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{ OUR TAKE }

Quest for peace, progress in sight

The Prime Minister's visit opens up the space for reconciliation in Manipur

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's first trip to Manipur since ethnic violence engulfed the state 28 months ago offers a chance for the region to move forward from over two years of discord and establish a new paradigm of peace. The seeds of the violence were first led by the unilateral actions of the then state government to withdraw from a tripartite accord and further actions by former chief minister N Biren Singh that were seen by the Kuki-Zo communities as partisan. The high court's decision on Scheduled Tribe reservation lit this powder keg, widening chasms between communities and demolishing law and order. Key to this strife was the loss of faith of the common citizen in the impartiality of the state and its ability to act as a neutral arbiter between the Kukis and Meiteis — something that former CM Singh, a Meitei was unable, or unwilling, to restore. As a result, 260 people died, 60,000 were displaced and thousands of arms were looted from armories, resulting in a situation where community vigilantes took the place of the security establishment. Against this backdrop, the PM's comments linking development to peace, his promises to help the internally displaced people, and his assurance that the government will back any attempt at restoring normalcy, hold out hope. It can mark a beginning in addressing the root political causes that animated this conflict, and a restoration of popular franchise and democracy in the state. Of course, progress will be painstaking. The Kuki-Zo communities are still demanding a separate state, something that the Meiteis are staunchly opposed to. The Opposition is alleging that the PM's intervention should have come far earlier. And the ground situation — the stage is now under President's rule — remains delicate and volatile, with no room for complacency from either the security forces or the political establishment. But if the state, and national, governments commit themselves to building bridges, if the local authorities become impartial regulators following the laws (and not let their kin or community allegiance take precedence), if a new government can visualise Manipur as a federal polity that holds space for diverse communities to affirm their economic and political rights, if militant groups from either side are not given any more political or social space, and if security forces start acting in unison against elements that continue to disturb the peace, Manipur can be put back on the road to progress. The groundwork must begin now.

New PM in office, all quiet in Kathmandu

Nepal looks firmly on the track to normalcy after a week of violence and uncertainty, with the appointment of Sushila Karki, 73, as the interim PM on Saturday. Karki, a former chief justice of the Supreme Court of Nepal, is the choice of the Gen Z protesters who led the street action that forced PM KP Sharma Oli and his cabinet to resign against the backdrop of their attempts to stifle youth dissent against corruption in public office. Two of the main demands of the Gen Z protesters — Oli's resignation and the sacking of the legislature — were met by the country's President before Karki was sworn in: The new PM had reportedly insisted on the dismissal of the House as a precondition to accept office. And, unlike in Bangladesh, where the caretaker administrator has hemmed and hawed about conducting polls even a year after street protests ended the Sheikh Hasina regime, the new leadership has already announced that fresh polls will be held in March next year. This should put to rest the fears that Nepal may abandon parliamentary democracy and return to monarchy, a demand gaining ground even outside the small section of royalists. However, the next few months will be crucial for Kathmandu as the promised fair probe into graft gets underway and the political class regroup to address the new situation and engage with Gen Z. The Nepalese army, as in Dhaka 2024 and Colombo 2022, has been exemplary in its conduct during the past week, ending violence and facilitating the appointment of a caretaker administration that reflects the mood on the street. Kathmandu would have faced serious economic hardship if the chaos had continued, and any political vacuum could have been exploited by outside forces seeking to buy influence in Nepal. New Delhi wisely kept itself out of the crisis and waited for the churn to settle down. Its wholehearted welcome to the new dispensation confirms Delhi's resolve not to be involved in Nepal's internal affairs.

There's a new urban India in the making

Indian cities are again on that path to being modern yet humane, ambitious yet inclusive, global in outlook yet rooted in our values

Even as we demand more from our cities, we must also pause to acknowledge the distance we have already travelled. For decades after Independence, India's urban spaces were an afterthought. Jawaharlal Nehru's fascination with Soviet-style centralisation gave us the likes of Shastri Bhavan and Udyog Bhavan, concrete monoliths already crumbling by the 1990s, monuments to bureaucracy rather than service. By the 2010s, central Delhi presented a dismal sight: Potholed avenues, drab and leaking government buildings, and peripheral roads in the national capital region (NCR) that were hopelessly jammed. Expressways were scarce, metros were confined to a handful of cities, and civic infrastructure was visibly decaying. A country aspiring to global leadership had a capital city that reflected neglect. Prime Minister Narendra Modi changed that trajectory. He placed cities at the heart of the national development agenda, treating them not as burdens to be managed but as engines of growth and symbols of pride. The transformation is visible everywhere. The Central Vista redevelopment turned Kartavya Path into a people's space, the new Parliament building into a future-ready institution, and

Kartavya Bhawan into a streamlined hub for governance. Where once there was decay, there is now ambition and confidence. The scale of this change is backed by numbers. Between 2004 and 2014, cumulative central investment in India's urban sector was around ₹1.57 lakh crore. Since 2014, that figure has risen to nearly ₹28.5 lakh crore, a 16-fold increase. This unprecedented financial commitment is reshaping the urban fabric at a pace India had never seen before. India's broader economic and digital surge amplifies this momentum. Today, we are the world's fourth-largest economy at roughly \$4.2 trillion, with digital rails powering everyday life. The metro revolution illustrates the transformation on the ground. In 2014, India had about 248 km of operational metro across five cities. Today, over 1,000 km span more than 23 cities, carrying more than one crore passengers daily. Dozens of new corridors are under construction, from Pune and Nagpur to Surat and Agra, making urban commutes faster, cleaner and safer. This is not just steel and concrete; it is reduced travel times, cleaner air, and millions of hours of productivity returned to citizens. Urban connectivity has been rewritten. NCR's choked peripheries are being decongested by the newly inaugurated Urban Extension Road II, linking NH-44, NH-9 and Dwarka Expressway to ease traffic at chronic bottlenecks. India's first Regional Rapid Transit System (Delhi-Meerut) is already running on major sections and nearing full commissioning, slashing

end-to-end travel to under an hour. These high-speed, integrated systems are defining a new metropolitan logic for a new India. Expressways are recasting inter-city movement. The Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, the Bengaluru-Mysuru Expressway, the Delhi-Meerut access-controlled corridor, and the Mumbai Coastal Road are shortening distances and cleaning city air by taking long-haul traffic out of local streets. Atal Setu in Mumbai, the nation's longest sea bridge, now seamlessly connects the island city to the mainland. The Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail, India's first bullet train corridor, will anchor a western growth spine. Inclusion has remained central. PM SVANidhi has extended collateral-free credit and digital empowerment to over 68 lakh street vendors, helping micro-entrepreneurs rebuild livelihoods and enter the formal economy. PM Awas Yojana (Urban) has sanctioned more than 120 lakh houses, with about 94 lakh already completed. Millions of families once confined to slums now live in secure pucca homes. These are not just statistics; they are transformed lives and aspirations unlocked. Energy reform is improving daily urban life. Piped natural gas (PNG) is increasingly the norm, safer, cleaner and more convenient. City gas distribution has expanded from just 57 geographical areas in 2014 to over 300 today. Domestic PNG connections have risen from about 25 lakh to over 1.5 crore, while thousands of CNG stations power cleaner public transport.



Hardeep S Puri



The urban connectivity story is being rewritten. NCR's choked peripheries are being decongested by the Urban Extension Road II.

Turning a tap for fuel is now a reality for millions of urban homes. India has built the confidence to host the world. Bharat Mandapam successfully hosted the G20 Leaders' Summit. Yashobhoomi has emerged among the largest convention complexes globally. India Energy Week has drawn the global energy ecosystem to Bengaluru, Goa and New Delhi. None of this would have been imaginable when dilapidated halls and crumbling stadiums defined our civic infrastructure. Transport modernisation is happening at scale and speed. Operational airports have more than doubled, from 74 in 2014 to about 160 today. Vande Bharat now runs on over 140 services, cutting travel times across regions. Over 1,300 railway stations are being modernised under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme, with more than a hundred already inaugurated. In Delhi, the expanded Terminal-1 has lifted IGT's capacity past 100 million passengers per annum, putting our capital in the global big league. Sensible tax policy supports consumers and growth. The recent GST rationalisation moves most goods and services into 5% and 18% slabs, with steep rates reserved only for select sin and luxury items. For urban households, this means lower monthly bills, stronger consumption and a virtuous

cycle of investment and jobs. Having represented India abroad for decades as a diplomat, I saw firsthand how cities serve as the face of a nation. Vienna's Ringstrasse, New York's skyline, or the boulevards of Paris all embodied national ambition. It was clear to me that global perception begins in urban spaces. This conviction has guided my work in urban affairs: To ensure that Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad and our other cities reflect the confidence, modernity, and aspirations of a rising India. Just as my diplomatic career taught me the value of projecting India's image internationally, my ministerial role has been to make our cities worthy of that image. This is the arc of transformation: from post-Independence neglect to modernisation. India's ancient cities once embodied the heights of urban civilisation. Today, under PM Modi, Indian cities are again on that path to being modern yet humane, ambitious yet inclusive, global in outlook yet rooted in our values. New Urban India is being built every day, brick by brick, train by train, home by home. And it is already transforming the lives of millions.

Hardeep S Puri is the minister for petroleum and natural gas. The views expressed are personal

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



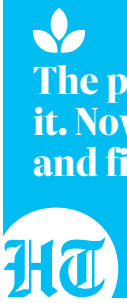
The rise of a leader and his enduring popularity

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi will turn 75 this week. It is a diamond jubilee for a man who lived his formative years in anonymity, dedicated his middle years to organisational work, and the last quarter of his life at the zenith of power, in Gandhinagar and in New Delhi. Till a few weeks ago, September 17 was not just viewed as his birthday but also a kind of D-Day in a political suspense thriller, thanks to some needless sensationalism. The question, based on a comment taken entirely out of context, was whether Modi would retire as PM? Those waiting for a response got their answer on August 28. On that day, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said in New Delhi, "I never said I will retire or someone else should retire." Returning the favour, PM Modi, in an article on September 11, wished Bhagwat (who also turned 75) on his birthday. It was a meaningless controversy; and it ended abruptly. Few parties have set an age limit for retirement in India and elsewhere. Nationalist Congress Party supremo Sharad Pawar is 84. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge is 83, and Kerala's CPM chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan is past 80. The world's most powerful head of State, US President Donald Trump, is 79. Russian president Vladimir Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping are in their seventh decade of life. You may ask why Lal Krishna Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and Shanta Kumar, senior leaders in the BJP, were relegated to an amorphous *margdarshak mandal* on the pretext that they were over 75 years old. The truth is, these BJP leaders weren't as fit or as popular as Modi is. At times, honourable exits are created to ease people out of public life. In office, Modi has turned politics into a kind of social movement. After gaining power, he initiated actions against vexed and complex problems while trying to raise public awareness for issues like cleanliness, women empowerment, ease of living and doing business, and national unity through Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, GST, abrogation of Article 370 and triple *talaq*. He's not invested in the politics of appeasement. Remember his statement during his second term that the country's middle class will have to bear pain for a few days in the national interest. In the last 11 years, from providing free ration to 800 million people to all-round development of infrastructure, Modi has initiated many actions to infuse fresh vigour into the bureaucracy. This is his signature style. Let me narrate an incident. In Gandhinagar, Gujarat, he once asked senior bureaucrats what their response would be to a 70-year-old

lady if she asked which government schemes she could avail. He asked them to list all the schemes and the number of forms that she would have to fill up to get them. Most of the bureaucrats failed this flash test. Concern for the last person in the queue is the secret of his enduring popularity. He never compromised on his beliefs and ideas. For example, in a minority gathering, when people tried to put a skull cap on his head, he politely refused. He stopped *iftar* parties at the PM's residence. Modi's detractors have labelled him a majoritarian. But is this true? You may recall the PM addressing a gathering at the BJP headquarters after the party's victory in assembly elections in the North-East in March 2018. When the *azan* was heard, he paused his speech. This year, he faced a fresh challenge from Pakistan. Operation Sindoor, conducted under his stewardship, not only humbled our neighbour but also set a "new normal" in India's response to terrorism. Now every terror attack would be considered an attack on India, he said. He has also shown remarkable grit and nerves of steel in dealing with the challenges coming from the US. He knows the stakes are high and the situation is perilous. On the surface, it seems like "tariff terror" unleashed by the US, but the script is far more complex. The global economic order that was built in Bretton Woods in 1944 has entered its decisive stage. A new economic order is in the works, and the PM wants India's strong presence in the emerging new global system. His recent meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping are a testament to this fact. The effects are visible. The mercurial Trump, who till the other day was breathing fire, is sending conciliatory signals. Modi cleverly ignored President Trump's outrageous allegations and reacted positively to his friendship overtures. An economic deal with the US will be thrashed out, but the world is gravitating towards another Cold War. India will need to rebrand its non-aligned approach. It's a difficult task, but for Modi, things have never been easy. Even his ascent to power was the result of a precarious situation. On January 26, 2001, Gujarat's Bhuj city suffered massive destruction in an earthquake. The BJP government led by Keshubhai Patel started caving in its wake. Sensing that the party was losing its grip on the state, both Atal Bihari Vajpayee and LK Advani chose Modi to lead the Gujarat government. To understand Modi's leadership, compare the rebuilding efforts in Bhuj and Maharashtra's Latur, which experienced severe destruction in an earthquake eight years before Bhuj. The shining success of Bhuj was achieved by a man who had no prior experience of administration. This is what separates Modi from the rest. Would you like to congratulate him on this auspicious day of his life and glory?

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{ MARCO RUBIO } US SECRETARY OF STATE



The president was not happy about it. Now we need to move forward and figure out what comes next

Before his visit to Israel, against the backdrop of Israel's attack on alleged Hamas officials in Doha that has derailed peace talks



Thoughtful judgement in the age of outrage

In an age of instant information, hot takes, and algorithmically fuelled outrage, the premium on speed has overtaken the premium on thought. Today, business leaders, investors, and policy makers are expected to have views on everything — from geopolitical conflicts to corporate governance scandals — often within hours, if not minutes. But we must ask ourselves: Are we responding with insight, or simply reacting with emotion? Are we contributing clarity — or adding to the noise? As public trust shifts from institutions to individuals, the burden on leaders to offer opinions grows. However, opinion alone does not equate to leadership. An ill-informed or prematurely expressed view — especially in complex or emotionally charged contexts — can do real harm to credibility, policy outcomes, investor confidence, and social cohesion. Every responsible leader must periodically ask if they understand this issue deeply enough to speak with conviction, if they can articulate both the position for and against the argument they are leaning toward, and whether they are relying on verified data or on headlines and emotion. If the answer to any of these is "no," then silence isn't a weakness — it is strategic maturity. Great leadership, especially in volatile environments, requires resisting the temptation to fill every silence with a stance. It requires the courage to say, "I'm still evaluating. Let's wait for more clarity." For centuries, Indian philosophical traditions have grappled with questions of how to determine truth, engage in discourse, and test knowledge claims. One of the most powerful frameworks to emerge from this is *tarkashastra* — the science of reasoning, debate, and inquiry. *Tarkashastra* (*tarka* meaning logic or debate, and *shastra* meaning science) is not about cleverness in argument — it is about disciplined thinking. It outlines how to distinguish valid from invalid knowledge, use hypothetical reasoning (*tarka*) to test claims, engage in structured, truth-seeking debate (*vada*), and avoid fallacies, emotional manipulation, and intellectual dishonesty. These have deep relevance in the boardroom, Parliament, and policy desk. Closely linked to this tradition is the Jain philosophical doctrine of *anekantwad* — the doctrine of many-sidedness. It rests on a simple yet profound idea: Truth is multifaceted, and no single perspective has a monopoly on it. This principle is not about relativism — it is about strategic humility. *Anekantwad* teaches us to hold space for multiple viewpoints (even conflicting ones), recognise the limits of our own

perception, and remain open to refining our views as new information emerges. For today's decision-makers, *anekantwad* is a useful filter — a reminder that opposing views may not be wrong, they may simply be incomplete. In a world of polarisation and binary narratives, this is not just philosophical elegance — it is practical wisdom. Why does this matter for business and policy? Let's step back and look at the cost of opinion formed in haste and delivered with certainty. In moments of controversy, the rush to comment often backfires. Public trust erodes when leaders walk back positions or appear reactive. Deliberate, well-informed silence builds long-term credibility. Hasty opinions often oversimplify complex issues. Most real-world challenges require nuanced, multi-dimensional thinking. Binary opinions do little to improve decisions. They can, however, derail consensus and long-term vision. Public conversations suffer when every view is either praised or attacked. *Anekantwad* encourages us to listen with curiosity, not with a rebuttal prepared in advance. This is a crucial skill for negotiating in high-stakes, multi-stakeholder environments. Leaders shape the narratives around them. In times of uncertainty, measured words (or intentional silence) set the tone for how others react — be it investors, employees, regulators, or citizens. Before offering a public view, a simple checklist can be considered: Is this issue within one's domain of responsibility or influence? Has one examined it from multiple sides, including those one disagrees with? Is the information verified from credible sources? Is one reacting with emotion or responding from analysis? Thought leadership is not about being first. It's about being right — and being wise. In an age where speed is often mistaken for relevance, we must reclaim the value of disciplined thinking and deliberate speech. Ancient frameworks like *tarkashastra* and *anekantwad* remind us that clarity comes not from certainty, but from inquiry — and that truth often hides in the nuance. As business leaders, investors, and policy shapers, our responsibility is not to have an opinion on everything. Our responsibility is to ensure that when we do speak, we do so from a place of context, competence, and credibility. In business — as in life — clarity beats speed, and wisdom beats noise.



Rahul Bhasin

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OUR VIEW



Yuan versus the dollar: Propose a third option

As China attempts to globalize its legal tender, America guards the supremacy of its own and digital currencies gain traction, India should revive Keynes' idea of a global trade currency

If China fancies the chances of its yuan taking on the mighty US dollar, India must keep watch. Right now, it is a no-contest. The yuan accounts for just 4% of international payments, while the dollar notches up about half of them. Only 2% of the forex reserves of central banks are held in yuan assets versus 58% in dollar assets. Yet, signs of Beijing's long game have begun to emerge. How it fares will test not just its resolve, but whether a fully convertible currency is necessary for global dominance. Misguided US sanctions after the 2022 outbreak of war in Europe have catalysed Chinese efforts. Despite its economic slowdown, China's trade heft is aiding its push for settlements in its own currency. Over 30% of its trade is already yuan-based. Its banks have been lending abroad in yuan instead of dollars to make yuan payments more acceptable for its imports, even as it bills more of its exports in yuan to crush exchange-rate risks and stay off the grid of dollar flows that's perilously exposed to punitive US clamps. Globally, many banks have signed up for its CIPS alternative to the Swift system of cross-border transfers. It also has a digital yuan, though its global success may depend on headway made by mBridge, a platform for conversions of central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) that was incubated in Hong Kong by the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) in alliance with the central banks of China and others. In October 2024, the BIS gave up running mBridge, but it remains firmly backed by Thailand, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, apart from China. Note the context: as a cheap and instant means of payment, CBDCs could easily come to dominate the future.

While the US remains wedded to the *status quo*, its dollar has the distinct advantage of full

convertibility, with capital allowed to flow in and out of its economy freely. In contrast, Beijing tightened its capital controls in 2015 to curb outflows and seems bent on trying to globalize its yuan without easing them much. This restricts the overseas liquidity—and appeal—of yuan assets. For now, Beijing's strategy appears to rest on granting friendly foreign entities access to its bond market, where money can be raised at very low rates of interest, given its easy-money policy amid near-zero inflation. Moreover, its central bank has given swap lines to over 30 other central banks so that they don't fear a yuan crunch. As none of this will make the world at large pile into yuan assets, America's privileged low-cost access to global credit—in spite of its fragile finances—looks safe for now. Two of China's bets could come good: first, that US neglect of global interests will tip the dollar into a long but hard-to-arrest decline; and second, that as money evolves with technology, a digital currency could ascend to the top. Over time, both these trends could plausibly make space for India's own e-rupee to join the action. While a few moves have already been made to globalize the rupee, our thin slice of world trade makes its worldwide use hard to promote. Hence, if the sun starts setting on the US dollar's reign, a safer bet would be to revive Keynes' basic idea of a global trade currency. Whatever digital form it takes, we can insist its charter be set by consensus and its control kept equitable and democratic. For the credibility of our tech proposals, we could make the e-rupee evolve into a distinctive CBDC that upholds the ideals of democracy. Perhaps privacy features can give it an edge over the coinage of a surveillance state. The dollar looks wobbly, no doubt, but the e-yuan's ascent isn't a done deal.

THEIR VIEW

Why corporate borrowers need to track credit default swap rates

These determine capital costs by offering a market view of risks that goes beyond agency ratings



MADAN SABNAVIS is chief economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of 'Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun'

Discussions on sovereign ratings usually focus on how rating agencies view the creditworthiness of a country, as broadly judged by its government's management of fiscal and other balances, among other factors. This is an issue of prestige even for governments—like India's—that do not need to borrow in the international market. Ratings, however, matter more to Indian companies that borrow from abroad, given that India's sovereign rating serves as a ceiling on their own rating. A company can get a rating up to two notches higher than the sovereign in case its global operations justify it. One way to view the impact of sovereign ratings on companies is to look at the interest rates they are asked to pay on their borrowings. Here, sovereign credit default swaps (CDS) are the key, as all private borrowing is benchmarked against these swap rates. A CDS is essentially a form of insurance taken by an investor while investing in a security where the CDS seller provides cover in case of a default. The swap rate, which is denoted in basis points, is the premium to be paid for the cover. Sovereigns are not usually expected to default, but sovereign CDS rates serve as anchors to assess the probability of a default by any entity operating in that country. These rates are based on actual transactions and hence reveal the market's view. Globally, CDS rates are available for

several countries. For Sweden, Germany, Australia and the Netherlands, for instance, all rated AAA, the CDS rate range was between 8 and 11 basis points (bps) on 8 September, according to World Government Bonds. On the other end, for Turkey, rated BB-, the CDS rate is as high as 263bps. India, rated BBB, has a CDS rate of 95bps. These rates vary daily, just like stock prices, but remain mostly within a small range. Besides these, there also are country ratings that are referred to. These CDS levels reveal some interesting points. *First*, the difference in CDS rates between AAA and BBB rated countries is between 30bps and 85bps, which is very wide. *Second*, even within a band, there is considerable variation in the CDS spread. Canada, with 40bps, has a much higher CDS rate than Germany, for instance. That's because it is still in the throes of the tariff hit by the US and is seen to be more vulnerable. The same is true of India, which has been hit with a high tariff of 50%, far greater than similarly rated Greece and Indonesia. It is important to note that S&P did not see this as a significant challenge when it upgraded India's rating. *Third*, the US has a higher CDS rate (36bps with a AA+ rating) relative to Finland and South Korea (under 21bps) due to uncertainty over GDP growth caused by its tariff war with the rest of the world. *Fourth*, China's considerable economic power has helped keep its CDS rate under check at 41bps, which is marginally higher than that of the US even though its credit rating is two notches lower at A+. *Fifth*, Israel, which has a rating of A, has a 73bps CDS rate, almost the same as Indonesia and much higher than Greece, even though the latter two have ratings three notches below. Clearly, the war in West Asia is a driving factor in the market. *Sixth*, once a credit rating goes below investment grade, which is BBB-, CDS rates rise substantially. Last checked, they vary significantly across the three countries in that category: Brazil, South

Africa and Turkey. Turkey has the highest, as it is probably the most fragile among the three, given its high inflation and interest rates, coupled with high unemployment and a weak currency. Interestingly, the probability of default, which is calculated at a theoretical level, can vary from less than 0.2% for an AAA-rated country to 1.4% for India. If one's rating falls to a sub-investment grade, the probability of default rises to 2.5-3% and is nearly 5% for Turkey. A major takeaway from CDS spreads is that financial markets view the credit worthiness of a sovereign through a wider lens than rating agencies. Market assessments appear to assign the overall geopolitical situation and economic conditions greater weight, so CDS spreads are driven by these factors. A rating alone is rarely a clinching factor. To this extent, it can be said that the market is more discerning and does not take agency ratings at face value while evaluating risks on its own. This is why it is essential for every country to keep its economic house in order, including variables such as inflation, currency and interest rates. In fact, issues such as the debt of a country—which dominates the assessment of rating agencies focused on the concept's rationale—would be taken as an institutional factor that cannot change in the short run. However, swap rates incorporate all current economic conditions, covering both the polity as well as policies being pursued and immediate challenges being faced. With sovereign CDS rates becoming virtual market benchmarks, companies that borrow money would find their capital costs gravitating towards these limits. In other words, there is clearly merit in striving for a higher rating. For this, a consistent economic performance can be combined with a dialogue with rating agencies. There is potentially a CDS gain of 10-20bps for every upgrade notch. This could mean a lot for Indian borrowers. *These are the author's personal views.*



JUST A THOUGHT

I think holding Yuan is going to be increasingly important as China becomes as fertile as the Americas in terms of the global business landscape.

HENDRITH VANLON SMITH JR.

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

The big myth about revolutions: That they're all organic

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. His latest book is 'Why the Poor Don't Kill Us.'

We are told that an 'organic' uprising against corruption broke out in Kathmandu a few weeks ago. The youth, angry with the government, supposedly rushed out of their homes in unison after social media apps were banned, set fire to buildings, nearly killed politicians and toppled the government, all within days. And this happened without anyone in the shadows pulling strings. If the revolt had taken place a few months ago, it would have been enshrined as the 'Nepalese Spring.' In the first hours of any modern uprising, it always looks like this. The young, Gen-something, some late alphabet, rise violently against injustice, apparently risking their own lives. State forces, despite their weapons and power, are surprisingly unable to quell the insurgency. Later, it becomes clear that there was a power behind it, one that does not seem to be made up of ordinary people. Or perhaps it is true that in Nepal the uprising occurred exactly the way we have been told. Just that revolts do not happen

that way, without the intent, funding or co-option of some part of the elite. At the heart of all revolutions is the second rung of power, aristocracy, wealth or clergy, after attempting to bring down those above them. For this, they recruit a moral reason and the youth and poor. The French Revolution, which is remembered as the poor beheading the rich, is in reality and substance aristocrats taking down the monarchy and other aristocrats who were in the royalty's inner circle. The doomed German peasant revolution that preceded it in the 16th century, which is framed in history as peasants waging a heroic war against the nobility, was also about knights and lords of the lower nobility exploiting the rage of peasants to plot the downfall of the higher nobility. In *Summer of Fire and Blood*, Lyndal Roper points out that some of the second-rung elites of the 1520s even dressed like peasants and pantomimed illiteracy to manipulate serfs into attacking the top rungs. (Her book's point, though, is not the argument I am making.) The Indian Naxal movement is framed as an armed struggle of the poor against the state, but its founding father Charu Mazumdar was from a feudal *zamindari* family, a class that was diminished by the state. The Arab Spring, remembered as an anti-corruption

movement against the political class, was an urban middle-class movement against traditional power. The term 'middle class' is one of the most misleading words in English. These are rarely people in the 'middle.' The public figures among them are probably in the top 5% of their population, who naturally have a grievance against the top 1%. When the anti-corruption movement began in India, it was called an 'Indian Spring,' even though India doesn't have a spring. The day Anna Hazare came to Delhi and sat on the pavement to fast until he died or India ended corruption (both are alive), it was in reality an anti-rich movement. It flopped. I know this because I was there. There were just a handful of people and no media. His meagre followers who sat watching him were rural activists and they were saying that India was making beautiful roads and airports for the rich, and nothing for the poor. The movement gathered political momentum when news anchors and the

Bharatiya Janata Party spun it as an 'organic' middle-class uprising against the Congress. In the recent uprising in Bangladesh too, the middle class had a role. The bureaucracy despised the regime of Sheikh Hasina. Almost all revolutions are framed as the rage of the poor. As though there is a place and time where there is a place and time where they are not angry. The idea that the poor can topple the rich without any help from the rich themselves does not come from history, but from an assumption that at first seems commonsensical. Surely, people living in wretchedness must eventually strike back? This is how, say, the popular myth of the French Revolution hardened into legend. Karl Marx's writings are the most popular medium of this notion. He himself, though, is an example of someone from the second-rung in economic terms with a grievance against the top rung. He hailed, after all, from a wealthy German family; that he found ways to go broke is not as important as the class he came from. His

later-life penury makes complete sense in his war against those who were not broke but a lot like him. It is not surprising that he did not look at revolution as something that emerges from a man like him, but as a more moral force that emanates from the misery of the poor. Long after his death, the many assumptions of what he said became weapons in the hands of elites to fight other elites. People underestimate how much organization is needed for a revolution, and how that can only come from influential people. The myth of organic uprisings persists because those who pull the strings usually remain in the shadows. Reputed journalists, bound by standards of credibility, report only what is visible. They can only go in search of facts, not the truth. Facts and truth need not be the same thing, especially over a long arc of time. In Nepal, a fact is that thousands of angry young people overthrew a government. This was followed by odd behaviour. Those same youth, after risking their lives, are now handing power to people who were not on the streets, people who are negotiating with the army, which had an outsized role in the success of the movement because it chose not to crush it with force. Yet, we are told no institutions were behind the uprising.

The right call

Telecom services should be affordable

India’s telecom industry has once again reached an inflection point. Over the last year, operators have increased tariffs by 10-27 per cent, a move that directly impacts millions of prepaid and postpaid subscribers. More recently, entry-level 1GB-per-day plans have been quietly phased out, nudging users towards higher-value packs.

With Jio preparing for an IPO, the market is bracing for another 10-15 per cent hike by the year’s end. While this push has undoubtedly improved average revenue per user (ARPU) — Airtel, for instance, saw ARPU climb to ₹250 from ₹211 within a year — it also raises an uncomfortable question: are tariff hikes becoming the industry’s crutch for profitability? It is undeniable that the telecom sector has endured a bruising decade, marked by hyper-competition, price wars, and unsustainable losses. The present duopoly, with Jio and Airtel dominating and Vodafone Idea hanging on, offers long elusive stability. Yet, operators must decide whether to simply exploit their market power through routine price increases or to seize this moment to reimagine telecom services for the next era.

The arrival of 5G technology illustrates this dilemma well. Despite billions spent on rollouts, there is still no “killer application” that makes 5G indispensable for the average user. In contrast, the 4G era saw over-the-top (OTT) platforms, including Netflix, YouTube, and Meta, create massive value on the back of telco infrastructure, while operators themselves remained little more than data pipelines. Unless telecom companies partner with India’s thriving startup ecosystem or invest in building applications themselves, history may repeat itself. Importantly, operators today now have the financial flexibility to pursue innovation. First, capital expenditure demands are set to taper. With spectrum holdings plentiful and existing 4G infrastructure being refarmed for 5G, the incremental cost of network rollouts is modest. Second, surging data consumption underpins steady revenue growth: per-user daily data use has grown at a CAGR of 37 per cent, while industry revenues between FY20 and FY25 have risen at a CAGR of 13.4 per cent. Third, the absence of disruptive new entrants, with satellite broadband expected to be expensive and niche, gives telcos breathing room to think long-term.

The present situation does not really justify another round of tariff hikes. Pricing strategies that exclude large swathes of consumers will widen the digital divide, undermine social equity and the industry’s long-term growth prospects. Instead, telcos must consider differentiated models. Telecom operators could adopt graded pricing wherein premium users pay more in return for bundled services, while preserving affordable basic plans for mass users. Revenue growth should come from value creation, not just tariff tweaks. Telecom operators are at a crossroads. They can either lean on annual tariff hikes, or innovate, partner, and build the services that will define the next digital era.

OTHER VOICES.



New York Declaration must translato tangible results
China has consistently pointed out that without Middle East peace, the world will not be stable, and that the Palestinian question has always been at the heart of the Middle East turmoil. It is thus a positive development that the UN has set out an action-oriented pathway toward a peaceful settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the realization of the “two-state solution”, which is the only way to resolve the long-running conflict. The UN General Assembly has adopted a draft resolution endorsing the New York Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. That the draft resolution was passed by 142 votes in favour, 10 against speaks volumes about the international community’s will on how the Palestinian question should be settled. (BEIJING, SEPTEMBER 14)

The Island

Conspiracies here and overseas
These are apparently bad days for former heads of state across the world. Close on the heels of the passage of a new law, stripping former Sri Lankan Presidents of their perks and privileges, came the news of ex-Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro being sentenced to jail for 27 years and three months for plotting a military coup. A panel of five Supreme Court judges handed down the sentence immediately after convicting Bolsonaro. A dissenting judge voted to acquit him, and the former President’s lawyers have taken exception to the sentence. The main charge against Bolsonaro is that he led a conspiracy in a bid to stay in power after losing the 2022 presidential election to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. (COLOMBO, SEPTEMBER 14)

Quite a flutter over stablecoins

The practice of the state’s monopoly over note issuance is just 175 years old. It’s neither been complete nor unchallenged



The latest issue of the IMF’s popular journal, *Finance and Development*, has an article on the growth of stablecoins (<https://tinyurl.com/3jn4zbat>). These are digital currencies linked to the legal tender of a country but they are usually privately issued. The author, a professor at the London School of Business, says “...we must brace ourselves for substantial consequences. On the negative side are dollarization and its side effects, financial stability risks, potential hollowing out of the banking system, currency competition and instability, money laundering, fiscal base erosion, privatization of seigniorage, and intense lobbying...”
“On the positive side, cross-border payments may be quicker and cheaper, which matters especially for remittances. And citizens of countries with poor governance would have access to more stable and convenient means of payment and store of value than their domestic currency. Who gets payment data and US dominance when it comes to imposing sanctions will be affected as well.”
She concludes that while the impact will be “profound” we can’t predict what will happen because everything is becoming more unpredictable. So, as if Donald Trump’s trade instability isn’t enough, the world is in for “major financial stability risks, including increased volatility in exchange rates; threats to public finances in many economies; and competition across currency networks are likely.”

NOT THE FIRST TIME
That said when you read the article you will think that this is the first time this is happening. The truth, however, is that this kind of challenge to the existing financial system has been a regular occurrence throughout modern history.
The idea and practice of the state’s monopoly over note issuance is just about 175 years old. And even then it’s neither been complete nor unchallenged.



Usually the competition was for the seigniorage, which is the difference in cost of issuing the unit of money and its face value. In other words, private issuance of money was commonplace because it was profitable.
In India, for example, the East India Company came up with its own coinage because the Company was dealing with a whole lot of diverse coins issued by local *rajās*. It lost a lot of money in exchange and arbitrage.
So it decided to unify the money and introduced a silver rupee. This was made the standard currency in Madras in 1818 and in Bombay in 1823. In 1835, via an Act, it became the standard currency throughout British India, replacing gold.
Jolly good, everyone said, but over the next three decades the price of gold and

If the American stablecoins are seen as being as liquid and trustworthy as the dollar, it’s game, set and match to the US

silver fluctuated so much that the situation started to resemble what the IMF essay is warning against: financial instability. The Brits began panicking.
They then took all sorts of evasive and aggressive action but a peculiar and completely unforeseen problem arose: Indians simply could not afford the high denomination coins for making small payments. So all the schemes were soon abandoned. Despite the best efforts of the British, there were all sorts of coins and notes that continued to float about. The RBI museum has many of them. There was a clear need for unity in diversity and, when Keynes came here in 1913, he ended up writing a book on the Indian currency problem.
India has always been unreceptive to economic reasoning. So it didn’t get a fully used single currency until the mid-1950s when the old system was replaced by the naya paisa system, and the metric system introduced. Its rapid acceptance demonstrated the people’s faith in Nehru and his government.

THE REAL QUESTION
Now to the real question: which currencies will stablecoins compete

with? The answer is all currencies that are not linked to the dollar in some way, because the dollar itself is or will be linked to the stablecoins.
The extent of the competition, which in this case means substitutability, will depend on fungibility. If the American stablecoins are seen as being as liquid and trustworthy as the dollar, it’s game, set and match to the US.
One might wonder about China. Well, stop wondering. China has banned all these newfangled stuff, rather as some of the maharajas in British India who had their own currency banned British India’s currency.
However, there’s always the offshore yuan that could get linked to a Chinese stable coin. But then the question of trust comes: after Trump goes will you still distrust America as much as you distrust China? Unlikely.
That leaves India which does not recognise stablecoins. But now many people are asking if the time has not come to allow them. There will be arguments both for and against but one question that must be asked is this: if the rest of the world is going in one direction, should India go in some other?

Are cesses serving their intended purpose?

Though huge amounts have been collected, crucial sectors such as health and education continue to be underfunded

Govind Bhattacharjee

Cess, which is an additional tax levied by the Government to raise funds for a specific purpose, has always been a bone of contention between the Centre and the States because it is not shareable with the latter, and hence outside the scope of Finance Commission transfers. So is surcharge, which is a tax on tax.
This non-shareability acts as an inbuilt incentive for the Centre to resort to cess whenever it faces funding constraints. Cesses therefore tend to proliferate — a 2018-study has identified 44 cesses levied by India since 1944. Unlike for taxes, the Constitution is rather vague on cess and makes only passing references in articles 270 and 271; cess, in fact, predates the Constitution.
Before the GST was introduced in July 2017, 26 cesses were abolished; GST then subsumed 13 of the 19 cesses then operating, while adding one more — a GST Compensation Cess (GCC) on sin and luxury goods to compensate the States for their loss of revenue.
Existing cesses include a health and education cess (HEC) levied on our income taxes, to be spent on health and education.
There are cesses on exports and some imported goods like petroleum, etc., besides on luxury and sin goods, to finance our social and physical infrastructure.
Cesses have no sunset clause — the GCC — the only cess passed on to the

States — was to have expired in June 2022; now it has been extended till March 2026. Besides cess, there’s a surcharge payable by taxpayers earning an annual income exceeding ₹50 lakh. Collections of both cess and surcharge go to the Consolidated Fund of India, but while surcharge is spent like the other taxes, cess is transferred to the Public Account, a part of government account that deals with provident funds, civil deposits, reserves, etc., where a specific reserve is created for each cess, for spending it only for the specified purpose.
Almost 95 per cent of the total cess collection comes from only four cesses: GCC, HEC, agriculture infrastructure and development cess and road cess.

WEAK OVERSIGHT
Public Account is inherently problematic, as oversight here is loose and so are budgetary controls, and thus it often escapes closer scrutiny. Irregularities and malfeasance rarely surface unless the CAG audits any specific public account.
A recent CAG report highlights that the total collection under cess and surcharge during FY24 was ₹4.88 lakh crore, or 14 per cent of gross tax revenues, of which ₹3.57 lakh crore was from cess alone.
The CAG cited the case of oil cess which should go to the Oil Industry Development Fund (OIDB) in Public Account. But of the total ₹2.95 lakh collected under oil cess till FY24, only ₹902 crore was transferred, and nothing after 1991-92.



EDUCATION. Funding re-routed

The idea of OIDB was apparently junked by the government. So, even though these have been collected as cess, they are being used like taxes, without the obligation of sharing with the States.
This is nothing but a gross violation of the Constitutional spirit, and an enticement for the Centre to indulge in profligacy, defeating the purpose of the cess.

EDUCATION CESS
The case with HEC similarly shows how the purpose of the cess has been hijacked by successive governments. Until FY18, there only was a 3 per cent Education Cess on the income tax payable, of which 2 per cent was earmarked for primary education for financing the centrally sponsored Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and mid-day meal scheme, and 1 per cent for secondary education.
In the Budget for FY19, Arun Jaitley introduced an additional 1 per cent Health Cess to finance rural healthcare

for BPL families, to be transferred to the reserve fund Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi in the Public Account. The idea was to enhance outlays for this crucial sector that needed enhanced funding.
In reality, however, this cess was utilised by the government to finance its existing healthcare expenditure rather than expanding it, as the share of health in total government expenditure has actually fallen below the FY19-level when the cess was introduced.
HEALTH BUDGET
In FY18, the total allocation for health was 2.5 per cent of total expenditure, when there was no cess. The share came down to 2.3 per cent in FY19 after cess was introduced.
The share has now fallen to only 1.9 per cent (FY26 Budget). The 2018 level allocation of 2.5 per cent would have raised the health budget to almost ₹1.3 lakh crore, as against the actual allocation of just ₹98,000 crore including the cess-funded portion.
The cess, instead of augmenting health expenditure, actually ended up trimming the budgetary support, just like in education, whose share of total expenditure has come down from 3.7 per cent in FY18 to only 2.5 per cent now. Thus, effectively the cesses have substituted the existing budgetary outlays, and the chronic underfunding that has characterised our health and education policies all along continues.

The writer is a former DG of CAG if India, and currently a Professor at AJNIFM. Views are personal

BELOW THE LINE



Let the regulator do its job
The usually measured SEBI Chairman, Tuhin Kanta Pandey, turned a little testy when the weekly chatter on ‘expiry’ days came up yet again at Friday’s post-board meeting briefing. “Stop speculating in the media every day,” he told reporters,

clearly fed up with the will-they-won’t-they headlines, even when SEBI isn’t sure yet as it is a complex issue and consultation will take some time.
The subtext was simple: let the process play out, for regulators don’t have time swatting half-baked stories.
Double standards
The India head of a global firm was recently saying in an interview that the country holds a significant place for the company’s global business and it values local talent. However, just a few hours before he said it, there was a rather different scene that played out in his enterprise. The guests invited to the company faculty for an event walked

up to a neatly arranged buffet only to be stopped by company representatives, who said that the offerings were ‘exclusively for foreign executives’. Indians, whether company staff or guests, were asked to head to the company canteen for their meals. So much for localisation and India-first strategy!
Festival politics
The Karnataka Government’s decision on writer-activist Banu Mushtaq — a Booker prize winning author — being the chief guest to inaugurate Dasara celebrations has not gone down well with a section of the populace and BJP supporters. The government and Congress supporters point out that there have

been precedents where non-Hindus like poet KS Nisar Ahmed, apart from self-declared atheists, have inaugurated the festivities. They say it is a State-sponsored event and not a religious one. The BJP and its supporters say that Dasara is a quintessential Hindu festival and only believers can partake in it. Hotels, travel agencies and other locals dependent on the tourist economy are hoping that the controversy will not dampen the festivities or inflow of visitors in the busiest season of the year for them.
‘Gyan Bharatam’
The Ministry of Culture had launched the ‘Gyan Bharatam’, an initiative dedicated to preserving, digitising

and disseminating India’s manuscript heritage.
To mark the occasion, it held an event in Delhi recently where Union Minister for Culture and Tourism, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, was the Chief Guest. He said that the knowledge preserved in written form after ‘Shruti’ and ‘Smriti’ is now being revived through the ‘Gyan Bharatam Mission’ by the Ministry. He emphasised that this process should not be seen merely as an academic exercise but as part of a cultural renaissance. Though the intent is to ensure that this heritage reaches future generations, how many will be really interested, a critic questioned.
Our Bureaus



Improving macros

India seems set for a period of low inflation and relatively high growth

Neither the government nor the RBI will likely be alarmed by the rise in retail inflation in August 2025, even though it snapped a nine-month streak of declining inflation rates. At 2.1%, it is just marginally within the RBI's comfort band of 2%-6%, with no real macroeconomic risk. The government would be glad to see food inflation remaining subdued at the urban and rural levels. Especially heartening would have been the 15.9% and 14.5% contraction in the prices of vegetables and pulses, respectively. When combined with the free foodgrains provision under the National Food Security Act, this downward movement in food prices ensures affordable supplies of these necessities. Other necessities, such as clothing and footwear, housing, and fuel and light, are all seeing inflation remain low, and lower in August than in July. As things stand, India's macroeconomic outlook looks the exact opposite of what it was last year. From a relatively low growth, high inflation scenario, India is now witnessing high growth and low inflation. In other words, the differential between growth and inflation at this time last year was about 2.1 percentage points. This year, it is about 5.5 percentage points, a welcome and large gap. Of course, there are legitimate questions to be asked about GDP and inflation data, but those questions were valid last year as well, and so do not erode the comparability of the two years.

Looking ahead, the overall outlook for inflation continues to appear benign. Even if India decides to accede to the U.S.'s demands and abandon its purchase of Russian oil, the economic impact is likely to be limited. Global crude prices are relatively low, and so the discount Russia is able to provide is not as attractive as it was in 2022. The cost increase of switching to other countries for oil is, therefore, likely to be limited. As a result, the impact on inflation within India is also likely to be limited, if such an eventuality comes to pass. On the other hand, the new GST rates will come into effect from September 22. With most prices set to come down due to their rates being cut, the impact on the inflation rate is also going to be in the same direction. The low inflation rate and high growth in Q1 have raised expectations that the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee will cut interest rates further in its next meeting at the end of September. However, given the ongoing global uncertainties, this might be premature. Depending on how the renewed bonhomie between India and the U.S. progresses, a rate cut in December is the more likely outcome.

Sliver of hope

An inclusive vision of conservation can protect more habitats

The recent survey of saltwater crocodiles in the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve is a notable advance for conservation in India. The census indicates a rise in overall numbers and demographic diversity, implying an ecological success that is also a marker of how wildlife law and conservation policy are gradually moving beyond their fixation on a handful of charismatic species, including the tiger and the elephant. In the early years of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, protection was disproportionately directed at megafauna whose appeal could mobilise public opinion. Saltwater crocodiles do not command the same affection, so their recovery demonstrates how the statutory framework, when coupled with targeted interventions such as the Bhagabatpur Crocodile Project, can yield durable gains even for less prominent species. In many countries, reptiles continue to receive weaker safeguards, often subordinated to fisheries or land-use concerns. The increase in Sundarban crocodiles suggests that India's model of combining blanket legal protection with site-specific captive breeding and release programmes has been effective. But in absolute terms, the law still has gaps: it does not adequately anticipate emerging threats linked to climate change, rising salinity or habitat fragmentation. Protection has also been reactive.

As hypercarnivorous apex predators, crocodiles regulate prey populations and remove carcasses from water channels, contributing to the health of mangroves. Thus, their presence signals that creeks and rivers still sustain a functioning food web despite immense pressures from human settlement, cyclones and sea-level rise. Better juvenile survival also indicates that the breeding habitat retains sufficient quality. This is an important ecological marker for the delta, where rising salinity and erosion are narrowing the niches available to wildlife. If the crocodile population can establish a stable age structure, it may bolster the resilience of the Sundarbans' mangrove networks. The species' trajectory also highlights what can be done for other neglected ones. Current Schedules under the Act should be accompanied by proactive, well-funded recovery plans, and public communication strategies need to be recalibrated. The crocodiles did not gain numbers because they became beloved but because conservation agencies invested in their protection. A similar shift in focus can support other species. Climate change integration is also essential. Saltwater crocodiles tolerate wide salinity ranges but many amphibians or freshwater reptiles do not. Anticipatory measures including identifying climate refugia and enabling assisted breeding are thus required. The recovery illustrates that non-charismatic species can benefit from law and policy with sustained attention. For India, the lesson is that a richer, more inclusive, vision of conservation is possible and necessary.

An article, in *Foreign Affairs*, titled "India's Great Power Delusions - How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions" (July/August 2025), is creating a storm in the proverbial tea cup. The article's key point is that India had 'delusions' of grandeur, and about becoming a Great Power, and that this lacked substance. More to the point, the article talks disparagingly about India, stating that it stood nowhere in the race between China and the United States, as far as the Great Power sweepstakes are concerned.

Not unexpectedly, this has ruffled feathers, at a time when India had begun to believe that it was on the cusp of overcoming the 'middle income trap' and emerging into the category of a Big Power. This may be termed delusional by some, but India's belief in its future is not new and has strong foundations. What may be faulted is the writer's premise that India and China are on the cusp of a conflict, and that India would need the United States' assistance to counter Chinese aggression. Both India and China are civilisational powers, though they have adopted different paths to progress. Neither country is, however, ready for a round of conflict, notwithstanding the existence of certain border issues between them. However, given India's experience in 1962 and 1971, when the U.S. went out of its way to remove any doubts that India might have had about U.S. support, the former is not looking for its aid in any future conflict.

The tenor of this article would suggest that the U.S. currently thinks that it can wield the big stick of the 'tariff war' to compel India to fall in line with its wishes. Lost in translation, however, is that Donald Trump's America is unable to comprehend the fact that the more advanced civilisations of the east, such as India and China, are not thinking of war or conflict at this time. Recent events and the meetings in Tianjin confirm this, and further demonstrate that India and China, along with Russia, constitute a strong phalanx against those anxious to disrupt the current world order – at least as far as Asia is concerned.

A closer look at the India story

It may, nevertheless, be worth analysing whether India's Big Power ambitions are indeed out of sync with reality. Also, whether it is wrong for India to start believing that achieving Great Power status is within reach. The first mistake made by critics is that India has never made the claim that it was about to overtake China in the near future. Or that it was within striking distance of the U.S. The worst that India can be accused of is to start believing that it had indeed pulled well ahead of a pack of nations that had started with similar hopes, and that India had succeeded in overcoming the 'middle income trap' – reaching striking distance of their main objective.



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India's belief in its future is not new and has strong foundations, which the West should understand

Positioning India in an unruly world

The derisive tone adopted by the writer of the article does seem to reflect an element of outrage at India's claims to progress. There is, however, a great deal to be said in favour of India's growth story, and, even more so, in the manner in which it has been achieved, in sharp contrast to that of countries such as China.

The Americans cannot be faulted for not reading or understanding history since this is not in their DNA. But India's spectacular transformation, from a 'famine affected' nation, through the Green Revolution, to becoming an exporter of food grains is, perhaps, unrivalled in the history of modern or even ancient times. Economic progress, rather than accumulating military strength, was the sine qua non of India's existence during its early years of independence, and provided the backbone for future progress. Butter before guns was the motto.

Nevertheless, and throughout this period, India exercised a degree of moral authority – that most countries including the U.S. have seldom exercised – to emerge as a balancing factor in international relations. This has few, if any, equals in politics post the Second World War. It is India that coined and propagated a new philosophy in international relations, viz., the concept of Non Alignment, at a time when the world was split into two rival and conflicting orthodoxies; it helped safeguard the identity and hopes of newer nations post 1945, that did not wish to be aligned with either of the two rival blocs headed by the U.S. and Russia, respectively. India often acted as an arbiter in conflicts at the time (such as the Korean War in the 1950s), gaining international acclaim.

In the eyes of the West

The U.S.-China 'bromance' in the 1970s – achieved through the mesmerising diplomacy of then U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, and his friendship with China's Deng Xiaoping – which transformed the attitude of the U.S. and of the West to China's potential as a market, had the effect of diminishing India's importance in western eyes, especially that of the U.S. Simultaneously, India's close friendship with Russia proved to be an irritant, further cemented with the signing of the India-Soviet Treaty of 1971. The 1974 nuclear test in the Pokhran desert – 'Buddha is Smiling' – aggravated this situation further.

The imperious tone of the *Foreign Affairs* article betrays a lack of understanding about India's ability to manage contradictions of every kind. India's relations with the U.S. vastly improved since the turn of the century, reaching a high point following the India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008. But this happened even as India-U.S. relations were still far from warm. Many irritants remain, the most nagging of them being India's reliance on Russian weapons, and,

more recently, Russian oil, despite U.S. opposition.

This is despite India having more than made up for this by joining the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, the U.S.). Managing contradictions is among the key strengths that this country has derived from its civilisational past, which is little understood by countries in the West, specially those in the far West such as the U.S. The mandarins in the U.S. are, hence, unable to comprehend how India and China, despite being embroiled in a border dispute, can also be friends, as evidenced during the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit. Even more confusing for the West is the 'entente cordiale' between China, India and Russia, as demonstrated on this occasion.

Technological superiority is the driver

What is truly delusional, however, is the failure of the West to recognise the real impetus in world affairs today, which stems from the 'empires of the mind'. In this respect, the U.S. today has far fewer cards to deal. This is the age of the 'cybernated generation' and the digital fortress is being breached today by countries with evolved civilisations such as China, India, Japan and Vietnam.

Harvesting data is today the main weapon of choice – and this is very different from employing 'laser weapons'. Technological superiority is leading to new digital colonies, and the U.S. can at best, and only for now, claim a marginal advantage over countries such as India. India's intrinsic capacity in this area, meanwhile, shows strong and steady growth. Those like the writer of the *Foreign Affairs* article, who scoff at India's strength may, hence, have to repent at leisure.

Rather than casting stones at India, the U.S. and the West would do well to contemplate whether their current lead in critical technologies may soon prove illusory. As a new wave of technology 'geeks' storm and overturn the citadels of the past, and usher in a new world order, this is a real possibility. The West would also do well to realise that the 'Sherpas' that dominate Silicon Valley today, are mainly of Indian and Asian origin.

The U.S.'s lead of today is, thus, at best, ephemeral. India, for its part, is betting on this leap of faith as far as technologies of the future are concerned, and the West would do well to understand them rather than depend on hackneyed themes of countries seeking U.S. support to protect themselves. The sun may well set on the U.S., and much earlier than it realises, even as an India, steeped in the virtues of an ancient civilisation and based on knowledge derived from centuries of civilisational existence, gains ground. Better positioning is more important today rather than indulging in vague concerns.

Cutting off online gaming with the scissors of prohibition

In a manner akin to a stealth operation, the Government of India pushed the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Bill 2025 in Parliament as the monsoon session drew to a close. This Bill outlawed online real money games while aiming to promote the growth of e-sports and online social games. The Bill was rushed through both Houses without any debate and was not preceded by any consultations with the affected industry or with States, which have jurisdiction over key aspects of the topic.

Online gaming was a sunrise sector in India and had seen significant foreign investment. This sudden ban will have repercussions for foreign direct investment across domains. Why would global investors trust India when rules flip overnight, and when the government kills one of the few digital industries where India could lead globally?

The fallout

Online gaming sits at the intersection of technology, payments, and digital content – the very sectors India claims to champion under the banner of Digital India. Choking this industry means shutting the doors on thousands of skilled jobs, slowing down innovation, and discouraging entrepreneurship at a time when the economy desperately needs them all.

When job creation in India is pitifully slow and at a time when the world is investing in gaming as the next digital frontier, this Bill has directly resulted in tremendous job losses. The gaming sector was on track to employ 1.5 lakh people by 2025 – across development, design, programming, customer support and analytics. These are precisely the kinds of cutting-edge, quality tech jobs India needs in its digital economy. Some of these will survive the ban.

Online real-money games were expected to generate about ₹17,000 crore in Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenue for the Union



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The Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Bill 2025 will only end the prospects of a sunrise sector

government and States. By closing this source of revenue, the Centre has unilaterally cut off a crucial revenue source for States also, while making a significant sacrifice. Why?

The government's central arguments in support of the ban are that online real money games have resulted in financial ruin for players and resulted in something akin to drug addiction. That it is clearly a societal harm that needed to be addressed urgently. However, is the ban likely to provide a cure? Or, would careful regulation, as being developed in States such as Tamil Nadu, provide a more balanced resolution? Were there other, possibly better, ways to curb the negative side-effects of online real money games?

Glossing over responsible gaming

Online gaming companies were working on technological initiatives to identify and prevent problematic gaming. Responsible play tools already exist and are proven globally. These include age-gating to restrict access to minors, self-exclusion mechanisms, deposit and time limits, bot-detection systems, Know Your Customer (KYC) and Anti-Money Laundering (AML) checks, and ethical advertising standards. Instead of strengthening such safeguards, the ban abruptly destroys them, leaving players more vulnerable than before.

If online gaming platforms that complied with taxation and regulation are forced out, compulsive players will inevitably find a way to shift to illegal apps hosted by offshore or underground networks. Such platforms operate beyond the reach of Indian authorities, pay no taxes, and expose consumers to fraud and unsafe practices. The government will not only lose revenue but also inadvertently encourage the very illegal gambling rackets that it seeks to curb. This ban would just end accountability. The real issue here is regulatory capacity. Instead of building strong oversight frameworks which

balance public interest with private profit, India has fallen back on the blunt tool of prohibition.

The ban also violates constitutional provisions, judicial doctrines and strikes a blow to federalism. Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution grants every person the fundamental right to practise any profession or business. The ban attacks the very foundations of this right. With one piece of legislation, a thriving industry has been dealt a body blow. If the concern was about the promotion of gambling, the Union government should have consulted with States as regulation of betting and gambling are State subjects. The new law has already been challenged in courts as it raises several questions of constitutional propriety.

A grey zone concerning online gaming has been whether it constitutes a 'game of skill' or a 'game of chance'. Judicial decisions have consistently upheld the legitimacy of games of skill. States are allowed to regulate or ban games of chance or gambling. Good regulation would clear the doubts around this subject.

A middle ground exists

Ideally, legislation should be developed which protects players, prevents addiction and exploitation, and addresses the priorities of various stakeholders and States. The choice is not between prohibition and a free-for-all. There is a middle ground: a clear licensing framework, strict compliance standards, and a taxation regime that is fair but predictable.

Banning online real money gaming, on the other hand, only ensures that both revenues and opportunities vanish into the underground economy, while leaving players unprotected and vulnerable. Time will tell whether, through this ban, India has protected its citizens or failed them.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hope, peace and Manipur

The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Manipur, his first since the ethnic clashes, carries deep significance for a State that is scarred by violence and displacement. Mr. Modi's emphasis on dialogue reflects the only path forward — one based on mutual respect and understanding. However, true reconciliation

requires more than financial aid or infrastructure projects. It demands trust-building, protection of vulnerable communities, and the active participation of civil society in bridging divides. The Prime Minister's visit should mark not just symbolism but also a turning point in the State's history.

Rukma Sharma, Jalandhar, Punjab

Holding SIR

No institution, however powerful it is, can claim exclusive and absolute power ("EC claims 'exclusive' power to decide how and when to hold SIR", September 14). Gone are the days when powerful institutions were beyond questioning. This is an age where the hands of the common man are strengthened with the Right

to Information Act, pleas and PILs. Though the Election Commission of India (ECI) is bestowed with enormous powers and has the huge responsibility of conducting fair elections, it must realise that its policies are not totally flawless. People have the right to know and the ECI should be open to scrutiny. Balasubramaniam Pavani, Secunderabad

Great Nicobar project

An attempt is now being made to justify the mega-infrastructure project in the Nicobar Islands by labelling it as one of 'strategic, defence and national importance'. Constitution of a tribal welfare committee, afforestation, creation of wildlife corridors, "geo-fencing" of the Shompen people and other

"mitigation measures" will not undo the damage. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are the 'treasure' islands straddling the east coast in all their exuberance. See reason and shelve the project.

G. David Milton, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

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

Bringing global education home

Based on the University Grants Commission's recommendations, the Ministry of Education has handed over twelve letters of intent to top foreign universities to establish their campuses in India during the last year. One U.K. university has already opened its doors in Gurugram, launching its programmes for the 2025-26 academic session, with the remaining universities setting up campuses in Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai and the National Capital Region. The fact that world-class universities are establishing their physical campuses in India shows our conscious policy realignment. It opens new opportunities for our students and expands educational horizons in ways we could hardly imagine a decade ago.

The beginning point for this development is a regulation introduced by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2023. The idea is to allow top-ranking foreign universities to establish campuses in India with operational autonomy and regulatory clarity. The UGC took this calibrated decision to align with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. At its core, NEP 2020 calls for re-imagining higher education to be globally competitive while remaining locally rooted. Facilitating the establishment of global university campuses in India constitutes a direct implementation of that objective.

Why now? India stands at an inflexion point. With a large aspirational youth population, India has a rapidly expanding and stable economy. Our start-up economy ranks among the fastest-growing globally and is a crucible of global innovation. There is a demand for quality higher education, especially in new-age fields such as AI, design, data science, sustainability, and finance. Foreign universities are not arriving on empty ground. They are coming into a country already



Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar
is former Chairman, University Grants Commission, and former Vice-Chancellor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

undergoing serious educational reform. Multidisciplinary is being actively built into the curriculum. We are adopting hybrid educational delivery mechanisms using digital public infrastructure. Research funding is being streamlined through the Anusandhan National Research Foundation. Quality assurance mechanisms are becoming more outcome-oriented due to the reforms in accreditation. Foreign universities see the potential. Many western institutions face diverse challenges, including rising operational costs, demographic changes, and expanding globally. Establishing campuses in countries with a high youth population and growing intellectual capital makes strategic sense. India offers both.

Local advantage, global gains For students in India, its long-term impact could be truly consequential. Access to international-quality education without the high costs of going abroad changes the game entirely. Families no longer have to stretch their finances or send their children halfway across the world. The benefits go beyond academic degrees. Students will have exposure to diverse peer networks, industry partnerships, and entrepreneurial ecosystems embedded within the country. And here lies a critical point. Students who might not have considered international education due to economic or social constraints can make that possibility real now. From the parents' perspective, the appeal is straightforward. They want their children to have the best possible education, and they want to feel secure in that choice. Sending a child abroad involves logistical, emotional, and financial complications. With global campuses coming to Indian cities, that equation changes. This situation, in turn, raises the bar for Indian institutions as well. Healthy competition never hurts a system. When foreign

university campuses in India offer cutting-edge programmes, our universities must innovate, reflect, and re-energise their models. There is a strong case for research collaboration, too. For instance, we have seen IITs, IISERs, AIIMS, central universities, and State universities collaborate with global partners on areas such as renewable energy, public health, and engineering. Australian and U.K. universities share strong educational collaborations with Indian universities. European and U.S. universities are intensifying linkages. These collaborations support research, innovation, and skills development.

Education powerhouse India is a rising power in technology, diplomacy, and manufacturing. Yet, we rarely speak of our potential in global education with the same conviction. India must position itself as an emerging force in international education not by imitating the western university model, but by drawing the world to engage with us on our terms, within our cultural, intellectual, and societal landscape. India's centuries-old tradition of scholarship, from Nalanda to Shantiniketan, should not be seen as relics of the past, but as living sources of credibility in shaping a distinctive, modern learning environment. India already draws thousands of international students each year, yet the scale is negligible compared to our potential. Some claim that prioritising global education is a distraction from India's domestic needs. The truth is the opposite. Inviting the world's students, researchers, and institutions to work with us here also lifts our universities' quality, resources, and ambitions. To ignore this is to allow other nations to monopolise the narrative of what "world-class education" means, while we remain consumers instead of shapers of that narrative.

The views expressed are personal

Time to reorganise JSP's structure

Alliance stays strong, but identity remains in a limbo

STATE OF PLAY

Sumit Bhattacharjee
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When the matinee idol of the Telugu film industry, K. Chiranjeevi, launched his political party, Jana Sena Party (JSP), in March 2014, political pundits had written him off as a 'political novice.' They even went so far as to claim that he, like his elder brother K. Chiranjeevi, would fade away within a few years.

Chiranjeevi, a superstar in Tollywood, had burned his fingers by launching his own political party, Praja Rajyam Party (PRP), in August 2008, which later merged with the Congress.

But Mr. Pawan proved them wrong. Not only did he hold on to his party, but he has also become a force to reckon with today, not just in Andhra Pradesh's political landscape, but at the national level, as his party is a key alliance partner of the NDA at the Centre.

Today, Mr. Pawan is the Deputy Chief Minister of the State. However, it appears he is losing grip over the party. In a recent 'Senatho Senani' meeting with party workers in Visakhapatnam, he candidly expressed his dissatisfaction with the party's cadres and leaders, vowing to personally steer it forward from here.

From a political rookie, Mr. Pawan has grown into a politician with a purpose. His clean image still helps him maintain unity within the party and gain political mileage in A.P.'s political fabric.

However, there is growing concern that since he won the elections and became Deputy CM, Mr. Pawan has distanced himself from the party acti-



vists and leaders. Reports of intra-party tensions and dissatisfaction among the cadres are on the rise. There is a sense of quiet discontent among the once-vocally supportive ranks. Many have voiced frustration over delays in local appointments, being sidelined in coalition politics, and the lack of representation.

There is also serious concern regarding the dominance of the alliance over JSP. Some even question Mr. Pawan's assertiveness in governance, amid the opinion that he is playing second fiddle to the Telugu Desam Party (TDP).

But PK seems to have understood the message early and is now on a mission to reorganise and restructure his party. He admitted in the meeting that due to overconcentration on governance, he had been forced to distance himself from party activities.

A senior leader of his party also agreed with Mr. Pawan's assessment. He explained that since they had come to power for the first time and the party was new to governance, it took some time to understand the complexities of managing a State.

Over the past 10 years, since Mr. Pawan launched his party, he has led it from the front despite numerous setbacks. He has demonstrated resilience by staying true to his ideals and fighting hard. In 2014, Mr. Pawan did not contest in the elections, despite

supporting the NDA alliance of TDP and (Bharatiya Janata Party) BJP. In 2019, he contested alone and suffered a crushing defeat, losing from both constituencies where he had stood.

But in the 2024 elections, he turned the tide. After solidifying the alliance with BJP and TDP, he launched a vigorous campaign against YSR Congress Party's (YSRCP) Jagan Mohan Reddy, achieving a 100 per cent strike rate.

He won all 21 MLA seats from where his party had contested, as per the seat-sharing agreement, as well as two MP seats.

However, in the past year, a sense of insecurity has crept in. The cadres have been particularly unhappy with the allocation ratio of various nominated and quasi-judicial posts. While the upper echelons of the alliance appear to maintain good relations, there is simmering conflict at the mid and lower levels.

Now, Mr. Pawan is on a mission to rejuvenate and revive the moral strength of the cadre. He has made it clear that the alliance will remain intact, and the YSRCP will not be allowed to make a comeback.

At the Visakhapatnam meeting, Mr. Pawan officially declared that he would focus on strengthening his party at the grassroots level. He has set a target to complete this process by March 2026, making it clear that the cadre base is his strength and that there will be no room for complacency at any level. It seems that Mr. Pawan understands that he has a big task on his hands. Now is the time for him to re-engage with the cadres and activists, ramp up his visible participation in governance, and assert JSP's distinct identity within the alliance.

Cotton import duty cuts: The farms versus firms debate

In 2024-25, cotton imports recorded a 77% jump even with the import duty in place

DATA POINT

Ranjini Basu

The Indian government's removal of the 11% import duty on cotton has drawn protests from farmer unions. The textile industry, however, has welcomed the move, as it faces the burden of punitive 50% tariffs imposed by the Trump administration. The textile sector, being one of the biggest employers, is witnessing retrenchment of women garment workers as global apparel brands shift the burden of higher tariffs onto supply chains in the Global South. Aside from geopolitics, the issue must be understood in the context of structural changes in India's cotton trade and the blind spots in cotton research and development. It also highlights the need to revitalise farm-to-firm linkages in the domestic supply chain.

Trends in Indian cotton trade India's rise as a global cotton player is linked to production changes, especially after 2004-05. Post-independence, India emphasised raising cotton output, having lost major producing regions during Partition. The Intensive Cotton Production Programme initiated this growth, followed by the introduction of hybrid varieties in the 1970s. The Technology Mission on Cotton (1999-2000 to 2013-14) gave a strong boost to productivity and quality. Bt cotton or Bollgard II variety received approval in 2002 for western and southern zones and in 2006 for the north.

Traditionally, India exported Bengal desi and short-staple cotton. Exports of medium and long-staple varieties later grew modestly. After 2004-05, exports surged exponentially. Until then, demand came mainly from Indian mills, but since then, international demand has driven additional growth of exports and expansion

of market. Additionally, increase in domestic supply reduced the textile industry's import dependency and boosted local ginning. For instance, in Gujarat's Saurashtra, many groundnut-oil mills converted to cotton ginning and cotton-seed oil production. Strong farm-to-firm linkages in India's cotton supply chain took shape after 2004-05.

Issue of price parity Despite previous progress, raw cotton imports are rising. In 2024-25, imports touched 5,25,158 tonnes – a 77% jump from the previous year, even with the import duty in place. The main reason is declining price parity: domestic cotton is costlier, while global prices are falling.

The Indian cotton supply chain begins with farmers and extends through ginners, spinners, textile mills, and the garment industry, eventually linking to major multinational brands. Over time, this chain has become increasingly integrated with global markets, making it vulnerable to international price fluctuations. Domestic spot market prices are influenced by global commodity indices and cotton-seed rates, with the Minimum Support Price (MSP) serving as a benchmark. As parity declines, ginning mills and brokers seek to acquire cotton at lower prices from farmers.

The Cotton Corporation of India (CCI) procures only when market prices fall below MSP, and its procurement signals inefficiencies in supply-demand balance. By June 2025, CCI had procured 34% of the production, among the highest in seven years.

High domestic costs are linked to falling production, declining acreage, stagnating productivity, and a weak cotton-to-lint ratio. Cultivation costs have also risen. Provisional estimates for 2024-25 show an 8.7% decline in cotton acreage, with north Indian farmers shifting to paddy and Gujarat farmers to soyabean and ground-

nut. In terms of productivity, Indian cotton took big leaps in the per hectare lint output ratio, especially in the post 2004-05 period. Average lint yield rose from 207 kg/hectare (1997-2002) to 481 kg/hectare (2012-17). The current yield of 437 kg/hectare, although above pre-2000 levels, lags considerably behind the world average of 833 kg/hectare, Brazil's 1,903, and China's 2,257.

Bt hybrids now cover over 95% of cotton acreage. Initially meant to tackle the persistent pink bollworm attacks and reduce insecticide use, the technology is over two decades old – a long time for any crop-technology to become more susceptible to pest-resistance. Bt hybrids soon spread to drylands, leading to loss of potency and other episodes of ineffectiveness and crop failures.

Research and investment Globally, innovation and technology adoption has advanced further: major cotton exporters Brazil and Australia have adopted Bollgard-III, while China, the largest cotton producer, is using CRISPR-based gene editing. Indian debates have rightfully focused on corporate control of Bt technology; however, contemporary cotton production has fallen behind. In the present moment, advanced seed technology with adaptability to diverse agro-climatic conditions, higher lint output, and sustainable resource management require a targeted public-research response.

India's R&D spending is among the lowest in the developing world.

Correcting falling price parity does not mean retreating to a time of weak domestic and international demand of Indian cotton. Instead, India must envision a future where public investments in cotton strengthen farm-to-firm linkages by focusing on both quantity and quality.

The writer teaches at School of Economics and Public Policy, RV University, Bangalore

Cotton conundrum

The data for the charts were sourced from Indiatat, the Cotton Association of India's annual "Cotton Balancesheet" and the Cotton Corporation of India (CCI)

Chart 1: The chart shows the year-wise total demand, supply, and consumption of raw cotton in India from 1991-92 to 2023-24, in lakh bales of 170kg each

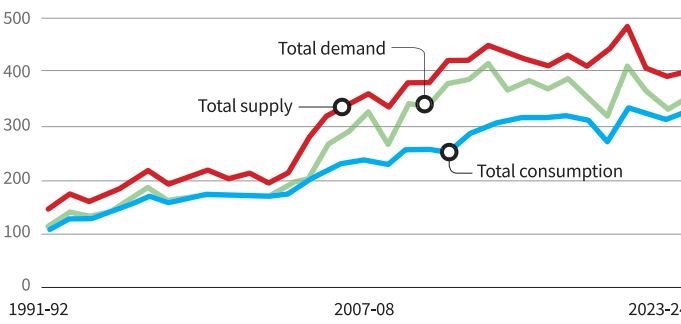
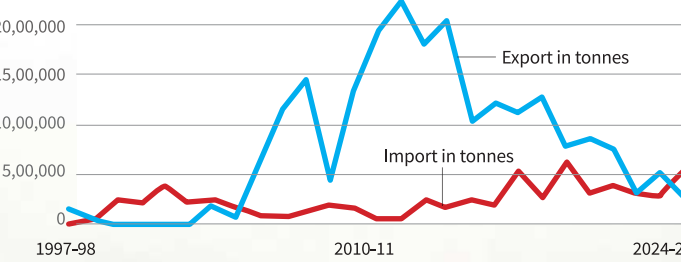


Chart 2: The chart shows the export and import of raw cotton (including waste) in India between 1997-98 and 2024-25, in tonnes. In 2024-25, imports touched 5 lakh tonnes—a 77 % jump from the previous year



The textile sector, one of the biggest employers, is witnessing the reduction of women garment-workers, as global apparel brands shift the burden of higher tariffs onto supply chains in the Global South.

1 India's R&D spending is among the lowest in the developing world. An uncompetitive sector could push farmers towards unsustainable crops.

2 More imports mean declining price parity: domestic cotton is costlier, while global prices are falling.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu.**

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 15, 1975

Colour Adulterants

NEW DELHI, Sept. 14. Metanil yellow, a non-permitted colour which has been found to damage the testicles of animals is the most popular adulterant in foodstuffs, according to the Indian Toxicological Research Centre in Lucknow. In a study, the ITRC found "all the 940 samples" of "arhar dal" and other pulses examined by the centre contained non-permitted colours. Metanil yellow was used in 97 per cent of the cases to paint "arhar" bright yellow. It was also found to be the major colourant for powdered turmeric and chewing tobacco. The study by Drs. S.K. Khanna and G.B. Singh has shown that out of the 12,575 coloured food samples collected from various parts of Uttar Pradesh, 8,820 contained banned colours. About one-third of them contained metanil yellow. Giving the details in the "Science Reporter," the ITRC scientists claim that only 30 per cent of the samples they examined contained permitted colours. The other 70 per cent of samples contained banned colours. They say the banned colours – about eight in number – are to-day being indiscriminately used in sweets, spices, beverages, pulses and even tea because they are cheaper than the permitted colours. The banned colours were present in 83 per cent of non-mill products and 57 per cent of mill product samples. In the miscellaneous group (sugar products, soft drinks, etc.) the extent of colour adulteration was 48 per cent. Non-permitted colours were used in "samples of sugar and general confectionery."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 15, 1925

Elections in British Cochin

There is a bye-election for five seats in the British Cochin Municipality which is to commence on the 24th instant, Mr. K.B. Jacob, Chairman, will have to vacate his seat as his term as a councillor is to expire shortly and the election campaign is already in full swing. The Chairman had requested the Collector of Malabar to depute the local Divisional Officer to conduct the ensuing election, but the Collector has declined to grant the request as such a deputation is not justifiable when there is a vice-Chairman who has to conduct the elections according to the rules.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of cases settled in Thane Lok Adalat

55,981 The National Lok Adalat held in Maharashtra's Thane district resolved more than 55,000 cases, awarding settlements worth ₹205 crore, an official from the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) said on Sunday. PTI

Villages in U.P. deprived of State roadways bus service

12,200 Uttar Pradesh Transport Minister Daya Shankar Singh on Sunday said 12,200 villages that are currently deprived of State roadways bus service will be connected with public transport facilities in the next one year. PTI

Number of prisoners in Nepal re-arrested after escaping

3,723 The prisoners had escaped on September 9 due to the vandalism, arson and demonstration following the Gen-Z protests against corruption and a ban on various social media sites that forced Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli to resign. PTI

Cost of projects launched by Prime Minister in Assam

18,530 in ₹ crore. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday launched projects worth ₹18,530 crore in Assam. In Darrang district's Mangaldoi town, he laid foundation stones for three major projects with an investment of ₹6,300 crore. PTI

Passenger vehicles equipped with GPS-enabled VLTD

94,974 Nearly 95,000 passenger vehicles in Maharashtra are now fitted with GPS-enabled Vehicle Location Tracking Devices that allow real-time monitoring and SOS alert facilities, officials said. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What do SC guidelines say on DNA?

Why did the Supreme Court intervene in DNA samples in criminal cases? What lapses did the court uncover? What has the court said about DNA reliability in past rulings? What do the new guidelines mandate? Is DNA alone enough to convict?

EXPLAINER

R.K.Vij

The story so far: The Supreme Court, in *Kattavellai @ Devakar v. State of Tamil Nadu*, recently issued guidelines to maintain the integrity of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) samples in criminal cases. The court directed the Director Generals of Police of all States to prepare sample forms of the Chain of Custody Register and all other necessary documentation as directed, and to ensure their dispatch to all districts with instructions.

What was the need to issue such directions?

The court, in the above case involving rape, murder, and robbery with an attempt to cause death, found significant unexplained delays in sending samples of the vaginal swabs to the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) for DNA analysis. Moreover, the chain of custody of the sample could not be established. Under such circumstances, the court held that the possibility of sample contamination could not be ruled out.

The court observed that although some guidelines have been issued by various bodies, there is neither uniformity nor a common procedure required to be followed by all investigating authorities. Even though 'Police' and 'Public Order' are subjects mentioned in the State List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, the Supreme Court deemed it necessary to issue these guidelines to have uniformity of procedure.

What are the guidelines?

The Supreme Court issued four guidelines for cases where DNA evidence is involved. The first guideline states that the collection of DNA samples once made



DNA is a molecule that encodes the genetic information in all living organisms. GETTY IMAGES

after due care and swift and appropriate packaging, including FIR number and date, the sections and statutes involved, details of the investigating officer, the police station, and the requisite serial number, shall be duly documented. The document recording the collection must include the signatures and designations of the medical professional present, the investigating officer, and independent witnesses.

Second, the investigating officer shall be responsible for the transportation of the DNA evidence (sample) to the concerned police station or hospital, as the case may be. He must also ensure that the samples reach the concerned FSL within 48 hours of collection. In the event of any delay, the reasons must be recorded, and all efforts should be made to preserve the samples.

Third, while samples are stored pending trial or appeal, no package shall be opened, altered, or resealed without express authorisation from the trial court.

The fourth guideline states that from the time of collection to the logical end, i.e., conviction or acquittal of the

accused, a Chain of Custody Register must be maintained. This register must be appended to the trial court record. The investigating officer is responsible for explaining any lapses in compliance.

What has the Supreme Court said so far?

The DNA profiles have a tremendous impact on criminal investigations. In *Anil v. State of Maharashtra* (2014), the Supreme Court observed that a DNA profile is valid and reliable, but this depends on quality control and procedure in the laboratory. However, in the *Devakar* case, the court said that quality control and procedure outside the laboratory are equally important to ensure that the best results can be derived from collected samples.

In a three-judge Bench decision in *Manoj and Ors. v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (2022), the Supreme Court rejected a DNA report on the ground that recovery was made 'from an open area and the likelihood of its contamination cannot be ruled out'. It was also observed that the blood stains found on the articles were

disintegrated, and the quantity was insufficient to run any classification test.

In another case, *Rahul v. State of Delhi, Ministry of Home Affairs* (2022), DNA evidence was 'rejected because it remained in the police Malkhana for two months and during such time, the possibility of tampering could not be ruled out'. It was said that 'the collection and sealing of the samples sent for examination were not free from suspicion'. The court also said the trial court and the High Court did not examine the underlying basis of the findings in the DNA reports or whether the techniques used had been reliably applied by the concerned expert.

Therefore, while the investigating agency needs to ensure that samples are collected properly, without any possibility of contamination, and sent to the FSL without any (unexplained) delay, the expert must also ensure proper quality control and procedure in the FSL.

How important is the DNA evidence in criminal cases?

DNA is a molecule that encodes the genetic information in all living organisms. It can be obtained from biological materials, such as bone, blood, semen, saliva, hair, or skin. Generally, when the DNA profile of a sample found at a crime scene matches the DNA profile of a suspect, it can be concluded that both samples have the same biological origin. However, it is not substantive evidence in criminal cases.

The Supreme Court, in the *Devakar* case, stated that DNA evidence is in the nature of opinion evidence as envisaged under Section 45 of the Evidence Act (Section 39 of the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023), and like any other opinion evidence, its probative value varies from case to case. Therefore, DNA evidence must be proved scientifically and legally.

R.K. Vij is a former IPS officer

THE GIST

▼ The Supreme Court has issued uniform guidelines to ensure the integrity of DNA samples in criminal cases, directing strict documentation, swift transfer, and a clear chain of custody.

▼ Past rulings show that lapses in handling have led to DNA reports being rejected, making both proper collection and quality control essential.

How serious is the global plastic pollution crisis?

What role should governments and individuals play in curbing plastic use?

Prakash Nelliyyat

The story so far:

Rapidly increasing plastic pollution is a serious global environmental issue as it significantly impacts ecosystems, their functions, sustainable development, and ultimately the socio-economic and health dimensions of humanity. With this realisation, this year's World Environment Day (June 5) focused on "Ending Plastic Pollution" and encouraging worldwide awareness and action against it.

How serious is the issue?

The OECD's 'Global Plastic Outlook' reveals that global plastic consumption has increased significantly due to the growth of emerging economies and markets. Plastics production doubled from 2000 to 2019, reaching 460 million tonnes, while waste generation grew to 353 million tonnes. Nearly two-thirds of plastic waste has a lifespan of less than five years, with 40% coming from

packaging, 12% from consumer goods, and 11% from clothing and textiles. Among this waste, only 9% is recycled. Another 19% is incinerated, 50% ends up in landfills, and 22% evades waste management systems, often entering uncontrolled dumpsites, being burned in pits, or ending up in terrestrial or aquatic environments, especially in poorer countries.

According to the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution, in 2024 alone, 500 million tonnes of plastic were produced or used, generating around 400 million tonnes of waste. If the current trends continue, global plastic waste could almost triple by 2060, reaching 1.2 billion tonnes.

The Ocean Conservancy data reveal that each year, 11 million tonnes of plastic enter the ocean, in addition to the estimated 200 million tonnes that already flow through our marine environment. According to a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) expert, if the current rate of plastic production and waste generation continues, there

will be more plastic in the ocean than fish by the mid-century.

Why is plastic pollution such a grave problem?

The non-biodegradable character of plastics is a serious challenge. It simply breaks into smaller and smaller pieces over time, creating micro- and nano-plastics that infiltrate and contaminate every part of the planet, from the summit of Mount Everest to the depths of the oceans. Plastics account for 3.4% of global greenhouse gas emissions. UNEP has stated that plastic production, use, and disposal could account for 19% of the total global carbon budget by 2040.

What remedies are being proposed?

At the fifth session of the UN Environment Assembly (2022), all 193 UN member states agreed to end plastic pollution through a legally binding international agreement. This is critical to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including climate action, sustainable consumption and production, protection

of oceans, and the restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity. UNEP's ambitious goal of reducing plastic waste by 80% within two decades requires serious action and international cooperation, innovation, better product design, and environment-friendly alternatives, as well as efforts to improve waste management and increase recycling.

As plastics and their chemical additives are primarily made from petrochemical feedstock, limiting their production and eliminating unnecessary items, especially single-use plastics, is urgent. Governments should permit production only within existing legal frameworks.

Most plastics used today are virgin (primary) plastics, while global production of recycled (secondary) plastics is only 6%. Improving recycling technologies and building profitable markets for recycled plastics are crucial.

Imposing landfill and incineration taxes can incentivise recycling. Extended Producer Responsibility schemes, landfill taxes, deposit refunds, and pay-as-you-throw systems need to be introduced.

Finally, people must adopt greener alternatives that have been used in the past. The media, too, has a significant role to play in shaping awareness.

Prakash Nelliyyat is Former Fellow, Centre for Biodiversity Policy and Law at the National Biodiversity Authority, Chennai, and the co-author of the books: 'Biodiversity Conservation through Access and Benefit Sharing' and 'Biodiversity and Business'

THE GIST

▼ Plastic pollution is a serious global environmental issue that significantly impacts ecosystems, sustainable development, and human health, with rapidly increasing production and waste threatening oceans and the climate.

▼ Addressing the crisis requires urgent international action, improved recycling, limiting production of unnecessary plastics, and responsible behaviour by individuals and governments.



Editor's
TAKE

Promises of peace, pathways of progress

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's long-awaited visit to the Northeast marks both a political statement and a humanitarian gesture, even if it comes rather late

It was a long-awaited trip to the Northeast that the Prime Minister undertook to assuage the feelings of people torn apart by a bloody ethnic war that killed hundreds and left many homeless, as the state of Manipur plunged into anarchy and burned for months. Coming two years after the ethnic clashes between the Meitei majority and the largely Christian Kuki community left more than 260 dead and tens of thousands displaced, the visit was not just ceremonial – it was symbolic of the Centre's renewed commitment to restore peace and rebuild lives in a state scarred by violence.

During his visit Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined centenary celebrations of Bhupen Hazarika in Guwahati, releasing a ₹100 commemorative coin and a biography titled Bharat Ratna Bhupen Hazarika. Remembering the legendary singer, Modi highlighted the timeless message of humanity in his songs, urging people to embrace compassion and build bridges across divides.

But main purpose of his visit was Manipur which has seen ethnic clashes since May 2023. The clashes – rooted in historical competition for land, resources, and political recognition – pitted valley against hills, turning neighbours into adversaries. Modi's presence in both Churachandpur, a Kuki stronghold, and Imphal, the Meitei-majority capital, was a carefully calibrated message: The Centre stands equidistant, willing to listen and determined to reconcile.

He appealed directly to the communities to take "the path of peace for realising their dreams," invoking the image of a "bridge of brotherhood" between hills and valley. In Imphal, he reinforced this sentiment with concrete promises – 7,000 new homes for families uprooted by the violence, a lifeline for those still struggling to find stability. But Modi's visit was not limited to reassurance; it was also about reimagining Manipur's future. Development, often described as the antidote to unrest, formed a core part of his announcements. Projects worth nearly \$1 billion were unveiled, including five new highways and a modern police headquarters, alongside infrastructure aimed at integrating the northeast more firmly into India's economic mainstream.

While Modi's visit to northeast and Manipur in particular is welcome but it would have been better had it come at the time when Manipur was burning. Indeed, the visit comes after a considerable delay – Modi had last visited Manipur before the eruption of violence. His silence during the initial months of bloodshed gave his opponents enough ammunition to question his leadership. The resignation of former Chief Minister N Biren Singh underscored how local governance faltered under pressure. Peace in Manipur requires rebuilding trust at the grassroots, addressing grievances on both sides, and ensuring that political actors do not inflame old wounds for narrow gain. Modi's appeal to dialogue must therefore be matched with transparent mechanisms of reconciliation.

NITI Aayog's human capital revolution

More than just achieving targets, NITI Aayog has focused on creating systems that are sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready. Its commitment to the SDGs is evident in its every initiative – from digital public infrastructure to gender equity



RAO INDERJIT
SINGH

In a country as vast and varied as India, the true measure of progress lies not merely in GDP figures or infrastructure milestones but in how well a nation nurtures its people. Human capital – our education, skills, health, and productivity – is not just an economic asset but a moral imperative. Over the last ten years, a quiet yet formidable revolution has taken shape under the stewardship of India's premier policy think tank, NITI Aayog, reshaping how the country invests in its most valuable resource: its citizens. In a nation where over 65 per cent of the population is below the age of 35, the demographic dividend presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity. But the sheer scale of this young population brings enormous responsibility. The challenge lies in converting youthful energy into a force for economic growth and national development. This is where NITI Aayog has emerged as a visionary catalyst – charting a roadmap not just for today's progress but for tomorrow's prosperity. Over the last decade, NITI Aayog has evolved from a think tank into a reformist engine and an execution partner, known for bold ideas backed by data, collaboration, and human-centred design. It has transformed policymaking from a top-down exercise to a dynamic process of co-creation with states, private players, global institutions, and civil society. Its strength lies not just in planning, but in listening – and turning those insights into action. Education, the bedrock of human capital, has witnessed a complete reimagining under its guidance. Recognising that access alone is not enough, NITI Aayog pushed for quality and equity. The National Education Policy 2020, where it played a pivotal role, ushered in a new era – shifting from rote learning to critical thinking, flexibility, and vocational integration.

It emphasised early childhood education, mother-tongue instruction, and seamless transitions between disciplines. Through initiatives like the Atal Innovation Mission, it ensured both accountability and imagination – embedding innovation in over 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs that now dot the country. Skilling India's youth for the twenty-first century has been another cornerstone of its mission.

From backing the Skill India Mission to ensuring that vocational programmes reach the heart of underserved districts via the Aspirational Districts Programme, NITI Aayog has helped bridge the gap between classroom and career. Under Skill India Mission, more than 1.5 crore youth have been trained through initiatives that blend technology, industry linkages, and demand-driven curricula. It did not just train for training's sake – it mapped sectoral needs and designed



The Pioneer SINCE 1865

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NATION

Author is Minister of State
(Independent Charge)
Ministry of Statistics and
Programme
Implementation;
Planning and Minister of
State, Culture

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programmes that opened real economic doors for India's rural and urban youth alike. In parallel, it championed a dynamic, inclusive labour market. It supported the rationalisation of forty-four central labour laws into four simplified codes – on wages, social security, industrial relations, and occupational safety. These reforms balanced employer flexibility with worker protection, particularly benefiting informal sector workers who make up the majority of India's workforce.

By simplifying compliance and encouraging formalisation, the workplace became not only more productive but also more humane. Healthcare, often seen as a cost, was reframed as an investment. NITI Aayog helped architect the shift from reactive treatment to proactive wellness. The flagship Ayushman Bharat scheme, backed and monitored by NITI Aayog, provided over 50 crore Indians with health insurance, while more than 1.5 lakh Health and Wellness Centres took primary care to the grassroots. Programmes targeted nutrition, maternal and child health, mental well-being, and non-communicable diseases – aiming not just to heal the sick, but to keep people healthy.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the resilience of India's health system like never before. In this crisis, NITI Aayog stood tall – partnering with the Ministry of Health and ICMR to model infection patterns, ensure equitable medical resource allocation, and roll out platforms like eSanjeevani for telemedicine. Its post-pandemic vision emphasised not just recovery, but readiness – pushing for public health management cadres and modern digital health infrastructure.

Beyond these domains, NITI Aayog has been a lighthouse for entrepreneurship and innovation. Programmes like *Start-Up India, Stand-Up India*, and the *Atal Innovation Mission* created a fertile ecosystem for ideas to flourish. Thousands of start-ups in fintech, edtech, agritech, health tech, and clean energy are thriving today because they had policy support, incubation, and mentorship at crucial stages. These are not just businesses; they are job creators and

problem-solvers, contributing to a resilient and self-reliant India. But perhaps its greatest achievement lies in how it has institutionalised a culture of evidence-based policymaking. By leveraging big data, artificial intelligence, real-time dashboards, and rigorous monitoring frameworks, it ensured policies remain adaptive, accountable, and aligned with ground realities. Whether it was launching India's first SDG Index, guiding states on performance metrics, or using behavioural insights for policy design, NITI Aayog brought scientific thinking to the heart of governance. Its ability to convene and coordinate across ministries and sectors made it more than an advisory body – it became the conscience-keeper of development. It encouraged healthy competition among states through performance-based rankings, worked with civil society to amplify voices from the margins, and engaged global partners to bring the best practices home.

India's rising position in the Global Innovation Index and the praise from institutions like the UN, World Bank, and UNESCO reflect the world's recognition of this effort. More than just achieving targets, NITI Aayog has focused on creating systems that are sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready. Its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals is evident in every initiative – from clean energy transitions to green mobility, from digital public infrastructure to gender equity in workspaces. India's rise as a knowledge economy is no longer a distant dream – it is a work in progress, propelled by policies that see people as the nation's greatest asset.

What NITI Aayog has done is elevate the discourse around development, reminding us that true progress is measured not by the tallest buildings or biggest factories, but by the strength, health, and dignity of its people. In doing so, it has become more than a think tank. It has become the pulse of a young, aspiring India – an India that dreams, dares, and does. At the heart of this story lies the quiet confidence that when you invest in people, you build not just a better economy, but a better nation.

PIC TALK



Artisans prepare idols of Lord Vishwakarma ahead of 'Vishwakarma Puja', in Agartala

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE



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MANIPUR NEEDS HEALING, NOT POLITICAL TOKENISM

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Manipur, nearly twenty-eight months after the outbreak of ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, appears to many as "too little, too late." His three-hour stop in the North-Eastern state has been criticised as mere tokenism rather than a meaningful step towards reconciliation.

The violence has claimed more than 260 lives, while over 60,000 people continue to languish in relief camps – figures that speak of a tragedy demanding urgent intervention from the outset. The Manipur High Court's March 2023 direction to the state government regarding the Meitei community's inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list was widely viewed as the trigger for the conflict. Incidents such as the horrific public assault of a woman underscored the

depth of the crisis. Reports of groups such as the "Arambai Tenggo" and other valley and hill-based outfits fuelling unrest require thorough investigation. Decades-long ethnic tensions, culminating in such violence, recall dark episodes of the past, including the Nellie massacre of the 1980s. Allegations of attempts to seize forest lands in Kuki-dominated hill regions, alongside cross-border activities involving the Chin community, further complicate the situation.

Instead of gestures of damage control, the focus must be on genuine community engagement. Cultural initiatives – whether Ratan Thiyam's harmonious theatrical vision or the Shirui Lily festival – can serve as bridges to peace.

PRASUN KUMAR DUTTA | KOLKATA

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

Prayer heals wounds, wounds heal through faith



AJIT KUMAR
BISHNOI

2ND THE PIONEER OPINION

From my earliest childhood, prayer came to me as naturally as breathing. Whenever I was sick, anxious, or dreading an exam, I instinctively folded my hands and turned to God. At the time, I did not understand why it felt so spontaneous. Now I do. The Bhagavad-Gita explains: "The living entities in this conditioned world are My eternal, fragmental parts" (15.7).

Just as a child instinctively seeks a parent's embrace, the soul naturally turns to God. Prayer is not a ritual – it is the soul's most natural response. As I grew older, I began to recognise the immense benefits of prayer. The first is its immediacy. Prayer connects us to God instantly – no waiting, no intermediaries. Krishna Himself says: "Four kinds of virtuous people worship Me – the dis-

tressed, the inquisitive, the seeker of wealth, and the wise" (7.16). In other words, prayer belongs to all, in all situations. But this raised a question for me: does God always grant what we pray for? I often recall the example of a jobseeker. He may approach a businessman, but unless he is qualified, no job is given. Similarly, God listens to every prayer, but His help comes in proportion to our deservingness. When I prayed before exams, I often wondered – had I truly earned His help? Did I nurture a relationship with Him daily, or did I only remember Him in fear? Thankfully, my grandmother's poojaghar gave me a rhythm of daily prayer. Alongside, I worked sincerely on my studies. This balance of effort and devotion often bore fruit. Prayer alone would not have sufficed; effort without prayer would have lacked grace.

When youth arrived, life demanded more. I needed to stand on my own feet. Once again, God's mercy revealed itself. I found myself in the United States, guided to a professor who became my mentor, even though I had gone for a different specialisation. My intuition urged me to accept, and that choice shaped my career. Education, work, and livelihood unfolded in ways that felt nothing short of miraculous. Here I learned that sincere prayer attracts divine mercy, but blessings flow through timing, deservingness, and dharma. Material success, however, did not guarantee peace.

There was achievement, but not sukha – true happiness. At that point, I turned to prayer more deeply, not for external gains but for inner guidance. Slowly, my dependence shifted from self to God. Worries and fears began to fade. Ego softened. Humility and faith grew roots. Over time, I began to experience something extraordinary: God guiding the details of my life. Intuitions arose, decisions unfolded effortlessly, and I felt secure. Yet I realised one truth – God never breaks dharma. Prayer does not excuse us from responsibility; rather, it aligns us with the higher order. Today, when I see people endlessly worrying about their future, I remember my own restless mind. Prayer has shown me that peace does not come from overthinking but from surrender. Prayer is universal. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains – all uphold it as the soul's lifeline. It may be spoken, written, sung, or silent; in a temple, mosque, church, or simply in the heart. No qualification is needed – only sincerity.

My counsel to all is simple: pray. Pray for strength, clarity, and guidance. God is eager to respond. As the saying goes: "Take one step toward God, and He will take ninety-nine toward you." That one step is prayer. Taken earnestly, it opens the door to peace, hope, and joy.

The writer is a spiritual teacher

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Voter conscience shapes destiny

The Vice-Presidential election has once again revealed fragile loyalties within political alliances. While the BJD, BRS, and SAD abstained, it was the defection of 14 MPs from the INDI bloc in favour of the NDA nominee that caused much heartburn in the Opposition. Leaders swiftly condemned it as "betrayal."

Yet history offers a striking precedent. In 1969, when the Congress was undivided under S. Nijalingappa, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi defied the official nominee, instead backing VV Giri. By urging MPs to vote by "conscience," she ensured Giri's victory—ironically by encouraging cross-voting against her own party's candidate. Thus, "conscience voting" or strategic cross-voting is not new to Indian politics.

Once deployed by the Congress as an instrument of political assertion, it now unsettles the same party under the INDI bloc.

The present echoes the past, showing how conscience voting can alter political outcomes, reshaping alliances and testing party discipline. History, indeed, has a long memory – and its lessons continue to play out in the corridors of power. Conscience voting remains a recurring force that reshapes alliances and tests the resilience of Indian democracy.

GOPALASWAMY J | CHENNAI

Rafale strengthens Indian Defence

The Indian Air Force (IAF) has submitted a proposal to the Defence Ministry to buy 114 "Made in India" Rafale fighter jets. These jets will be built by Dassault Aviation of France in partnership with Indian aerospace companies. The deal is estimated at over ₹2 lakh crore and requires more than 60 per cent indigenous content, boosting local industry and jobs.

The aircraft made in India are likely to feature longer-range air-to-ground missiles than the current Scalp, which has been used effectively against military and terrorist targets in Pakistan. The high indigenous share in the Rafale programme would reduce dependence on imports while enhancing self-reliance in defence manufacturing.

Further, the French side plans to set up a Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) facility in Hyderabad for the M-88 engines that power the Rafales. Dassault has already established a company in India for maintaining French-origin jets. Leading Indian aerospace firms, including Tata, are expected to join the manufacturing ecosystem, ensuring technology transfer and skill growth. Such a landmark project would considerably enhance the IAF's capability while bolstering Atmanirbhar Bharat.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Speaker's role beyond party & power

The Lok Sabha has a new Speaker, primarily its custodian rather than a partisan referee. Across Westminster, Ottawa, Canberra, and other legislatures, such a tradition abides in the Chair.

The Speaker's authority is rooted not in command but in mastery of rules, precedent, and restraint – embodying dignity and ensuring continuity despite the vagaries of party politics. As vital is the severance of party loyalties, in practice and perception. In institutional stewardship, the Speaker personifies the House – far above faction, blending firmness with fairness, ceremony with humility.

When a Speaker rises to the occasion, the ethos of parliamentary democracy is greatly ennobled. The 15th Speaker of the Lok Sabha has been elected with a huge majority, the very reason why he need not carry the burden of defending numbers for the ruling party by hand-holding the Government with interventions and rulings.

With strong numbers, the Government can well afford to listen to alternate views rather than dictate. Hon Radhakrishnan in the Chair, as an anchor, is sure to earn the trust of both Government and Opposition, guarding their rights fairly and strengthening democracy.

R NARAYANAN | NAVI MUMBAI

Women directors and the rewriting of world cinema

Across Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Busan, Toronto, and India’s own IFFI, women are no longer a token presence but a defining force: winning grand prizes, rewriting programming ratios, and setting the terms of global cinematic conversation

FIRST
Column



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

For decades, women made landmark films from the margins. Today, they are writing the marquee. In the space of a few seasons, festival line-ups, major prizes, and even the Oscars scoreboard have shifted in ways that feel structural, not symbolic. Indian filmmakers are right in the thick of this turn, winning grand prizes, anchoring juries, and setting programming benchmarks at home. The result is not just better representation; it is a deeper recalibration of what stories global cinema deems central.

Consider the springboard moment: in May 2024, Payal Kapadia’s *All We Imagine as Light* became the first Indian film ever to win Cannes’ Grand Prix and the first Indian film in 30 years to compete for the Palme. In 2025 she returned to Cannes as a main-competition juror; proof that the system now sees her not as an outlier but as an authority. The halo effects were immediate: theatrical runs, major critics’ lists, and awards-season momentum that travelled well beyond the Croisette.

The ripple stretched across the festival map. At the 2024 Berlinale, the Golden Bear went to Mati Diop’s *Dahomey*, consolidating a two-year pattern of documentaries, and of women, owning the top prize. That outcome, coupled with the festival’s broader authorial mix, signalled that “female gaze” is no longer a sidebar; it’s a core cinematic grammar.

Venice, long a bellwether for awards season, has also edged toward breadth. In 2024, women accounted for a meaningful slice of the main competition; by 2025, the festival’s awards slate again featured high-profile wins by women, and critically for India; a breakthrough in the Orizzonti (Horizons) competition: Bengal-born Anupama Roy won Best Director for her debut *Songs of Forgetting Trees*, the first Indian filmmaker to take that prize in the section. It’s a milestone that sits comfortably alongside the Kapadia moment, evidence that Indian women are no longer exceptions but a cohort.

Busan, Asia’s most influential launchpad, formalised this direction in 2024 by introducing the Camellia Award to “raise the status of women in the film industry.” In the same edition, Rima Das’s *Village Rockstars* 2 won



BUSAN, ASIA’S MOST INFLUENTIAL LAUNCHPAD, FORMALISED THIS DIRECTION IN 2024 BY INTRODUCING THE CAMELLIA AWARD TO “RAISE THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE FILM INDUSTRY.”

The writer is a former civil servant and writes on cinema and strategic communication. Inputs by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavie Srinivasan

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The Pioneer

the Kim Jiseok Award, one of BIFF’s signature honours, before moving on to the Berlinale programme in 2025. It’s a neat illustration of pipeline power: an Asian premiere, a women-focused institutional signal, and then a European A-list platform.

The quickening isn’t only about red carpets; it’s showing up in programming ratios. India’s own IFFI (Goa) put nine films by women into its 15-title international competition in 2024, an extraordinary 60 per cent share that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. This wasn’t a token corner; it was the centre of the flagship competition.

Awards seasons are catching up as well. At the 97th Academy Awards (2025), Coralie Fargeat’s nomination for Best Director (*The Substance*) pushed the all-time list of women nominees in that category to 10, a club that, outside the hot-takes, quietly keeps expanding post-Bigelow, Zhao, and Campion. That numeric baseline matters: once a pattern is visible, financing norms and greenlight maths follow.

Zoom back to India and you see a layered bench, not a single star. Kiran Rao’s *Laapataa Ladies* has moved through a year-long festival-to-popular-awards arc, winning critical and mainstream recogni-

tion even as it missed an Oscar slot, important because it proves a female-directed social comedy can build audience without riding controversy. Shuchi Talati’s *Girls Will Be Girls* took the Sundance World Cinema Audience Award and kept travelling, a textbook case of discovery-to-distribution momentum for a woman-led, India-rooted indie.

The momentum has been equally visible at Toronto. At TIFF 2024, Lakshmi Priya Devi’s *Boong*, a debut feature from Manipur in the Discovery section, signalled how even the most regionally rooted Indian stories by first-time women directors are now finding global premieres at one of the world’s most influential festivals. Building on that, TIFF 2025 is set to host India’s first formally women-led delegation, coordinated by Women in Film India, a striking signal of institutional support that goes beyond individual breakthroughs. Panels like *New HORIZONS: Asian Women Shaping Film*, featuring filmmakers such as Taiwan’s Tsou Shih-ching and Japan’s Chie Hayakawa, underscore how the conversation on women’s authorship is now central to TIFF’s programming vocabulary. The Toronto-Busan circuit is also tightening its embrace of South Asian voices; alongside women-directed

works, films like *Bayaan* in TIFF’s Discovery section are crossing over into Busan’s A Window on Asian Cinema, creating a festival ecosystem where Indian women filmmakers are consistently part of the conversation. These additions matter because they mark a systemic change: it is no longer rare for an Indian woman director to premiere in Toronto, win at Busan, or sit on the Cannes jury. It is expected. The fact that such breakthroughs are now accompanied by structural initiatives, delegations, panels, awards created explicitly to raise women’s visibility, suggests the cinema landscape is not simply accommodating women directors, but actively centring them as the future.

These developments together signal a structural realignment in cinema. The very definition of what counts as “international” is expanding, as Kapadia’s Cannes triumph and Rima Das’s Busan win prove that stories rooted in Mumbai’s working class or Assam’s villages can travel alongside West African restitution narratives. Festivals are also shifting from mere representation to repertoires; IFFI’s decision to place 60 per cent of its international competition films in women’s hands wasn’t a token gesture but a recalibration of the competitive field, shaping the

ambitions of a new generation. The Oscars are reinforcing this trend: each nomination of a woman director chips away at the notion of exception, influencing financiers and distributors who look to Los Angeles for cues.

At the same time, Asia is creating its own scaffolding for women filmmakers. Busan’s Camellia Award and similar initiatives convert recognition into mentorships, visibility, and eventually, funding, setting precedents for the region. The audience appetite is proving just as decisive. All We Imagine as Light didn’t just collect prizes, it sold tickets and crossed into mainstream lists, validating the market for auteurist, women-centred cinema. Most significantly, India’s female gaze is no longer a novelty but a market segment in itself. From Kiran Rao’s socially attuned comedy to Shuchi Talati’s teenage-angle drama to Rima Das’s rural continuum, the tonal range is widening, and as these films travel from Sundance to MAMI to Busan, Berlin, and streaming platforms, they carve grooves that the next slate of women filmmakers can confidently reuse.

Crucially, this rise has also shifted who holds institutional voice. Women directors are not only winning prizes; they’re sitting on juries and shaping selections. Kapadia’s 2025 Cannes jury role is emblematic; it ensures that evaluative vocabularies themselves broaden, a subtle but powerful flywheel for future choices.

What changes next? Three pressures will define the curve. First, distribution. As Kapadia herself has noted, independent cinema in India still contends with scarce screens and inconsistent state support. Policy tweaks, public funds for subtitling, targeted screen subsidies for festival winners, and co-production facilitation, can turn fragile wins into a pipeline. Second, mid-budget financing. With awards data shifting, banks and streamers can underwrite women-led projects at the ₹10-30 crore band without insisting on formulaic casting. Third, craft ecosystems. The rise of women in direction is mirrored by gains in cinematography, editing, and production design; keeping that momentum means training, not just trophies. If the last two years were the “proof,” the next two should be about “scale.” On the global stage, women are not just present; they are centring the frame — artistically, institutionally, and commercially. And in that frame, India is no longer waiting at the edge of the picture. It’s in focus.

Nepal’s Gen Z fury turns moral outrage into chaos, not reform



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

Just like in Bangladesh, we witness the same pattern in Nepal. Unwise groups of youth, armed with social media channels and a distorted sense of justice, have manipulated the sentiments of entire communities, transforming moral outrage into instruments of disorder. At the conclusion of Bangladesh’s upheavals, the country found Muhammad Yunus and a semblance of reconstruction. Nepal, in its own chaotic moment, now looks to a ‘messiah’ in former Chief Justice Sushila Karki. The so-called ‘Gen-Z Movement,’ which emerged after days of violent protests and consultations with the Chief of Army Staff, recommended Karki to lead the interim government. Their initial agenda includes the dissolution of Parliament, the formation of an interim administration, and comprehensive revisions to the decade-old Constitution. Representatives of the movement emphasised that her name had been proposed through online votes within their networks, a mechanism that, in its ambition, perfectly captures the illusion of participatory democracy in the digital era, even as it dangerously divorces decision-making from political prudence.

The images that emerged from the streets of Kathmandu are seared into memory: former Prime Ministers stripped and paraded, political leaders’ residences set ablaze, and government buildings reduced to ruins. The ostensible trigger — a fleeting ban on social media platforms — quickly morphed into a grotesque pageant of street vengeance. Rajyalaxmi Chitrakar, wife of former Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal, sustained severe burns when protesters set her house alight. The protests, led by Generation Z, began ostensibly as a campaign against corruption and social media restrictions but soon escalated into unmediated retribution, public humiliation, and mob rule. Moral fury, amplified through social media, cannot substitute for governance or revolutionary action; it generates chaos, raw and untempered.

Nepal’s historical record reveals a society perpetually perched on the edge of instability. From the monarchy’s overthrow in 2008 to repeated constitutional crises, political upheaval has been a recurrent feature. Young Nepalese have long been marginalised by endemic corruption, nepotism, and econom-

ic stagnation. Their frustration is neither new nor unfounded. Yet, the mode of expression reveals a generation more attuned to digital signalling than strategic political thinking.

The role of social media in this generational turbulence cannot be overstated. Platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram, celebrated in the West as engines of freedom of expression, have acted as accelerants in contexts like Nepal. Western powers, insisting that digital liberties be “respected,” frequently overlook the fact that these tools, when exported to nations with fragile institutions, can destabilise society. Unlike in established democracies, where legal frameworks, media literacy campaigns, and accountable institutions moderate the impact of virality, in Nepal, social media created a feedback loop of outrage. Tweets, reels, and viral posts replaced dialogue, planning, and institutional oversight. The outcome was inevitable: moral indignation manifested as tangible destruction, exemplified by the torching of Nakkhu Central Jail and the release of thousands of inmates into an already fraying social fabric. Historically, revolutionary movements that produced durable change combined moral urgency with strategic intelligence. Hannah Arendt warned that “power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent.” In Kathmandu, the crowd wielded violence without authority; government offices burned, leaders were humiliated, yet no coherent political programme emerged to channel the energy constructively. Chaos is not power; spectacle is not reform.

Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and the role of “organic intellectuals” is instructive. He noted that societies in crisis produce “morbid symptoms” when old orders collapse but no new leadership is ready to emerge. Nepal’s Gen Z movement exemplifies this: the political elite had long lost legitimacy, but the young insurgents, despite their moral outrage, lacked the organisational and intellectual framework to propose coherent alternatives. They replaced strategy with chaos, reform with humiliation, and governance with digital validation.

Alexis de Tocqueville provides another pertinent lens. He argued that democratic energy, unchecked by deliberation and institutions, is volatile and potentially destructive: “In a democracy, the people are both the most powerful and the most vulnerable; their energy can create freedom or chaos.” In Nepal, it created chaos. The rage of the crowd, born of decades of nepotism, corruption, and youth unemployment, was real. Yet, channelled through the unregulated architecture of social media, it yielded immediate destruction and public

degradation rather than structural reform.

Stripping former leaders, assaulting public servants, and burning civic institutions were not political statements — they were barbaric actions mistaken for revolution.

Everyday resistance further highlights the dilemma, as incremental, often invisible acts of defiance can produce more enduring change than spectacular uprisings. In Nepal, however, the spectacular violence overshadowed any prospect of sustained reform. The participants may have felt righteous, but without political intelligence, their actions were transient, leaving governance structures in shreds and citizens exposed. This embodies the “Gen Z illusion”: the belief that moral indignation and digital virality suffice as instruments of political change.

The consequences extend far beyond immediate destruction. Thousands of prisoners escaped from Nakkhu Central Jail, including juveniles, highlighting the state’s failure to maintain order. Government offices, court records, and historical archives were obliterated. A society once bound by legal and civic frameworks now finds these pillars weakened, and social trust eroded. Social media, with its selective outrage and punitive display, has supplanted due process, turning justice into humiliation. Former Prime Ministers accused of corruption were stripped and paraded before any judicial examination — social media acting as jury, judge, and executioner simultaneously. Freedom of expression, when taken to extremes, has morphed into a tool of social barbarism. Western insistence on “respecting fundamental rights” has exported digital liberties without the accompanying institutional infrastructure. The result: moral outrage weaponised, social cohesion fractured, and state authority eroded. The Nepalese experience illustrates how digital tools, unmediated by governance, can inflame human psychology to uncontrollable levels, producing what Arendt might term violence masquerading as power. Nepal’s Gen Z movement is not revolutionary in the classical sense. It is an emotional, performative eruption, fuelled by outrage and frustration, yet devoid of the strategic foresight, institutional knowledge, and political acumen essential for genuine reform.

To claim otherwise is to conflate destruction with progress. Burning jails, humiliating political elites — these are acts of vengeance, morally rationalised only in the imagination of a digital mob. They signal not the birth of democracy, but the collapse of civility.

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GST 2.0 fuels hope, hurdles remain for renewables



KOTA SRIRAJ

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council’s 56th meeting set in motion the next generation GST reforms as announced by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 15th August 2025.

Highlighted as being strategic, principled and citizen-centric, the reforms are expected to enhance the quality of life of the common man and provide impetus to the economy ahead of the festive season. India Inc. have hailed the reforms as a defining milestone in India’s tax journey and undertook to pass on the benefit to the consumers. The rationalisation of the tax slabs from four to two is aimed at increasing the ease of doing business, reducing costs and helping businesses get a grip on inflationary pressures.

Expected to be rolled out on 22nd September, the first day of Navaratri, the much-talked-about GST reforms have been predictably received with bouquets and brickbats alike. While the opposition termed the reforms as too little and too late, eight years late to be precise, economists and industrial analysts on the other hand have welcomed the move, especially the speed with which the GST Council implemented the Prime Minister’s directive. Few things spur optimism and demand as effectively as tax cuts, and the Indian economy, with sluggish consumer confidence and spending, very much needed this shot in the arm.

Politics aside, GST 2.0 has definitely provided some much-needed relief to the beleaguered and besieged renewable energy sector in India, especially the manufacturing side of it.

The GST Council’s decision to reduce the taxation rate on renewable energy devices, relating to solar, wind and biogas, and on parts required to manufacture them, from 12 per cent to 5 per cent has been welcomed by the industry as a step towards spurring domestic manufacturing by easing capital expenditures, besides potentially lowering the tariffs for consumers.

Parallel to the GST cut on clean energy equipment, the GST hike of 18 per cent from five per cent on coal and lignite is also a step towards promoting renewable energy by discouraging fossil fuel use.

On the other hand, the simultaneous removal of the ₹400/tonne compensation cess has been designed to soften the impact on the coal sector. These steps may prove to

be major enablers for India’s ambitious climate goals, as a favourable tax regime means a reduction in the cost of renewable power and helps increase adoption across sectors, besides improving project economics for developers and investors.

All this bodes well, as India’s energy demand is spiralling with consumption projected to grow at over three per cent annually for the next 20 years. Complementing this appetite, India achieved a significant milestone by reaching 234 GW of renewable energy capacity in August this year. Yet, despite record-breaking growth in renewable energy (RE) capacity, the sector faces a barrage of infrastructural and bureaucratic bottlenecks. According to the report sent by the Sustainable Projects Developers Association (SPDA) to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, nearly 44 GW is ready for deployment but has no takers, as these projects have not been able to sign power purchase agreements (PPAs).

Plagued by unfinished interstate transmission lines, particularly visible in Rajasthan and Gujarat, projects have missed deadlines

because they cannot connect to the grid. The scale of stranded renewable projects now accounts for nearly 20 per cent of India’s total installed renewable capacity of 234 GW. Moreover, developers are also dealing with court cases and delays in getting land and environmental clearances.

These regulatory hurdles have forced many companies and investors to pause construction or hold back on commissioning. Making matters worse is the fact that coal still remains the “go-to” source of energy for the nation, posing serious environmental risks.

This is evident with several states such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal signing fresh contracts for coal-based power plants. In the financial year 2023, for instance, 79 per cent of domestic energy came from coal and lignite.

As India locks itself into fossil fuel energy commitments, the unused green energy is going to waste, thanks to the unaddressed bottlenecks. While the GST reforms mean well for the renewable energy sector, they only succeed in addressing some of the challenges facing the sector and not all.

The government must focus on how to ensure that the installed RE capacity of India is able to seamlessly flow into a flexible smart grid, and for that, GST reforms are just the starters.

The writer is a policy analyst

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Bolstering markets

Sebi’s mega reforms are a win-win for all—FPIs, DIIs as well as retail investors

AT A TIME when foreign institutional investors (FPIs) have been circumspect about the Indian stock market, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has given comfort to them as well as domestic investors to bolster the capital markets. The market regulator’s strategy is interesting. With the realisation that the secondary market doesn’t seem to be going anywhere whereas the mood in the initial public offering (IPO) segment is robust, it has taken a two-pronged approach. One, as reports suggest, it is working on cutting down the IPO clearance tenure by 50%—from six to three months. One can expect as much as ₹1.8 lakh crore worth of issues to hit the market, and even more, if companies apply aggressively. Two, to ensure that these issues are well subscribed, Sebi has given more institutional heft and relief to issuers, by increasing the anchor investors’ limit to 40% and bringing pension funds and insurers into play.

The good news: The portion for retail investors has been left unchanged at 35%, after the market regulator received feedback to this effect. As Sebi Chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey explained on Friday, it has been addressed by changing the minimum public offer (MPO) for issues with post-issue market capitalisation of ₹50,000 crore and more—from 5% to a 2.5-2.7% structure. This is good news for companies like NSE and Reliance Jio which are expected to come up with listing plans shortly. In addition, it has given such companies a longer timeline—up to 10 years under certain circumstances—to meet the 25% minimum public shareholding (MPS). There seems to be a significant change in stance as well, with focus on accredited investors and FPIs. So, FPIs and foreign venture capital investors with a tag of “trusted foreign investors” have been given a host of benefits.

The regulator said sovereign wealth funds and overseas retail funds will be able to access domestic market via an automatic window. This single clearance window enables simplified registration across multiple investment routes and reduced compliance requirements. According to Sebi’s assessment, this rule will cover 70% of 11,913 registered FPIs. Clearly, the market regulator is not against “money making but not seeking market manipulators” after its tussle with US market maker Jane Street—a case that is being reviewed by the Securities Appellate Tribunal. At the same time, alternative investment funds (AIFs) have been allowed schemes specific for domestic accredited investors and classified as AIs and large value funds for regulatory benefits. Real estate investment trusts have got a significant leg-up after being classified as equity, giving them an opportunity to become part of mainstream indices.

From the perspective of ease of doing business for investment advisors (IAs) and research analysts, it has relaxed registration norms, eliminating requirements for address proof, CIBIL reports, and infrastructure details. Graduates from any stream can now apply, subject to certification. IAs may also offer second opinions on pre-distributed assets and charge advisory fees within prescribed limits, provided clients are informed of dual charges. They can also share past performance data in one-on-one communications, subject to certification and a two-year regulatory window. The market regulator, while protecting retail investor interest, is encouraging sophisticated investors—both domestic and FPIs—to enter Indian markets more aggressively. It would be interesting to see if these relaxations, along with the goods and services tax boost, can change the market mood.

How far can Warner push the Ellisons above \$70 bn?

YOU MIGHT HAVE thought the tortuous acquisition of Paramount Global would have put David Ellison off dealmaking at least for a few months.

But the movie producer—backed by his billionaire father, Larry, the co-founder of Oracle—has only gained more ambition. His enlarged Paramount Skydance media business is considering an audacious bid for larger rival Warner Bros Discovery. The challenge for Warner’s CEO, David Zaslav, is finding levers to push the wealthy Ellisons to their pain threshold—wherever that may be. A tie-up makes sense. Both companies face the same core challenges: managing the decline of traditional cable television and becoming more competitive in streaming given the relentless march of Netflix.

The main benefit of merging Paramount with the smaller Skydance was the financial stability that came with control passing to the Ellisons. The hard synergy potential was limited. As for Warner, it faced its challenges head-on this year by announcing a plan to spin off its cable channels, sending a large chunk of debt with them. This frees up the streaming and studio business to command a higher stock price befitting its growth prospects. But there are limits to the value that can be created for shareholders from break-ups, which just move assets into different legal structures.

Abandoning Warner’s plan to split up and combining the company with Paramount Skydance would, by contrast, bring concrete synergies. The cable networks could cut costs while Paramount+, HBO Max, and Pluto could be merged in streaming and focus on their more popular titles. Studios behind franchises including *DC Comics*, *Harry Potter*, and *Mission Impossible* could consolidate space. That’s a sizeable opportunity relative to Warner’s roughly \$8.5 billion of predicted profit this year as measured by earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation.

What’s Warner worth? Warner stock closed up 29% on Thursday after the *Wall Street Journal* reported Paramount Skydance’s deliberations, implying an enterprise value of \$71 billion, according to *Bloomberg*. It was up an additional 1.4% on Friday, pricing in a high chance of a decent premium being dangled.

Analysts at Barclays reckon a fair valuation would be 7.5 times Ebitda. They allocate shareholders a half share of the synergies, estimated at \$5 billion annually, and reach an \$83 billion enterprise value. Deduct adjusted net debt, and you arrive at a reasonable price for the equity of \$57 billion, or \$22.80 a share. That’s roughly 80% above Wednesday’s closing price of \$12.54.

While Paramount Skydance’s market value is only \$20 billion, it wouldn’t be too hard to structure an offer containing a large slug of cash plus a continuing stake in the expanded business. Leaving aside the obvious capacity of the Ellisons to support the project (Larry Ellison’s wealth is \$363 billion, according to *Bloomberg*’s billionaire index), further equity financing from existing partner Redbird Capital Partners could well be available, and the combined entity might be able to take on additional debt.

Clearly, there will be political and antitrust issues for a deal creating a dominant force in making films as well as bringing together multiple news and entertainment assets. Still, this combination may have more of a fighting chance than others.

The trickier matter could be Warner’s negotiating position. Ideally there would be competing interest to push the price up. But conjuring a rival transaction with comparable potential and chances of completion won’t be easy. Comcast faces financial constraints and might face tougher regulatory scrutiny in the current political climate, while it’s hard to see Netflix or Amazon.com being interested in buying Warner whole, the Barclays analysts caution. As for sticking with the break-up plan, the benefit of that is that it’s tax free and could ultimately lead to potential deals involving the separated units. Morgan Stanley analysts warn of potential tax snags being created by merger talks going beyond informal discussions.

Maybe Warner could try finding alternative buyers for its component units. That’s messier than a clean deal for the whole. And if consolidation is the endgame of the split plan, why not just get on with it now, given the opportunity? The Ellisons have the upper hand here. But getting a good deal would still beat a break-up as Zaslav’s legacy.



PARMY OLSON
Bloomberg

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

INDIA MUST MOVE FROM BEING A PROTECTOR OF INEFFICIENCY TO A COMPETITIVENESS CHAMPION

Shed the ‘tariff king’ crown

ASHOK GULATI
TANAY SUNTWA

Respectively distinguished professor and research assistant, ICRIER



has 4%, and even China has 2.2%.

Interestingly, China is the largest net importer of agri-products (over \$100 billion in 2024). The US, which is the biggest agricultural exporter (\$182.8 billion), too is a net importer (\$59 billion). If the world’s two biggest economies can thrive by being net importers of agriculture, India should evaluate its comparative advantage, produce what we do best, and import what others can do more efficiently. The notion of imports being bad ignores the theory that underpins global trade.

Does it mean India has no scope to lower its agri-tariffs, which is holding back its trade negotiations with the US? We don’t think so. India’s agri-tariff regime is not just high, but it is riddled with irrationalities. Edible oils, one-third of India’s agri-imports, face just 10% duty. Cotton duties are slashed to zero, and yellow peas face negligible tariffs. Almonds attract below 15% duty, while walnuts and chicken legs face duties above 100%.

Apples attract 50% and blueberries 30%, but skimmed milk powder is at 60%. Food preparations such as soft drink concentrates, custard powder, and lactose syrups face 150%. The paradox is the most stark for rice—India is the world’s largest exporter, yet it has an import duty of 70%. Such irrational duties cannot be justified to “protect farmers”.

The 50% tariff imposed by the US on Indian goods is a wake-up call. India must reform, not retreat. First, we must rationalise tariffs, independent of Washington’s pressure. We feel no duty should exceed 50%. Raw materials should have the lowest import duty (0-10%), non-sensitive goods 10-20%, sensitive goods 20-35%, and luxury items 35-50%. In case of sensitive agri-commodities, it is better to adopt tariff rate quotas to protect farmers. Second, domestic reforms should be implemented to raise productivity. India must double agri-R&D to at least 1% of agri-GDP, focussing on precision agriculture. Ferti-

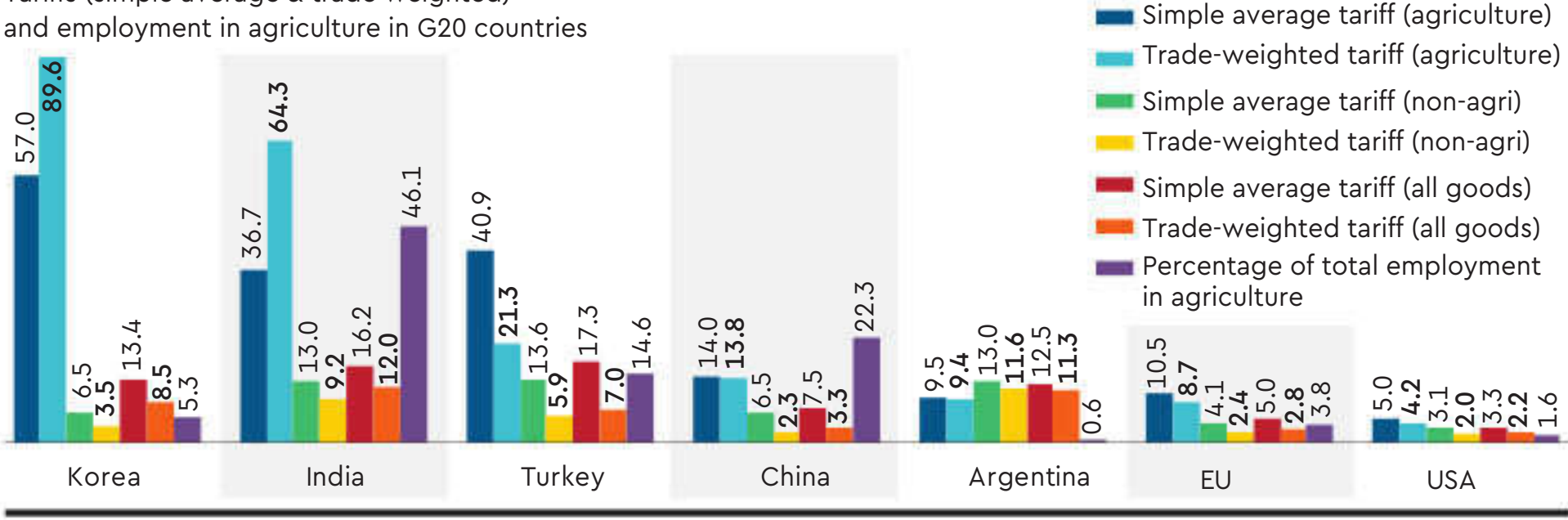
liser subsidy should be at top of the reform agenda—it is time to rationalise it by giving direct benefit transfer to farmers, freeing up fertiliser prices. Third, value chains must be strengthened. Competitiveness is not just about yields, but how efficiently produce moves from farm to fork.

India has already shown the capacity to reform goods and services Tax rates. Why not tariffs? The principle is similar—a clean, logical structure fosters efficiency, competitiveness, and credibility. India protects agriculture for livelihoods, but excessive protection driven by lobbies and undue caution is ultimately self-defeating. If India truly wants to claim its place as a global superpower, it must shed the tariff king crown. Imports are not enemies—they are partners in growth. Comparative advantage remains as relevant today as when David Ricardo wrote of it two centuries ago. India can either cling to its fortress of tariffs, inviting retaliation and stifling competitiveness; or it can embrace reform, rationalise tariffs, invest in innovation, and build efficient value chains. The former leads to irrelevance; the latter to resilience. India must move from being a protector of inefficiency to a competitiveness champion for the sake of its farmers, consumers, and global standing.

Views are personal

VARYING DUTIES

Tariffs (simple average & trade weighted) and employment in agriculture in G20 countries



Time for a different monetary policy target



SHAILENDRA JHINGAN

Head-treasury, ICICI Bank

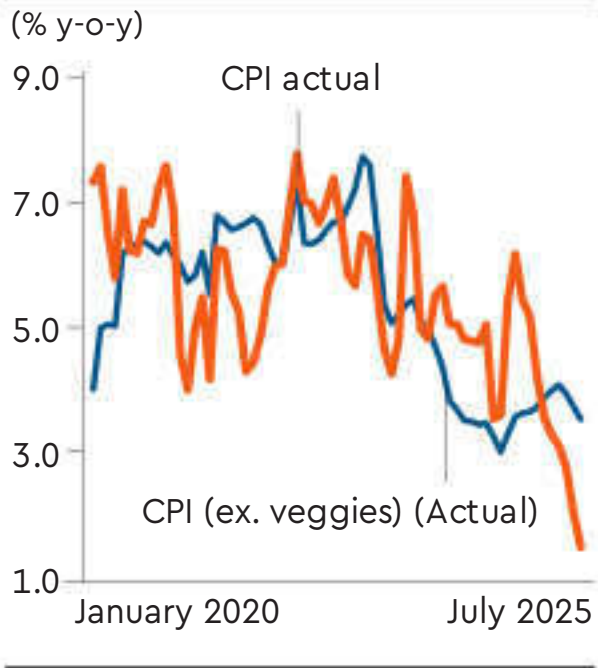
While monetary policy framework can still retain headline as target, the actual policy should be made on the basis of signals coming from headline excluding vegetables

THE RESERVE BANK of India’s (RBI) flexible inflation targeting (FIT) framework is due for a revision. India has been a recent entrant to inflation targeting (2016) although the framework has been around since 1990 with New Zealand being the first country to implement it. Today, there are 45 countries that are targeting inflation in one form or another. Despite being a late entrant, India has seen a considerable success in inflation management post-FIT with monetary and fiscal policy co-ordination ensuring inflation is far better behaved now than before.

In a country like India with a high weightage of food items (46%), the government is an important stakeholder in inflation management as the quantum of supply often becomes more important in food price management. That is why some commentators have argued that core inflation is a better metric since it responds to monetary policy signals whereas food prices often oscillate merely because of supply-side dynamics. However, with less than half the weightage in the overall consumer price index (CPI) basket, core CPI excludes more than it includes. The RBI needs a more inclusive target which also responds to monetary policy and not just supply dynamics of volatile food items.

The RBI has alluded to tracking inflation with Arjuna’s eye. The story in *Mahabharata* goes like this. Guru Dronacharya is taking a test of the Kaurava and Pandava princes’ shooting skills by placing a clay bird at the top of a tree. The pupils were supposed to shoot at the eye of the bird. One

INFLATION TRACKER



by one the princes came forward. Their teacher asked each one question, “What do you see?” Each of them replied, “Gurudev, I can see the bird, the tree, my brothers, and you.” Drona did not allow them to shoot and asked them to stand aside. When it was Arjuna’s turn, Drona asked him the same question. He answered, “I can see the bird’s eye.” “Then, shoot at once,” ordered Drona. Arjuna’s arrow flew from the bow and pierced the left eye of the bird.

In the context of monetary policy, headline CPI inflation is much like what the other princes could see. It has the noise element which distracted all the other princes except Arjuna. And a large part of that noise emanates from vegetable inflation. For instance, vegetable inflation has seen

a high of 42.2% in October 2024 and a low of -20.7% this July. Since vegetables are perishable with short cropping cycles, they tend to be extremely volatile and often distort the underlying inflation signals. Looking at headline inflation can often lead to delays in policy action and we know monetary transmission happens with a lag. For instance, in FY25 the RBI retained the withdrawal of accommodation stance largely due to an above target headline inflation (4.6% average) even as CPI ex-vegetable inflation was benign averaging 3.6%. Similarly from the beginning of 2021, CPI ex-vegetables was higher than headline inflation by more than 1% and the RBI started monetary tightening from April 2022. Once again CPI ex-vegetables surged above headline inflation from the middle of FY23 and the RBI raised the repo rate by 250 basis points over the year.

What works in favour of this measure is also the fact that vegetable prices tend to mean revert as supply catches up far more quickly than in case of cereals or other protein-based items which have a longer lag and also have a demand element embedded in the price signal. Typically, as households get wealthier they tend to consume more of protein-based items and the same is corroborated by the recent NSS survey which shows weight of cereals and vegetables coming down while that of processed foods, beverages, and protein-based items increasing. Not only should this measure give a signal of timing but also of the quantum of rate cuts. For instance, even in this financial year

while CPI has averaged 2.4%, CPI excluding vegetables has averaged 3.9% which is closer to the target.

On the tolerance band, headline inflation is volatile in a range of 1.5-7.8% during the FIT regime when CPI excluding vegetables has ranged between 2.9% and 7.8%. Given that breach on the upper bound is asymmetric compared to the lower, should it mean keeping an asymmetric band given that instances of inflation remaining below 2% are few and far between whereas those of inflation remaining above 6% are more frequent (25% since 2016)—in particular when we see a pass-through of global energy and commodity prices? Empirically, an inflation above 6% should drive inflation expectations higher and result in higher nominal wage growth, which can impact services exports. A symmetric band along with a point target is helpful in signalling and communication. Would moving from a point target to a range be helpful? Market participants would use the mid-point of the range as the target and thus it may not be helpful as such and could lead to signalling and communication issues. Hence, given India’s potential growth and long-term trend inflation, a target of 4% with a band of +/-2% is most suitable. While monetary policy framework can continue to retain headline as the target for FIT, the actual policy should be made on the basis of signals coming from headline excluding vegetables, which is less volatile and contains far more information on the economic momentum than headline alone.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ethanol transition

Apropos of “Slipping on E20” (*FE*, September 13), the use of ethanol will surely reduce fossil fuel dependence and increase farmer. But the Centre must not ignore the issues related to ethanol usage. It has not taken original equipment manufacturers on board and given them an opportunity to

make their vehicles compliant because according to auto experts E20 is damaging fuel valves from the inside. Most vehicles on Indian roads aren’t E20-compliant. As far as farmers are concerned, they would require more water to grow sugarcane for ethanol, and there would be feedstock shortages too. So, the government should prepare farmers better and offer E0

alongside E20 with clear labelling, to balance consumer rights and environmental goals.

—Bal Govind, Noida

Ethanol transition

PM Narendra Modi’s long-awaited visit to Manipur has failed to meet people’s expectations. It has taken him 864 days to set foot in a state riven by

ethnic violence. His visit may open the door to dialogue, but it does not by itself guarantee peace. Healing Manipur will depend on whether the Centre follows up with credible peace initiatives, impartial security steps, and a firm rehabilitation plan.

—Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

●Write to us at fletters@expressindia.com

Grand Old Man who told us of an empire’s loot

SANTHOSH MATHEW

History often rewards those who speak for the voiceless, even when their words are unwelcome.” In his 200th birth anniversary year, Dadabhai Naoroji stands tall not merely as a nationalist icon, but as a polymath, thinker, parliamentarian, social reformer, and above all, the conscience-keeper of colonial India. If today Shashi Tharoor reminds the world that India once contributed nearly a quarter of global GDP in the 18th century, it was Naoroji who, more than 150 years earlier, laid the intellectual foundation of this argument. His Drain of Wealth Theory revealed how Britain’s prosperity was being built on India’s ruin. It was not merely economics – it was a manifesto of awakening for a nation yet to be politically mobilized.

Born on 4 September 1825, in a modest Parsi family in Bombay, Dadabhai Naoroji’s early life embodied the fusion of tradition and reform. Married at the tender age of 11, he nevertheless became a pioneer of modern education and social progress. He excelled in mathematics at Elphinstone College and soon became one of its first Indian professors – a rare feat in colonial India where academic chairs were jealously guarded by Europeans. Naoroji was not just a man of letters; he was an institution builder. In 1851, he founded the Gujarati fortnightly Rast Gofar (The Truth Teller) in the aftermath of communal unrest in Bombay, to address Parsi social reform and the grievances of the middle and poor classes. The paper also became a platform for his wider reformist ideas, including women’s education and religious reform, and soon emerged as one of the most widely circulated newspapers in Western India, giving Naoroji a powerful public voice.

He would later help establish organizations like the Zoroastrian Fund and spearhead campaigns against casteism and social inequality. His was a reformist mind as much as a nationalist one. His ventures in London demonstrated his global outlook. He co-founded Cama & Co. and later Naoroji & Co., becoming one of the earliest Indian entrepreneurs in Britain. For him, commerce was not merely about profit; it was about building bridges, establishing credibility, and breaking stereotypes of Indian inferiority. His business pursuits gave him entry into British circles, which he would later use as platforms to articulate the Indian cause.

Naoroji’s career was remarkably versatile. He briefly served as Dewan of Baroda, where he proved his administrative acumen. In Bombay, he was elected as a municipal councillor and later as a member of the Bombay Legislative Council. These experiences honed his understanding of governance and exposed him to the structural injustices of colonial rule.

But it was in London that Naoroji made his greatest impact. Through his writings in journals like The Voice of India and The Friend of India, and his lectures such as The Wants and Means of India (1870), he educated not only Indians but also the British public about the economic exploitation of India. His meticulous use of statistics, budgets, and trade data gave his arguments an irrefutable credibility.

Naoroji’s most enduring contribution remains his Drain of Wealth Theory. He argued that India’s poverty was not the result of laziness or cultural backwardness, as colonial propaganda suggested, but the systematic siphoning of wealth by the British. Through “home charges,” excessive military expenditure, and the repatriation of salaries of British officials, wealth that should have stayed in India was enriching England.

His landmark book, Poverty and

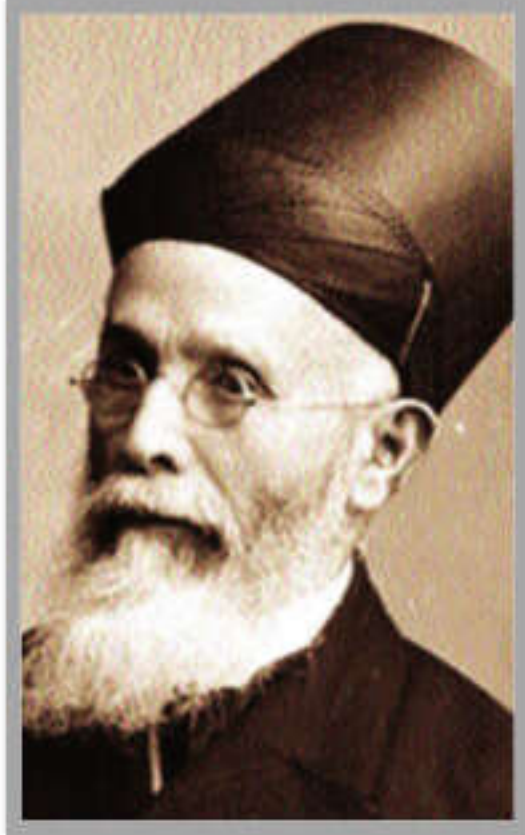
Un-British Rule in India (1901), crystallized these arguments. The very title was an indictment: colonialism was not just oppressive, it was “un-British,” violating the very ideals of fairness and justice the empire claimed to uphold. For a colonized people, this was a revolutionary assertion – that poverty was political, and that freedom was economic as much as political. Naoroji was not merely an economist; he was a political organizer. As one of the founders of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and later its second president in 1886, he provided the nascent body with intellectual credibility and moral leadership. It was Naoroji who first articulated the demand for Swaraj – self-rule – long before it became the battle cry of Gandhi and Tilak. His presidential addresses to the Congress were not fiery slogans but carefully reasoned appeals, balancing moderation with national pride. The fact that he was often called the Grand Old Man of India was not only because of his age but because of his fatherly guidance to the nationalist movement.

Naoroji broke barriers that no Indian before him had even dared to dream of. In 1892, he was elected to the British House of Commons as the Liberal Party MP for Central Finsbury, making him the first non-European ever elected to Parliament. It was a symbolic victory for India – proof that an Indian voice could be heard in the very citadel of imperial power. In the House, he tirelessly raised the Indian question – on poverty, on governance, on economic injustice. His presence itself was a rebuke to colonial arrogance.

While his political career in Britain was brief, its impact was profound. He gave confidence to Indians that they could match the English on their own ground. From The Voice of India to The Indian Spectator, from The Wants and Means of India to Poverty and Un-British Rule,

Naoroji’s writings created an intellectual scaffolding for the freedom movement. They injected nationalism into the bloodstream of educated Indians, transforming passive discontent into active demand. Even British thinkers were forced to acknowledge his erudition. John Bright, William Gladstone, and other leaders of liberal politics interacted with him. His economic critique inspired a generation of Indian leaders – Gokhale, Ranade, and even Gandhi, who once described Naoroji as a father figure. Naoroji’s vision was not limited to politics and economics. He advocated women’s education, campaigned against child marriage, and opposed rigid caste barriers. For him, national progress was impossible without social progress. His reformism was grounded in his Zoroastrian ethics of truth and justice, but it transcended sectarian lines. He believed in combining tradition with modernity – arguing that Indians must embrace education, rationalism, and civic responsibility, while retaining their cultural identity. In this sense, he was both a nationalist and a cosmopolitan.

What makes Naoroji remarkable even today is the sheer range of his pursuits. He was an academic, a businessman, a legislator, a journalist, a reformer, a parliamentarian, and a nationalist thinker. He could move from lecturing on mathematics to debating imperial finance in Westminster, from editing a vernacular newspaper to advising reformist movements. Few Indians before or after him embodied such polymathy. In an age of specialization, Naoroji reminds us of the power of being a generalist – of connecting economics to politics, social reform to nationalism, and ideas to action. Two centuries after his birth, Naoroji’s relevance has only grown. When global discussions on reparations, colonial responsibility, and historical injustice are taking place, his Drain Theory



stands vindicated. The world now recognizes, as Tharoor recently iterated, that India once accounted for a quarter of the world’s wealth before colonial plunder. Naoroji saw it, wrote it, and fought against it when it was unfashionable to do so. For India, he remains more than a historical figure. He was the moral compass of early nationalism, the intellectual who gave a fragmented society the confidence of argument, and the reformer who insisted that freedom was not only political but social and economic. In a sense, the Indian freedom movement had three phases: the moderate awakening of Naoroji, the assertive nationalism of Tilak, and the mass mobilization of Gandhi. Without Naoroji’s groundwork, the latter phases would not have found their intellectual legitimacy.

Naoroji@200 is not merely an occasion for nostalgia. It is a reminder of how one man’s pen shook an empire, how meticulous reasoning can challenge brute power, and how a life lived with integrity can inspire generations. The Grand Old Man of India lived to the age of 91, passing away in 1917, a decade before India’s political struggle would enter its mass phase. Yet, his voice continues to echo: in the cries for justice, in the debates on economic fairness, and in the unfinished conversations about colonial responsibility.

(The writer is Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry Central University.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman on 15 September, 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

The French attempt at a non-stop flight to Karachi has quickly closed in a lamentable disaster. The aeroplane with its two pilots crashed over the Black Forest and M. Thierry was killed and his companion, M. Coste, seriously injured. There is no present explanation of the fall, but there seldom is in such cases. A mechanical shortcoming, equally with a momentary mistake on the part of the aviator, may cause a crash. Yet men are not deterred by such accidents more than sailors have been by disasters at sea or railwayman by accidents to trains. Mankind pays for its conquest of the elements and its devouring of space and goes on unappalled. The real marvel is that flight should have been made comparatively safe within a few years and with so small a death-roll. The epitaph of the men who fail is that, even in their deaths they add something to human knowledge and human progress.

News Items

SPEED RECORD

FRENCHMAN’S GREAT ACHIEVEMENT

Etampes, Sept.

The French airman Lasne to-day beat the speed record of over 2,000 kilometres, doing it in nine hours eight minutes 32 4/5 seconds, averaging 219 kilometres per hour, as compared with the American record of 184. —Reuter’s Special Service.

RESCUED AIRMEN

ENTHUSIASTIC WELCOME AT HONOLULU

London, Sept.

A Santiago (Honolulu) message states that Rodgers and his four comrades on the rescued American seaplane received a wild welcome on their arrival here. All were ordered to hospital for further examination, food and sleep. One of them stated that big black sharks followed them daily. — Reuter.

MISSING PRINCE

RUMOURED STAY IN PARIS HOTEL

(Special Cable.)

Paris, Sept.

The manager of a hotel in the suburb of Brunoy states that a man, with two attendants, who resided there from September 3 till last evening when a motor-car took them off, admitted that he was the missing Egyptian Prince Seifeddin, and enjoined secrecy on the manager. — Copyright

STRIKERS REPLACED

DEFEAT OF SYDNEY EXTREMISTS

London, Sept.

When the Royal Mail steamer Ohio arrived at Southampton, from Hamburg, bound for New York, 140 seamen and firemen and 60 stewards struck and left the ship. They were replaced and the vessel proceeded to New York. — Reuter.

TENNIS BATTLE

TILDEN AND LACOSTE IN THREE-HOUR DUEL

Philadelphia, Sept.

In the Davis Cup Challenge Round, Tilden beat Lacoste by three sets to two, 3—6, 10—12, 8—6, 7—5, 6—2. Johnston (America) beat Borotra (France) by 6—1, 6—4, 6—0. Tilden was nearly three hours in saving the match against the confident Lacoste, who played a faultless game in the first sets, after which Tilden was four times within view of defeat, but recovered in invincible style. Johnston overwhelmed Borotra in under an hour. The Californian’s driving and placing were superb. — Reuter.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

A stellar secret

When I left the university and joined a large company, I found myself among older people few of whom shared my interests. I became friendly with the young set of secretaries all of whom were Eurasians. I was especially friendly with Ellie, petite and charming, with large eyes and long hair. She smiled often, and each time she smiled there was a beguiling dimple in her cheeks.

Ellie had a close friend, Stella, who joined us periodically. Stella was statuesque, noticeably well-dressed, her glistening hair cascading to her waist. She had left school to join work but loved to read and had a reputation for good work. I liked her instantly and enjoyed her company. Ellie and I would invite her, and Saturdays we would have coffee at Flury’s or a gimlet at Trinca’s.

A big change occurred when Oliver arrived in town from the company’s headquarters in London as a young auditor. No two youths were more unlike: I was earnest and gregarious; Oliver was pleasant but asocial. Strangely, from the moment my boss asked me to show him around town, we hit it off. He was older and taller, devoted to his work and clearly of the new English generation devoid of colonial pretensions. We became friends. I helped him meet people

he needed to know, in the company and outside, took him around showing him the main stores and streets, clubs and cafés. Eventually he met Ellie.

“Is she your girlfriend,” Oliver asked.

“She is a girl, and she is my friend,” I replied as accurately as I could.

I invited Stella and Oliver, and the four of us went to a dance party where I had been invited. I thought of it as an icebreaker for the four of us and it turned out to be an event festive enough to break the biggest iceberg. I danced with Ellie, but we also exchanged partners. Oliver, in his quiet way, seemed comfortable with Stella. They too danced several times; in between, they sat by themselves in a corner and talked. I was glad to see them talk, for both Oliver and Stella were economical with their words.

I was a rudderless young man in a lively town and the four of us soon became a number. When I moved from my tiny apartment to a larger home, it became a congenial base for us to get together often. Stella was a good cook, Ellie was always spirited, and even the quiet Oliver turned slowly friendlier, especially toward Stella.

Even those early days I noticed how charmingly protective Stella was of Ellie. She often covered

Ellie’s expenses. If Ellie and I had differing views on any subject, she invariably took Ellie’s side. I thought it was an endearingly loyal gesture and perhaps a sign of comradeship support. I liked Stella, thought her a great sport and was titillated by her quiet tenderness toward the relatively retiring Englishman.

Our best days together came to an end when I took another job and got busy with my new responsibilities, which entailed repeated travel to out-of-town mining areas.

I sensed Ellie was keen to get married and settle down, but marriage was nowhere on the horizon of my expanding world. Ellie emigrated with her elder brother to Australia after two years.

My work grew more demanding. I also taught in a local university as a side gig and my days were full. I occasionally saw Oliver and Stella who remained dear friends. That too ended when I left my job and went overseas.

Like most newcomers, my initial years in the US were one of many uncertainties, swift changes and a slow process of settling down. I took a job with the UN group which entailed repeated travel to a large variety of countries. Then I landed in a small Emirate with a large assignment that involved

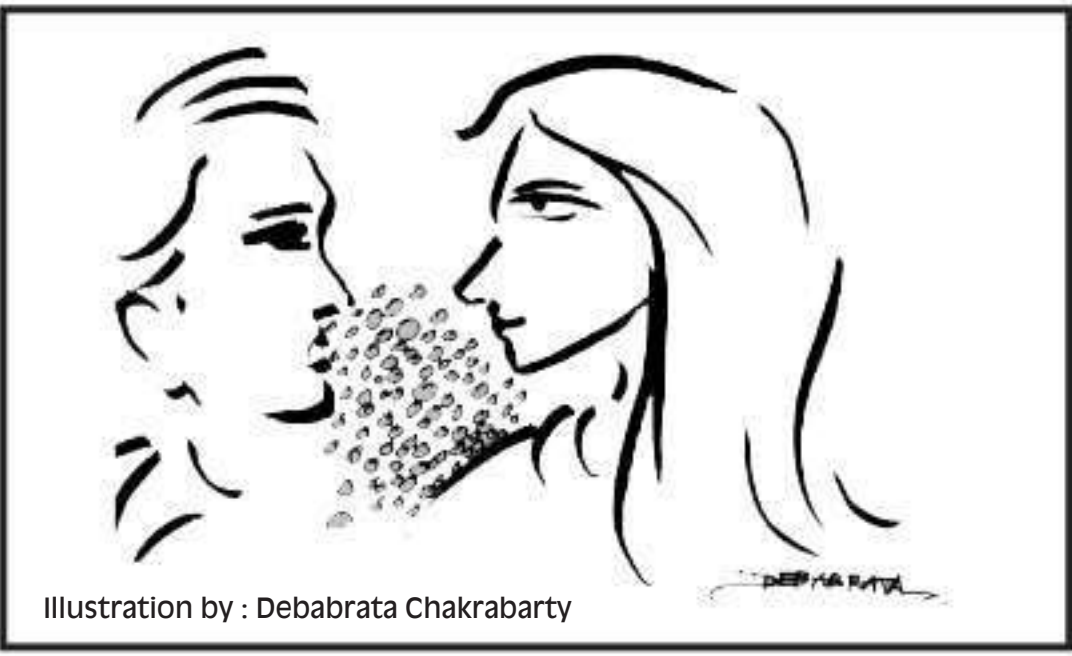


Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

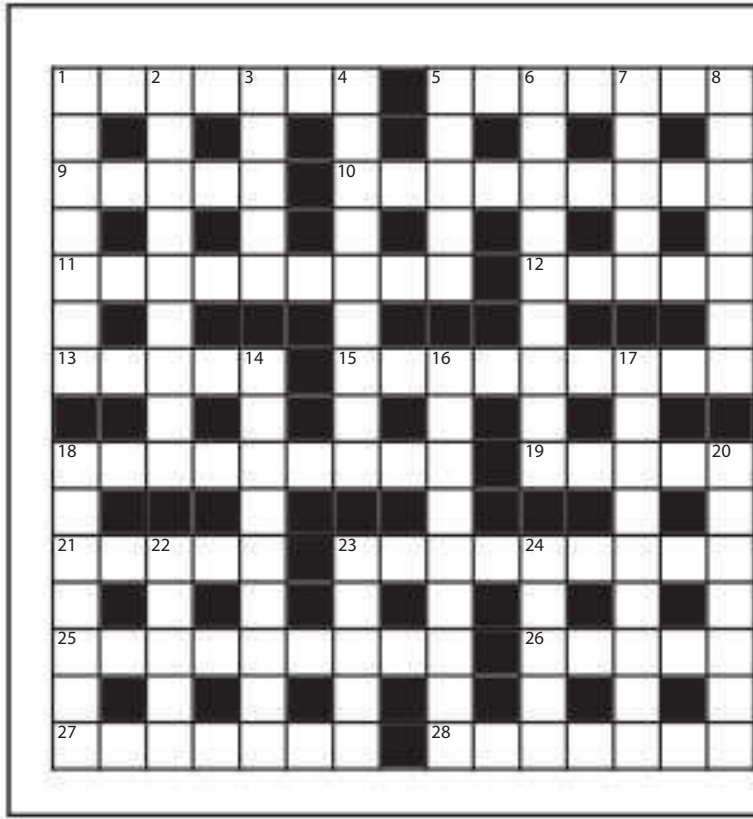
several months’ work.

Two months later I was in a business conference and the opening ceremony was to be addressed by the director of a large British investment group. It turned out to be Oliver. We were delighted to be reunited and had a long chat over lunch.

So it was that the following week I sat at a glittering large dinner party at Oliver’s sumptuous home. I was invited to sit at the main table, next to Oliver’s wife. I could barely recognize Stella. She looked even more statuesque, in a spectacular Givenchy long black-and-white outfit, with a snakish necklace with a diamond centerpiece. She politely asked about me and my life in the US.



Crossword | No. 293235



Last Saturday’s Solution



ACROSS

- 1 Flyer almost primeval in construction (7)
- 5 Regularly bring me my feed like a bushbaby (3-4)
- 9 Wine region right to improve (5)
- 10 Go again and tear up invite (9)
- 11 Artists’ medium with colours which can sharpen with a little effort (9)
- 12 Locations losing last English mollusc (5)
- 13 Costumes which chatterboxes like (5)

DOWN

- 15 Gets authorisation for drug free area (5,4)
- 18 Modifiers transposing late tirades (9)
- 19 Priest possibly saw about Israeli actor (5)
- 21 Middle Earth is back to front (5)
- 23 Back in Parliament, sense rampant confusion (5,4)
- 25 Arabs embarrassed about being converted to Catholicism (9)
- 26 Famous quintet finally meet defeat (5)

- 27 Unknown faces, arse-covering (1-6)
- 28 Duplicate parcel one lost (7)

DOWN

- 1 Check up on marine working to penetrate Green Mountain State (7)
- 2 Spooner’s Canadian diver could possibly have a second job (9)
- 3 Still at home, regret regularly missing out (5)
- 4 Country and neighbouring province study

- 5 Prohibits importing European haricots? (5)
- 6 What people on bridge intend to give otter in distress (3,4,2)
- 7 Country where Alchemi’s come into money! (5)
- 8 Information contained in recording is mostly a shocker (4,3)
- 14 Mood regulator translated into Norse (9)

- 16 Film horse-trader’s plug for docile pony (4,5)
- 17 Sausage season starts to overwhelm Norwegian island (9)
- 18 Criminal has a go holding a smoker’s accessory (7)
- 20 Clickbait I televised turned up some woman (7)
- 22 After 1 in the morning, I’m not sure I have targets (5)
- 23 Covers 1000 questions (5)
- 24 Arrange coat for strange sheep (3,2)

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

8



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2025

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
THE HEART OF A STATESMAN
SHOULD BE IN HIS HEAD.
— NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BUILDING BRIDGES

PM was right in framing Manipur's future as the focus of governance. The challenge now is to address historical faultlines

EIGHT HUNDRED AND sixty-four days since violence erupted and snowballed into an ethnic conflict, which has claimed more than 250 lives and displaced tens of thousands of the state's residents, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Manipur on September 13. Although belated, the visit is a welcome step amid the deadlock between the Meiteis and the Kukis, especially since the PM repeatedly emphasised the peace imperative and talked of the need to address the aspirations of the state's youth. His stops in Kuki-dominated Churachandpur and Meitei-dominated Imphal, to meet internally displaced persons and inaugurate infrastructure projects, were symbolically significant, signalling to both communities that the country's highest executive authority has summoned all political capital to respond to their concerns. The major theme of PM Modi's speeches was putting Manipur back on the developmental pathway — a journey that has been disrupted by cycles of inter-community friction. At Churachandpur, his first stop, and later in Imphal, the Prime Minister reassured the people of Manipur that his government was making "all efforts" to restore normalcy as he inaugurated highway, rail, and infotech projects worth thousands of crores. These initiatives are much-needed. The Centre must now ensure that they are implemented in a time-bound manner.

A more compelling task is to address Manipur's historical faultlines and restore trust among the state's communities. PM Modi described the strife as a grave injustice to "our ancestors and our future generations," and stressed the need to build a "strong bridge between the people of the Hills and the Valley." Even a cursory look at the demands of the Meiteis and Kuki-Zos reveals the complexity of this challenge. On Saturday, the Kuki-Zo Council submitted a memorandum, reiterating their longstanding demand for a "lasting political solution" through a "separate administration". In contrast, the most influential Meitei civil society organisation, COCOMI, fiercely opposes any separate administration, denouncing it as the "ethnicisation" of citizenship and statehood. COCOMI has also pressed for a National Register of Citizens and the identification of "illegal immigrants" to correct what it perceives as a "demographic imbalance". And looming in the background is the issue that triggered the conflict in the first place: The Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status and the fear in the hills that it threatens the land rights of the tribal people.

That the PM and the state governor were the only dignitaries on the stage at both Churachandpur and Imphal frames the immediate challenge for the Centre in Manipur. The dismissal of the deeply unpopular N Biren Singh in February was followed by President's Rule, which has since been extended. At the same time, weakening the conditions that have made ethnicity a divisive force in the state's society requires sustained dialogue between the representatives of the communities. The Centre will have to handhold Manipur on the long haul and enable the state to resume the political process that has been scarred by the ethnic conflict. PM Modi's visit should be the harbinger of a healing process. In the coming weeks and months, the Centre will need to keep talking to all groups in Manipur to make sure they talk to each other. The PM's words need to translate to progress on the ground.

CALMING INFLUENCE

Amidst US tariffs, moderation in inflation, lowering of GST rates could be spur economy needs

AFTER FALLING TO 1.61 per cent in July, retail inflation has inched upwards marginally in the weeks thereafter. Inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, stood at 2.07 per cent in August as per data released by the National Statistics Office. With this latest reading, inflation has averaged 1.84 per cent so far in the second quarter (July-August) of the year, lower than the central bank's most recent projection of 2.1 per cent made in the last monetary policy committee meeting. Since February this year, inflation has remained below the RBI's target of 4 per cent.

This moderation is largely due to falling food prices. The consumer food price index, which had touched 10.87 per cent in October last year, had declined to 3.75 per cent by February, and moved into deflation in June, July and August. Within the food category, the sharpest falls in August have been observed in vegetables and pulses. Oils and fruits though saw elevated inflation. While excess rainfall in parts of the country may cause some crop damage, it is unlikely to significantly affect output. Any shortfall in kharif will possibly be made up in rabi. This suggests that food inflation is likely to remain under control in the near term. In contrast, core inflation, which excludes the volatile food and fuel components, remains range bound. Inflation remained muted in most categories such as clothing and footwear, household goods and services and education. The exception being the personal care and effects segment, where inflation was at 16.61 per cent.

Going ahead, the recent rationalisation and lowering of GST rates, which will be in effect from September 22, will also have a calming influence. Economists at SBI estimate that the tax cuts will lead to inflation moderating in the range of 65-75 basis points over FY26-27. These effects should be visible from the October data onwards. This calls for a recalibration of inflation forecasts. In August, the RBI had forecasted inflation to average 3.1 per cent for the year. Projections by some others now indicate much lower levels — for instance, CARE Edge Ratings has pegged inflation at 2.7 per cent in 2025-26, while ICRA has forecasted 2.6 per cent. While this may create the space for more interest rate cuts, it is debatable whether the MPC will opt to loosen policy further in the near term. Growth has been strong — the Indian economy grew at a faster than expected 7.8 per cent in the first quarter. However, the effects of tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump — though there have been some positive signals recently on the India-US trade deal — will become evident in the weeks and months ahead.

FREEZE FRAME



E P UNNY



SAJJID Z CHINOI

THE OVERWHELMING FOCUS of the current global disruption has been on assessing its impact on the US and China. Instead, the real pressure is likely to fall on emerging markets and developing economies that are simultaneously being buffeted by the triple shocks of tariffs, trade diversion, and technology.

Tariffs: International trade has been the lifeblood of emerging markets (EMs) for 25 years. Growth in EMs (even outside China) and global trade volumes are so strongly correlated that they are virtually indistinguishable. Now global trade is facing one of its most acute crises. First, growth had slowed sharply after the global financial crisis. Then, Covid engendered a slew of non-tariff barriers around the world. Now come the Trump tariffs. The effective tariffs in the US have increased from 2.7 per cent to almost 18 per cent, levels last seen in the 1930s.

How will emerging markets — far more open and export-reliant than the US — grow amid rising protectionism and economic balkanisation? Where will growth come from for the small open economies whose domestic markets are not large enough to create sufficient demand? What about the enormous efficiency benefits that trade has delivered? In the run-up to the 250th anniversary of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, the concept of specialisation and exchange is under serious threat.

Trade Diversion and China Shock 2.0: Protectionism is only half of the story. Think about its knock-on effects. Ever since the US started imposing tariffs on China in 2017, China has begun to redirect its exports to developing economies from Latin America and Africa to Asia. With US tariffs on China hiked from 10 per cent to 42 per cent, expect that dynamic to accelerate sharply. China is currently floating in excess capacity that is driving deflationary pressures at home. Emerging markets must, therefore, brace for this Chinese excess capacity to flood their markets at prices they can scarcely compete with.

Surging Chinese imports have impinged on domestic manufacturing in Thailand, Indonesia and India in recent years. Expect those pressures to increase dramatically after the Trump tariffs. The US experienced a

A time to reinvent

Developing countries risk being casualties of global reset. They can use shocks to recharge their economies

"China Shock" in the early 2000s. EMs must brace for a China Shock 2.0 after the Trump tariffs. Not only must they prepare for a more protectionist world that hinders exports, but EMs must also simultaneously play defence at home to compete against a rising influx of Chinese imports that threaten their domestic manufacturing bases.

Technology: The breathtaking pace of technological change risks morphing from labour-augmenting to labour-substituting. Already, rising capital-labour ratios in manufacturing have pressured blue-collar jobs around the world. India, too, has experienced a sharp rise in its capital intensity across manufacturing and exports over the last two decades, at odds with its labour-abundant endowment. Now, the rapid evolution of AI will simply broaden pressures from blue-collar to white-collar. Job creation is getting progressively harder, and developing economies with their younger populations — from South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa — are most at risk.

All told, a potent combination of tariffs, trade diversion and technology risks creating a perfect storm for developing economies. Are the slew of recent youth protests in South Asia the canary in the coal mine? How then should policy respond?

Don't turn inward: The demonstration effect of the US raising tariffs may embolden the developing world to turn protectionist in the mistaken belief that import substitution generates more growth and jobs. This would be a grave mistake. We have seen this movie before in India and know how it ends. We have lived through the Lerner Symmetry Theorem — that an import tariff is effectively an export tax. Only 13 economies since the Second World War have grown at 7 per cent for 25 years or more, and they all had one thing in common: Strong exports and global engagement. The US accounts for less than 15 per cent of global imports. There is hope yet for the rest of the world to promote rules-based multilateral trade.

Even if global trade were to wobble, India must not despair. India's share of global manufacturing is still less than 2 per cent. So we don't need the pie to grow. We need our share to grow within the pie. The collateral benefits

of external orientation are well understood. Apart from exports providing a source of demand, global competition forces firms to be more productive, efficient and reach economic scale. If we want our firms to be more innovative and spend more on R&D, they should be exposed to more global competition.

Reform Reform Reform: This is also a world where the premium on being competitive has gone up enormously. To export amid rising protectionism or produce domestically against the threat of Chinese imports, increasing competitiveness is the key. This will require pushing hard on foundational reforms: Land, labour, power, health and education. The recent GST simplification and announcement of committees on deregulation and next-generation reforms are crucial and encouraging starts. We must now take this to its logical conclusion.

Bending the capital-labour ratio: The key to job creation is to equip labour to more effectively compete with capital. This will not be easy and necessitates a sustained push on education, health, skilling and ensuring that stringent labour laws don't disadvantage the very factor of production they are meant to safeguard.

Finally, the sheer pace of technological dynamism and diffusion demands that societies and economies are re-wired to enable, almost welcome, creative destruction. This will require letting capital and labour move more seamlessly from sunset to sunrise industries. It will require large investments in re-skilling, re-training and continuing education. It will require intelligent and robust safety nets to protect those left behind and a tax system that can finance all this.

These are epochal times. Emerging markets are at a fork in the road. They are likely to face multiple, reinforcing shocks. One option is to look in the mirror and use these shocks to do the hard work of reforming and reinventing themselves. Another option is to turn protectionist and inward in the hope of wishing away the global storm. The latter would be tempting and simple. And wrong.

The writer is Head of Asia Economics at JPMorgan



SUKHMANI MALIK

IN HER 2018 special, *Nanette*, comedian Hannah Gadsby talks about the role tension plays in the telling of a good joke: If you build it right, when you finally break that tension — relieving the audience — you get a great pay-off. A horror story follows a similar logic. But with horror, the breaking of the tension does not always lead to relief. This is why horror films are notably sequel-prone.

This cleavage between closure and relief has, in the last decade, been explored by filmmakers to create horror films that speak to social and political tensions. There may be resolution, but no relief. Instead, it forces people to sit with the discomfort of what the reel reveals about the real.

Zach Cregger's *Weapons* follows the story of a small town in the US, where 17 of 18 kids in a class go missing. Shot in a point-of-view frame, the film puts you in the shoes of the characters as much as it seems to say: "This is our world, these characters are us". Cregger marries the tensions of comedy and horror to create a film that makes you shriek with terror and laughter in equal measure. A sketch artist for decades, Cregger's work with his troupe, *The Whitest Kids U'Know*, explored the gory and the uncomfortable through comedy.

In 2017, another comedian and sketch artist, Jordan Peele, was among the first to break open the potential of this subgenre with *Get Out*. The last decade has seen many films and shows in a similar vein. Like *Get*

FEAR THE WORST

New horror films are forcing people to confront what the reel reveals about the real

Out, Nope and Us by Peele deal with questions of race, class and identity; Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Mark Mylod's *The Menu* dismantle the walls that the rich build to insulate themselves from "horrors" like poverty and mortality.

But tonally, in the last year, there has been a shift. The new horror films — dubbed as "elevated horror" — take themselves seriously. Filmmakers use the tropes of the genre to communicate something far scarier than a haunted house: The blurred lines between the fantastical dystopias they have created and the dangerous, broken realities we inhabit. Peele and Jane Schoenbrun's (*I Saw the TV Glow*) brand of horror is a plea for the recognition of those who have been dehumanised, of stories that have been made footnotes. The camera presents evidence of a society haunted by itself.

This year, films like the spellbinding *Sinners* by Ryan Coogler and *Weapons* have reinvented the sub-genre in small but significant ways. Coogler and Cregger's films reflect a shift in how many choose to process life's disquieting truths — with a dose of humour. *Sinners*, set in the Mississippi Delta of 1932, depicts one night at a juke joint during the Jim Crow years. Made by and for people of colour, in the joint, there is song, dance and jest. There is also the pain of freedoms denied and the glory of snatching it away. In moments boiling over with tension, charac-

ters crack jokes and laugh at themselves and their circumstances.

Weapons deals with the horrors of gun violence in the US. The kids are literally turned into weapons: "It was like he was weaponised. Like a heat missile just locked onto you." The exposition up top names this grief: "The kids left their homes... and never came back."

Coogler and Cregger's brand of horror is built on absurdity — of the politics of the day and people's response to it. In the climax of *Weapons*, as kids turn on the adult responsible for their ordeal, unleashing the vitriol that has been fed to them, residents look on in bewilderment, eating cereal, mowing their lawns, worrying about the shattered "glass everywhere" in their homes. As these kids are stolen away and brainwashed, the adults are missing from the scene. Caught up in their own messes, these adults are perpetrators at worst, bystanders at best.

The moment of resolution is bloody — the kids save the day but are irrevocably changed for having to do it — and the background music swells with notes of triumph and liberation. As if the incompetence and ignorance of adults is a victory for anyone. As if kids having to turn to violence can be liberation for any society. Many would believe it is. That is the ultimate horror — and the ultimate joke.

sukhmani.malik@expressindia.com

SEPTEMBER 15, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

ENLF TO MEET PM

THE EELAM NATIONAL Liberation Front (ENLF) on Saturday night decided to meet the Prime Minister, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, to explain the current situation in Sri Lanka. The decision was taken at a meeting of the top leaders of the ENLF here, the first in recent months. A spokesman said the Eelam National Liberation Front leaders would discuss with Gandhi the need for a monitoring agency for effective implementation of a cease-fire in the island nation as the present arrangement was not satisfactory. The meeting also discussed the recent deaths of three Tamil prisoners in the Welikada prison in Colombo.

AKALI BOYCOTT

THE UNITED AKALI Dal has launched an offensive of sorts in Punjab to make Sikhs boycott the coming elections in the state. Joginder Singh is addressing meetings at various places. He addressed a gathering of about 5,000 persons at Guru Ka Baag Gurudwara near Ajnala. He also addressed a gathering at Tarn Taran.

CHARAS SEIZED

THE NORTH DISTRICT police made a record haul of charas weighing 250 kg valued at Rs 2 crore when they intercepted a white Ambassador car (DEC 9936) near Merba

Chowk. Suresh Chand, 20, the driver of the car and Karan Singh, 40, who was sitting beside him, were arrested. The contraband was neatly packed in 1 kg packages. Smuggling of narcotics and drug trafficking have become big business in the national capital.

JAIL FOR TEASING

IN A RARE case, a young girl here has been sentenced to a day's imprisonment and a fine of Rs 20 on the charge of teasing boys. The girl was arrested from the fashionable Sector 17 market. The sentence was awarded by the chief judicial magistrate, J D Chandna, the police said.



9 THE IDEAS PAGE

Resist pressure, lower tariffs

Irrespective of Trump's charges, India should take a rational approach towards imports, invest in innovation and build efficient value chains



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

BY ASHOK GULATI AND TANAY SUNTWAL

US PRESIDENT DONALD Trump has often chided India as the “tariff king” and his trade adviser Peter Navarro has dubbed India the “tariff maharaja”. Is this mere rhetoric, or is there some truth to these accusations? We examine here the tariff structures of G20 countries which account for roughly 85 per cent of the global GDP, 75 per cent of global trade, and two-thirds of the world's population. We look specifically at simple averages and trade-weighted tariffs on all goods, as well as separately for agriculture and non-agriculture goods. The numbers tell an interesting story.

For all goods, Turkey has the highest simple average tariff (17.3 per cent), followed by India (16.2 per cent). But if one takes the trade-weighted tariff of all goods, India's score of 12 per cent makes it the “tariff king”. The US, by contrast, stands at 3.3 per cent for simple average, and 2.2 per cent in terms of trade-weighted tariff on all goods (see infographics). No wonder it keeps naming India and other countries, including several American allies, for having high tariff walls.

Lower tariffs are a sign of the competitive strength of the economy, not its weakness. So, if India wants to be a superpower, it must develop its trade competitiveness and lower tariffs well below 10 per cent for all goods. But it cannot be done overnight, although there is ample scope even currently to reduce tariffs. For that, we look at tariffs on agricultural and non-agricultural goods separately.

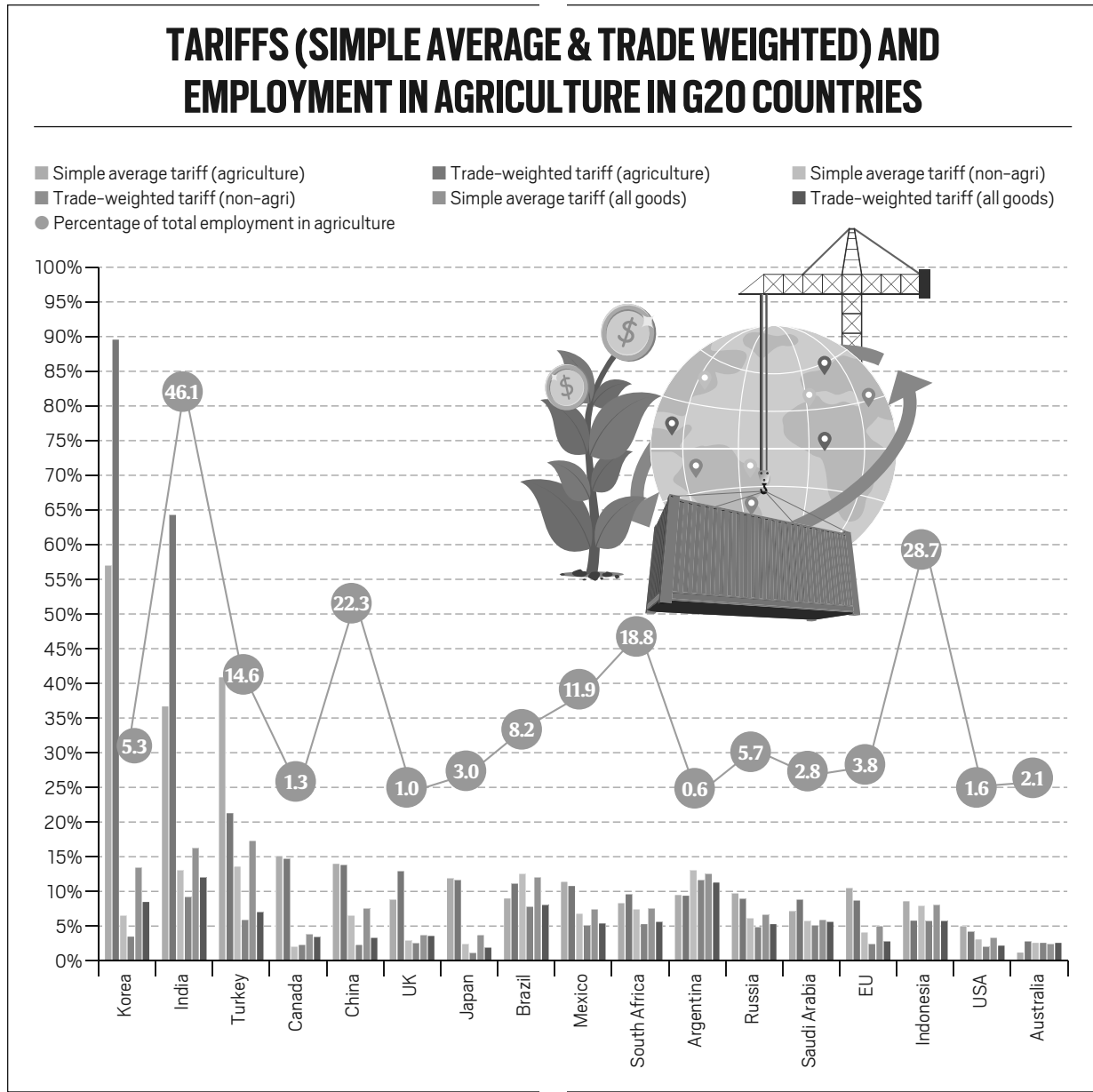
In agriculture, there is no doubt that India is the “tariff king” with a trade-weighted tariff of 64.3 per cent, although on a simple average tariff basis, South Korea tops with 57 per cent — India has an average of 36.7 per cent. In contrast, the US has a trade-weighted tariff of just 4.2 per cent, the EU 8.7 per cent and China 13.8 per cent.

In case of non-agriculture products, India may not be the king — Argentina leads with a trade weighted tariff at 11.6 per cent — but it follows at 9.2 per cent.

So, overall, India does have higher trade-weighted tariffs, especially for agriculture, making it somewhat of an outlier amongst G20 countries. But why is India so protective towards its agriculture? The reason is simple: India has the highest share of the labour force engaged in agriculture (46 per cent) and the highest population (1.45 billion) to feed, with an average holding size of just around 1 hectare. In contrast, only 2 per cent of the US workforce is engaged in agriculture, for the EU, that figure is 4 per cent, and for China, it is 22 per cent.

Interestingly, China is the largest net importer of agri-products (over \$100 billion in 2024), and even the US, which is the biggest agricultural exporter (\$182.8 billion), is also a net importer of agriculture (\$59 billion). If the world's two biggest economies can thrive by being net importers of agriculture, India should evaluate its comparative advantage and produce what we do best, and import what others can do more efficiently. Politicians who often claim that “imports are bad” ignore the theory that underpins global trade.

Does it, then, mean India has no scope to lower its agri-tariffs, which are holding back its trade negotiations with the US? We don't



Graphics: Ritesh Kumar

think so. India's agri-tariffs are not just high, but they are also riddled with irrationalities. Edible oils, one-third of India's agri-imports, face just 10 per cent duty. Cotton duties have been slashed to zero, and yellow peas face negligible tariffs. Almonds attract a duty of below 15 per cent, while walnuts and chicken legs face duties above 100 per cent. Apples attract a 50 per cent duty, blueberries 30 per cent, and skimmed milk powder is at 60 per cent. Food preparations, such as soft drink concentrates, custard powder, and lactose syrups face a duty of 150 per cent. Nowhere is the paradox starker than in the case of rice. India is the world's largest exporter, yet it also imposes an import duty of 70 per cent. Such irrational duties cannot be justified to “protect farmers”. Oilseed farmers or cotton farmers are no less important than dairy farmers or those who cultivate walnuts or apples.

The 50 per cent tariff imposed by the US on Indian goods is a wake-up call. India must reform, not retreat. First, rationalise tariffs, independent of Washington's pressures. We feel no duty should exceed 50 per cent. The raw materials should have the lowest import duty, say 0-10 per cent, non-sensitive goods between 10-20 per cent, sensitive goods from 20-35 per cent, and luxury items between 35-50 per cent. In the case of sensitive agri-commodities, it's better to adopt tariff rate quotas (TRQs) to protect farmers. Second, carry out domestic reforms to raise productivity. India must double agri-R&D to at least 1 per cent of agri-GDP and focus on precision agriculture so that farmers produce more from less. Fertiliser subsidy

We feel no duty should exceed 50 per cent. The raw materials should have the lowest import duty, say 0-10 per cent, non-sensitive goods between 10-20 per cent, sensitive goods from 20-35 per cent, and luxury items between 35-50 per cent. In the case of sensitive agri-commodities, it's better to adopt tariff rate quotas (TRQs) to protect farmers. Second, carry out domestic reforms to raise productivity.

should be at the top of the reform agenda. Now is the time to rationalise it by giving direct benefit transfer (DBT) to farmers and freeing up the fertiliser prices. Third, value chains must be strengthened. Competitiveness is not just about yields but how efficiently produce moves from farm to fork.

India has already shown the capacity to reform GST rates. Why not tariffs? The principle is similar: A clean, logical structure fosters efficiency, competitiveness, and credibility. Trump is right in calling India the tariff king. India protects agriculture for livelihoods, not for commerce, but excessive protection driven by lobbies and undue caution is ultimately self-defeating. If India truly wants to claim its place as a global superpower, it must shed the tariff maharaja image. Imports do not hurt growth. Instead, they should be part of a growth strategy. Comparative advantage remains as relevant today as when Ricardo wrote of it two centuries ago. The choice is simple: India can persist with its approach to tariffs, inviting retaliation and stifling competitiveness. Or it can embrace reform, rationalise tariffs, invest in innovation, and build efficient value chains. The former path leads to irrelevance, the latter to resilience. India must now move from being a protector of inefficiency to a champion of competitiveness for the sake of its farmers, consumers, and its place in the world.

Gulati is Distinguished Professor and Suntwal is research assistant at ICRIER. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“General Assembly resolutions are not binding, but they blaze the path to realizing the idea of a Palestinian state. Israel must stop the war in Gaza, obtain the release of the hostages, withdraw from the Strip and reopen the political path.”
— HAARETZ, ISRAEL

In Manipur, beyond optics

Developmental projects can be a catalyst for a return to peace in the state if they are accompanied by initiatives that address faultlines



KHAM KHAN SUAN HAUSING

AFTER TURNING HIS back on the state for more than 123 weeks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi finally visited Manipur on September 13. That he chose to visit the Peace Ground at Churachandpur and Kangla Fort in Imphal to address two communities separated and bruised by over two years of violence is symbolic and sends the right political optics. Befitting one of the most anticipated visits in recent memory, Modi unveiled 19 development projects worth over Rs 7,300 crore for the state in Churachandpur. These development projects, PM Modi claimed, would be instrumental in easing life, strengthening the infrastructure, digital access, education, and healthcare in the state.

The fact that the Prime Minister weathered the heavy downpour to visit Churachandpur by road demonstrated his political resolve. However, his overemphasis on development and the conspicuous failure to lay down a political roadmap for resolving the over two years of violence in Manipur is being seen as a wasted opportunity across the divide. In that sense, there seems to be a certain absentmindedness about the trauma of families who have lost their loved ones and an underplaying of the suffering of the thousands of internally displaced persons who continue to languish in various relief centres across the state in subhuman conditions. Loud declarations of projects may be useful as a carefully choreographed event for political optics, yet the silence on substantive concerns with respect to peace, justice, and the reluctance to frame a commitment to a rules-based constitutional order where citizens are accorded equal protection of the law may not be particularly helpful in winning the hearts and minds of the people.

To be fair to PM Modi, development has always been seen as a big equaliser and a panacea to solving endemic social, economic, and political problems. Since the founding moments of India's republic, the magic bullet of development, centred around big infrastructure projects, has been prioritised as an instrument of state-building because of the trickle-down capabilities of such initiatives — the promise to remove poverty and reduce inequality in the society. Yet, beyond the material promise of peace, progress and prosperity — a point underscored by PM Modi in his speech in both the places — development is seen as a discursive construct. Wolfgang Sachs, one of the leading economists of our times, aptly captures this point when he contends that “development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavour: it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies, and a fantasy which unleashes passions.”

What is unmistakable about PM Modi's speech in Churachandpur and Imphal is the

repackaging of development projects that have been in the works for quite some time as vertical properties of the state. On deeper scrutiny, however, these projects are steeped in two problems: Firstly, they showcase the state's tendency to act in a top-down manner, and leverage a patronising logic. Under this rubric, the state — with its command over capital, technology, and know-how — is seen to exclusively wield the elixir that resolves all societal problems. As a consequence, the society/people for whom development projects are doled out are seen to be mere pliant receivers. Not surprisingly, the unveiling of these development projects has not excited “passions” from the intended beneficiaries across the divide as they do not give primacy to their first-order interests, namely, the demand for peace, justice, and accountability from the perpetrators of this violence. Secondly, the unveiling of these projects has also reinforced the development bias of the state, as, historically, the major chunk of development projects has been concentrated in the valley areas.

One of the unintended consequences of these launches could be the redrawing of structural and ethnic faultlines in the state. The projects could accentuate the unequal access of communities to power and resources. For instance, they may weaken the bargaining power of the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar groups, perpetuate the existing structures — political and economic — of injustice, and reinforce their unequal citizenship.

While PM Modi did not explicitly address two of the principal concerns expressed by the Meiteis, demographic imbalance and free movement, Governor Ajay Bhalla alluded to them in his welcome speech at the Peace Ground at Lamka. He squarely put the onus on the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar people to not allow settlement of “illegal immigrants” in the state. However, it remains the primary responsibility of the state to regulate the movement of population across the border in line with the existing institutional framework. Political leaders and civil society organisations must not be allowed to arrogate this responsibility to relentlessly dehumanise and target a particular community en masse as “illegal immigrants”. Governor Bhalla rightly acknowledged the three formidable challenges facing Manipur, namely, peace, development, and trust. “To heal and help and look forward”, he underscored the imperative to engage in “dialogue, understanding and inclusive governance”.

PM Modi could have seized the political opportunity offered by his long-pending visit to Manipur to elaborate and chart out a clear political roadmap on the mutual complementarity of peace, development, and trust that his able host flagged. In his silence, he revealed his priority on development and setting the political optics right. It remains to be seen whether development can, as Sachs argues, serve as “a myth which comforts societies,” which are already tormented and psychologically bruised by over two years of violence.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TOO LATE

THIS REFERS TO the report, ‘In Manipur, PM seeks to bridge the divide’ (IE, September 14). Prime Minister Narendra Modi ought to have visited Manipur when ethnic violence erupted in the state two years ago. It was a failure of leadership on his part that he did not. His first-ever visit since the 2023 ethnic clashes was delayed for over two years and his announcement of development projects worth Rs 8,500 crore cannot cancel out his failure to visit the state when it was most needed. He did not feel that there was a moral obligation on him to visit the state and defuse the ethnic tensions. Great leaders show great moral strength in times of crisis without playing it safe or bothering about their “image”.

G David Milton, Maruthancode

ISRAEL'S IMPUNITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Doha strike and the day after’ (IE, September 13). The assumption that Qatar's close ties with the US and the 2020 Abraham Accords — one of Donald Trump's major foreign policy achievements from his first term, which resulted in the normalisation of diplomatic ties between some Arab states and Israel — have done little to stabilise the West Asia region. Israel has flouted international law unabashedly, killed more than 64,000 Palestinians,

and attacked neighbouring countries as well. The Doha attack is an extension of its unilateral attitude. The West's double-speak is visible when Donald Trump goes hammer and tongs in accusing countries of financing the Ukraine war through import of Russian oil but remains elusive in mediating a ceasefire in Gaza.

Madhusree Guha, Kolkata

ACT OF REPRESSION

This refers to the editorial, ‘An outrageous arrest’ (IE, September 13). The arrest of Mehraj Malik, an AAP MLA in Jammu and Kashmir, is reminiscent of similar harassment of many AAP MLAs in Delhi, suggesting a pattern of threatening all those whom the BJP sees as hurdles to its political dominance. The J&K-specific Public Safety Act, under which Malik was arrested, is comparable to the nationwide UAPA in that it allows for protracted imprisonment on vague and unsubstantiated grounds, with no checks and balances, and is open to political misuse. Even Amnesty International has labelled the PSA a “lawless law” since it has been frequently used against activists, critics, journalists, and Opposition leaders, when its original objective was only to detain militants posing a threat to national security. Significantly, political figures from all parties, except the BJP, and civil society have condemned the arrest.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

Road to reconciliation

PM Modi's Manipur visit is part of continuing process to heal strife-torn state



RAMANI NIRANJANA DESAI

MANIPUR CAPTURED THE public imagination on May 3, 2023. Unfortunately, it wasn't because of its famed Raas Leela, its refined cuisine, or even because of how it had long been India's gateway to Southeast Asia. This time, Manipur was in conflict, after years of relative peace. Ethnic violence had broken out between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo people. An estimated 258 people were killed and over 60,000 were displaced between May 2023 and February 2025, when President's rule was imposed in the state.

This was not the first time that the state had witnessed ethnic violence. It was in 1992 that the Naga-Kuki conflict broke out and lasted for over six years, leading to the deaths of more than 1,000 and the displacement of up to 100,000 people. But many may not have heard of the Naga-Kuki conflict. Seemingly, the significant difference between then and now is the presence of social media and round-the-clock news channels that have brought every minute detail of the Meitei-Kuki-Zo conflict to every phone and television set in the country.

This hyper vigilance made the recent conflict, everyone's conflict. There was renewed interest in the northeast region's security im-

peratives, new community leaders emerged, and the political Opposition thought it had finally found a new lease of life. But most importantly, many found a reason to attack Prime Minister Narendra Modi not just because the conflict had broken out under his watch but also because he had not relented to the demand of a visit to Manipur. This may have even cost the BJP the two Lok Sabha seats from the state.

However, on September 13, 2025, the story changed. Prime Minister Modi visited Manipur. He first travelled to the Kuki-Zo dominated Churachandpur and then to the historic Kangla Fort in Imphal. Even though the weather conditions made it difficult for him to land in Churachandpur, he made the decision to travel one and a half hours by road to address the gathering.

Modi's messaging was finely curated as well. In the hill areas of Manipur where the grievance has been the lack of development, especially in healthcare, Modi laid the foundation for projects which included super-specialty healthcare infrastructure, hostels for working women, enhancement of higher secondary schools, and infotech development, among others. In Imphal, where the Meiteis

dominate, a community that has at times felt that their contributions have been “unseen”, Modi spoke about the many “bravehearts” that were involved in Operation Sindoor with a special mention of Deepak Chingakhom who was martyred during the Operation. He also mentioned Ima Keithel, Asia's oldest women-run marketplace, keeping in mind the crucial role of women in the Meitei community. This was in addition to the launch of infrastructure projects.

It was through Governor Ajay Bhalla that some of the critical messaging was delivered. The Governor reinforced the idea of Churachandpur being a symbol of “rich cultural diversity”. Churachandpur, while named after a famed Meitei King, is now dominated by the Kuki-Zo community. The Governor also addressed the issue of the influx of illegal immigration, reaffirming the state and the Central government's commitment to preventing it. This is an issue that has been fiercely debated between the Kuki-Zo people and the Meiteis.

Clearly, those who relentlessly demanded that Modi visit Manipur have got what they asked for and more. While there were some who felt that he would add a “healing touch”, there were others who used

it for political leverage. The fact is that the government responds in a systematic manner. First, it emphasises containing the violence, then on reconciliation, and finally, on rehabilitation and the way forward. Modi's visit is a signal that Manipur is between the second and the third phase.

Violence in Manipur was further contained after the Centre decided to impose President's rule in February this year. This was followed by a series of efforts to bring both the warring communities to the negotiating table. The recently held talks with Kuki-Zo armed groups resulted in a renewed SoO (Suspension of Operations) agreement to relocate camps and the opening of communication channels to negotiate further. Because of enhanced security deployment, looted weapons are being returned or retrieved. The legitimate concern of illegal infiltration is being addressed with proposed measures such as fencing, biometrics, and new regulations for the Free Movement Regime.

The writer is an anthropologist and a scholar of the northeast region of India and South Asia. She is presently a Distinguished Fellow at India Foundation, New Delhi

Santosh Singh: How do you view your political career and what issues do you think will be important in the forthcoming Bihar Assembly elections?

I started my political journey as a student under the tutelage of *jananayak* Karpoori Thakurji. His area of work was Vaishali district, next to Samastipur, where my home is. He had a very good relationship with my father, a simple farmer who was also a social activist. My father would campaign with the candidates of Karpoori Thakurji's party at that time and work for them. I would make people aware of the party symbol and gather them on voting day. This whetted my curiosity about Karpoori Thakurji and introduced me to the idea of social justice. If someone in the village fell ill, I would accompany them for treatment whether it was to a nearby hospital or Patna or somewhere else.

Later, having completed my post-graduate studies, I joined Thakurji's party, Lok Dal. It was at the same time that I met Nitish Kumarji (now Bihar CM). After Thakurji's death, I began working with Nitishji. I was with him when he co-founded the Samata Party against the misrule and terror of Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) across Bihar. Then, when he assumed power, some issues led to my separation from Nitishji.

Generally, after struggling for 12-14 years to get power, people usually want to benefit from it and don't want to part with it. But I always had a rebellious nature. So, I formed my own party, then went with Nitishji again. He gave me a Rajya Sabha membership. But when I found that the party's internal dynamic was not favourable for me to work, I resigned from the Rajya Sabha. I went back to the grassroots and formed my own party (Rashtriya Lok Morcha). I became its candidate as an ally of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) from Karakat Lok Sabha constituency. I could not win the elections due to local factors but now I am a Rajya Sabha member.

The atmosphere in Bihar is in favour of the NDA. The Opposition is trying various ways to assume power by making the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls an issue. But this issue did not have an impact on people as the yatra by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi started from zero and ended at zero. It is very clear now that if some names have been deleted from the rolls, there are reasons for it. People have also been given the opportunity to raise objections. So the Election Commission is taking action based on their claims. The Election Commission, in between, asked Opposition leaders like Rahulji and Tejashwiji (Rashtriya Janata Dal-RJD) to provide an affidavit for whatever they were claiming. They were not ready for that either. People have also gone to court. In court too, they could have properly presented their case and resolved any perceived irregularities. But perhaps they didn't trust the court. So, they undertook a yatra, which didn't connect with common people.

Santosh Singh: But the Congress is claiming that it had lodged 89 lakh complaints, which the Election Commission did not register because they were not in the required format. Identity cards, ration cards, EPICs were not accepted. Do you think that the timing of SIR was not correct, given the inconvenience it caused, and it could have been done in a non-election year?

Even if there were time constraints for the exercise to be completed before the elections, rejecting the work of the Election Commission is not appropriate. Whatever the Election Commission has done is its Constitutional responsibility. I would say that the Opposition submitted lakhs of objections deliberately using a wrong format, knowing well that the poll panel would reject them and they would have an agenda to go to the people with. "Look, the Election Commission is not listening to us," would be their slogan. I often give the example that if someone doesn't want to contest an election but wants to show the public that they want to, they fill out the nomination form in such a way that their nomination eventually gets cancelled. The Opposition's objective is to just create a ruckus.

Deeptiman Tiwary: The NDA is going into this election as a united front but is riddled with contradictions. You have had a strained relationship with Nitish Kumar in the past. The LJP (Lok Janshakti Party) had fielded candidates against him. Are you facing any coordination issues within the NDA?

No, no, not at all. If there was a dispute or difference of opinion among the alliance parties or their leaders on some matter years ago, it happened due to the circumstances of that time. In the current situation, there is no carryover of old issues. If you look at the other alliance too, there was a time when Congress leader Sonia Gandhi did not even give RJD leader Laluji a chance to become a minister. Now he is in an alliance with her. So, a disagreement or difference of opinion with someone once, be it in a family or a party alliance, doesn't last forever.

Deeptiman Tiwary: In Bihar, caste equations are very important for elections. In the last Lok Sabha elections, the RJD gave away many tickets to representatives from the Kushwaha



UPENDRA KUSHWAHA
RASHTRIYA LOK MORCHA LEADER

WHY UPENDRA KUSHWAHA

Rashtriya Lok Morcha leader Upendra Kushwaha, who started his political career under former CM and socialist leader Karpoori Thakur, is an asset for any party as a representative of his community. From being chief minister Nitish Kumar's blue-eyed boy to being a Rajya Sabha MP nominated by the NDA, he has established his relevance to each despite flip-flops. The BJP is hoping the Kushwaha votes would return to the NDA fold for the Assembly polls

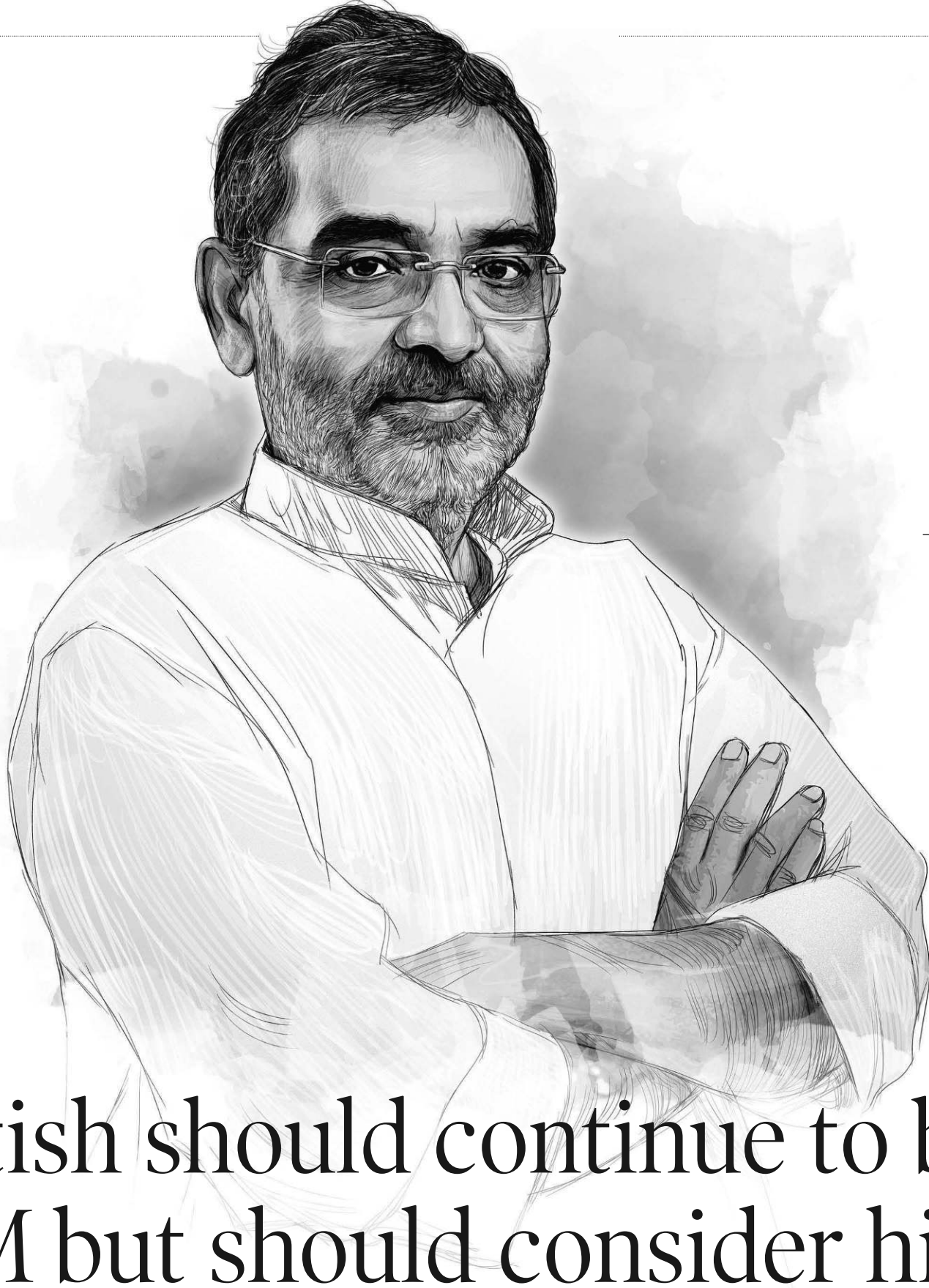


Illustration: Suvojit Dey

‘Nitish should continue to be CM but should consider his party’s leadership issue’

Rashtriya Lok Morcha leader Upendra Kushwaha on why the Opposition's plank of electoral roll revision had lost steam, what Rahul Gandhi's yatra in Bihar could do to his image, the need for a caste census and why BJP has an edge in the Assembly polls. The session was moderated by Senior Assistant Editor Santosh Singh

community to attract non-Yadav OBCs. This time, too, there are indications that the Mahagathbandhan will focus heavily on non-Yadav OBCs. Is the NDA concerned about this strategy?

There are two parts to this question. One, you said that caste equations are important in the Bihar elections. But they matter in other states too. Attributing this only to Bihar often makes me wonder if some people are intentionally or unintentionally defaming the state.

Sabha elections to create a better strategy for the Assembly elections so that they don't gain any advantage. The NDA will remain strong.

Jatin Anand: How big a factor is Chirag Paswan, who wants to contest in more Assembly seats this time? How do you view smaller parties like Aam Aadmi Party and Jan Suraj Party?

Naturally, Chiragji is trying to carry forward the legacy of Ram Vilas Paswanji. He is part of the NDA alliance and he is also a minister at the Centre. As far as him wanting more seats is concerned, every party wants to get as many seats as possible in the alliance. Wanting is one thing. But when talks happen, considering the practical situation, everyone has to compromise a little bit.

Speaking to create pressure or to send a message to one's own people is one thing but everything will happen in due course. There will be no problem. Chiragji and people from other parties will be adjusted. There are just two teams on the field right now: NDA and the Mahagathbandhan. The rest of the teams you are naming are not on the field right now.

Lalmani Verma: Regarding SIR, almost 65 lakh voters have been deleted. In the Assembly elections, results in most seats change with a margin of 5,000 to 10,000 votes. So, have you or the NDA received any feedback yet about who these 65 lakh deleted votes belonged to?

No. You can see that deletions are happening when a person's name is on the voters' list in two places, in Bihar and Delhi. Such people exist on both sides. In the initial phase, the apprehension was that Mahagathbandhan votes would be targeted and deleted in some areas. But the truth that has come out now shows that this is not the case. The largest number of deletions in the published draft was from Patna district, which is a stronghold of the NDA. More names

were cut from Patna than from the Purvanchal districts. So, the exercise does not appear to be targeted.

Asad Rehman: Although you said that Rahul Gandhi's allegations will not have much impact on the election, how do you view his vote theft charge regarding the 2024 election?

Their allegation is absolutely

false. The Election Commission repeatedly asked them to submit an affidavit, they didn't. I had also said that if indeed certain people had been targeted and their names removed, they should be presented before the media and should register cases. Nothing happened because they don't exist. Their (the Opposition's) only aim is to create a ruckus.

However, I agree is that this yatra has certainly improved Rahul Gandhi's image among people. Even if the issues he raised are not real,

ON THE CASTE CENSUS

CASTE DATA IS NEEDED, AND WHEN THE GOVERNMENT ACTS AND MAKES SCHEMES LATER, WE WILL BE ABLE TO REMOVE THE INEQUALITY IN SOCIETY. SO, OVERALL, THIS WILL ULTIMATELY ELIMINATE CASTEISM, NOT PROMOTE IT

he is working hard and taking to the road. A positive image has certainly been created. But will he gain any benefit in this Assembly election? Absolutely not.

Himanshu Harsh: You have supported the argument that delimitation should be based on population. But leaders of southern parties fear they will suffer in terms of representation because effective family planning has meant that their

population has not increased as much as in the northern states. Your comments?

There's no substance in what the people of the South are saying. Their population decreased due to family planning. Since the census began in the country in 1881, their population continuously increased before independence. In Bihar or the neighbouring Hindi-belt states, the population didn't increase because the British exploited us the most. We fell far behind in education gradually. In contrast, they advanced in education and with more development, they understood the importance of controlling population growth. Our people have not yet properly understood its importance. Even now, people in villages do not understand family planning and believe children to be the gift of God.

The population down South started decreasing gradually 20 years after independence. Our population did not increase until a little before independence. Later, when delimitation happened based on population figures – as per the 1951, 1961, and 1971 census – you will see that until '61, the population growth rate in those states was higher and ours was lower. At that time, there was no objection to delimitation. Now, when our population has started growing, they are saying that delimitation should not happen.

Santosh Singh: Do you think Nishant (Nitish Kumar's son) should enter politics now? Will that ensure the longevity of the Janata Dal-United?

How can I make a proposal about anyone? It's his decision. Nitish Kumar should continue to be Chief Minister now and in the future. But he should definitely consider the party leadership issue and make a decision. This is what I have said. In the NDA, it is unanimously decided in every way that Nitish Kumarji will be the

next Chief Minister again.

Manoj C G: There's a new player, Prashant Kishor. How much impact will he have?

I only see two teams on the field. Whatever you ask, I will comment only on those teams. What comment can I make on a team that isn't on the field?

Manoj C G: Do you think there should be a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) in Bihar among the allies in the NDA?

The NDA has been in Bihar for quite some time and everybody is working together. When the caste census issue came up, a delegation, under the leadership of Nitish Kumar, including BJP members, told the Prime Minister to conduct it. Ultimately the BJP government at the Centre took a decision (the government approved the inclusion of caste enumeration in the next population census on April 30, 2025). So the CMP, whether declared or undeclared, is already ongoing. There is no new formation of the NDA that requires laying out a new agenda again.

Vandita Mishra: But in the old NDA, there used to be coordination mechanisms and a coordination charter. In the current NDA, there is one BJP, which deals separately with all its allies. It doesn't create any common coordination mechanism or programme. Don't you think this is a backward step for coalition politics? This is not moving forward.

In the context of Bihar, everyone is sitting together and taking decisions. There is no lack of coordination in Bihar. Had they behaved that way, Upendra Kushwaha would not be a Rajya Sabha member.

Vandita Mishra: You are not talking about Prashant Kishor. While the BJP is now talking about a caste census, he is saying, "Don't look at caste. Look at whether your children are getting education, whether you are getting a job or a house." How do you see the caste card play out in this election?

A caste census is 100 per cent necessary and it will happen. Aren't there caste-based differences in society? Even today, if you go to a Dalit settlement, you will know without being told who belongs to a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe. You will know without being told who the EBCs (extremely backward classes) are.

When this situation exists, does it need to be fixed or not? And if it needs to be fixed, should there be some programme or not? If there's a ditch on the road and you want to level it, don't you need to measure how deep that ditch is? The caste census is about measuring such a ditch in society. Based on that data, both the Centre and state governments will formulate schemes.

This data is needed, and when the government acts and makes schemes later, we will be able to remove the inequality in society that we are talking about. So, overall, this caste census is ultimately to eliminate casteism, not to promote it. When a person is sick, and if surgery is needed to treat the illness,

there will be pain during the surgery. If we just say, 'No, the doctor is not good. This is causing a lot of pain,' how else can the illness be treated? So, those who say that the caste census will increase casteism are absolutely wrong. It will gradually reduce casteism.

Whether BJP does it or anyone else, every party in Bihar is supporting it. Is any party in the country opposing it? Be it the Congress or any other party, nobody is opposing it. All parties are collectively supporting it.

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Centre must end strife in Manipur, ensure harmony

Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling on different ethnic groups in the strife-torn Manipur to build a bridge of harmony is a reflection of the urgent need of the hour or the border state but the onus of it lies on the Union government as much as it is on the people of the state.

Mr Modi has picked the right imagery, for Manipuri society is divided by the communal strife which started in May 2023 and is continuing with varying intensity even now. That Prime Minister has made the exhortation while making his first visit to the state nearly two-and-a-half years after it witnessed the worst-ever ethnic violence which claimed more than 200 lives and rendered thousands homeless is also significant.

The deep divide is there for all to see: people are still living in refugee camps, some of which Mr Modi visited. It was aided and abetted by the governments at the Centre and in the state: If the violence had its historical reasons that reached the breaking point by a high court order, the silence and inaction of the state government, led by a chief minister who belonged to the Prime Minister's party, have been inexplicable. Mr Biren Singh as chief minister led a clearly partisan administration aiding in no way the restoration of peace. While Mr Singh and the government he headed were culpable for their acts of commission, the Union government is in the dock for its acts of omission, including its failure to step in despite the Supreme Court's 2023 observation about the total failure of law-and-order machinery in the state. The Union government sent Mr Singh packing only when it reached a point where even people who belonged to his ethnic group felt that his continuance would undermine their survival.

The strife is as intense or more now than what it was when it all started and it is now best explained by the representation all the 10 Kuki-Zo MLAs in the Manipur Assembly, including the seven who belong to the BJP, made to the Prime Minister during his visit. They have demanded either a separate administration or a Union territory for the hill areas where the tribes people live. This demand has been there in the air for quite some time but it has now acquired a shrillness that the government cannot ignore anymore.

If Mr Modi is serious about helping the people of Manipur build a bridge of harmony, he and the Union government should help them find the rock on which its foundations are to be laid. For the minority tribes people, it will be justice and fairness on which the bridge needs to be built, an idea the majority Meitei community will have no objection to. This exercise will require an active involvement of the Union government which should act as an impartial referee. If this were to happen, then it will call for a change in tack for the NDA government which has been banking on ad-hocism and avoidance while dealing with a serious issue in a border state. It is up to Mr Modi and the Union government to show to the people of Manipur that they are committed to bringing peace and prosperity and will remove all the impediments in its way, irrespective of their political affiliations. Mr Modi will score a point if positive actions of the Union government now follow his exhortation to the people of Manipur.

SC ruling to cheer homebuyers

The Supreme Court's judgement on stressed housing projects is trend-setting in more than one way and will protect interests of homebuyers.

The most important pronouncement of the court through its judgement is its declaration that the right to housing is not merely a contractual entitlement but a facet of the fundamental right to life under Article 21. This elevation will have a far-reaching impact in the country and will force the central government to take an active role in ensuring that every family is provided with a house.

By asking the Centre to consider establishing a revival fund to provide bridge financing for stressed projects, the court has prodded officials to provide logical conclusion to these projects and safeguard homebuyers' interests.

Though the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA) was established to protect the interests of homebuyers, it doesn't have enough power to act against violations and the court's direction to strengthen the regulator.

While the apex court's directions are helpful, the real estate market will not be cleansed of fraudsters until the government prevents the sector from being used as a parking place for black money and speculative investment. Speculative investment is steroid for real estate, which in turn attracts black money. The presence of stash incentivises the builder and buyer to opt for opaque dealings, which denies transparency and defeats the purpose of regulation.

If the right of housing is a facet of fundamental rights, every family would be entitled to a house. However, this purpose will not be achieved until speculative investment is curbed. Instead of pursuing profit maximisation through land auction as a private enterprise, the government should use its vast land bank to develop and build affordable housing for common people. When the government steps in, the cost of housing will become affordable and disincentivises fraudsters.

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Subhani



Can Modi visit bring peace in Manipur?



Wasbir Hussain

He came, he saw, and he left, telling the people of Manipur "I am with you". The biggest message Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave to the people in violence-wracked Manipur on Saturday was when he told them his government at the Centre was with the state and its people.

This was Mr Modi's first visit to Manipur since the violence between the majority Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo tribes began on May 3, 2023. There was a nationwide clamour for the Prime Minister to visit Manipur, where the violence took 250 or more lives on both sides and 60,000 were uprooted from their homes, forcing them to live in makeshift relief camps.

During his five-hour stay, the PM visited the nerve centre of the Kuki-Zo community, the district town of Churachandpur, 65 km from capital Imphal, as well as Imphal itself, the Meitei heartland. Mr Modi didn't talk directly about the violence but said talks to restore peace are going on in the right direction. When he said, "I am with you and so is my government", Mr Modi possibly wanted to send out a message that the peace initiatives at the behest of the Union home ministry have his blessings. Addressing the large gathering at Imphal's historic Kangla Fort, the PM said dialogue or talks was the only way to find an acceptable solution and resolve the conflict.

The PM laid the foundation for projects worth ₹7,300 crores and inaugurated other projects totalling ₹1,200 crores. The big question now is whether development, or the talk of ushering in development, can bring in peace in Manipur or reduce the trust deficit between Meiteis and Kukis.

What Manipur is witnessing is clearly a turf war between the two communities. On Saturday, Mr Modi drove from Imphal to Churachandpur. But on this road, Meiteis cannot travel to Churachandpur or Kukis cannot go to Imphal, obviously for reasons of security. This is the ground situation.

The PM stressed on dialogue and referred to the ongoing talks between the Centre's representatives and community groups. Recently, the Centre, through a PIB statement, said the Kuki-Zo Council, a leading organisation, had reached an agreement with the Centre to open National Highway 2 for goods and movement of people. This is the highway that links Manipur to the rest of India through Nagaland and Assam. But within hours of the statement being made public, the Kuki-Zo Council itself issued a clarification saying NH-2 was never closed but there was the "buffer zone" that had to be respected or adhered to. The question is, if the "buffer zone" is to remain undisturbed, meaning people from both clashing communities cannot cross a certain point, how can anyone say the highway blockade has been lifted. Again, a group representing the Kuki-Zo Village Volunteers openly lashed out at the Kuki-Zo Council, saying it had entered into a unilateral agreement with the government without consulting the people. Such voices and statements raise the question whether the Kuki-Zo community is united or there are cracks within it.

The Prime Minister did visit Manipur to provide a healing touch. Will this lead to peace that the masses may actually want? Well, things may not be that easy. The 10 Kuki-Zo MLAs, who had not set foot in the Imphal Valley since

the violence in 2023, met the Prime Minister and submitted a memorandum reiterating their demand for a "separate administration" in the form of a Union territory. In the memorandum, signed by all ten MLA, including a few who belong to the BJP, the legislators said only granting the Kuki-Zo community a "separate administration" will bring about a resolution to the problem in Manipur facing the two communities.

This clearly means that the Kuki-Zo community is in no mood to talk and settle for anything less. Of course, the PM, in his Churachandpur address, talked about strengthening the local government bodies, perhaps meaning the autonomous councils that function in accordance with Article 371C of the Constitution, and not under the Sixth Schedule, as in Assam, for instance. The general feeling is that these autonomous councils are not powerful because they are almost under the control of the state government, unlike councils under the Sixth Schedule that have a fair amount of autonomy.

Now, here lies the problem. The Meiteis are in no mood to allow a dismemberment of Manipur and will oppose any move to divide the state. In this scenario, what could be the solution? Can the Meiteis and Kukis live together like they had been doing before? An answer to this may come if the internally displaced people can have their desire fulfilled — that of returning to their homes from where they were uprooted. This will mean the Kukis returning to their razed homes in the Imphal Valley and the

Meiteis returning to their burnt homes in Churachandpur and elsewhere in the hills.

But this may be a really difficult task. On its part, the government made some pre-fabricated homes for the displaced people, but many are unwilling to move in to them. The living condition of the displaced living in relief camps are very poor and if reports are to be believed, they have to make do with ₹80 per person per day as assistance from the government.

Again, there is constant talk in Imphal about the need to form what is being termed a "popular government". This is because although President's Rule was imposed in February this year, the State Legislative Assembly has not been dissolved but kept in suspended animation. The term of the present Assembly is on till early 2027. The question, however, is that if a "popular government" is to be formed, it must have representation from the Kuki-Zo community as well, that has ten elected legislators. Now, Kuki-Zo community groups have clamped a ban on these ten MLAs to refrain from any government formation process, and, going by the fact that these ten MLAs have submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister seeking a Union territory for the Kuki-Zo people, it is clear they would not like to be part of any new government in Manipur in the near future.

The Meitei groups are relatively silent at the moment but the calm could lead to a possible storm if the government comes up with moves that may seem, even remotely, like recognising the hill areas as an entity in itself, away from the idea of a unified Manipur. The job of bringing peace in Manipur is challenging, to say the least.

Wasbir Hussain, author and political commentator, is editor-in-chief of Northeast Live, Northeast India's only satellite English and Hindi news channel. The views expressed here are personal.

LETTERS

PM'S MANIPUR VISIT

PM Narendra Modi's visit to Manipur on Saturday, though belated, could by and by help restore normalcy in trouble-torn state. One earnestly feels that if Modi and his team of ministers make regular visits to Manipur, people there will join the mainstream and help the region progress in all spheres. After all, "Out of sight, out of mind", they say. That said, the demand for a separate Union territory in Manipur by 10 Kuki-Zo tribal MLAs is plausible. The Union government can think it aloud and take a correct decision. It must ensure that no foreign government is behind the demand of the Kuki MLAs.

S.Ramakrishnasayee,
Chennai

UTTER NEGLECT

It was shocking to learn that the new Government District Headquarters Hospital in Tambaram, inaugurated just a month ago by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, is in a critical condition today thanks to total neglect by the authorities. The hospital, built at a cost of Rs.110 crores, is plagued by lack of even basic amenities. The CM urged doctors not to view all those who come to hospitals as "patients" but to see them as "beneficiaries of health programmes". What the poor patients need is not a new name, but good medical facilities with easy access. Time has come for our leaders to realise that people have started sensing hypocrisy even from a distance.

P.G. Menon, Chennai

POOR ROAD CONDITIONS

This refers to the all-out attack by TVK founder Vijay on DMK over their failure to keep their 2021 election promises. This may have prompted the DMK Chief to update the status of petitions received by them in their "Ungaludan Stalin" slogan. But he has been able to solve only close to 50% of petitions received. The drainage work, which the DMK Chief had promised to complete by 2022, is still to be completed and most of the roads, especially small roads, continue to be flooded, even after an overnight drizzle. Less said about the battered roads, footpaths are better. One such road is T. M. Maistry Street, Vannanthurai, Thiruvamiyur, Chennai.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

Mail your letters to
chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

Saeed Naqvi
Wide Angle



Wars in Ukraine, Gaza Strip may end with a bang, not a whimper

Ukraine and Gaza are TV serials streaming interminably on our screens because the authors don't know how to script the final scene. The general drift of the story is known, but not the end.

An end to the Gaza war is in perpetual delay because both the United States and Israel are embarrassed admitting that global exceptionalism for one and regional exceptionalism for the Jewish state ring hollow with global power shifting rapidly from the North to South since the 2008 Lehman Brothers collapse. After the Vietnam debacle and the fall of Saigon in 1975, US public opinion became resistant to foreign involvement. The post-9/11 wars caused an adrenalin rush as the "neo-cons" embarked on expediting the American century. With the US embroiled in numerous wars, big and small, maintaining 760 bases worldwide, Donald Trump asked President Jimmy Carter: "China is going ahead of the US; what should we do?" Carter's response: "Except for a skirmish with Vietnam in 1978, China has not been at war; we have never stopped being at war."

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 was, in many ways, even more destructive of American, in fact Western, self-esteem than the Vietnam debacle 50 years ago. Indefatigable Vietnamese nationalism was a factor, but it was US public opinion, stoked by outstanding journalism by anchors like Walter Cronkite, which helped precipitate the dramatic end.

In Afghanistan, the mainstream media played a

negative role. It covered up. One of the West's current tragedies is the collapse of the Western media's credibility. There is a complex bunch of reasons for this reliability deficit, but let me touch on two.

The Rupert Murdoch syndrome mistook the "sole superpower" moment as more durable. Editorials in the *Washington Post*, say, became indistinguishable from *Le Monde*. While the unipolar world passed, the media remained frozen, deluding itself that it served a unipolar system.

Also, when wars break out, the war correspondent becomes a propagandist and mythmaker. As the US has been continuously at war since the 1990s, journalists tended to be propagandists, without credibility.

The narrative in both the wars is in conflict with the ground realities. The narrative, amplified by the media, dreamt up a scenario in which Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine without any provocation to fulfil his "imperialist dreams".

Totally forgotten were the promises to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 by US secretary of state James Baker that "Nato would not move by an inch any closer to Russia". At the Bucharest Nato summit in 2008, President George W. Bush virtually poked Mr Putin in the eye by announcing that Georgia and Ukraine would join Nato. This was a "red line" Mr Putin wouldn't allow to be breached, as for Russia this was an existential threat.

There were worse provocations, including the coup in 2014 in which elected President Yanukovich, who sought neutrality, and was replaced by a West-friend-

ly candidate. This was almost ignored by the Western media.

Likewise, on the Gaza front Israel's genocide and mass murder by starvation, spread over two years, are justified as punishment for Hamas's temerity for having murdered 1,200 Jews and taken 251 hostages with stunning audacity on October 7, 2023.

In Ukraine the might of Nato, EU, Europe and the US are all pitted against Russia. What has thrown a monkey wrench in Western plans against Russia is the friendship "with no limits" which Russia and China announced earlier in the same month that Russian troops moved into Ukraine.

What is actually fuelling the two wars was blurted out by Boris Johnson when he, trapped in "Partygate", scuttled a deal that was arrived at in April 2022 in Istanbul. According to a Foreign Policy article, Johnson turned up in Kyiv to stay Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hand. "The West was not ready to end the war yet." To him, the war was not about Ukraine but Western hegemony.

The casualty figure of Ukrainians is 1.7 million. By all reliable accounts, the Russian advance on the battlefield is relentless. The seven leaders of what Donald Rumsfeld disparagingly described as "old Europe", chartered Mr Zelenskyy to the Trump durbar at the Oval Office, but with what purpose? Please don't talk to Vladimir Putin? Don't end the Ukraine war on his terms. Cite European security, though it is Western hegemony which is on the line. In Gaza, nearly two years after the October 7 attack,

what is the scorecard? Hamas' audacious, bold attack was not designed to inflict defeat on Israel, but to invite Israeli retaliation. The Jewish state walked straight into the trap with such barbarity as to make the world gasp and close its eyes.

Supposing Adolf Hitler had survived in some Satanic scenario, would he have been welcomed in any post-war assembly. The answer, obviously, is a resounding "no". Why would any other logic apply to the apartheid state which has perpetrated genocide, murdered by starvation on live TV and whose only expertise in war is to assassinate popular leaders.

The day after this war is over, I cannot visualise Benjamin Netanyahu being showered with petals. Neither he nor the "river to the sea" project that he strives for has survivability.

How will the West cope with two more defeats: one in the heart of Europe and the other in its most powerful outpost in West Asia? This will not be allowed to happen easily. There has been talk of Taurus missiles and medium-range missiles to bolster Ukraine. In desperation, these could be brought into play with cameras prepositioned around Moscow and St. Petersburg for fireworks, which will temporarily drown out the reversals on the ground. Israel, with its back to the wall, may target Iran with something more lethal. The world will keep a steady gaze on Moscow and Tehran in mortifying suspense.

The writer is a senior journalist and commentator based in New Delhi

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

PM in Manipur

Sustained efforts a must for long-term peace

LONG overdue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Manipur was an attempt to bridge the trust deficit between the Centre and the people of the strife-torn state. He vowed to transform Manipur into a "symbol of peace and prosperity" — a challenging task that will test his government's resolve. Even though the ethnic violence that broke out nearly two-and-a-half years ago has abated in recent months, especially after the imposition of President's rule in February, there is no room for complacency. The Centre must pull out all the stops to bring back normalcy and long-term peace.

A major stumbling block is the persistent trust gap between Kukis, who live largely in the hills, and the valley-based Meiteis. The government needs to do a difficult balancing act so that the concerns and grievances of both communities are addressed. The Meiteis are seeking Scheduled Tribe status, an issue that has sparked insecurity and unrest within the Kuki-Zo people. A group of Kuki-Zo MLAs, including seven from the BJP, has claimed that the two sides can "live in peace only as good neighbours, but never under the same roof again". They have even gone to the extent of demanding a separate union territory with legislature for non-Meitei communities. This underscores the deep schism that has ravaged Manipur.

There is a year and a half to go for the Assembly elections in the northeastern state. The onus is on the Centre to prevent recurrence of violence so that the polls are not delayed. It also has to weigh the pros and cons of keeping the Assembly in "suspended animation" for a prolonged period. As of now, the focus should be on resettling displaced families and encouraging more and more militants to lay down arms. Initiating or accelerating work on development projects can also serve as a confidence-building measure for the long-suffering Manipuris. The Centre must not slip up this time.

Sikh woman raped

Britain must confront hate crimes head on

THE recent sexual assault on a young Sikh woman in the UK is an unspeakable crime; it is a shameful indictment of a society that is allowing racism and misogyny to thrive in plain sight. The perpetrators did not just commit a vile act of rape; they used it as a weapon to tell the victim she "did not belong here." This was racially aggravated hatred, deliberately targeting both her identity as a Sikh and as a woman. British MP Preet Gill has rightly called it "an act of extreme violence" and reminded the country that the Sikh community does belong in Britain — as does every minority that has helped build the nation. Her words reflect the anguish of thousands who are asking: if women cannot walk to work without fear of being violated and are told to "go back", what does that say about Britain today?

This outrage comes against the backdrop of a swelling tide of far-right mobilisation. Just a day later, London witnessed one of its largest right-wing rallies in decades, with more than one lakh protesters waving flags and chanting anti-immigrant slogans under Tommy Robinson's toxic banner. The rhetoric of exclusion heard at rallies does not end at placards; it seeps into streets and emboldens violent men to act. The rise of hate-fuelled politics is visible across the globe: shootings in the US, mosque attacks in New Zealand and anti-migrant violence in Germany. Each reflects the same dangerous pattern — political movements that demonise minorities and normalise violence.

The UK government cannot downplay these linkages. Condemnations mean little if there is no decisive action. Justice must be swift, hate crime laws enforced rigorously and communities assured with protection — not platitudes. Britain must confront racism and misogyny head on before it metastasises into daily terror for minorities.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 1925

Expected outcome

IF the virtually unanimous Indian and non-official vote in favour of the joint amendment to the official resolution on the Muddiman report in the Legislative Assembly was a foregone conclusion, so was the rejection of that amendment in the Council of State. That is why we said that Sir Deva Prasad Sarbadhikari would not take long to discover that he had rendered no service to the country by insisting upon the Council being afforded an opportunity of discussing the report. This is not to say, of course, that but for Sir Deva Prasad's insistence, the Council would have been ignored. The bureaucracy knew its business and its interests far too well to do any such thing. It knew that it had everything to gain and nothing to lose by bringing the matter up before this utterly unrepresentative body, that the rejection by this body of the joint amendment, even if it did nothing else, would, at any rate, enable it to pretend in England that the two Houses of the Central Legislature were divided on this matter, that if one was against the Government, the other was for it. Happily, Englishmen are already familiar with this sort of thing in their own country. How often had the House of Lords, before its wings were successfully dipped, played this game of obstruction in regard to matters of outstanding, far-reaching importance? Nor, so far as mere resolutions as distinguished from Bills are concerned, and particularly resolutions affecting the cause of freedom in other countries, has even the clipping of its wings prevented the House from exhibiting its incurable antipathy to freedom and progress.

Honour Indian legacy of World Wars

India should dedicate a day to remember the monumental contribution of its soldiers



MANISH TEWARI
LOK SABHA MP AND
FORMER I&B MINISTER

THE annals of global history often overlook a profound truth. The monumental contribution and sacrifices of Indian soldiers during the two World Wars. It is forgotten not just by the Western powers that benefited from their service but tragically by even the very nation in whose name they served professionally with quiet dignity and fortitude.

There needs to be recognition that these soldiers, notwithstanding whether they served in the British Indian Army, the Indian Legion or the Indian National Army, ultimately shed their blood for a civilisational continuum called India, even though it was unfortunately colonised at that time.

The scale of India's contribution was staggering. During the First World War, the Indian Army expanded from about 150,000 personnel in 1914 to around 1.4 million by 1918.

By the time the Second World War culminated, this figure had swelled to an astonishing 2.5 million personnel, constituting the largest volunteer army in history.

Following the near destruction of the British Expeditionary Force in the opening months of World War I, the arrival of 28,500 Indian troops in France by September 1914 provided a critical reinforcement without which the Western Front might have collapsed. Field Marshal Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief of India, later conceded that Britain "couldn't have come through both wars if they hadn't had the Indian Army".

During the First World War, Indian Expeditionary Forces were deployed across an astonishingly broad geographical spectrum - from the Western Front to East Africa, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Gallipoli and beyond.

The pre-war Indian Army had developed considerable expertise



SALUTE: It's vital to recognise the unwavering spirit of those who served with fidelity and honour. ISTOCK

in conducting operations across diverse terrains and climates. This versatility proved invaluable to British strategy, which required simultaneous campaigns across radically different operational environments.

The Indian Army functioned as an imperial fire brigade, deployed to critical sectors where its specialised capabilities could achieve maximum effect. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Middle East, where Indian formations constituted the overwhelming majority of British imperial forces.

On the Western Front in 1914, Indian soldiers played a crucial role in preventing a German breakthrough during the First Battle of Ypres, where they held approximately one-third of the entire British lines despite having recently arrived from garrison duty in India.

Military historians have recognised and applauded the fact that the pre-1914 Indian Army was "a leading professional force" with "high training standards both for regular warfare and for small wars".

At the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, Indian cavalry units conducted a critical counterattack that prevented German forces from exploiting a breach in Allied lines. In Mesopotamia, despite the disastrous surrender at Kut al-Amarah, a failure attributable to British command deficiencies, Indian units subsequently demonstrated remarkable operational effectiveness during the capture of Baghdad and further

While nations like Russia, France and China commemorate their war dead with grandeur, India remains curiously silent.

advances into Persia.

The Second World War witnessed an even more dramatic demonstration of Indian military prowess across vastly different battlefields. In North Africa, Indian formations proved pivotal in both offensive and defensive operations against Field Marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps.

The 4th Indian Infantry Division established itself as one of the most effective Allied formations in the desert campaign, contributing significantly to the victory at El Alamein. At Monte Cassino, Indian soldiers fought with extraordinary determination under appalling conditions, with the Gurkha regiments particularly distinguishing themselves in mountain combat.

The most significant contribution occurred in the Asian theatre. Following the disastrous British defeats in Malaya and Burma in 1942, Indian formations constituted the bulk of the Commonwealth forces available to defend India itself and eventually launch counteroffensives into Southeast Asia.

Indian units provided the majority of the combat power in the victories at Imphal and Kohima in 1944, described as the 'Stalingrad of the East'. The Fourteenth Army, which contained substantial Indian components, became the largest single field army in the British imperial order of battle.

The Indian contribution extended to even include specialised capabilities and encompass broader geopolitical considerations. The Royal Indian Navy expanded significantly during the Second World War, contributing to naval operations in the Indian Ocean and protecting vital sea lanes against Japanese and German threats.

The availability of Indian manpower allowed Britain to maintain her global empire while simultaneously fighting major conflicts in Europe, a strategic luxury unavailable to other European colonial powers. France, for instance, lacked equivalent colonial military resources, contributing to her rapid defeat in 1940 and subsequent dependence on Allied support for liberation. The Netherlands also could not draw upon substantial colonial military forces, limiting its ability to contribute to Allied campaigns.

What makes the sacrifices of Indian soldiers particularly poignant, and what justifies our national remembrance, is that they did not fight merely as imperial mercenaries. They were also motivated by the promise of self-determination — a promise repeatedly made and cynically betrayed. In 1917, Edwin Samuel Montagu, Secretary of State for India,

dangled the prospect of 'self-government' for India in exchange for wartime loyalty. Yet, after World War I, instead of freedom, India received the repressive Rowlatt Act and the horrors of Jallianwala Bagh.

The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 offered not 'responsible government' but a diluted parody of autonomy. Similarly, during World War II, the British despatched the Cripps Mission in 1942, offering Dominion status post-war, a proposal Gandhi astutely dismissed as a "post-dated cheque drawn on a failing bank".

The yearning for independence also manifested in the actions of those who opposed the British Raj through armed struggle. The 1915 Singapore Mutiny, orchestrated under the foiled Hindu-German conspiracy, was a clear manifestation of the simmering discontent.

The Indian National Army (INA), led by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, and the Indian Legion in Europe were composed of soldiers who believed that Axis support could catalyse India's liberation. They fought with the same patriotic fervour as their Allied-serving counterparts. The INA's campaigns in Burma and the Indian Legion's existence in Europe symbolised a desperate bid for sovereignty. History, always complex, is often convoluted.

Oxymorically, post-Independence India has failed to adequately honour these sacrifices. While nations like Russia, France and China commemorate their war dead with grandeur, India remains curiously silent. While we decided to remain a part of the Commonwealth, we chose to forget those who had shed blood and martyred themselves for the same Commonwealth. In the narrative of the Indian freedom struggle, theirs was the inconvenient truth that was airbrushed out of history books.

As a nation that values her heritage and her future, India must establish a day of remembrance, not to glorify war but to honour sacrifice, not to celebrate an empire but to recognise the unwavering spirit of those who served with fidelity and honour in the global struggle against Nazism, fascism and Japanese expansionism in Asia. We owe them nothing less than everlasting remembrance.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

In war it does not matter who is right, but who is left. — Winston Churchill

Tragic song of Punjab's rivers

GS AUJLA

CELEBRATED singer Diljit Dosanjh's Punjabi song, "Ravi ton Chenab puchhda, kee haal hai Satluj da?", sums up the romance of Punjab's legendary rivers. Tragically, floods in these rivers have caused unprecedented destruction during the monsoon this year.

The fury of the floods, almost evenly distributed between western and eastern Punjab, brought intolerable misery. The river waters on both sides of the barbed wire fence seemed to have merged, as if by a providential will. The fence, which geographically divides the two Punjabs (or countries, to be more precise), virtually disappeared, as if rendered unnecessary in the face of a common tragedy. Water, which was the bone of contention when available in a limited quantity, became surplus, with neither side wanting to have more of it. God's bounty went abegging.

Guru Nanak had said, "Pawan Guru, Pani pita, mata dhart mahat". He equated water with the father in the natural order of things. In recent weeks, however, the elixir of life — so vital for the survival of living beings — became unfit for human or livestock consumption. It was part of the problem rather than the solution. Mixed toxically with dangerous pesticides, it left the thirsty multitudes waiting for bottled water.

Rescuers have been working under severe constraints, such as paucity of resources. Contingency plans, if any, were not adequately firmed up to handle a crisis of this magnitude. Environmentalists can only warn about the consequences of ecological devastation — it's the plunderers of Mother Nature who have to find ways to cope up with such catastrophes.

Painfully, a man was seen drifting into the neighbouring country without a visa, with border patrols unable to stop him. He was heard shouting, "Perhaps I have left behind something on the other side, waiting to be retrieved." The silent flow of water sucked in livestock as if they did not belong anywhere. In fact, they belonged where water took them in life or death. And amid the ordeal caused by the deluge, the dreaded drones — notorious for ferrying lethal drugs across the border — were used to provide food to the hungry ones.

There is no greater tragedy for Punjab's fabled rivers, which have inspired romantic epics that are a part of folklore on both sides of the fence, than to sing this cross-border dirge.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Empathetic partnerships needed

Refer to 'Nepal upheaval has lessons for India' (*The Great Game*); India cannot afford to be a mere bystander as Nepal's historic revolution unfolds. *The roti-beti rishta* woven through blood, bread and kinship is India's living bridge with Nepal, making the Kathmandu violence also Delhi's concern. The people's revolt against authoritarian drift, echoing across South Asia, gives a clear warning: neglect breeds instability. South Asia's fate is intertwined with India's, regardless of economic disparity. Fragile democracies in the neighbourhood need more than platitudes; they need engaged, empathetic partnerships. In these uncertain times, the cost of disengagement is far greater than the cost of vigilance.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

Consensus for regional peace

Apropos of 'Nepal upheaval has lessons for India'; India, the world's largest democracy, must realise that the youth uprising in Nepal cannot be underplayed. Youth sentiments, particularly in developing countries, have the potential to trigger a rebellion against the status quo of corruption and indifference to public concerns. In this digital age, a strong undercurrent gets built up for or against every major issue. India needs to take the lead in South Asia by proactively developing consensus for peace in the region.

BRU B GOYAL, LUDHIANA

Wrong precedent

With reference to 'Nepal upheaval has lessons for India'; whatever the demands of the Gen Z, the senseless burning of vital public assets like Parliament, Supreme Court, Secretariat, etc by mindless protesters was uncalled for. This has put Nepal 25 years behind. If their violent acts go unpunished, it will send a wrong message to the youth. Protests in India have so far been largely peaceful. The Gen Z protesters in Nepal have set a wrong precedent that regime change can be achieved more swiftly by violent means. The roots of democracy in India are strong and possibility of any such eventuality is almost ruled out.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

Lacuna in GST reform

The GST Council has taken a bold step by abolishing GST on all health and life insurance policies of individuals. However, there is a serious lacuna. The exemption has been granted only to individual policies, not to group insurance policies. Perhaps the Council assumed that group policies are taken only by large corporates for their employees. This perception is not entirely correct. Group medical insurance is also taken by many PSUs for their retired staff. In the case of retirees, the premium along with the GST component is borne entirely by the individual. So, the GST exemption must be extended to group health insurance policies for retirees as well.

ANMOL RATTAN NARANG, JALANDHAR

A balanced approach

Apropos of 'Ethanol mission'; the government must not ignore the issues related to ethanol use. It has not taken original equipment manufacturers on board and not given them an opportunity to make their vehicles compliant. According to automobile experts, E20 is damaging fuel valves. Most vehicles on Indian roads aren't E20-compliant. Farmers would require more water to grow sugarcane from which ethanol is produced. The Central government should prepare farmers for the future and also offer EO (ethanol-free) fuel alongside E20 with clear labelling, which is a balanced approach. This will protect consumer rights while pursuing environmental goals.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Making green fuel impactful

Refer to 'Ethanol mission'; introducing the E20 petrol is a laudable step towards sustainability, yet consumer confidence depends on clarity and transparent communication. While the E20 programme's intent is commendable, doubts over engine performance, costs and warranties must be addressed through credible engagement. A sustained awareness campaign and responsive policy measures will ensure smoother adoption. Building trust, not dismissing concerns, is the key to making India's green fuel journey impactful.

PARVINDER SINGH, CHANDIGARH

The ethanol imperative

Welcome move, but transition challenges remain

The announcement of achieving the E20 fuel, or a 20 per cent ethanol blend in motor fuel this year, five years ahead of schedule, and the intention to move beyond to E27, must be welcomed at a time when greenhouse-gas (GHG) emission has been sharply rising thanks to India's thermal-power plants, and urban pollution is becoming a nationwide health crisis. E20 is a viable means of aligning with India's "nationally determined contribution" to reach "net zero" by 2070 and reducing the country's dependence on imported crude oil. The government data shows that from ethanol supply year (ESY) 2014-15 (when the ethanol blend was just 1.5 per cent) to ESY 2024-25, state-owned oil-marketing companies saved more than ₹1.44 trillion of foreign exchange, accounting for crude-oil substitution of 245,000 tonnes and a reduction in carbon-dioxide emission roughly equivalent to planting 300 million trees. According to a NITI Aayog study, the life-cycle emissions of GHGs in the case of sugarcane- and maize-based ethanol are, respectively, 65 and 50 per cent less than that of petrol. Ethanol production can also bring significant benefits to farmers by creating a reliable market for maize, sugarcane, and rice straw. With this, India joins an exclusive club of Brazil, the United States (US), and European countries in blending ethanol with petrol.

From the consumer point of view, the transition needed better management. Although E20 has been available in select fuel stations, it has now become the only choice in nearly 90,000 stations across the country. Not unexpectedly, this has caused widespread consternation about the efficacy of E20 in terms of mileage and acceleration. In Europe and the US, motorists are given a choice of tanking up on E10, E15, or E20, depending on the age of their vehicles. In fact, in 2020, the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers said E10 must be provided alongside E20 to ensure an optimal operation of vehicles. It pointed out that changing items such as rubber parts and gaskets would be a major operation. In India, most car engines are calibrated for E10; only those produced after April 1, 2025, are designed for E20. Automakers initially hinted at performance-related issues. Now, they appear to have fallen in line with the government's views, reassuring consumers that the differences in performance parameters are minor. This variability of industry opinion is unlikely to assuage concerns.

In the long run, though the broader benefits of biofuel in terms of air quality and farmer incomes may outweigh the immediate transition pangs, there are unintended consequences embedded in this policy. One is the "food-versus-fuel" debate since returns for farmers from biofuel crops can often be better than from agricultural crops. Maize prices, for instance, rose from ₹1,800 a quintal to more than ₹2,500 a quintal in two years owing to biofuel demand. This has undoubtedly enhanced farmers' income but has had a knock-on effect on prices of poultry- and cattle-feed (which consume 70 per cent of maize production) and diversion of land from millet and oilseed cultivation. Besides, the cultivation of rice and sugarcane, other kinds of biofuel feedstock are extremely water-intensive; their expansion in areas such as Punjab, Haryana, and Maharashtra can be catastrophic for India's water security. Balancing these competing options demands an appropriate response mechanism from the government to ensure that food and water security is not sacrificed at the altar of energy security.

An inclusive search

Google order can reduce entry barriers

Judging by the market reaction, Google emerged from a five-year antitrust case less damaged than was expected. The stock jumped 8 per cent on the remedies announced by US District Court Judge Amit P Mehta, who had already ruled Google was perpetrating monopolistic behaviour. Google will not be forced to divest Chrome or Android, as proposed by the Department of Justice (DoJ). But it will have to share some of the data it receives from its search engine with competitors, and it cannot make exclusive deals that tie the distribution of search, Chrome, Google Assistant, or Gemini to other apps or revenue arrangements. Since most users stick with default search engines and browsers, exclusive arrangements lock rivals out.

However, the company may continue to have non-exclusive arrangements to preload or distribute applications. But it could pay Apple, Samsung, etc to preload its Chrome browser and search engine. Google, for instance, shares around one-third of the search revenue it derives from Apple devices with Apple. These remedies are also not final in that the judge ordered Google and the DoJ to meet and confer and submit a revised final judgment by mid-September. A technical committee will be established to help enforce the final judgment. And, of course, Google may appeal this judgment. Judge Mehta acknowledged that the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has changed the competitive landscape in the past two years (the case was filed in 2020), and this influenced his remedies. Indeed, the search industry has changed, now that AI offers many alternative pathways to accessing and organising information.

However, Google continues to dominate traditional search via keywords, where it holds around a 90 per cent market share, and many of the searches driven by AI prompts (instead of keywords) could be considered "skins", wherein the AI uses Google and reorganises the content in the links it receives into coherent summaries of information. Another interesting point is that the court explicitly referenced the European Digital Markets Act (DMA), especially in making the recommendations of sharing search data. The DMA requires Google (and similar large service providers) to share certain click and query data with third parties while maintaining privacy. The court also said Google must offer search and search ad syndication services to competitors at standard rates.

The court order is narrower and more "temporary" than the DMA's obligations. For example, advertisement-related data need not be shared. The order is also much more limited than the access the DoJ requested, which included sharing the source code, search ranking, and algorithms, which Google argued is intellectual property. Google lives with the DMA since it cannot do business in the European Union without compliance. If American courts ask for similar data-sharing, it could have a wider impact since it is likely other jurisdictions (including India) will follow suit with similar rulings. This ruling may set the scope of tech antitrust remedies in the world's largest market. Blocking exclusive deals and asking Google to share search index and interaction data with rivals do address barriers to entry that could open up search to competition.



The economy needs short-dated options

Banning or proscribing weekly options would be unwise

A debate is underway in India on whether the state should use its coercive power to prohibit weekly option contracts. This follows regulatory concerns about the scale of retail participation and the high proportion of individual traders who incur losses. While these concerns are understandable, a ban would be a policy error. It is a misdiagnosis of the problem and risks damaging hard-won financial-market development. We should not dismantle functioning markets; we should learn from global experience and foster a deeper, more resilient financial ecosystem.

The debate is being framed incorrectly as a tradeoff between speculation and investor protection. The correct framing, grounded in financial economics, is about whether India should continue on the path toward creating more liquid and more complete markets. Financial derivatives are not only instruments of speculation; they are fundamental tools for customising risk. The Nobel-winning work of Kenneth Arrow and Gérard Debreu provides the theoretical ideal: A "complete market" where a security exists for every possible future "state of the world", allowing any risk to be perfectly hedged. While a truly complete market is unattainable, financial innovation strives to approximate it. Short-dated options are the closest practical instruments we have to one-period Arrow securities, allowing participants to isolate and trade the risk of a single event on a single day. They perform an economic function — enhancing the liquidity and efficiency of the overall securities markets. Banning these instruments would make our markets less complete, less efficient, and less liquid.

The Indian equity derivatives ecosystem has made

progress, but excessive attention has shifted to protecting some individuals from facing losses. While the data on retail losses is a concern, the proposed solution is flawed. The problem is not the instrument itself. The recent scrutiny intensified after the Jane Street case, an episode the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Board of India correctly identified as a "surveillance issue", not an indictment of the product. To ban the product is to punish the entire market for a failure of surveillance or individual decision making, a dangerous break from the long-term policy of market development.

A live experiment gives us insight. In May 2022, the CBOE began offering options on the S&P 500 index with daily expiries, known as oDTE options. By mid-2023, oDTE trading accounted for over 43 per cent of total S&P 500 options volumes, with a notional daily volume around \$1 trillion. This explosive growth shows that these products are valuable, and they are performing a useful function for voluntary users. And this explosive growth, contrary to fears, did not cause systemic instability. It created a deep, liquid, and balanced ecosystem. The CBOE data shows the market is not a one-sided speculative frenzy: Retail clients account for roughly 55 per cent of the flow, but sophisticated institutional clients make up the other 45 per cent.

In the Indian discourse, short-dated options are slammed as being "mere" speculative instruments. Researchers have worked with the CBOE data and found that they are used in sophisticated and sensible ways, from precise event hedging by institutions to tactical intraday strategies. The concern that such products create volatility is also not borne out by evi-



AJAY SHAH & URVISH BIDKAR

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The past and present of Indian spices

Prima facie India's spice sector seems to be doing quite well, with both production and export scaling new peaks in 2024-25, maintaining a steady long-term uptrend. But some glaring snags still need to be fixed to realise the true potential of this sector.

While output is estimated to have doubled over the past one decade, from less than 6 million tonnes to a record 12 million tonnes, export too has burgeoned by a whopping 88 per cent in volumes and 97 per cent in value, during this period. Net export in 2024-25 amounted to a record 1.79 million tonnes, worth around \$4.72 billion. This robust performance upholds India's historic image as the "land of spices", which lured several explorers, including the legendary Vasco da Gama at the end of the 15th century, to this country. It also validates India's status as the global leader in spices.

However, sector analysts are far from satisfied with this showing and maintain there is ample room for improvement. The potential of this business is fairly high, thanks to favourable climate, a long tradition of growing annual, as also perennial, spice crops, supportive government policies, and, most importantly, rapidly growing international demand. The overall value of the country's spice market, reckoned currently at around ₹2 trillion, can touch, or exceed, ₹5 trillion in next five years, they point out.

The vast diversity of agro-ecological conditions in different parts of the country allows cultivation of almost all types of spices. Of the 109 varieties of spices formally recognised by the International Organisation for Standardisation, 75 are produced in India. With appropriate research & development (R&D), it

should be possible to grow some of the non-traditional spices as well to further expand the country's rich and diverse spice basket. That would allow India to bolster its standing in the global spice bazaar.

At present, export is confined majorly to a few bulk-produced spices, such as pepper, cardamom, chilli, ginger, turmeric, cumin, celery, fennel, fenugreek, garlic, nutmeg, and mace. Actually, just five spices — chilli, cumin, turmeric, ginger, and coriander — make up over two-thirds of output and export. Unsurprisingly, therefore, despite accounting for nearly 48 per cent of global production, India's cumulative share in the international trade of these low-volume, but high-value, commodities is relatively low. The bulk of the spices, over 75 per cent, are consumed locally. What is worse, most exports consist of raw spices rather than their processed and value-added products, such as blended spices, spice extracts, essential oils, and oleoresins. The shipments of some of the spices produced exclusively in India, including those holding the coveted Geographical Indication (GI) tag, are dismally meagre for want of adequate promotional effort. The massive, and

briskly growing, demand for organic spices, especially in the developed countries, is also not being adequately capitalised upon, though India has the capacity to do so, thanks to liberal incentives being offered by the government to promote organic and natural farming. Moreover, though Indian spices find their way to around 200 countries, the bulk of the consignments land up in China, the United States, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. The United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Germany, Thailand, and the United



FARM VIEW
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dence; studies show that overall close-to-close realised volatility has not significantly changed. The United States experience is proof-of-concept that a mature financial ecosystem can successfully achieve depth in short-dated options trading — depth that enables useful applications chosen by a wide variety of market players. What India needs is a wave of high-quality research that understands the nature of what is happening under Indian conditions, so as to protect policy making from impressions, prejudices and political economy.

The rationale for a ban rests on paternalism, contradicting a core principle of economic liberty: Consenting adults should be free to enter into contracts. The state's role is to enforce contracts and prevent fraud, not to prohibit risk-taking. Many vital economic activities, from angel investing to entrepreneurship, have high failure rates, yet the government does not intrude into the individual's right to pursue her objectives. The vast majority of new businesses fail! But the government does not require an examination before a person starts a business.

Policy debates in India often create a false dichotomy between "good" hedging and "bad" speculation. Speculators are the lifeblood of liquidity; a hedger needs a speculator on the other side of the trade. Banning a product to curb speculation inevitably punishes legitimate hedgers by draining liquidity. When trading in derivatives is banned, the underlying risk does not vanish. To some extent, activity does subside, which harms liquidity. To some extent, the demand for risk transfer will be driven into less transparent channels like offshore or illegal markets, placing participants outside Indian law and blinding regulators to the true buildup of risk. The intervention, intended to reduce risk, would perversely increase it.

The purpose of securities markets is to create liquid and efficient markets. Achieving this financial development is a critical input to Indian economic growth and should be the focus of policy. Instead of prohibition, a superior path exists. The key is not fewer retail participants but more institutional ones. Policy should focus on enabling domestic institutions to do more with derivatives by removing the state impediments that hold this back. The regulator should enhance transparency through clearer risk disclosures and initiatives on financial literacy initiatives. If expiry-day volatility is a specific concern, the focus should be on technical market-design solutions like call auctions for the closing price.

The materiality of the Indian equity market lies not just in the domination of equity financing in shaping private-investment activities but also as the institutional foundation for future progress on commodities, currencies, and government bonds. That upside potential requires success on the equity market.

Short-dated options are a healthy and successful aspect of the derivatives markets. Policymakers should see this not as a threat but as an opportunity to build a more sophisticated and resilient financial system.

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What happened to the high-tech space race?



REBECCA BOYLE

When the rocket company Blue Origin didn't get a lunar lander contract with NASA in April 2021, its founder, Jeff Bezos, was fuming. Blue Origin had been working for years on a prototype lander, hoping to wrest funding — and some fame — from Elon Musk's SpaceX, by then a trusted partner to the American space agency. Just four months into the Biden administration, Bezos began assembling attorneys to file a formal protest with the federal government. According to the journalist Christian

Davenport's latest dispatch from the high-tech space race, *Rocket Dreams*, Bezos also posed a question: "How would we go about this if NASA did not exist?"

The answer: Build big rockets that can get people to the moon (and Mars) anyway. Billionaires just really want to do that. They have plenty of money to spend and nobody is stopping them; in fact, NASA is welcoming their ideas and their designs. What no one asks, including in this book, is why this is something we should encourage the billionaires to do, let alone why we should praise them for it.

As the space exploration beat writer at *The Washington Post*, Davenport is in frequent contact with the government space officials, tech bros and billionaires who are transforming the industry — including Bezos, who owns Davenport's employer. *Rocket Dreams* offers a fly-on-the-wall account from launchpads and flight decks across nearly a decade of space exploration, from the early days of

the first Trump administration to the beginning of the second.

Davenport is impressively sourced and his book is a fine piece of reporting; historians will be able to use this first draft of rocket history to craft deeper analyses of our first real steps as a space-faring society.

At the centre of these unfolding events lie Bezos and Musk. Davenport's portraits of them are frequently sympathetic, even complimentary. At the helm of a meeting between NASA and Blue Origin in 2017, Bezos is described as "a self-taught rocket scientist who could keep up with even the best of his engineers."

Meanwhile, at a giant rocket facility being built in Boca Chica, Texas, around 2018, we hear John Muratore, the NASA engineer turned SpaceX launch director, tell Davenport that Musk would "look at everything, climb around" and "constantly" have "great suggestions." Fearful of telling Musk that anything is

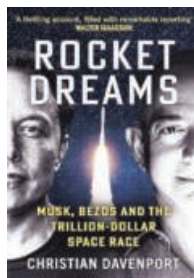
impossible, the SpaceX team in Boca Chica worked 16 hours a day, seven days a week, and slept in cars on-site. But even this is framed as a positive. "It was an amazing few months," Muratore recalls.

Criticism does crop up — Davenport includes his reporting on sex-discrimination complaints against Blue Origin, for instance — but the overall picture is of two visionary men committed to getting humans and eventually industry off this planet and among the stars. Musk comes off as a workaholic and a maniacally committed true believer, even as he buys Twitter and slouches toward far-right conspiracy theories and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Bezos seems like a sincere, patriotic, steadfast track-layer who can never seem to outdo his rival.

Neither one of them is the heel of this story, however; that role falls to the NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine. After Musk smokes weed on Joe Rogan's

podcast in 2018, Bridenstine orders an investigation of SpaceX's work safety culture. The relationship between Musk and NASA begins to deteriorate. In 2019, Bridenstine bristles publicly about Musk's obsession with Starship — a mega rocket that could theoretically get humans to Mars — which the tech mogul seems to pursue at the expense of NASA's more immediate concerns, namely, preparing to deliver astronauts to the International Space Station as SpaceX had promised to do.

This tension does not last. Musk surprises Bridenstine by doing just what the NASA administrator wants: making some tweaks to the commercial crew capsule and getting it ready to fly. The NASA administrator "was starting to see him in a different light, as someone who would get things done. As someone he could trust."



ROCKET DREAMS: Musk, Bezos, and the Inside Story of the New, Trillion-Dollar Space Race by Christian Davenport, Published by Crown Currency 371 pages \$32

The space race between Bezos and Musk often does not feel like an adventure, or an elevation of the human spirit. In Davenport's straightforward, journalistic telling, it is more like a cynical quest for likes and power.

Only a few months ago, Musk and Trump seemed aligned on the goal of putting human beings on Mars. To Trump, Davenport explains, "Mars was Fifth Avenue," prime real estate. But Musk's relationship with the president began to crumble this spring and Musk's pick for NASA administrator, Jared Isaacman, was yanked out of the running. Mars might as well be in Yonkers now.

The reviewer is the author of *Our Moon: How Earth's Celestial Companion Transformed the Planet, Guided Evolution, and Made Us Who We Are*. ©2025 The New York Times News Service



CONTRAPUNTO

It is not talking but walking that will bring us to heaven

- MATTHEW HENRY

Keep Talking

Manipur's many groups and points of view will need long and patient hearing from GOI

Modi's much-awaited visit to Manipur – in spite of torrential rainfall in the region that grounded his chopper, forcing him to take the road through the heart of territories that had seen massive ethnic strife – certainly lifted spirits in the state. The two-and-a-half-year-long conflict has led to a near-total separation of Manipur's hills and valley, and President's Rule since Feb this year. During this period, both communities at the centre of the ethnic conflict have seen armed groups spring up to defend their respective villages and people. There is massive distrust in Manipur police, and calls for a separate administration for the hill areas.

All of this is to say that Centre is facing a hugely complicated challenge in Manipur and there are no easy solutions. While many contend that Modi should have visited earlier, it is unclear if that would have changed anything on the ground. With President's Rule now, at least violence in the state has ebbed. Against this backdrop, Modi's pitch for development and dialogue as the way forward is well-timed.



That said, bridging divisions won't be easy. The valley's Meitei community is dead against any division of the state, while the Kuki-Zos in the hills can no longer envisage living under one roof. Then there are myriad civil society and armed groups with different opinions within the two communities. For example, just before Modi's visit, Centre inked an updated Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with two Kuki-Zo groups. One key takeaway of the deal is maintaining territorial integrity of Manipur. However, other Kuki-Zo groups want a separate administration. And during Modi's visit, 10 Kuki-Zo MLAs including seven from BJP, appealed for a separate UT with a legislature for the hills.

Meanwhile, the umbrella Meitei organisation COCOMI slammed the new SoO for legitimising armed Kuki-Zo groups. Plus, there are other Meitei groups that are unhappy that Centre hasn't reached out to them. Given this scenario, progress in Manipur will be slow. But wider dialogue is the only way forward. All options should be on the table. True, Manipur being a border state complicates matters. And foreign inimical forces will look to fish in troubled waters. Therefore, some high degree of autonomy for the hills within the framework of Manipur state could be a way forward. Modi's visit should galvanise both the state administration and Centre to redouble their efforts to find a widely acceptable solution.

THEYDUNNIT...

...Why can't we? TOI's Christie-in-India story is a reminder how we do disservice to India's vernacular crime fiction

A gatha Christie's fiction gives one a sense that she travelled lots. And she did. For example, in her girlhood she summered in the south of France, her debutante 'coming out' was in Egypt, she learnt surfing in Hawaii, and was a frequent traveller on the fabled Orient Express. And yet, despite her legions of fans in India, until it was revealed in **TOI** yesterday, we did not know that she had travelled here too, not once but twice. Her correspondence from those 1960 and 1961 journeys, suggests an eagerness to explore our country and an appreciation of its scenic beauty. This in turn brings us to thinking about how widely the crime novel has travelled since – and how much the Indian crime novel hasn't.



Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi and Satyajit Ray's Feluda are rare for having been able to have travelled widely outside their original Bengali. More common is the fate of Surender Mohan Pathak, who has been prolifically authoring Hindi-language detective novels since the 1960s, but has begun to be available to Anglophone audiences only recently. Occasionally vernacular pulp fiction is bunged into anthologies, which have zero mass appeal.

Upon translation, crime fiction travels remarkably well across cultures. Because of its shared core elements. Readers follow clues, make deductions, sort the puzzle of human motivation, curiosity mixed with fear – the logic of investigation functions as a sort of universal language. But the authors who can be found at airport lounges across the world – such as Keigo Higashino from Japan, Henning Mankell of Sweden, Fred Vargas from France – did not get there on their own tongue. They are easily found across the big city bookshops of India too, sitting alongside Indian authors who write in English. Indian authors who don't write in English are MIA even in their own airports, despite mass popularity. But the crores of copies they have already sold is a good clue that translating and marketing will hit the target.

Don't Mind Your Language

On preserving the multi-lingua franca of Bengaluru

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Cities speak. Some in a single tongue, others in several. Bengaluru has always belonged to the second kind. I'm a thoroughbred Bengalee. My mother, her parents, and theirs were born here. Kannada is our mother tongue. But growing up here, you'd often hear a sentence begin in Kannada, twist into Tamil, borrow a phrase from Telugu or Marathi, and end in English.

The 2011 Census ranked Bengaluru as India's most linguistically diverse city, with 107 languages spoken. That multilingual rhythm is now fading, the ease with which the city once switched tongues is weakening. Conversations feel narrower; people notice more when the 'wrong' language is spoken, and a quiet tension has crept in.

One factor driving this change is the growing dominance of Hindi. Migration from the north has brought energy and diversity, but what troubles long-time residents is the assumption that Bengaluru must adapt to one language to make others feel at home. Apps built here now greet customers in Hindi first, as if the city's older polyphony never existed.

A second factor is the sharper assertion of exclusivity by some pro-Kannada groups. Their concern is rooted in a real anxiety: Kannada has often been sidelined in its own capital. Protecting the language is vital but Bengaluru was never about uniformity. It was about accommodation. Whether you came from Ballari or Bhubaneswar, Bhopal or Bahrain, you belonged by adding your words to the mix. Kannada anchored the city, English offered a bridge, and other languages found space without permission or apology.

This multilingualism came from history – a British cantonment culture, old trade routes, dynasties that crossed linguistic borders, families that lived across them. It created a civic culture of listening – you might not know every tongue, but you learnt to catch tone, rhythm, intent. That gift is now under strain. Schools fine children for speaking 'wrong' languages, offices drift towards linguistic silos, neighbourhood groups default to one tongue. If this continues, the city risks losing not just diversity but imagination.

The way forward is not to choose sides but to practise plurality. Strengthen Kannada with pride, but also show up for Tamil theatre, Telugu cinema, Urdu poetry, Malayalam literature. Switch languages mid-sentence if the moment allows. Resist imposition and resist exclusion. Because Bengaluru's strength has never been in speaking one language, it has been in making room for many. If the city forgets this, it forgets itself.



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In a state fractured by 29 months of ethnic strife, PM's long-awaited visit clearly marked a solemn symbolic moment. There's wide agreement that his presence in both Churachandpur and Imphal – the emotional hearts of the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities respectively – is a gesture loaded with political significance. But gestures alone cannot heal wounds. And the big question that remains to be answered is, what next?

Legacy of violence | Modi's visit came two years after the violent clashes erupted in Manipur, between the Meitei majority in the valley and the Kuki-Zo tribal communities in the hills. Since May 2023, this conflict has claimed over 260 lives, displaced more than 60,000, and left a society deeply scarred.

Entire villages lie abandoned and in both the valley and hills, communities have been emptied out – not just physically, but emotionally. Many of the displaced are still living in overcrowded relief camps with poor sanitation, extremely poor healthcare, and no clear path home.

Modi's absence during the peak of the crisis had drawn widespread criticism, and his arrival now – though welcomed by many – was also met with scepticism and unresolved demands.

Development as outreach | At both Churachandpur and Imphal, he inaugurated and laid the foundation stone for development projects worth over ₹8,500cr.

The most powerful moment came when Modi made a direct emotional appeal to build bridges of harmony between the hills and the valley. It was not just a metaphor. It was a call to action – to replace resentment with reconciliation, and division with dialogue.

Yet, beneath the surface of infra and investment lies a deeper political fault line. The Kuki-Zo Council and 10 Kuki MLAs have submitted memoranda to the PM, demanding a separate UT with a legislature under Article 239A of the Constitution. Their appeal is unequivocal: coexistence within the current political framework is no longer viable. "We can now live in peace only as good neighbours, never under the same roof again," they stated.

This demand is not new but it has gained urgency

and clarity in the aftermath of the violence. They now feel that their call for separation is rooted in survival, not convenience.

Meitei concerns and unease | Meitei civil society, on the other hand, remains wary of any move that could alter Manipur's territorial integrity. For them, the idea of a separate administration threatens the unity of the state and risks setting a precedent for further fragmentation. Centre's recent renewal of the Suspension of Operations agreement with Kuki militant groups has also stirred



Welcome: Manipuris greet the PM in Imphal (left) and Churachandpur (right) on Saturday

unease, with Meiteis viewing it as a concession that undermines justice and accountability.

The divide between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities is not just geographic or political – it has percolated into every stratum of society. Schools, markets, places of worship, and even govt offices now operate in silos, mirroring the fractured social fabric.

Relief and rehabilitation efforts have been marred by allegations of bias, with accusations that aid distribution is uneven and politically motivated. Even the police and paramilitary forces have faced criticism for perceived partiality, further deepening the mistrust.

This institutional polarisation is dangerous. It risks turning temporary displacement into permanent segregation. It also undermines the very machinery that is supposed to deliver justice, governance, and development.

'Israel Is Fighting For Its Very Survival'

An Israeli embassy spokesperson, responding to a **TOI** editorial, argues that Tel Aviv's military operations in Gaza are an existential necessity

Guy Nir



The Times of India published an editorial, "Hell Gaza" (Aug 22), that completely misses the mark on Israel's ongoing security operations. Let's set the record straight. What would any nation do if its towns were invaded, its civilians massacred, women raped, and children taken hostage? For Israel, this is not a hypothetical question. It's a reality. When a terrorist group openly calls for your destruction and then acts on it in the most brutal way imaginable, defending your people is not just a right – it's an obligation.

The Israel-Hamas conflict is often reduced to headlines about borders, territory, or military action. But for Israel, this is not a dispute over land. It's a struggle for survival in the face of an ideology committed to annihilation. Israel is not fighting a people, a religion, or a political disagreement – it's fighting a terrorist organisation that thrives on bloodshed and chaos.

Hamas is not a liberation movement. It's a terrorist group, formally designated as such by US, EU, and many other nations. Its founding charter explicitly calls for the murder of Jews. On Oct 7, 2023, the world saw this ideology manifested in its most horrific form. That day – Israel's deadliest since the Holocaust – was one Hamas celebrated as a victory.

Let's be clear: We are determined to defeat Hamas and bring back our hostages. Israel is not at war with the Palestinian people. Israel is at war with Hamas. Israel does not seek to conquer or govern Gaza. In fact, Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, in the hope that Palestinians would build a peaceful, self-governing society. Instead, Hamas violently seized power in 2007, and since then has diverted every resource into building tunnels, stockpiling weapons, and launching rockets, while holding its own population hostage to its extremist goals.

Hamas is not only the enemy of Israel and democracies worldwide. It's a part of a radicalised Islamic movement that is destabilising many Arab states as well as countries

in Europe and South Asia. Israel's failure to eliminate Hamas will have terrible consequences for all of them.

Israel's military campaign is not driven by revenge or conquest. Its sole purpose is to ensure that another Oct 7 can never happen again. Today, 49 hostages remain in Hamas's captivity. Rescuing them is a moral imperative. But Hamas's tactics make it brutally difficult: it hides in hospitals, launches rockets from schoolyards, and stores weapons in mosques and homes. Its strategy is simple: maximise civilian suffering in Gaza to manipulate global opinion.

This reality explains why the war is taking time.



Many ask, "When will it end?" Israel could move quickly, but at the cost of countless civilian lives. Instead, the Israel Defense Forces act with caution and precision, slowing operations in order to target terrorists while sparing civilians as much as possible. No other military in the world takes such extraordinary measures to warn its enemies before striking, even at the expense of tactical surprise. But Hamas exploits this humanitarian concern by blocking evacuations, stealing aid, and forcing its people into the line of fire.

The toll is heartbreaking. Every civilian life lost, Israeli

Beyond symbolism | The PM's visit cannot be the end of the conversation. It must be the beginning of a sustained and sincere engagement. Centre must decide whether it will merely manage the crisis or resolve it. That means confronting hard questions: Can Manipur remain united without justice and reconciliation? Can peace be imposed without addressing the root causes of conflict – land, identity, representation, and autonomy?

There is also the question of accountability. Survivors of the violence continue to demand justice for killings, sexual assaults, and displacement. Prolonged imposition of President's Rule and a vacuum in local governance have also led to the weakening of trust in institutions and rebuilding it will require more than development packages.

Relief camps still house thousands, families remain separated, and the social fabric torn. Stitching it back together will require empathy, courage, and political will.

For the Kuki-Zo community, the visit was an opportunity to press their long-standing demands. For the Meitei community, it was a test of whether New Delhi truly understands their fears. For Manipur as a whole, it was a moment of reckoning.

Naga perspective | Then there is the third factor, Nagas, who form the other major community of the state. The United Naga Council (UNC), Naga apex body in the state, has distanced itself from the conflict but demands resolution of the Indo-Naga peace process following the Naga Framework Agreement signed between NSCN-IM and GOI in 2015. They also oppose border

fencing and scrapping of the Free Movement Regime, which they say threaten ancestral ties. Their concerns must be part of any peace roadmap.

Time to build the bridge | The road ahead is fraught. Any solution must be rooted in constitutional values, respect for diversity, and a commitment to justice. GOI must facilitate a dialogue that includes all stakeholders – tribal leaders, valley-based groups, civil society, and displaced persons. It must also ensure that development does not become a substitute for political resolution.

PM has taken the first step by showing up. Now he must follow through. Manipur does not need more promises. It needs a roadmap – one that leads not just to highways and hostels, but to healing and harmony.

The bridge to peace has been sketched. It is time to build it.

or Palestinian, is a tragedy. Israel recognises this and takes responsibility when mistakes occur. When IDF errs, it does not hide behind excuses – it investigates transparently and acknowledges its mistakes. When journalists were tragically killed in an Israeli strike on Hamas terrorists, Israel acknowledged its mistake, and opened an investigation. Hamas, on the other hand, deliberately blurs the lines by disguising operatives as reporters or humanitarian aid seekers, making it extremely difficult to distinguish between real journalists and those who use press vests as cover for terror.

Hamas leaders live in luxury abroad while ordinary Gazans pay the price for their leaders' decisions. Hamas trains children for jihad, starves its own citizens, and hoards aid. Its cruelty is not only towards Israelis, it's towards the very people it claims to represent. Hamas also weaponises perception together with its supporters: it launched an information war. Images of suffering circulate rapidly online, often without context, while Hamas's own crimes remain hidden. Israel is judged not by its intentions but by the distorted narrative that terrorists construct.

Some demand that Israel stop the war immediately. But stopping now would mean leaving hostages behind. It would mean allowing Hamas to regroup and attack again. It would mean condemning both Israelis, Palestinians and the region to a future of endless bloodshed. No responsible govt would accept such a fate for its people.

Those who advocate for peace must also recognise that Israel has offered compromises repeatedly. Five times, Israel has supported a two-state solution, and five times Palestinian leadership has rejected it – because too often, what they seek is not two states for two peoples, but one state without Jews.

The international community must be honest about who perpetuates violence and who seeks to end it. Israel remains committed to international humanitarian law, even while facing an enemy that systematically violates it. We will not apologise for defending our families, our homes, and our very future.

Sacredspace



Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been

given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion...Impossible is nothing.

Muhammad Ali

Safeguarding The World Within Us

Jug Suraiya

When we think of the environment we think of the world out there, and for the majority of us that world out there is of increasing concern because of the jeopardy it faces through our interaction with it.

In pursuit of what we deem to be progress, we have darkened the skies with the smoke of factories, our 'dark satanic mills'. We have poisoned the oceans and rivers with industrial effluents, garbage and oil spills. We have cut down forests and turned green woodland and field into arid desert.

We have even given a geological name to what we have done to this world outside by calling it the Anthropocene epoch, denoting an age in which human activity has adversely, perhaps irreversibly, affected entire ecosystems, resulting in climate change, extreme weather events

like floods and droughts, and wiped out whole species of flora and fauna at an estimated rate of 30,000 every year.

We have imperilled, perhaps beyond salvation, the outer world in which we live. But as we accord paramountcy to all efforts and rescue missions to save this world on which our own survival depends, it is imperative that we not overlook that other world, equally crucial to our existence, which is the world within us. That limitless landscape of the spirit, the internal environment of consciousness.

The outer world of the physical environment is an infinitely intricate web of interdependent relationships, each supporting and complementing all others. The greater the complexity and diversity of these interactive linkages, the richer and more resilient is

the environment. The fewer and less varied the interconnections, the more barren and sterile the ecosystem. Think a Sahara desert; think an Amazon rainforest. Which of the two is more life-supportive, more enriched and enriching?

The inner world of consciousness, the ecosystem of mind and spirit, is founded on the same principle of plenitude: the greater and more numerous the divergences it encompasses, the more rainforest-fertile and life-affirmative it is, in contrast to the sterile sameness of the Sahara.

The health of the environment, external or internal, is based on its capacity to absorb and sustain the heterogeneity on which it thrives; homogeneity leads to the barrenness of desolate wasteland.

In today's world diversity, both of the physical outer world and that of the inner



THE SPEAKING TREE

WELL BEGUN, STAY ON LONG JOURNEY TO HEALING IN MANIPUR

WHILE Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a call for peace and reconciliation between the warring Kukis and the Meiteis in troubled Manipur, Kuki lawmakers told him the best-case scenario was living together as good neighbours but never under the same roof. It conveyed the scale of mutual distrust ever since the 2023 ethnic riots. Before the clashes, Meitei government employees posted in the hills where Kukis reside could function as comfortably as their Kuki-Zo counterparts in the Meitei-dominated valley. Access to institutional markers, such as the legislative assembly, courts, and the lone airport in the Imphal Valley, was free for all communities and races. All that changed in mid-2023 when the violence resulted in ethnic cleansing on both sides. Kuki MLAs dare not go to the legislative assembly any longer, fearing threats to their lives. Modi was aware of the wedge when he spoke about building an ethnic bridge of trust. Ten Kuki lawmakers, including seven from the BJP, shared their thoughts with the PM through a joint memorandum. As things stand, achieving what the Kuki-Zo MLAs think is doable—both sides agreeing to live as good neighbours—would in itself be a very big deal.

Modi, motoring 64 km to Churachandpur from Imphal, as his helicopter could not take off due to blinding rain, came as a positive gesture, as the Kuki-Zos lined the streets to give him a warm welcome. The size of the development package announced for the Kuki-Zo region (over ₹7,300 crore) was significantly more than that for the Meiteis (₹1,200 crore), which did not go unnoticed. Announcements like the establishment of Churachandpur’s first-ever medical college have the benevolent potential for racial intermixing when things change for the better.

The PM, interacting with the internally displaced on both sides, some of whom broke down, gave an indication of how the scars of the violence are yet to heal. Modi said resettling them after their homes are reconstructed is right up on his to-do list. Going forward, making both sides equal stakeholders in the Manipur growth engine through innovative ideas and universal participation, and addressing demographic aspirations with full transparency, will be the balm for peace and rehabilitation. As Modi said, the story of Indian culture would be incomplete without the rich Manipuri culture.

TELANGANA HC DEFENDS DISSENT, UPHOLDS RIGHTS

EARLY, freedom of speech and expression is coming under attack with alarming frequency across the country. Most assaults are directed at common social media users who air opinions, more often than not, in language that is less than civil. Unfortunately, though they do not mean harm, many have faced the wrath of the powers that be. Against this backdrop, the recent verdict of the Telangana High Court in *Nalla Balu (2025)* is a grim reminder. It is time we find a way to protect our rights and ensure some semblance of civility in social discourse.

The case began with the arrest of a social media user sympathetic to the Bharat Rashtira Samiti, who posted critical comments against the ruling Congress. The court quashed the FIRs, finding the allegations—including incitement and public mischief—to be baseless. The court cited Supreme Court rulings and issued specific guidelines to prevent police abuse of power. The key legal point clarified is that criticism, even if offensive, is protected under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, so long as there is no intent or threat to incite law and order issues.

The court’s guidelines provide a common-sense approach. It is blindingly obvious that police must conduct an inquiry to verify the complaint and determine if the complainant is, in fact, the aggrieved person before proceeding further. And, any FIR could be registered for the alleged offence of seeking to promote enmity or public disorder if there is prima facie evidence. Most important is the court’s insistence that arrest cannot be the norm. The Supreme Court, in several rulings, including the *Shreya Singhal* case (2015), has pointed to a similar conclusion.

There are other aspects to consider. The judiciary noted that there is a need for the Centre or the States to develop legislation or guidelines on the use of social media. However, we are of the view that many victims post offensive content, carried away by the polarising stance taken by political parties or ideologues. The onus, hence, is on the latter to exercise restraint. And the police should not act to please their political masters. After all, we are no longer in the British Raj.

QUICK TAKE

DYING WITHOUT CARE

THE recent report of the Sample Registration System (SRS) 2023 shows 45.7 percent of deaths in Indian hospitals occurred without medical attention or were handled by untrained functionaries. In rural areas, the trauma compounds as people also die at home because hospitals are too far, ambulances are too late, and care is unaffordable. The numbers are a grim reminder of how fragile access to emergency healthcare remains and how timely care can save or at least ease patients’ final hours. This is a waste of life we cannot ignore. Healthcare must be brought closer, faster, and fairer, and public health departments must also track end-of-life medical attention as a development indicator.

THE peninsular states have achieved per capita incomes well above the national average, eliminated extreme poverty, and made laudable progress in human development. They are manufacturing and modern service hubs, with low-quality jobs increasingly outsourced to migrants from poorer parts of India. The peninsula needs a massive increase in productivity and growth in the size and employment-generating potential of the formal sector. A virtuous nexus of high wages and high productivity is the next aspiration.

This will require a significant increase in the volume and quality of higher education offered in the peninsula. Improving the quality of school education is a necessary priority; however, in the peninsula, there is every reason to simultaneously double down on higher education.

This focus on higher education is both achievable and essential. The peninsular states already have a foundation in quality private higher education institutions, such as medical and engineering schools at Suratkal and Manipal, as well as the evolution of GITAM University, Vellore Christian Medical College, and the Vellore Institute of Technology, among other pioneers. These institutions, along with newer entrants such as SRM University and Azim Premji University, offer a practical starting point for scaling up the quality of higher education to boost productivity.

This is a partial list of higher education institutions that have established an outstanding track record of delivering quality higher education. The success of their placement activities also demonstrates the employment ‘fit for purpose’ delivery of these universities.

These are not *babalog* universities. The students I teach come from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom are from tier three towns and rural areas. They are curious, eager to learn, and aware that their generation needs to struggle far harder than mine to survive in an increasingly fractious and partitioned global market. They have, through their higher education journey, seen only stagnation in entry-level salaries and a shrinking of economic opportunities in stark contrast to every generation that came to adulthood since 1991.

Even so, they have embraced three core ideas. First, that their economic future, and that of the country, is critically dependent on rapidly increasing productivity in services and manufacturing.

Southern stakeholders must jointly deliver the next phase of the peninsula’s development transformation—a productive and high-income society driven by prosperity & capability

HIGHER LEARNING, BRIGHTER FUTURE: NEXT SOUTH SLOGAN

RATHIN ROY

Distinguished professor at Kautilya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad; visiting senior fellow, Overseas Development Institute, London

PENINSULA



SOURAV ROY

Second, there is work to be done to reform the rotten and collapsing socio-economic ecosystem that we have bequeathed to them. Third, and most importantly, a successful career is a by-product of a holistic and well-rounded education, and it is key to building productivity-enhancing ecosystems.

As I have taught and interacted with students, educators, founders, and leaders in private university campuses across the peninsula, I see these three core ideas both internalised and embraced.

Doubling down on higher education is desirable because:

1. Public higher education institutions in the peninsula have atrophied, as have most in the rest of India. Most of them are now intellectual dead zones occupying desirable real estate, providing subsidised food and housing to those taking competitive exams. And political interference is throttling even the successful outliers.
2. Switching public money to funding school education makes fiscal sense. This need not mean obstacles for financially or socially challenged students—Azim Premji University provides a template for addressing societal, caste, and ethnic barriers to entry. GITAM offers significant means-tested scholarships. I have also worked on a model where every student finances their education through a loan to cover the entire cost of their education. Repayment is calibrated to the

EXPLAINING KARMIC REPERCUSSIONS

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

of Amba, the anger of Drona, the anger of Duryodhana, the anger of Draupadi, the anger of Ashwatthama, and, in a shattering finale, the brawling doom of the Vrishnis that marks the passing of the Krishnavatara and the end of the epoch.

As we read, we come to know Vyasa better, especially his high literary confidence. He does not hesitate to cast even his most virtuous characters in an ambivalent light, demonstrating that no human being is perfect. Karna, Yudhishthira, and Arjuna are striking examples of this. Conversely, Duryodhana has his positive moments, when he elevates the then outsider Karna to the king of Anga, disregarding his social status.

The middle of a war story, we hear the question: “What is the highest duty in the world?” and Yudhishthira’s profound answer: “To not hurt others is the highest of all duties”.

Charming events occur, as when Rishi Markandeya visits the Pandavas twice in exile, in the Kamyaka forest to the west of the Kurukshetra plain, and in the Dvaitayana forest on the border of the Thar Desert. Once, his visit coincides with Krishna’s.

The rishi is a great favourite of theirs since he is a good storyteller. They sit around him, and Krishna says, “Please tell us a story, tell us lots of stories.” It conjures up a vivid picture of Krishna, the Pandavas, and their followers seated around Sage Markandeya in a verdant grove, all listening to stories—touchingly different from the typical battlefield images and chocolate-box Krishna pictures that we are used to seeing in calendar art.

The stories told in the Mahabharata constantly shore up the concept of karma. There are also frequent utterances by the Pandavas that ‘it is all fate’ and ‘who can escape fate?’ Kunti laments, “*Bhagyavantamparasuyeta ma shooram ma cha panditam*”, meaning, “Only the lucky can prevail, not the brave nor the learned.”

Is there a way out of their understandably fatalistic view? Yes, there is, avers the epic. We have to wait, though, until that electrifying moment on the battlefield of Kurukshetra when Krishna imparts the Bhagavad Gita.

The most haunting passage for me is the passing of Krishna near the end, after he completes 125 years on earth. It is unbearably sad to read, but I read it nevertheless, assured of his eternal presence. My foremost takeaways from it are marvel at Vyasa, and the drained yet elated feeling of having completed an important journey into the heart of the human condition. If, at the end of reading the Mahabharata, we find that we were moved by pity and terror, and attained a valuable perspective on life, we belong to a very old family of countless *pitris*.

(Views are personal) (shebaba09@gmail.com)



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Anger is consistently identified as the worst destabiliser through story after story. Therefore, by removing oneself from anger, one’s karmic consequences may be reduced and may even be nullified, to break free of the endless cycle of birth

The longest and possibly the most popular *parva* in the Mahabharata is the *Vana Parva* or Forest Section, in which the Pandavas spend twelve years exiled in the forest. It contains many gems that have been explored by the performing and visual arts of India, for instance, the story of Nala and Damayanti.

Also, the episode of Yaksha Prashna is a gripping passage on the nature of life, in the form of a dialogue between Yudhishthira and his father, Yama, disguised as a Yaksha or nature spirit. In

MAIL BAG

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Stumbling G7

Ref: *Poor rich G7 and their third world troubles* (Sep 14). The G7, once symbols of stability, now stumble with debt, deficits and political turmoil—echoing the very ‘third-world troubles’ they scorned. Gun violence, leadership churn, and fiscal chaos exposes their tall claims. Arrogance and inaction have hollowed their strength, proving wealth without reform only magnifies fragility.

A Mylsami, Coimbatore

India-Nepal history

Ref: *Nepal’s search for ideological identity* (Sep 14). India has a deep connection with Nepal not just being the closest neighbour, but through our shared culture, history and spiritual heritage. It is our responsibility to come to its rescue by offering financial and diplomatic support to tide over the situation.

NA Joseph, Kottayam

Survival tools

Ref: *Getting the five elements right* (Sep 14). The column is educational and timely. Ayurveda also emphasises on ‘Pancha Maha bhootas’ which are very important for survival. Earth, water and air get priority attention for their protection and maintenance of their clean source. Without these, a healthy lifestyle or a healthy society would be a farce.

TN Manjunatha, Mysuru

Public fury

Ref: *India must support Nepal with empathy, embrace its youth* (Sep 12). The Nepalese ethos, where its youth turns fearless, calls for a deeper study. Why are rulers, unable to face public uprising, forced to flee the country? Every nation has to draw lessons from Nepal’s story.

Geetha B K, Kannur

Wellness shortcuts

Ref: *Bring to heal* (Sep 14). Fancy ‘wellness’ and feel-good quick fixes have increasingly been tagged to travel and holidaying. People must be cautious of wellness quick fixes. Only time will reveal their ill effects on the human body. Shortcuts to ‘wellness’ are notorious to turn out to be shortcuts to disease.

George Jacob, Kochi

Manipur delay

Ref: *PM’s big pitch for peace and reconciliation* (Sep 14). Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Manipur is a stark reminder of the government’s inordinately delayed response to the humanitarian crisis. The ‘double-engine government’ has failed miserably in restoring peace and the untimely intervention has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis.

Dileep D Anand, Alappuzha

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