 10 real estate companies and six construction firms are registered in the state every month. Over the past 16 months, 166 real estate companies and 110 construction firms were registered in Goa. If 725 companies were registered between April and Nov 2024, 826 firms made Goa its base between April and Nov 2025, taking the total to 1,541 companies.

The pushback by Goa's villagers to what they perceive as land-grabbing with state connivance sounds like war cries. Signboards appeared overnight at village boundaries: 'Buy at your own risk'. The boards did something unprecedented in Goa – villages publicly telling outsiders to stay away and sending out a clear message: We have nothing left to give.

With a nonchalant govt and an equally irresponsible bunch of officials, Goans have been left with no choice but to knock on courts' doors to save their lands, homes and soul.

Hearing a bunch of petitions, Justice (retd) Gautam Patel of Bombay HC observed about Goa in a judgment: "If NGT in Pune has so very many cases from Goa, it is not because – or not just because – the people of Goa are litigious; it is because they perceive there is something of value here to protect… For this is something none can deny: This is a land truly worth fighting for."

The Messy Affair Wasn't Football Hooliganism

Kolkata witnessed what happens when paying public are treated with contempt. Telangana admin showed Bengal authorities how to organise a superstar tour

Shikha Mukerjee

Football is a culture, collectively created by a public that offers its homage to the genius of its uniquely gifted stars. Football clubs are places of community worship at the altar of the game. There is spiritual kinship and ferocious loyalty, rituals and superstitions that link each football fan with every other football fan, be it in bitter and violent competition or in joyous celebration.

That's why the VIPs and their associates, family and hangers-on, who robbed the 60,000 acolytes who travelled over 1,000km, scraping together their savings, borrowing against no expectations of return on their investment in the once-in-a-lifetime experience of seeing, simply seeing, the hero, the icon, their idol Lionel Messi, are not exactly criminals – they are culpable of provoking crime. If the fans erupted in rage, throwing water bottles, uprooting bucket seats, jumping fences and invading the pitch, their actions are not forgivable, but do need to be understood with sympathy.

Kolkata's Vivekananda Yuva Bharati Krirangan, otherwise known as Salt Lake Stadium, turned into an arena of rage when VIPs with passes invaded the pitch, surrounded Messi, obscured him from sight, and elbowed others to take selfies with the icon. The worst offenders were two ministers of the Mamata Banerjee govt, Arup Biswas and Sujit Bose. The mayhem was of their manufacturing.

The Messi G.O.A.T tour was a non-sectarian, all-faith event; it was not a Derby match, a gladiatorial contest, intense, ruthless and hard fought, between rivals, the Mohun Bagan Football Club and the East Bengal Football Club. Spectators had come to see their Argentinian hero, cherish the moment and recount it for the rest of their lives.

The crowd was not unruly to begin with; VIPs and their entourage were. Football is a performance in which the spectators are part of the theatre; their presence, their responses, their energies, their expectations and their fervent prayers in support of their teams and heroes, are part of the collectively created culture of the game.

By inserting themselves between the fan who paid up to see his hero, and the hero himself, the gaggle of VIPs provoked the crowd into reacting in the only way that football fans know: going on the rampage. The icon did not make it to the trolley that was meant to hoist him up so that his devotees could see him. He was slated, as per the official programme, to meet the

Mohun Bagan Messi All Stars and Diamond Harbour Messi All Stars players. That did not happen.

The outrage and the administrative follow-up measures were overdone and possibly designed to deflect attention from the perpetrators of the mess. From Mamata Banerjee's reaction that she was shocked and disturbed, to BJP's accusations that the failure of crowd management in Kolkata had shamed India in the eyes of the world, it was all over-the-top drama.

Blaming the frustrated and heartbroken Messi bhakts is about as easy as it can get; because the elite live under the illusion that they cannot be held responsible for their misdemeanours. They have a way of monopolising credit, and an acute reluctance to share blame.

Hooliganism and football are synonyms. The chair chucking, bottle throwing, and invasion of the pitch at Salt Lake Stadium were and weren't hooliganism. The violence inside and outside football grounds that are regular in all football crazy cultures is invariably the product of the intensity of the rivalry between two groups separated by their loyalties. The small fraction of mayhem makers in Kolkata were angry; they were angry with the VIPs for taking possession of their idol and excluding the true believers.

The paying public has rights, which includes getting what they paid to see. Being cheated of the only opportunity they were ever likely to have of seeing Messi, and maybe seeing him play a magical penalty shot, was their only reason for being there.

Management of the Messi event in Kolkata was a disaster. The organisers clearly caved under pressure from VIPs. So did police and security personnel, who should have screened the invasion of the stadium and the pitch by VIPs and their entourage. These people were not part of the paying public; they were freeloaders. And fans ran riot. CM should care about the young people who were heartbroken, instead of blaming them, if for no other reason than they are also voters, and now voters with a grudge.

If West Bengal sullied India's reputation, Telangana made up for the loss and restored India's pride. Telangana CM Revanth Reddy posted, "I thank all sports lovers and fans for their best conduct and disciplined manner in which they played host to our guests." He also said that it was an occasion when Telangana was "able to showcase to the world" that it means sports, excellence and hospitality.

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacredspace

To be a well-rounded person and know what's going on in the world around you, to have a perspective outside of your sport, is important for every athlete. I'm blessed that our parents gave us that.

Venus Williams

Better To Be Average Than To Be A Broken Genius

Sonal Srivastava

Sheldon Cooper is depicted as a theoretical physicist and genius in popular sitcom, 'The Big Bang Theory'. He effortlessly solves equations and spouts scientific theories, much to his friends' chagrin; he is, to put it mildly, a pain in their necks. Sheldon is a fictional character, but many geniuses excel in one field yet remain oblivious, insensitive and unmindful in other areas of life. While such geniuses have often accomplished extraordinary achievements for humanity's benefit, many have also led lonely lives and caused distress to their spouses, partners, friends or relatives. Being a genius in one aspect of life is not necessarily the best thing that can happen to us. It is better to be a balanced, well-rounded individual – who may not be a genius but triumphs through effort – than to excel in one domain while struggling in all others.

Albert Einstein, among most celebrated scientists, is a case in point. He had a turbulent relationship with his first wife, Mileva Maric that ended in divorce. Einstein's initial letters to his first wife and mother of his children reveal a tender, passionate side to the scientist. Over time, however, the tone of these letters changed as Einstein progressed in his career. Mileva, a physicist and a mathematician, found herself increasingly distanced.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Intellectual brilliance doesn't necessarily translate into emotional sensitivity. In domains of art, philosophy, music and sports too, there've been geniuses who suffered under the weight of their own intellect.

Vincent van Gogh managed to sell only a single painting in his entire career as an artist and suffered from depression. Nietzsche, who declared 'God is dead' and 'if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into you', led a lonely life. Many musicians are part of the '27 Club', comprising artists who died at 27 years of age from substance abuse or by suicide. This 'club' includes popular singers such as Jim Morrison, Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain.

Olympians suffer what is referred to as 'Olympic Blues'. Athletes such as Michael Phelps are so focused on their training they reportedly experience withdrawal after the Games end and the adrenaline rush subsides.

It's essential to excel in your chosen field; however, it's equally important to be grounded, humble, sensitive and aware of what's going on around you in order to remain balanced. If cultivating such qualities makes you an average person, it is better to be average than a genius who destroys others.

A wise person, Gita says, is one who sees inaction in action and action in inaction. She is a yogi who performs all actions, remaining inwardly free from ego and attachment to fruits of action. The real genius, Gita says, is the intellect that correctly determines what ought to be done and what should *not* be done.

Indian Astronomers Discover An Ancient Spiral Galaxy With Arms That Could Cradle Worlds Like Ours

Could Milky Way's Older Twin Hold Life?

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Earlier this month, scientists Rashi Jain and Yogesh Wadadekar, from National Centre for Radio Astrophysics in Pune, announced an extraordinary discovery, of a galaxy 12 billion light years away with the perfect grand spiral design — a bulge in the middle, at least two visible arms and massive in size, nearly 30,000 light years in diameter.

The shape has sparked a mystery as according to most scientific models, such a galaxy should not exist, not that far back in time.

Alaknanda was found using the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), stationed 1.5 million kilometres away in an orbit around the Sun. All telescopes are like time machines, but Webb has the largest mirror ever launched into space. It collects enough light for its cameras to "see" nearly 13 billion years into the past, back to the "early Universe", when the first structures such as galaxies began to form and emit light *(see box)*.

"That's how we know Alaknanda's age," says Jain. "Its light began to travel 12 billion years ago, which means it existed when the Universe was at just 10% of its current age."

But scientific models state galaxies that formed so soon after the Big Bang should be unstable structures, too turbulent to settle into stable, rotating discs, which take about 3 billion years to form.

"Alaknanda though," says Wadadekar, "formed in half that time. So it does not match our theoretical models."

There was another surprise. Alaknanda was found forming stars 20-30 times faster than the Milky Way today. In fact, nearly half of its 10 billion stars appear to have formed within the first 200 million years — its spiral arms revealing a "beads-on-a-string pattern", an indication of active star formation. All these properties then take us to a tantalising question: Can a galaxy this ancient, so similar to ours, with arms that carry millions of stars, hold life?

For years, scientists have debated over what type of galaxies are ideal for complex life. In 2015, astronomer Pratika Dayal, from University of Durham, wrote giant elliptical galaxies could hold 10,000 times more habitable worlds than spirals, because elliptical structures had trillions more stars and saw fewer destructive supernovae.

But the paper was countered by University of Arkansas astrophysicist Daniel Whitmire who said it contradicted the 'Principle of Mediocrity', the notion that Earth, the humans on it and our solar system are not special and that if life exists in a spiral Milky Way, it could thrive in another similar spiral structure. "Why do we not find ourselves located in a large elliptical galaxy?" wrote Whitmire in 2020.

He said elliptical structures, early in their formation, were also filled with so much radiation from violent explosions that no habitable planet would've survived.

"If habitable planets hosting intelligent life are unlikely in large elliptical galaxies, where most stars and planets reside, then by default galaxies such as the Milky Way will be the primary sites of these civilizations, as expected by the Principle of Mediocrity," Whitmire concluded.

But spiral galaxies can be hazardous places too. Many form stars at a rapid rate, which means every once in a while, they're likely to see cosmic explosions ejecting radiation strong enough to scorch any lifeform more complex than a microbe.

So, given its shocking rate of star formation, is Alaknanda too violent to host life?

Early observations offer yet another twist. "The low contribution of light from its central bulge suggests Alaknanda grew mainly through smooth gas accretion rather than through major collisions," says Wadadekar.

"However, such a process should take about a billion years to create spiral arms, longer than the 600 million years in which Alaknanda formed most of its stars." These puzzling properties do call for investigations, he says.

"People often ask if spiral galaxies are necessary for life," he adds.

"We don't know for sure, but if such galaxies existed earlier than expected, maybe conditions suitable for life also began earlier. These are the questions discoveries like this open up. I have written over a hundred papers, but this object is truly unusual."

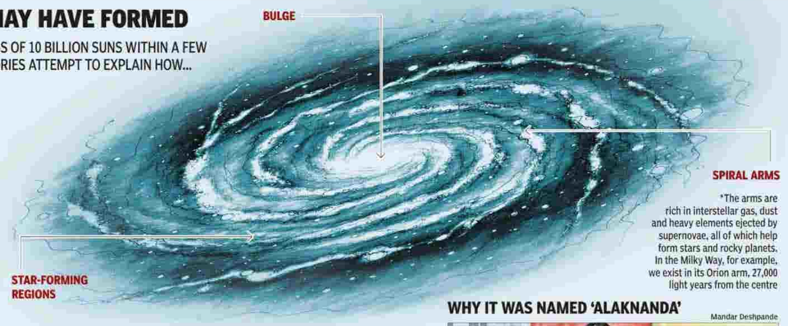
HOW ALAKNANDA MAY HAVE FORMED

THIS GALAXY GAINED A STELLAR MASS OF 10 BILLION SUNS WITHIN A FEW HUNDRED MILLION YEARS. TWO THEORIES ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN HOW...

AI rendering of Alaknanda

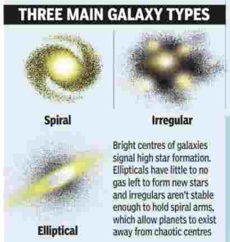
1 **It pulled streams of cold gas**, allowing density waves to form spiral patterns. Imagine slow, heavy vehicles stuck in a traffic jam (high-density zone). The waves act on these regions and compress gas to convert some of it into stars

2 **A gravitational encounter** with a smaller companion galaxy that stretched out the arms. But spiral arms forced by such forces tend to fade quickly



AI-generated image of a typical spiral galaxy

THREE MAIN GALAXY TYPES

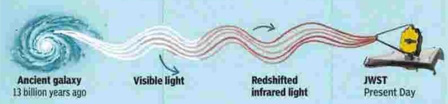


Bright centres of galaxies signal high star formation. Ellipticals have little to no gas left to form new stars and irregulars aren't stable enough to hold spiral arms, which allow planets to exist away from chaotic centres

HOW JAMES WEBB SPACE TELESCOPE (JWST) LOOKS INTO THE PAST

- This $10 billion-dollar space telescope has a gold-coated mirror that lets us see faint light from galaxies as they were over 13 billion years ago, the dawn of time
- Astronomers use light to 'look back in time'. For instance, the **Moon we see now is what it was 1.8 seconds ago**, the time it took for its light to reach planet Earth
- JWST sees in infrared, which means it detects light from so early in time, it has been **stretched by Universe's expansion, an effect called 'redshift'**. It's similar to how a line drawn on the surface of a balloon would stretch if the balloon were to be inflated
- JWST recently imaged a supernova that occurred just 700 million years after Big Bang

JWST DETECTS LIGHT FROM 13 BILLION YEARS AGO IN INFRARED SPECTRUM



WHY IT WAS NAMED 'ALAKNANDA'

Mandar Deshpande

- Thousands of celestial objects were analysed frame-by-frame by **Rashi Jain** and **Yogesh Wadadekar** as they searched deep space for 'high-redshift' structures
- Incidentally, both are trained metallurgists who shifted fields to astronomy. Alaknanda is now one of the most significant detections ever made by JWST
- Alaknanda is the sister river of Mandakini, the Hindi name for Milky Way (aka Akash Ganga). So their name for this galaxy was fitting, the researchers said

Breakthroughs From Around The World

DIABETES PILL TARGETING MUSCLES SHOWS PROMISE

A tablet that "improves metabolic health without losing muscle mass", according to Stockholm University's Tore Bengtsson, is emerging as a potential alternative to GLP-1 drugs, a study in 'Cell' reports. Unlike Ozempic-style injections that suppress appetite, the ß2-agonist "boosts metabolic activity directly within skeletal muscle". It avoided appetite loss or muscle decline in animal tests. A phase I trial in 48 healthy volunteers and 25 people with type 2 diabetes found it well tolerated. Karolinska Institutet's Shane C Wright says it "represents a completely new type of treatment" that may also pair with GLP-1 therapies.

NEW MOONQUAKE STUDY COULD ALTER NASA PLANS

Smithsonian scientist Thomas R Watters and University of Maryland geologist Nicholas Schmerr have found through a recent study that repeated moonquakes, and not meteoroid hits, shifted the Apollo 17 landing region. In the study published in the journal, 'Science Advances', Watters and Schmerr stated that they studied boulder tracks and landslides to estimate shaking close to magnitude 3.0 from the Lee-Lincoln fault. Schmerr said they lacked "strong motion instruments", so they relied on surface clues instead. Watters warned that still-active faults "should be considered" when planning future lunar bases. Schmerr added that the daily chance of a damaging quake is "one in 20 million," but long stays raise the risk, meaning habitats should be built well away from active scarps.

LAST WEEK'S QUICK QUIZ Question on Dec 8: During thunderstorms, flashes of lightning appear before the accompanying sound of thunder, even though both originate from the same event. Why do we see lightning before hearing thunder? **Answer:** Light travels faster than sound

BTech students can exit after 3 yrs with BSc degree: IIT-M

Will Help Those Who Seek To Pursue Business, Civil Services Or MBA

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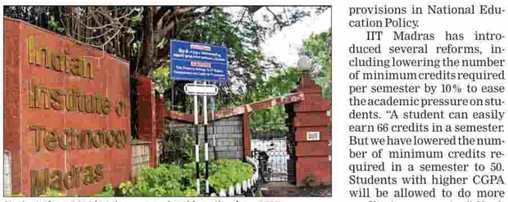
Chennai: Students struggling to complete BTech degrees at IIT Madras will now have an exit option with a BSc degree after three years, provided they earn 250 credits out of the total 400. Students from 2024 batch can exercise this option from 2027.

The institute is also planning to make it available for senior students from this academic year. However, these students should have tried to complete the degree at least once before opting for a BSc.

"We are planning to offer a BSc degree with specialisation as well. Each department will specify the number of core credits required for specialisation," professor Prathap Haridoss, dean (academic courses), IIT Madras, told **TOI**. "This BSc degree will help students to join higher education, including MBA, and appear for civil services. Those who exit also later join in our online BS degrees as well," he added.

Students who join without interest in the subject struggle to complete their degrees. Some leave their course after becoming entrepreneurs. "This option will help such students get a degree," the dean said.



Students from 2024 batch can exercise this option from 2027

Providing for multiple entries and exits to degree programmes is one of the key provisions in National Education Policy.

IIT Madras has introduced several reforms, including lowering the number of minimum credits required per semester by 10% to ease the academic pressure on students. "A student can easily earn 66 credits in a semester. But we have lowered the number of minimum credits required in a semester to 50. Students with higher CGPA will be allowed to do more credits in a semester," Haridoss said.

Further, IIT Madras made up to 40% of the courses in the BTech programme electives so students can select the subjects they are interested in. It also introduced interdisciplinary dual degrees and minor degrees to offer more choices.

Compassionate employment no ladder to climb to higher posts: SC

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New Delhi: Supreme Court has said that a person employed on compassionate grounds to alleviate family difficulties because of the death of a parent in harness cannot seek appointment to higher posts merely because they have the requisite qualifications for the same.

A bench of Justices Rajesh Bindal and Manmohan on Friday reversed a Madras high court judgment directing Tamil Nadu govt to promote two persons initially appointed as sweepers on compassionate grounds, due to the deaths of their fathers, to junior assistants as they had the requisite qualifications for that post at the time of their appointment in 2007 and 2012. Both had approached the HC in 2015.

The bench said employment was provided on compassionate grounds to the eligible kin of an employee who dies in harness to enable the family of the deceased to tide over difficult times. "Such appointment which is arising out of exceptional circumstances cannot be used as a ladder to climb up in seniority by claiming a higher post merely on the basis that s/he is eligible for such post," it said.

REVERSES MADRAS HC ORDER

Writing the judgment, Justice Bindal said once the dependent of a deceased employee was offered employment on a compassionate basis, their right stood exercised. "Thereafter, no question arises for seeking appointment to a higher post. Otherwise, it would be a case of 'endless compassion'," he said.

The bench said compassionate appointment was a relief against financial hardship caused by the sudden and unforeseen loss of the earning member of a family, and employment to the kin was provided to ensure that the family did not face impoverishment. The SC said recruitment for other posts were governed by rules and regulations that apply to all eligible candidates. Thus, it would be impermissible to allow a person who had entered employment through compassionate grounds to bypass the process of recruitment and get promoted, it said.

"An applicant for the post on a compassionate basis may be eligible for any higher post, but that does not mean he has the right to be appointed on that post. This depends on the rules and the policy applicable and also the number of vacancies to be offered in that category. In fact, this is not an additional source of recruitment, rather an exception to the general rule of providing equal opportunities to all for recruitment in govt jobs," SC said.

HC: Autopsy detecting alcohol no ground to deny compensation

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> **The person, if alive, was fit to defend his case as to whether he was in a drunken condition... but when he is dead there is no such opportunity**
>
> CALCUTTA HIGH COURT

Kolkata: Insurers cannot deny compensation to the family of a fatal road accident victim merely because an autopsy has detected alcohol in the abdomen, as the deceased is not available to defend himself against allegations of drunk driving, Calcutta high court has observed.

Justice Biswaroop Chowdhury on Friday upheld an East Midnapore court's decision awarding Rs 11.4 lakh to the biker's family, directing the insurance company to pay the compensation along with 6% per annum interest from 2021, when the claim was filed.

The court acknowledged that drunk driving violates Motor Vehicles Act. "But when the person who met with an accident is dead and is alleged to have been drunk, the heirs of the victim cannot be deprived of compensation, as the person, if alive, was fit to defend his case as to whether he was in drunken condition... but when he is dead there is no such opportunity," Justice Chowdhury said.

The claimants' counsel argued that under Section 185 of Motor Vehicles Act, punishment applied only when blood alcohol content exceeded 30mg per 100ml, as detected by a breath analyser. Since the victim could not defend himself, allegations of drunkenness could not be used to deny compensation. The counsel further submitted that the bike being uninsured did not alter liability, as the offending truck was insured.

The accident occurred in Dec 2020 when Ganesh Das and another person were travelling from Nimtouri to Nandakumar on NH-41. A speeding truck hit the motorcycle. While the pillion rider survived, Ganesh died on the spot.

Justice Chowdhury also took "sad note" of vehicles plying without valid insurance and observed that insurers should inform transport authorities when a policy expired and was not renewed despite reminders.

Inquiry panel gives Justice Varma 6 more weeks to respond to cash discovery charges

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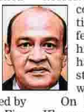
New Delhi: The three-member inquiry committee headed by Supreme Court Judge Aravind Kumar has asked Justice **Yashwant Varma**, facing a removal motion in Lok Sabha in the aftermath of the discovery of wads of burnt and unaccounted for currency notes at his official residence, to respond to the memo of charges against him.

In its Dec 5 proceedings, Justice Varma sought eight more weeks to respond to the charges of misconduct framed against him by the committee — comprising Justice Kumar, Madras HC Chief Justice M M Srivastava and senior advocate B V Acharya — that was constituted under Judges (Inquiry) Act on Aug 12 by LS Speaker Om Birla pursuant to a removal motion signed by 146 MPs.

The committee granted Justice Varma six more weeks to file a detailed response to the charges and said no further time would be given to him for this purpose. The proceedings are scheduled to resume in the last week of Jan.



The inquiry panel has supplied the memo of charges along with evidence — mainly comprising videos of the burning cash recorded by Delhi Police and Delhi Fire Service personnel on the night of March 14-15 while dousing a fire in a room inside the judge's Lutyens Zone bungalow, and statements of witnesses recorded by the in-house inquiry conducted by another three-member panel set up by former CJI Sanjiv Khanna.

During the proceedings before the inquiry panel constituted by the LS speaker, Justice Varma will have the opportunity to counter the charges, produce witnesses in support of his innocence and can cross examine witnesses. A week after the discovery of the cash, Justice Varma was transferred from Delhi HC to his parent HC at Allahabad. He has been stripped of judicial work since then.

On March 22, then CJI Khanna set up a three-member in-house inquiry panel comprising Punjab and Haryana Chief Justice Sheel Nagu, Himachal Chief Justice G S Sandhawalia and Karnataka HC's Justice Anu Sivaraman. This panel had submitted its report dated May 3 to the CJI on May 5.

The in-house panel had rejected Justice Varma's defence that the cash had been planted to defame and discredit him, and said that it had "no hesitation in holding that in the backdrop of direct as well as electronic evidence of unimpeachable character, further corroborated by the evidence of the experts, the issue of presence of cash in the storeroom situated within 30, Tughlaq Crescent, New Delhi, is established." It had recorded that the electronic evidence, mainly comprising videos and still photographs taken by the first responders, were found to be authentic by CFSL, Chandigarh.

The panel's 64-page report had recorded that wads of half-burnt Rs 500 notes in Justice Varma's storeroom were cleaned up early on March 15 by "trusted servants".

AI mania grips Wall Street: But is it the right fit for your investments?

The rally, concentrated in AI mega-caps like Nvidia, Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet and Meta, is raising concerns

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The extraordinary rally in US technology stocks over the past few years, especially those linked to artificial intelligence (AI), has left investors wondering whether they are witnessing the formation of another classic market bubble.

For Indian investors, the concern is sharper because most international exposure from the country is concentrated in US equities, particularly Nasdaq-heavy funds. While exposure to the world's largest economy is important, the current environment suggests that investors must think more about global diversification, rather than anchoring portfolios to a single market and a single theme.

The rise of mega-caps

The US market rally has increasingly become a narrow one, powered by a small group of AI-linked mega-caps. While mega-caps are defined as firms with over $200 billion market capitalization, 10 US stocks currently hold a market cap of over $1 trillion each, including names like Nvidia Corp., Apple Inc., Alphabet Inc., Microsoft Corp., and Meta Platforms Inc.

Over the last three to four years, these companies have surged on the back of aggressive spending on data centres, chips, and computing infrastructure. The scale of this concentration is unprecedented. "AI-related firms have contributed almost 80% of US equity gains in 2025, with just the five biggest AI mega-caps making up around 30% of the S&P 500 and 20% of the MSCI World Index, the highest concentration in nearly 50 years," said Ankur Punj, managing director and business head at wealth management platform Equirus Wealth.

The US tech sector accounts for around 35% of total US market capitalization, and the 10 largest US companies comprise more than 20% of global equity value. Such dominance is extraordinary by historical standards and raises the risk that returns are being driven by an increasingly narrow part of the market.

Punj added that the S&P 500 is currently trading around 23x forward earnings, placing it in one of the most stretched valuation phases relative to other global markets since the dot-com boom. AI-related capital expenditure is expected to touch $390 billion in 2025, heavily concentrated in a handful of companies and contributing to what Punj described as a "circular AI economy".

Signs of a bubble

Yet, most analysts and reports say, despite stretched valuations and the lopsided market structure, the US tech sector is not in an outright bubble, at least not in the classic sense.

Some segments of the US market are expensive relative to their own history, said Raunak Onkar, head of research and fund manager at PPFAS Mutual Fund. "Some businesses have seen a sharp rise in valuations simply because their short-term numbers have surged with AI demand, but not all these companies have cash flows strong enough to justify those valuations." But he added that it would be inaccurate to call the entire US tech landscape a bubble, because certain firms continue to generate strong cash flows with growth.

A recent Deutsche Bank report makes the same point: The rise in AI-driven valuations has been accompanied by real earnings growth and robust profitability, unlike earlier bubbles that were fuelled by unproven business models and unrealistic assumptions.

Dangerous dependence

Onkar cautioned that chasing fads simply because stock prices are rising is not advisable. Both Punj and Onkar emphasized that the real problem for Indian investors is not exposure to the US per se, but excessive dependence on a single geography and theme.

Punj said that Indian investors face a double risk in a US correction. "A US pullback driven by an AI correction could see stocks fall. If stocks fall, capital may move out of US, causing the dollar to weaken against the rupee, hitting Indian investors both ways."

Analysts advise diversification beyond the US to mitigate risks from currency fluctuations and mkt corrections

Beyond US

US comprises half of the global market capitalization. Therefore, any diversified global portfolio, noted Onkar of PPFAS Mutual Fund, cannot and should not exclude the US entirely. "If one has to build global exposure, investors will need to accept US markets as being part of that diversified portfolio. Also, looking at it purely from a US and non-US perspective might disadvantage investors as they won't be able to participate in sectors that are leading with growth," he explained. Many innovative firms are listed in US but earn cash flows from across the world.

Nevertheless, valuation opportunities outside US look more balanced. Punj highlighted Europe and Japan as attractive regions. Europe offers broad-based exposure through cyclical sectors, industrials, and stable dividend-paying companies that have significantly lagged US valuations.

Japan, despite its strong run, continues to benefit from corporate governance reforms, improving shareholder returns, and valuations that remain appealing in many long-neglected sectors.

In emerging markets, Brazil appears compelling. Punj said that Brazil trades at low-teen price-to-earnings multiples while benefiting from commodity demand, structural reforms, and higher foreign participation. Taiwan and Korea also offer exposure to the global semiconductor supply chain, but remain more volatile and sensitive to US tech sentiment. "Retail investors should restrict international allocation to 20% of the overall portfolio, and as far as allocation outside the US is concerned, currently should focus on Europe/Japan, 80%, and some allocation to emerging markets like Brazil, 20%," Punj said.

Diversification through MFs

Interestingly, mutual fund (MF) data suggests that Indian investors have already started rebalancing to other geographies. Several international funds outside US have seen significant AUM growth. The Invesco India-Invesco Global Equity Income Fund of Fund grew from ₹25 crore in December 2024 to ₹170 crore in October 2025, a jump of 580%. The Axis Greater China Equity FoF saw its AUM rise 488% to ₹1,501 crore over the same period. These trends show growing willingness among investors to explore opportunities beyond US-centric products.

Onkar stressed that even outside US, there are pockets of expensive and reasonably priced businesses. "Valuation opportunities exist everywhere, even in markets that appear overvalued in aggregates," he said.

Saurabh Mittal, CFA and founding director at wealth manager Circle Wealth Advisors, said most client portfolios maintain 10% to 15% international exposure. But after the sharp US rally in recent months, the weight of US funds has naturally risen. "What we are doing is just rebalancing those allocations and bringing them back to desired levels," he explained.

Money is also being shifted from US-specific funds to broader global indices like the MSCI World Index. "But even in the MSCI World Index, US stocks are approximately 75%. So you are not immune to what happens in US," he said. The MSCI World Index captures large- and mid-cap representation across 23 Developed Markets (DM) countries.

Mutual funds or ETFs?

Most experts believe India-domiciled international MFs and exchange-traded funds (ETFs) are the cleanest and relatively safer way for Indian investors to build global exposure. Punj gave their advantages: better risk control, simpler taxation, transparent structure, and none of the complexities involved in owning stocks directly abroad.

Both Punj and Onkar emphasized the importance of a staggered approach to investments, as predicting corrections or bubbles is impossible. A long-term horizon and systematic investing is a reliable path.

While that may be true given that domestic domiciled ETFs are trading at a premium, now may not be the time to invest through them.

Rushabh Desai, founder of MF distributor Rupee With Rushabh Investment Services, said valuations in US equity markets, especially tech, have become expensive, and due to Securities and Exchange Board of India's (Sebi) restrictions on overseas MF inflows, many ETFs are trading at unusually high premiums.

In his view, domestic markets currently offer better risk-adjusted opportunities. "This is the right time to focus on home rather than abroad as the returns in the Indian equity markets have been subdued and with reasonable valuations in many pockets," he added.

Investing via MFs, either through active or index funds, said Desai, is always better from a risk, return and liquidity point of view for retail investors. But if you are looking to invest abroad, you could consider outbound retail funds and ETFs that apps like Vested Finance and IndMoney offer.

Experts also warned that chasing US tech after a huge AI-driven surge can backfire; Fomo buying and panic exits destroy wealth.

As Onkar noted, investing isn't thrill-seeking but goal-driven. With the US so dominant and capable of making global markets "catch a cold" when it sneezes, a broader, more balanced global diversification via the mutual fund route, where experts invest your money after deep research, remains the safer long-term path.

Scan the QR code to read an extended version of this story.

AI frenzy in US markets: Smart or speculative?

US tech stocks, especially AI-linked, have surged sharply, raising concerns about a potential market bubble.

US capital markets are the largest in the world

Source: SIFMA July 2025 Report (Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association)

US bull run: Balanced on a needle

In the US, a small group of tech companies drives the index

S&P 500 giants: 10 stocks drive 41% of the index

	Sector/industry	Weight (in %)
Nvidia	Technology	7.15
Apple Inc.	Technology	6.64
Microsoft	Technology	5.79
Amazon	Internet-retail	3.96
Alphabet Inc.	Internet-content & information	6.26
Broadcom	Technology	2.97
Meta Platforms	Internet-content & information	2.74
Tesla Inc.	Consumer cyclical-auto	2.44
Berkshire Hathaway	Financial services	1.75
Walmart	Consumer defensive	1.48

Data as on 5 December 2025. Source: slickcharts.com, yahoofinance

Nasdaq 100 heavyweights: 5 companies drive 54% of the index

	Sector/industry	Weight (in %)
Nvidia	Technology	13.07
Apple Inc.	Technology	12.14
Microsoft	Technology	10.59
Amazon	Internet-retail	7.23
Alphabet Inc.	Internet-content & information	11.44

Data as on 5 December 2025. Source: slickcharts.com

The right way to go global today

- Use global MFs/ETFs for overseas exposure.
- Stick to disciplined investing instead of timing markets.
- Explore beyond the US as non-US fund AUM surges.
- Choose broad index like MSCI World Index to cut single-country risk.
- Escaping US entirely is difficult.
- Avoid Fomo in US tech/AI rallies.
- Right time to focus at home, say experts

Investor interest in international funds has increased with the AUM nearly doubling in three years

International funds AUM (₹ crore)

37,902 — Dec 2022 (Beginning of AI enthusiasm)

75,327 — Oct 2025

Source: Value Research

How leading stock markets have fared

Returns (in %)

Index	1-year	5-year
South Korea (KOSPI)	70.01	8.40
Germany (DAX)	18.49	12.62
Japan (Nikkei 225)	27.39	13.39
US (S&P)	13.78	13.40
Taiwan (TAIEX)	21.19	14.48
Hong Kong (Hang Seng)	25.70	-0.68
Singapore (STI)	19.19	9.63
Brazil (BOVESPA)	25.05	7.08
UK (FTSE 100)	16.41	8.10
US (Nasdaq)	18.06	13.90
China (SSECI)	12.84	1.04
France (CAC 40)	8.82	7.71
India (Sensex)	**4.10**	**13.05**

1-year returns are absolute; 5-year CAGR returns; data as on 11 December 2025. Source: Value Research, Yahoo Finance

GOPAKUMAR WARRIER/MINT

POWER POINT

DHIRENDRA KUMAR

We welcome your views and comments at mintmoney@livemint.com

ASSETS TO ASHES: WHEN SHORTCUTS DESTROY WEALTH

I recently attended an investment conclave in Ayodhya where, in a keynote speech, Acharya Mithilesh Nandini Sharan Ji vividly shared the story of Bhasmasura as a metaphor for what investors do. It was an unexpected but insightful connection, and it was the perfect metaphor for what I see happening to retail investors across India today.

For those unfamiliar with the tale, Bhasmasura was a demon who desperately wanted divine powers. Impatient with the slow path of righteous living, he sought a shortcut through Lord Shiva, known for granting boons quickly to devoted supplicants.

To demonstrate his intense devotion, Bhasmasura performed severe penance. The particularly gruesome and striking detail that makes this story so relevant to modern investing is this: he cut pieces of flesh from his own body and offered them into the sacred fire, progressively mutilating himself in his relentless pursuit of divine favour. Pleased by this extreme and unwavering sacrifice, Shiva granted him a terrible boon—the power to turn anyone to ash by merely touching their head.

What happened next is instructive.

Bhasmasura immediately attempted to test this power on Shiva himself. Lord Vishnu intervened by assuming the form of Mohini, who tricked the demon into placing his hand on his own head during a dance. The boon worked perfectly, and Bhasmasura was reduced to ashes by his own power.

Look around at the investment landscape today, and you'll see this ancient story playing out in modern dress. Retail investors, desperate for quick wealth, are progressively sacrificing critical pieces of their financial security.

First goes the emergency fund, which is then risked in futures and options (F&O) trading. Next, the children's education corpus gets diverted into speculative cryptocurrency investments. Retirement savings follow, often invested in dubious schemes promising impossibly high returns. Insurance policies are surrendered, gold is sold, and loans are taken—each financial sacrifice made in the hope of obtaining that elusive divine boon of instant wealth.

The financial industry, much like Shiva in our story, is more than willing to grant these boons. Want the power to control vast positions with minimal capital? Here's huge leverage for your trading. Want to profit from minute-to-minute price movements? Here are derivatives that allow constant, high-speed trading. The industry does not create these instruments reluctantly; it actively promotes them, extends trading hours to facilitate more transactions, and designs incentive structures that push these products hardest.

Understanding one's limits and the instruments used is crucial to build wealth for long term

But like *Bhasmasura's* boon, these instruments often end up destroying their users. The fact that most individual derivatives traders lose money is not an anomaly—it is the system's mathematical certainty.

The person who borrowed against their home to trade options, the young professional who liquidated mutual fund investments to chase cryptocurrency arbitrage, and the retiree who shifted fixed deposits into high-return schemes—all are progressively reducing themselves to financial ash using the very tools they sought for wealth creation.

The Acharya narrating this story emphasised a crucial point: there is no need for fear for those who truly understand the investing process, its steps, and the likely outcomes. The real problem is not investing itself—it lies in the toxic combination of impatience, limited understanding, and easy access to dangerously complex financial instruments.

When people ask why Buffett and Munger missed the technology boom, the answer lies in this principle: they understood that not understanding something is itself valuable information. They recognized what they didn't know, and that knowledge shielded them from both spectacular wins and catastrophic losses in areas beyond their expertise.

The ancient story also offers another lesson we often overlook. Bhasmasura wasn't destroyed by external enemies or bad luck; he was undone by his own power, wielded without wisdom. Similarly, leverage doesn't ruin investors because markets are rigged or regulators are asleep—it destroys them when they use powerful tools without understanding their true nature. The difference between a boon and a curse often lies not in the instrument itself, but in the wisdom of the person wielding it.

Patient wealth-building may lack the dramatic appeal of Bhasmasura's desperate penance. Systematic investments in familiar, understood assets, the compounding of interest over decades, and living within one's means while savings grow—none of this generates viral social media excitement.

Yet, unlike Bhasmasura's spectacular rise and fall, this disciplined approach actually works. You preserve your wealth, keep all your "flesh" intact, and remain safely standing when the financial fire finally burns out.

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How to lose money: 2025 edition

FROM PAGE 12

"Many IPOs may need two-three years for business performance to play out before meaningful value accrues," she added.

HOME AND THE WORLD

Home is where the heart is. And increasingly, where the ownership sits.

FPI ownership of the Indian equity markets fell to a 15-month low of 16.9% in Q2 FY26, as per National Stock Exchange data. In contrast, domestic mutual funds, buoyed by record systematic investment plan (SIP) inflows, extended their overall ownership to 10.9%—their ninth consecutive quarterly high.

Promoter holdings and direct ownership by individuals were broadly steady at 50.1% and 9.6%, respectively. Taken together with mutual funds, individual investors now account for 18.75% of listed equities—the highest in 22 years.

It's tempting to read this as a sign of a newly "self-reliant" market, one where domestic institutions can easily offset even record bouts of foreign selling. Yet, as 2025 showed, Dalal Street remains acutely exposed to global crosswinds.

From Donald Trump's tariff pirouettes to the rapid shifts in AI that have dragged down India's information technology (IT) heavyweights and the recent plunge in the rupee, the market is nowhere close to being decoupled from the world.

"India is more insulated than it once was — deepening retail participation, pension reforms, insurance penetration and systematic SIP culture have created a stable domestic bid. But markets remain global theatres. Foreign capital is still dominant in large-cap ownership; currency and commodities are external variables; geopolitics can swing sentiment in minutes," Pradeep Gupta, co-founder and vice chairman at Anand Rathi, stated.

Compared with peers, India may be less fragile, but it is not unshakable.


Sebi came down hard against finfluencer Avadhut Sathe.

"The structure is sturdier, yet the winds still matter. The sensible conclusion is neither triumphalism nor fatalism. India is building a resilient base — but resilience is not the same as decoupling," he added.

Self-reliance, it seems, does not grant immunity.

ROAD AHEAD

2025 was a year of consolidation and recalibration where fundamentals replaced frenzy for Dalal Street, and broad-based rallies were replaced by sector and stock-specific opportunities. Experts say this trend is expected to continue in the new year, even as the overall outlook remains optimistic.

"After having reclaimed the highs, we expect a new leg of uptrend in markets, especially as corporate earnings environment has improved owing to multiple factors such as stimulative fiscal and monetary measures, better liquidity, a likely thaw in the abruptly strained Indo-US relationships and a softer base for demand and earnings," Motilal Oswal's Shah said.

He also suggests adopting a sector-specific approach.

"We raise Indian IT services to mild-overweight by trimming our position in consumer discretionary and healthcare names. Our preferred sectors are diversified financials, IT services, automobiles, telecom and capital goods, whereas our key underweights are energy, metals and utilities," he added.

For retail investors, the present market calls for balance rather than bravado, Anand Rathi's Gupta opined.

"With sectoral returns diverging sharply, a diversified portfolio is wiser than concentrated sector bets. Systematic investing—through SIPs or staggered entry—helps counter volatility and avoids the trap of timing peaks. High-quality businesses with strong cash flows and reasonable valuations remain safer than momentum-driven plays. Keep expectations moderate; 2025 has rewarded selectivity, not indiscriminate enthusiasm," he said.

Most importantly, investors would do well to stay anchored to asset allocation, maintain an emergency fund, and resist reacting to every global tremor.

In uncertain markets, discipline, patience and process often outperform cleverness, he added.

OUR VIEW

REUTERS

Mexico buckles: How far will America's writ run?

Mexico's tariff hikes reflect US concerns over Chinese designs. As US-reliant countries fall in line with Trump's reset, autonomy must underpin India's economic emergence. Here's how

America's greatness, or at least the White House version of it, gets costlier for others by the day. The blow taken by India's auto exports to Mexico, whose tariffs are set to more than double next year, could also be ascribed to that project. When Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum unveiled her plan to raise barriers in September, a shield for local industry was the stated aim, but her real anxiety was clearly a review of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) due in 2026. Recall how US President Donald Trump rattled Mexico and Canada with threats within days of taking office. In April, his 'reciprocal tariffs' spared them both; today, they face an effective rate of under 10%, thanks mostly to how deeply integrated that trade bloc is. With US-bound exports making up 80% of Mexico's total, worth a third of its GDP, its vulnerability was obvious. Sheinbaum had no option but to respond to Trump's grouse over Chinese exporters using Mexico as a launch-pad for the US market. Before Trump could tighten the USMCA's 'rules of origin' or slam US gates shut, she had to act against Asian supply chains seen as running rings around his goal of reviving American factories behind tariff walls. Whether he can bend Canada to his will is far less clear, but America's latest National Security Strategy suggests that the US views North America as its fortress all the way to the North Pole.

As an economy moulded by US demand, Mexico is plainly a special case. Trump's jigsaw of geopolitics, however, has other major pieces that dare not defy his contours of how they fit in. Across the Atlantic, Europe's fear of Russia has played a role in the EU's acceptance of a lop-sided trade deal with America, a price paid for Uncle Sam's security. Further east, a swathe of countries has lined up behind America's snappy plan for "eternal peace" in West Asia. As for the Indo-Pacific, Japan's recent deal with the US tilts trade and investment flows the latter's way, *à la* Europe. Similar patterns are visible in US dealmaking with Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand; for US favour and tariff relief, they must grant America not just uneven market access, but also the authority to reset rules in ways that place US interests above their own sovereignty. China, of course, has held its own in this fraught scenario. But how far will the US imperium go?

In India, we face a test of strategic autonomy only to the extent a US-loaded deal could yield us economic benefits that outweigh this solemn national pledge, the odds of which look dismal. A trade pact with America should represent a clean bet on mutual gains, that's all. Yet, the emergence of India's economy must rely on an export thrust in trying times. To cover all bases, we must look east and aim to compete globally, instead of merely seeking 'complementary' markets. For success free of trade winds that may shift on foreign whimsy or assertions of power, we need to sell stuff that's either cost competitive or unique in markets that value it. Since we must count on our very own market for offtake that assures us economies of scale, domestic demand must not threaten to plateau once middle-class consumption reaches saturation. Internally, therefore, we should invest heavily in affordable healthcare and education to steadily expand the base of Indian buyers as we go along. As we move to close gaps in infrastructure, catch up on logistics, ease regulatory friction and rethink import policy, let's also guard against weak upward mobility letting us down. A self-deal to that effect is all it takes.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

A good death is as important as a good life: Wisdom must prevail

The right to die with dignity in accordance with one's wishes should be upheld in letter and spirit

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David Michael Malone, my friend and mentor, elected to die with dignity on 24 November at the age of 71. The veteran scholar-diplomat—a former Canadian high commissioner to India—had been diagnosed with prostate cancer a couple of years ago and Alzheimer's disease more recently. He was spared the pain but did not want to suffer the loss of memory and degradation of the quality of life that comes with Alzheimer's. He invoked Canada's right to die when he was still in control of his mental faculties and passed away a day after spending an enjoyable evening out with his close friends.

As much as I will miss his long-distance friendship and sage advice, I was not unhappy to see him depart the way he did. Death is an important subject, but there is both a psychological and social aversion to discussing it. It is inadequately discussed in the public sphere, and even in policy debates, we engage with the topic more in the context of healthcare than something in and of itself.

As a consequence, we continue to hang on to old mindsets, norms, social attitudes and laws concerning death even though the world around us has changed. Now, there is a case to be conservative in matters of life and death. But there is also a need to be responsive to our present and future contexts.

Nearly two-thirds of deaths in urban India occur in hospitals. Even in rural areas, more than four out of ten are hospital deaths. Frequently, family members feel compelled to continue with medical treatment even for terminal conditions because they feel it would not be morally appropriate to do otherwise.

Hospitalization turns a person into a patient, with an attendant loss of dignity. Families incur medical expenses even if they are aware of a negligible chance of recovery. Patients suffer—and not just pain. Scarce medical facilities, from hospital beds to intensive care units, mean others are deprived who might have a better chance of survival. Yet, this way of dying appears to have an unspoken family or social consensus. Unless the individual is able to clearly express a desire not to be hospitalized, or has left written instructions to such an effect, families do whatever they can to ensure medical treatment until the very end.

So it is a good sign that the Supreme Court of India ruled some years ago that the fundamental right to life guaranteed by the Constitution includes the right to die with dignity. Kerala and Karnataka, among other states, have implemented this through orders enabling an individual to record an Advance Medical Directive (AMD) or 'living will' stating precise preferences of medical treatment in the future. Families can request Withdrawal of Life-Sustaining Therapy (WLST) through a due process that involves approvals by medical boards. The Supreme Court has relaxed AMD norms from requiring registration with a judicial magistrate to a gazetted officer or notary, but state governments still require multiple government officials to sign off on a WLST.

Procedural safeguards and bureaucratic hurdles are perhaps warranted at the outset. It is better to be prudent in such a sensitive matter. At the same time, policymakers must recognize that a deep involvement of our heartless bureaucracy in such matters at emotionally fraught moments can have unintended but anticipable consequences. Indeed, political leaders should resist the temptation to tighten regulations or roll back this policy merely because of a few high-profile instances of malpractice.

Canada and a few European countries allow Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID). This goes beyond an AMD. Here, like David, a person can decide to terminate their life with medical assistance. A decade after its implementation, the MAID death rate has risen to around 5% of all deaths in Canada and is stabilizing at this level, according to its government. Critics point out that only a fifth of the people who request MAID had serious medical conditions, a quarter did so out of loneliness and isolation and half because they didn't want to burden their families and caregivers. Even so, if there is a right to die with dignity, it is for the individual to decide what dignity is. Society can try to dissuade a person from opting out of life, but the old notion that suicide is a crime, and people should not be allowed to end their lives under any condition, is not only illiberal, but also sadistic and cruel. Do we have the right to insist that another person live in unending pain, indignity and dependence? Who gave us that right?

The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote, "Life, if well lived, is long enough." It is not the duration of one's life that matters, but its subjective quality. I like to think of human life on earth as being similar to a good guest at a party: make your presence enjoyable for everyone and leave before the hosts get tired. There is such a thing as overstaying. Even the new billionaires who are preoccupied with longevity are merely pursuing what old potentates did. Even if scientific advances extend lifespans, they cannot resolve the issue of overstaying. Wisdom lies in knowing what's a good time to leave and leaving at that time. Like David Malone did.

10 YEARS AGO


mint
Rising retail prices stoke concerns
GROWING WORRIES
India inches up one spot in UN index

JUST A THOUGHT

History has shown that non-alignment is an idea that evolves but does not fade. We must take it forward, harnessing it to meet the challenges of today.

MANMOHAN SINGH

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

How 'The New Yorker' embodied the elite but survived

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In a Netflix documentary that celebrates one hundred years of *The New Yorker* magazine, its staff writer Andrew Marantz says that he has often been in places where people would say "All you elite [expletive], you don't know the first thing" about America. It is the kind of magazine, he says, that would faithfully quote that expletive, but place an accent on the first 'e' of elite, thereby confirming at least one part of the abuse. The documentary, *The New Yorker at 100*, though insipid, will baffle millions who have not heard of the magazine, who are far removed from arts or journalism or the West. It is not only a revered magazine, but also one of the most revered things the upper crust has ever created.

The New Yorker is evidence that there are some things only the cultural elite can do very well and that an exceptional product does not need geniuses, just an exceptional system. It carries, apart from poems, short fiction and cartoons, articles that are at times over 10,000 words long about anything that might interest a curious American. In return, the magazine actually makes money. It is probably the most imitated product in the field of print media, except the profits part. Many magazines have tried to be *The New Yorker* and generations of writers have spent months writing long and soulless articles that often begin with an anecdote.

I have been in rooms where Indians have tried to understand how they may recreate the success of *The New Yorker*, only to come to the conclusion that the magazine is successful because it is simply very good, a realization that oddly made them sad. But I don't think that is the actual reason why the magazine is inimitable.

The New Yorker can't be imitated because its allure comes from the nature of prestige. Prestige can come only from the cream of a society. In fact, when other kinds of people take over a prestigious institution, it ceases to be prestigious. In the case of this magazine, it emerges not from any ordinary elite, but the elite of the financial and cultural centre of the world's most powerful nation.

The magazine's impact on popular culture is far deeper than even its admirers realize. Rachel Carson's articles about the impact of fertilizers, first on birds, then on the rest of the environment, evolved into the book *Silent Spring*, which eventually created modern environmental activism. The magazine launched or rebirthed James Baldwin, John Cheever, J. D. Salinger, Malcolm Gladwell, Hannah Arendt, Truman Capote and many others. Capote's *In Cold Blood* began as a series of articles around the mysterious murder of a family for the magazine. It would be an exaggeration to say that Capote and *The New Yorker* invented narrative crime journalism, but that is the sort of hyperbole that goes with its aura.

The magazine endures as a living relic of olden times against the odds for a very good reason: quality

It is remarkable that this publication has survived these democratic times, when most other structures of the cultural elite have collapsed or lost their monopolies. The reason it has not only survived but thrived is that it appeared to recognize that adaptation is a form of death. Evolution, which at first glance appears to be a form of survival, is essentially the extinction of a species and the birth of something new. *The New Yorker* changed very sparingly; it only grudgingly allowed photographs into its pages, for instance. The magazine offers glaring proof, like bestselling books, that the shortened attention span of people is a poor analysis of the crisis in media, whose real problem is that most of it is not worthy of attention. *The New Yorker* did not fear changing times, nor adapt too much. As a result, it is now a rare antidote, like the dense novel, to mindless scrolling. The magazine also has a snappier online edition, which I feel is a mistake that has somewhat diluted its brand in the name of capturing the young.

Some things we still do or see are from another time. Just as in the poverty of some is the heritage of us all, in the elitism of *The New Yorker* is a rare preservation of the golden years of a cultural aristocracy—a time when some people from 'good families' could create something beautiful, a whole new profession where the elite held all the cards.

The magazine is also a living relic of a time when a handful of people had an extraordinary impact on society. Future generations may not fully fathom the influence that elite American journalism had over American politics and culture and to an extent on the rest of the world. It could change governments, destroy films, create stars, decide what was considered art and tell you what you should read. Facebook ended this. That is why the US legacy media has a problem with Mark Zuckerberg, though it may cite more respectful reasons.

In a world where some people regulated who got to speak and be heard, Zuckerberg's Facebook converted every user into a journalist. Suddenly, the world experienced an unimagined form of equality, where ordinary people could challenge the pundits, even replace them. In their desperation to explain their fall, the Western media found a villain in Zuckerberg. *The New Yorker*, too, seems to nurse some disdain for him, as the magazine is not entirely unaffected by the rise of social media.

The magazine's diminished influence is not because it has lost anything in absolute terms. It has more subscribers than ever and probably more fans. More writers, agents and publishers send short stories and poems to the magazine than ever. What it has lost is the gift of deep inequality. For a class of people to wield power, it is not enough for them to thrive. Others must recede.

THEIR VIEW

Factor market reforms could set the stage for India's next big leap

Bold moves on land, power and capital would enable the country to emerge as a globally competitive manufacturing hub

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India's strong GDP performance, kept up even in a period of global uncertainty, reflects structural strength built through consistent policy reform. As India moves towards becoming the world's third-largest economy, the key challenge is not the pace of growth, but ensuring that this momentum is sustainable, productivity-driven and inclusive. In this context, the next major frontier for India's economic transformation lies in accelerating factor market reforms.

Significant progress has already been achieved. The implementation of GST 2.0 marks a major milestone in India's indirect tax architecture. Rationalization of slabs, correction of inverted duty regimes and simplified technology-enabled compliance are reducing friction for businesses and stimulating consumption. Over time, if the GST Council considers bringing fuel products under the GST regime, it would represent a structural inflection point that dramatically lowers logistical costs and improves India's export competitiveness.

Similarly, the notification of four labour codes represents a decisive step toward modernizing India's labour market. The consolidation of 29 laws into a coherent framework simplifies compliance, promotes formalization, introduces a unified definition of wages and strengthens worker protection. Widespread implementation across states, ideally in a time-bound manner, will determine the extent to which India can unlock the full potential of labour reforms.

With labour and tax reforms advancing, the next phase of economic stewardship must focus on the core factors of production—land, power and capital—that determine the economy's long-term trajectory of growth.

Land reforms: Land remains one of the most constrained resources in India's development journey. Initiatives under the National Industrial Corridor Development Programme are promising and the expansion of plug-and-play industrial parks will be vital. Some of the key land reforms that can be undertaken include:

First, alternative public-private partnership (PPP) models for industrial development. For instance, government land can be developed via an equity model, wherein the developer builds the park and sub-leases plots to industries, while the government holds a maximum equity stake of 49%. Another option is a revenue-sharing model, where a private developer and the government form a special purpose vehicle (SPV) for a project that develops industrial infrastructure and sub-leases it to industries. In all these models, the industrial park developer would get full freedom to run and manage such a park efficiently.

Second, encourage states to streamline land conversion, zoning, building permits and environmental clearances under a unified digital window for enhancing the ease of doing business. While the Business Reforms Action Plan that promotes competition among states covers reforms related to land administration and land use, the Central government may consider incentivizing states by linking these reforms to their financial assistance and additional borrowings.

Power reforms: India's energy transition requires not just expanding generation capacity, but also ensuring cost-competitiveness, reliability and grid stability. The next wave of power reforms must address these key issues.

First, high industrial tariffs, driven by cross-subsidization, remain a major barrier to India's manufacturing competitiveness. Promoting cost-reflective tariffs and transitioning to direct benefit transfers for targeted consumer categories can lower tariffs for industry while improving cost recovery for discoms.

Second, augmentation of India's transmission and distribution (T&D) infrastructure is crucial. Policy reforms should include streamlining right-of-way (RoW) rules to enable faster land acquisition and strengthening project financing by providing viability-gap funding.

Third, India's transition to a renewable-heavy grid demands strong storage solutions. Establishing pooled storage at the substation level can improve resilience and reduce costs.

Finally, India needs unified policies across states that promote the consumption of renewable power by industry. The country must address issues such as changes in time-of-day tariffs, grid-support charges on large-scale open-access solar power and night-time banking of solar power generated in the daytime that increase industrial power bills and create uncertainty.

Capital market reforms: India's ambitions require deep capital markets to enable finance beyond bank credit. Yet, corporate bonds account for only around 18% of GDP, far lower than South Korea's 80% and China's 36%. Most issuances remain concentrated among corporates with AA ratings and above, limiting access to finance for mid-size and growth-stage firms that generate the bulk of jobs. Deepening the corporate bond market requires (a) expanding mandatory market borrowing beyond top-rated companies and (b) encouraging prudent fund allocations by insurers and provident/pension funds to high-quality but lower-rated bonds.

Trust-based governance: Ultimately, factor market reforms will be most effective within a regulatory environment grounded in trust, predictability and transparency. India has made notable progress in reducing compliance burdens and decriminalizing minor offences, and that momentum must continue. The High-Level Committee for Regulatory Reforms announced in the Union budget for 2025-26 has identified several such reform measures. Implementing these will be key. A shift in favour of risk-based regulation, predictable regulatory calendars and wider adoption of single-window digital clearance systems will be essential. Coordinated Centre-state action will determine how effectively India can raise the share of manufacturing in GDP from 17% to 25%.

India is at a critical juncture in its development. Global supply chains are being restructured, capital is seeking resilient investment destinations and a transition to clean energy is reshaping industries worldwide. With bold reforms in land, power and capital, supported by a high-trust regulatory environment, India has an opportunity not only to become the world's third-largest economy, but to emerge as a globally competitive and innovation-led manufacturing hub.

MINT CURATOR

Thailand and Cambodia seem trapped in an endless conflict

Southeast Asia can't afford to be a war zone. Too much is at stake

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Asean should stop 'managing' crises and start resolving them. AFP

Renewed hostilities between Thailand and Cambodia are a wake-up call for Southeast Asia about the costs of letting historical border disputes fester. The century-old conflict, rooted in colonial-era cartography, is flaring at a time when the region is already straining from US President Donald Trump's trade war and intensifying rivalry between the US and China.

Fighting erupted last week along their shared frontier and so far has killed at least 11 people. Both sides have exchanged artillery fire and Thailand carried out air strikes with F-16 jets after accusing Cambodia of firing rockets into civilian areas.

The neighbours have clashed repeatedly before, most recently in July, when dozens were killed and tens of thousands displaced. A fragile ceasefire—brokered in part with Trump's self-touted involvement—has collapsed, and there is no clear diplomatic off-ramp in sight.

Washington is concerned by the continued clashes and casualties along parts of the 800km border. US secretary of state Marco Rubio urged both sides to immediately cease hostilities and to return to the measures outlined on 26 October in the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords, which were one of Trump's more prominent successes in branding himself a global peacemaker.

But a return to calm looks unlikely, at least in the near term. Both governments are leaning on deeply rooted nationalist sentiment to shore up support. The hardened rhetoric lays the groundwork for a prolonged and destructive conflict.

Like many disputes in Asia, this one is a hangover from Western imperialism, though the roots go back further. The once-powerful Khmer Empire declined and what was left was being nibbled away for centuries by the ascendant Siam in the west and what is now Vietnam in the east. In colonizing Indochina, France made "the land in-between" a protectorate in 1863 and expanded its shrunken frontiers. Siam, now Thailand, remained independent despite pressure from France and also Britain, which ruled over Burma and India.

A Franco-Siamese treaty signed in 1904 proposed the frontier would follow the watershed line of the Dângrêk Mountains. But another map produced by French officials in 1907 deviated from that, placing key landmarks, including the 11th-century Preah Vihear temple, on the Cambodian side. Thailand later argued the map was never properly approved, while Cambodia maintained it was binding because Siam did not formally object at the time. In 1962, the International Court of Justice ruled in favour of Phnom Penh, a decision it reaffirmed in 2013. But the surrounding border area was never fully demarcated, laying the groundwork for recurrent tensions.

The danger this time is how much more firepower is being used. Thailand's forces are far larger and better equipped; the country is a longstanding ally of the US. Much-poorer Cambodia fields a smaller military and relies on Chinese assistance.

The risks of escalation cannot be overstated. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) has historically avoided wading into the affairs of other members because of its policy of non-interference. But fighting between two member countries cannot but be of concern. As it intensifies, voices within the region are calling for stronger intervention. This year's chair, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia, says he's ready to help (as he did with the Trump deal) and is urging de-escalation. His efforts are sensible, but ultimately insufficient. It's a longstanding complaint, but the bloc has to stop managing crises and start resolving them. Installing an independent observer mission along the border and creating a mechanism to verify and publicly report violations would be a start towards real accountability. Some Asean states have been involved in monitoring the ceasefire, but that's a long way from enforcement.

Resolving the border dispute would be even harder. It would need buy-in from both governments. Any demarcation process should be conducted by neutral surveyors, anchored in the existing world court rulings. Both Bangkok and Phnom Penh would need to commit publicly to accept the outcome and refrain from inciting nationalist sentiment further.

This won't be easy. Both sides have compelling domestic incentives to let the fighting go on. Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul is using the conflict to tap nationalist sentiment before an election as early as 2026. Cambodia's most influential politician, Hun Sen, has exploited the violence to reassert himself in politics, portraying himself as a national defender.

Until Southeast Asia confronts its unresolved borders with some real determination, the war over a line on a map will remain a recurring threat the region can no longer afford.

MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

Some ghosts from 2025 will haunt us in 2026 as well

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As the year draws to a close, tradition demands that General Disequilibrium provide a perspective on the year gone by. However, in the spirit of bygones being bygones, it might be instructive to dwell on some of the issues that raised their ugly heads during the year and are likely to keep popping up in some form or another during the new year.

The ignoble gong for 'most dangerous trend of the year' must go to the stubborn conflicts that have refused to settle for a peaceful resolution, despite global intermediation and mass decimation of life and property. Many of these conflicts are likely to continue well into 2026. During his first papal tour overseas, Pope Leo XIV told a gathering of Turkish authorities, civil society delegates and members of the diplomatic corps at Ankara that, piecemeal, a third world war is being waged. "We are now experiencing a phase marked by a heightened level of conflict on the global level, fuelled by prevailing strategies of economic and military power...The future of humanity is at stake. The energies and resources absorbed by this destructive dynamic are being diverted from the real challenges that the human family should instead be facing together today, namely peace, the fight against hunger and poverty, health and education, and the protection of creation."

On one side, there is the unrelenting Russia-Ukraine war in which thousands of young lives continue to be snuffed out daily, not to mention the widespread destruction of habitat, irreversible damage to the environment and long-term harm to economic or productive energies. Israel continues to wage a cruel and unjust war on Gaza's hapless, defenceless citizens by blithely violating ceasefire agreements. Across the Red Sea, Sudan has been in the throes of a deadly civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces since April 2023, a conflict that has claimed close to 21,000 lives in 2025 and displaced over 12 million people. A global seam of bloodlust and wanton hostility seems to have seeped across many national boundaries—Myanmar, Yemen, Ethiopia and Somalia, among others.

While the demon of war and bloodshed is proving to be indomitable, the ghost in all our machines—artificial intelligence (AI)—will acquire ubiquity during the coming year by either making or breaking fortunes. Doubts and suspicions have started surfacing over whether 2026 will usher in a sobering morning for the AI euphoria that has sent capital markets into bullish territory over the past few months, disregarding the dampening effect of US President Donald Trump's tariff tantrums. As reservations and misgivings arise, an uncertain and indistinct pall now hangs over the capital markets globally.

Brutal conflicts and AI excesses are likely to continue but let us hope for a painless shift to normalcy

Many tech companies have rushed herd-like to build massive AI infrastructure, the desperation resembling a gold rush. Every tech company is in a tearing hurry to stack up AI infrastructure and cash in on what is viewed as an inevitable future revenue source. There is only one problem in this desperate scramble: a substantial part of this capital expenditure is being financed by borrowing billions of dollars. According to some reports, Microsoft, Amazon, Meta and Google alone are estimated to have spent $350 billion as capex during 2025. But here's the nub: OpenAI's commitment to spend $1.4 trillion over the next eight years sits uneasily with its $20-billion revenue projected for 2025. This, and many other similar examples, have spooked markets. Apprehensions that many of these companies may not be able to generate revenues commensurate with their borrowings have multiplied after independent surveys showed that enterprise investment in AI has had no significant impact on bottom-lines so far. This has sparked off a nervousness about the likelihood of a meltdown resembling the dotcom bust.

What has added to the fears are two other factors. First came statements from OpenAI chief executive Sam Altman and Google chief Sundar Pichai cautioning markets about an irrational AI boom. Second, the word 'circularity' has cropped up a lot in AI discussions, indicating that companies have invested in each other in an incestuous loop that multiplies risks to systemic stability. For example, chip-maker Nvidia has committed a $100-billion investment in OpenAI, with the money being used to buy processing units from Nvidia. OpenAI's circularity touches other tech companies as well, like Oracle and AMD. Competitor Anthropic flipped back the investment it received from Microsoft and Nvidia as payments for Azure cloud and chip purchases. If any one piece of this domino topples, it could bring down the entire chain.

But a counter-narrative also has emerged. Many analysts feel that even after an AI bubble bursts, there will be value available in the rubble and that an industry shake-up will throw up more efficient and productive AI companies. For instance, writing in the *New York Times*, bond-trader-turned-professor Mohamed A. El-Erian argues that though some tech companies will definitely lose after the bubble bursts, mankind would be left better off overall from the benefits of AI's "transformative power."

It is now certain that bloody wars and big investments in AI technology will continue well into 2026. Hopefully, Russia will heed global demands for a long-term ceasefire. Likewise, let us pray the AI meltdown has a soft landing, without displacing too many jobs and deepening an economic crisis. After all, hope is all we can do.

PAISANOMICS
WHERE EVERY RUPEE TELLS A BIGGER STORY

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Papa kehte hain bada naam karega

Before signing up for a 20-year loan commitment, forget the chorus and think: if things go wrong, do you have the emotional maturity to walk away from it?

Earlier this month, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), cut the repo rate – or the interest rate at which it lends to banks – by 25 basis points to 5.25 per cent. One basis point is 0.01 per cent.

This has pushed down home-loan rates. But should that really nudge you into finally taking a home loan and buying a home to live in? Here's a simple way to think about it. Let's say you've found a flat priced at Rs 75 lakh. At that price, within Mumbai's municipal limits, you're most likely looking at a one-BHK kholi. A bank agrees to give you a loan of up to 80 per cent of the price. This works out to Rs 60 lakh. It's to be repaid at 7.75 per cent over 20 years. Before the RBI's cut, the rate was 8 per cent. The remaining Rs 15 lakh – the gap between Rs 75 lakh and Rs 60 lakh – must come from your savings as the down payment.

At 8 per cent, the EMI works out to Rs 50,186. At 7.75 per cent, it's Rs 49,257. Clearly, you are not going to take on a Rs 60 lakh loan because the EMI is now Rs 929 lower. What you need to know is this: Will you be able to continue paying EMI month on month?

Further, the home loan rates are not fixed but floating. So, they can also go up. Which is why some slack needs to be built in.

Let's say you repay the loan for two years at 7.75 per cent, and then the rate rises to 8.25 per cent. Now, 18 years are left to repay the loan. If you want to repay within that period, the EMI must increase from Rs 49,257 to Rs 50,989 – a jump of Rs 1,732 a month.

Of course, the bank may let you continue with the original EMI of Rs 49,257. But then your remaining tenure will rise from 18 years to 19.5 years, or 18 additional EMIs. That's the cost of not being able to pay an extra Rs 1,732 a month. Which is why you should start off in a position where you can afford a higher EMI than the one you pay.

You also need to make a Rs 15 lakh downpayment. It's important not to drain all your savings to cover it because life may throw up a financial emergency. Plus, you'll also have to account for stamp duty and other charges.

Finally, the decision to buy a house is usually part of a social dynamic I like to call Papa kehte hain bada naam karega. This dynamic includes mothers, siblings, cousins, assorted relatives, and just about everyone who thinks they're qualified to advise you on how to live your life.

So, people will come and sell their stories: how they took a 20-year home loan and repaid it in just 10 years. They'll tell you it's nowhere as risky as it's made out to be. And that everything eventually works out. And you'll live happily ever after.

Now, your well-wishers are not lying, but just because a risk doesn't materialise doesn't mean it never existed. Also, there's a catch they rarely factor in – the world of work has changed.

Indeed, anyone who took a home loan in the 1990s and the 2000s did not have to face the risk of artificial intelligence (AI) taking away their jobs. That's a reality now. So, what can be done when AI takes away a job and a new one isn't in sight, especially as it becomes harder to know which skills in a given line of work will stay relevant?

It's easy to say you should have enough savings to keep paying the EMI for a year or two even without a job. But for many who are already stretched thin, reaching that kind of financial nirvana is far from easy.

There's only one answer here: if you ever land in such a situation, it's time to prick the Papa kehte hain bada naam karega bubble. Sell the house and clear the outstanding loan. Yes, it will be mentally tough. And yes, selling a home is harder than buying one. But those challenges are far smaller than the fallout of defaulting on a home loan.

Indeed, buying a house is a bet on your future income and job stability. In a world where jobs can vanish overnight and AI doesn't care about your EMI schedule, sentiment is a terrible risk-management tool. So, before you sign up for a 20-year commitment, forget the Papa-kehte-hain chorus and ask yourself one hard question: if things go wrong, do you have the emotional maturity to walk away from it? Of course, your personal narrative will then change from Papa kehte hain bada naam karega to Papa kehte the bada naam karega.

Vivek Kaul is an economic commentator and a writer

AROUND THE BEND
ON BECOMING A BETTER MOTORIST

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Those who venture, become stronger

A detour during a recent ride showed me that by adapting to the conditions, I enjoyed the process of dealing with adversity

It is amazing what you can feel confident about if you let yourself. Humanity's most incredible trait is that we adapt. Think about what adapting means. It means we arrive at a situation we don't prefer. Given enough exposure, we alter our approach to place ourselves in a better position to deal with it. You might enjoy the results, or it's a coping mechanism. In either case, it's a way forward.

This weekend, I learnt a lot about getting out of my own way.

The quick version is I had meetings in Goa on Monday, and I had time off starting halfway through Saturday. I selected a circuitous and unfamiliar route, because I could. Information on this route led to nought. That should've been a flag. But I saw it as green, not red. I navigated about 200km of treacherous roads in the middle of nowhere. First on tenterhooks, then in mute acceptance of whatever happened next. And finally found myself smiling at the hard progress I was able to make.

This was comically stupid even for me. I consider myself a cautious person. I approach new situations with a galaxy of prep. This weekend? Not a chink in the armour, it was a yawning hole the size of a building. I was without cell phone reception for five hours. No way to reach out for help. Which I realised precisely halfway in. Over five hours and 200km, I saw maybe four vehicles, under 20 people in all. Had it gone sideways, I would have been in a world of trouble.

Here I am itching for more. I'll aim to be better prepared. I'll aim not to go alone. But I'll go again. Because I think I adapted, and I enjoyed the process of learning to deal with adversity, self-inflicted as it was.

The rocks I went over, the soft-tricky soil I navigated through, the steep climbs I crawled up, the weird and unfamiliar sensations set my teeth on edge. Until it became normalised. Until I began to expect it. I didn't even understand this until I hit the Goa highway when I hit the construction diversions. Rocks, monsoon-striated hard-packed mud, and an evil configuration of bumps and holes. I found myself thrilled as I rode.

I knew the detour onto smoother roads and chose not to take the easy way out. There's an adaptation I never thought I'd make. The moral of the story has been obvious for centuries, I guess.

Those who venture, become stronger for the exposure. Those who sit on the couch on the weekend instead of being out there? They usually do not. Humans not only adapt, but they also can choose to. Amazing.

An automotive expert, Shubhabrata Marmar decodes modern Indian motoring

ALEXANDER KAZAKOV

Russian President Vladimir Putin

HOW PUTIN'S WORLD TURNED INTO AN ECHO CHAMBER

With years of cracking down on opposition and being surrounded by yes-men, Russian President Vladimir Putin sees no reason for real concessions on Ukraine

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The generals say all goals of the war will be achieved. The economists say despite the pressure the economy will outlast Ukraine's. Even President Donald Trump says that Russia is much stronger and Kyiv has no cards left to play in the war. Hearing only reassurance, it is little wonder that President Vladimir Putin sees no reason for real concessions on Ukraine. From the vantage point of the Kremlin, the war is going according to plan.

It is unclear whether Putin will accept the latest United States peace plan, which most analysts have called slanted towards Russia, since it does not achieve all of his goals in the war. Since he believes he is winning and thinks the economy is strong, there is little reason for any sort of concessions. Putin has long been surrounded by a chorus of supportive voices, but over the past 25 years of his rule, the range of views reaching him has narrowed dramatically.

Boris Bondarev, a Russian diplomat who resigned in 2022 over the full-scale invasion, explains, "One of the invasion's central lessons had to do with something I had witnessed over the preceding two decades: what happens when a government is slowly warped by its own propaganda. The war is a stark demonstration of how decisions made in echo chambers can backfire."

Dissenting voices vanish

Yet it was not always this way. An archival Instagram project called Achtopotv offers glimpses into that earlier period, resurfacing moments when Russian public discourse reflected a far wider range of opinions than it does today. One of the clips shows a young Russian senator and historian, Vladimir Medinsky, in 2005 arguing passionately against the restoration of monuments to Joseph Stalin. He warned of the dangers of glorifying a system built on mass repression and the sacrifice of individuals for imperial ambitions.

Two decades later, Medinsky is Russia's chief negotiator in talks with Ukraine and one of the most prominent advocates of Putin's attempt to pull the former Soviet satellite nations back into Moscow's orbit. A new bust of Stalin appeared in the Moscow subway this spring.

Another video unearthed by the project shows Putin in 2000, his first year in office, saying that independent media and civil liberties are necessary to keep Russia from "sliding into totalitarianism," and arguing that a free press was vital for the country's future. In the ensuing two decades, Putin shed his interest in independent media and civil liberties and turned his focus to restoring the sphere of influence of the old Soviet Union — and those around him fell in line.

Perhaps the most stunning transformation is that of Dmitry Medvedev, who as prime minister swapped the presidency with Putin in 2008-2012 and whose term was marked by a brief liberal thaw, a friendlier attitude towards the West and a love for Western gadgets and social media. Now, he has reinvented himself as a hawk who repeatedly wished nuclear destruction on the West in his blog posts. Analysts have attributed his transformation to a bid to avoid political obscurity and make up for his past more liberal views.

A long-lasting effect

Russia analysts have identified different events as watershed moments. For some it's Putin's return to power in 2012 after Medvedev's slight thaw. Others put the 2014 annexation of Crimea as a point of no return. Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, Russian investigative journalists reporting on special services, wrote in their book *Our Dear Friends in Moscow* that the transformation began much earlier, in Putin's first terms, describing how many of their colleagues and acquaintances adopted the Kremlin's point of view in private early on.

By the time Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it had become unimaginable for any senior official to oppose any of Putin's decisions in public. During the now-infamous Russian Security Council meeting three days before the full-scale invasion, many of Russia's top officials appeared visibly startled when Putin called on them one by one to deliver a speech, on camera, and endorse his plans.

Behind the scenes, however, there was at least one exception. Dmitry Kozak, a longtime aide who had worked with Putin since the 1990s and served as his chief negotiator on Ukraine, was his go-to man for some of the most sensitive tasks. He was reportedly the only senior figure to present arguments against military action during that meeting. His alleged remarks did not appear in the televised version of the meeting and he has not appeared publicly since. His duties at the Kremlin slowly drifted to a rival aide until his resignation this fall.

TOM BRENNER

President Donald Trump grins after receiving applause from Cabinet members during a meeting at the White House on August 26

Bondarev described how for years diplomats were sent abroad with the task to echo the Kremlin's version of events without questioning it. Then, in cables and internal reports, he said, the diplomats were gradually expected to tell the leadership that Russia's narrative had succeeded and that Western opposition had been disarmed. What has unsettled many Russians most has been the speed with which powerful figures in Washington have adjusted their positions. Marco Rubio, now serving as secretary of state, was once one of the most forceful Republican voices arguing that abandoning Ukraine would shatter American credibility.

Trump's main envoy, Steve Witkoff, has been criticised for advising Russia how to negotiate with Washington to get a better deal, including extracting territorial concessions from Ukraine. Bondarev said on X that while Witkoff's faults lie in that he "sees the world exclusively through the prism of Putin". "It's unpleasant to admit — he owes [Ukraine] nothing," Bondarev wrote. "He works for the US, or, as he understands it, for the US president…His goal is to hand Trump some kind of 'peace' here and now." The first year of Trump's second term has been the subject of a joke among Russia's anti-war exiles: America appeared to be "speedrunning" parts of Russia's recent political history.

"It's a common human trait of adaptability, including political adaptability," Badanin said. But, particularly in authoritarian countries like Russia, "anyone who's ever entered the system, even if well-intended at the start, over time becomes either an indirect or direct accomplice to something bad."

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Messy show

Chaos at Messi event lays bare systemic flaws

IT'S been a tragic year of stampedes in India, right from the Mahakumbh in Prayagraj to IPL victory celebrations in Bengaluru and a political rally in Tamil Nadu. Over 125 lives, going by the official count, have been lost in various incidents so far, and it's a sheer miracle that there was no fatality at the overcrowded Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on Saturday. However, the chaos and violence that erupted during football icon Lionel Messi's brief visit must make the organisers and the West Bengal government hang their heads in shame.

Spectators had shelled out thousands of rupees per ticket to catch a glimpse of their hero, but it was a shock for them when overzealous VIPs obstructed their view. Sports Minister Aroop Biswas was among the few privileged ones who rubbed shoulders with Messi. Enraged by the all-out mess, some angry fans threw bottles, tore banners, broke railings and damaged fibreglass seats. The nasty scenes prompted Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to not only set up a probe committee but also apologise to Messi and football fans. The panel has been tasked with recommending corrective steps to prevent mayhem at high-profile events, but the fact remains that no lessons have been learnt from similar incidents. Lack of accountability is par for the course, especially in the higher echelons of power, whenever there is poor crowd management.

The Kolkata fiasco is undoubtedly a bad advertisement for a country that will host the 2030 Commonwealth Games. The Hyderabad and Mumbai legs of Messi's India tour were relatively well-organised, even though strict implementation of the standard operating procedure for such events remains a rarity. Unfortunately, the ordinary people who expend so much time, money and effort to reach the venue are left in the lurch, while VIPs smugly have a field day. India's sporting ambitions won't count for much if the anonymous, faceless fans continue to be treated like dirt.

A toxic staple

Fake *paneer* exposes regulatory failure

THE revelation that nearly half the *paneer* sold in Punjab's markets is spurious should set off alarm bells beyond the state. *Paneer* is not a luxury product; it is a daily protein source for millions, integral to Punjabi households, school meals and vegetarian diets across north India. When such a staple turns toxic, it points to a systemic failure in food safety governance. A recent report showing that 47 per cent of paneer samples failed quality tests is not an aberration. Repeated seizures over the years — 545 kg in Ludhiana in April, 1.5 quintals destroyed in October last year and earlier raids in Phagwara and elsewhere — tell a story of an entrenched and thriving underground industry. Warnings from health experts about adulterants like starch, synthetic milk solids and harmful chemicals underscore the crisis.

More disturbing is that the crackdowns, though frequent, remain reactive. Raids make headlines, stocks are seized and destroyed. But the cycle resumes. The persistence of fake *paneer* factories over more than a decade suggests that enforcement lacks both deterrence and follow-through. Punjab's dairy sector is central to its rural economy. Allowing food adulteration to flourish compounds that distress while posing public health risks.

The issue is not merely about food purity. It is about governance capacity. Consumers have little way of distinguishing real *paneer* from its adulterated versions, especially in unbranded products. The absence of clear labelling and traceability erodes trust. Stronger surveillance, faster prosecutions and public disclosure of offenders are essential. Equally important is consumer awareness about red flags, sourcing and the importance of certified products. Finally, the state must invest in food-testing infrastructure and empower local bodies to act swiftly. It is time to ask harder questions — and demand firmer answers — from those tasked with protecting public health.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1925

Origin of communalism

IN the *Indian Daily Mail* of Bombay, Mahomed Ali has found strong supporters of his theory that the responsibility for communalism in India does not rest with the Muslims but with the Hindus. Commenting upon that part of Lala Lajpat Rai's presidential address at the recent Bombay Hindu Conference in which the Punjab leader discussed the origin of communalism in this country, our contemporary says that the statement that the Muslims are responsible for the existence of communalism in India is historically wrong, and that it was the Hindu leaders who, by raising the cry of "Hindus in danger" in 1905 in connection with the partition of Bengal brought communalism into being. The *Indian Daily Mail* is an infant in journalism, but not its editor, who is one of the oldest, most experienced and most widely respected of all Indian journalists. When such a man makes himself responsible for such a statement, it is impossible for those who consider it wholly and absolutely wrong to entirely ignore it. With the doubtful exception of the non-cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi, there has been no political movement in India during the last half a century so prolific of literature as the anti-partition movement. The number of speeches, newspaper articles, essays, poems and songs and last but not least memorials and representations made by public bodies and the resolutions adopted by public meetings, which the agitation produced, would run into many volumes. It is impossible to say that in none of these cases was the cry "Hindus in danger" ever raised.

The process is the punishment in India

The weaponisation of probe agencies is a corrosive practice divorced from justice

MANISH TEWARI
LOK SABHA MP AND
FORMER I&B MINISTER

COLONIAL BAGGAGE: The police retain their near-unfettered powers to arrest, detain and investigate. PTI

SINCE the dawn of our Republic, India has been subject to a criminal justice system whose procedural soul was forged in the crucible of colonial subjugation, never designed for a vibrant, raucous and fractious democracy driven by due process, equal protection and the presumption of innocence.

What was heralded by the Union government in December 2023 as a 'decolonising moment' to indigenise our criminal law framework — the enactment of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) and its sister statutes — belies a far more stubborn and insidious continuity.

The mere substitution of nomenclature, *Dand* (punishment) with *Nyaya* (justice) or *Aapradhik Prakriya* with *Nagarik Suraksha*, is a legislative sleight of hand that does not alter the fundamental architecture of the system. The BNSS, for all its promises of expeditious trials and technological modernisation, leaves the foundational power dynamics perilously unchanged.

The administration of justice requires more than philological revisionism: a fundamental re-imagination of the relationship between the investigating State and the accused citizen.

Successive re-enactments, from the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC-1898) to CrPC-1973 and now BNSS-2023, have tinkered at the margins, adding layers of judicial oversight and procedural niceties, but do little to surgically exorcise the original sin of the system: the control of the investigative and prosecutorial machinery by a partisan executive.

The police retain their near-unfettered powers to arrest, detain and investigate, powers too often exercised not as a solemn duty to unearth the truth but as a tool for political vendetta or a blunt instrument to instil fear. The power concentrated in the hands of the police remains a colonial feature and not a systemic bug.

The tragedy of this criminal system lies in the infinitesimal quality and integrity of the investigation and the prosecution that succeeds it. Legal safeguards for the accused remain parchment barriers, weakly enforced against law enforcement agencies. Ergo, the investigative branch becomes both a sword for the government to smite its opponents and a shield for the powerful to evade accountability.

This weaponisation of investigative agencies (CBI, ED and NIA) is a corrosive practice divorced from justice that shatters the social contract. The State, which has the monopoly on legitimate force, is honour-bound to protect individual rights. When that force is deployed to deprive an individual of his/her liberty for extraneous reasons, the contract collapses and the State descends into illegitimacy.

To ensure that the lofty ideals of the new Sanhitas are not suffocated by old pathologies, a denouement of executive control is imperative. The supervisory strings over investigation and prosecution must be wrested from the hands of the partisan (often legally untrained) ministerial executive and handed over to a legally astute, constitutionally mindful and operationally independent authority.

> The duty to dispense justice falls not just on the judges, but more fundamentally, on the prosecutors and investigators who build the case.

The first principle of this reform is to replace a system driven by the calculus of political vendetta with one accountable to the satisfaction of legally trained minds and the standards of evidence.

An investigator, often poorly versed in the exacting standards of proof beyond reasonable doubt, currently operates in a vacuum, paving the way for overburdened prosecutors to mechanically send files for trial. Should the investigation, from its inception, be guided and supervised by a senior legal practitioner — a directorate of prosecution — the entire process would be infused with a forensic rigour it currently lacks. The prosecutor must be statutorily obligated to satisfy himself on the substance of the evidence collected and that its integrity substantively points towards the guilt of the accused, not merely that it provides a pretext for a chargesheet.

A viable model for this lies within our own constitutional scheme: the offices of the Attorney General and the Advocate General at the Centre and in the states. Though they are political appointees, the Constitution sets a formidable bar, requiring these law officers to possess distinguished legal acumen and experience. The Attorney/Advocate General must be appointed by a committee consisting of the Prime Minister/Chief Minister, Leader of the Opposition and the respective Chief Justice.

This is not an unprecedented fantasy. The problem of arbitrary, capricious, mala fide and partisan prosecution that plagued the US in the 19th century was surmounted by an 1870 law that placed all federal prosecutors under the Attorney General, leading to the creation of the Department of Justice (DOJ).

Unlike their Indian counterparts, US probe agencies operate under the legal and professional supervision of the DOJ, and not overtly under a partisan minister. The contemporary public debate in the US concerns the independence of the Attorney General, a debate we are yet to even commence in earnest. We remain mired in a system where the executive and the prosecution branches are virtually fused. It obligates no detailed weighing of the prosecution evidence and allows the court to proceed on a presumption of commission of the offence, leaving the solitary accused pitted against the mighty State, with no meaningful opportunity to plead even an open-and-shut defence at this nascent stage.

The courts must be statutorily required to find that a prima facie case against the accused is made out, a higher threshold that demands a diligent appreciation of evidence before the ordeal of a trial is unleashed upon them.

The cases of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, French politician Marine Le Pen and Russian Opposition leader Alexei Navalny illustrate the perils of unfettered investigative powers vested in partisan actors in heavily polarised democracies.

The law of procedure, as is said, must be the handmaid of justice, not its mistress. The Supreme Court, in *Vineet Narain vs Union of India* (1997, Hawala judgment), recognised this profound truth and attempted to insulate the CBI by mandating a degree of autonomy. Yet, that vision remains largely unfulfilled, its spirit diluted by subsequent executive and legislative manoeuvres. The duty to dispense justice, therefore, falls not just on the judges, but more fundamentally, on the prosecutors and investigators who build the case. They must be guided only by the light of evidence and the compass of the law.

Until we possess the courage to undertake this structural emancipation, the new Sanhitas will remain but old wine in a new, and deceptively labelled, bottle. And the insanity of expecting different results from the same processes will continue to extract its great human cost — the cost of liberty, rights and the presumption of innocence on which the entire legal edifice stands.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"If we do not maintain justice, justice will not maintain us. — Francis Bacon"

A pleasant surprise in Norway

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA

MY daughter and I were on cloud nine after receiving an invitation to address an international academic conference in Norway. Arctic University, which was hosting the event, sent us an email with a photo of the person deputed to pick us up from the airport. We guessed that he was a student or a member of the clerical staff. When we landed at the airport, he welcomed us with a signboard raised above his shoulders.

The flight had been tiring, but the cherubic smile on his face made us feel refreshed. He promptly picked up our luggage and we followed him to his car. Hardly had we covered 10 miles when he stopped, walked up to a gas station and bought snacks, bottled water and cookies for us.

Just near the entry gate of the university, he stopped again, got us registered and gave us two cards. After driving another half mile, he stopped once more, opened the boot, brought out our bags and placed them inside the rooms allotted to us.

We kept wrestling with the thought of tipping him for his professional and courteous demeanour, but strangely enough, no verbal exchange took place between us. As he took our leave after handing over a booklet of instructions to be followed during our stay, we were astonished to watch the midnight sun in all its glory.

From the next morning till the conclusion of the conference, we found ourselves immersed in Nordic culture — the land of fjords, Vikings, and, of course, Henrik Ibsen, popularly known as the father of modern drama. To our surprise, the food served to us was weighed on scales before being put on our plates. People around us loved walking, taking Hurtigruten rides in the seas and savouring reindeer delicacies with the choicest wine.

Seven days passed as quickly as seven hours, and soon we were asked to assemble for a concluding function followed by a grand dinner. Soon, it turned into a musical gala. I couldn't resist the temptation of playing the famous Punjabi song "*Dhol Jageero da*..." on my mobile phone, which I placed before the mic on the stage so that everyone could hear it. Within no time, the Scandinavian delegates were seen dancing to the beats. All of us wanted *bhangra* to go on and on — until a bell suddenly rang. It was the signal for everyone to resume their seats.

The master of ceremonies got up to invite the Vice-Rector of the university to present the vote of thanks. Lo and behold, he was none other than the man who had received us at the airport! It was a pleasant surprise for us to learn that he was Nils M Knutsen, a renowned professor and a recipient of Norway's top civilian honour.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Resistance to saffronisation

Refer to 'BJP takes Hindutva route in TN, Bengal'; as the saffron juggernaut moves toward Tamil Nadu and West Bengal for the 2026 elections, the BJP is attempting to bridge the Gangetic plains with the delta plateau using the Hindutva plank. However, this strategy risks colliding with the granite resolve of regional identity. In Tamil Nadu, the party is misreading a landscape where deep devotion to Lord Murugan coexists with Periyar's rationalism; there, faith is fervent but politics remains stubbornly secular. Similarly, in Bengal, while the TMC stares at anti-incumbency, the BJP's cultural mishandling may impede its own progress. The upcoming battle is not merely electoral but existential. Unless the BJP harmonises its melody with local cultural chords, strong currents of regionalism may resist its bid for pan-India saffronisation.

GAGANPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Unprofessional planning

Apropos of 'Messi's Bengal event messed up; organiser held, Didi apologises'; the chaotic collapse of soccer star Lionel Messi's Kolkata appearance is a sobering reminder that celebrity spectacle without professional planning can quickly turn into a public hazard. Tens of thousands of fans paid exorbitant prices in good faith, only to be denied even a fleeting glimpse of their idol. The vandalism that followed was not spontaneous mob behaviour, but the predictable outcome of gross mismanagement. Messi's brief appearance was swallowed by a rush of VIPs and selfie-seekers, while spectators were left stranded in uncertainty. The abrupt exit of the player without public engagement deepened the sense of betrayal.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Lapses in crowd control

What was meant to be a landmark moment for Indian football turned into an oft-repeated version of administrative mismanagement. In a city that prides itself on its deep love for the game, the spectacle was overshadowed by glaring lapses. The scenes evoked darker sporting memories of the 1996 Cricket World Cup semifinal at the Eden Gardens and the 1980 Derby stampede which claimed 16 lives. If India hopes to host more high-profile sporting events, planning must be the key focus, apart from other concerns.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Fix responsibility

Refer to 'Tackling the digital arrest phenomenon'; the growing menace of cyberfraud demands clearly defined responsibility. While public awareness is essential, banks and telecom operators must be held accountable. Mule accounts thrive due to weak banking vigilance and fraudulent calls persist because fake SIMs remain active. Every fraudulent call must be reported and investigated. The Supreme Court's decision to hand over the investigation of digital arrest cases to the CBI underscores the seriousness of the cyber threat.

VIJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

Fire safety not a mere formality

Apropos of 'Trapped in flames: public fire safety ratings are needed'; many lives are lost due to blocked exits, faulty wiring, lack of alarms and untrained staff. The article rightly suggests introducing public fire safety ratings for buildings like hospitals, schools and malls. Displaying such ratings will increase transparency and force authorities and owners to follow safety rules seriously. It will also help people make informed choices. Fire safety should not be treated as a formality but as a basic rule. Strict inspection, accountability and public awareness are essential to prevent future tragedies.

SUMESH MATHAS, SHIMLA

Need cops for public safety

With reference to 'Blacklist those who show off their security: DGP'; as a law-enforcing agency, the prime duty of the police force is to control and combat crime, and that is what they are trained for, rather than being deployed to guard pseudo VIPs who often misuse the uniformed personnel. The move will fulfil the deficiency in the police department which is generally understaffed. The step is much-needed, but thorny.

DEEPAK KAUSHIK, KURUKSHETRA

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@tribunemail.com**

Reimagining Punjabi identity in 21st century

DR ARVIND
PROFESSOR, IISER, MOHALI, & EX-VC, PUNJABI UNIVERSITY

PUNJABI is an ancient language, spoken across a large region, from Multan to Delhi, including regions of Jammu and parts of Himachal Pradesh. Punjabi has over a dozen dialects, the major ones being Multani, Lahindi, Pothohari, Majhi, Doabi, Malvai and Puadhi. The Punjabi diaspora also includes Punjabi-speaking communities scattered across the world. About 75 per cent of native Punjabi speakers are situated geographically in what is now Pakistan, while the remaining are in India, where they are predominantly divided into Sikh and Hindu communities.

How old is the Punjabi language? Was Punjabi spoken in this region when Darius I invaded Punjab around 520 BC and Alexander invaded Punjab in 327 BC? Are there any local, Persian or Greek records available to ascertain the language of this region? While a definitive answer to these questions requires deeper research, it is nevertheless unassailable that Punjabi is an ancient language. When one considers literature written in Punjabi,Baba Farid emerges as the first documented Punjabi writer. He wrote his Sufi *kalam* in Punjabi in the 12th century. Although there are a few indicators pointing to poets who wrote in Punjabi in the preceding centuries, Baba Farid wrote in Punjabi and used the *Farsi* script.

More than two centuries after Baba Farid, when Guru Nanak chose Punjabi to express himself, there still was no widespread tradition of writing in Punjabi. Punjabi never enjoyed patronage from the state. Even Maharaja Ranjit Singh used Persian as the official court language. While all Sikh gurus used Punjabi in their writings and modified existing local scripts into the current Gurmukhi script, the tradition of Sufi and other poets writing in Punjabi using the *Farsi* script continued.

The situation towards the end of the 19th century was no different. Bhai Veer Singh was dissuaded from writing in Punjabi. He was allegedly told that there were better languages to express himself in. The British brought in Urdu as the official language for school instruction in Punjab, and Punjabi remained unsupported by the state. Only in recent times, and in the Indian side of Punjab (which does not include all Punjabi-speaking communities) is Punjabi properly taught in schools as part of the curriculum. Overall, for about 80 per cent of native Punjabi speakers, formal education in Punjabi is unavailable. They either know only spoken Punjabi or learn it on their own.

AT ODDS: For 80% of native Punjabi speakers, education in Punjabi is unavailable. FILE PHOTO

LOOKING BACK AHEAD
60 YEARS OF PUNJAB'S REORGANISATION

The partition of Punjab had a major effect on Punjabis on both sides of the border. In west Punjab, Urdu remained the official language, while on the Indian side, the creation of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh further divided Punjab into a very small region. Punjabi-speaking communities in Himachal, Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir also face difficulties in learning their language. In fact, both Haryana and Himachal Pradesh have Hindi as their state language, which is at odds with the languages actually spoken in these regions.

The pre-1947 Lahore was the political, cultural and academic centre of Punjab. It was, in fact, the biggest educational hub in Asia. After 1947, the Indian side of Punjab could not build such a centre and Lahore too declined in terms of its intellectual fervour. The Indian Punjab underwent the Green Revolution, leading to high incomes for farmers and changing the rural landscape completely. New universities and educational institutions that were created led to a surge in various types of intellectual activities and literature in Punjabi written in the Gurmukhi script. Punjab was perceived as a leader and a progressive state.

Punjabi culture and language have survived without state patronage for over 1,000 years.

Currently, with the Green Revolution resulting in widespread and devastating environmental degradation, the decline of Punjabi teaching in private schools, the state of Punjab acquiring more than Rs 4 lakh crore debt, widespread unemployment and a serious drug problem, the Indian side of Punjab is in a major crisis. The departments of Punjabi and history in universities have been significantly weakened with dwindling faculty strengths. With the Punjabi language kept on the back burner, no major land reforms and lack of economic growth, western Punjab is in no better shape. With large-scale immigration to North America and Australia, immigrant communities have been growing with roots in both east and west Punjab. However, with a very strong western influence, the next generation is moving away from its roots.

The cultural identity of Punjab has been evolving over time. Sometimes culture has been shaped by emerging spiritual movements like Sufism and Sikhism and sometimes it has been sharply re-imagined by political developments, like the Partition. Punjabi communities remain divided along national, religious and caste lines. While Punjabi culture and language have survived without state patronage for over two thousand years, the current crisis requires a serious introspection.

Punjabis everywhere should reimagine themselves while transcending national, geographical and religious boundaries. They should build a vibrant global community network around the Punjabi language and Punjabi culture. Here, the Punjabi diaspora has an important role to play. The resilience of the Punjabi community is apparent from its history as Punjabi and Punjabiyat have flourished over the centuries, often under rather harsh circumstances. Stalwarts like Baba Farid and Guru Nanak have given the Punjabi community a great long-term vision. The Punjabis need to build upon it. The community should reinvent itself as an international community with a primary presence in two countries and a diaspora present in the entire world.

The key is how these diverse and spread-out communities can build synergy across different axes, while still remaining rooted in their language and culture. While sub-communities organised along national identities, religion and other factors may exist, they must synergise with one another along lines that allow Punjabiyat to develop and grow.

The twenty-first century has opened new avenues of various media and social media platforms. They are already being used to build such communities. What we need is an umbrella under which diverse subgroups can flourish. Narrow and sectarian approaches based on national, religious or caste identities will be detrimental to the true growth of the Punjabi community. Punjabi and Punjabiyat have a bright future if the community learns from its history and develops the right focus based on a long-term vision.

The policy failure behind the aviation meltdown

KP NAYAR
STRATEGIC ANALYST

SINCE the change of government at the Centre in 2014, the Civil Aviation Minister's office in New Delhi has become a customary port of call for foreign ministers from the Gulf visiting India, to no avail in all cases. They have been wasting their time and many such visiting ministers have eventually given up, treating India's civil transport industry as a dead end. This is a side story of the meltdown in air passenger transport across the nation this month, of which the Indigo airline has become emblematic and is the whipping boy for everyone, with Air India being cited as the other but smaller, part of a duopoly on the country's skies.

The less publicised story of a spate of regular calls to successive Indian civil aviation ministers by foreign visitors who have little to do with civil aviation in their portfolios offers a foreign policy dimension to India's ongoing air transport and tourism crises. The Civil Aviation Ministry's stranglehold on the larger government apparatus has been such over the last 11 years that it has held the country's solemn treaties to ransom and challenged India's sovereign responsibilities. The blanket refusal to review and renegotiate Bilateral Air Service Agreements with most Gulf states as mandated in their clauses is the most egregious example. Such a cavalier attitude has stunted the growth of India's civil aviation. Proactive external actions during the last decade could have prevented the current crisis.

Foreign ministers from the Gulf are not the only ones who have grievances against the civil aviation ministry. For different — actually opposite — reasons, the US has accused this ministry in bilateral conversations of having stunted the growth of India's aviation industry. The ministry's mandate is actually the opposite. Americans have argued, behind closed doors, that lack of imagination and negativism in this ministry have prevented meaningful cooperation between India and the US in the entire range of aviation. Like those in the Gulf, the Americans have also given up their decades-long efforts to get more involved in the airline business in India.

At last count, there were just 58 non-stop weekly flights between India and the US. A recent comparative study by the Centre for Aviation and Space Laws at the

CAVALIER: The refusal to review bilateral air service pacts has hit the aviation sector's growth. REUTERS

National University of Juridical Sciences in Kolkata has shown that in marked contrast, there are 287 non-stop weekly flights between the US and Japan, a destination much smaller than India in both size and population.

One of the most reliable and sought-after domestic airlines in the US since 2007 has been Virgin America, headquartered in California. It was originally promoted by the United Kingdom-based international airline conglomerate, the Virgin Group. It was possible to launch a new domestic carrier in the crowded US aviation market at the turn of the new millennium because of constructive cooperation between the US Department of Transportation, its UK counterpart and Richard Branson, the man behind the Virgin Group. This is completely alien to the mindset at the Rajiv Gandhi Bhavan headquarters of the Civil Aviation Ministry. Foreigners are perennially viewed there with suspicion bordering on enmity, according to numerous interlocutors from many countries in accounts given to this columnist over the last 30 years.

Like the Gulf states, the Americans have also given up their decades-long efforts to get more involved in India's airline business.

There is a postscript to the Virgin America story. The US airline made its first public offering in NASDAQ stock exchange in 2014. Because Virgin America emerged as a hugely attractive investment, several US carriers attempted to take it over in a bidding war. Eventually, Alaska Airlines became its owners.

For the Gulf states, South Asia is an extension of their own air transport and tourism business. India, of course, is the biggest component of this extended market. Within the Gulf, in the United Arab Emirates, tourism contributes to 13 per cent of the UAE's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). UAE's Minister of Economy and Tourism Abdulla bin Touq Al Marri said on this year's World Tourism Day in September. An ambitious plan to increase the domestic hospitality industry's share to 25 per cent of the GDP envisages sending some of the 33 million guests who stayed in hotels in the UAE this year as tourists to India as the second, extended leg of a regional tour.

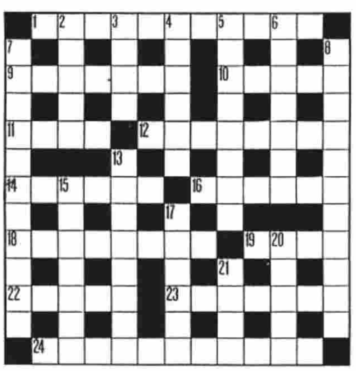
Singapore unveiled a similar plan a few decades ago to add India to the itinerary of global tourists arriving in the city-state. The plan has been only a modest success because of bottlenecks at the India end. But it was a consideration in the creation of Vistara, an Indian airline, which was recently merged with Air India. Singapore Airlines had a 49 per cent stake in Vistara, which had a 10 per cent share of India's domestic aviation market at the time of its merger. Singapore's plans to set up an airline in India began in the early 1990s, but faced stumbling blocks at every stage from the Indian civil service culture and xenophobic politicians.

If the UAE or any other Gulf state is to send some of its tourists to India as part of a regional itinerary on the Singapore model, they would have to consider setting up a Vistara-type domestic airline, part-owned by the Emirates airline or another Gulf carrier. But it would be an uphill struggle, unless Rajiv Gandhi Bhavan opens its doors to winds of change. Any such effort would contribute to cutting the duopoly in domestic aviation, like Vistara did.

Not only airlines, but airports are also victims of the Civil Aviation Ministry's tunnel vision. Kannur International Airport is an example. It is the first greenfield airport to be built in India in a long time. Bureaucrats at Rajiv Gandhi Bhavan are asphyxiating it by denying foreign carriers permission to fly to and from Kannur, although it is a designated international airport. The domestic duopoly has lobbied the ministry's bureaucrats to allow only Indigo and Air India to pick up passengers from Kannur to the Gulf.

Retired IAS officer Vasudevan Tulasidas, who helped build the airport as its first Managing Director, once told Hardeep Puri, when he was Civil Aviation Minister, that Kannur may be the first airport in India to go bankrupt because the ministry is arbitrarily denying business which is its due. "Airlines sometimes go bankrupt," Tulasidas told Puri, adding, "The Civil Aviation Ministry will set a precedent by causing India's first airport bankruptcy."

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Galore (2,9)
9 Stupid (7)
10 Giver (5)
11 Team working together (4)
12 Micro-organisms (8)
14 Kicked out (6)
16 Insincere (6)
18 Worthy of belief (8)
19 An individual's lifetime (4)
22 Rogue (5)
23 Unexceptional (7)
24 Thirteen (6,5)

DOWN
2 Ingenuous (5)
3 Snack (4)
4 A delicious drink (6)
5 A supplement (8)
6 Most important (7)
7 Very easy task (5,2,4)
8 Family's wage-earner (11)
13 A breed of lapdog (8)
15 Composer of The Bartered Bride (7)
17 In perpetuity (6)
20 Period of development (5)
21 Authoritative prohibition (4)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Steady, 4 Imagined, 9 Expert, 10 Play down, 12 Luck, 13 Shoal, 14 Flat, 17 Heart-rending, 20 Unremarkable, 23 Plod, 24 Haven, 25 Snap, 28 Outstrip, 29 Bazaar, 30 Badinage, 31 Knotty.

Down: 1 Stealthy, 2 Especial, 3 Dire, 5 Milk-and-water, 6 Goya, 7 Noodle, 8 Denote, 11 Cheese-paring, 15 Stand, 16 Snake, 18 Abundant, 19 Jeopardy, 21 Aplomb, 22 Wonted, 26 Stun, 27 Main.

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 15, 2025, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Marghshirsh Shaka 24
- Posh Parvishte 1
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 11, up to 9:21 pm
- Sobhana Yoga up to 12:30 pm
- Chitra Nakshatra up to 11:09 am
- Moon in Libra sign

FORECAST

SUNSET: MONDAY 17:24 HRS
SUNRISE: TUESDAY 07:12 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	25	09
New Delhi	24	08
Amritsar	20	09
Bathinda	24	10
Jalandhar	22	09
Ludhiana	21	07
Bhiwani	23	07
Hisar	23	06
Sirsa	24	10
Dharamsala	20	06
Manali	17	02
Shimla	18	09
Srinagar	08	01
Jammu	19	11
Kargil	04	-06
Leh	04	-06
Dehradun	24	07
Mussoorie	18	07

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Good to see Govt, Oppn agree to discuss air pollution in Parliament

IT'S not very often that our politicians focus on the real issues confronting the people. The leaders have a penchant for abstruse matters, catchy slogans, and cryptic buzzwords like Vishwaguru, one-nation one-election, and mohabbat ki dukan. While the ruling dispensation under the saffron family pushes its agenda of Hindu glorification (often accompanied with Muslim demonisation), the Opposition promotes equally, if not more, divisive issues like caste census. So, it was indeed heartening to know that, after a long time, they have agreed to get real: they agreed to discuss air pollution. Last week, Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi talked about air pollution in the country's major cities and sought a discussion on the issue in the Lok Sabha. He raised the matter during Zero Hour, suggesting that both the Opposition and the government work together to find a solution to the problem. "This is not an ideological issue. Everybody in this House would agree that air pollution and the damage it is causing to our people, is something that we would like to cooperate on," Gandhi said. Thankfully, the treasury bench agreed to the Congress leader's suggestion, with Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju saying that the government was ready for a discussion on the issue and the Business Advisory Committee of the Lok Sabha could allot time for the same.

To be sure, it will be sanguine to expect a sudden solution to the vexed problem that has been plaguing not just the national capital and the surrounding areas but almost the entire north India. But one can hope that the discussion will bring the focus of the administrations in the region to the severe air pollution issue. It will be futile to blame bureaucrats for having allowed the problem to turn deadly, for they can act only if their political bosses want them to; and our politicians are more concerned about scoring brownie points and promoting catchy slogans than addressing the real issues. But now there is the possibility of some sort of consensus emerging out of the impending parliamentary discussion.

The political class must ensure that the discussion doesn't become an opportunity to trade allegations and counter-allegations. It must realise that the entire class has failed the nation on the issue of air pollution (apart from many other issues). It must also acknowledge the fact that there are problems that need urgent solutions, and the solutions generally are predicated upon sensible action, not political one-upmanship. The media and civil society also have a role to play towards this. Sustained public pressure can ensure that air pollution does not slip back into obscurity once the immediate crisis fades. Citizens must demand transparency in data, clarity in targets, and timelines for action. Clean air should not be seen as a luxury or an elite concern but as a basic right, integral to the constitutional promise of life and dignity. In a political climate saturated with slogans, rhetoric and symbolic battles, the decision to talk about air pollution feels almost radical. This tentative shift towards addressing a real, urgent problem offers a glimmer of hope. For once, our politicians may be compelled to confront an issue that cannot be deflected, rebranded, or communalised—because the air we (and they) breathe, or struggle to breathe, is something we all share.

Global Summit sets the stage for Telangana's rapid rise

Attracting Rs 5.75-lakh-cr investment proposals in state's 1st investors' summit is a good augury

P MADHUSUDHAN REDDY

Recently, the Telangana Congress government led by Chief Minister Anumula Revanth Reddy organised the Telangana Rising Global Summit 2025 at the proposed Bharat Future City near Hyderabad. The two-day conclave, which was organised amid much fanfare, was not only aimed at attracting investments, but was also used as a platform to unveil Telangana Rising Vision 2047 document- a roadmap to achieve a five-fold jump in the gross state domestic product (GSDP) from the current $200 billion to $1 trillion by 2034.

In the long run, the document envisaged a 15-fold upswing in the state's economy from the current level to $3 trillion by 2047 when India celebrates its centenary year of Independence. The timeline for the final goal for Telangana is in line with the central government's Viksit Bharat (Developed India) target to be crossed by the same year. But the Union Government is aiming at only an eight-fold jump in the gross domestic product (GDP) to around $30 trillion by 2047 from the current $4 trillion. That way, Telangana needs to consistently clock double the national GDP growth rate every year till 2047 to scale its monumental $3-trillion economy target.

To achieve this lofty goal, the Revanth Reddy government, as enunciated in the vision document, has divided the entire state into three growth areas – the Core Urban Region Economy (CURE), Peri Urban Region Economy (PURE) and Rural Agriculture Region Economy (RARE). It's always good to have a long-term vision for the state, but accelerating the economic growth rate to double the level of the national average will test the Revanth Reddy government's acumen.

> **The Andhra Pradesh govt is doing a better job on the investment front. The credit obviously goes to Nara Lokesh, AP's IT & HRD Minister. He put up a team which vets the investment proposals before signing formal agreements. That's the reason why grounding of the investment projects is happening at a faster clip in AP. The state attracted a whopping Rs 20 lakh crore investments after the TDP-led NDA stormed to power in June 2024. In the recent Partnership Summit 2025 alone, the state govt inked 613 MoUs worth Rs 13.25 lakh crore. Given the quality of proposals it signed, the realization rate is likely to be high. The Telangana govt should adopt a similar approach when it comes to attracting investments**

The unwrapping of the long-term vision apart, the summit had a short-term target as well. That was to attract large scale investments into the state. By the end of the second day on December 9, the state government inked memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with companies that entailed total investment commitments of Rs 5.75 lakh crore. Of them, the power sector accounted for more than 56 per cent as the state government signed agreements worth Rs 3.24 lakh crore in this space. Though the Chief Minister was the main driving force behind the two-day global conclave, which was put together on a large scale in a short period to mark the second anniversary of the Congress government, it was a team effort as some senior ministers also played their part well. That bodes well for the Congress in the state and especially to Revanth Reddy.

Attracting many investment proposals at the global conclave is obviously a good sign as it is for the first time that Telangana has organised a large-scale event focused entirely on investments.

The previous BRS government eschewed this well-established strategy. Instead, it opted to pursue individual investors and companies directly. But organising investors' conclaves and summits is always a better option as it provides a good networking platform for investors and companies as well. That way, the Revanth Reddy government has adopted a sound and proven strategy.

However, none of the officials in the state government's team to attract investments, has any experience of organising an investors' gathering of a global scale. This inexperience was clearly visible during the two-day summit. Besides, most of the industry bodies, including the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), were conspicuous by their absence. The state government should have roped in industry bodies to make the event worth the effort.

Further, the Telangana government should also focus on attracting quality investments. Normally, the average realisation rate of the investment proposals signed at such conclaves is around 15-20 per cent. An investors' summit is considered successful even if it hits a realisation rate of 25 per cent. But given the kind of investment agreements Telangana has signed at the Global Summit, the realisation rate will be far below the average. Barring Mahindra, Godrej and Adani groups with small size investments, there are not many big names in the investors' list.

The Andhra Pradesh government, led by Nara Chandrababu Naidu, is doing a far better job on this front. The credit obviously goes to Nara Lokesh, its IT & HRD Minister. Lokesh put up a team that vets the investment proposals before signing formal agreements. That's the reason why grounding of investment projects is happening at a faster clip in AP. The TDP-led NDA government attracted a whopping Rs 20 lakh crore investments after it stormed to power in June 2024.

In the recent Partnership Summit 2025 held at Visakhapatnam, the state government inked 613 memoranda of understanding (MoUs) worth Rs 13.25 lakh crore with a potential to generate over 16 lakh jobs. Given the quality of proposals it signed, the realisation rate is likely to be the highest in the country.

Meanwhile, the Telangana government should adopt a similar approach when it comes to attracting investments. A real investment of Rs 1,000 crore on the ground is far more effective and useful than investment proposals worth Rs one lakh crore on paper.

Frankly speaking, Telangana should have attracted more investment proposals than it received at the Global Summit and much more than what AP achieved at the Partnership Summit 2025. After all, Telangana has the globally popular Hyderabad, which ranks foremost among the country's major IT hubs. Andhra Pradesh has no such metropolis. But organising an investors' conclave of a global magnitude needs around six months of proactive groundwork, active marketing and concerted efforts. Support from industry bodies is also important.

The Telangana Rising Global Summit 2025 had distinctly visible shortcomings on these fronts, which I noticed when I visited the summit on the second day. The communication strategy of the state government was also below par and so was the quality of speakers in various panels. The state government should have been more proactive to showcase to the investors the true potential of Telangana through the Global Summit platform.

Of course, the Global Summit is a laudable effort from the Telangana government as it will put the state on a rapid growth path. Even if 10 per cent of investment proposals translate into reality, the state will stand to gain significantly. As regards Revanth Reddy, he further consolidated his position as the Chief Minister as he was successful in pushing his Cabinet colleagues to work hard for the success of the two-day event. The Congress high command also seems to be pleased with his performance.

The presence of Leader of Opposition and key Congress leader Rahul Gandhi at Argentine footballer and the game's global icon Lionel Andrés Messi's event in Hyderabad underscores the fact that all is well between Revanth and Rahul. Will Revanth leverage this to put Telangana on a higher pedal when it comes to growth, development and welfare? If Revanth Reddy does that, he will get closer to his aim of notching up a second consecutive term as the Telangana Chief Minister.

Change is inevitable even in technological usage

E SREENIVASA REDDY

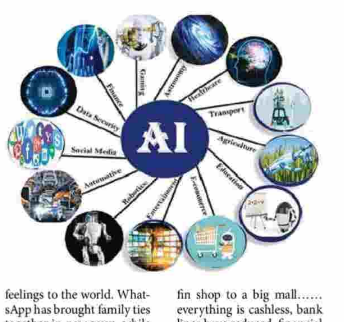
WE have reached the end of 2025. In this quarter century, the world has seen technology move at such a speed that human life has had to keep up with it. By the year 2000, the word 'future' seemed a bit like science fiction. Watching videos on phones, managing office from home and transferring money, was perhaps foreseen by only a few. But as it turns out this has become commonplace in our daily lives.

These 25 years have not only been a period of technological advancement, but also a period of great change that has transformed human habits, relationships, work patterns, thoughts, and beliefs about the future.

The Internet brought the world together in one room!

In 2000, the internet existed, but the speed was slow and the usage was limited. But with the advent of smartphones and mobile internet between 2010 and 2020, life changed at an alarming speed.

Following the advent of 4G and the data revolution, the internet became not just a convenience for every Indian but a part of life. The way we read news changed. The way we get information has changed. Jobs, skills, and opportunities have all revolved around the internet. The entire world that was not available in our village has now become easily accessible. We, who once sought out cyber cafes for using the internet, have now reached a point where we cannot go a day without the internet.



Smartphone has swallowed everything:

The phone was once meant only for talking. But after the arrival of the smartphone, it has become multi-purpose-a camera, clock, radio, notebook, dictionary, map, calculator and a music system. In a nutshell, a single device now handles 20 of our daily necessities. It's not just a machine. It's our personal world.

The phone camera has instilled the habit of documenting our daily lives. Social media has become a platform to express our feelings to the world. WhatsApp has brought family ties together in new ways, while video calls have reduced distances.

This device has transformed us to the point where it is difficult to work, make payments, and even communicate without a smartphone.

Digital payments-Money is not paper:

The UPI changed the way money is exchanged. We have reached a point where we can scan and pay even a rupee. From a small tiffin shop to a big mall...... everything is cashless, bank lines have reduced, financial transparency has increased

Opinions, arts and feelings are all on a new page, thanks to the advent of social media, which has given everyone the power to take the world forward, whether it's a photo, video, art, or review.

This has resulted in the birth of new writers; new filmmakers and growth of small businesses, while politics is social media driven.

Streaming:

Once upon a time, there was no other way to watch a movie than going to the theatre. But with the advent of OTTs in the last ten years:

-Stories have crossed the world and entered our homes

-Our tastes have expanded with world cinema, web series and documentaries

The platform for talent has grown and this has completely changed our entertainment habits.

Children raised with technology:

All those born in the 2000s are now adults. Their childhood was spent with mobile phones. They grew up closer to screens than books. Is this good or bad? It is still a big debate. But change has inevitably happened.

Now, the turning point of the next 25 years is the AI era!

The last 25 years have been the era of the internet, mobile, and digitalisation. And the next 25 years will be the era of artificial intelligence (AI).

What we are experiencing about AI right now are just small waves. In the future, these are going to become big waves.

Jobs change and so do skills:

On the one hand, AI will reduce old jobs, but on the other, it will also create new ones. With diagnostic systems that detect diseases early, treatment based on personal medical profiles, virtual doctors from home, health is shifting to a preventive model. Schools, coaching, lectures are all being redesigned to keep pace with the changing equations.

Human-machine collaboration will become essential in some tasks, such as household chores, factory work, and deliveries. Arts, music, film, and writing will advance faster and with greater diversity with the help of AI tools.

The changes that have come from 2000 to 2025 have come at the hands of man. There has been a revolution in every field, in housing, in banking, in communication and in entertainment.

The next 25 years? Well!!!

LETTERS

'Real' goal of Messi's visit was to rake in $20 million

The real goal of bringing Lionel Messi to India as part of his GOAT tour and touching Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Hyderabad, is apparently aimed at raking in up to Rs 181 crore. All earnings from ticket sales and revenue from brand space go to the Kolkata organizers and to any state government. Hope this fund will be properly utilised to help football clubs that are starved for finances. The windfall can also be used for developing infrastructure for sports to make a meaningful use of the funds that have been generated. Meanwhile, the sports ministry can bolster their revenue from crowdsourcing by asking every citizen to regularly donate at least one rupee that can help raise a mindboggling Rs 143 crore each time. There won't be any need to bring in international celebrities and pay them hefty money.

Sreelekha P S, Secunderabad-61

India's organisational acumen takes a beating

THE chaos at Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata during Lionel Messi's visit exposes numerous deficiencies of the organisers. In a state with millions of football enthusiasts, the event planners should have conceptualised all aspects of the programme with foresight and pragmatism. To deprive the masses of getting to see their idol just to accommodate hundreds of VIPs has obviously led to the vandalism one saw and cancellation of an eagerly awaited scheduled programme. Such mistakes will dent the country's reputation that is inching towards achieving a developed country status.

M N Saraswathi Devi, Secunderabad-10

Mamata's 'probe' will be a non-starter

Apropos 'A messy affair!' (THI Dec 14). Football icon Lionel Messi's appearance at Kolkata's Salt Lake Stadium ended as a damp squib. VIPs, celebrities and security personnel cordoned him off, leaving large numbers of his fans disappointed. They vented their ire by vandalising the stadium by breaking chairs, fences, throwing bottles, and starting fires. Meanwhile, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's'high-level enquiry is fated for the deep freezer, enabling those responsible to get away scot-free. The shameful incident has shown the entire nation in an extremely poor light.

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

Messi weaves magic in Hyd

LIKE a storm that sweeps across the city, Lionel Messi's visit to Hyderabad left a lasting impact on football fans. The exhibition match at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium was like a dream come true for enthusiasts, who cheered and chanted his name like a chorus. Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy's goal was like icing on the cake, adding to the excitement of the event. The stadium was electric, with fans packed like sardines, all eager to catch a glimpse of the football legend. Overall, it was a fantastic experience for football fans in Hyderabad.

Kolluru. Raju, Kakinada

Shed bias for VVIPs in sports events

The unruly incident at the Salt Lake stadium where fans, who spent up to Rs 10, 000, failed to catch a glimpse of Lionel Messi during a much-hyped event owing to the mismanagement of the event and highhanded behaviour of the VVIPs, was indeed messy all through his stay. State Governor C V Anand Bose also could not enter the stadium. In an impromptu press conference at the very place, he condemned the government for deliberately insulting him.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

Hyd saves the day

IT is very sad that the much-hyped tour of Lionel Messi turned messy at Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on Saturday. As part of the UNICEF ambassador's four-leg tour, the global icon was to showcase his famed football skills in friendly matches against politicians and others. The ruckus in West Bengal was such that even Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee could not reach the stadium to felicitate the legend. The Salt Lake Stadium incident once again brought the issue of crowd mismanagement to the forefront. In fact, it was a great relief to the public and the Telangana government as Messi's match at Hyderabad ended without any untoward incident.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramala, Tiruvuru (AP)

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Karnataka ex-MLA saves life of American co-passenger mid air

BENGALURU: A Karnataka ex-MLA, Anjali Nimbalkar, a doctor by profession, has saved the life of an American woman passenger, who suffered a medical emergency mid-air during a Goa–New Delhi flight, official sources said on Sunday.

The incident happened when Nimbalkar, AICC secretary co-incharge of Goa, Daman & Diu, Dadra Nagar Haveli, was travelling to Delhi to attend the "Vote Chori" rally organised by Congress at Ramleela Maidan on Sunday, they added. Nimbalkar performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and revived the co-passenger, who complained of uneasiness and shivering, fainted and lost her pulse, they said.

Nimbalkar reportedly remained by the patient's side for the entire duration of the flight, constantly paying attention to her medical needs and comforting her. Soon after landing at Delhi, the unwell foreign passenger was shifted to a hospital by an ambulance, sources said, adding that Nimbalkar's timely action received praise from passengers and crew members.

Read more at https://epaper.thehansindia.com

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Hans India
Business

"Gold and silver's momentum will remain positive as (traders) focus on key data from China, followed by inflation numbers from India, the US, and the UK, along with provisional manufacturing/ services PMI data from across regions
-Pranav Mer, Vice President, JM Financial Services

Progress in US-India trade deal to set tone for mkts

Markets currently struggling and not having any trend. The atmosphere is one of anticipation and people waiting for strong news flow that can drive markets

Sectoral Outlook

- BANKNIFTY lost 387.25pts (-0.65%) to 59,389.95
- BSE100, BSE200 and BSE500 lost 0.54%, 0.46% and 0.44% respectively

Arun Kejriwal

THE week gone by was one of two halves. The first saw markets declining all the way till Thursday morning and then making a sharp U-turn on Thursday. In the second half it made sharp recoveries on Thursday and Friday, but not enough to reverse the losses markets suffered.

It did however experience a substantial recovery from Thursday's lows which were made at 84,150.19 on BSESENSEX and at 25,693.25 points on NIFTY. Markets gained on two of the five trading sessions and lost on three. BSESENSEX was down 444.71 points or 0.52 per cent to close at 85,267.66 points while NIFTY lost 139.50 points or 0.53 per cent to close at 26,046.95 points. BANKNIFTY lost 387.25 points or 0.65 per cent to close at 59,389.95 points. The broader markets saw BSE100, BSE200 AND BSE500 lose 0.54 per cent, 0.46 per cent and 0.44 per cent respectively. BSEMIDCAP lost 0.30 per cent while BSESMALLCAP lost 0.40 per cent. The Indian Rupee continued to be under pressure and lost 44 paisa or 0.49 per cent to close at Rs 90.52 to the US Dollar. The US FED has cut interest rates by 25 basis points to a band of 3.5 per cent - 3.75 per cent during its two-day meeting held between Thursday and Friday, last week. Dow Jones gained on two of the five trading sessions and lost on three. It was up 503.06 points or 1.05 per cent to close at 48,458.05 points.

The primary market juggernaut continues. On Friday last week, we saw the mega-issue from ICICI Prudential Asset Management Company Limited open. The issue consists of entirely an offer for sale of 4.89 crore shares in a price band of Rs 2,061-Rs 2,165. The issue would raise Rs 10,600 crores at the top end of the price band. The company is the 2nd largest AMC in the country after SBI. This business has one great characteristic, that it does not require capital for doing the business. The AUM of investors is the capital, and the AMC gets a commission on handling the money and generating returns for unit holders and now shareholders.

There is another issue which would open in the week ahead from KSH International Limited which is tapping the markets with its fresh issue of Rs 420 crores and an offer for sale of Rs 290 crores. The price band is Rs 365-384 and the issue would open on Tuesday the 16th of December and close on Thursday the 18th of December. The company is the 3rd largest manufacturer of magnet winding wires in the country in terms of capacity. It is also the largest exporter of such wires from India. It is doubling its capacity from the roughly 30,000 MT that it has currently to 60,000 MT in two phases. As of date the first phase of expansion of 12,000 MT has already been commissioned and the second phase of 18,000 MT is roughly 15 months away. There is huge demand of the company's products looking at the need for transformers which need to be replaced and also new demand looking at the massive thrust on renewable energy like wind and solar.

We also have in the midst of all of this a company on the SME platform which has opened its issue to raise Rs 12.27 crores. What raises eyebrows and draws attention to is the fact that the company is into the business of selling vegetables through the company's outlets in Gujarat. The fixed price is Rs 30. The share would list on BSE SME exchange and the issue is open from 12th to 16th December. No business is small and everyone has a right to access the capital markets. The issue has been subscribed 0.05 times at the end of day one. The merchant banker of this company is Grow House Wealth Management Private Limited. Looking at the kind of issue hitting the markets, it makes one wary and skeptical. Hope the stock exchanges and the regulator are taking care of the system or we could see a larger meltdown in the markets in time to come.

We would be having quite a few listings on the main board in the week ahead. They would be led by mattress and furniture maker Wakefit Innovations Limited on Monday, 15th December along with Corona Remedies Limited. This would be followed by Nephrocare Health Services Limited and Park Medi World Limited on Wednesday the 17th of December. Markets are currently struggling and are not having any trend. The atmosphere is one of anticipation and people waiting for strong news flow which is expected to drive markets. The visit of Russian Premier happened and no trade deals have been announced as yet. USA wants to push the agreement with India and maintain its hold, but is for reasons best known to them not announcing the deal. They did rush a team to India, but that's that. This state of limbo saw markets crack last week but find strong support at areas of around 25,700 on NIFTY. This continues to be a strong support zone. On the upside we have a clear pathway which could take us to 26,500 and beyond......... provided there is big news. When that would happen or come, your guess is as good as mine. What if it does not come? We will continue to wait and hope for the best. The simple strategy would be to keep your ears to the ground and hope to pick up even murmurs. Markets are evenly poised and are testing one's patience. News on the Russia-Ukraine front or the US trade deal have a big potential to drive markets with many ramifications as well. The delay could at worse dampen the sentiment and make people desperate to take wrong decisions. Look to buy on dips and there will be plenty of such moves in the short term. Take advantage of the uncertainty and sell what you have bought when everyone wants to buy. Keep in mind that in roughly four weeks' time from now we would be discussing Q3 results for the October to December quarter. Trade cautiously but be extremely patient.

(The author is the founder of Kejriwal Research and Investment Services, an advisory firm)

Beyond asset allocation, how to choose the right mutual funds

K Naresh Kumar

WHILE many investment lessons and ideas ponder on asset allocation, goal-mapping, and risk appetite, they only addresses the most basic. While it certainly serves us the initial action plan or to derive an investment policy statement/philosophy, it won't get us to the nuts-and-bolts of executing the plan. That's only the beginning of the investment journey, and the actual dirty work remains elsewhere.

Once the investment plan is in place, for instance, the asset allocation mix is in place, and now we get down to shortlisting the instruments. The classic, transparent, and convenient way is to build through mutual funds. So, how to pick the right funds from the plethora of offerings that fit to your requirements. This is a work in itself, similar to the initial exhaustive exercise of the investment planning.

The crude and most common way is to mimic a friend or a known person. The most frequent question I've ventured is what's the flavor of the season, or which fund to invest. There's no background of the need description or goal timelines, but just to invest in a fund. The other frequent way is to pull out the top performers list as on a date, comparing over periods of 1-yr, 3-yr, 5-yr, and more.

True, the very reason for any investment is to make money, i.e., higher returns, but its like comparing a car based on the fastest to reach 0 to 100kmph. Would that allow you to make up your mind? How then do we arrive at zeroing down on a fund to invest?

Chasing returns wouldn't end us with better returns but could expose us to higher risks than we might desire or tolerate. So, one should first begin with their risk profile.

If the risk is conservative with shorter timeline requirements, then debt or debt-oriented funds would address the need. That way, we're aligning the risk, goal, and time periods. If the risk is moderate with a relatively lengthier period, a hybrid fund could suffice the need and an equity fund for longer time and moderate to aggressive risk profiles.

And how many times do we see the same fund(s) at the top, across multiple timelines? There's a seasonality of fund returns, like many of the sportsmen. It's only a few who perform over longer periods that become great and remain etched in our memory. Similarly, we need to check for not just performance but consistent ones to consider in our portfolio within the suitable category.

If one were to check the performance comparisons, one could find suddenly a new fund top of the list with spectacular returns suddenly and then fade away after a few months or quarters. It might never again feature in the top-quartile, even.

DIIS BUYING OFFSETS FIIS SELLING IN DEC

MUMBAI: THE foreign institutional investor (FII) selling is likely to decline in days to come as the economy is doing well, prospects for earnings growth are improving, and mutual fund SIPs are performing well, analysts said on Saturday. In December so far, FIIs have sold equity worth Rs 15,959 crore through the exchanges. This FII sell figure has been completely eclipsed by the domestic institutional investor (DII) buying for Rs 39,965 crore during this period, said market watchers. "Sustained selling in India when the prospects for growth and earnings look bright is not a sustainable policy," said Dr. VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Investments Ltd. A healthy feature of the investment behaviour of retail investors is the steady inflows into mutual fund SIPs, which have been consistently above Rs 29,000 crore during the last three months. SIP inflows in November remained almost steady at Rs 29,445 crore, according to data released by the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI).

VALUATION OF TOP-8 FIRMS ERODE BY ₹79,129 CR

NEW DELHI: The combined market valuation of eight of the top-10 most valued domestic firms eroded by Rs 79,129.21 crore last week, with Bajaj Finance and ICICI Bank taking the biggest hit, amid a largely bearish trend in equities. Last week, the BSE benchmark index declined by 444.71 points or 0.51 per cent. From the top-10 pack, Reliance Industries and Larsen & Toubro were the only gainers, while HDFC Bank, Bharti Airtel, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), ICICI Bank, State Bank of India, Infosys, Bajaj Finance and Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) faced erosion from their valuation.

The market capitalisation (mcap) of Bajaj Finance dropped by Rs 19,289.7 crore to Rs 6,33,106.69 crore. ICICI Bank's valuation tumbled Rs 18,516.31 crore to Rs 9,76,668.15 crore. The mcap of Bharti Airtel tanked Rs 13,884.63 crore to Rs 11,87,948.11 crore and that of State Bank of India diminished by Rs 7,846.02 crore to Rs 8,88,816.17 crore.

Be cautious amid currency swings, mixed global signals

Avoid chasing stocks facing negative news flow in anticipation of a rebound and wait for clear signs of stability before taking fresh exposure

Negative Close

- BSE Sensex shed 444.71pts (-0.51%) to 85,267.66
- NSE Nifty declined 139.5pts (-0.53%) to 26,046.95
- FII out flows are at Rs1,52,273 cr during the year

C Kutumba Rao

SPOOKED by ongoing uncertainty surrounding the US–India trade deal and threats of fresh round of tariffs by Mexico, further rupee depreciation against the dollar, persistent FII outflows and weak sentiment in broader market; the benchmark indices ended lower during the week ended.

The Sensex shed 444.71 points or 0.51 per cent at 85,267.66, while Nifty fell 139.5 points or 0.53 per cent at 26,046.95. In the broader market, the BSE Mid-cap Index shed 0.3 per cent and the BSE Small-cap index fell 0.4 per cent. On the sectoral front, the Nifty Defence index shed 3 per cent; however, the Nifty Media, Nifty PSU Bank, Nifty IT, and Nifty FMCG were down between 1-1.7 per cent. On the other hand, the Nifty Metal index rose 2 per cent, and the Nifty Consumer Durables added 0.4 per cent.

The FIIs sold equities worth Rs 9,201.89 crore. However, the DIIs' continued their support by buying equities worth Rs 20,184.70 crore. It is pertinent to observe that FIIs have been net sellers on 141 of 234 trading days this calendar year and is second only to 2008, when sell days peaked at 154 amid the global financial crisis. Till date net FII out flows are at Rs 1,52,273 crore. Spread across 234 trading days of six hours each, this translates to about Rs110 crore exiting the market every trading hour. By any measure, 2025 ranks among the toughest years for Indian equities in nearly two decades in terms of foreign participation.

Yet, the market impact has been far milder than in past episodes of sustained FPI exodus. The Indian rupee has extended its fall against the US dollar as it touched a fresh record low of 90.56 during the week and ended 43 paise lower at 90.42. With global yields climbing, Indian bonds are facing stress from the unwinding of the USD and JPY carry trades. The tailwind from monetary easing by RBI is being supported by continuing reform momentum - labour codes, end of QCOs and EoDB.

Decisive signals from the RBI have restarted the credit channel, the most important driver of monetary transmission, in addition to lower rates helping loan demand. Observers feel that as policy targets economic slack, growth can remain above trend for longer without generating inflation. The GST changes implemented in Sep'25 were not only a fiscal boost to growth, but also a simplification (fewer slabs), and make the government's stance more contemporary. The incessant structural pressure of Chinese exports (to India's export markets) and higher global capital costs are challenges, but not enough to derail growth.

India to remain the fastest growing economy with 7.5 per cent growth in FY27E. Developments related to India–US trade discussions will also remain in focus. The spate of new listings is reshaping the market: in the past five years, 126 new entrants to the BSE500 have added 21 per cent to incremental market capitalization. The IPO market is well-positioned to gain further momentum in the second half of the calendar year with a robust pipeline.

The pipeline of issues continues to be healthy as 74 companies, holding SEBI approval waiting to hit the market, while another 104 are awaiting SEBI approval. Some marquee names who have filed DRHP include Imagine Marketing (boaT), Manipal Payment and Identity Solutions and Shadowfax Technologies. Market performance is usually driven by swings in P/E multiples, while the likelihood of improving earnings should keep the market well supported.

Follow market trends and history. Don't speculate that this particular time will be any different. For example, a major key to investing in a specific stock is its performance over five years.

FUTURES & OPTIONS / SECTOR WATCH

Amidst heightened volatility, continued foreign fund outflows and a sharp fall in the rupee; derivative segment witnessed fresh shorts and during the early part of week ended the Nifty slipped below its rollover range of 26,050–26,100. However, after the Fed's rate cut announcement, the Nifty rebounded later in the week but both the Nifty and the Bank Nifty still closed the week with a loss of around half a per cent. In the options segment, the highest Call open interest for Nifty was observed at the 26,500 and 26,200 strike levels whereas notable Put open interest was concentrated at the 26,000 and 25,800 strikes. For Bank Nifty, significant Call open interest was seen at the 60,000 and 59,500 strikes with substantial Put open interest at the 59,500 and 59,000 strikes. Implied volatility (IV) for Nifty's Call options settled at 9.11 per cent while Put options concluded at 10.23 per cent. The India VIX, a key indicator of market volatility declined by -2.01 per cent to 10.11, reflecting continued complacency and low hedging demand. India The Put-Call Ratio Open Interest (PCR OI) stood at 1.07 for the week. Given the current technical picture, the coming week may see a cautious-to-flat start. Key resistance lies at 26,200 and 26,300, followed by a stronger barrier near 26,550. On the downside, immediate support is at 25,750, followed by the 25,600 zone. Market players should stay selective and maintain a balanced approach amid ongoing currency volatility and mixed global cues. Besides, traders should avoid chasing stocks facing negative news flow in anticipation of a rebound and wait for clear signs of stability before taking fresh exposure.

Stocks looking good are AU Bank, Godrej Consumer, HDFC Life, Phoenix Ltd, Voltas and VBL. Stocks looking weak are BDL, Dabur, JSW Energy, Trent, Zydus Life and PI Inds.

(The author is a senior maket analyst and former vice-chairman, Andhra Pradesh State Planning Board)

Jamna Auto Industries Limited

THE company is engaged in the manufacturing of diverse parts and accessories for motor vehicles. The company is in the business of manufacturing automotive suspension, which includes parabolic and tapered leaf spring, lift axle and air suspension, stabilizer bars, bushes. Product portfolio includes a wide range of offerings: leaf springs, parabolic springs, Z springs, lift axles, trailer suspensions, slipper suspensions, air suspensions, suspension allied products, stabilizer bars, and other high-consumption parts such as brake linings, clutches, water pumps, bearings, jack rods, and universal joint crosses. The introduction of advanced vehicles is accelerating demand for technology-based components. As a technology-driven company, the company is well-positioned to capitalize on this shift with several competitive advantages: Parabolic springs are a key technology product, with OEMs increasingly transitioning from conventional leaf springs. In the commercial vehicle segment, parabolic springs now represent approximately 30 per cent of total spring demand — and the company holds a dominant 85 per cent market share in this category. To meet the growing demand, it is expanding parabolic spring production capacity, both at the existing facilities and through new upcoming plants in Adityapur in Jamshedpur and Indore. Additionally, air suspension systems, lift axles and other allied products are gaining strong traction in both domestic and export markets. Started supplying Slipper Suspension to Ashok Leyland. It has its manufacturing facilities at Malanpur, Chennai, Yamuna Nagar, Jamshedpur, Hosur, Pillaipakkam and Pune. Buy on declines for medium term target of Rs200

The Pioneer
NEW DELHI | MONDAY | DECEMBER 15, 2025

Editor's TAKE

A dispute written in stone

The clashes between two otherwise peaceful countries underscore how unresolved historical disputes can turn heritage sites and borderlines into flashpoints

The year 2025 has been turbulent throughout. From the war in Ukraine to the Gaza conflict and renewed hostilities along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, the year has witnessed conflict on multiple fronts. Even in its final month, unrest persists, with unexpected clashes erupting between Cambodia and Thailand – two otherwise peaceful neighbours bound by shared borders and intertwined histories.

The latest flare-up along the Thailand-Cambodia border is a grim reminder that unresolved issues have a habit of erupting into armed conflict. Sporadic skirmishes on the border escalated into air strikes and artillery exchanges, leading to large-scale evacuations on both sides and leaving at least 20 dead. If there is a conflict anywhere in the world, US President Donald Trump has an uncanny urge to get involved and become a self-appointed peace broker, often with detrimental effect. This time too, US President Donald Trump announced that both sides had "agreed to cease all shooting", a statement that proved rather premature, as neither side appeared very keen on it.

At the heart of the confrontation lies the long-disputed border region surrounding the 11th-century Preah Vihear temple complex. Though the International Court of Justice awarded the temple to Cambodia decades ago, divergent interpretations of boundary lines and provocative statements on both sides have fuelled public anger. Periodic flare-ups, including violent clashes in 2008–11 and again earlier this year, demonstrate how fragile past ceasefires have been.

This week's violence followed the collapse of October talks, after Thailand accused Cambodian forces of laying landmines in the region. What is clear is that deep mistrust, militarised borders, and domestic political pressures in both countries continue to fuel this conflict, which is more emotive than real. The involvement of Donald Trump as a self-styled mediator adds another dimension to the problem. Announcing the ceasefire on his Truth Social platform, Trump cast himself as an indispensable power broker, positioning himself as the principal mediator. His eagerness to insert himself into every global conflict often appears driven less by a commitment to peace than by the pursuit of personal legacy. By sidelining regional diplomacy and framing himself as a Nobel Peace Prize contender, Trump ultimately does more harm than good to the cause of peace. For India, the conflict is not a distant Southeast Asian squabble but a matter of tangible concern. New Delhi's immediate worry has been the reported damage to conservation facilities at the Preah Vihear temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the Archaeological Survey of India has been leading a $5.5 million restoration project since 2022. Beyond heritage, India has strategic stakes in regional stability under its Act East policy. Prolonged instability between two ASEAN members threatens trade routes, economic integration, and the broader balance in a region already under pressure from great-power rivalry. For India and the wider region, the lesson is stark: history ignored does not fade – it flares up, often with consequences far beyond the battlefield.

How a Jaish network was uncovered

What began as a routine investigation into Jaish-e-Mohammed posters in Srinagar's Nowgam area spiralled into the exposure of a chilling, multi-state terror network involving radicalised doctors, clerics and overground workers

ANIL BHAT

On October 19, 2025, when Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) Police began an investigation into Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) posters threatening attacks on security forces that appeared in Srinagar's Nowgam area, a terror network involving Kashmiri doctors was exposed. Persistent police work, including analysis of CCTV footage, led to the identification and arrest of three local overground workers (OGWs) with prior records of stone-pelting. Their interrogation led the police to a cleric and former paramedic named Maulvi Irfan Ahmad from Shopian.

Irfan's interrogation revealed a wider Jaish-e-Mohammed network operating across multiple states, including J&K, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. He had allegedly used his position as an imam to radicalise educated professionals, including doctors. Maulvi Irfan's phone contacts included several doctors, raising police suspicion. His interrogation, along with that of another arrested individual, Zameer Ahmad Ahanger, exposed a network of radicalised medical professionals. Based on these leads, police conducted a series of raids across different states.

Dr Adeel Ahmad Rather was arrested in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, where he had moved after working at Government Medical College (GMC), Anantnag. An AK-47 rifle was recovered from his old locker at GMC, and his interrogation led the police to Dr Muzammil Ganaie at Al-Falah University in Faridabad, Haryana.

Raids on two houses rented by Ganaie in Faridabad uncovered a massive cache of explosives — nearly 2,900 kg of materials, including ammonium nitrate, two AK-series rifles, and other bomb-making equipment.

The multi-agency crackdown caused panic among the network members, which, it is believed, led another doctor, Dr Umar Ul Nabi, who worked with Drs Adeel and Muzammil, to prematurely detonate a vehicle-borne explosive device near Delhi's Red Fort on November 10, 2025, resulting in 13 fatalities and his own death. On November 10, 2025, at about 6:52 pm, a white Hyundai i20 car parked near the Red Fort Metro rail station in Delhi exploded, killing at least eight people and injuring many more. Reportedly, a probable reason was that its driver, Dr Umar Nabi, whose accomplices were already under investigation and some of whom had been arrested, may have panicked and prematurely caused the detonation of the device.

Immediately afterwards, Delhi Police, forensic teams, and fire engines rushed to the scene. CCTV footage from the scene and nearby areas was collected to trace the car's movements and ownership. On November 11, 2025, the Ministry of Home Affairs handed over the probe to the National Investigation Agency (NIA), indicating that it was being treated as a terror attack. J&K Police collected DNA samples from Nabi's family in Pulwama for matching with the remains from the blast site. On November 12, 2025, DNA results confirmed that Dr Umar Nabi was the driver and sole occupant of the exploded car. It was revealed that Drs Nabi and Ganaie had visited the Red Fort in January 2025, possibly for reconnaissance. A red Ford EcoSport car linked to the accused was also found in Haryana. On November 13, 2025, J&K Police's Counter Intelligence Kashmir wing conducted further raids at 13 locations across the Kashmir Valley in connection with the terror module.

On November 15, 2025, an explosion occurred inside the Nowgam police station in Srinagar while police and forensic teams were handling the seized explosive materials brought from Faridabad as evidence in the Red Fort case, resulting in nine deaths and numerous injuries among police personnel and civilians.

It is believed that Nabi's panicked actions inadvertently set off an explosion and thereby prevented a larger, planned series of attacks in many other parts of the country.

Wider investigations also revealed Dr Shaheen Saeed, a doctor and teacher from Lucknow, who raised ?20 lakh for procuring raw materials for IEDs; Amir Rashid Ali, arrested for arranging the Hyundai i20 car used in the attack and helping prepare the explosives; and Jasir Bilal Wani, a technician tasked with exploring ways to attach explosives to drones. Authorities also reportedly questioned over 50 doctors in Kashmir in connection with the case, including Drs Sajjad Ahmed and Sajad Malik. The doctors were reportedly radicalised through online channels such as Telegram and through trips to countries like Turkey. Funds were allegedly raised under the guise of social or charitable causes.

Al-Falah University, a private university in Faridabad, Haryana, established in 2014 by the Al-Falah Charitable Trust, is headed by Jawad Ahmad Siddiqui, chairman-cum-chancellor of Al-Falah University and founder of the Al-Falah Group. While it aims to provide "quality education, promote research, and prepare students for successful careers" and is officially recognised by the University Grants Commission, it has been a hub of Kashmiri doctors involved in terror.

White-collar terrorists are certainly not new in the Kashmir Valley. One classic case is Yasin Malik, head of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), who spearheaded separatist ideology and violent activities in the Valley since 1988, when the term 'white-collar terror' was not current. He was the mastermind behind the purging of Kashmiri Pandits and was responsible for their genocide and the exodus of at least 400,000 from the Kashmir Valley. He and his colleagues were known to boast about murdering Indian Air Force officers and many innocent non-Muslims. After all that, they masqueraded as 'separatists' and enjoyed being hosted at taxpayers' expense by Congress governments.

It should also not be forgotten that political leaders ruling J&K were responsible for allowing the massacre and purge of the Kashmiri Pandits and who, after five years of the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A, got elected again in 2024 by the decision of the Supreme Court, and are ruling at a time when Pakistani terrorists massacred tourists in Pahalgam, with their presence being known to and accommodated by local shopkeepers and pony operators.

A vital course correction for India's security by New Delhi, albeit very right-wing sounding, should be:

(a) reverting J&K to long-term President's Rule;

(b) ensuring long-term, organised, and effective de-radicalisation;

(c) increasing permanent Army presence in the Kashmir Valley and hinterland, with many more cantonments; and

(d) ensuring that elections are held in J&K only when there are sufficient Kashmiri Pandit and/or Dogra candidates.

WHITE-COLLAR TERRORISTS ARE CERTAINLY NOT NEW IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY. ONE CLASSIC CASE IS YASIN MALIK, HEAD OF THE JAMMU KASHMIR LIBERATION FRONT (JKLF), WHO SPEARHEADED SEPARATIST IDEOLOGY AND VIOLENT ACTIVITIES IN THE VALLEY SINCE 1988, WHEN THE TERM 'WHITE-COLLAR TERROR' WAS NOT CURRENT

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anil-bhat-70b94766

PIC TALK

An artist performing at the Divya Kala Mela on Kartavya Path, near India Gate, New Delhi.

PHOTO: PANKAJ KUMAR

Justice delayed leaves truth unanswered still

ASHA IYER KUMAR

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

Justice is an elusive and often ambiguous idea. It does not always arrive where one expects it to, nor does it consistently side with those who have been grievously wronged. At times, it appears to favour individuals widely perceived as guilty in the court of public opinion, yet declared "not guilty" within the strict confines of the law.

This uneasy tension between moral certainty and legal outcome came sharply into focus in Kerala this week, when a prominent actor was acquitted of criminal conspiracy in the 2017 abduction and rape case involving another actor. The verdict triggered an outpouring of anger across social media and public forums in the state. Many viewed the acquittal as a stain on the country's judicial system, a moment that seemed to reaffirm public cynicism about the ability of institutions to deliver justice in cases involving wealth, influence, and power. Accusations flew thick and fast — some openly asserting that money and clout had tilted the scales, quietly seeping into the crevices of a system meant to safeguard truth and fairness. Enough rage has been vented over what many see as the irony of the judgment, and it will likely remain one of the most telling examples of how a high-profile case can unravel over time. For eight long years, the matter lingered in court.

While it is true that truth, in law, must be established through evidence alone — and, viewed strictly through that prism, the acquittal followed established legal principles — the larger question cannot be ignored. When justice is delayed for nearly a decade, it ceases to be justice in any meaningful sense. In such cases, delay itself becomes a denial of the victim's fundamental right.

Memories fade, narratives shift, and pressure — subtle or otherwise — begins to reshape testimony. In this case, several witnesses who once provided critical statements later turned hostile. Of the 261 witnesses examined, 28 reversed their earlier accounts. How much truth was lost in that erosion is impossible to measure, but its impact on the outcome is undeniable. Such reversals are not uncommon in trials involving influential accused persons, and they point to a systemic vulnerability that the justice system has yet to adequately address. While there may be no legal proof establishing intimidation or directly implicating the accused as a conspirator, the manner in which the crime was executed and subsequently handled makes it difficult to accept that it was a random act. The precision of the crime and the subsequent disintegration of the prosecution's case suggest manipulation so thorough that it left the state with little to sustain a conviction.

For the public — largely excluded from the complexities of legal procedure and the unseen forces that can shape a trial — the only option is reluctant acceptance of the verdict. There is some consolation in knowing that higher courts remain open should the survivor choose to pursue the matter further, with the hope that proceedings there may be swifter and more resolute. Yet a deep unease lingers. When crimes appear to be softened by power and privilege, it breeds fear and insecurity. It sends a chilling message that truth can be weakened by neglect, delay, or influence, and that the law may not always protect the vulnerable. The anger provoked by the Ernakulam court's verdict may eventually fade, but the questions it raises will endure. At the heart of this legal and moral dilemma stands a woman whose struggle for justice and dignity remains painfully unresolved.

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

FOREIGN CAMPUSES EXPOSE NEGLECT OF INDIA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

The entry of foreign universities into India marks a significant shift in the country's higher education landscape, but it also exposes a worrying lack of confidence in public, government run institutions.

While foreign campuses may reduce foreign exchange outflow and offer international exposure, their high fees, absence of reservation policies, and limited geographical reach will largely benefit a privileged minority. More fundamentally, the policy raises an uncomfortable question: is India's education system truly incapable of reform, or has it simply suffered from prolonged neglect? Public universities, despite chronic underfunding, faculty shortages and infrastructure constraints, continue to educate the overwhelming majority of students and remain vital spaces for social mobility, inclusion and diversity. They produce teachers, researchers, administrators and professionals who sustain the country's economic and democratic life.

Instead of importing exclusivity under the banner of globalisation, the government must prioritise strengthening domestic institutions. Meaningful reform requires sustained public investment, academic autonomy, transparent governance and respect for constitutional values such as equity and access. Without this, foreign universities will remain islands of privilege, while the foundational system that serves millions continues to erode, undermining education as a public good.

KYAMUDIN ANSARI | MUMBAI

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Parliamentary praise for Ladakh institute

The Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, HIAL, founded by Ladakh educator and innovator Sonam Wangchuk, has received strong praise from a Parliamentary panel, which described its work as exemplary and urged the University Grants Commission to grant long pending recognition. In its report, the Standing Committee on Education, Women, Youth and Sports, chaired by Congress Member of Parliament Digvijaya Singh, expressed concern that HIAL's application for recognition has remained unresolved for years despite the institute's growing academic stature and international acclaim. The committee said it was impressed by HIAL's distinctive academic ecosystem, which blends education, research and entrepreneurship while remaining rooted in the region's socio cultural and ecological realities. It highlighted the institute's emphasis on experiential and project based learning, noting that HIAL reflects the spirit of the National Education Policy 2020.

The panel noted HIAL's impact on local communities and its global recognition through initiatives such as ice stupas and sustained community engagement. Despite administrative challenges, the report presents HIAL as a beacon of educational innovation deserving recognition and wider national adoption.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Messi event signals administrative failure

The chaotic collapse of Lionel Messi's Kolkata appearance is a sobering reminder that celebrity spectacle without professional planning can quickly turn into a public hazard. Tens of thousands of fans paid exorbitant prices in good faith, only to be denied even a fleeting and dignified glimpse of the footballer they idolise. What followed, vandalism, pitch invasion and panic, was not spontaneous behaviour but the predictable outcome of gross mismanagement.

Events of such scale demand meticulous crowd control, transparent communication and realistic expectations. Instead, Messi's brief appearance was overwhelmed by VIPs and selfie seekers, while paying spectators were left confused and frustrated. The abrupt withdrawal of players without explanation deepened the sense of betrayal. That even experienced administrators and security forces were overwhelmed speaks volumes about the organisers' lack of preparedness. Damage to a stadium refurbished with public funds and risks to lives make this more than an entertainment fiasco. Accountability must be fixed, refunds ensured and criminal negligence examined. India's sporting ambitions will ring hollow unless professionalism, transparency and respect for fans are strictly enforced.

SANJAY CHOPRA | MOHALI

Centralisation threatens higher education

The Cabinet's approval of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill is being presented as reform, yet it reveals a troubling obsession with centralisation in higher education governance. Replacing the University Grants Commission, AICTE and NCTE with a single regulator ignores India's deeper crisis of chronic underfunding, faculty shortages, rural exclusion and shrinking academic freedom. Separating funding from regulation while retaining ministerial control invites political interference and weakens university autonomy.

Centralised uniform standards will disproportionately harm small and rural institutions, pushing many towards closure or privatisation. Genuine reform requires trust in universities, sustained public investment and transparent, accountable governance. India's higher education system needs empowerment, not another top down, one size fits all experiment that rewards administrative control over quality, equity and intellectual freedom. Students and teachers deserve meaningful investment, institutional autonomy and academic accountability, rather than cosmetic restructuring and symbolic renaming of regulatory bodies that fail to address foundational structural problems affecting access, excellence and inclusion nationwide.

VIJAYKUMAR H K | RAICHUR

Remembering Chandan Mitra: Mentor, visionary, and friend

In an industry often marred by sensationalism, Chandan championed balanced reporting, reminding us that journalism's true power lies in informing, not inflaming. Beyond his professional acumen, he was a multifaceted personality — a politician, historian and cultural enthusiast

FIRST Column

PROF (DR) K G SURESH

DR. CHANDAN MITRA
(12 DEC 1954-01 SEPT 2021)

As I sit down to pen this tribute (my first column after his demise) on the occasion of Chandan Mitra's birth anniversary, my thoughts drift back to the man who shaped not just Indian journalism but also impacted the lives of countless journalists like me. Born on December 12, 1955, Chandan would have turned 70 this year, a milestone that feels both poignant and unreal in his absence. He left us on September 1, 2021, at the age of 66, but his legacy endures like the enduring ink of a well-crafted editorial.

My association with Chandan Da was both as a columnist with *The Pioneer*, where he served as the Editor and Managing Director for many years and as General Secretary of the Indian Media Centre (IMC), an organisation focused on media training and skill upgradation, led by him as Chairman. There, we collaborated on initiatives aimed at strengthening grassroots journalism, a cause close to both our hearts.

Chandan's journey into journalism was nothing short of illustrious, marked by academic excellence and a relentless pursuit of truth. A product of Kolkata's La Martiniere School, he went on to graduate from St Stephen's College, Delhi University, before earning a Master's and a DPhil from Oxford University. His scholarly background infused his journalism with depth and rigor, setting him apart in an era when reporting often prioritized speed over substance.

Starting his career at *The Statesman* in Kolkata, Chandan quickly rose through the ranks, moving to *The Times of India* in Delhi and then to the *Hindustan Times*, where he served as Executive Editor. But it was at *The Pioneer*, which he joined in 1993 and eventually led as editor and managing director, that he truly left his mark. Under his stewardship, *The Pioneer* transformed from a regional newspaper into a national voice known for its bold editorials, investigative reporting, and commitment to ethical journalism.

As a senior journalist with experience in broadcast and print media, I had contributed to various outlets, but writing for *The Pioneer* under Chandan's guidance was a defining phase. He had a knack for spotting potential in young and mid-career journalists, encouraging us to push boundaries while maintaining journalistic integrity. I remember submitting columns on socio-political issues, and Chandan would often call me personally to discuss nuances — sometimes challenging my views, other times refining them with his sharp insights. His feedback was never condescending; it was always aimed at elevating the discourse.

ON THIS DAY, I RAISE A SILENT TOAST TO MY FRIEND AND MENTOR. MAY HIS VISION FOR A VIBRANT, ETHICAL, AND INCLUSIVE MEDIA CONTINUE TO GUIDE US. REST IN PEACE, CHANDAN — YOU ARE MISSED, BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN

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In an industry often marred by sensationalism, Chandan championed balanced reporting, reminding us that journalism's true power lies in informing, not inflaming. Our collaboration extended beyond *The Pioneer* to the Indian Media Center initiatives, particularly through events and programs at IIMC, where I later served as Director General. IIMC, with its focus on training and skill upgradation for aspiring journalists, especially from grassroots levels, aligned perfectly with Chandan's vision for a more inclusive media ecosystem.

He was a frequent panelist and guest at IIMC events, sharing his experiences on topics ranging from the evolution of Indian language journalism to the challenges of digital media. One memorable occasion was a panel discussion on journalism ethics, where Chandan delved into how media could empower rural and underserved communities. He emphasized the need for skill-building programs that went beyond urban elites, advocating for training modules that equipped journalists from small towns with tools for investigative reporting and multimedia storytelling. Often me and IMC Founder and veteran journalist late Shyam Khosla would admire the manner in which Chandan, unlike people of his stature and with hectic work schedules, would spend days together at our meetings in Chandigarh and other cities discussing how to empower content wise and technologically the journalists working in small towns and districts.

Chandan's commitment to grassroots journalism was not mere rhetoric; it was action-oriented. At *The Pioneer*, he initiated coverage of underreported stories from India's hinterlands, giving voice to issues like rural development, tribal rights, and local governance. This approach resonated with the ethos of IMC's training programs, which aim to bridge the gap between metropolitan media and regional realities. He was also a passionate advocate for the soft power of Indian cinema, and was amongst the first to dedicate space in any mainstream newspaper to discussions linked to the industry. During our joint sessions, we discussed strategies to integrate digital literacy into journalism curricula, recognizing that the rise of social media demanded new skills for fact-checking and ethical online reporting. Chandan often shared anecdotes from his early days, illustrating how grassroots stories could influence national policy. He whole heartedly supported our demand for a National Register for Working Journalists, expanding the scope of Press Council of India to a wider Media Council of India and giving the ombudsman more teeth to enforce its mandate and fixing a minimum qualification for scribes. Later, as Vice Chancellor of Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism and Communication, Bhopal, I tried to take forward Chandan's dream by facilitating meetings between a high level delegation of Press Council of India led by Prof J S Rajput with local journalists and media educators for determining a minimum qualification for journalists in the backdrop of untrained and so called Citizen Journalists peddling fake news, misinformation and disinformation and thereby causing incalculable damage to the credibility of mainstream media.

Beyond his professional acumen, Chandan was a multifaceted personality—a politician, historian, and cultural enthusiast. Nominated to the Rajya Sabha twice by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2003 and 2010, he later joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in 2018. His political journey reflected his ideological flexibility and deep understanding of India's diverse socio-political fabric. As a parliamentarian, he contributed to debates on media freedom, education, and cultural heritage, often drawing from his journalistic roots. I recall him speaking passionately about preserving India's linguistic diversity in journalism, a theme that echoed in our IIMC collaborations. He was very supportive when I introduced Marathi, Malayalam, Urdu and Sanskrit courses at the Institute.

On a personal level, Chandan was warm, witty, and incredibly generous with his time. Despite his busy schedule, he mentored many, including me, during transitional phases in our careers. When I moved from active journalism to media education, Chandan was one of the first to encourage me, saying, "Suresh, teaching the next generation is the ultimate form of journalism — it's about passing the torch." His words stuck with me as I took on roles at IIMC and later at institutions like IIMC and Apeejay Institute of Mass Communication. He believed that journalism wasn't just a profession but a public service, and his life exemplified that. Chandan's impact on Indian media is immeasurable. He revived The Pioneer during turbulent times, expanding its reach and introducing innovative formats that blended print with emerging digital trends. His editorials were incisive, often critiquing power structures while advocating for democratic values. In fact, I vividly remember him telling me that financially managing a newspaper was a huge challenge and he was never interested in becoming a proprietor "but circumstances, the prospects of my journalist and non journalist colleagues losing their jobs, prompted me to take up this challenge."

In politics, he bridged the gap between media and governance, using his platform to highlight issues like press freedom and cultural preservation. Tributes poured in after his passing, from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to fellow journalists, underscoring his role in nurturing young talent. The Rajya Sabha even paid homage to him in November 2021, recognizing his contributions as a former MP and Editor.

In the context of grassroots journalism, Chandan's work at The Pioneer and his engagements with training bodies like IMC were pioneering. He supported programs that trained journalists in regional languages, ensuring that stories from India's villages reached national audiences. Today, as media faces challenges from misinformation and digital disruption, his emphasis on skill upgradation feels more relevant than ever. I often reflect on our discussions about integrating technology into journalism education — ideas that have influenced modern curricula at institutions across India. As we mark this anniversary, I am reminded of Chandan's enduring spirit. He was a man of many seasons: journalist, politician, scholar, and above all, a humanist.

His death snapped long-standing friendships, as noted by colleagues like Swapan Dasgupta, who remembered their bond dating back to 1966. For me, Chandan was a guiding light in a profession that demands both courage and compassion. His initiatives at the Indian Media Center — through panels, workshops, and advocacy — helped democratize journalism. In closing, Chandan Mitra's legacy is not confined to headlines or parliamentary records; it lives in the journalists he inspired, the stories he amplified, and the institutions he strengthened. On this day, I raise a silent toast to my friend and mentor. May his vision for a vibrant, ethical, and inclusive media continue to guide us. Rest in peace, Chandan — you are missed, but never forgotten.

India's missing digital infrastructure: Why a tech Superpower still imports Computer

KRISHNA V GIRI

PAYAL SETH

India generates close to one-fifth of the world's digital data yet hosts barely 2–3 per cent of global data-centre capacity. The result is stark: a country that creates the digital exhaust of 1.4 billion people depends heavily on infrastructure physically located elsewhere. Our firms, start-ups and even public systems increasingly rely on computing outside India's borders.

The global comparison is sobering (see Figure 1). Switzerland, with under ten million people, operates over a hundred data centres, while India, with 1.4 billion, has only around 150. That is roughly a hundred-fold gap on a per-capita basis. The paradox is that India, the world's software factory, is still a compute importer.

Our domestic capacity today is about 1.2 gigawatts (GW) and is projected to rise to 2 GW by 2026 and 9 GW by 2032. These are healthy growth numbers, yet they remain modest relative to our digital footprint, and as AI workloads surge, the deficit will deepen unless compute is treated as national infrastructure.

The Job Question and the Real Economic Multiplier

It is easy to dismiss data centres as "job-poor". Indeed, a typical 100 MW facility might sustain only around 50 long-term operational jobs and approximately 500 construction roles during its build phase. But this narrow view ignores the broader ecosystem they anchor: power infrastructure, fibre connectivity, cooling systems, server manufacturing and high-skilled services. The surrounding economic activity is expected to exceed ₹50,000 crore by FY 2027. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, a ₹4,500-crore facility (by Adani Group and Google) is projected to create over 16,000 direct and indirect jobs, and a broader renewables-plus-data-centre cluster could add over 70,000 indirect jobs.

If India reaches 9 GW by 2032, even conservative multipliers imply tens of thousands of direct construction jobs, several thousand high-skill permanent roles and many times that number in the wider ecosystem spanning equipment, power, cooling, connectivity and services. That is not labour-intensive in the way textiles are, but it is deeply consequential for state economies looking to anchor clusters of high-wage activity.

How India Built the Wrong Architecture

India entered the data-centre era early but built the wrong model. Beginning in 2006, government funding created State Data Centres (SDCs) with a ₹1,623-crore outlay to host e-governance workloads. They replaced scattered server rooms but were designed for kilowatt-scale loads — not the tens of megawatts modern workloads need. Managed as government IT assets rather than industrial platforms, they remain closed to private demand. India essentially built small server rooms and mistook them for a compute strategy.

The Policy Flip-Flop That Followed

Regulatory shifts deepened investor uncertainty. The 2018 Srikrishna Committee recommended storing a copy of all personal data in India and designating some as "critical", to be stored exclusively onshore. This signalled a strong localisation push and could have guaranteed domestic demand. But the 2023 law took the opposite approach: most cross-border transfers are allowed unless countries are blacklisted. Investors, expecting guaranteed local demand, faced years of ambiguity followed by a diluted regime. The result was predictable: hesitation and slow capacity growth.

A Compute Hub Emerges on the East Coast

Against this backdrop, Visakhapatnam (Vizag) demonstrates what a coherent ecosystem can achieve. A planned US$15-billion investment, including a subsea cable landing and gigawatt-scale compute capacity, aims to position Vizag as a regional gateway. Andhra Pradesh targets 6 GW in five years, with 1.6 GW already committed. The vision includes Google's largest India data centre and major renewable-energy integration. Andhra Pradesh's IT Minister has separately articulated a vision of Visakhapatnam as "India's Data City". While many states—Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana—have data-centre policies offering tariff waivers and land subsidies, the absence of a national framework risks a race to the bottom. States compete on incentives but lack coordination on grid integration, cooling standards, renewable-energy tie-ups and geographic distribution.

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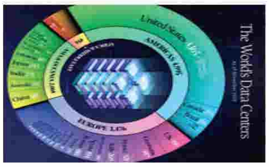
A Coherent National Strategy

India's compute transition will not happen by accident. It requires three deliberate shifts. First, treat data centres as core national infrastructure: link incentives to efficiency, water use and renewable PPAs. Second, adopt a national spatial strategy: coast to inland, cable-landing hubs to high-voltage corridors. Third, shift the state from operator to enabler: provide land, trunk infrastructure and clearances; let private capital build and run to global standards.



The Energy Constraint: Why Green Is Not Optional

Finally, no credible data-centre strategy can ignore energy. One expects data centres to consume nearly 30 per cent of national electricity in a decade. India's share today is modest, around 0.8 per cent of total electricity demand, rising to 2.6 per cent by 2030. But the grid is weaker and reliability uneven. One megawatt of IT load requires roughly 1.2-1.5 megawatts of grid power, depending on efficiency.

Without pairing new capacity with dedicated renewable generation, the sector risks public backlash in a country where many households still face outages. The only durable solution is to structurally couple new data-centre capacity with new renewable-energy projects. For instance, Madhya Pradesh's agreement with Submer Technologies is to develop up to 1 GW of energy-efficient, immersion-cooled, AI-ready data centres with up to 45 per cent energy savings and 90% water conservation relative to conventional designs. Another good example of the model India needs is Greenko's 1,680 MW pumped-storage hydropower project at Pinnapuram in Andhra Pradesh, one of the largest of its kind globally. By pairing long-duration storage with solar and wind, it functions as a round-the-clock clean-energy backbone.

The Stakes

The next decade will be defined not by who writes the algorithms, but by who owns the infrastructure that runs them. If India remains a talent exporter but a compute importer, it will capture only a fragment of the value the AI era creates. We already generate the data. We already have the developers. What we lack is the infrastructure, the strategy and the execution strength to convert that into sovereign compute power.

Krishna V Giri. Distinguished Fellow & Special Advisor to the Chairperson and Payal Seth, Fellow. Both are at Pahle India Foundation
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The high-technology turn in India–Russia relations

PRIYA GUPTA

President Vladimir Putin's 4-5 December visit to India has often been interpreted through conventional lenses such as energy supplies, defence transactions and routine diplomatic signalling. Putin described India as "a unique civilisation and a trusted partner," a sentiment that framed the tone of his visit and underscored why technological cooperation now sits at the centre of the relationship. "India has shown remarkable stability and responsible leadership," he observed in the interview.

India's emergence as the world's fifth-largest economy, with credible projections of becoming the third largest by 2027, forms the backdrop to this renewed engagement. A median age of twenty-eight strengthens India's long-term capacity in digital innovation, advanced computing and scientific research. Bilateral trade with Russia has now crossed sixty-five billion dollars. A large part of this increase came from the shift in energy sourcing, with Russian crude rising from one per cent of India's imports in 2021 to more than thirty-five per cent today. This shift generated savings estimated to be between five and six billion dollars in the last financial year.

Defence cooperation remains substantial. Russia continues to supply a significant share of India's military equipment, and a large proportion of India's defence platforms still depend on Russian technical ecosystems. The digital economy is projected to reach one trillion dollars by 2030. India has become the third-largest hub of global AI talent. Unlike earlier engagements that were centred on defence procurement and hydrocarbons, this visit placed technology at the forefront of bilateral priorities.

From Buyer and Seller to Joint Innovators

As he put it in the interview, Russia does not "simply sell weapons to India; we share technologies," a remark that reveals how Moscow now views India as a long-term co-developer rather than a downstream recipient.

Putin's interview reflects an important shift in Russia's approach to India. He stated that Russia seeks to share technology with India rather than remain a supplier of equipment. The principle of joint development is now extending beyond defence into artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, space systems, nuclear research and advanced materials. These sectors jointly form a coherent Indo-Russian technology corridor. It represents a move from a transactional relationship to one grounded in shared knowledge creation and scientific confidence. For India, this aligns closely with the pursuit of technological sovereignty and long-term strategic autonomy.

Artificial Intelligence and the New East-Eurasian Axis

Artificial intelligence is one of the clearest areas where the benefits of collaboration are visible. India contributes nearly sixteen per cent of global AI talent and hosts more than nine hundred AI-based start-ups. Its digital public infrastructure, which includes Aadhaar, UPI and DigiLocker, provides a fertile environment for designing and deploying large-scale AI systems. Russia adds strengths derived from several decades of scientific investment. When combined, these capacities give the partnership the ability to build independent AI architectures without relying on Western technological ecosystems.

Quantum Technologies as a Transformative Frontier

Quantum science is another domain in which cooperation could deliver long-term advantages. India's National Quantum Mission, supported by significant public investment, aims to build national capacity in quantum communication, quantum computing and advanced materials. Russia already possesses strong foundations in quantum physics and superconducting materials. Joint projects could include Quantum Key Distribution satellites, secure post-quantum communication protocols, shared quantum laboratories and hardware accelerators for high-performance computing.

Space Cooperation for Renewed Strategic Depth

India and Russia have a long history of collaboration in space. The recent visit opens the possibility of a much more expansive programme. Potential areas of cooperation include joint lunar exploration building upon India's Chandrayaan missions, propulsion systems for deep-space mobility and a coordinated navigation architecture through NavIC and GLONASS. This functions as a form of national infrastructure that influences communication, logistics, defence readiness and economic planning.

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AI for India

India has suddenly become the centre of global attention in artificial intelligence, not for producing the next OpenAI or DeepSeek, but for the sheer scale of opportunity it represents. Recent commitments by major tech players to invest tens of billions of dollars into India's AI ecosystem signal more than corporate ambition ~ they underscore the country's strategic importance in a world increasingly defined by AI capabilities.

Yet these investments also raise a pressing question: can India keep pace in the global AI race, or will it chart a different path that leverages its unique strengths?

The country possesses one undeniable advantage: human capital. India produces a high concentration of AI-skilled professionals, with a developer base 2.5 times the global average. Indian engineers and data scientists are actively contributing to research, publications, and start-ups, often punching above their economic weight.

Despite these strengths, India's AI ambitions are constrained by systemic limitations. Computational infrastructure is still sparse, semiconductor access is limited, and the scale of public and private R&D investment pales in comparison with the United States and China. Even the government's sovereign AI mission, though commendable in its intent, represents a fraction of the resources committed by nations that aim to dominate the field.

But focusing solely on building large foundational models may miss India's real opportunity. Unlike markets where the primary goal is technological prestige or dominance, India can harness AI to solve pressing social and economic problems. Already, AI-driven applications are reshaping the everyday lives of millions.

Tools delivering agricultural guidance in regional languages, platforms improving access to healthcare, and localised educational solutions illustrate how AI can create tangible impact. In these contexts, India does not need to outspend the global giants; it only needs to innovate in ways that are culturally and socially relevant.

The challenge lies in creating an environment that retains talent, fosters entrepreneurship, and builds the infrastructure necessary to scale solutions nationally and globally. Visa restrictions abroad and the mobility of AI professionals present an opportunity: India could become a magnet for domestic and diaspora talent, but only if policy, incentives, and research opportunities are aligned.

The downstream potential ~ AI-powered start-ups, consumer applications, and sector-specific solutions ~ may well define India's comparative advantage in the coming decade.

India's AI journey is therefore unlikely to mirror that of the US or China. It will not be about owning the biggest models or commanding the most computing power, but about embedding intelligence into the real-world problems that matter most.

If India can play this role effectively, it may not just keep pace in the AI age ~ it could redefine what it means to leverage technology for inclusive growth, demonstrating that innovation is not only about scale, but also about relevance.

Border of Distrust

The renewed fighting between Thailand and Cambodia is a reminder that ceasefires, when imposed rather than earned, rarely outlast the pressure that produced them. The truce pushed on to the two countries earlier this year offered a temporary lull, but not a settlement. It quietened artillery yet deepened resentment, and the relapse into hostilities was only a matter of time.

What is unfolding along the border between the two countries is not a war over land so much as a war over legitimacy. The terrain itself is insignificant ~ tiny, uninhabited pockets of scrub and stone.

What matters is who gets to define the national narrative. For Thailand's military, defending these slivers is a ritual affirmation of sovereignty, almost a sacred duty. For Cambodia, standing firm against a stronger neighbour serves both national pride and the political choreography of its leadership circle.

The latest escalation, triggered by a minor incident involving a Thai engineering team, might once have been defused through quiet negotiation.

But diplomatic muscle memory has atrophied. In its place lies a widening gulf of mistrust. Thailand believes Cambodia continues to act in bad faith, particularly with new land-mines maiming Thai soldiers and a provocative leak of a confidential phone call that toppled a Thai government. Cambodia insists it is the aggrieved party, boxed in by a more powerful neighbour determined to impose its will.

Domestic politics on both sides have aggravated the conflict. In Thailand, a fragile minority government has ceded broad autonomy to the military, which now views the border as a laboratory for proving its indispensability.

Public opinion, already inflamed by casualties and political humiliation, overwhelmingly backs a tough approach. Cambodia's leadership, meanwhile, remains shaped by the long shadow of its former strongman, whose behind-the-scenes manoeuvring often intensifies tensions rather than calming them.

International pressure may once again push the two sides towards a ceasefire, but external leverage cannot substitute for political will. Previous interventions froze the conflict without resolving the drivers of escalation. Another hurried truce may simply reset the clock for the next round of clashes.

True de-escalation will require steps neither side appears ready to take: verifiable cessation of land-mine deployment, a mutual halt to provocative troop movements, and the rebuilding of direct diplomatic channels that have been deliberately severed.

Most importantly, leaders in both countries must be willing to let go of the temptation to convert border skirmishes into symbols of nationalist righteousness.

Until that happens, the cycle is likely to persist ~ a pattern of brief silences punctuated by sudden bursts of artillery, of families fleeing and returning and fleeing again, of political leaders treating a volatile frontier as a stage for their own power struggles. What is at stake is not territory, but trust. And without trust, no ceasefire, however forcefully arranged, can hold.

Finger on the button

Nine nations now hold about 12,241 warheads, all led by men: Russia (Vladimir Putin), the US (Donald Trump), China (Xi Jinping), France (Emmanuel Macron), the UK (Keir Starmer), India (Narendra Modi), Pakistan (Shehbaz Sharif), Israel (Benjamin Netanyahu), and North Korea (Kim Jong Un), listed in order of nuclear arsenal size. The concentration of such destructive power in one gender is alarming. We urgently need institutions that ensure gender balance and create space for dissent in nuclear decision-making

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the last U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control treaty, expires on 5 February 2026. Moscow has proposed voluntarily keeping its limits for just one more year, a departure from the previous five-year extension. While Russia is still awaiting a formal reply, U.S. President Donald Trump ordered the resumption of nuclear testing in response to alleged covert tests by Russia, China, and Pakistan, a claim that immediately went critical, triggering a chain reaction of similar statements worldwide, with Moscow and Beijing in particular warning of reciprocal action.

Even a limited nuclear exchange, a 2022 study in Nature Food (Xia et al.) shows, involving just 100 Hiroshima-sized weapons would drop global temperatures by about 5°C, cause agricultural yields to plummet by 10–40 per cent, trigger a severe nuclear winter, and leave about 5.3 billion starved people within two years. Trump himself has admitted the existing stockpile can "blow up the world 150 times." After the first round, who will bother with the other 149? Kathryn Bigelow's movie A House of Dynamite captures the agony of time-pressured nuclear decision-making, whether to retaliate and risk annihilation or hold fire and lose Chicago.

Real-world events have been even more dramatic. The Russia-Ukraine war, Middle East and Korean tensions, and incidents such as India's accidental missile launch into Pakistan in 2022 show how close the world remains to catastrophe. Disasters have been averted only by restraint: John F. Kennedy's blockade during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, or Soviet officer Stanislav Petrov's refusal to act on a false alarm in 1983. Humanity survived, so far, by luck.

Annie Jacobsen's book Nuclear War: A Scenario warns that nuclear conflict could erupt in minutes of confusion, miscommunication, and automation errors, where a single launch can trigger an almost unstoppable chain of retaliatory nuclear strikes.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security, now marking 25 years, promotes the participation of women in peace processes, changing the narrative from viewing women solely as "victims of war" to "agents of peace."

The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which bans all nuclear test explosions, identifies 44 states that possessed nuclear power or research reactors in 1996. South Africa is the only country that has performed the Ashoka act by voluntarily dismantling all nuclear warheads.

Nine nations now hold about 12,241 warheads, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Yearbook 2025, all led by men: Russia (Vladimir Putin), the US (Donald Trump), China (Xi Jinping), France (Emmanuel Macron), the UK (Keir Starmer), India (Narendra Modi), Pakistan (Shehbaz Sharif), Israel (Benjamin Netanyahu), and North Korea (Kim Jong Un), listed in order of nuclear arsenal size.

Only four nations, India, Israel, Britain, and Pakistan, have ever had women leaders, and that was decades ago. Israel's Golda Meir, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, reportedly refused a nuclear strike even when their defenses collapsed.

Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto signed a Non-Nuclear Aggression Agreement with India, preferring diplomacy to brinkmanship. In contrast, Britain's Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May upheld the Trident deterrent, while India's Indira Gandhi herself authorized the first nuclear test in 1974.

The concentration of such destructive power in one gender is alarming. We urgently need institutions that ensure gender balance and create space for dissent in nuclear decision-making. As Groupthink theory (Irving Janis, 1972) explains, cohesive groups often suppress criticism to maintain consensus, resulting in flawed and catastrophic outcomes such as the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vietnam escalation.

Global military spending exceeds 2.7 trillion dollars, and the UN quotes an equivalent gap to meet Sustainable Development Goals. Humanity spends more on weapons than on eradicating poverty or educating children. Evidence shows women leaders prioritize social welfare and peacebuilding. Women are also twice as likely to develop radiation-related cancers, yet safety standards still rely on the male "Reference Man."

SRINIVAS MADHAV

The writer is a transparency and equality advocate and author. Views expressed are personal

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), championed by Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), and signed by 95 states, reflects this moral shift.

Its prominent women leaders such as Mia Mottley, Xiomara Castro, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, and Hilda Heine, and diplomats Beatrice Fihn (ICAN), Izumi Nakamitsu, and Tatiana Valovaya (UN Office for Disarmament Affairs) were instrumental in advancing gender-responsive disarmament.

Studies show mixed-gender teams produce more innovative and impactful work than uniform groups. A PNAS study (Larivière et al., 2013) found performance peaks near 50:50 gender balance. Research on risk perception (Slovic 1999; Finucane et al. 2000) shows women consistently foresee higher likelihood and severity of negative outcomes. In nuclear decision-making, that diversity adds a vital perspective focused on catastrophic consequences.

Can the world's five democratic nuclear powers, the US, UK, India, France, and Israel, truly lead humanity toward peace without equality in their own power corridors?

For the US, the recent Virginia gubernatorial election offers an example: both parties nominated women, Democrat Abigail Spanberger and Republican Winsome Earle-Sears, ensuring the state's first female governor and breaking a 400-year barrier. Should the U.S. build on this momentum by having both major parties nominate women for vice president in 2028, paving the way for an all-women presidential race by 2032, thus ending a 256-year gap?

Should Britain's Labour Party match the Conservatives' precedent by elevating women to leadership contention? Can India see the day when both major parties put forward women to lead the nation as prime minister? In France, with its two-round system, when is the right time to ensure women reach the decisive runoff through genuine multiparty backing? In Israel, half a century later, should women again lead, shaping deterrence through empathy as well as strategy?

North Korea, for all its dictatorship, now presents a paradoxically progressive image as Kim Jong Un's public appearances with his daughter, Kim Ju Ae, hint at a possible female succession, something even champions of democracy and gender equality, like the U.S. and France, have yet to achieve.

The Doomsday Clock stands at 89 seconds to midnight, the closest to annihilation in its 75-year history. Excluding women from the nuclear chain of command is a risk humanity can no longer afford. Women bear the burden of creating life; it is only just they also share the authority over decisions that could end it.

The Korea Herald

Why AI ethics needs 'gongsheng'

I recently tried a small experiment in my graduate seminar on AI ethics. I asked the room, mostly bright students in their 20s and 30s, a simple question: "When you close your eyes and imagine a user for the AI system you are designing, whose face do you see?"

The answers were telling. Most admitted they pictured someone like themselves: young, quick with a smartphone, constantly engaged with digital interfaces. Almost no one pictured their own grandparents. That moment of silence in the classroom stayed with me. It revealed a blind spot in how we talk about technology. We spend so much energy debating data privacy, algorithmic bias, or the existential risks of some future superintelligence. These are real issues. But while we worry about the future, we are failing the people already losing ground today.

We live in a world that worships speed. German sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls this "social acceleration." Everything moves faster, and the time we have to adjust shrinks. In this environment, experience loses value. We no longer look to older adults for the kind of wisdom our ancestors sought: when to plant and how to harvest. Instead, we see them as obstacles — people who hold up the line because they can't navigate a touchscreen kiosk or a smartphone login.

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This is what scholars call "heartless harm." The developers behind these systems do not intend to exclude anyone. There is no malice. Yet the outcome is brutal. If a voice assistant cannot understand a slower, shakier voice, or if a smart home interface demands the eyesight of a 20-year-old, we are building a world that quietly shuts the door on millions of people aging or living with disabilities. So how do we fix this? Many say we need a new ethical vocabulary. My colleagues at Yonsei introduced me to a concept called "gongsheng." Often translated as "symbiosis," it means more than simply existing side by side. Yiwen Zhan at Beijing Normal University describes it as a "co-becoming": a way for different beings to grow together through interaction. It is not about tolerating differences; it is about needing them to thrive. Shoujun Hu at Fudan University takes this further into social theory. He argues that you cannot have true gongsheng without equality. It does not matter how old you are or what your job is; if the relationship isn't grounded in mutual respect, it isn't symbiotic. It is just parasitic. This isn't just abstract philosophy. In Korea, we are seeing these ideas put into practice. Lee Yeun-sook, emeritus professor at Yonsei University, has spent years translating this philosophy into concrete designs through her "aging in community" framework. Her argument is simple but profound: Getting older shouldn't mean your world gets smaller. Instead of "aging in place," which often just means staying home alone, she proposes an adaptive system where the home, the community and the city all work together. Her research shows how we can use technology to make this happen. They look at smart mobility systems that connect a senior's front door to the local clinic, or AI-assisted planning tools that help cities allocate resources fairly. This is where the rubber meets the road for AI ethics. Professor Lee's work suggests that we shouldn't just ask if a robot is "intelligent." We should ask if it helps build a relationship. Does this technology help a grandmother stay connected to her neighborhood, or does it isolate her further?

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Nip it in the bud

Sir, The condemnation of the impeachment move against Justice Swaminathan by 56 ex-Judges is well-timed. The motion filed by the DMK alleges misconduct ~ specifically 'lack of impartiality, bias along religious lines, and decisions that might contradict secular constitutional principles'. The party feels that the order passed by the judge for 'lighting the Karthigai Deepam lamp at a site near both a Temple and a Dargah' could inflame communal tensions.

The DMK is a party known to attribute motives to judges whose judgements are not palatable to it. For instance, in 2007, despite the Supreme Court order banning a 'Bandh' on Oct. 1, the state government went ahead with it in support of the Sethusamudram shipping channel project, with a party MP even threatening the then judge(s) with impeachment! Again, despite the categorical SC ruling upholding the NEET in selection of candidates for medical admissions, the party keeps raising objections against it. However, the same party does not hesitate to rush to the courts whenever it feels aggrieved, or if a VIP party member is jailed.

The impeachment of a HC judge is resorted to only in cases of serious misconduct – 'proven misbehaviour or incapacity' and not whenever there is an inconvenient or unpopular ruling.

As the ex-Judges contend, the present impeachment attempt is anti-democratic and a dangerous precedent meant to intimidate the judiciary.

If the ruling of a judge is found to be biased, the aggrieved party can always appeal against it, wherever permissible. Even the present contested judgment has been challenged by the state government in the High Court benches and the Supreme Court.

The primary motivation of most politicians is an electoral win, whereas a judge is expected to decide disputes based on facts and in accordance with the law. In the circumstances, one hopes the Speaker rejects the impeachment motion, nipping the ongoing theatrics in the bud!

Yours, etc., V. Jayaraman,
Chennai, 13 December.

Online vigil

Sir, This refers to the editorial, "Fragile Firewalls" published today. The Australian move might influence discussions in India about online safety and digital responsibility ~ possibly encouraging stricter regulation or prompting emphasis on cyber literacy. However, the issue underlines a broad global tension: how to protect children from online harm while preserving access to opportunities, expression and connectivity that social media offers.

We should look beyond outright bans and instead focus on building a healthier digital environment for our children. Excessive control can stifle innovation and creativity. Instead, social platforms must clearly disclose their safety levels, much like nutrition labels on food, so that parents know what their children are consuming online and guide them without resorting to constant policing. Agencies could then use AI to flag risks based on data (age, content type, usage patterns, contracts, etc.) Schools must also equip children to handle online pressure, recognise misleading content and develop balanced digital habits.

With such policies in place, we can protect young minds without pulling them away from the benefits of the digital age. There is no dearth of research that highlights harmful effects of the overuse of social media on kids. Their mental health is being impacted by misinformation, cyberbullying, body shaming, pornography, etc.

The perils of online toxicity were chillingly depicted in the award-winning Netflix series Adolescents. The all-important question, of course, is: will the Aussie ban prove effective?

Yours, etc., S S Paul,
Nadia, 12 December.

Kerala's development paradox

MAYA K AND NEERAJ KUMAR

Kerala has long been recognised as a unique model of development among Indian states, particularly for its remarkable social achievements despite modest economic growth. The state's success in education, healthcare, and human development has attracted global attention from scholars examining whether high-quality social outcomes can be achieved without robust industrial performance. Kerala ranks among the top Indian states in human development indicators with high literacy, low infant mortality, long life expectancy, and minimal poverty and recently topped the SDG India Index 2023–24.

However, despite these achievements, Kerala has been struggling to sustain its industrial growth and manage increasing fiscal distress. While it ranks 11th among Indian states in projected Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), with an estimated Rs 13.11 lakh crore for 2024-25 and a per capita GSDP of Rs 2,95,787 (2022–23) compared to the national average of Rs 1,96,983, its economic growth has slowed. The RBI's Handbook on Statistics on Indian States 2023-24 placed Kerala 30th in the last five years' economic growth among 33 states and union territories.

In recent years, Kerala has emerged as one of India's most fiscally distressed states, primarily due to its high debt burden, limited revenue sources, and reduced fiscal autonomy. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) Report 2023-24 reveals that Kerala's total revenue receipts amounted to Rs 1,24,486.15 crore, while revenue expenditure reached Rs 1,42,626.34 crore, leaving a revenue deficit of Rs 18,140 crore. Including borrowing needs, the fiscal deficit stood at Rs 34,258 crore, nearly 3 per cent of GSDP. A deeper look at Kerala's fiscal structure explains this vulnerability. More than 73 per cent of revenue receipts are spent on salaries, pensions, and interest payments, all non-discretionary obligations. The CAG report notes spending of Rs 38,572 crore on salaries, Rs 27,106 crore on pensions, and Rs 25,644 crore on interest payments. This leaves less than a quarter of revenue for essential services like education, healthcare, infrastructure, and welfare. In effect, Kerala is borrowing to meet basic expenses, leaving little fiscal space for future investment, much like a household that spends most of its income on loan repayments and bills, with little left for food, children's education, or savings.

Kerala's public debt receipts for 2023-24 touched a staggering Rs 1,04,354.86 crore, but only 13 per cent of this, about Rs 13,584.45 crore, was used for capital expenditure. This means that only a small portion of borrowed funds was allocated to creating assets, while the rest was covered by day-to-day expenses. Five years ago, nearly a quarter of borrowings supported productive investments; today, debt increasingly fills routine financial gaps. The effects of this shift are readily apparent in the daily lives of citizens. They observe deteriorating road conditions, ageing school buildings, and overstretched healthcare facilities, all of which occur alongside a rising debt burden. The Kerala Fiscal Responsibility (Amendment) Act, 2022, had set ambitious goals: eliminating the revenue deficit and achieving a 0.8 per cent revenue surplus of GSDP by 2023-24, and limiting debt to 33.7 per cent of GSDP. In reality, the state reported a revenue deficit of 1.58 per cent, while debt reached 36.23 per cent of GSDP, slightly improved from the previous year but still above target. Though the fiscal deficit (2.99 per cent) remained within the 4 per cent ceiling, this was mainly due to reduced expenditure rather than increased revenue. In summary, Kerala did not meet its own legally mandated financial targets.

A significant challenge lies in the composition of Kerala's revenue. In 2023–24, tax revenues stood at Rs 96,072 crore, but grants-in-aid from the Union Government declined sharply to Rs 12,068 crore, less than half of what Kerala received two years earlier. This reduction, coupled with only moderate growth in state taxes, tightened the fiscal space even as expenditure demands grew, especially for welfare programmes, subsidies, and healthcare. Though it shows, Kerala continues to prioritise spending on social programmes to support human development. However, this commitment has led to increased financial strain. The state's financial strain has even led to a petition before the Supreme Court, alleging that Kerala has been denied its constitutionally guaranteed share of revenue. Despite its efforts to improve tax collection relative to GSDP, Kerala remains heavily dependent on central transfers and grants.

These fiscal pressures directly affect citizens, with over two-thirds of state revenue absorbed by committed payments, and little remains for infrastructure development, such as schools, roads, or public transport. Consequently, community development projects stagnate, leading to long-term socio-economic challenges, including traffic congestion, insufficient educational facilities, and weak transport networks. Rising public debt also increases interest obligations, diverting future revenues to repay today's borrowings.

To cope, governments may resort to raising taxes, cutting subsidies, or increasing user fees, potentially worsening living costs and inequality. High deficits also weaken Kerala's ability to respond to natural disasters, health crises, or economic shocks. For a disaster-prone state with strong welfare expectations, this fiscal rigidity poses serious risks to public safety and well-being. Limited financial flexibility delays responses, amplifying hardship during crises. Kerala's fiscal challenge is also rooted in its distinct economic structure. Unlike manufacturing-based states, Kerala's strength lies in the export of human capital, particularly skilled workers in education, healthcare, and the service sector across India and abroad. This has generated enormous remittance inflows, accounting for nearly 23 per cent of India's total remittance, benefitting both Kerala's households and the national economy. Yet, remittances do not directly translate into significant tax revenue for the state. This creates a paradox: while Keralites are relatively prosperous, the state government remains financially constrained. Unlike states that export goods and collect production-based taxes, Kerala cannot tax exported labour, limiting its fiscal capacity. Kerala's challenges extend beyond fiscal imbalances. The state faces recurring floods, natural disasters, an ageing population, and an ongoing brain drain as youth and skilled professionals migrate for better opportunities. Environmental degradation further compounds these problems. Inefficient dam management, unregulated quarrying in the Western Ghats, illegal forest encroachments, and ecologically insensitive tourism projects have increased Kerala's vulnerability to disasters. The Gadgil Committee Report warned that extensive mining and quarrying in environmentally fragile zones heighten the risk of landslides, and the prediction has been consistently proven correct in recent years. Addressing these environmental challenges demands stricter land-use regulation, improved disaster management, and a commitment to sustainable development that balances tourism, infrastructure, and ecology. Kerala's resilience depends on aligning its environmental policies with long-term safety and sustainability.

Another emerging challenge is population ageing. With one of India's highest proportions of elderly citizens, Kerala must move beyond viewing older adults as a non-productive group. Instead, the state can leverage their skills and experience through flexible employment, mentorship programmes, and community-based initiatives, turning a potential burden into a valuable resource. Kerala's dependence on remittances also exposes it to global economic fluctuations and migration trends. Diversifying its economy by revitalising small-scale industries, promoting green technology, and encouraging entrepreneurship could create sustainable domestic growth and reduce overreliance on external income sources. Enhancing vocational training and research-linked higher education can help retain youth talent while aligning skills with emerging sectors such as renewable energy, biotechnology, and digital services. Experts argue that fiscal reforms at the national level could also ease Kerala's strain. They suggest that the Finance Commission's devolution formula should better reflect contributions of human capital to national development, not just tangible goods production. Service-oriented states like Kerala play a crucial role in India's growth by supplying skilled professionals nationwide and abroad. Recognising this contribution in fiscal transfers would provide Kerala with fairer and more flexible financial space.

Ultimately, Kerala's experience illustrates the complex trade-off between social progress and economic sustainability. The state has demonstrated that prioritising human development can lead to remarkable social outcomes, even without rapid industrialisation. Yet, sustaining this model requires a reimagined approach, one that strengthens fiscal discipline, expands revenue bases, promotes sustainable industries, and protects the environment.

Kerala's most significant asset remains its people, educated, skilled, and globally connected. By reforming its fiscal management, fostering local enterprise, and adapting to demographic and ecological realities, Kerala can build a resilient, inclusive economy. With adequate budgetary support and forward-looking governance, the "Kerala model" can continue to serve as a blueprint for equitable and sustainable development in India.

(The writers are Assistant Professors, Department of Economics, CHRIST (deemed to be University), Bengaluru)

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

Let us think again

I intend to go down on my knees and pray – perhaps you should too: Lord, take away my certainties and let me think again. Wipe out my rooted beliefs and allow me to start with a clean slate. Cure me please of my sloth of clinging to worn, old thoughts and set me free to ponder afresh. Help me shed my lazy habit of living with old assumptions, habits and thoughts and begin anew. Let me think again!

This desperate plea arose from a look at myself and the people around me. I feel submerged in a sea of old ideas, shopworn clichés, hackneyed notions and tired, trite mindsets. The problem with the endless airing of old concepts is that you breathe that air and start responding with your old concepts. You start living contentedly in the same fetid biosphere. Didn't Oscar Wilde once say that all arguments are vulgar because everybody in a polite society has the same idea?

Why do I want to get rid of my old ideas? Because they belong to the world of yesterday, the world that doesn't exist anymore except in my nostalgia. The thoughts that the old world generated served their purpose at the time; now they are the detritus that stops the inflow of new ideas. I remember a friend once telling me, "Why should I move to Windows 10 when Windows 7 on my computer does everything well?" I had to alert him that Windows 10 did everything Windows 7 did and did it better, and it did a few more things that Windows 7 could not do. He did not think of those things because he lived in the Windows 7 world, which did not prompt him to think of things beyond.

It is easy and comfortable to live in the old world because we are accustomed to it. It is endearingly familiar and calls for no effort to deal with it. The only problem is the very worst: that world doesn't exist anymore. The political ideas your father used to analyze and understand the events in his days are nearly useless today, because the political problems today are different and more complex. If you are still loyally spouting his ideas, paying dues to his party and paying homage to his leaders, you are yourself as antiquated as your venerable father. The books you once read in college, some of which rightly impressed you, are passé too. They talked of issues that mattered then; the issues today are different, perhaps hugely different. All that past reading – sorry to tell you – is not much help. If you cite them, you are wading into irrelevance. If you want to live, act and make a difference in the new world, where you happen to be, better pick up some new books. Don't tell me of Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky, for you didn't read them then either. Chances are that when you pick up a new book, even on an old subject you think you know well, you will find yourself perturbed by new ideas that may seem disturbingly different and dangerously deviant.

The most disturbing will be the realization that things that you had long considered quite settled are still open and being furiously litigated. The relationship of men and women, the way parents ought to rear their children, how major decisions in the family should be taken, the role of older people especially after they are no longer functional, the use of authority by people earlier considered sacrosanct, such as bosses and policemen – you will find to your horror are all up in the air, being debated and fought over. If it seems perverse to you, what is perverse is your outlook. It is hopelessly out of touch with extant reality.

What handicaps us are our tenacious assumptions, about life, society and values. Much of the time we have simply absorbed them unquestioningly in our family, our club, our community, our community of friends, with scant examination of their roots in logic, equity or ethics. We are quickly threatened by contrary views, for we see them as a wrecking ball for our entire worldview. Perhaps those are no more than a partial emendation of our opinion. Perhaps, a little more painfully, those are well-equipped to wreck some significant article of faith dear to us. By forcing us to check on our long-held notions, and then hopefully modify some of those notions, troublesome contrary views make a therapeutic difference to our life. My brilliant friend from Jamaica, Rashad, who toiled for years in the academic backwoods before getting tenure in an Ivy League institution, talks sarcastically of our invincible tribalism: we always want to sit with, talk to and have meals with people who live and think like us.

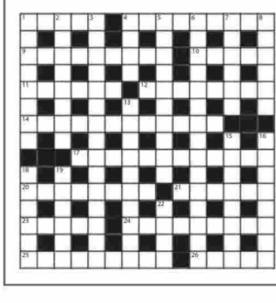
Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

"We can keep living and thinking the way we have always done, without the slightest change," he says. "We don't have the humility to reconsider the way we do things or the courage to examine the fairness of the way we have always thought. We simply don't want the unease of unfamiliar ideas or untried behaviors."

Psychologists talk of the desirability bias. We like to be with people who will agree with us, who we think we will like from the word Go. It may not be a bad idea to be a little adventurous and spend a few hours with people who seem to be from another 'tribe.' They may plant a few seeds of alien or unusual ideas. Learning, we know, needs focus and energy. Unlearning requires curiosity and courage. And, above all, relearning demands elasticity and imagination.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

Crossword | No. 293322



Last Saturday's Solution

ACROSS

1 Damp fog gathers round (5)
4 Dirty trick reported at the same time (9)
9 Getting hold of recipe, magistrate fixed a meal (9)
10 A leader of Brexiteers needs striking roughly (5)
11 Gallery lost half of Caravaggio works (6)
12 His luck changed, close to someone similar (8)
14 Acquiring shopping area by hospital, joins property owners (12)
17 Wretched record playing well into the night? (12)
20 Mark cuts grass, uncomplaining (8)
21 Artistic technique mostly creating mood (6)
23 One fellow abandons dinosaur droppings (5)
24 At home, tucked into pineapple drink (9)
25 Hems can go high for this dress (9)
26 Article with extremely macabre subject (5)

DOWN

1 To rally crowd, I tell a story about head of state (8)
2 Graphic symbol or image daughter redesigned (8)
3 Could be to yield, wanting minimum of kerfuffle? (4,2,5,4)
4 Starter of mutton to devour? (4)
5 Advanced plumbing needs little time to be installed – amazing (10)
6 We're told if a force 10 on way – by this? (7,8)
7 Well-known passage from mystic on I Ching (6)
8 Charlie drops out of Middle English course (6)
13 Hall porters recognise suspect outside college (10)
15 Place for holidaymakers affected the audience's view (8)
16 On reflection, did wrong pinching one monarch's bottom (8)
18 Josh is boring jerk? Very sad (6)
19 It's an adventure, missing commercial flight (6)
22 Broadcast live in the morning (4)

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

100 Years Ago

Front page of The Statesman dated 15 December 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

At Home the campaign for economy is gaining force. Nor is that surprising in face of the state of trade revealed by the figures of the Ministry of Commerce. Electors who are hard pressed by the taxpayer almost every day of their lives are not willing to absorb the theory that Government departments must cost three hundred per cent more than they did in pre-war days and that in times of general peace the cost of armaments must be much higher than they were when all Europe was arming for possible, catastrophe. Big cuts are promised in the Army Estimates next year, and the Air Ministry is stated to have embarked on a voluntary campaign of reduction of its immediate demands. Even so Mr. Churchill will have the greatest difficulty in making ends meet, and it may well prove that his suggestion of fresh taxes is not quite the joke that he would make it appear. If new taxes did become necessary the popularity of the Ministry, which is not growing, would suffer a most grievous fall.

News Items

PRELIMINARY WORK

DRAFTING CONVENTION OF CONTROL

Geneva, Dec.

A Preparatory Committee for the Disarmament Conference has been fixed to meet at Geneva on February 15. The questions to be submitted appertain to the nature of the international supervision to be established, if possible, in order to ensure that countries keep within the limits of the scale of armaments fixed for them. The Council has agreed to a Committee composed of M. Colban, M. Guani and M. Veverka which will undertake forthwith a preliminary investigation with a view to drafting a convention for the control of the private manufacture of arms, munitions, and implements of war, which will serve as the basis for discussion at the International Conference.— Reuter.

7-TON FLYING BOAT

TRIAL TRIP OF NEW BRITISH CRAFT

(British Official Wireless.)
Leafield (Oxford), Dec.

The new large flying boat which has been built for the Admiralty was launched at dawn yesterday at Lythain, on the coast of Lancashire. Her two Napier Lion engines are capable of developing nearly 1,000 horse-power. The machine set off for Felixtowe, 830 miles away on the East Coast. Yesterday evening she had arrived at Plymouth, having covered 460 miles of the journey. She is built of stainless steel, measures nearly 90 feet across the wings and weighs seven tons.

INDO-EUROPE AIRWAY

PLANS FOR ITALIAN SERVICES

London, Dec.

The Marchese de Pinedo, in an interview in London stated that probably within three years Italy would have inaugurated Her own Eastern service along the route the Marchese followed in his recent flight, and would soon link up with the contemplated British-Kantara-Karachi service.—Reuter's Special Service.

GERMAN CABINET

ATTEMPTS TO FORM GRAND COALITION

("Times" Special Service.)
London, Dec.

Germany has now been without a Cabinet for a week, and it is still impossible to say that any progress has been made with the attempt to form a Grand Coalition Cabinet, comprising the Centre, Democrats, and Peoples' Party, and the Socialists. This is due to the attitude of the two last-named parties, who up till now have refused to co-operate, one with another. President Hindenburg has summoned Herr Fehrensack, leader of the Centre Party, who is at present endeavouring to compose the differences between the People's Party and the Socialists but it is generally considered the efforts will fail, especially in view of the bargaining demands of the Socialists, which greatly complicates the situation.

INSIDE VINTAGE CHICAGO TRIBUNE • NATION & WORLD

OPINION

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EDITORIALS

The chaotic situation involving property taxes and Cook County tax sales

SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

If you are still staring at your eyewatering Cook County property tax bill — due Dec. 15, as in Monday — you might well be wondering what would happen if you failed to pay in a timely fashion.

First, you'll be charged a late fee of 0.75% per month (9% annually), which is actually less egregious than was previously the case, thanks to the efforts of Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas. About 13 months after the second installment due date, the county must by Illinois law sell your debt at public auctions called the Annual Tax Sale and Scavenger Sale. There, investors who know how to play this system (often because their parents taught them) immediately pay your tax debt to the county. They don't get your property (yet), but they do obtain so-called tax certificate, giving them a claim. If you have not paid (taxes, interest, fees etc.) after about another 30 months (less if it is commercial property) that buyer can snag your place and kick you to the curb. Often, the delinquent owner stays put but is no longer a property owner; instead they now owe rent to the taxpayer to live in the place they used to own.

As we have written before, this system feels like something from the 19th century; it has the historical stench of a racist method to strip equity from Black homeowners.

There is only one argument in its favor: Cook County gets paid in a timely way. But it then interjects a self-interested private party into the procedure even though the dispute is between the homeowner and Cook County. And, of course, the sale results in a loss of equity. Let's say your home is worth $200,000 and you have a mortgage of $150,000 and you can't pay your $5,000 bill. You'd end up losing the $45,000 you have in the house, even after the sale.

That part, that heinous aspect of this system, is what a federal judge found to be unconstitutional last Monday. Ruling on a class-action lawsuit filed more than three years ago and falling in line with a 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision involving a case in Hennepin County, Minnesota (Hennepin v. Tyler), U.S. District Judge Matthew F. Kennelly found that the sales violate the Fifth Amendment's prohibition against taking property without just compensation and the Eighth Amendment's ban on excessive fines. He's right, of course. Everybody involved in the system knows he's right.

So this cannot — will not — continue. The salient question now, yet to be ruled upon, is what liability Cook County has for those wronged in the past. We'd say the plaintiffs have a very good case and not just the 1,700 who are part of the class-action suit. Similar cases are pending in DuPage and Lake counties.

The wild thing here is that Illinois is the *only* U.S. state that failed to nix its tax sales in light of the Supreme Court's ruling. As a result, the counties have argued that they should not be the ones paying out because they were following state law. *They* may well have a decent case when they claim to have had no choice in the matter. The state? Perhaps not as much.

The counties have made other novel legal arguments: it's a private investor who gets the equity so it's not their fault (sue the buyer instead); there is more than ample chance to pay and even a fund to help — that kind of thing. But that stuff is mostly balderdash. Equity was being stripped and the Supremes have said, no can do. Either the state or the county is the responsible party. If you lose your home, you won't care which unit of government is responsible.

This mess might be yet bigger.

There's another interesting case involving a situation in Isabella County, Michigan. Michigan does *not* now have a system like Illinois but when it is determining what equity it should be remitting back to the homeowner, it uses the basis of the tax sale. But in this case, the descendent of a deceased homeowner argues that the proceeds from the sale are not a fair representation of the home's true market value, but a mere fraction.

Obviously, you get more if you sell your house on the open market over time than you do in a rushed, shady auction (and these are rushed, shady auctions). So that's another problem for Cook County. Even if it agrees to repay equity as part of some settlement, how will it determine what that amount should be?

You could argue that if you don't want your home sold under duress, then pay your darn property taxes. Fair point there. Banks foreclose all the time and sell property at auction, often getting less than a standard listing would bring in. But the justices have said equity must be repaid by government entities and we've heard plenty of stories of Cook County tax sales resulting in buyer bargains. After all, that's why these buyers are willing to show up and then wait 30 months for their bounty.

So, reform is needed here and, based on the actions of the courts, needed quickly. The solution won't be easy; maybe Cook County is going to need some kind of real estate sales arm, which might not be as crazy as it sounds, given that we think it's fair for government to recoup its costs from the property tax scofflaws.

The real value to the Illinois counties, of course, is not the tax sale but the *threat* of the tax sale that gets people to pay up. However this is resolved, some kind of consequence for not paying will have to be in place.

But the courts are clear and, in this case, morally right: Government can't take your entire equity if it is more than what you owe.

Of course, if Illinois did not have such crushing property taxes in the first place, this would be far less of a problem.

Porch piracy is costly and frustrating. And Chicagoland is a hotbed of parcel theft

You've probably seen those doorbell-camera videos of petty thieves dashing up to homes and swiping freshly delivered packages, sometimes getting caught in booby traps that end up covering them in paint. Porch pirates, as they're known, might be a staple of Tiktok. But they get especially busy during the holiday season, preying on an astonishing number of victims across Chicagoland.

We recognize that such small-scale stealing does not rise to the level of serious crime by Chicago standards. Every week, gun violence claims multiple lives. Homicides, assaults and armed robberies have marred our city's reputation worldwide.

But the theft of parcels from the doorsteps of honest citizens isn't harmless either. Even though crime rates are declining overall, Chicagoland has the unfortunate distinction of being a leader in this annoying category of crime.

A recent survey from security company SafeWise pegs Chicago as the No. 1 metropolitan area for parcel theft, based on the financial toll it takes: the metro area apparently will lose an estimated $254 million in packages to porch pirates this year.


Jorgina Mojica directs large packages at a diverter during the ribbon-cutting ceremony and tour of the Amazon fulfillment center in Merrillville, Indiana, on March 19. **JOHN SMIERCIAK/FOR THE POST-TRIBUNE**

SafeWise, which has tracked package theft for eight years, estimates that American consumers will lose $15 billion to stolen packages in 2025, with retailers out another $22 billion. That's below the more than $100 billion estimated annual loss from traditional shoplifting, but hardly pocket change.

A competing online survey by a different security company unearthed some interesting details. Fewer than 1 in 4 victims of package theft bother to report the crime to law enforcement, assuming correctly that the police aren't going to stage a manhunt every time a package goes missing. Instead, most complain to the retailer or delivery services such as FedEx and UPS, according to the Security.org report.

Theft rates tend to be high in some rural areas and suburbs where security is looser than in cities. People living in apartments and condos without a doorman or mailroom are among the most vulnerable, as they attract thieves aiming to steal a bunch of packages at once.

What to do? There's plenty of advice available, starting with the simple choice of buying stuff (or at least picking it up) in brick-and-mortar stores, as opposed to getting online orders delivered to the home. E-commerce is still growing, but it's possible that frustration with package theft could be a factor in slowing it down.

E-commerce companies take porch pirates seriously enough to offer services such as Amazon Key, which lets drivers leave packages inside locked garages, doors or gates. That requires a lot of trust, however, compared to less-intrusive steps such as tracking a delivery to ensure someone is available to receive it.

Outdoor cameras and smart lighting have become very popular. They can also help solve crimes.

Chicago police Superintendent Larry Snelling told us recently that technology has revolutionized crime-fighting techniques. "We police differently now," he said during a meeting with the Tribune Editorial Board in September. "Everything we do is intelligence-based. The use of technology is the key."

During a separate session with the Tribune on Dec. 9, Cook County State's Attorney Eileen O'Neill Burke said the prevalence of cameras has provided some of the best possible video evidence for convicting criminals. And she acknowledged that package thefts aren't trivial, as they can make people feel unsafe, telling us, "There has to be a feeling of safety all over the system."

You can say that again. Porch pirates, technology is gaining on you and your infuriating violations of our personal spaces. Keep your mitts off our baby formula, pet food, medication, work supplies, holiday presents and all the other packages arriving in the days ahead.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"From this moment forward, my purpose is simple: that those responsible for her death must be held accountable."

— Yolanda Rivera, Officer Krystal Rivera's mother

"Overwhelmingly, Hoosiers, reaching out, have said one thing, and that is that they do not, and I do not, want to live in a country where our republic is as fickle as this legislation asks it to be."

— Democratic state Sen. J.D. Ford of Indianapolis on the failed redistricting effort

"Look, I'm going to do everything that I can to avoid the chaos that, quite frankly — there are some individuals that want chaos to occur. Because those interests benefit from chaos."

— Mayor Brandon Johnson

"If the mayor goes for a veto, that's on him. Then he's going to be the one driving this city toward the fiscal cliff."

— Ald. Scott Waguespack, 32nd

"Whoever thought the Hoosiers would be here? But now the Hoosiers are flipping champs! Let's go!"

— Fernando Mendoza, Indiana quarterback after beating Ohio State for the Big Ten title

"Both teams are going to be out there. Whatever. If it's 100 degrees or it's negative 100, both teams are out there."

— Al Harris, Bears defensive backs coach/passing game coordinator

OPINION

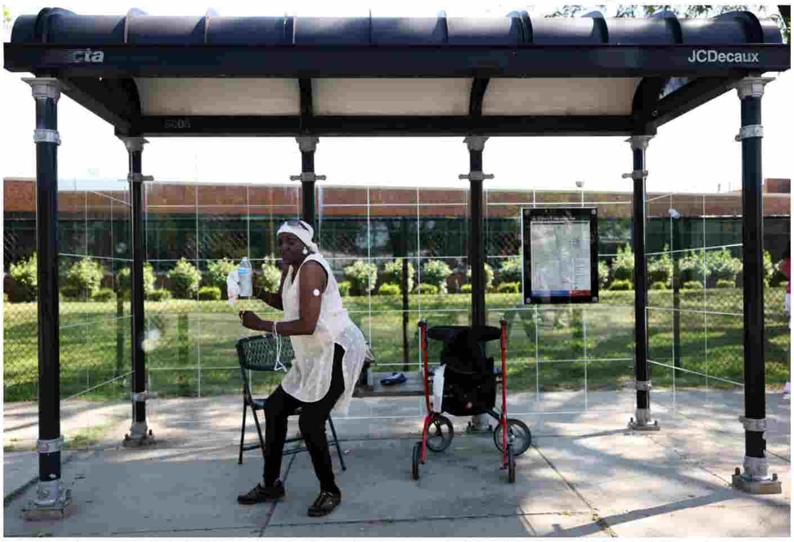
Robert A.M. Stern wrote 7,000 pages about New York architecture. Who can write Chicago's tome?

Edward Keegan

Chicagoans know Robert A.M. Stern better than they might realize; his ubiquitous designs for bus stop shelters and other street furniture for JC Decaux have graced streets throughout the city since 2002.

The noted New York-based architect passed away on Thanksgiving at the age of 86.

The bus shelters are an amalgam of varied historical influences and reveal a bit of the contradictory forces that shaped Stern's most intriguing work. The structures deploy largely traditional columns that support shallow arched roofs above glass partitions — save for a single wall that always holds the ever-changing supersized advertisements that financially supported the wholesale replication of the structures at most CTA stops. They are memorable while being quiet and discreet, becoming thoughtful background players in the larger Chicago story.



Vivian Loving dances under the shade of a Robert A.M. Stern bus shelter while viewing the Chicago Labor Day parade along South Cottage Grove Avenue in the Pullman neighborhood Sept. 2, 2023. **JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

One Bennett Park, center, in Streeterville, July 29, 2019. **ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Architect Robert A.M. Stern at his office in New York on Oct. 31, 2007. He died Nov. 27 at his home in Manhattan. **RICHARD PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

Stern was no stranger to Chicago. His father was raised here and attended the Dwight Perkins-designed Carl Schurz High School — a building that a young Stern visited with his dad. Beyond the bus shelters, he designed a handful of notable buildings here including the old Banana Republic on North Michigan Avenue (now demolished), the One Bennett Park residential tower in Streeterville and a new south portico for the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry that's slated to be completed in 2027. In the early 1980s, Stern produced a memorable "late entry" to the Chicago Tribune Tower competition and was among a group of architects and planners who worked on the proposed 1992 World's Fair on Northerly Island. In 2011, Stern won the Chicago-based Richard H. Driehaus Prize — the Pritzker Prize alternate conceived by the Chicago businessman and philanthropist with the University of Notre Dame to recognize practitioners in traditional and classical architecture.

Stern built throughout the country and around the world, but his connection to his home city of New York was paramount. Perhaps no single architect since Stanford White during the Gilded Age symbolized New York City as well as Stern, who always spoke of his enchantment with the city starting during his childhood in the 1940s and 1950s.

The architect would complete four dozen or so buildings in the city during his career, but his magnum opus is an epic six-volume, almost 7,000-page series of books that form the definitive history of New York's architecture and urbanism. It was a collaborative effort with an evolving cast of contributors and Stern at the helm that saw the books released sporadically starting in 1983. The series was built around specific dates: 1880, 1900, 1930, 1960, 2000 and 2020. The final volume, titled "New York 2020: Architecture and Urbanism at the Beginning of a New Century," appeared just weeks before his death.

Initially conceived as a three-part series that would span from the Civil War to the start of World War II, the scope was broadened to reach the end of the 20th century and later extended to 2020. The final volume spans the period from 9/11 to COVID. It's not something you'll ever contemplate reading from cover to cover, but it's sensibly written much like a city — you can jump in anyplace, look around a bit, learn and enjoy the scenery. It is a remarkably pleasurable read that packs tons of information about individual projects while setting each into its particular architectural and social contexts through copious primary source material. A difference from earlier volumes is the exclusion of floor plans in lieu of more photography. It seems to reflect Stern's personal agenda; he could mine the more historically oriented material for his own architecture, but the more contemporary work had less to offer him.

Until just a few days before his passing, Stern and I had planned to chat about this column. I had planned to ask him why Chicago — where we consider ourselves superior to New York in architectural matters — doesn't have a similar series of historical record. Alas, that conversation never happened, but I turned to others for their insights.

John Zukowsky was the Art Institute of Chicago's first curator of architecture from 1978 to 2004. He says that Stern's books "are absolutely amazing surveys — something that no one else has done for any American city" and notes that "the early ones inspired the two large volumes that I organized ... for the Art Institute." Those books, "Chicago Architecture 1872-1922: Birth of a Metropolis" and "Chicago Architecture 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis" remain the closest analogue we have.

New York-based architect John Hill began his career in Chicago and has written seven books, including a "Guide to Chicago's Twenty-First-Century Architecture" and "Guide to Contemporary New York City Architecture". When asked who might play a similar role in creating a Chicago version of Stern's series, Hill suggests Chicago former cultural historian Tim Samuelson or MAS Context Editor In Chief Iker Gil. "Perhaps it's up to organizations like the Chicago Architecture Center or Society for Architectural Historians to take the reins and put a team together with the goal of creating an expansive and exhaustive reference on a city deserving of such a series," Hill says.

"It should be a collaborative effort," Chicago-based architectural historian and preservationist Elizabeth Blasius agrees. "It is always exciting when architects, journalists, critics and historians get together and provide both information and perspective on the built environment."

If New York merits a comprehensive six-volume architectural history, certainly Chicago deserves something of similar scope. The easiest version would be to adopt the earlier books from the Art Institute and produce a third volume that covers from 1994 to the present. Even better would be the launch of a more epic series that would reconsider the city's architectural legacy anew from start to finish.

Now where can we find the next Robert A.M. Stern who can do as much for us?

Edward Keegan writes, broadcasts and teaches on architectural subjects. Keegan's biweekly architecture column is supported by a grant from former Tribune critic Blair Kamin, as administered by the not-for-profit Journalism Funding Partners. The Tribune maintains editorial control over assignments and content.

Trump wants a resurgence in European nationalism

By Richard C. Longworth

To fix what he sees wrong in Europe, President Donald Trump has prescribed the continent's ancient and most lethal poison — nationalism.

Nationalism is a patriotism, a love of one's own country, that has curdled into a hatred both of other countries and of minority groups at home. In the 20th century, nationalism was the driving force behind the two world wars that destroyed Europe. For 80 years since then, Europeans have worked, with considerable success, to leach this poison. Now Trump wants to return it to its prewar domination of European politics.

Protesters march to the Messe trade fair hall prior to the founding congress of the new youth wing of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party on Nov. 29 in Giessen, Germany. **HESHAM ELSHERIF/GETTY**

All this is in the Trump administration's new national security strategy, a broad overview of America's place in the world, its friends and enemies, its priorities and how to promote them. It sweeps across the planet, arguing for U.S. dominance in the Western hemisphere, promoting Vladimir Putin's Russia not as an adversary but as a potential partner and, in general, truncating American foreign policy from its traditional goal of spreading and protecting democracy to a series of business deals. The main theme is "America First" — a nationalistic slogan if there ever was one.

Europe takes up only three of the document's 33 pages, but they make frightening reading. Basically, Trump sees Europe committing "civilizational erasure." By this, he means a "loss of national identities and self-confidence," brought about mostly by immigration, which is transforming the continent. In the end, some "NATO members will become majority non-European."

This is, obviously, pure racism, a frequent handmaiden of nationalism. It is the theory of the great replacement, a trope of American white supremacists in which white people become a minority in the United States, but was transported without shame to Europe.

This racist backlash is already a force in Europe, where parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and France's National Rally threaten to become majority parties. It should be American policy to repel these neofascist germs: After all, when Europe went to war twice in the last century, the U.S. had to intervene, at huge cost in lives and treasure, to end the wars and restore decency.

But no. As the strategy paper says, the U.S. stands for "unapologetic celebrations of European nations' individual character and history. America encourages its political allies in Europe to promote this revival of spirit, and the growing influence of patriotic European parties indeed gives cause for great optimism."

In other words, what's good for these neo-Nazi parties in Europe is good for the United States.

The great foe of these parties is the European Union itself, which Trump says undermines "political liberty and sovereignty" and promotes the Europeans' open immigration policies. In fact, the EU is the most successful economic and political experiment of the past century, a union of 27 countries that stopped fighting each other and turned themselves into a continent of peace and real, if uneven, prosperity.

The purpose of the EU is to bury nationalism by submerging these countries into a larger union. It's often misunderstood as just an economic union, a glorified trade bloc. In fact, its essence is historic, an attempt by its founders to overcome the continent's tragic history, by uniting the economies of the member nations so they can never wage war on each other. Its unofficial motto has been "never again" — never again an Adolf Hitler, never again a Holocaust. From the start, the U.S. has backed this process and project, kick-starting it with the Marshall Plan and supporting it through its growing pains, simply because that goal — never again — was in our national interest, too.

Trump clearly understands none of this or, if he does, doesn't care. What he wants is to run this country in the authoritarian model of Viktor Orbán's Hungary, itself an awkward member of the EU. To this end, the poison of nationalism is his tool.

Richard C. Longworth is the former chief European correspondent for the Chicago Tribune and a distinguished fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

OPINION

Iran's white SIM card scandal reveals privilege, state control and fake dissent

By Pegah Banihashemi

For many decades, Iranian citizens have lived under one of the world's most restrictive internet regimes. The Islamic Republic has crafted a sophisticated digital architecture that allows the state to surveil, monitor and limit access to information at will. Yet it was only recently — following Elon Musk's decision to reveal the approximate connection locations of X users — that a deeper layer of digital inequality emerged into public view.

Musk's transparency initiative unintentionally exposed a stark divide between ordinary Iranians who rely on virtual private networks and filtered connections, and a select group of regime-affiliated individuals who access social media through what are widely referred to as white SIM cards.

These white SIM cards are special telecommunication lines that bypass Iran's national filtering system entirely.

Unlike ordinary users — who must constantly navigate a maze of VPNs, proxy servers and state-imposed connectivity disruptions — holders of white SIM cards enjoy stable, high-speed, unfiltered access to global platforms. In a country where the internet has become a battlefield of power, this privilege alone reveals a profound political hierarchy.

But the scandal did not end with the exposure of inequality. What emerged was a revelation far more corrosive: Many individuals who presented themselves as "opposition activists," political commentators or even former detainees of the Islamic Republic were discovered to be using these state-issued lines. The discovery has ignited a wave of anger across the Iranian diaspora and inside Iran, raising serious questions about infiltration, manufactured dissent and the state's strategy of embedding informants in activist communities.

To understand the significance of this scandal, we must consider the everyday reality for ordinary Iranians. Since the protests of 2009 and, more severely, during the nationwide uprisings of 2017, 2019 and 2022, the government has restricted or entirely shut down the internet.

An Iranian holds a cellphone after activating a virtual private network service to access the internet while shopping in a supermarket in Tehran in 2023. **GETTY-AFP**

During the 2019 Aban protests — where hundreds were killed — Iran imposed a near-total blackout that lasted almost a week. Information flow was choked off, families were unable to reach one another and activists risked their lives to smuggle footage out of Iran.

Even during periods without mass protests, the average Iranian faces a highly filtered and unstable digital environment; basic communication often depends on unreliable VPN services.

Against this backdrop, the existence of a privileged category of unfiltered SIM cards — accessible only to the Revolutionary Guard, intelligence agencies, state media operatives and a select group of regime-favored individuals — exposes not only inequality but also a deliberate two-tier system of digital citizenship.

Perhaps the most explosive element of the scandal was the discovery that some figures long treated as dissidents were operating with white SIM cards. Iranian users noticed that during major shutdowns, these individuals remained active on X, livestreaming political debates, attacking opposition groups and shaping online narratives that subtly aligned with the regime's interests.

Some of these figures had publicly claimed to be persecuted by the government or even arrested in the past. Yet the use of white SIM cards suggested cooperation with, or at minimum protection from, the very intelligence networks they claimed to oppose. Many Iranians had already suspected that the digital and political opposition space had been penetrated by the state. Musk's data leak, intentionally or not, confirmed that suspicion.

The scandal also revealed the strategic sophistication of Iran's security apparatus. By enabling certain individuals to maintain unrestricted internet access — even during national shutdowns — the state ensured that pro-regime narratives could continue circulating while the voices of ordinary citizens were silenced. Online activism became a stage managed from above, with these dissenters amplifying divisive rhetoric, attacking other activists and creating confusion about the authenticity of opposition movements.

The existence of white SIM cards must be understood as part of a larger ecosystem of digital repression. For years, Iranian authorities have framed internet filtering as a measure to "protect national security," "preserve morality" or "counter Western influence." In practice, however, control over the internet has functioned as the regime's most powerful nonlethal weapon against mass mobilization.

By controlling bandwidth; blocking platforms such as X, Instagram and WhatsApp; and deploying artificial intelligence-driven surveillance tools, the government has created a digital environment in which dissent can be monitored, slowed or crushed at the state's discretion.

Yet the white SIM card scandal reveals something deeper. The internet in Iran is not merely filtered — it is weaponized. The same tool that deprives millions of Iranians of access to information becomes a privilege handed out to insiders, spies and propagandists.

From a human rights perspective, access to the internet is increasingly recognized as a fundamental right connected to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and access to information. The United Nations has repeatedly affirmed that states should not intentionally disrupt or shut down internet access. In my own academic work, including an article written for the Chicago Law Journal, I have argued that internet access is foundational to meaningful participation in public life.

Iran's discriminatory system of digital access violates basic principles of equality and freedom. It also undermines any claim by the state that internet restrictions are imposed uniformly for national security.

For many Iranians, the white SIM card scandal confirmed long-standing fears that the government had infiltrated opposition movements, empowered undercover agents and shaped online discourse.

And perhaps most importantly, it demonstrated that internet control in Iran is not merely a technical policy — it is a mechanism of political domination. As long as the Islamic Republic maintains its monopoly over connectivity, the possibility of organic, widespread, coordinated protest remains constrained.

The scandal may have uncovered a hidden truth, but it also provided clarity. It showed Iranians — inside and outside the country — that the struggle for democracy cannot be separated from the struggle for digital freedom.

Until the architecture of digital repression is dismantled, political change will remain vulnerable to the state's most potent weapon: control over the flow of information itself.

Pegah Banihashemi, a native of Iran, is a legal scholar and journalist in Chicago whose work focuses on human rights, constitutional and international law, and Middle East politics.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Reducing fatal crashes

At a time when Chicago has emerged as a national leader in reducing fatal crashes on our streets, Mayor Brandon Johnson and the City Council are poised to turn back the clock with drastic cuts to street safety funding.

According to the Chicago Department of Transportation, the number of fatal crashes has fallen 30% in the city from its most recent peak in 2021. When compared to a 9% drop nationally, Chicago is now at the forefront of making streets safer for everyone who uses them.

This is an achievement we should be proud of. It's the result of hard work and major investment alongside a relentless focus on redesigning roads to eliminate dangerous speeding.

Like most cities, Chicago pays for infrastructure improvements using bond funding. Yet the latest bond proposal before the City Council includes a staggering 70% cut to complete streets projects — the very projects that have driven Chicago's remarkable reductions in severe injuries and fatalities.

These cuts would erase years of hard-won progress and make streets more dangerous, especially for people on the South and West sides who already bear the brunt of traffic violence and have fewer safe, affordable transportation options. When safety investments are cut, it is these communities that pay the highest price in lives, injuries and lost opportunity.

City leaders have not only a moral obligation to prevent avoidable deaths on our streets, but also a fiscal one in this era of tight budgets. The economic costs of traffic crashes far exceed the price of building and maintaining a safe street network, from medical bills and emergency response to lost productivity and long-term disability.

Investing in safe streets is one of the clearest, most cost-effective public decisions available: It protects public health, and it is sound financial policy. Well-designed, well-maintained roads also keep our transit system running and freight moving efficiently — core economic activities that strengthen Chicago's tax base and overall competitiveness.

The City Council and the mayor must change course before this damage is done. They should fully fund safe streets in the upcoming capital improvement bond and continue building a Chicago where no one has to risk their life just to cross the street or get to work.

— *Jim Merrell, managing director of advocacy, Active Transportation Alliance*

Where harm would fall

The potential budget shutdown in Chicago at the end of the month feels way too real for me as someone who has lived in this city my entire life. I care about what happens here and what it means for my neighbors. We all remember the long federal shutdown and how disruptive it was, and I can't help but think about how much worse it would be at the city level. When services stop, that hits everyone, but the people who rely on city-supported programs feel it the most.

Take youth programs, for example. A lot of these programs give kids a safe place to be, especially in neighborhoods that already don't get enough resources. If the city can't pass a budget, those programs could be paused or cut. That's not just an inconvenience; it's something that affects real families, real kids and the stability they depend on.

And even if someone doesn't use social services, a shutdown still reaches them. Basic things we count on, such as sanitation, building inspections, permit processing, administrative help and other everyday city functions, could slow down or stop altogether. People forget how much of the city operates quietly in the background until it suddenly doesn't.

A shutdown doesn't just freeze the government; it freezes daily life for all of us who live here.

As someone who's been part of this city my whole life, I don't want to see Chicago pushed into this. We're the ones who feel it first, the families, the workers, the neighbors who rely on this city to function. Our neighborhoods shouldn't become collateral damage in a political standoff. Chicago only works because its communities do, and we need leaders who understand that basic services and public safety aren't things we can afford to gamble with.

We deserve a stable budget, not a shutdown that leaves everyday people dealing with the fallout.

— *Cristian Pulagrin, Chicago*

Mayor's tax plans

Chicago homeowners have begun paying a big price for the deep decline that's hit the vacancy-filled downtown office market. A responsible mayor would work tirelessly to attract businesses to reinvigorate the commercial tax base and increase foot traffic to help downtown retail businesses as well.

Yet, Brandon Johnson and his progressive handlers at the Chicago Teachers Union have double-downed on their per-employee head tax despite its historic and decisive 25-10 rejection by the City Council's Finance Committee. "Tax the rich" is their mantra.

Yet, a simple Google search reveals that Chicago's commercial property tax rate is at least double the average of other major U.S. cities. Landlords typically pass these taxes through to their tenants — the very same tenants Chicago desperately needs to retain and attract.

Moreover, per Cook County ordinance, residential properties are assessed at 10% of their fair market value, while commercial properties are assessed at 25%. This means that for properties of the same market value, commercial properties inherently bear a larger portion of the overall tax burden.

So commercial properties are not paying their "fair share," Mr. Mayor?

Johnson will quickly come to realize that business owners don't simply pull out their wallets when taxation gets this aggressive. They downsize, relocate or, in worst-case scenarios, shut down.

I have represented office tenants in Chicago and across the U.S. for over 25 years as an attorney and commercial real estate broker. Nobody has ever been a better salesperson for other cities competing for new business investment than Johnson.

— *Mike Cello, Chicago*

Johnson and Trump

As the editorial "Johnson's game of budgetary chicken puts Chicago's future at risk" (Dec. 7) notes, although Mayor Brandon Johnson is the polar opposite of President Donald Trump politically, he shares both the latter's stubborn my-way-or-the-highway style of governance and the latter's unwillingness (and/or inability?) to consider the likely long-term consequences of his proposals/policies.

So, despite being political enemies, the mayor and the president are, at least to my mind, equally toxic to their respective governmental realms.

— *Jim Searle, Chicago*

Violence prevention

I read with great interest the editorial about community violence intervention ("Why we continue to support, and worry about, community violence intervention in Chicago," Dec. 10). The Tribune Editorial Board describes one situation in which an unarmed interventionist jumped out of his car to de-escalate a confrontation between two men, with at least one of them armed. Who are these brave men and women, doing so much to keep communities safe?

Many have criminal records and past gang involvement, and they have served time in prison. Their past is why they understand the streets and how to intervene. They have credibility because they've been there. They have turned their lives around and are courageously doing all they can to keep our young people safe and out of trouble.

An editorial cartoon appears in print on the same page. It shows the New York Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani interviewing a transition team applicant who says, "Oh, and I've never committed a criminal offense or done time in prison." Mamdani says, "Next," as he dismisses the applicant.

I know it's fashionable to criticize those who would suggest that those with a criminal background should be given a chance for employment, housing, etc. I would hope the editorial board would see the hypocrisy in promoting a wonderful program (community violence intervention) while simultaneously mocking those with a criminal background. The board owes an apology to the brave men and women who bravely and courageously risk their lives on a daily basis.

Additionally, if the board is worried about crime, wouldn't it want increased employment opportunities for those who are leaving prison or on probation?

— *Patti Marino, River Forest*

Note to readers: We'd like to know your hopes for the new year. Please send us a letter, of no more than 400 words, to letters@chicagotribune.com by Sunday, Dec. 28. Include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.