

DECCAN Chronicle

16 FEBRUARY 2026

Govt, Rahul both need to tone down confrontation

Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, wrote Samuel Johnson. Those who cannot stand criticism and those who consider power a tool to silence opponents and critics shall use patriotism as a façade to hoodwink the larger population while they move against their opponents.

The BJP-led Union government has been demonstrating its irritation at Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi's criticism of the government and its actions. It has now put its full weight behind the substantive motion moved by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey calling for action against Mr Gandhi, including stripping him of the membership in the House, for his "anti-national statements". The motion, if admitted by the Speaker, will entail a motion in the House which the ruling alliance can get through as it has the numbers.

Of late, Mr Gandhi has been targeting the government for the Indo-US trade treaty which the governments say has been finalised. The Union government has been anything other than transparent in the matter: statements keep coming from the White House about the details of the deal and the Union government makes approving noises. The farming community in the country has been restive about the bits and pieces of information that are coming out about the deal. It apprehends that there will be provisions in the deal which could take away farmers' livelihoods as they cannot fight with the US farmers who have been at an advantageous position for several reasons, including the substantial government support, vis-a-vis Indian farmers. The government has been assuring them that agriculture and dairy are out of purview of negotiations but they are not convinced. It is a substantive issue, and Mr Gandhi has been taking up their cause, much to the chagrin of the ruling dispensation.

Mr Gandhi has raised the issue of the government position on the matter of border skirmishes with China in 2020. He questions the claims that there has been no Chinese incursion on the border and that the government has been fully on board. Mr Gandhi has been quoting from an unpublished book of then Army Chief Gen. M.M. Naravane which, inter alia, suggests that there was a lag in the response of the government to an emergent situation. Neither Gen. Naravane nor the government has denied the references in the book yet; the government has instead taken the position that the reference is not authenticated as it is from an unpublished book. The Delhi police has reportedly launched a multi-nation investigation into the leakage of the book, too.

The government can make a clean breast of the deal and assure the nation that the interests of its *annadatas* will be protected fully. It can also hold talks with the farming community and allay their fears, instead of making evasive and half-baked statements. Mr Gandhi can be legally proceeded against if he has broken some law with his statements on the border situation and the former Army Chief's book. However, it has chosen to resort to rhetoric instead, invoking patriotism and nationalism, and is angling to strip the Leader of Opposition of his membership of Parliament with the majority it commands in the Lok Sabha. The NDA has done it in the last Lok Sabha, and is spoiling to do a repeat of it in this House.

Substantive issues call for substantive answers and solutions based on fairness and a sense of justice, not substantive motions that can be decided based on who has the numbers. Invocation of nationalism and patriotism hardly help to address them.

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political leadership to an emergent situation. Neither Gen. Naravane nor the government has denied the references in the book yet; the government has instead taken the position that the reference is not authenticated as it is from an unpublished book. The Delhi police has reportedly launched a multi-nation investigation into the leakage of the book, too.

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Do states count freebies' cost?

The welfare versus populism argument rages on as ruling parties in states going to the polls lean on populism to garner votes. Tamil Nadu, one of the innovators who may even have set the ball rolling on freebies in the clash of the two Dravidian majors aiming for power through people's votes from the mid-1970s, not only announced a freebie of ₹5,000 a month for five months, from February to June 2026, for 1.31 crore eligible women but also put the money on the same day in their bank accounts.

The pre-emptive move was said to have been politically driven as the state suspected the Centre may try to deny the freebie by announcing the poll dates soon. The argument is, however, not about the mechanics of offering such an inducement for votes just before polls. It is about the desirability of populism that triggers a bribe in the garb of a hardship or living allowance.

When Bihar did this by paying some women ₹10,000 before the polls, the Opposition I.N.D.I.A. bloc parties cried foul, but when it comes to the states they rule, they do much the same. Of course, Tamil Nadu can afford to do it as its public debt — estimated to be near about ₹9 lakh crore which is just over 26 per cent of GDP — is well within limits set by the finance commission.

Before getting sucked into argument over the efficacy of such payouts, it must be said that the inducements are considered legal as the top court upheld the right of political parties to offer freebies while emphasising that they should be done responsibly. Since being responsible is a tough task for parties when facing the polls, freebies bring us back to the popular saying that we Indians are like this only.

The cost of freebies for some states is estimated to be as high as ₹96,000 crore or 2.2 per cent of GDP and which crowds out resources for economic and infrastructure besides leaving less for education and public health. But the benefit of direct transfer into women's accounts is considered a surefire vote catcher. As ever, the prospect of winning or holding power becomes supreme and trumps common sense. The Indian first-past-the-post electoral system becomes a convenient scapegoat.

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India-China relations go far beyond the border



Sanjaya Baru  
Sanjayovacha

Public discourse on India's relations with China has become obsessed with the border issue. The international relations and national security commentariat has monopolised much of it, sidelining scholars from the fields of society, culture and business. The present Chinese leadership has to accept a large part of the blame for this. The repeated incursions along the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC) since 2013 revived memories of the 1962 war in India.

The bilateral relationship took an unfortunate turn after that. Myopia in both Beijing and New Delhi has blurred the multi-dimensional nature of the long-term relationship.

The fact is that through the 1990s and early 2000s both countries were able to maintain peace and tranquility along the LAC and build a stable relationship. Travel and trade had increased as a result. Both are now once again trying to rebalance the relationship.

Thanks to this return to some sort of a *modus vivendi*, direct flights between the two countries have resumed. They now fly full with tourists and business persons. First-time visitors to China return home dazzled by the country's progress.

To enable Indians to secure a better understanding of China and of India's relations with it over the centuries, R. Gopalakrishnan and Nirmala Isaac have written a book, *Chanakya and Sun Tzu: A Business Lens on Trade, Thought and Travel*, that everyone travelling to China must read.

Gopalakrishnan is well placed to be your guide to contemporary China. As a director on the board of Tata Sons and chairman of Tata Auto Company Ltd, he first landed in the country in 2008 to visit a 100-per

cent Tata-owned company based in Nanjing. The Tatas have had a long, even if initially dubious, association with China.

From opium to information technology, the Tata foray into China has a long history. During British colonial rule the United Kingdom repeatedly failed to establish a trading relationship with China. They wanted Chinese tea, silks, porcelain and other exotic stuff, but the Chinese were not interested in buying anything from Britain. How then to forge a trading relationship without giving up too much silver and gold?

Britain found a way around this problem by getting the Chinese hooked on to opium. The opium was cultivated on plantations in India and transported to China. The Tatas were among the early Indian business families to get a share of this lucrative trade.

Bejan Dadabhoj Tata was the first to set up house, buying a villa in Shanghai in 1910. Jamsetji Tata followed in his footsteps, taking the trading relationship forward. The last time I met the late Ratan Tata was at the Boao Forum on Hainan island, China's answer to the Davos World Economic Forum, in 2018. He was proud of the century-old Tata association with China. Tata Consultancy Services has had a flourishing business in China.

Today, hundreds of business persons travel regularly to China, contributing to the growing India-China trade relationship. Little wonder then that as chief minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi chose to travel to China, and as Prime Minister he had three important summit meetings with President Xi Jinping.

If the present stability in the government-to-government relationship endures, the people-to-people and

**What is required is a change in mindset. A willingness to think of China as a rising, modern economy rather than merely as a suspect neighbour. Mindsets need to change in China too. Its elites' arrogance can be a dampener.**

business-to-business relationships can only grow. Many in India would then find Gopalakrishnan and Isaac's book a useful introduction to China. As a former corporate chief, Gopalakrishnan adopts a pragmatic view of the relationship, eschewing standard tropes that have become altogether familiar these days. He is not harking back to the tired old idea of "*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*", but lays out a framework for closer ties.

He advocates wider opportunities for Indians to learn Mandarin. On Peking University campus in 2011, where a Chinese translation of my book *Strategic Consequences of India's Economic Performance* was discussed, I met many Hindi-speaking Chinese students. India too needs an army of people across many professions who have a working knowledge of Mandarin. Gopalakrishnan and Isaac strongly advocate increased travel and trade and believe that Indian firms can in fact plug into Chinese supply chains and benefit from the China+1 opportunity.

More importantly, they draw attention to the learning opportunity in China. Very few in India are aware of the fact that 15 Chinese universities have made it to the world's top 100. The US has 36 in the top 100. India is yet to enter this list. China leads in several fields, most importantly the STEM fields — science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

China has much to offer in terms of policy experience with respect to agricultural reform and productivity, industrial regulation, urban development, civil engineering and railway modernisation. Chinese firms have built

some of the best highways and airports in the developing world. Chinese municipalities have established clean and green neighbourhoods. Urban architecture has much to show for itself in many Chinese cities.

In all these fields, including in maintaining heritage sites, museums and arts and crafts centres, China has demonstrated quality and capacity. Increased travel and professional contacts can help India benefit from China's experience. What is required is a change in mindset. A willingness to think of China as a rising, modern economy rather than merely as a suspect neighbour. Mindsets need to change in China too. The arrogance of its elites, even if justified by the record of the country's historic and meteoric rise, can be a dampener. Hopefully, a more confident China will learn to be more open.

To enable the growth of a more productive relationship between the two countries both require a more imaginative elite and a forward-looking political leadership. There was a time when a leader like Deng Xiaoping took the view that the rise of Asia would only be possible if both China and India rise together. Any attempt by one to disrupt the rise of the other is not going to help either.

The West will continue to dominate the world if China and India continue to spar. Asia's rise is contingent upon a cooperative relationship between both Asian powers. The fact is that the border question can easily be resolved if political leaders in both countries demonstrate will and exude self-confidence. It will require both countries to come to terms with ground realities and resist the temptation for scoring points.

In the past mistakes were made by leaders of both countries. One hopes that in future, indeed in the present, the leaderships can come together and craft a mutually acceptable solution.

*Sanjaya Baru is a writer and economist. His most recent book is *Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India*.*

LETTERS

**AP BUDGET**  
Andhra Pradesh finance minister Payyavula Keshav's presents the state Budget which has been so helpful to education and welfare (*FM presents AP growth Budget, Feb. 15*). Agriculture, power sector and transportation too got a boost. Hope the ₹3,32,205 cr Budget will help develop all sectors in the coming year.

**Chunduri Satya**  
Visakhapatnam

NEGLECTED NORTHEAST

The Northeastern states, otherwise known as Seven Sisters were never truly integrated with mainland India (*Cong. neglected NE, divided it, says Modi, Feb. 15*). There is no doubt that successive governments since Independence have neglected their development. For 11 years, the NDA government at the Centre under Prime Minister Narendra Modi also did precious little to alleviate poverty in those states. Now he is blaming the Congress alone for the backwardness of the northeastern state. On one hand the NDA boasts of surging economic growth but on the other, the common man continues to reel under abject poverty unable to earn a square meal per day due to unemployment. Whether the Congress was divisive or not, it has not done justice to the people who reposed faith in it during the initial decades of post-Independence era.

**Pranava Kumar V.**  
Vijayawada

CONFUSING DEAL

The recent Indo-US deal is strangely opaque and the government's veiled multiversions make it even more confusing (*US and Venezuelan crude oil hits India's refining sector hard, Feb. 15*). The trade deal is a trap for Indian farmers. First, soybean is not imported but soya oil is. Corn is not imported but DDG (distilled dry grain) is for cattle feed. The US increased import duty from 3% to 18% for Indian export even for agri produce. The US agreement with Bangladesh on reciprocal basis of US supply of cotton and import on converted apparels at 0% duty to the US would smash Indian cotton farmers and textiles industry. Apples, almonds, pista and pears and others imported at 0% duty will impact HP and J&K farmers. It is all out road rolling of farmers and a death warrant in disguise. This deal must be reversed.

**Buddha Jagdish Rao**  
Visakhapatnam

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Indranil Banerje

As we head for a brave new world, best & brightest in AI flock to Delhi

The most dramatic transformation in India is the change in attitudes towards technology. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, had written back in 1908, echoing his country's conservative mindset, that the railways and hospitals were necessary evils whose natural destruction he would welcome! Decades later, in the mid-1980s, when the government decided to widely adopt computers, the entire country rose up in protest. The year 1984 was dubbed the "Anti-Computerisation Year". Labour unions precipitated a wave of strikes across the country supported by several political parties, while Indians across the ideological spectrum claimed it would destroy employment, the economy and ultimately the nation. Technology was viewed as a peril.

The complete turnaround in attitudes since then is evident in the widespread adoption of digital technologies across all strata of society and across the country. Computers and modern technology, far from being undesirable, have proven to be huge job creators and a major convenience. Even AI or Artificial Intelligence is not viewed as a threat despite warnings about its potential to make many jobs redundant. Today, the cutting edge of technology is viewed more as an opportunity than a threat, with AI emerging as the centre of a brave new world that India is hurtling towards.

This trend is the underlying motivation for the India-AI Impact Summit 2026, scheduled for

February 16 to 26, 2026 in New Delhi. India seems to have fixed its gaze on cutting-edge technology and is preparing to thrust itself into the frenetic AI race that is transforming the globe like little else before it. And the world, for once, is noticing.

The Indian plan is ambitious: It not only seeks to build a formidable national AI ecosystem but also to involve other partners from the Global South to be part of a larger grid of inter-related AI networks. The idea is to pitch for a global AI environment where the developing world will not be left behind. To attract world players, the Delhi AI Summit organisers have come up with the slogan of "People, Planet and Progress", which talks about using AI for the betterment of humanity, inclusive growth and the safeguard of planet Earth.

The idea of humanity coalescing for the benefit of mankind as a whole is pretty seductive. Not surprisingly, if you are anyone in AI you got to be at the New Delhi Summit. The event organisers claim the event will see some 35,000 participants, including 15-20 heads of government, fifty or more international ministers, and over forty CEOs from major global and Indian tech companies. The big guns of AI, Sam Altman of OpenAI, Google's head Sundar Pichai, Nvidia chief Jensen Huang and Microsoft boss Bill Gates, among others, will be in attendance. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, French President Emmanuel Macron and Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will also attend.

The summit ties in with India's internal and very purposeful initiative, the "IndiaAI Mission", being implemented by the ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY), headed by minister of state Jitin Prasada, who points out: "What nuclear technology once was to the last century, AI is to this one." With that in mind, the Indian government has been racing to build its AI ecosystem in order to position the country as a key player.

The challenge was enormous given that India was not capable of manufacturing even the most basic semiconductors or computer chips; it had no mega data centres and no Indian company with AI capabilities. How on earth could it get its act together if it had neither the players, nor the stage and no script? Yet within a matter of a few years, the green shoots of the requisite ecosystem have begun to sprout.

The most dramatic has been the emergence of semiconductor manufacturing capabilities in the last two years. As of January this year, an estimated ten semiconductor manufacturing projects are coming up across six states, some of which are expected to come online this year.

The second spoke of the government's strategy is to encourage the establishment of mega data centres in the country. Last year, a slew of global technology companies, including Google, Amazon, Microsoft and DigitalGlobe, announced multi-billion-dollar investments in AI infrastructure and

data centres in India. The third crucial spoke connected with all these efforts is the chip design and software development environment. Indian government cash handouts require all companies, both foreign and domestic, to simultaneously invest in design capabilities in order to build a self-sustaining and composite semiconductor, data processing and AI ecosystem.

Tech leaders are generally bullish about India's potential: Nvidia's Jensen Huang predicts India's next generation will be the "back-office for AI delivery", while Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, believes India has the ability to "push the AI frontier forward", thanks to its human resources and rocketing AI adoption rates. Already, India is the second largest market for AI frontrunner ChatGPT, whose chief executive Sam Altman admits that India is an "incredibly important market" for AI.

While the AI Summit obviously aims to position India as a global actor in the AI and computing realm, it is at the same time trying to achieve something bigger. It is attempting to emerge as a leading voice in the development of AI and associated technologies in the Global South. It's a pretty long shot but worth a try. Should it succeed, the summit then would not merely be a celebration of Indian intent but a pivotal moment for the world as well.

*The writer is an independent commentator on political and security issues*



BUZZ WORDS IN AI



**LARGE LANGUAGE MODEL (LLM):** An LLM is a type of AI model trained on vast amounts of data (books, websites, articles) to understand and generate human-like language. LLMs power chatbots, writing assistants, coding tools and search summaries. Examples: Grok, GPT-4o, Claude 4, Gemini 2.5, Llama 4 and DeepSeek-R1.



**GENERATIVE AI:** AI that can create new content - text, images, music, code or video in response to prompts. It includes text generators (often powered by LLMs), as well as image models, video models, voice synthesis tools and music generators.



**USE CASES:** A 'use case' means how AI is applied in real-world scenarios, or simply, its practical impact. Common use cases could include fraud detection in banking, personalised recommendations on OTT platforms, AI tools in agriculture, analysing soil and weather data, healthcare diagnostics, and drug discovery.

**ALGORITHM:** A set of defined rules or instructions that tells a computer how to process data and make decisions. Think of algorithms as the building blocks of AI systems.

**AI GUARDRAILS:** Safeguards woven into AI systems to ensure they operate safely, ethically and within defined boundaries. They are designed to prevent harmful, biased, illegal or inappropriate outputs, and to align the system's behaviour with laws, policies and human values. Guardrails could be around content filters, safety policies, bias mitigation, among others.

**BIAS (AI BIAS):** Systematic errors in AI outputs caused by skewed training data, flawed assumptions or design limitations.

**AI HALLUCINATION:** When an AI system generates information that appears plausible and convincing but is factually incorrect or fabricated.



**PROMPT:** The input or instruction given to a generative AI system to produce a response.

**TOKEN:** A unit of text (word, sub-word, or character) that an AI model processes during training and inference.

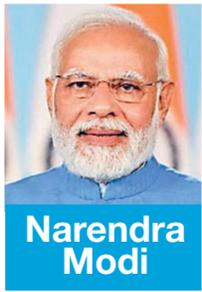
IN BRIEF

Top Putin aide to lead Russian team

**Moscow:** Russian President Vladimir Putin's senior aide Maxim Oreshkin will lead a large delegation for the AI Impact Summit being held in New Delhi from Monday. This (choice of sending Oreshkin) highlights a strategic push for AI collaboration between the two nations, a Kremlin source said.

# Viksit Bharat is near: Modi

## Underscores importance of AI in enabling India's rise by setting up data centres



Narendra Modi

Prime Minister of India

New Delhi, Feb. 15: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday hailed the latest Budget and a spate of global trade deals signed by his government as foundations for Viksit Bharat, and urged the private sector to step in "more aggressively" and "boldly" now.

In a wide-ranging interview with PTI, Modi blasted the UPA government for failing to achieve substantial trade agreements, and asserted that women will play the "most important role" in Viksit Bharat. He said political stability and predictability have restored investor confidence in India and that stronger manufacturing, services and MSMEs have enabled it to negotiate free trade pacts with 38 countries from a "position of strength."

He listed three top priorities for the next three decades — more structural reforms, deepening of innovation in technology, manufacturing and services, and simpler governance so that citizens and businesses can operate with greater ease and trust.

Modi underscored the importance of data centres. "When we think of technology, we often focus on what is visible, such as applications, platforms and devices. But equally important are the foundational layers that make all such things possible. Data centres are one such critical layer," he said.

Linking this to AI, the Prime Minister said, "The importance of this becomes even more apparent when we look at the domain of artificial intelligence. AI needs computing power and data-centre infrastructure. By expanding capacity today, we are laying the foundations for a thriving Indian AI ecosystem."

Recognising this potential, major investments have already been announced in this space by international and Indian companies in the recent past. "The tax incentives announced in the Budget are designed

to accelerate investment in this space, lower the cost of building advanced facilities and position India as a globally-competitive destination for data infrastructure. The result of this, too, will be a massive number of jobs for our youth," Modi said in the written interview.

Asked if he is satisfied with the progress made by India's Reform Express, he said "I must say that by temperament I am never fully satisfied."

"I believe public life demands certain constructive restlessness. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the scale of progress achieved in the journey of Reform Express."

He was asked if India is ready to take the moonshot for Viksit Bharat and was it a now or never situation that led his government to create a Budget that was not typically a 'Bahi Khata' document. "First of all I would respectfully say that none of our budgets has been made with an attitude of creating a run-of-the-mill Bahi Khataif one takes a closer look at my approach in the last 25 years it becomes clear that our work does not happen in bits and pieces."

The Prime Minister said there is a broader strategy, a plan of action and an effective implementation that reflects the 'whole of the nation' thinking, continuity of purpose and a long-term vision, progressively unfolding step by step, year after year. "So, this is not a 'now or never' moment born out of compulsion. It is a 'we are ready' moment born out of preparation and inspiration. This (2026-27) Budget reflects this yearning to become a developed nation."

In the written interview, Modi also said his government has used its years in office to plug "structural gaps left behind by earlier administrations", pursued bold reforms and laid the foundations for a developed India.

India has in quick succession concluded landmark trade deals with the European Union and the United Kingdom, securing sweeping tariff reductions and expanded market access for goods and services, while also

### WHY THE SUMMIT MATTERS

GLOBAL GATHERINGS - INCLUDING THE UK'S AI SAFETY SUMMIT AT BLETCHLEY PARK (2023), THE SEOUL SUMMIT (2024), AND THE PARIS MEET (2025) - PLACED SIGNIFICANT EMPHASIS ON FRONTIER RISKS, SAFETY GUARDRAILS AND VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS

INDIA IS WIDENING the lens to foreground AI's developmental impact and real-world applications that can drive economic growth, social inclusion and sustainability. In essence, People, Planet and Progress.



**THE KEY** message we want to send is that whatever happens with AI needs to be human-centric and inclusive. There needs to be democratic access to AI resources, and it needs to be done in a way where people are at the centre of this process," — S. KRISHNAN IT secretary.



INDIA IS the architect of one of the world's largest digital public infrastructures and is home to a fast-growing startup ecosystem.



BACKED by the IndiaAI Mission's push for compute capacity, datasets and skilling, the summit will signal New Delhi's strategy for harnessing Artificial Intelligence while balancing rapid innovation with appropriate safeguards.



GOVERNMENTS, captains of the global tech industry, researchers, startups, students and citizens from across the world will tune in to high-voltage deliberations for a peek into the future and what it would look like in the AI era.

I'm chasing the companies that make those servers that go sit in those data centres, the companies that make the entire air conditioning, the water-cooling system — the whole nine yards," the 43-year-old, Stanford-educated minister said.

—NARA LOKESH Minister for Information Technology (AP)

### BIG THEMES TO WATCH

7 thematic working groups, co-chaired by representatives from the Global North and Global South, will present concrete deliverables, including proposals for AI Commons, trusted AI tools, shared compute infrastructure, and sector-specific compendiums of AI use cases.

700 power-packed sessions planned over five days to address AI safety, governance, ethical use, data protection and India's approach to sovereign AI, including the development of indigenous foundation models for strategic sectors.

840+ Exhibitors, including governments, startups, global tech firms, and research institutions.

reaching an understanding with the United States to ease tariff frictions and deepen trade engagement. Together, the moves are seen as significantly improving access for Indian exporters in advanced markets and reinforcing New Delhi's push to integrate more closely with global supply chains.

"We now have FTAs with 38 partner nations, an unprecedented milestone in India's trade history. A remarkable feature of these trade agreements is that they span continents and include countries of varying economic strength," Modi said. "There is a new confidence in our nation.

Our national character has revealed itself even in times of different kinds of challenges and we are a bright spot of growth even in difficult global circumstances."

Calling productive spending a hallmark of his government, Modi said the Union Budget deliberately avoided short-term populism and instead channelled record capital outlays into infrastructure to drive jobs and sustainable growth. "Taken together, Budget 2026 is all about strengthening the manufacturing ecosystem, expanding value addition and creating conditions for skill and scale to come together.

The end result will be Aatmanirbharta and massive job creation." Modi said the next leap toward Viksit Bharat by 2047 will depend on how boldly Indian enterprise invests in innovation, builds long-term capacity and positions itself as a globally competitive, technologically confident and socially responsible engine of growth. He urged the dynamic private corporate sector to invest "more aggressively" in research and development, adopt frontier technologies, deepen supply-chain capabilities and compete on quality and productivity rather than on protected margins. "Policy can only

create the enabling framework. The next phase of transformation requires a decisive response from the private sector. Incentives and tariff preferences can catalyse growth, but durable competitiveness must rest on innovation, efficiency and scale."

"Equally, as productivity rises, the gains must be shared between workers, and owner-managers. Sustainable growth requires social legitimacy. Rising real wages, skill upgrading, and stable employment reinforce domestic demand and social cohesion, which, in turn, support long-term investment." — PTI

Some question whether data centres will create meaningful employment when up and running, but Lokesh rejected that. "Every industrial revolution has always created more jobs than it has displaced," he said. "But it has created those jobs in countries that have embraced the industrial revolution."

Lokesh argued that the jobs and economic benefits would more than compensate for the giveaway cost of land. He said the Andhra Pradesh government had accounted for the vast electricity and water demands for the energy-hungry industry, and would tap "surplus water" that drains into the Bay of Bengal to cool the massive data centres.

"It's a crime that so much water during monsoons goes into our oceans," he said. — AFP

# Riding AI wave: Start early, stay skilled, spend wisely

S. UMAMAHESHWAR | DC HYDERABAD, FEB. 15

The world is on the cusp of unprecedented change. Uncertainty has become the norm, certainty an exception. If artificial intelligence (AI) is threatening the jobs of white-collar employees, machine learning and robotics are making blue-collar workers almost irrelevant. Global protectionism and hypernationalism have dented the ability of established companies to forecast profitability with confidence. Nor can countries predict their macroeconomic indices with any certainty.

This outlook appears threatening for most people, including those having established careers. For youngsters who are about to start their careers, this scenario could sound almost apocalyptic. However, no apocalypse is insurmountable with proper planning and guidance.

Ahead of the four-day AI Summit being organised in New Delhi from

February 16 to boost the AI ecosystem in India, Deccan Chronicle tries to demystify the issues involved and try to solve them.

Artificial intelligence is like a tiger. If you try to fight it, it will devour you. So you need to ride it. But the question is: how can you ride a tiger?

### Here's how

#### FOR STUDENTS: EARLY START

Take baby steps towards immediately after Class 10. You will have nine years in the field by post-graduation. This is not new to Indian families, who have been early adapters, switching easily to mechanisation and the industrialised world, as well as, more recently, the tech sector. Try apprenticeships with local workshops or join local professionals as trainees on a part-time basis.

Another fact to remember is that AI is extremely good at executing tasks



that are predictable or logical. But humans are unpredictable. There are many things that AI cannot understand... yet.

Think Rolls-Royce. It's so prestigious and highly priced because nearly every component is handcrafted and hand-assembled. It takes more than six months to manufacture one Rolls-Royce, while most other cars are manufactured in a few hours. Handcrafting also makes every Rolls-Royce unique because each vehicle has a unique imperfection. AI cannot duplicate this.

Similarly, AI cannot be trusted with works that

involve complex emotions. For example, the moon is traditionally considered to symbolise beauty. But AI may not understand the logic behind it unless humans explain why they do so.

#### NO LEVERAGE

With the nature of employment in a flux, affecting job security in its traditional sense, avoid loans based on future income. Indians traditionally frowned upon indebtedness before post-1990s consumerism made debt-driven purchases fashionable. If youth have enough sav-

ings for basic necessities and no loans, insecurity about jobs will not consume their peace. A peaceful mind will be more productive and hence better equipped to execute work well.

Desist from borrowing for unproductive purposes, for marriage, social events, vacations, or buying things that can be postponed for a year or so. Don't take an education loan if you are not sure of topping the course. The brand name of a college or university alone no longer guarantees placement. Use online courses to learn at an affordable cost.

Don't take personal debt for unproven business models. Use debt only after revenue visibility and without risking household stability. However, a working capital loan to smoothen the functioning of an existing business started with your own money is fine.

#### UPGRADE AND INVENT

Investing in oneself is

always considered the best investment. This principle holds true even in the AI era. Invest in upgrading oneself constantly as AI continues to improve every day. As AI cannot replace all jobs, creative professions will see tougher competition. Young people who choose to become entrepreneurs must reinvent themselves and regularly upgrade their offerings. This principle applies equally, if not more, to those who have already started their careers. A static career or business is no longer an option, if you want to build an ambitious career. Otherwise, you will fall behind.

#### HEALTH AND INSURANCE

A healthy body and a peaceful mind are key to performing well. Adopt a healthy lifestyle and reduce screen time that does not add to your skills. Social media platforms pitch you products that you love to acquire and therefore actively push

you towards compulsive buying. One way to avoid compulsive buying is to reduce your time on social media.

Insurance is crucial to protect your income flow from unforeseen events. So health insurance and income protection insurance may be apt additions to safeguard income. If you have dependents, you must take a pure life policy that does not have a savings element.

For thousands of years, new skills and technologies have forced humans to adapt. The discovery of fire and the domestication of cattle converted humans from a nomadic lifestyle to a settled life. The complexity of life introduced markets and urbanisation. Industrialisation ended traditional occupations. Technology introduced new professions. Yet none of these have made humans jobless, and neither will the AI revolution. All that one needs is the foresight to adapt to change, which is inevitable.

# The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from  
the Friends of India -founded 1818

## After the Uprising

Bangladesh's latest election marks a dramatic return to competitive politics after years of political closure, but it does so through a mostly familiar cast of characters. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party has swept to power with a commanding majority, positioning its leader Tarique Rahman to take over as prime minister, barely eighteen months after mass, youth-led protests forced former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina out and ended the Awami League's long, increasingly authoritarian grip on the state.

The result is both a release of pent-up public anger and a reminder of how hard it is for Bangladesh to escape the gravitational pull of dynastic politics.

The scale of the BNP's victory reflects a clear public verdict on the Hasina era. After fifteen years in power, the Awami League had come to be seen less as a ruling party and more as a permanent regime, intolerant of dissent and reliant on coercive institutions to manage politics.

The Gen Z-led uprising that broke this order was not merely about changing governments; it was about reclaiming political space. In that sense, the election is a historic correction. Voters have used the ballot to close a chapter that many felt had become immune to democratic pressure.

Yet the transition is not as clean as the numbers suggest. The Awami League's exclusion from the contest casts a long shadow over the process, even for those who welcomed its downfall. Democracy is strengthened not just by the defeat of an unpopular ruler, but by the presence of credible competition. Add to this the mutual accusations of irregularities and the strikingly poor representation of women among candidates and the picture that emerges is of a system still in repair rather than fully restored.

Mr Rahman now carries a double burden. On one hand, he leads a government with the parliamentary strength to attempt serious constitutional and institutional reforms, including changes aimed at limiting executive overreach and strengthening judicial independence.

On the other, he is the heir to a political lineage that symbolises the very continuity many young protesters were rebelling against. His long exile and limited governing experience only sharpen the question: will he use this mandate to open up the system, or to consolidate a new version of winner-takes-all politics?

For India, the outcome matters in practical terms as much as symbolic ones. Relations with Dhaka had become closely tied to the Hasina government's preferences and calculations. A BNP-led administration will inevitably seek to rebalance that relationship.

New Delhi should read this not as a setback or windfall, but as a chance to anchor ties in institutions, trade, and people-to-people links rather than in the fortunes of any single leader.

Ultimately, the election is best seen as a beginning, not a conclusion. The fall of Sheikh Hasina and the rise of the BNP answer the question of who governs. They do not yet answer the more important one: whether Bangladesh can finally build a political order where power changes hands without uprisings, exclusions, or fear.

## Reframing Inflation

A quiet but consequential shift has just taken place in how India understands inflation. The latest retail inflation reading, the first under a revamped price index, is not merely another data point for economists to debate. It signals a change in the story policymakers, businesses, and households will now tell themselves about prices, growth, and stability.

At 2.75 per cent, inflation sits comfortably within the central bank's tolerance range. On the surface, this suggests a benign price environment, especially when paired with resilient economic growth. But the more important development lies beneath the headline number.

The consumer price index has been updated to reflect a new base year and, more significantly, a new picture of how Indians spend their money. The reduced weight of food in the inflation basket is the clearest expression of this shift.

For decades, food prices have dominated India's inflation narrative, often swinging the headline number wildly in response to weather shocks or supply disruptions. That era may now be receding.

This does not mean food prices have stopped mattering to households. They still do and deeply. But statistically, the inflation gauge is now designed to mirror a more diversified consumption pattern, one in which housing, services, transport, and digital subscriptions carry greater influence.

The immediate effect of this change is likely to be a smoother inflation trajectory. When the most volatile component of the basket carries less weight, the overall number becomes less prone to sharp spikes and sudden drops. This can be a blessing for monetary policy.

It allows the central bank to focus more on underlying demand pressures and less on firefighting every supply-side flare-up. A steadier inflation signal also makes it easier to communicate policy intent and anchor expectations among investors and consumers alike.

Yet there is a subtle risk here. By softening the statistical impact of food prices, policymakers may find it easier to look past stresses that ordinary households still feel acutely.

A spike in vegetable prices or cooking oil may no longer shake the headline number as much, but it will still strain budgets, especially for lower-income families.

The credibility of any inflation framework rests not only on technical elegance but also on whether it resonates with lived experience.

The broader message from the current data is that India appears to be in a phase of relatively contained inflation, with price pressures increasingly shaped by core components rather than episodic supply shocks.

Ultimately, this new inflation series is not just a statistical upgrade; it is a statement about India's economic self-image. If used wisely, it can help steer policy toward long-term stability and growth.

But it must be paired with a continued sensitivity to the everyday realities behind the numbers. Inflation, after all, is not only what the index says - it is what people feel when they step into the market.

# Water Budgeting

The future scenario on water in India is not encouraging. The World Bank in 2012 estimated that if current trends continue, in 20 years about 60 per cent of India's aquifers will be in critical condition. The Water Resources Group (2009) estimated that by 2030, water demand in India will grow to about 1.5 trillion m<sup>3</sup> against current water supply of about 740 billion m<sup>3</sup> unless effective actions are taken. These estimates call for a need to act effectively as shortage of water means poor quality of life, less food and lower economic growth

Water resources are finite, and are critical for life and economic growth. The per capita water availability in India has declined over the years and is likely to reach a water scarce situation in the coming days. Estimates show that water demand for various uses will far exceed the water supply in future. There is thus a need to address this situation by using the water budgeting approach.

A water budget is a hydrological tool based on conservation of mass, stating that for a catchment area, the difference between total water inflow and outflow equals the change in storage over a specific period. Key components of a water budget are various inputs i.e. precipitation, surface water inflow and groundwater; output i.e. evapotranspiration, surface water outflow and groundwater discharge, and change in storage which is the difference between input and output volumes. Thus, water budgeting is a management technique that treats water resources like a bank account calculating inflows (precipitation, supply) against outflows (uses, evaporation) to ensure sustainability.

Water budgeting promotes sustainability by helping communities to identify water risk, minimize losses and manage water resources efficiently; provides scientific and data-driven insights into water availability (surface water and groundwater) allowing for better long-term planning; optimizes agricultural productivity; allows farmers to match crop plan to available water, reducing the risk of crop failure during droughts; promoting efficient irrigation system (drift/sprinkler) in agriculture; improving drought preparedness, and monitoring recharge rate of groundwater.

Water budgeting is, however, a data-intensive approach and is technically challenging. For example, sometimes data on complex hydrological processes such as evaporation, transportation and infiltration are required, resulting in high implementation cost (efficient



systems used such as drip/sprinkler system). A water budget demands accurate data. Effective water budgeting depends on users' compliance requiring behavioral change of water users.

Water budgeting enables sustainable water management by promoting equitable, efficient and proactive resource allocation. Key advantages of water budgeting are: it helps in identifying water availability and water consumptions to plan for shortage and avoid critical deficiencies. It identifies wasteful resources and helps set water conservation targets reducing unproductive losses from evaporation or deep drainage; provides a scientific basis for managing groundwater and surface water helping policy-makers in water management; addresses increasing water scarcity caused by erratic rainfall and global warming by enabling better proactive management, and helps in maintaining ecosystem needs by limiting excessive extraction and ensuring sustainable levels of water uses.

If the water budgeting approach shows a water deficit, there is a need to improve water conservation and adoption of water demand-side management. If the water budgeting approach shows surplus water in a particular area, effective water management to use the surplus water in deficit areas should be undertaken. Water budgeting has the potential to become the cornerstone in India's transition towards sustainable development and Viksit Bharat 2047.

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Water budgeting is prevalent in many countries such as Austria, Brazil, Canada, Italy, the UAE, and the USA with respect to specific regions, river basins/public area.

Use of precipitation, evapotranspiration, runoff, surface storage, groundwater recharge, soil moisture etc. are adopted and information is gathered from remote sensing and other available data in these countries.

The water budgeting efforts in India are not new. In the Atal Bhujal Yojna programme (December 2019) of the Central Government, the water budget in seven states is being prepared by the community or Gram Panchayat which indicates whether a Gram Panchayat is water surplus or water deficit helping the community to utilise water judiciously and for future planning. In Kerala, the water budgeting efforts (2023) were carried out by CWRDM (Centre for Water Resources Development and Management) in collaboration with various departments in the state.

Water availability in Kerala is calculated based on rainfall, land use, and runoff coefficients while accounting for water supply. Water demand is estimated for domestic, agricultural, livestock, industrial and tourism needs, based on population and land use data.

The National Water Mission under Ministry of Jal Shakti promoted water budgeting (2018) as a data-driven tool for sustainable water management, focusing on balancing water demand and supply at local and basin levels, especially for agriculture, industry, and domestic use.

In November 2025, the Niti Aayog released a report on 'Water Budgeting' in 18 Aspirational Blocks highlighting the needs for context-specific adaptive strategies, particularly in regions marked by competing water demand, ecological vulnerability, and infrastructural limitations. The NITI Aayog, in association with various stakeholders, developed the water budgeting approach by using the 'Varuni App', employing scientific methods to understand block characteristics through appropriate use of spatial and nonspatial data sets. The components of water demand,

as developed by NITI Aayog, in 18 Aspirational blocks are: domestic water demand, livestock water demand, agriculture water period and industrial water demand. The components of water supply are calculated with surface run off, surface water supply, groundwater supply, and water source from outside geography.

For water budgeting efforts, all sources of water are measured through information on rainfall, glaciers, springs, rivers, water storage structures, wetlands, tanks, groundwater, coastal water and wastewater by estimating the availability, usability, supply, demand and consumption on an annual basis.

At the same time, usable water in various sectors such as forestry and wildlife, farm sector, industry, infrastructure, institution, drinking water and domestic use are based on past use. Water Budgeting at the State level is yet to be completed in India.

For water budgeting, the 'Varuni App', as developed for block level assessment by NITI Aayog, has the potential to be modified for application at village, GP, district, and state level. To begin with, water budgeting can be prepared on a pilot basis at all levels. And the information relating to budgeting should be placed in the public domain.

Second, water budgeting needs availability of technical data at various levels on various items. Accurate data availability on all aspects is a complicated task. Capacity building on application of 'Varuni App' at all levels is a must.

Third, there is a need to involve all stakeholders such as farmers, local bodies, functionaries, industry representatives, indigenous communities and the general public to foster stakeholder engagement for the water budgeting process, for participatory decision-making, and for addressing the agenda of policy makers.

Fourth, the Water Policy of the Central Government and the states, should incorporate the need and details for water budgeting at all levels. A time-bound action plan for the preparation and implementation of water budgeting at all levels should be the agenda of the Centre and States. There is a need to introduce water budgeting concepts in all national policies and programmes.



**S K SARKAR**  
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## The Korea Herald

## Uneven competition

South Korea's debate over retail regulation has finally caught up with reality. After more than a decade of treating large discount stores as a threat to be contained rather than a sector to be governed, the ruling Democratic Party of Korea and the government are considering relaxing overnight delivery restrictions on big-box retailers.

The shift is overdue. It exposes how rules designed to protect small merchants reshaped the distribution market in ways lawmakers never intended.

Under the Distribution Industry Development Act, large discount stores and corporate supermarket chains face strict operating limits, including suspending operations from midnight to 10 a.m. and closing twice a month.

These restrictions extend to online orders, barring overnight packaging and delivery work. Online-only platforms operate under such constraints. Coupang's

dawn and overnight delivery services expanded precisely during the hours when offline retailers were legally prohibited from operating. These rules were introduced in 2013 with clear intentions. Lawmakers sought to protect traditional markets, curb late-night commercial activity and limit excessive overnight labor. But as consumer behavior shifted toward e-commerce, the restrictions became a barrier to adaptation rather than a shield for small merchants.

Large discount stores were prevented from responding to demand that had already moved online. Consumers followed convenience, and regulation quietly redirected market power.

That reality is now shaping policy. At recent working-level meetings between government officials and the Democratic Party, discussions focused on revising the law so that e-commerce transactions

would be exempt from business-hour restrictions. Rep. Kim Dong-ah of the Democratic Party introduced a bill allowing large retail stores to carry out overnight packaging, shipment and delivery for online orders without reopening physical outlets.

The argument behind the change is pragmatic rather than ideological. Restrictions meant to restrain scale instead accelerated it by pushing consumers toward platforms with fewer obligations.

Coupang's rise illustrates the result. Its annual revenue now exceeds the combined sales of domestic large discount stores, a gap widened by years of uneven regulation.

The political backdrop matters. Until late last year, the Democratic Party defended extending business-hour limits through 2029, framing them as a minimum safeguard for small merchants.

That position softened as criticism of

platform dominance intensified. A major data leak involving tens of millions of users at Coupang underscored how lightly regulated some digital giants had become.

As one ruling party lawmaker later argued, meaningful oversight of platforms requires changing the distribution structure that generates their profits. Opposition has been swift. Labor groups and small shop owners have rallied outside the National Assembly, warning that allowing overnight delivery at large discount stores could further concentrate consumer demand and weaken local commercial districts.

Merchant associations argue that once logistics scales shift, neighborhood commerce rarely recovers. The main opposition party has gone further. Rep. Kim Sung-won of the People Power Party introduced a separate amendment last week that would abolish not only the overnight delivery restriction but also business-hour limits and mandatory closure days altogether.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

## Living in the past

Sir, The trade unions affiliated to the left (CITU, AITUC, UTUC) called a general strike on 12 February in protest against the newly formulated labour codes by the central government.

In the name of industrial strike, these unions tried to impose Bharat Bandh forcibly by converting the strike to a hartal.

Though our constitution allows strike as a conditional statutory right, the right is not absolute and it is subject to restrictions particularly with reference to essential services.

But in practice, on innumerable occasions including yesterday, these trade unions with their political masters, the Left, try to forcibly impose a bandh or a hartal with the intention



to paralyze public life.

With less than 10 M.P.s in Parliament and one state under its rule, the Left still dreams of paralyzing essential services throughout the nation. They succeeded in bringing essential services to a halt only in Kerala.

The Left is yet to come out of the past. It

should introspect on what the bandh culture has given in return.

Yours, etc., Dr. Purushottam Chattopadhyay, Kolkata, 13 February.

## Wrong path

Sir, The police is very cunning. They attack the weak and remain silent on the powerful. Now, Delhi Police has issued a notice to Penguin Random House India regarding the alleged circulation of former Army Chief Naravane's memoir.

Why? You could have confirmed the excerpt from the book that the Leader of the Opposition read in the House with the former Army Chief himself.

The police stated that an FIR has been registered over allegations of unauthorized

distribution of the manuscript, and the investigation is ongoing.

Had the book stated that the Indian Army had pushed the Chinese back 100 kilometers, would Delhi Police have filed a similar FIR against its publishers?

General Manoj Mukund Naravane served as the 28th Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army - from 31 December 2019, to 30 April 2022. If he has penned his memoirs, questioning them would be extremely dangerous.

If the ruling party believes that General Naravane has written a false account in his book, why not take action against him? Taking action against the Leader of the Opposition and the publishers alone cannot conceal the truth.

Yours, etc., Jang Bahadur Singh, Jamshedpur, 12 February.

# Gandhi's blueprint for self-transformation

RAJDEEP PATHAK

In an age addicted to instant success, curated identities, and often 'manufactured' truths, it is almost radical to return to a book that documents failure, doubt, moral struggle, and relentless self-examination. Yet, a hundred years after its first appearance, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, written by M.K. Gandhi stands not merely as a historical text but as a living ethical manual for humanity.

The year 2025 marked the centenary of the serialization of Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, originally published in Gujarati as 'Satya na Prayogo Athva Atmakatha'. The first chapter appeared in Gandhi's weekly journal Navajivan on 29 November 1925, and continued until 3 February 1929. What began as a series of reflective essays intended for ordinary readers has since become one of the most influential autobiographical works ever written – translated into nearly 50 languages and read across continents, cultures, and generations.

More than a personal narrative, Gandhi's autobiography remains a blueprint for self-transformation and moral courage, offering guidance in times when societies per se grapple with ethical confusion, political polarization, and spiritual fatigue. Unlike conventional autobiographies that celebrate achievement, Gandhi's work is striking for its humility and moral transparency. He famously clarified his intention at the outset: "I am not writing my autobiography to recount my achievements, but to describe my experiments with truth." This framing was unprecedented. Gandhi did not claim to possess absolute truth. Instead, he saw himself as a seeker, testing ideas through lived experience.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi penned the autobiography at



Sabarmati Ashram between 1925 and 1929, serializing 166 chapters in his Gujarati weekly Navajivan. The English version, translated mainly by Mahadev Desai, his personal secretary (with Pyarelal handling chapters 29-43, after Desai's death at Pune's Aga Khan Palace), appeared concurrently in *Young India* from 3 December 1925 to 7 February 1929.

The book covers his life from childhood until 1921. It captures the "Himalayan miscalculations," the struggles with carnal desire, the agonizing guilt over his father's death, and the evolution of Satyagraha in South Africa. By the time the serialization ended in 1929, Gandhi had provided the world with a new definition of power, which was "power not over others, but over oneself."

Historian Ramachandra Guha aptly notes that "Gandhi's autobiography is less a chronicle of events and more a laboratory of ethics." The late scholar and Gandhi's grandson, Ramchandra Gandhi, once noted that "The Atmakatha (autobiography) is not a record of a perfected life, but the laboratory notes of a man who treated his own soul as a crucible for the world's problems."

Navajivan Trust reports almost over 60 lakh of English and Hindi copies sold, with Malayalam (9.12 lakh) followed by Tamil (7.75 lakh). Translated into about 50 languages, it remains a bestseller, proving its cross-cultural appeal. Soham Patel, a former trustee of Navajivan, once attributed this to "its honesty... There is no autobiography where truth has been confessed to this extent... Gandhi has made all the confessions and his churning."

Scholars believe that for a century, the autobiography has acted as a bridge between Eastern philosophy and Western political thought. Historian Guha, in his extensive biographical work, highlights why this text remains a bestseller 100 years later. He writes, "Gandhi was a rare leader who operated in the light of day. By publishing his 'experiments' weekly, he was inviting his followers to judge him, to criticize him, and to grow with him. It turned politics into a collective moral quest."

For thinkers like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, the autobiography was not just a book. It was a tactical manual. King famously remarked that "From my background, I gained my Christian ethics; from Gandhi, I

gained my method."

In an age shaped by post-truth narratives, digital echo chambers, and the carefully curated illusions of social media, Gandhi's relentless commitment to absolute truth feels not antiquated, but radically contemporary. Today's youth face a world of immense technical connectivity but profound moral fragmentation. Gandhian thinker and late author Narayan Desai (son of Mahadev Desai) often emphasized that the autobiography was written for the common man. He argued that "The beauty of the 'Experiments' is that they are repeatable. Gandhi doesn't ask you to be him; he asks you to find your own truth with the same rigor he applied to his own."

Eminent Gandhian scholar and historian Tridip Suhrud observes that Gandhi viewed truth as "something one grows into through ethical labour." This makes the autobiography especially relevant for young readers navigating a world obsessed with outcomes rather than integrity.

Moreover, in today's world, where public discourse often oscillates between amnesia and aggression – forgetful of historical lessons on the one hand and intoxicated by outrage on the other – Gandhi's autobiography offers a rare philosophical anchor. The *Story of My Experiments with Truth* does not shout slogans or offer ready-made certainties. Instead, it slows the reader down, insisting on introspection in an age of instant reactions. Gandhi's candid acknowledgment of his failures, doubts, and moral missteps stands in sharp contrast to contemporary cultures of performative righteousness and ideological absolutism. By rooting politics in self-scrutiny and public action in private ethics, the autobiography reminds us that enduring social change begins not with the conquest of opponents but with the discipline of the self,

thereby developing the characteristics of humility, moral courage, and the patience to seek truth through dialogue rather than domination, for Gandhi had warned that "if we do not know how to govern ourselves, we shall not be able to govern others."

Educationist Prof. Krishna Kumar argues that Gandhi's autobiography should be read in schools not as hagiography but as "a text that teaches ethical reasoning through lived dilemmas." For younger generations facing anxiety, identity conflicts, and ethical overload, Gandhi's autobiography offers something rare – permission to be imperfect yet principled.

Gandhi did not claim moral infallibility. He modeled moral courage through self-correction. His life demonstrates that ethical living is not about withdrawal from the world but deeper engagement with it, armed with humility, restraint, and compassion. In an increasingly noisy world, Gandhi's quiet voice still carries weight. Not because it is loud or fashionable, but because it is anchored in 'lived truth'.

A century after its first publication, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* endures because it refuses to offer easy answers. It challenges readers to examine their own lives with honesty and courage. As British historian Edward Hallett Carr famously wrote, "History is an unending dialogue between the past and the present." Gandhi's autobiography sustains this dialogue, speaking to each generation in its own moral language. The book's journey into 50 languages – from Swahili to Spanish – proves its universal resonance. It has survived the decline of empires and the rise of the digital age because it addresses the one thing that hasn't changed in a century – the human conscience.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti.)

## 100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 16 February 1926

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

The shipbuilding returns for the year 1925 are far from comforting. The picture is one of gloom. British output fell by 360,000 tons as compared with 1924, and the yards were used only up to some 35 per cent of their capacity. The proportion of the world's output constructed in non-British yards has grown since the years immediately before the War. World figures show that Italy alone is improving her position, and it is worthy of note that of the 360,000 tons now under construction in Italian yards more than three quarters are to be propelled by internal-combustion engines. Motor-vessel tonnage is increasing. Great Britain produced 253,000 tons against its 87,000 of 1923, but the world figure for 1925 was 812,000 against the 222,000 of 1923. The British outlook is not bright in any department.

## News Items

### BENGAL MINISTERS

## PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION TO GOVERNMENT

Mr. Tarit Bhushan Roy has submitted the following resolution for consideration at the session of the Bengal Legislative Council commencing this week:—"This Council recommends to the Government that His Excellency the Governor be advised not to appoint Ministers during the life of the existing Legislative Council."

### INDIAN NAVY

## LEGITIMATE DEVELOPMENT OF BOMBAY MARINE

(Special Cable.) London, Feb.

The formation of an Indian Navy says the Sunday Observer is the proper and legitimate development of the Bombay Marine. The Honourable East India Company was as well served by sea as by land. There is every reason why modern India should support a squadron on the level of efficiency with her most famous land regiments, as the British mercantile marine has good reason to know she has an apt and hardy sea-faring population.—Copyright.

### ADMIRALTY ECONOMY

## BIG SAVING OF PUBLIC MONEY

(British Official Wireless.) Rugby, Feb.

The First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. W. C. Bridgeman, speaking at Torquay last night, said the Admiralty economics to be submitted in the Navy Estimates shortly would not be sufficient merely to cover the whole cost of the new construction programme, but would save the taxpayers more than two millions besides. Practically all of the economies were devised by his advisers at the Admiralty and settled by agreement with the Treasury. Any point on which they did not agree was referred to somebody else to arbitrate. Stories of disagreements between the Admiralty and Treasury could be completely disregarded.

### WOMAN'S INJURY

## DISCOVERY IN CALCUTTA HOTEL

Mrs. Bienvenido Martinez, wife of the Cuban Vice-Consul in Calcutta, was admitted to the Presidency General Hospital on Sunday night suffering from a bullet wound in the left shoulder. The injury is not serious. Mrs. Martinez, who has been in Calcutta for a considerable time, lived with her husband at the Grand Hotel.

### LORD READING

## HOME RUMOUR OF CHANGE OF PARTY

London, Feb.

Another political sensation was caused yesterday owing to the report that the Earl of Reading, after his retirement from the Viceroyalty, would leave the Liberal Party for the Conservative. Interviewed by the Daily Graphic, Viscount Erleigh said he could only regard such a report as an invention.—Reuter.

## IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

# What is the central principle?

How many of us have felt frustrated and unfulfilled in our work and yet lacked the gumption to seek another kind of work? How many more of us have felt disheartened and disappointed in our current life – home, family, beliefs, surroundings – but have shrunk from the prospect of making a radical change?

Leo Tolstoy was in his sixties when he found himself in a tortuous midlife crisis. His faith, in the Russian Orthodox Church, was no longer meaningful to him. More important, his whole lifestyle seemed shallow and meaningless to him. He studied world religions, translated the gospels, learned to make shoes, wore peasant clothes, wrote theology and preached pacifism and abolition of private ownership of land. These passionate explorations led to his late and last novel, *Resurrection*, written over ten years, as he was living like an ascetic, and completed just ten years before his death.

*Resurrection* begins with a dramatic, pivotal event. Dmitri Nekhlyudov, a nobleman, is a juror in a murder trial. Astonished, he finds the accused harlot to be Katyusha Maslova, who was an innocent protégé of his aunt ten years earlier, whom he had seduced and left impregnated. Dmitri has the traumatic realization that his irresponsibility had reduced Katyusha to prostitution and had



Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

eventually brought her to this catastrophe. Deeply penitent about how he had wrecked a young woman's life, Dmitri resolves to make amends.

Following an intense mental and moral struggle, Dmitri visits Katyusha in prison and gets to know her fellow prisoners and hear their horrific stories: their long and unjust sentences, confinement in dungeons without reason, torture and beatings without cause, their helpless suffering without any recourse. Dmitri begins to realize that beneath his gilded, aristocratic world lies a huge, corrupt, miserable underworld where cruelty is common and

suffering is stringent. Men die of thirst routinely, women are raped.

The experience changes Dmitri radically. He abandons his property, giving it to his tenants, and follows Katyusha in her arduous journey to Siberia where she has been sentenced. He bravely chooses the life of a penal community. He offers to marry Katyusha, but she turns him down, saying, "Once you got your pleasure from me, and now you want to get your salvation from me." She marries another prisoner, but Dmitri continues in Siberia, a resurrected human.

*Resurrection* is a strong, sharp, sturdy novel that flinches little in drawing a brutal contrast between

the superficial and comfortable world we choose to live in and the real and brutal world around us that we prefer to disregard. Tolstoy just won't let us escape the contrast and shut our eyes to the unjust, unkind reality surrounding us. It awakens us mercilessly to the hypocrisy that encases our comfortable life.

But *Resurrection* – I prefer the title other translators have chosen, *The Awakening* – is also a story of love and loyalty, of Dmitri, a loving person, who never flinches from his loyalty to his old love and Katyusha who declines his offer of marriage because she must stay true to her love.

When people talk of Tolstoy, they always refer to his unequalled masterpieces, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, but I have a special partiality to *Resurrection*, a later discovery, for it seems to capture Tolstoy's hard-won later-life wisdom and insight. It tells me to look around me and observe what is less obvious. So many of us are like the Dmitri who went naively to a prostitute's trial. We need a nudge to be like Dmitri who emerged from an unjust trial to a brighter horizon.

A book is not worth reading if we are not prepared to let it change our life a little bit. I can't imagine anybody reading this remarkable book immune to its shattering question: is your life what you

want it to be? Our life, unquestionably, is never perfect, but are we steering it in a direction closer to what is worthy or meaningful for us? What are the criteria by which we decide our life's worth or meaning?

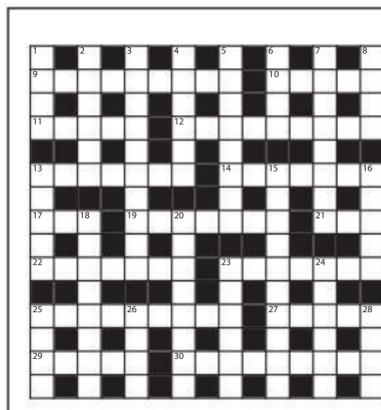
People we know, our friends and associates, often talk admiringly of celebrities. Do we want celebrity or fame, so that scores of anonymous people recognize us? Many talk enviously of the wealthy, their large mansions and impressive yachts. Will wealth give us the satisfaction and peace that have so far eluded us? One does not, like Dmitri, has to give up all of one's possessions, but one must reckon with the truth that things that we have sought so eagerly haven't given us the fulfillment we have forever sought.

Like Dmitri, we all have to ask what is the principle that might give us an inkling of satisfaction and guide us on the road to tranquility. Tolstoy gives us a simple clue:

"If once we admit that anything can be more important than a feeling of love for our fellows, then there is no crime which we may not commit with easy minds. We think there are circumstances when one may deal with human beings without love. But there are no such circumstances."

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

## Crossword | No. 293377



### Last Saturday's Solution

PARASITE CHORUS  
A O T R M O A P  
UNNERVE APOSTLE  
L E E M L D C  
SMEW BRILLIANT  
W A T T U R A  
HUNCHBACK MIMIC  
I A N E O L L  
TIGHT TURQUOISE  
E E H B N R S  
HARVESTED LEEK  
O R A R U A  
UNKEMPT INCLAS  
S I O T L K L L I  
ELDEST PLAYOFFS

### ACROSS

- 9 See 13 Across
- 10 Cheek smuggling in ecstasy at low price (5)
- 11 Clown Launcelot covering two bachelors in slime (5)
- 12 Imagine this clue starts out as cryptic (9)
- 13/9 Much else shattered with fragment for 23 Across at birth? (7,5,4)
- 14 Ogre unyielding in pastoral setting (7)
- 17 Tread boards in leading parts at Criterion Theatre (3)
- 19 MP needs support entering global alliance: plenty given! (7)
- 21 Learner driver needing two wheels for convenience? (3)
- 22/28 Oz character cooked hot fish outside before storm (7,4)
- 23 See 25 Down
- 25 Father over street going on to raise nipper (4,5)
- 27 Creature initially employed in Crosby? (5)
- 29 Opener in difficulty to collect duck (5)
- 30 Snakes haul back potentially poisonous fungus (9)

### DOWN

- 1 Scorer getting runs after live game's start (4)
- 2 Letter from Greek grips old boy with a fear (6)
- 3 Health check is family matter (5,5)
- 4 Coercion has Don going round the bend (6)
- 5 Possibly badger new man in East End residence? (8)
- 6 Monkey scratching bottom sees rook (4)
- 7 Yours truly at social event supplies food item (6)
- 8 Eastern prince in odd places – that's a long story (4)
- 13 Married woman initially detecting crime (5)
- 15 Cat on brass perhaps making bull fiddle (10)
- 16 Doctor Who finally given papers for automation (5)
- 18 Move round bed to corner a rat (8)
- 20 Continuously feed speaker port (8)
- 23 Cake served with a drink in Burgundy's centre (6)
- 24 Stasi moved to hold American author (6)
- 25/23A Jefferson's First Lady with drug an inebriate performer (4,7)
- 26 According to report virus was airborne (4)
- 28 See 22 Across

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



## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

## Documents of statecraft

Service stories enrich public debate and enhance our understanding of society, politics and international affairs. Encourage their publication

For a manuscript that has technically never seen the light of day, *Four Stars of Destiny* appears to have had an outsized impact. The unpublished memoirs of former army chief, General (retired) MM Naravane, first roiled Parliament for a week, resulting in the Prime Minister not being able to reply to the debate on the President's speech — the first time this has happened after 2004. Then, it created grounds for a bizarre investigation by the Delhi Police that is hunting down how copies of the manuscript found their way on to social media. Now, it appears to have pushed the government into considering a surreally long cooling-off period for officials in positions of power before they can author books. This newspaper reported last week that the government may consider introducing a cooling-off period of 20 years for senior officials in positions of power, including military officers, before they can author books after retirement. The controversial book appears to have come up at the Union cabinet meeting last Friday, and several ministers were of the view that there must be a cooling-off period after retirement for people who have held positions of power to write a book, the report added.

While no formal order on the 20-year cooling-off period has been issued yet and the government has not commented on it one way or the other, the proposal is misguided and an overreaction. It will stymie the still-nascent culture in India of powerful actors writing to explain to the public their actions and responses when in positions of responsibility. Such memoirs and books, however one-sided, have contributed significantly to our understanding of global events such as wars, international relations, statecraft and the thinking of powerful nations. These books are a valuable window into a justifiably opaque and closed-door decision-making system that not only enrich public debate but also enhance our understanding of society, politics, and international affairs.

A protracted cooling-off period threatens to stymie this debate and create a vacuum in our understanding of how nations behave. Instead, to avoid unseemly controversy, the government should consider streamlining the approval process and making it transparent, avoiding situations where a ministry can sit on a book for over two years — as happened with the Naravane memoir — without a decision. Instead of a blanket (or in-effect) ban, irritants should be sorted out on a case-to-case basis. And cooling-off periods should instead be mooted for judges or bureaucrats taking up positions (political or corporate) with potential conflicts of interest immediately after retirement.

## Retrieving lost ground in ties with Bangladesh

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader and Prime Minister (PM)-designate Tarique Rahman's invitation to PM Narendra Modi to his swearing-in in Dhaka, along with leaders of several regional and friendly nations, is a welcome gesture that points to a new beginning and a possible recalibration of bilateral relations. The move follows New Delhi's own outreach to the BNP in recent months, including external affairs minister S Jaishankar's participation in the funeral of Rahman's mother, former premier Khaleda Zia, and Modi's phone call to Rahman immediately after his victory in the general election last week. Given PM Modi's prior commitments, Speaker Om Birla will be representing India at the swearing-in ceremony.

But New Delhi and Dhaka will do well to schedule an early meeting of the two leaders so that the recent momentum gets transformed into proper policy pivots and the normalisation of ties after a particularly rough patch. Numerous issues need to be urgently addressed, including visa facilitation, especially for patients, resumption of cross-border trade, connectivity, and the renewal of the Ganga Water Treaty so that the two sides can regain ground lost over the past 18 months, largely due to the short-sighted actions of the interim administration led by Muhammad Yunus.

Rahman has said his government's foreign policy will be shaped solely by the interests of Bangladesh and its people, pointing to his desire to balance relations with China, India and Pakistan. The BNP has also outlined plans to revive the Saarc, which is not a priority for India. But Bangladesh's interests are not necessarily against Indian concerns and Rahman's ascension may just be the fresh start both countries need.

## After polls, resetting Delhi-Dhaka relations

India's reaction to the BNP win has been swift and unreservedly positive. Expect India to work with the Tarique Rahman government to restore the relationship that was broken under Muhammad Yunus

The February 2026 election in Bangladesh will go down in history as one of the most consequential for many reasons, but one among them will be the absence of the Awami League in it. The election was free and fair, but not inclusive. While the Awami League is to blame for its predicament, it is for the people to pronounce their verdict on its record, and the democratic way to do this is through the ballot. The decision to keep the Awami League out was taken by a cabal of individuals lacking constitutional authority. The disenfranchisement of the party in this round does not mean its demise, just as the problems faced by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami in the past did not lead to theirs.

Having said this, we also need to accept that the best is the enemy of the good. In a perfect world, Bangladesh would not have come to this

pass. Its record of holding, or rather lack of, regular, free, credible and inclusive elections and constitutional transfer of power, is well known. All parties are guilty of repeated assaults on democratic institutions and norms. Accusing India of being responsible for Sheikh Hasina's excesses may be expedient politics, but it does not solve the problem. In fact, the implications of such assertions are even more disturbing from a Bangladeshi point of view. Is it the suggestion that Dhaka can be run from New Delhi? Or is it being suggested that India should intervene in the internal affairs of Bangladesh? It is for Bangladesh, and Bangladesh alone, to come to terms with its past and deal with it.

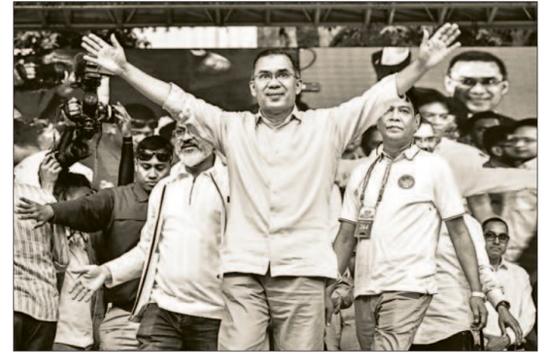
It is no surprise that the idea of reform was central to the run-up and during the election. The BNP has a new face. So does the Jamaat. The students emerged as a new political force. The Awami League is under pressure to reform. The July Charter and the referendum contain a detailed package of constitutional reforms. All this is good and welcome. Yet the road ahead is uphill and laden with the baggage of history. India can and should assist in this journey in any way it can, given the high stakes involved.

BNP leader Tarique Rahman has to prove that his 17 years in London have made him a changed man. The onus lies on the BNP to show that it

has moved beyond the kleptocracy and sponsorship of ISI-backed terrorism, insurgency and extremism of the past. Will one dynastic culture be replaced by the defecation and perpetuation of another dynasty? How will the political opposition be treated, even if it is the Awami League? These are some of the questions that will determine whether the break from the past is real this time.

The good news about the Jamaat is that it too felt the need to distance itself from the ignominy of its role in the 1971 Liberation War. Even though its core hardline, fundamentalist ideology remains intact, the arrival of a new leadership is noteworthy. The reform of institutions will only be as successful as the parties want and allow them to be. Given the nature of the electoral verdict and the legal authority that has come with it, the ruling party will have its own views about which constitutional reforms it will push. These will be different from the opposition Jamaat, which will take a long-term view to advance its prospects, which it sees as bright.

The BNP's strong showing, after having been in the political wilderness, with a leadership under siege, and cadres in disarray, pitted against a well-oiled Jamaat machine, backed by Muhammad Yunus and the West, is significant. Its filling of the political vacuum created by the Awami League's absence is a testament to the nature of Bangladeshi society,



India's redlines are well known to those who matter in Dhaka. Within those, there is ample room for advancement of the bilateral relationship. AFP

and particularly of the young voter. It is an assertion of Bangladeshi nationalism. If this is a step towards resolving the identity debate within the country, this is good news for Bangladesh and for India. It is equally significant that despite a most favourable atmosphere, the Jamaat was not able to secure a majority. Its vote share is estimated at 32%, which is significant but not what could have been. It has, of course, won the highest number of seats since 1971. The Yunus-backed National Citizen Party was expectedly swept away.

The BNP's tasks are cut out. It will be faced with strong opposition inside Parliament and the Awami League outside.

Where does this leave India and its relations with Bangladesh? India has critical interests in Bangladesh. The elections have opened the door for rebooting of the relationship and picking up the threads from we left off. It is most significant that the official Indian reaction to the BNP victory was swift and unreservedly positive, with direct involvement of the Prime Minister. This signals intent. We can expect

India to work with the Tarique Rahman government to restore the relationship that was broken under Yunus. The issues ahead are challenging, as are the spoilers. But that has always been the case, including during the Hasina period. India's redlines are well known to those who matter in Dhaka. Within those, there is ample room for ambition and advancement of the bilateral relationship. The India-Bangladesh relationship is a saga with no full stops.

India has been dexterous in managing political transitions in Afghanistan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. After Bangladesh, the next test for India's neighbourhood diplomacy will be Nepal, which goes to the polls on the back of the Gen Z revolution. The new alignments are an opportunity for India to reclaim its rightful primacy in the region, which is, at the very least, driven by the reality of geography.

Pankaj Saran is convenor, NatStrat, former deputy national security adviser, and former Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh. The views expressed are personal

## Placing people at the heart of the AI story

Two hundred twenty thousand public registrations, 1,400 unique speakers, and 300,000 engaged participants — these numbers are only indicative of the scale of the India AI Impact Summit that will be hosted in New Delhi, over February 16-20. Approximately 500 pre-summit events were hosted within India and across the world. For days on end, television channels have highlighted the impressive list of AI leaders that will be reaching Delhi for what is nothing less than a striking AI carnival. From Sam Altman to Dario Amodei to Yann LeCun — most major names and firms in the AI universe will be present. This includes an impressive set of representations from across the Global South. Twenty-odd heads of State, close to fifty ministers, and thousands of CEOs and entrepreneurs from around the world will all be part of the blitz.

It is easy to get swept away by these dazzling numbers and the star cast of speakers. Yet, what is equally important is the symbolic and pragmatic value of India hosting this summit for the present and the future of what Artificial Intelligence (AI) actually means for people, the planet, and progress. These are the three *sutras* that have served as the guiding principles for all seven working groups, a set of expert engagement groups, the summit agenda, and much else that will inform the main outcomes of the summit.

The India AI Impact Summit is the fourth in a series of Global AI Summits that began at Bletchley Park in the UK in 2023. Former British Prime Minister (PM) Rishi Sunak started this process. The aim then was to arrive at a "shared understanding of risk" of AI. Some of this was achieved. A declaration was published that underlined the need to "identify AI risks of shared concern" and "build risk-based policies" for individual countries. It kickstarted the creation of national AI Safety Institutes. India created its own institute a little more than a year ago.

Six months after Bletchley, and with the view to keep the momentum of global cooperation going, the Republic of Korea hosted the AI Seoul Summit. The outcomes, again, focussed on safety. Sixteen top AI companies made voluntary commitments on safety. Ten countries launched Safety Institutes. Yet, amongst many in India and large parts of Africa, there was an intensifying sense that developed countries' hypnosis with the threat of AI, over-focussed on risks.

The productive gains that AI can bring to the developing world was the question that the majority was asking in just about every symposium and workshop held with representa-

tives from Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world in attendance. The conversation on the benefit of AI had not been mainstreamed yet. The doomsdayers had the pen, and the majority were in the minority. It was only a year ago, in France, that the balance began to shift. The third global gathering was fittingly titled the AI Action Summit. It was co-chaired by PM Narendra Modi.

As Ann Bouverot, the French special envoy who ran the Summit, put it, the aim was to "move past the science fiction aspect of AI to demonstrate its tangible applications". The political needle, ever so slowly, began swinging in the direction of use cases. The fascination with what large language models (LLMs) could do with supernatural computing capabilities led to a conversation on how AI can actually help humanity. On stage in Paris, PM Modi provided a clear articulation of what this swing ought to be about. "Governance," he made plain, "is not just about managing risks and rivalries." "It is also," he underlined, "about promoting innovation, and deploying it to the global good." The focus turned to what AI is doing, and could do, for people. It is turned to impact. The India AI Impact Summit is, in many ways, the strongest collective expression of the need to focus on people.

Over the last six months, public events, closed-door discussions, and parleys between government officials from across the world have had little choice but to address the importance of impact. Global CEOs fixated on frontier models, with a cult-like craze for creating superintelligence, and pouring fortunes into compute, were persuasively confronted with a question they had to address: How does all this add up for the lives of people across the planet?

The techno-political needle has shifted the focus to people. Safety and risks matter, of course, but what has been made clear in India's approach is that these are not all that matters. Leading academics and inventors who are in a frenzy over their creations were actually, and literally, forced to consider the beneficial effects of AI.

Companies got it fast. And they moved faster. Global engineering teams between the Bay Area and Bengaluru were in conversation with those in India, building applications for farmers, teachers, and doctors. The outcomes of these discussions will be on full display at the expos that might just be the most exciting part of the summit. Two Indian firms have also launched AI tools with a focus on Indic languages and rural dialects.

In sum, the news cycle is likely to be shaped by announcements on inward investments and massive names in the world of AI. But the real story of the India AI Impact Summit is that it has firmly placed people at the heart of the global discourse on AI. How does AI actually change lives is the central question of the week. Which is why, apart from big firms, key names in the Small Island Countries grouping and those across Africa are attending a summit in the heart of the Global South. They are not coming only to listen to the likes of Altman and Amodei; they can do that on YouTube. They are coming to build a bridge for South-South cooperation. They are coming for their people.

Rudra Chaudhuri is a vice-president at the Observer Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal

{ HILLARY CLINTON } FORMER US SECRETARY OF STATE



HT

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



## Echoes of past distrust in US trade deal debate

Last Thursday, when the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, was criticising the government in Parliament, I was reminded of Manmohan Singh's historic 1991 reforms budget speech. It was July 24, Singh, introducing the budget, said, "Time has come for India to rise as a great economic power". His concluding statement was, "No power on Earth can stop an idea whose time has come".

Singh was trying to rouse hope among the people, who were apprehensive as the doors of the economy — shut for decades — were being unlocked. The mood in Parliament was pessimistic. Two months earlier, the government led by Prime Minister (PM) Chandra Shekhar had sold 20 tonnes of gold to the Union Bank of Switzerland with a buy-back pledge. Then, upon assuming charge, the government led by PV Narasimha Rao mortgaged 47 tonnes to the Bank of England. The news had dampened the spirits of ordinary Indians.

Many sections within the political spectrum and the public were uncomfortable with the reforms. Some thought India would decline the way Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But, the last 35 years are testimony of the success of these reforms — India has become economically so strong that, in 2009, we bought 200 tonnes of gold from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Today, our country is one of the biggest buyers of gold in the world. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who succeeded Narasimha Rao after two years of political instability, not only persisted with the reforms but also gave a big push to it. Economists call it India's economic continuity.

Thanks to the 1991 budget, many Indian companies emerged as global conglomerates. Competition grew within the country and trade, long deemed a no-go zone, became the go-to vocation for a large number of the country's youth. Now, the Modi government has brought a unique balance between vision, speed and execution. As a result, India is now the fourth-largest economy in the world.

Bitterness and toxicity returned in 2008 — India had signed a nuclear deal with the US, and the Left parties withdrew their support to the ruling coalition. But within hours, Mulayam Singh Yadav came to the beleaguered government's rescue. At that time, Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader Prakash Karat bristled, "We won't let India

be subservient to US imperialism. This deal links India's foreign policy to the US military interests." The BJP's Lal Krishna Advani echoed his sentiments. He said, "This deal will make India US's junior partner. We can't leave our strategic interest at the mercy of Washington." But Singh remained unfazed. He said in Parliament, "I am not here to sell my country. This deal will end India's nuclear isolation and provide us with clean energy". He wasn't wrong, and the biggest proof is the present government's fresh nuclear energy deal with the US.

Since the India-US trade deal was inked, the same stale arguments are floating in the national discourse that have been debunked earlier. The Lok Sabha adjournment on Friday is a testimony to the fact. Between 1991 and 2008, we saw many such showdowns. The only difference was the ones who were accusing are the ones in power and those who were being judged now sit in judgment as opposition.

The basic trade framework decided with the US has been elaborated point by point by commerce minister Piyush Goyal. The PM and other senior members of the cabinet have made it clear that no compromise has been made and the interests of the farmers, labourers and Indian traders are protected. Still, the din continues.

One should never assess a sovereign country on the basis of personal like or dislike towards its current ruling dispensation. There are still hundreds of thousands of people alive in our country who were forced to eat tasteless PL-480 wheat during 1965-66 that was used as poultry feed in the US. The same generation undertook the Green Revolution to restore the nation's self-respect. Similarly, when the foreign banks came to India and foreign car brands appeared on Indian roads, the same arguments were given by the naysayers. Indian banks did not shut down. Nor did Indian car-makers go bankrupt.

We Indians have been working towards reclaiming our lost glory from the time India won independence. There have been numerous failures but, equally, there are hundreds of things to be proud of. Before slipping into a slanging match, we must not forget that we the people of India are the source of our government's strength.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal



## Poll sop

The ECIs proven bias on model code seems to have forced T.N.'s hand

When welfare measures to uplift under-privileged sections are deployed as a political tool in an election year it raises the question whether it is an instance of affirmative action or merely a cynical device that plays out as a poll-eve incentive. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's surgical action of crediting ₹5,000 each in the bank accounts of over 1.31 crore women beneficiaries of the *Kalaig-nar Magalir Urimai Thittam* (KMUT), triggers exactly this uncomfortable thought. The KMUT, in operation since September 2023, envisages a monthly direct transfer of ₹1,000 "rights grant" recognising the dignity and contribution of women heads of families. Notably 32% of its beneficiaries are SC/STs. Citing political and legal apprehensions that the scheme, which is being projected as a rights-based social entitlement and not as a populist freebie, could be suspended prior to the Assembly election, Mr. Stalin chose to give it the force of a political multiplier by disbursing ₹3,000 each for February, March and April in one go. He also introduced a novel "summer assistance" of ₹2,000. Mr. Stalin's concerns about the possibility of the scheme being stopped after the announcement of the election schedule are not unwarranted. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has not been consistent in its interpretation of what constitutes a violation of the Model Code of Conduct. A recent precedent for voter incentivisation emerged during the 2025 Bihar elections, when the JD(U)-BJP coalition deposited ₹10,000 each to one crore women under the *Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana*. The ECI turned a blind eye to what was widely seen as an attempt to buy votes for the ruling coalition with funds from the exchequer. Previously, in Tamil Nadu, the ECI had suspended a cash support scheme for farmers (2004) and distribution of free colour television sets (2011). Adoption of double standards by the ECI when it comes to adjudication of such issues has become common.

The overall outgo from the exchequer on a single day exceeded ₹6,550 crore including an unplanned expenditure of ₹2,620 crore for the summer component. Offering cash benefits through government schemes on poll eve does not guarantee absolute voter loyalty. But it certainly places the ruling party in the pole position to politically leverage the exchequer. Unless the ECI plays fair in the implementation of the model code, it is difficult to fault such measures by those in power. At least, in the case of Tamil Nadu, this was an on-going scheme since 2023, and only the newly added summer assistance raises a political stink. But, in the context of what the BJP-led coalition did in Bihar, this is innocuous.

## Hot air

Donald Trump is trying to turn back the clock on environmental issues

As part of his continuing assault on science, U.S. President Donald Trump revoked a foundational guideline of the American environment regulator that allowed it to control the transportation sector's emission of greenhouse gases. The repeal of the 'endangerment finding' was the final, formal blow following a series of actions by the U.S.'s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in weakening Obama-era administration fuel economy and greenhouse gas (GHG) standards for vehicle model years 2021-26 and loosening fuel efficiency norms. The 'endangerment finding' emerged after the US Supreme Court's 2007 decision, in *Massachusetts vs EPA*, which held that greenhouse gases qualify as "air pollutants" and required the EPA to determine whether they endanger public health or welfare. In December 2009, the EPA concluded that six greenhouse gases – including carbon dioxide and methane – "may reasonably be anticipated to endanger" health and welfare, drawing heavily on assessments by the IPCC and U.S. scientific bodies. The EPA's action had a seismic impact on the American automotive industry, setting in motion the first federal greenhouse gas standards, set in 2010, for cars and light trucks (2012-16), later extended through 2025. Manufacturers accelerated fuel-efficiency improvements, invested in hybrid systems, lightweight materials, and, eventually, battery-electric vehicles. Regulatory credit markets emerged, benefiting firms such as Tesla, Inc. and resulting in the popularity of electric vehicles globally, including in India.

Though indirect, the stricter greenhouse gas emission norms also influenced a world-wide shift away from the 'small car' to the mid-sized Sport Utility Vehicles (SUV) with car markers improving the SUV's emissions profile. Mr. Trump seems to believe that doing away with the EPA regulations will revive America's 'gas guzzler' era, boost American manufacturing jobs, and somehow tie in with his administration's rediscovery of Venezuelan oil. These are pipedreams. Auto-manufacturing production lines today are optimised around electrification, hybridisation and emissions controls. With China dominating most of the production value chain, it is unlikely that auto-manufacturers, who have invested over a multi-decadal horizon into clean vehicles – and with the intention to export to countries where emissions norms are only getting stricter by the day – will change tack to a regress. At best, the norms will be a speed bump to electric vehicle rollout and could win Mr. Trump some brownie points with his voter base. The real danger lies in automakers in India citing such regulation as a pretext to weaken fuel efficiency standards. Although India's standards do not yet connect climate goals with cars, the domestic automotive sector should view them as a lodestar.

# Bridging a divide with an 'Indian Scientific Service'



**P. Ragavan**

is a coastal ecosystem researcher with 15 years of research and field expertise on mangroves and seagrass

India's post-Independence service rules were designed to ensure stability through generalist administrators – an approach that was essential for nation-building. However, governance has since become increasingly shaped by science, technology, and environmental challenges. As scientists joined government service, they remained governed by rules created for a different era. This mismatch has limited the effective integration of scientific expertise into policymaking. Unlike many advanced countries with dedicated scientific cadres, India lacks a specialised framework for scientific governance, making the case for separate scientific service rules increasingly compelling.

**A paradox – administrator and scientist**  
Civil services recruitment is highly competitive, reflecting the rigour of the administrative system. Scientific careers, however, follow an equally demanding but different path – drawing from a smaller, highly specialised pool shaped by years of advanced education, research and peer review rather than a single examination. Within government, administrators receive structured training aligned with governance roles, while scientists are often placed in diverse technical portfolios without comparable frameworks for role-specific training, career progression, or clear alignment of authority and professional safeguards.

Scientific inputs in policymaking are often commissioned for immediate needs – such as legal cases or regulatory decisions – making research time-bound and narrow. A stronger approach would support continuous, long-term research that anticipates emerging challenges, allowing decisions to be guided by evidence and foresight rather than urgency.

Until science becomes a regular partner in governance rather than a reactive tool, its full potential to improve policy and public trust will remain underused. Thus, most scientific research is not specifically designed to improve the effectiveness of existing policies or to meet the future needs of countries in shaping policy change.

As India's responsibilities expanded into technically intensive sectors, environmental protection, climate change, oceans and coasts, public health, disaster management, nuclear safety, biotechnology, space science, and artificial intelligence, scientists became indispensable to government functioning.

Yet, instead of creating a distinct institutional framework that was suited to scientific work, scientists were largely absorbed into the existing administrative system. They continue to be governed by conduct rules, appraisal mechanisms, and hierarchies that were originally

A dedicated scientific cadre is needed to strengthen governance as science, technology and environmental challenges become central

designed for general administrative functions. Over time, this has limited the ability of scientists to exercise their professional role fully within governance structures. While organisations such as the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and a few others have separate rules for recruitment, assessment, and promotion, they continue to be bound by the Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1964, a framework designed primarily for administrative governance rather than scientific independence.

**Administrative rules are not neutral**  
Service rules shape behaviour and culture. While civil service rules stress discipline and neutrality, scientific work requires questioning assumptions and presenting evidence even when it challenges policy. Without frameworks that accommodate this, scientific inputs remain advisory rather than fully integrated into decision-making.

Scientific progress depends on continuous inquiry, testing of evidence, and honest assessment of risks and uncertainties. In governance, this translates into the ability to flag ecological risks, technological limitations, or long-term consequences in a transparent manner. When scientists are unable to formally record or communicate such assessments within institutional processes, their role risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Science that cannot question policy is not science. It is a decoration. Effective governance requires mechanisms that allow scientific assessments to be placed on record, even while final policy choices remain with elected authorities.

Many countries, which includes France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States have created distinct scientific cadres within government, with tailored service rules, career paths, and professional protections. These systems strengthen governance by ensuring transparent, independent scientific input into policymaking. For example, U.S. Scientific Integrity Policies protect scientists from political interference, require transparent documentation of advice, and prevent suppression or alteration of research findings, ensuring that policies are guided by credible evidence rather than political convenience.

India's situation is distinctive. Despite strong scientific institutions and highly trained professionals, government scientists often have limited institutional authority relative to their expertise. Their inputs may not always carry formal weight in decision-making processes, particularly in technically complex sectors. This can result in cautious communication, limited documentation of uncertainty, and an over-reliance on science during crises rather than as a continuous input into policy formulation. A

governance system that does not fully utilise its scientific capacity risks long-term policy weaknesses. India's aspirations, to be a leader in climate action, environmental stewardship, public health, and technology, require institutions that value scientific evidence alongside administrative efficiency. What is needed is not additional committees or ad-hoc advisory bodies, but structural reform that clearly defines the role of scientists within governance and provides appropriate institutional safeguards.

The creation of an Indian scientific services, or ISS, offers a constructive way forward. The ISS could function as a permanent, all-India scientific cadre working alongside existing civil services. Scientists would be recruited through rigorous national-level selection and peer evaluation and placed within ministries and regulatory institutions as integral participants in decision-making. Separate scientific service rules would protect professional integrity, enable transparent recording of scientific assessments, and clarify the distinction between scientific advice and policy decisions. The ISS is not intended to replace administrative systems, but to complement them. Administrators ensure coordination and execution; scientists contribute evidence, risk assessment, and long-term perspective.

### A potential framework

A possible structure for an ISS could include specialised cadres such as the Indian Environmental and Ecological Service, Indian Climate and Atmospheric Service, Indian Water and Hydrological Service, Indian Marine and Ocean Services, Indian Public Health and Biomedical Service, Indian Disaster Risk and Resilience Service, Indian Energy and Resources Service, Indian Science and Technology Policy Service, Indian Agricultural and Food Systems Service, and Indian Regulatory Science Service.

India has built strong scientific institutions. The next step is to integrate scientific expertise more directly into governance structures. The need for an ISS is no longer theoretical. It is a practical and timely reform to strengthen evidence-based policymaking and build more resilient governance for the future.

Under the current political leadership, India is steadily moving beyond its colonial legacy and building a confident new India. In this spirit, an ISS would be a forward-looking reform – much like the transformation of the Indian Civil Service after Independence – strengthening a science-driven administrative system that is aligned with India's national aspirations and global ambitions.

*The views expressed are personal*

# The UAE-India corridor is sparking a growth story



**Badr Jafar**

is Special Envoy of the United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister for Business and Philanthropy

Something remarkable has happened in the economic relationship between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). When the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed in 2022, both sides had set a target of \$100 billion in bilateral trade by 2030. That milestone was reached five years ahead of schedule. In January this year, leaders set a new target of \$200 billion by 2032. Few economic corridors in the world today are moving with the speed and ambition of this one.

### The scale and direction

The numbers tell part of the story. Non-oil trade between the two countries grew nearly 20% last year to reach \$65 billion, demonstrating that this partnership has moved well beyond its energy origins. UAE entities have invested over \$22 billion into India since 2000, while Indian companies have invested more than \$16 billion into the UAE. Nearly five million Indian nationals live and work in the Emirates, forming its largest diaspora community and the human backbone of a corridor that now supports over 1,200 flights a week between the two countries – one of the busiest air routes on earth.

But what excites the most is not just the scale. It is the direction. This corridor is being reshaped by advanced manufacturing, financial services, technology, and logistics. Reliance Industries has partnered with TA'ZIZ on a \$2 billion-plus investment in low-carbon chemicals manufacturing in Abu Dhabi. Ashok Leyland has relocated its electric bus production from the United Kingdom to the UAE. Larsen & Toubro has been selected as preferred contractor for one of the world's most ambitious solar-plus-storage projects in Abu Dhabi. Indian banks, technology firms, and health-care companies are building real operational presence across the Emirates. These are not tentative first steps. They are

confident long-term industrial commitments. Investment is flowing with equal conviction in the other direction. DP World has committed an additional \$5 billion to Indian infrastructure, expanding its already extensive network of ports and logistics parks across the country. Emirates NBD's acquisition of a majority stake in RBL Bank represents the largest single foreign direct investment in Indian banking history. ADNOC has signed long-term LNG supply agreements with Indian Oil Corporation Ltd and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited worth billions of dollars. Mubadala has deployed over \$4 billion across Indian health care, renewables, and technology platforms. Abu Dhabi Investment Authority became the first sovereign wealth fund to establish a base in India's GIFT City.

### It is for the long term

What underpins all of this is trust built over decades, reinforced by human connections, and supported by a policy architecture – the CEPA, which eliminated tariffs on roughly 90% of tariff lines, the 2024 Bilateral Investment Treaty, and now a strategic defence partnership – that gives businesses the certainty to make long-term bets.

The ambition is now extending into third markets. Bharat Mart, currently under construction in the UAE, will serve as a wholesale hub for Indian goods targeting Africa, West Asia and Eurasia, aiming to help double India's exports to these regions. India and the UAE are also exploring joint digital infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives across Africa. The corridor is becoming a platform not just for bilateral exchange but also for global reach.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as the next major frontier for this corridor. India this week hosts the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi (February 16-20, 2026) – the first global AI summit held in the Global South. It is a powerful

The UAE-India corridor is driving growth, technology and strategic global expansion

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### 'Welfare' concerns

Pre-election welfare announcements targeted at specific voter groups, particularly when timed strategically close to election dates, raise important ethical and regulatory questions. This political template, pioneered during the tenure of former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Ms. Jayalalithaa, and subsequently witnessed in several States – Odisha, Maharashtra,

Bihar and now Tamil Nadu and West Bengal – now appears to be shaping campaign strategies across the country. If such practices become the norm, they could blur the line between genuine welfare policy and electoral advantage. Therefore, it may be time for the Election Commission of India (ECI) to undertake a review of the Model Code of Conduct to ensure clarity, fairness, and a level playing field in

elections. Whether the ECI is prepared to address this evolving challenge remains to be seen.

**S.R. Patnaik,**  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

### Microplastic warning

There is no doubt that the Madras High Court has delivered a significant and timely judgment (Tamil Nadu, "Water, salt, and sugar packs must carry warning on presence of micro, nanoplastics: Madras

HC", February 15). By directing the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to require warning labels on packaged water, salt, and sugar regarding microplastic contamination, the High Court has taken an important step toward consumer awareness and public health protection in India. However, a crucial question remains. Who will

determine the permissible limits of microplastics in food products? Studies have detected worrying levels of microplastics even in seafood. Clear regulatory standards, backed by scientific assessment, are needed as time is running out.

**H. Panicker,**  
Mulakuzha, Chengannur, Kerala

**Linguistic concerns**  
India's linguistic diversity risks being undermined by

the growing use of Hindi in official names and central schemes. A recent example is the renaming of the Executive Enclave as "Seva Teerth". This trend risks marginalising non-Hindi speakers and creating the impression of India moving toward a Hindi-only national identity.

**Benci Jerald B.R.,**  
Chennai

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

## A common framework to build trust in AI in Asia

Artificial intelligence (AI) holds extraordinary promise for addressing globally persistent challenges such as improving public health outcomes, expanding access to education, and boosting productivity while respecting human rights. However, across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the wider Asia-Pacific, AI-driven transformation is unfolding unevenly. Decisions about safety, bias, accountability, and social impact are often made far from the communities most affected by them. With these contrasting developments, it is clear that the gains of AI will only be realised if AI systems are trusted by users, developers, regulators, and society at large.

Without trusted AI ecosystems, even the most advanced AI systems risk rejection by societies, resistance from governments, and misuse by certain entities. Enabling trust is a challenge since AI ecosystems are transnational, in terms of global data flows, global interdependence on the hardware, dispersed infrastructure supply chains, skewed supply of global talent, and the absence of common cybersecurity practices securing AI systems. For many developing countries, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, this means becoming consumers of AI systems over which they exercise little influence.

### Differing agendas

Recognising this, countries have come up with national AI policies attempting to create a conducive ecosystem for responsible AI development. However, their agendas differ, owing to their technological capabilities and resources. South Korea wants to retain its memory chip dominance within the AI supply chain. Singapore, as stated in its policy, aims to become the "pace-setter" for AI governance. China aims to lead the global AI governance efforts by respecting the sovereign



**Arun Teja Polcumpally**

JSW Science and Technology Fellow, Asia Society Policy Institute, New Delhi

control of the state within the borders. India looks to upskill its IT workforce and take advantage of its expanding digital market, while Nepal aims to establish itself as the provider of energy-efficient compute infrastructure.

Amidst these differing objectives, the AI policy and governance frameworks of Asian economies emphasise one common principle: building trust among stakeholders. For example, India announced its AI Governance Guidelines last November, anchoring trust as the foundation of AI development and adoption. South Korea's AI Basic Act, which came into force on January 22, 2026, aims to establish a foundation for trustworthiness. The UN Secretary-General's AI Advisory Body has called for shared understanding, common ground, and common benefits in AI governance.

To meet that objective, a common framework is required that measures and strengthens trust in AI ecosystems across Asia. Such a framework should reflect regional realities while remaining interoperable with global norms, encompassing cybersecurity practices, bias and risk mitigation, institutional accountability, and policy preparedness.

A trusted AI ecosystem in Asia rests on the interaction of several foundational layers. At its core are trusted datasets – a real-time, high-quality, and representative data infrastructure that reflects Asia's linguistic, cultural, and social diversity – increasingly anchored in Digital Public Infrastructure. This must be complemented by resilient AI infrastructure, including reliable access to compute, energy, and cloud resources that can withstand geopolitical and supply-side disruptions without undermining broader socioeconomic activity. Equally critical are AI skills and public awareness, encompassing both advanced technical talent pipelines and widespread societal literacy that enables responsible

adoption and productivity gains.

Trust is further shaped by a country's leverage on the global AI value chain, particularly its access to semiconductors, critical minerals, and manufacturing capabilities that determine the stability and predictability of AI development. Proportionate AI governance is essential to balance innovation with accountability – tackling risks such as misinformation, deepfakes, and liability – without disrupting data flows, hindering AI development, or deterring investment. Such governance institutions must operate within global frameworks, such as UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, and consider ISO 42001/42005 standards for AI management. Finally, cybersecurity underpins the entire ecosystem, safeguarding AI systems against both AI-enabled threats and attacks. Together, these layers provide a foundation for measuring trust in AI ecosystems and for guiding policy choices

### India's opportunity

As AI adoption accelerates across Asia, the region faces a choice. One pathway is to accept the fragmented governance that reinforces existing asymmetries. Another is to establish a shared framework that ensures technological progress and translates into inclusive human development. When the AI value chain is global and interdependent, India is particularly well positioned to lead this with its approach to AI governance. Characteristics such as techno-legal solutions that simplify compliance help establish governance mechanisms, balancing AI innovation with safeguards for individuals and society. India's AI Impact Summit offers an opportunity to advance the establishment of a shared framework that measures trust of AI ecosystems in Asia. It aims not to minimise AI's risks, but to build the trusted ecosystems necessary to realise its promise.

A shared framework that ensures technological progress and translates into inclusive human development is the need of the hour for Asia

## We need fiscal prudence during elections

Welfare should be accountable and targeted, not just election-time largesse

### STATE OF PLAY

**T. Ramakrishnan**  
ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

Fiscal prudence never seems to take precedence during elections in India. Last week, this was demonstrated yet again in Tamil Nadu when Chief Minister M.K. Stalin surprised 1.31 crore women covered under the Kalaigalar Magalir Urimai Thogai (KMUT) – a universal basic income scheme for poor women – by transferring ₹5,000 to each of them.

The amount included ₹1,000 each for the months of February, March, and April, along with a 'special summer assistance' of ₹2,000. The 'special summer assistance', the first of its kind in the State, drew appreciation from the allies of the DMK and criticism from the Opposition. Mr. Stalin also said that in the event that his party retained power in the Assembly elections, likely to be held in April, the government would increase the monthly amount to ₹2,000.

At one stroke, the Tamil Nadu government incurred an expenditure of ₹6,550 crore. Mr. Stalin's move comes at a time when the DMK has been accusing the Centre of being biased against Tamil Nadu in releasing funds. At a meeting in New Delhi last month, Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu told the Centre that ₹3,548 crore due under the Samagra Shiksha scheme for 2024-25 and 2025-26 had not been released. He also expressed concern that rate rationalisation of the Goods and Services Tax would lead to a revenue loss of ₹10,000 crore to the State this year.

The pre-poll bonanza is not new in Tamil Nadu or in other



States. On this score, no party in India is different from the other. During the Interim Budget for 2019-20, the BJP-led Central government announced ₹6,000 a year to farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi. The scheme has no link to the performance of agriculturists. It came into being in February 2019, just about two months before polling began for the Lok Sabha elections.

In June 2024, after securing only 17 out of 48 seats in the Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra, the Mahayuti government in the State rolled out a women-centric scheme. It was modelled along the lines of Madhya Pradesh's Ladli Behna Yojana, which played a major role in tilting the scales in favour of the BJP during the 2023 Assembly elections. Apart from announcing that it would increase assistance under the Mukhyamantri Mahila Ladki Bahin Yojana eventually from ₹1,500 to ₹2,100, the Maharashtra government released two installments at one go before the State went to polls in November 2024. The Mahayuti won the elections.

Last year, before the Assembly elections in Bihar, the Prime Minister launched the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana, an employment scheme. The government transferred ₹10,000 each to 75 lakh women. The NDA comprising the JD(U) and the BJP

was given one more term.

In mid-January 2026, AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami released the party's first set of guarantees for the Assembly elections. He assured the electorate that the AIADMK, if elected to power, would expand the monthly assistance scheme for women. He promised to provide ₹2,000 per month to the woman head of every ration card-holding family.

In defence of his government's latest move, Mr. Stalin contended that it had "thwarted the attempts of the BJP" to halt the distribution of monthly assistance under the KMUT scheme before the Assembly elections. Mr. Palaniswami accused the Chief Minister of suffering from the "fear" of losing elections after having made the State "insecure" for "girls, women, and senior citizens." He has consistently alleged that the DMK regime broke its promise of universal coverage for the women's cash assistance scheme.

The culture of freebies or 'welfare schemes' is deeply entrenched in the Indian political system. There seems to be no end to the launch of these schemes, whether in Tamil Nadu or other States. This is despite the fact that the efficacy of these schemes varies from one State to another, even in terms of electoral gains. What is required is not the proliferation of welfare schemes, but their efficient and targeted administration for a defined period. They cannot be entitlements without measurable outcomes or fiscal discipline. It would only be fair to expect Tamil Nadu – a State that has consistently been at the forefront of governance – to pave the way for a regime committed to this principle.

## Death sentences in India: fewer confirmations, higher acquittals

A staggering 34.6% of death sentences decided by High Courts in the last decade resulted in acquittals

### DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

As of December 31, 2025, 550 men and 24 women were on death row in India – a 43.5% increase in the country's death row population since 2016. About 45% were on death row for murder while 37% were on death row for murder involving sexual offences (Chart 1).

Data also show an increase in the number of persons being removed from the death row since 2020 (Chart 2). The latest Annual Death Penalty Statistics Report, released by the Square Circle Clinic at NALSAR, attributed this trend to an increased hesitance in the appellate judiciary to confirm death sentences.

Over the last decade, the Sessions Courts imposed 1,310 death sentences (822 cases). While 842 of these sentences were considered for confirmation by High Courts, merely 70 of them (8.31%) were upheld. Only 37 of them were decided by the Supreme Court and none were confirmed (Chart 3).

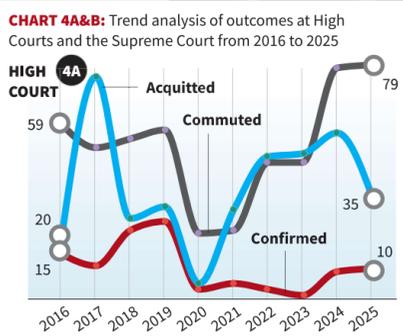
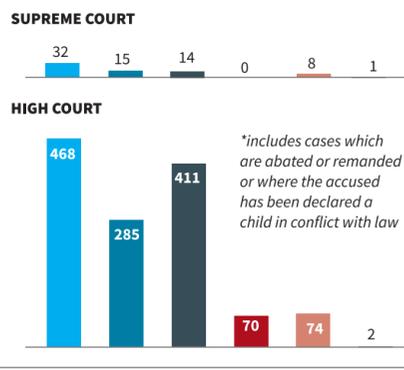
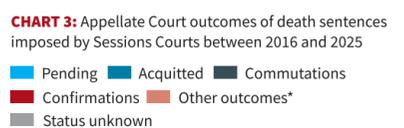
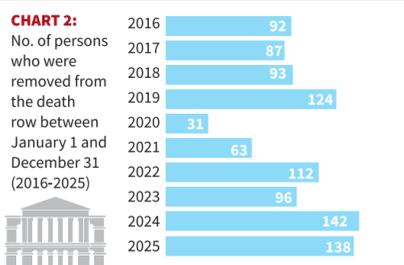
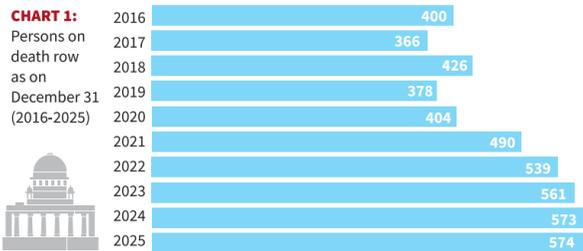
The number of cases confirmed by the High Courts has reduced by more than 60% since 2019. Of the 1,085 death sentences decided by the High Courts over the past decade, 34.65% resulted in acquittals. The highest share of acquittals were recorded at the Patna High Court (78.31%), Karnataka High Court (50.46%), Jharkhand High Court (46.97%), Andhra Pradesh High Court (44.44%), and Allahabad High Court (41.51%).

Further, the Supreme Court has not confirmed any death sentence in the last three years. In fact, in 2025, the Supreme Court acquitted and released 10 death row prisoners – the highest since 2016 (Chart 4B).

The report stated that this indicates concerns regarding the handling of evidence, procedural fairness, and substantive rights by Sessions Courts.

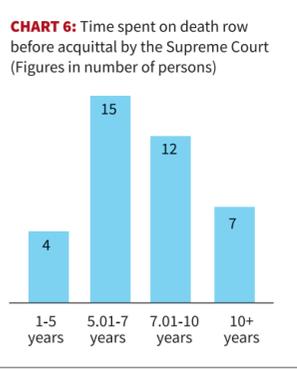
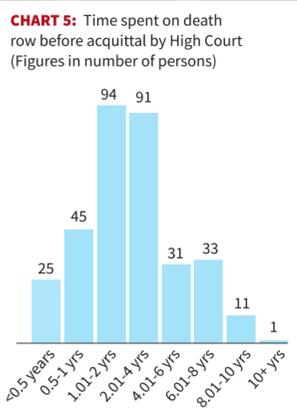
## Varying judgments

The data for the charts was sourced from 'Death Penalty in India Annual Statistics report 2025 & 10 Years of Death Penalty Data (2016-2025)' published by The Square Circle Clinic, NALSAR University of Law



While the Supreme Court decided 38 death sentence cases (involving 42 prisoners) in the last three years, between 2023 and 2025, it did not confirm any

For the purpose of analysis, the report has mostly used the unique IDs that are allotted to each death sentence imposed, as opposed to the unique IDs allotted to cases or persons. Unique IDs that are assigned to each person sentenced to death would lead to inaccurate analysis because of the possibility that a single individual may be sentenced to death in multiple cases. Unique IDs attached to each case would also not be accurate because of the possibility of reimposition of the death sentence in cases of remand



### FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 16, 1976

## Krishna water for Madras promised by 3 States: PM

Madras, Feb. 15: The Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have "promised" the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, that they would each give five tmc feet of water from the Krishna for augmenting the drinking water supply in Madras.

Mrs. Gandhi announced this at a mammoth rally on the Marina marking the merger of the two Congress parties in Tamil Nadu. Her announcement came after she referred to the futile attempts of the DMK Government to bring Veeranam water to Madras.

She said she would not like to go into the details of the charges against the DMK Government, as the people of Tamil Nadu had more knowledge of them than she did. She would, however, mention only one of the charges. Prolonged laughter greeted her as she mentioned "Veeranam".

The Prime Minister said that if the Veeranam project had been completed in time, it would have cost only Rs. 20 crores and would have helped the city avert the dreadful water famine of 1975.

"Now we find that after all these years, hardly anything has been done. Rs. 20 crores have been spent and we do not know how much more will now have to be spent." She then broke off and said: "I have some good news for you. The Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have promised each to give five tmc of water, making a total of 15 tmc feet. Once this gets going, the Madras water problem will be solved."

Mrs. Gandhi explained that the DMK Government had to be removed from power before its term ended, as the party had planned violent agitations and demonstrations from February 1.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 16, 1926

## The cotton industry

Osaka, Feb. 15: Japanese cotton mill-owners and traders are seriously concerned at the reports of Bombay mill-owners' agitation against the importation of Japanese cotton. The Japanese Cotton Spinners' Association have issued a statement in which they point out that hours of Japanese mill-hands are the same as those of Indians, namely, ten, but the Japanese mills pay thirty per cent higher wages.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**The number of people killed in Gaza in Israeli strikes on Sunday**

**12** Gaza's civil defence agency reported that Israeli strikes killed at least 12 people on Sunday, while a military official said the attacks were in response to ceasefire violations. Despite a U.S.-brokered truce that entered its second phase last month, violence has continued. AFP

**Amount sanctioned by Himachal govt. for healthcare facilities**

**1,617** In ₹ crore. Aiming to provide affordable, high-quality healthcare services across the State, the Himachal Pradesh government has approved ₹1,617 crore in the first phase of a ₹3,000-crore comprehensive healthcare modernisation plan. PTI

**Worth of Central govt. projects approved in last one year in Assam**

**55,000** In ₹ crore. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that central projects worth around ₹55,000 crore have been sanctioned for the State in the last one year. Mr. Sarma spoke about a range of projects in Assam. PTI

**Persons killed over 3 days during attack on Sudan's el-Fasher**

**6,000** More than 6,000 people were killed over three days when a Sudanese paramilitary group unleashed "a wave of intense violence ... shocking in its scale and brutality" in Sudan's Darfur region in October, the UN said in a recent report. PTI

**Indonesian troops to be potentially deployed to Gaza**

**8,000** Indonesia's military said that up to 8,000 troops are expected to be ready by the end of June for a potential deployment to Gaza as part of a humanitarian and peace mission. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# Ambiguities in the U.S.-India trade deal

The interim agreement raises several uncomfortable questions on a wide spectrum of issues, from its likely impact on several key stakeholders in India, particularly farmers, to the ability of the Indian government to take sovereign decisions in critical areas

## WORLD INSIGHT

**Biswajit Dhar**

Almost a year after India agreed to launch negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement with the U.S., the two countries took the first step by agreeing on an interim agreement. This agreement ends a period of fractured ties between the two strategic partners that began in August 2025 when U.S. President Donald Trump imposed 25% tariffs on imports from India, and additional tariffs of 25% as penalty for importing Russian crude oil.

As per the interim agreement, the U.S. will reduce tariffs on India's imports from 50% to 18% while India makes three significant concessions. First, India will eliminate or reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers on its imports of all industrial goods and a wide range of food and agricultural products from the U.S. Secondly, India, as per Mr. Trump's Executive Order issued alongside the Joint Statement, has made a huge commitment to stop "directly or indirectly" importing Russian oil (which Indian officials are yet to confirm). And finally, India has expressed its intent to "purchase \$500 billion of U.S. energy products, aircraft and aircraft parts, precious metals, technology products, and coking coal over the next 5 years". Mr. Trump has imposed this condition to ensure that henceforth, India cannot maintain the positive balance in its trade with the U.S., which it currently enjoys.

The interim agreement has found support in some quarters of the country. Advocates of the agreement point out that the reduction in U.S. tariffs would provide opportunities to Indian businesses to expand their presence in the world's biggest economy. They argue that India's labour-intensive products, especially textiles and clothing, would enjoy a competitive edge over the products of its neighbours in South and Southeast Asia since they face higher U.S. tariffs. But this



**Lingering doubts:** Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge with other opposition MPs protest the India-U.S. interim trade deal outside Parliament in New Delhi on February 12. ANI

purported advantage would be considerably diluted as the U.S. and Bangladesh have also announced their trade deal on February 9, under which certain textile and clothing products from Bangladesh would enjoy duty-free access into the U.S.

### Protecting farmers interests

The interim agreement raises several uncomfortable questions on a wide spectrum of issues, from its likely impact on several key stakeholders in India, particularly farmers, to the ability of the Indian government to take sovereign decisions in critical areas.

One, the interim agreement does not explicitly state that India would not reduce tariff-sensitive agricultural products, especially cereals, as has been the case in all its Free Trade Agreements

(FTAs), including the recent EU-India FTA. Does this absence of a clear statement that tariff protection on cereals would be maintained, suggest that India has yielded to Mr. Trump's pressures to comprehensively open India's agricultural market to U.S. agri-business? Serious doubts arose regarding this possibility when the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Brooke Rollins tweeted that the U.S.-India deal would help "export more American farm products to India's massive market, lifting prices, and pumping cash into rural America". The Government of India must ensure that the final deal with the U.S. unambiguously states that imports of cereals from the U.S. would not be allowed, which is the sole guarantee for protecting farmers' livelihoods and also the country's hard earned food security. This is also critical for the government's

credibility as Prime Minister Narendra Modi during last year's Independence Day speech had assured farmers that their interests would be protected in a trade deal with the U.S.

### Unanswered questions

Two, the interim agreement states that India would address the long-standing Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) to trade of U.S. food and agricultural products in recognition of the importance of working together to resolve U.S.'s long-standing concerns. The U.S. has consistently opposed India's refusal to import Genetically Modified (GM) food products, long considered as India's most significant NTB on food products. By agreeing to resolve "long standing concerns" in the interim agreement, has the government allowed imports of GM food products?

Three, why has the government accepted the most unequal trade agreement by eliminating tariffs and non-tariff barriers on U.S. imports, while allowing the U.S. to impose 18% tariffs on India's exports? It may be noted that before Mr. Trump began his tariff war, average U.S. tariffs on India's exports was around 2.5%, implying that India has allowed a seven-fold increase in tariff protection on its exports to the U.S. Four, why has India accepted such an unequal deal when the legitimacy of Mr. Trump's tariffs are being questioned in U.S. courts, and, more importantly, when several countries, including Brazil and China have refused to yield to Mr. Trump's pressures? And finally, why has the government allowed the Trump Administration to maintain surveillance on India's oil imports? Mr. Trump has directed his administration to reimpose 25% additional tariffs if India resumes its Russian oil imports. This raises a much larger question; hasn't the Government of India's acquiescence opened the door for U.S. surveillance to extend to more sensitive areas that could challenge India's sovereignty?

*Biswajit Dhar is former professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University.*

## THE GIST

Advocates of the agreement point out that the reduction in U.S. tariffs would provide opportunities to Indian businesses to expand their presence in the world's biggest economy.

The interim agreement does not explicitly state that India would not reduce tariff-sensitive agricultural products, especially cereals, as has been the case in all its Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), including the recent EU-India FTA.

The U.S. has consistently opposed India's refusal to import Genetically Modified (GM) food products, long considered as India's most significant NTB on food products.

# What are bio-based chemicals and enzymes?

How is India positioned with respect to scaling bio-based chemicals and enzymes?

**Shambhavi Naik**

### The story so far:

Bio-based chemicals are industrial chemicals produced using biological feedstocks like sugarcane, corn, starch, or biomass residues, often through fermentation or enzymatic processes. Examples include organic acids (such as lactic acid), bio-alcohols, solvents, surfactants, and intermediates used in plastics, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals. Enzymes are biological catalysts widely used in detergents, food processing, pharmaceuticals, textiles, pulp and paper, and increasingly in biomanufacturing. Enzymes often work at lower temperatures and pressures, reducing energy use and emissions.

**Why does India need such chemicals?** India has strong fundamentals for scaling bio-based chemicals and enzymes: a large

agricultural base, deep expertise in fermentation from pharmaceuticals and vaccines, and a growing manufacturing sector. Expanding this space could reduce import dependence on petrochemicals, create new markets for agricultural produce, and position India as a competitive supplier of sustainable industrial inputs. For example, India imported roughly \$479.8 million worth of acetic acid in 2023.

### Where does India stand today?

India has prioritised bio-based chemicals and enzymes as a priority area under the Department of Biotechnology's BioE3 policy. In the bio-based chemicals segment, companies such as Praj Industries and Godrej Industries are leading. Other firms such as Godavari Biorefineries are pioneering ethanol-based, bio-derived chemicals in India, while Jubilant Ingrevia produces "acetyls" intermediates (for example,

acetic anhydride/ethyl acetate). Emerging companies such as StringBio are using novel microbial strategies to develop such chemicals. The India enzymes market is consolidated in nature with top players accounting for more than 75% of the market share. Companies such as Novozymes India, DuPont, DSM, Advance Enzyme Technologies, BASF SE, and Ultrize Enzymes Private Limited are key players in the Indian market.

### What are other countries doing?

The EU Bioeconomy Strategy and Action Plan provides coordinated support for bio-based chemicals as part of circular bioeconomy goals. It links industrial transformation to climate goals, waste reduction, and sustainable growth. In the U.S., the USDA BioPreferred Program mandates federal procurement preference for certified bio-based products, including chemicals and enzymes, creating early markets for

producers. China's bioeconomy development plans explicitly prioritise high-value bio-based chemicals and enzyme technologies as strategic sectors. In Japan, priority projects funded through METI/NARO integrate bio-based chemical research with manufacturing readiness.

### What are the risks?

A key risk in developing the bio-based chemicals sector is the comparative cost of bio-based products relative to petrochemical alternatives. While this cost disadvantage may be temporary and limited to early stages of scale-up, it nonetheless creates a significant entry barrier for private investment. A second risk relates to the availability of reliable feedstocks and supporting infrastructure required to produce different categories of bio-based chemicals at scale. A third challenge lies in market adoption – specifically, whether bio-based chemicals can seamlessly substitute existing inputs in manufacturing pipelines and whether downstream manufacturers are willing to switch, even when costs are comparable.

Scaling shared biomanufacturing infrastructure – such as biofoundries, pilot plants, and demonstration facilities under BioE3 – can reduce capital risk for firms. Clear standards, certification, and procurement policies can help create build investor confidence.

*The author is chairperson, Takshashila Institution's Health & Life Sciences Policy.*

## THE GIST

India has prioritised bio-based chemicals and enzymes as a priority area under the Department of Biotechnology's BioE3 policy.

The India enzymes market is consolidated in nature with top players accounting for more than 75% of the market share.

A key risk in developing the bio-based chemicals sector is the comparative cost of bio-based products relative to petrochemical alternatives.

# Cows can use tools, and one Austrian cow has now shown it clearly

A cow named Veronika has been documented using a brush as a tool, choosing different ends and techniques for different body parts. The finding challenges long-held assumptions about cattle cognition and suggests our environments and biases, rather than animals, set the limits of what we notice

Sayantana Datta

In 1960, when she was studying chimpanzees in Tanzania, the primatologist Jane Goodall observed one chimp strip a stick of its leaves and use it to extract termites from a mound. She telegraphed her observation to her supervisor, the paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey.

"Now we must redefine 'tool,' redefine 'man' or accept chimpanzees as human," Leakey replied.

More than six decades later, another such moment has arrived – this time with an unlikely protagonist: Veronika, a cow in Austria.

## A cow uses a tool

University of Veterinary Medicine, Austria, cognitive biologist and associate professor Alice Auersperg first learnt of Veronika in a video she received. It purported to show "a cow using a stick-like object to scratch her body in a way that did not appear accidental," she recalled. She forwarded the clip to her colleague Antonio J. Osuna Mascaró.

Both researchers study how animals perceive, learn, remember, solve problems, and make decisions. They recognised that Veronika's actions were "not a case of simple rubbing against objects," Dr. Osuna-Mascaró said. Instead, the cow appeared to be "actively manipulating an object, orienting it, and using it to reach specific body parts."

In other words, Veronika was demonstrating "genuine tool use", something that had not been previously reported in cattle.

Still, the team was cautious. "Most claims of animal tool use do not survive careful scrutiny," Dr. Osuna-Mascaró explained. This is because scientists consider an animal's interaction with objects to be tool use only when it uses its body to manipulate the object and achieve a goal. This is why dogs scratching against trees doesn't count whereas chimpanzees fashioning spears out of sticks to hunt galagos does.

To check whether Veronika's behaviour met this definition, the team travelled to Nötsch im Gailtal, the Austrian town where Veronika lived. If they could confirm their suspicions, Veronika's tool use would prove "cattle possess more behavioural flexibility than they are usually credited with," Dr. Auersperg said.

## Scratch the itch

In Nötsch, the researchers designed an experiment to test Veronika's abilities. They chose a wooden scrubbing brush with bristles at the end of a smooth, long handle and expected Veronika to (a) use the brush to scratch parts of her body that were otherwise hard to reach, and (b) show a preference for the bristled end.

In more than 70 instances, the team



Unlike Veronika, who has access to open meadows and human interaction, most cattle spend their lives in barren environments. This means if farm animals were provided with richer environments, they could show more such behaviours. VOL. 36, ISSUE 2, PR44-R45 JANUARY 19, 2026

presented the brush to Veronika in different orientations – all to ensure her preference for one end couldn't be explained by how the brush was positioned.

In almost every instance, Veronika lifted the brush with her tongue, held it between her teeth, and scratched the rear half of her body. And she used the bristled end more often.

Veronika's behaviour was thus evidence of "goal-directed, context-sensitive tooling," the team reported in a January 2026 *Current Biology* paper.

## A surprise

There were, however, a small number of trials when Veronika used the handle. The team assumed these to be errors at first until they realised Veronika was "targeting different body areas with each end of the tool," Dr. Osuna-Mascaró told this reporter.

Veronika was using the abrasive bristles to scratch the thick skin of her upper body. But when scratching the delicate skin of her lower body, such as her udders, she used the smooth handle-end.

The team also saw Veronika use different techniques with the two ends. When using the bristled end, she raised the brush, rested it at a spot on the skin, then pulled it forward in what the researchers dubbed a "scrubbing motion". Her movements with the handle-end were however more precise and gentle "forward pushes".

Veronika was not only using a tool but

**In more than 70 instances, the team presented the brush to Veronika in different orientations; in almost every instance, Veronika lifted the brush with her tongue, held it between her teeth, and scratched the rear half of her body**

using it in different ways had the team surprised.

"It is astonishing to find that a cow has the capability to do something like this," Dr. Osuna-Mascaró said.

## Just noticing

Veronika's abilities are rivalled so far only by one other animal species: chimpanzees.

In the 2000s, researchers described chimpanzees in Congo using one end of a stick to pierce termite mounds and using the other, frayed end to scoop the insects out.

Ideally, Veronika's abilities shouldn't surprise us: "Given that there are numerous instances where cows have been recorded to make use of their tongues ... to open locks... it is not very surprising," University of Hyderabad associate professor of neural and cognitive sciences Joby Joseph said. At the same time, he agreed that "very few study and report these behaviours [in cattle]".

Primatologist Sindhu Radhakrishna, a professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, agreed.

She added that Veronika's tool-use challenges biologists to rethink why "they expect to see 'higher' cognition in some species but don't expect to see it in others."

According to Dr. Osuna-Mascaró, cattle are seen as less intelligent than they actually are for two reasons: "a lack of opportunity and observation," and due to "anthropocentric and utilitarian assumptions about animal minds."

Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are superior to all other life.

## Animal farm

Unlike Veronika, who has access to open meadows and human interaction, most cattle spend their lives in "barren environments with limited opportunities to manipulate objects," Dr. Osuna-Mascaró explained.

This means if farm animals were provided with richer environments, they could show more such behaviours. That, Dr. Osuna-Mascaró expressed hope, would ultimately force us to "reconsider how we treat them".

In the end, the discovery perhaps speaks more about humans than cattle. Despite co-existing for about 10,000 years, it is only now that scientists are taking cows' mental abilities seriously.

The real question then is "not whether cows can use tools, but why it took us so long to notice," Dr. Osuna-Mascaró said. (Sayantan Datta is a faculty member at Krea University and an independent science journalist. dattasayantana95@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

Scientists consider an animal's interaction with objects to be tool use only when it uses its body to manipulate the object and achieve a goal

Veronika used "a stick-like object to scratch her body in a way that did not appear accidental". Tool use such as this has not been reported in cattle earlier

Veronika's behaviour was evidence of "goal-directed, context-sensitive tooling"

## BIG SHOT



Smoke and lava erupting and flowing from the Piton de la Fournaise volcano, in the southeast of the French overseas island of La Reunion on February 13. The Piton de la Fournaise volcano on Reunion Island erupted for the second time this year on February 13 and is one of the most active volcanoes in the world. AFP

## WHAT IS IT?

# LHS 1903: a strange system

Reuters

Astronomers have observed a planetary system that challenges current planet formation theories, with a rocky planet that formed beyond the orbits of its gaseous neighbors, possibly after much of the planet-forming material had been used up.

The system, observed using the European Space Agency's Cheops space telescope, consists of four planets, two rocky and two gaseous, orbiting a relatively small and dim star called a red dwarf about 117 light-years from the earth. The star, named LHS 1903, is about 50% as massive and 5% as luminous as our sun. The innermost planet is rocky, the next two are gaseous and the fourth, which current planetary formation theory suggests should be gaseous, is rocky.

The two rocky planets are superEarths, meaning rocky like the earth but two to ten times more massive. The two gas planets are categorised as mini-Neptunes: gaseous and smaller than Neptune but larger than the earth.

The researchers suspect that rather than forming all at once in a large disk of gas and dust swirling around their host star, the system's planets formed



An artist's impression of the LHS 1903 planetary system. REUTERS

in series, with gas that otherwise would have made up the atmosphere of the fourth planet being used up by its sibling planets before it coalesced. Another possibility is that the planet was born with a gaseous atmosphere that later was lost in a calamity, leaving behind just the rocky planetary core.

This fourth planet also is interesting because its surface temperature is 60° C, which means it could be habitable.

**For feedback and suggestions** for 'Science', please write to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Daily page'

## InvIT with care

Investor interest must be central to REITs, InvITs push

**R**eal Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) and Infrastructure Investment Trusts (InvITs), which manage assets of more than ₹9 lakh crore, offer asset monetisation benefits to developers and investors. As the Economic Survey FY26 observes, these instruments have opened up alternative long-term fund raising options to bank credit. But they come with risks and opportunities. There are valid concerns over regulating the management of widely-held pooled funds, even as developers and investors benefit from easy liquidity.



In this fiscal, the stock exchange regulator has reduced minimum asset size and allowed REITs to be treated as equity-related instruments for mutual fund investments. These steps could enhance participation and secondary market liquidity. But the regulator also needs to be mindful of the interests of the investors, while easing the rules. For instance, the proposal to allow private InvITs to invest in greenfield projects may not benefit investors. Infrastructure projects carry higher regulatory and implementation risk. Given the greater uncertainty over the income generated from these projects, publicly listed InvITs are currently allowed to invest 80 per cent of their assets in completed and income generating projects and the remaining in under-construction projects. With publicly listed InvITs being under greater scrutiny and having higher disclosure requirements, they are permitted to invest up to 10 per cent of their assets in greenfield projects. However, expanding this dispensation to private InvITs may lead to diversion of funds.

Similarly, expanding the scope of using an InvIT's borrowed funds is not a good idea. Currently, net borrowings that exceed 49 per cent of an InvIT's assets are allowed only for fresh acquisition or for development of infrastructure projects, thereby leading to improvement in the revenue generated by the InvIT. The suggestion that this higher borrowing be used to refinance loans and be used for maintenance can lead to excessive leverage and interest cost.

The proposal to allow REITs and InvITs to raise funds from mutual fund schemes categorised as medium risk by SEBI can actually be considered. Given that there are very few schemes in the lowest risk category, expanding the investment universe may not be a bad idea. Similarly, InvITs can be allowed to continue the investment in special purpose vehicles, even after the infrastructure project held by the SPV has been handed over to the government. It is difficult to wind up a SPV immediately after the end of the concessional period (when the income from the project can be enjoyed by the InvIT) in the event of litigations, need to complete tax assessments and fulfil other liabilities. But there should be specific time-line for winding up the SPV or acquiring other projects. All necessary disclosures must be made to regulators and investors. Opening up fund raising options for REITs and InvITs must be accompanied by competent oversight.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



PLUTO LEARNS A MAN'S BEST FRIEND CAN BE AN AI COMPANION.

## New global order and economics

The collapse of the rules-based world order has resulted in an existential dilemma for the discipline of economics

LINE &amp; LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

**F**or the last nine months everyone has been asking questions about the 'new world order'. Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada summed up the global angst last month when he told the best and the brightest of the world at Davos that the world was back to a combination of Darwinism and Louis 18th of France.

Darwin had said only the fittest would survive. Louis had said if we don't hang together we will hang separately.

Carney, pulling the two together, said that the rule based world order was now gone and it would be survival of the fittest henceforth. He also said the middle powers must huddle together to ward off the big boys, you know, hang together.

Excellent. Large cosmic questions have a great advantage: they need not be answered except in large cosmic ways. This gives a lot of people a lot of grist for the mill.

But an important question that no one is asking is what's going to happen to that darling of academic disciplines for 75 years, economics. Or as Gabbar asks in Sholay, "ab tera kya hoga, Kaliye?"

The question is important because the answer depends on whether you regard the foundation of world order as being economics or vice versa, that is, economics as a product of world order. It's the old chicken-egg problem.

## TWO OPPOSING ASSUMPTIONS

It all depends on what assumptions are made. One is to assume that the world order doesn't change and the other is to assume that economics doesn't change. You can take your pick depending on your politics.

The first assumption is simply another way of saying that it's the dominant players that change. Britain then, America now, and who knows who else tomorrow, could even be India.

The second assumption is purely Marxian, you know, all that base and superstructure stuff which says the world order is built on economic and commercial considerations.

Economists who subscribe to the first view say liberalism and democracy,



accompanied by highly regulated capitalism, which regards profit as immoral, gives the best results socially. But those who subscribe to the Marxian view say economics must have a single goal: unregulated profit maximisation.

This sounds counterintuitive till you see Communist China focusing entirely on profit and capitalist Europe focusing on everything but profit. Again, you can decide which of these you prefer.

In this overall context economics has to decide which master it serves: government or market. Post-1945 western economics only talked about the markets. For Indians who studied economics in India, the disjunction between what was taught and what was experienced was stark. Western economics and Indian economics were poles apart.

**The West has moved to the left and the rest have moved to the right. The predictable result is that the West has lost its economic dominance and the rest have gained it**

The whole world is now facing this divergence. The intellectual endorsement of market economics has moved to non-western economies and its counterpart in western economics has moved towards non-market economics, that is, statism. You can see this in the published research of the last 25 years, and not just actions by governments.

In other words, the West has moved to the left and the rest have moved to the right. The predictable result is that the West has lost its economic dominance and the rest have gained it. In the West it's equity that's important. Elsewhere, it is efficiency.

## THE DILEMMA OF ECONOMICS

In such a situation, or series of situations, what should economists think about? Processes or outcomes? How can economics make itself useful again?

Until what's called 'big data' captured the attention of economists they were largely focusing on processes, basically, how do you get from situation A to situation B. This involved conjecture and speculation about the behaviour of consumers, firms, markets and governments. Most of it, as Amartya Sen once said, was puzzle solving.

All of it was based on the assumption that a set of rational rules — global order — and therefore certainty would underpin economic activity. With this now in tatters, what will drive economics?

The answer probably lies in a combination of data and algorithmisation. A few economists have already started down this path to move away from thinking about processes to achieving outcomes. Perhaps economics will cease to be about solving puzzles and become about getting desirable outcomes by rules made by machines rather than humans. Apparently that's already yielding better results because machines are infinitely better at detecting patterns than humans.

One other problem is that economics was obsessed with the idea of equilibrium and stable systems. But that requires stable rules and low uncertainty, neither of which seem likely or possible now. So out goes another key basis of economics, the idea of, and quest, for equilibrium.

This is an entirely new situation for the world, at least since 1815 when Pax Britannica came into being. Before that economics didn't quite exist as a full-fledged academic pursuit. It might not in the future.

## Boards must decide who authorises agentic AI

Given the speed with which agentic AI functions, it is vital for the board to define authority and assign responsibility

GBS Bindra

**A**rtificial intelligence is no longer merely advising executives.

Increasingly, agentic AI systems, when deployed at scale, shall be acting on behalf of organisations. Across parts of the financial sector, travel, infrastructure operators and digital platforms, advanced AI systems are beginning to execute consequential decisions autonomously. They will block transactions, approve or deny permissions, adjust prices, resolve customer disputes and execute trades, often in milliseconds.

No human reviews these decisions in real time. There is no committee vote before a suspicious wire transfer is stopped or a credit application is declined. Oversight, if it occurs, happens after the fact. Yet most corporate governance frameworks still assume that a person remains "in the loop" for high-risk decisions. That assumption is increasingly misaligned with operational reality, and it creates a governance exposure that boards of directors cannot afford to ignore.

Much of the public debate about AI has focused on accuracy, bias and ethics. But who authorises these systems to act without human approval? Delegated authority is, ultimately, a board responsibility.

Consider an example. A fraud detection system must decide within

milliseconds whether to block a \$50,000 wire transfer flagged as suspicious. If the system waits for human review, the money is gone. So it acts. If it blocks a legitimate payment, a business may miss payroll. If it lets a fraudulent transfer proceed, a customer suffers a loss. Either outcome carries financial, legal and reputational consequences. Where agentic systems are deployed, thousands of such decisions occur daily. The speed that makes these systems valuable also makes contemporaneous human supervision impossible.

## DELEGATION FACTOR

This is not merely automation. It is delegated authority operating at machine speed. And corporate boards understand delegation well. Directors routinely approve credit limits for lending officers, authorise trading mandates for investment desks and set capital allocation thresholds for senior executives. In each case, authority is explicit and bounded.

Accountability is clear. A chief risk officer is responsible for loans issued within approved limits, even if she never reviews them individually. A head of trading is accountable for algorithmic strategies operating within a defined mandate. Responsibility attaches to the delegation.

Agentic systems represent a similar transfer of decision rights, except the delegate is software. When deployed, these systems are effectively exercising authority on behalf of the organisation.



AI. Call for accountability JISTOCKPHOTO

Yet in many companies, that delegation has never been formally acknowledged at the board level. Autonomy often emerges incrementally, through vendor platforms, system integrations or efficiency initiatives. By the time directors fully understand the extent of automation, it is already embedded in core processes. Authority exists in code, but not in board minutes.

The legal treatment of autonomous vehicles offers a useful comparison. When a self-driving car causes harm, prosecutors do not automatically charge the board of directors. Liability typically attaches to the manufacturer, operator or insurer. Individual criminal exposure arises only when there is evidence of personal wrongdoing or gross negligence. That allocation reflects a simple principle: the authority to deploy autonomous driving is explicitly regulated, documented and insured. Delegation is formal. The debate is not

whether machines may drive, but under what authorised conditions they may do so.

Corporate AI deployments rarely receive the same governance treatment. If a lending algorithm violates fair-lending rules, a pricing model discriminates or a trading system contributes to market instability, regulators will ask a basic question: Who authorised the system to act? Boards that cannot answer with documented limits and clearly assigned accountability will face scrutiny grounded not in technical error but in governance failure. The issue will not be whether the model was perfect. It will be whether the board understood and formally approved the authority it had effectively delegated.

Addressing this risk does not require directors to become experts in machine learning. It requires them to perform a familiar function: define authority and assign responsibility.

At a minimum, boards should require a clear inventory of decisions currently being made autonomously, explicit approval of which categories of decisions may be delegated to agentic systems, defined financial and operational limits on that autonomy and a named executive accountable for outcomes within those limits. Autonomy should never be accidental. It should be authorised.

The writer is a tech entrepreneur and former Managing Director of CGI India

## BELOW THE LINE



RBI. Regulatory calls p11

## Thanks but no thanks

While the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may be inclined to give licence to a

few large, multi-state urban co-operative credit societies to convert into urban co-operative banks, the boards of these societies are likely to politely tell the banking regulator: "Thanks but no thanks". A senior co-operative banking expert captured their situation pithily. He said "As it is, the societies have one husband (the central registrar of co-operative societies). Now, if they convert into a Bank, they will have an unsparing second husband (RBI)."

## Wif at a cost

In the age of tech, for the creatives, it is not just inspiration, that is

important but also good infrastructure. This problem was evident at a gathering of creatives in Chennai recently. Exhibitors were reportedly required to pay additional money for Wi-Fi services over and above the fee charged for setting up their stalls. What was presented as an optional add-on charge soon became a necessity as the standard mobile internet connectivity at the venue was of sub-par quality. As a result, many artists could not sell their work as internet

connectivity issues affected UPI transactions. **Revant on backfoot?** Telangana Chief Minister Revant Reddy is ending up being controversies' favourite child. Latest being his remark, during his interaction with media in New Delhi — "Nene Raju, Nene Mantri" (I am the king, I am the minister). As expected, no sooner were his remarks out in public domain, social media was on fire and the Opposition got fodder. Comments like even Leader of Opposition Party and MP Rahul Gandhi never calls

himself a "King" were flying around. This is taking confidence to another level, said a critic. Reddy soon had to clarify his comment at an event in the State. He said that his remark "Nene Raju, Nene Mantri" (I am the king, I am the minister) was misinterpreted. "Some are writing that I have said I am the king and I am the minister...I have said that we are not rulers, we are servants. I have never behaved as a ruler...I am performing responsibilities as a servant..." Reddy said. Is the CM on backfoot? **Our Bureaus**

# Small town heft

How Tier-3, Tier-4 cities are powering growth

## BOOK REVIEW.

Giraj Sharma

The book *The Power of Tier-III and Tier-IV Cities of India: Gateway to a \$10 Trillion Economy* shines a light on the often overlooked economic dynamism of India's smaller towns and semi-urban centres. The book convincingly shows how these centres are shedding tags such as 'peripheral' or 'modest' or even 'back of nowhere' and emerging as powerful engines of growth. Driven by rising aspirations, expanding digital connectivity, better infrastructure, and a surge in entrepreneurial activity — these towns are now co-riders in this journey of the Indian economy.

Affordable smartphones, low-cost data and widespread 4G connectivity have dissolved the tyranny of distance. Small manufacturers, traders, artisans and service providers in Tier-3 and Tier-4 towns can now access national marketplaces through platforms such as e-commerce portals, social commerce and WhatsApp-led selling.

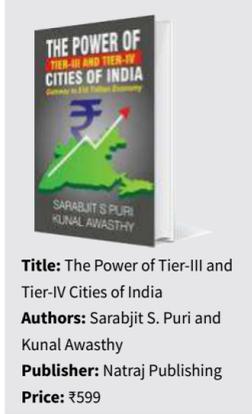
### MAKING CONNECTIONS

A kirana owner or a handicraft producer is no longer limited to the local bazaar; demand can be discovered, created and serviced well beyond district boundaries. This has expanded addressable markets without a proportional rise in physical infrastructure costs. In essence, digital infrastructure has not merely connected smaller towns to the Internet — it has connected them to opportunity.

The economic impact lies in inclusion, optionality and aspiration, allowing these towns to participate in India's growth story not as peripheral markets, but as active contributors shaping demand, talent and enterprise from the ground up.

The authors highlight how streaming, social media and vernacular digital content have influenced tastes in fashion, food, education and lifestyle products. This has led to higher demand for branded goods, better services and organised retail — even in towns previously dominated by unbranded or loose products. Importantly, demand is now informed and comparison-led, forcing local businesses to upgrade quality and service standards.

Divided into four sections, the first one deals with enhancing the



**Title:** The Power of Tier-III and Tier-IV Cities of India  
**Authors:** Sarabjit S. Puri and Kunal Awasthy  
**Publisher:** Natraj Publishing  
**Price:** ₹599

overall understanding of the Tier-3 and Tier-4 towns — the demography, the improving infrastructure and the cost advantage of operations here. The second part is about computing the strengths of these towns — and the authors estimate that most of the 7,935 towns in the country are Tier-3 or Tier-4 towns! The third part of the book deals with the opportunities for segments such as BFSI, FMCG, health and pharma, retail and automobiles, besides the usual suspects — agri and allied industry. The last part deals with the digital consumption patterns of these towns.

While the book scatters data all through the text — a more impactful presentation would have been in the form of charts and tables. And even as it gives credit to various government schemes, had these claims been backed up with data points, the reader would have bought into the story even more. The section on opportunities would have been far more impactful had the authors done the sizing of it. Claims such as "Hydrogen energy holds the power to transform rural India" or "As technology improves and costs fall further, solar energy will move from an alternative source to a primary one" needed backing up with some data.

This is not to take away any credit for the extensive coverage of issues and the forcefulness of the argument made in favour of smaller cities and towns of the country. The book also provides a segmentation framework for field activation tactics. The writing has a flow and is free of jargon, and the structure moves logically from diagnosis to opportunity.

The reviewer runs Behind The Moon, a boutique consultancy in the sales and marketing domain

# Charting China's industrial rise

The author traces the journey of China's manufacturing dominance, without glossing over its inadequacies and faultlines

## BOOK REVIEW.

Uday Balakrishnan

Dan Wang, a Chinese-American China specialist, brings to *Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future* a depth of lived experience rare among contemporary analysts. Having spent years in China as a technology analyst and travelled extensively across its showcase cities and industrial hinterlands, Wang writes with authority grounded as much in observation as in data.

The book is more analytically ambitious than Yukon Huang's *Cracking the China Comundrum* (2017) and complements Ananth Krishnan's *India's China Challenge*. Where Krishnan excels as an India-focused reporter-analyst, Wang operates as a systems thinker, probing how industrial capability, state capacity, and engineering culture intersect.

At the heart of the book lies a stark assertion: China's ascent as the world's leading manufacturing power has paralleled the weakening of America's industrial base. By outsourcing production while retaining design and branding, the West gradually surrendered its manufacturing capabilities. This enabled China to build depth in scale, tooling, dense supplier networks, and the accumulated process knowledge that eventually spills over into design and innovation.

### CHINA'S DOMINANCE

The result is China's dominance across an extraordinary range of world-beating products, from electronics and renewable energy to electric vehicles and ships.

Wang traces how America's manufacturing ecosystem hollowed out, leaving behind Rust Belt decline and social dislocation. Few comparisons are as revealing as infrastructure. He contrasts China's Beijing-Shanghai high-speed rail line, completed in 2011 for about \$36 billion, with California's high-speed rail project, which, after 17 years and projected costs exceeding \$120 billion, has delivered only a limited Central Valley stretch.

Wang amplifies a now widely held belief that the United States is unlikely to regain industrial primacy. Manufacturing today accounts for roughly 13 per cent of US GDP, compared with about 21 per cent in Germany and close to 30 per cent in China. He is sharply critical of America's "lawyerly society," where litigation and procedural vetoes delay or derail large projects.

By contrast, China's leadership, including Xi Jinping, is largely composed of engineers by training, fostering a technocratic mindset inclined to treat society as an aggregate system rather than as a collection of thinking individuals. There is a hint that Wang judges China as marginally better placed than the US to overcome its own distortions, despite the authoritarian excesses of its system.

Yet Wang's argument also invites qualification. A useful corrective was offered by JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon in a recent World Economic Forum discussion at Davos. China, he noted, remains a roughly \$15,000 per capita economy, compared with America's \$85,000, and lacks anything comparable to the United States' dense web of military alliances and economic partnerships. The point does not so much undermine Wang's thesis as refine it: industrial dominance is necessary, but not sufficient, for global leadership.



**Title:** Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future  
**Author:** Dan Wang  
**Publisher:** Allen Lane (Penguin)  
**Price:** ₹1,499

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Wang is a research fellow at the Hoover History Lab at Stanford University

### CHINA'S PROBLEMS

Importantly, Wang's book is not China-boosterism. It addresses hidden poverty, heavy local-government indebtedness, wasteful vanity projects, and the demographic damage inflicted by the one-child policy. He vividly captures the punishing regimentation of factory life and the disastrous Covid

lockdowns that exposed the system's capacity for self-inflicted harm. His account of rural deprivation echoes findings in Scott Rozelle's *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise* (2020).

For Indian readers, the implications are unavoidable. In the first 20 years of independence, India undertook major industrial and engineering projects — steel plants, fertilizer units, heavy engineering complexes, big dams, and other emblematic ventures of the Nehruvian industrial push — that built indigenous technological capability. Public sector enterprises such as HMT earned global respect for quality, and engineering graduates entered manufacturing rather than immediately diverting into management careers.

That trajectory later broke. The fire that crippled Semiconductor Complex Ltd. (SCL) in Mohali in 1989 came to symbolise a deeper institutional failure: India never seriously rebuilt the technological capability it had begun to create. China, by contrast, repurposed comparable institutions into global champions of innovation and manufacturing.

### LESSONS FOR INDIA

Today, India's manufacturing share of GDP at about 16-17 per cent is only marginally higher than America's, leaving it with rust belts and a depleted engineering depth that cannot be easily rebuilt. Wang's book should therefore be read by Indian policymakers. With a demographic window still open, India's challenge is not merely to attract factories, but to restore the engineering culture and institutional depth that once underpinned its industrial ambitions.

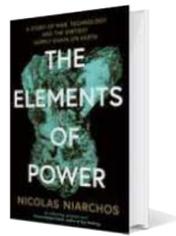
The reviewer is a columnist exploring the intersections of state, society, and history, and has taught public policy and contemporary history at IISc, Bengaluru

## NEW READS.



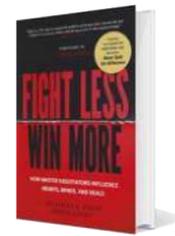
**Title:** Corporate Hostages  
**Author:** Dr. N. Raj Mohan  
**Publisher:** Rupa Publications India

The book unpacks the complex realities of modern work life, where professionals constantly navigate personal desires and professional demands



**Title:** The Elements of Power  
**Author:** Nicolas Niarchos  
**Publisher:** William Collins

This book tells the story of the war for the global supply of battery metals and the terrible human cost of this misunderstood industry



**Title:** Fight Less, Win More  
**Authors:** Jonathan B. Smith, Derek Gaunt  
**Publisher:** Cornerstone Press

A handbook for applying Tactical Empathy — the ability to understand and influence people — to every conversation

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

February 16, 2006

#### 14 cos bid for container services

With industry heavyweights such as Reliance Infrastructure, Central Warehousing Corporation (CWC), Adani Logistics and some prominent multinationals taking the plunge, the rail container operations space is hotting up in the country. So far, only Concor was allowed to operate in the sector. Fourteen companies have put in their applications with the Indian Railways to offer services with registration fee totalling Rs 540 crore.

#### DoT permits cell operators to offer Internet services

The Department of Telecom has allowed mobile operators to provide Internet services, including the lucrative Internet Protocol (IP) based Virtual Private Network (IP-VPN), without any additional fee. The services until now were being offered by Internet Service Providers such as Sify and also long distance service providers such as BSNL and Bharti Tele-ventures.

#### MRPL board recommends Rs 12,800 cr investment plan

The Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd (MRPL) board that met here on Wednesday has recommended to Oil and Natural Gas Corporation a capital expenditure plan of Rs 12,800 crore for its integrated refinery upgrade project.

### Short take

# Microfinance trades speed for stability

Ashish Mehrotra

Over the past decade, India has transformed from a largely bank-led credit system to a vibrant, multi-channel ecosystem. The micro-lending sector stepped in to address the aspirations of the bottom of the pyramid. However, the latest Sa-Dhan Quarterly Microfinance Report 2025 indicates that this journey has reached a critical juncture.

The current slowdown follows an aggressive expansion between 2021 and 2023. Credit penetration and rising ticket sizes outpaced rural income growth, leading to borrower overleveraging and portfolio stress.

The sector is now in deliberate contraction, with the gross loan portfolio at ₹3 lakh crore, down 15.5 per cent year-on-year and 3.11 per cent quarter-on-quarter from the ₹4 lakh crore peak in September 2024. This reflects institutional prudence, as liquidity constraints and lower disbursements drive recalibration.

Today, stricter underwriting and a focus on debt sustainability have effectively reduced the number of lenders per borrower to around 1.5 loans. The narrowing gap between the 1174 million total loan accounts and the 73.8 million unique borrowers reinforces this shift.

However, portfolio performance has deteriorated across delinquency buckets

over the past 12 months. The most notable stress is visible in the PAR 180+ days past due, which has surged from 7.64 per cent a year ago to 15.27 per cent, indicating that a significant portion of the older portfolio has hardened into long-term delinquency.

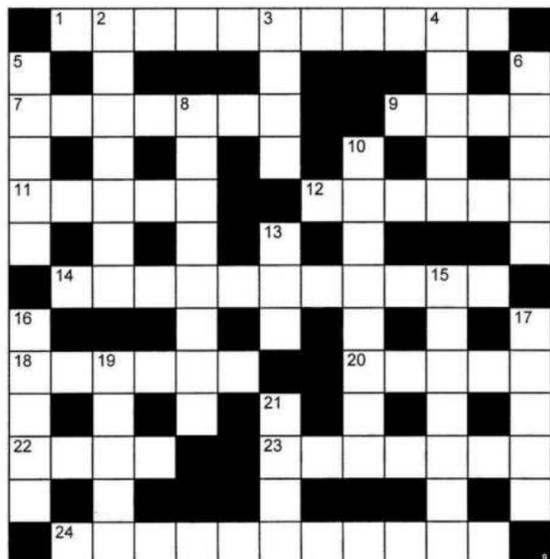
Many lenders have proactively strengthened their credit underwriting parameters to enhance portfolio resilience amid evolving market conditions. Complementing these efforts, the government's launch of the Credit Guarantee Fund for Micro Units (CGFMU) scheme has provided additional risk mitigation by offering credit guarantees to lenders extending loans to micro units, thereby improving credit access while containing downside

risk. Further supporting the sector, the RBI's decision to increase the non-MFI lending limit to 40 per cent has enabled institutions to diversify their portfolios beyond traditional microfinance.

In 2026, the microfinance sector is expected to emerge from this 'great recalibration' leaner and more resilient. The first half of 2026 is likely to be characterized by continued consolidation as institutions finish purging legacy 'bad' debt and fully align their operations with the MFII guardrails. We expect the industry to find its floor in terms of portfolio contraction by the second quarter of 2026, followed by a gradual, quality-led expansion.

The writer is MD & CEO, Northern Arc Capital

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2617



### EASY

- ACROSS**  
01. Branched candlestick (11)  
07. A prior screening (7)  
09. Poled river-craft (4)  
11. Press into folds; curl hair (5)  
12. Seasoned and cured herring (6)  
14. Of the art of making fireworks (11)  
16. Material used for kindling fire (6)  
20. Young eel (5)  
22. Correct homework (4)  
23. Free one from blame (7)  
24. Seat of Parliament (11)

- DOWN**  
02. A facility; pleasantness of situation etc (7)  
03. Stretch of tended grass (4)  
04. Take possession of by force (5)  
05. Piquant, pungent (5)  
06. Violent weather (5)  
08. Worker in part learner (8)  
10. State of being wealthy (8)  
13. Small in number (3)  
15. To implicate, comprehend (7)  
16. Bring foot down noisily (5)  
17. Move very gradually (5)  
19. Nanny (5)  
21. Hindu woman's garment (4)

### NOT SO EASY

- ACROSS**  
01. Branched lamp man with blue card can supply (11)  
07. Early showing for VIP we reorganised (7)  
09. In Ireland it's a pound for a boat (4)  
11. Use curling-tongs with credit on one person at 24 (5)  
12. Cured fish for the captain (not a starter) (6)  
14. Chic poetry North produced about fireworks (11)  
18. Material used in can turns red (6)  
20. Little fish always available around start of lunch (5)  
22. The stigma of being an Evangelist (4)  
23. Naval ratings love change - pardon? (7)  
24. The British Parliament in terms newt is responsible for (11)

- DOWN**  
02. A Noun that gives me a tiny adjustment (7)  
03. Area of grass tended to look like fine linen (4)  
04. Endlessly pursue it like this and unjustly take possession (5)  
05. It is highly flavoured and somewhat risqué (5)  
06. Bad weather in August or March (5)  
08. River Pom diverts - but he'll make it better (8)  
10. Wealth shown by credit note shires produce (8)  
13. Not many watts, the iron takes (3)  
15. Get one mixed up in love perhaps when about five (7)  
16. Put foot down hard to prepare it for posting (5)  
17. Move very slowly like a person who cringes (5)  
19. Look after one making runs at Edgbaston initially (5)  
21. Has a right to hold an Indian garment (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2616

- ACROSS** 1. Comfort 5. Patch 8. Lined up 9. Exist 10. Antipasto 12. Dye 13. Erase 17. Lap 19. Companion 21. Sauce 22. Narrate 24. Treat 25. Enjoyed  
**DOWN** 1. Cellar 2. Monitor 3. Old 4. Tapes 5. Phenomena 6. Third 7. Hatred 11. Prescient 14. Privacy 15. Closet 16. Indeed 18. Pause 20. Manse 23. Raj

## India's AI moment

Summit can pave the way for accountable AI at scale

The AI Impact Summit in New Delhi this week comes when artificial intelligence (AI) is being rapidly adopted across the world. The government's ambition is clear: To position India as a credible voice in the global AI landscape, largely dominated by the United States (US) and China. With participation from over 100 countries, the Summit is meant to amplify the Global South's voice, attract capital, and shape rules that do not simply mirror western priorities or Chinese state-led models. In this respect, India has strengths to build on. It is among the world's largest consumer markets for AI tools, with rapid adoption across firms and households. This demand pull is already drawing unprecedented commitments from global technology giants. Amazon has pledged over \$35 billion through 2030, Microsoft \$17.5 billion over four years, and Google \$15 billion for what will be its largest AI and data-centre hub outside the US. India's digital public infrastructure, low-cost data, and regulatory stability after the Digital Personal Data Protection Act have strengthened investor confidence.

India's broader strategy, alongside investment in sovereign compute and domestic large-language models, aims to balance expensive frontier-model development and focus on sectoral use cases. In this regard, the Economic Survey this year also flagged an asymmetry between frontier-model development and application-led deployment, noting that attempting to close the frontier gap could entail prohibitive costs. The tradeoff, therefore, is between chasing frontier-scale models and directing scarce resources towards domain-specific AI systems aligned with domestic priorities. Structural pillars such as expanding access to compute through 38,000 graphics processing units (GPUs), building the AI Kosha dataset repository, establishing an AI safety institute, and creating an AI incidents database are significant institutional moves. But enforceable accountability, robust data governance, and clear redress mechanisms will remain crucial. Voluntary compliance will not suffice if incentives push firms toward opacity. There are other constraints as well. India's data-centre capacity is still a small fraction of the global total, and the country lacks homegrown AI firms that have achieved meaningful scale. Moreover, hyperscale infrastructure comes with heavy demands, including uninterrupted power, advanced cooling systems, fibre connectivity, and large water use. The design choices made now will determine whether India can expand AI compute without deepening environmental stress.

At a broader level, the Summit's success should not be measured only by headline investment announcements. Notably, it is happening against the backdrop of a fragmented global governance landscape. The 2023 Bletchley Park AI Safety Summit produced declarations and commitments, but a consensus on long-term risks remains elusive, and even regulating big tech cannot fully constrain the diffuse misuse of AI by countless developers. International spillover makes harmonised standards difficult, yet global discussion is essential. It is already evident how algorithmic tools can produce wrongful exclusion. Nevertheless, despite the challenges, it is encouraging that a global discussion on the issues will be held, and there is hope that some of the potential ill effects of AI will be contained soon. A serious debate will also be needed on the possible impact on jobs and the issue of AI-skilling to absorb the expanding workforce. There are a number of other issues to be discussed. Given that AI is rapidly evolving, with the potential to reshape the world in many ways, the Summit can be a good starting point for defining the direction and standards.

## Vote for stability

Time for India and Bangladesh to rebuild relations

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP's) landslide victory in the elections, held on February 12, offers an opportunity for a nation suffering political turmoil to get back to building on its export-driven economic miracle, which lifted this nation of 180 million people from poverty. Though there are bound to be questions about the legitimacy of this exercise, given that the Awami League, which had dominated the political scene since 2008, was banned from participating, the outcome of the election and the parallel national referendum on sweeping democratic and constitutional reforms signal a desire for normalcy. On the face of it, the overwhelming 216-seat majority secured by the BNP-led alliance can be viewed as an enabler in delivering stability; more so when the alliance led by the Jamaat-e-Islami, the BNP's former coalition partner, won just 77, though this is its best performance to date. The fact that the Jamaat leaders have agreed to accept the election results, after initially claiming fraud, also augurs well for political stability. Most notable perhaps is the poor showing of the National Citizen Party, founded by student leaders who had led the movement for Sheikh Hasina's ouster as Prime Minister. It won only six of the 30 it contested.

The BNP's first test will be its ability to leverage this mandate and deliver the reforms contained in the July 2025 National Charter, which received a resounding "yes". The voter turnout for the referendum was 60.26 per cent, marginally higher than 59.44 per cent for the parliamentary elections. Among the 84 proposals the key ones include a limit for the prime-ministerial term, the creation of a 100-seat Upper House, freeing the judiciary and regulatory institutions, provisions for Opposition leaders to head parliamentary committees, and raising the representation of women in Parliament. Though the impulse for these reforms stems from Ms Hasina's increasingly autocratic regime, the BNP's record does not inspire confidence, given the disregard of its former leader, the late Khaleda Zia, for institutional independence when in power and current leader Tarique Rahman's earlier charges of corruption, which led him to 17 years of self-imposed exile.

For India, wrong-footed by Ms Hasina's precipitate ouster, the electoral result offers an opportunity to reset relations with a party with which New Delhi has had uneasy relations. Dhaka's willingness under Begum Zia to entertain Northeast insurgents and Islamic terrorists on Bangladeshi soil as well as the pro-Pakistani tilt stood in sharp contrast to Ms Hasina's crackdown on these elements and deeper cooperation with India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's early congratulatory call to Mr Rahman clearly signalled intentions for a constructive outreach — both political and economic. There are many pain points to address, starting with rising anti-Indian sentiment for offering Mr Hasina asylum, one symptom of which is the upsurge of attacks on Hindu minorities. Equally, with Bangladeshi immigration becoming a key element of political mobilisation in India, social tensions urgently need to be addressed on both sides of the border. Also brewing are possible tensions over the Teesta water-sharing agreement, which Bangladesh has long viewed as unfair. So far Mr Rahman has spoken of a "relationship of mutual respect and mutual understanding" with India. This is an encouraging foundation on which to repair ties, which have been more mutually beneficial than those with almost any other South Asian country.

# Interpreting the US trade deal

Focus on the gains from import liberalisation

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY



The trade agreement between India and the United States (US) has generated political criticism in this country. It is said that there is a "wholesale surrender" of the national interest. Farmers have organised protests. Security experts warn that India is relinquishing strategic autonomy by stopping Russian oil purchases.

The mercantilist view — that exports are the prize and imports are the price we pay — is economically flawed. At a fundamental level the prize in international trade is (a) imports (things that we get to buy from abroad) and (b) Indian firm productivity and economic growth. The value of each trade agreement is measured by reduction in Indian trade barriers.

High tariffs on intermediate goods and machinery increase the cost of production for Indian firms. By protecting inefficient domestic sectors, we implicitly tax the efficient ones. The narrative that liberalisation is a "surrender" assumes that the status quo was optimal. It was not. The status quo was a high-cost, low-competitiveness equilibrium that hindered India's integration into global supply chains and thus Indian economic growth. The commitment to eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods is a productivity shock. When Indian manufacturers can import high-tech machinery, intermediate inputs, and components from the US without the friction of prohibitive duties, their landed costs decrease.

Economists have a sweet phrase "the Lerner Symmetry Theorem" — a tax on imports is effectively a tax on exports. By lowering import barriers, we are improving the competitiveness of Indian exporters. We trigger a shift in the allocation of Indian labour and capital away from uncompetitive sectors and into the ones that India is really good at, which generates

growth in gross domestic product (GDP).

Tariffs on food are regressive taxes. They disproportionately impact the poor, who are net buyers of food. Political thinkers need to re-evaluate the size of the land-owning farming families group as against the number of poor people buying food. Food tariffs benefit large land holdings exactly as input subsidies and minimum support price do. The entire logic of positive externalities from improved nutrition for the poor translates into benefits from reducing trade barriers for food.

A problem that will now come up is the inconsistency between the superior economics knowledge, in three recent Indian trade agreements (the US, European Union, and United Kingdom) vs the old Indian socialism that's in force at multilateral level. India has long been a wrecker at the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Consider the agreement on Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) at the WTO. This initiative aims to streamline investment procedures and improve transparency. Yet, India has blocked its adoption. At the same time, the joint statement with the US highlights India's intent to attract capital and technology, including the signalled intent to purchase \$500 billion in US goods, comprising energy, aircraft, and technology products. It is incoherent to actively solicit investment bilaterally while structurally opposing investment facilitation multilaterally.

A similar hypocrisy exists in the digital domain. The bilateral agreement emphasises cooperation on sensitive technologies, graphics processing units, and artificial-intelligence infrastructure. Yet, at the WTO, India continues to oppose making the moratorium on Customs duties on electronic transmission perma-



**SNAKES & LADDERS**  
AJAY SHAH

# Addressing nutrition along with hunger

Are modern high-yielding varieties of grains less nutritive than traditional desi crops? This is a common perception that seems largely, albeit not wholly, well founded. Some scientific studies have also upheld this notion. High-yielding crop varieties developed in the initial few decades after the Green Revolution were bred chiefly to enhance yield, regardless of the quality or nutritional value of their grains. The main consideration was mitigating widely prevalent hunger by augmenting food supplies rather than promoting good health through balanced nutrition.

The result, expectedly, is that though food grains are now available aplenty, and the country has emerged as one of the world's leading food grain exporters, the incidence of undernourishment and malnutrition remains woefully high. The Global Hunger Index 2025 ranks India lowly at 102nd position, among 123 countries, in the "serious hunger" category. The poor score is because as many as 32.9 per cent of children below the age of five are "stunted" (low height for age) and 18.7 per cent "wasted" (low weight for height). Malnutrition is rampant also among adults, especially women and lactating mothers. About 12 per cent of the population is underfed, and nearly two-thirds do not eat what could be deemed a healthy diet.

It is, indeed, only in recent years that the nutrition aspect has begun to receive due attention from agricultural scientists. Crop breeders now include improvement of quality and the nutritional profile of staple grains among their priorities. Efforts are also afoot to develop biofortified crops through conventional breeding or biotechnology. They have an inherently high content of key nutrients like iron, zinc,

and Vitamin A. Over 100 highly productive biofortified varieties of various crops, including mass-consumed staples like rice, wheat, and maize, have already been released for cultivation in different parts of the country. These have been enriched with essential nutrients like zinc, iron, vitamins, and protein. However, many of the crop varieties, widely grown even now, do not match their older counterparts in terms of nutritional value.

According to a research paper published in the February 2025 issue of *Food Science & Nutrition* (Volume 13, Issue 2), modern wheat varieties have, on average, 19 to 28 per cent lower concentrations of minerals, such as zinc, iron, and magnesium, than older varieties. Generally, as the yield per hectare rises, the nutrient density of the grains tends to decline, this paper maintains. While breeding crop strains having special traits like higher immunity against diseases and pests and shorter life span, the nutrition aspect often gets overlooked.

More or less similar views have been expressed in another report prepared jointly by scientists of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), the Bidhan Chandra Krishi Vishwavidyalaya (West Bengal), and the Hyderabad-based National Institute of Nutrition. This report categorically states that the Green Revolution had helped India achieve food security, but by compromising its nutritional security. It reckons that rice and wheat, which meet over 50 per cent of the daily energy requirements of the people in India, have lost up to 45 per cent of their food value over the past 50 years or so. This paper was published in 2023 under the category of "Science Reports" (Article number 21164) in the

multidisciplinary science journal *Nature*. A significant observation made in this paper is that the depleting trend in the nutrient concentration of grains of the high-yielding varieties developed in the post-Green Revolution era is caused by plant factors rather than soil factors. The plants of these varieties are generally incapable of sequestering sufficient nutrients from the soil. More importantly, it also reveals that some of the recently evolved crop strains, especially those of rice, have shown the presence of certain toxic elements, notably arsenic, which are harmful for health.

The high incidence of anemia and stunting among children is also attributed to the growing trend of consuming polished rice. Many useful elements, including vitamins, minerals, fibre, and fatty acids, are lost during the process of rice polishing, which is done primarily to enhance the market appeal of the grains. The deficiency of these vital nutrients also causes high morbidity and mortality among children.

Thankfully, novel breeding techniques are now available to address the issue of nutrient deficiency in crop varieties. Apart from biofortification, gene-editing technology also enables evolving high-yielding crops having more nutritious grains. However, supportive policies and adequate funding are needed to promote the use of such technologies in crop-breeding programmes of the ICAR and state agricultural universities. The need, basically, is to upgrade the research infrastructure, and financial health, of these institutions to enable them to use hi-tech breeding methods to improve the nutrient status of grains of new crop varieties. Appropriate incentives also need to be offered to seed companies to multiply the seeds of nutrient-dense crop varieties, and to farmers to use these seeds.

Similarly, the digital economy requires more than just vague cooperation. India has committed to "negotiate" rules on digital trade but has not yet agreed to binding provisions on cross-border data flows or the prohibition of mandatory source code disclosure. In modern free-trade agreements (FTAs), such as the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, these are standard pillars. Without them, the "tech partnership" remains vulnerable to domestic regulatory whims and capricious Trump retaliation.

There are hoops to jump on rules of origin. As supply chains decouple from China, the US will demand intrusive verification to prevent leakage. This will require Indian firms to accept a higher degree of transparency and compliance burden than they are accustomed to. Implementing this requires state capability. The verification process should not become a next layer of inspector raj, with delays, compliance costs and corruption.

The FTAs with the European Union (EU) and United Kingdom (UK) and the trade agreement with the US are adding up to a good wave of Indian liberalisation. The agreements with the UK and EU, conducted in an amicable political environment, need to go up to becoming genuine "deep trade agreements".

We should pay heed to the document of the United States trade representative on Indian trade barriers. For us in India, it's knowledge of modern trade economics that dissects and documents Indian protectionism. And, it's the ever simmering problem that can induce a next Trump explosion. We in India should treat this document as a goal post to shoot for, in modernising Indian economic policy. What are all the changes required in this document, so that it shows an India that has sophisticated trade policy? By doing this, we gain twice. First, we will reduce trade friction with the US. Second, we will lay the foundations for high Indian GDP growth.

The author is a researcher at the XKDR Forum



**FARM VIEW**  
SURINDER SUD

# How Vietnam shaped the civil rights movement



BRENT STAPLES

The *New York Times* war correspondent David Halberstam caught the pulse of this era when he observed, in 1964, that there were parallels between America's misbegotten adventure in Vietnam and the struggle for civil rights in the murderous, Klan-infested state of Mississippi.

In the first years of the war, it was more than coincidental that the front-line fighters were disproportionately Black. Defence Secretary Robert McNamara — and the other federal officials whom Halberstam derisively called "the best and the brightest" — had contrived to capture thousands of souls for the ill-fated war on Communism by lowering testing standards and allowing the

courts to drop criminal charges against young men who agreed to enlist.

The scheme, known as Project 100,000, protected the white middle class by preserving college deferments. Nearly half of those brought in by the project were Black, though African Americans made up little more than 10 per cent of the population, and nearly all were poor.

The journalist Wil Haygood leverages this scenario to excellent effect in his clarifying and richly insightful Vietnam-era history, *The War Within a War*. As Haygood notes, Project 100,000 was cynically billed as part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. But behind closed doors, the famously salty president slipped into his neo-Confederate drawl, praising the project as a means of cleaning up "all these Nigra boys that are now rejects."

Still, the Pentagon was willing to tolerate Black soldiers only inasmuch as they forswore cultural expressions of Blackness. They could be arrested and even court-martialed for performing a ritual greeting known as the dap — short

for "dignity and pride" — which ranged from a simple fist bump and handshake to an elaborate display of grips, finger snaps and chest thumps that often varied from squad to squad, platoon to platoon.

By criminalising the dap, the Pentagon hardened it into a signifier of resistance that crossed the ocean from Vietnam to the riot-torn streets of the United States just in time to become a signature salutation of the Black Power movement.

Civil rights histories typically treat Vietnam as an external matter that came to the fore domestically when the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr condemned it on moral grounds in 1967. But *The War Within a War* conceives of Vietnam as a foreign theatre of the rights struggle, in which concerns about inequality were magnified by the fact that Black soldiers were being asked to die for a country that discriminated against them in housing, employment and education.

The view of the war as racially unfair spread swiftly through almost every

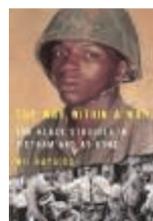
aspect of African American life. By 1967, Haygood points out, Black Mississippians had started linking their battles for voting rights to the unfair burden borne by their sons in Vietnam. That same year, the global celebrity Muhammad Ali surrendered the heavyweight boxing title rather than serve, declaring the war a racist act of aggression against the brown people of Southeast Asia.

The Motown singer Marvin Gaye responded to the Vietnam nightmare witnessed by his veteran brother Frankie with the epic 1971 album "What's Going On." As Haygood writes, the album's moving portrayal of a soldier returning home landed like "slow and rolling thunder," ushering politicians, activists and bereaved mothers into "the church of Marvin."

Haygood's is a temperate and perceptive social historian. He maintains his characteristic low-key tone as he explains why the full picture of Black Vietnam went unseen by most Americans as he retells the war through the

lives of nine African Americans, most of them soldiers. Among his subjects are Joe Anderson, the infantry commander whose exploits in battle were captured by an Academy Award-winning documentary; Philippa Schuyler, the fascinatingly eccentric concert pianist who died in a helicopter crash while rescuing Vietnamese orphans, many of whom had been fathered by Black troops; and Wallace Terry, a reporter for *Time* who struggled to convey what he had found in the war into the pages of the magazine.

Complaints about racial discrimination reached a crescendo just as the Pentagon was congratulating itself for integrating the fighting force. In 1968, an African American major named Lavell Merritt made an unexpected appearance at a daily press briefing. He used the occasion to denounce the American military services as the "strongest citadels of racism on the face of the earth" and proclaimed that Black officers like



**THE WAR WITHIN A WAR: The Black Struggle in Vietnam and at Home**  
by Wil Haygood  
Published by Knopf  
360 pages \$35

him were Uncle Toms who had been "clinging to the mistaken belief that patience, diligence and professional competence would yield the benefits enjoyed by the majority ethnic groups." He further startled listeners by declaring that only by being "a good nigger" had he been able to get a satisfactory rating from a racist superior.

Merritt's words resounded through the military and around the civilian world. After 18 years in the Army, he was forced into retirement. Just before he left the armed forces, he wrote a letter to President Johnson. "I understand the magnitude of the bitterness and animosity that would be heaped upon me," he said, but he was surprised by the fear that prevented the military from acknowledging its race problem and moving toward just treatment for all who served.

The reviewer was the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 2019. ©2026 The New York Times News Service

● HEALTH

## Refurbished medical devices: a new global vs domestic debate

Ankita Upadhyay  
New Delhi, February 15

THE IMPORT of refurbished or pre-used medical devices and other high-end diagnostic equipment has divided India's medical device industry. Indian manufacturers have raised concerns about safety, oversight and the impact on domestic industry. International medical device associations argue that instead of restrictions, India needs a clear policy under the Medical Devices Rules, overseen by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). Earlier this month, the government informed the Rajya Sabha that the MoHFW has constituted a committee to examine the scope of refurbished devices, develop methodologies to evaluate their safety and performance, and suggest guidance for waste disposal.

### What are refurbished medical devices?

Refurbished medical equipment are essentially used devices and systems restored to their original operating specifications and then sold at a lower cost. Most of these are capital-intensive technologies that cost several crores, depending on their configuration. These include diagnostic and imaging systems such as CT scanners, MRI machines, and robotic navigation systems. Although its medical device manufacturing ecosystem is expanding, India continues to depend on imports for advanced imaging and highly specialised technologies. Refurbished high-end equipment is sourced from the US, Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands, etc.

### What is India's current policy?

India has no dedicated regulatory pathway under the Medical Devices Rules, 2017, defining or governing refurbished devices. Imports are allowed through no-objection certificates issued by an expert committee under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC). The committee can approve imports of 38 high-end and high-value medical equipment items, strictly based on a list prescribed by the MoHFW. Industry estimates value the refurbished segment at around Rs 1,500 crore — nearly 10 per cent of India's medical equipment market.

### ● COST DIFFERENCE

- A new MRI machine can cost between Rs 4 crore and Rs 8 crore or more, while refurbished versions typically range between Rs 1-3.5 crore.
- Such expenditure is often beyond hospitals in tier-2 and tier-3 cities, district centres, and standalone diagnostic facilities.

In December 2022, amendments permitted the import of certain "high-end and high-value used medical equipment" subject to stringent conditions, including technical inputs from the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO).

In November 2025, an MoEFCC committee cleared several high-end refurbished devices for reuse. These were issued under the 2016 waste management rules rather than conventional medical device import laws.

This contradicted CDSCO's position, which in January 2025 said that refurbished devices cannot be imported for sale or distribution because there is no licensing provision for them under the Medical Devices Rules, 2017. This regulatory clash raised concerns about policy coherence, patient safety, and domestic manufacturing. India also lacks a definition distinguishing "used", "refurbished", "reconditioned", or "remanufactured" medical devices, creating ambiguity.

### What is the debate?

The issue is no longer whether refurbished devices should exist, but how they should be regulated. Another dimension is industrial policy versus healthcare access.

The Medical Technology Association of India (MTAI), representing over 50 international manufacturers, argued that a blanket ban is neither practical nor desirable given affordability challenges. The Association of Indian Medical Device Industry (AiMed), a forum representing domestic manufacturers, strongly opposed relaxing restrictions without a robust regulatory framework benchmarked to global standards. Rajiv Nath, AiMed coordinator, argued that refurbished devices pose risks that cannot be fully addressed through *post facto* checks, adding that India should prioritise new, indigenously manufactured devices rather than becoming a dumping ground for end-of-life equipment.

Srinivasa Reddy, senior vice president at the medical technology company SS Innovations, said that in developed countries, older medical equipment are refurbished, recalibrated, and sometimes updated with new software after their functional life, but core components remain a decade old. When such systems enter India at similar price points as new domestic products, they could potentially discourage investment in high-end technologies.

● INDIA AI IMPACT SUMMIT 2026

## At global event, India aims to spotlight local solutions



Soumyarendra Barik

WHAT DOES the boom of artificial intelligence (AI) mean for the future of work? Is India's IT sector ready for the onslaught? Should India build its own Large Language Models, similar to the likes of ChatGPT and DeepSeek, or focus more on tailored, sector-specific AI applications? Are most Indians skilled enough for an AI-first world? Will AI be detrimental to the environment, with its requirement of large amounts of data that must be stored in data centres?

As the world faces fundamental questions, spurred by the sensational growth in AI services, much of the global conversation around them will happen in India over the next five days, with New Delhi playing host for the India-AI Impact Summit 2026. Between February 16 and 20, several world and corporate leaders will try to answer the burning questions facing the world today.

With the summit, India intends to generate actionable recommendations that contribute to long-term AI innovation and governance objectives rather than framing immediate binding regulations.

### India, an aspiring voice for Global South

Coming to the Global South for the first time, the summit represents the latest chapter in an evolving international conversation on AI.

What began as the AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park in the UK in November 2023, where 28 countries signed the landmark Bletchley Declaration focusing on identifying AI safety risks, has progressively broadened its scope.

The Seoul Summit in May 2024 expanded discussions to include innovation and inclusivity alongside safety, while the Paris AI Action Summit in February 2025 (which Prime Minister Narendra Modi co-chaired) emphasised practical implementation and economic opportunities, though issues of safety and security were largely sidestepped.

India's pitch is somewhat different. Where previous summits wrestled with catastrophic risks and regulatory frameworks, New Delhi is centring the conversa-

### ● SUMMIT BEGINS TODAY

#### Key speakers and attendees

- NARENDRA MODI**, Prime Minister of India
- EMMANUEL MACRON**, President of France
- SUNDAR PICHAI**, CEO, Google
- MUKESH AMBANI**, Chairman and MD, Reliance Industries
- SAM ALTMAN**, CEO, OpenAI
- SHANTANU NARAYEN**, CEO, Adobe
- CRISTIANO AMON**, CEO, Qualcomm
- DARIO AMODEI**, CEO, Anthropic
- DEMIS HASSABIS**, CEO, Google DeepMind
- ARTHUR MENSCH**, CEO, Mistral AI
- ALEXANDR WANG**, Chief AI Officer, Meta
- PRATYUSH KUMAR AND VIVEK RAGHAVAN**, co-founders, Sarvam AI
- VISHAL SIKKA**, founder and CEO, Vianai



Security personnel on duty outside the Bharat Mandapam, a day ahead of the AI Summit in New Delhi. ABHINAV SAHA

#### Sessions of note

- The future of employability in the age of AI**  
**When:** Feb 16 (9:30 AM - 10:30 AM); **Where:** West Wing Room 4 A, Bharat Mandapam  
**Key speakers:** V Anantha Nageswaran, Chief Economic Advisor, India; Sanjeev Bhikchandani, InfoEdge; Anurag Mairal, Stanford University of Medicine; Shashi Shekhar Vempati, AI4India

#### Fireside chat

- When:** Feb 19 (12:04 PM - 12:24 PM); **Where:** Plenary Hall, Bharat Mandapam  
**Key speakers:** Dario Amodei, CEO, Anthropic; Nandan Nilekani, co-founder and Chairman, Infosys
- AI for economic development and social good**  
**When:** Feb 20 (9:30 AM - 10:30 AM); **Where:** L1 Meeting Room No. 7,

#### Bharat Mandapam

- Key speakers:** Ashwini Vaishnaw, IT, I&B, Railways Minister; Anshuman Awasthi, Mercedes-Benz Research & Development India; Karsten Wildberger, Federal Minister for Digital Transformation and Government Modernisation, Germany; Dattatri Salagame, Bosch Global Software Technologies; Sindhu Gangadharan, SAP Labs India

tion on what Electronics and IT Secretary S Krishnan calls "People, Planet, and Progress" — to build AI solutions that focus on on-ground issues. The approach reflects India's position both as an aspiring AI power and a voice for the Global South.

According to Abhishek Singh, CEO of IndiaAI Mission, one of the focus areas would be the democratisation of AI, apart from showcasing real-world AI solutions that Indian engineers and talent are building locally.

"The AI that we are using at present is

### In store

The summit will feature a startup showcase of more than 500 AI startups and host around 500 sessions

such that it's developed in and by a few countries and the majority of the world is just AI users. If the datasets are not inclusive, bias will be there in the outputs. The issue with regard to democratising AI resources in the form of datasets of compute, models, algorithms and applications becomes a key theme for the summit," Singh told *The Indian Express*.

### What to expect from the Summit

Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

## 'AI debate has moved from use to accountability... that is progress'



EXPERT EXPLAINS  
BY ANNIE HARTLEY

THE GREATEST opportunity of using Artificial Intelligence in the health sector lies at the community level, where it can strengthen health literacy and democratise access to medical information, **Prof. Annie Hartley**, a medical doctor and director of the Laboratory for Intelligent Global Health and Humanitarian Response Technologies (LiGHT) at the Lausanne-based Swiss public research university EPFL, told **Soumyarendra Barik** and **Anil Sasi**. Hartley is attending the AI Impact Summit.

### What was the starting point of your project on translating AI to clinical practice?

"Thou shalt not eat insulin on a Tuesday." That was the answer a chatbot gave when my medical colleague in Ethiopia asked, in her own language, how to manage a diabetic crisis in a child. It likely reflects the reality that, in that language, among the little digitised text available for AI to train on is the Bible.

Frontier AI systems are often impressive. But their accuracy is unevenly distributed. And in low-resource settings, er-

rors carry heavier consequences. There are fewer specialists, fewer safety nets, and less margin for harm.

LiGHT's initiative MOOVE, which stands for Massive Open Online Evaluation and Validation (a community-driven expert evaluation of specialist AI, which nudges large language models toward alignment ensuring transparency, contextualisation, and ownership), emerged from that need. It is a structured framework to test AI in real clinical settings, measure where it works and where it fails, and feed that evidence back into models to improve contextual relevance.

### In your experience so far trying to use AI in under-resourced and under-represented communities, what has been the response to such tech?

The response in under-resourced settings is typically much more pragmatic than ideological. Health workers adopt tools that function reliably in volatile environments: low connectivity, high workload, and limited infrastructure. They value systems that are freely accessible, low-friction, robust offline, and responsive in their own language, especially through voice-enabled interaction. They strongly resist duplicate workflows and any added administrative burden that does not clearly improve patient care.

Increasingly, clinicians are also asking deeper technical and policy questions: where is our data going, who owns it, who benefits from these multimillion-dollar systems, and what are their incentives?

### In mental healthcare

● When models operate in the mental health space outside formal care systems, and without mental health professionals involved in design and oversight, there is a risk that the AI becomes part of the psychological dynamic. It can reinforce dependency, particularly among children who may form emotional bonds with digital systems

● The danger is not just incorrect information. It is incorrect information delivered with fluency and authority, without supervision or escalation pathways. We must learn from real-world use and update both models and policy'

Ownership, governance, and public benefit are becoming primary concerns. That shift is fuelling demand for co-design, transparent validation, and benchmarks to support evidence-based choice in an increasingly noisy market.

### What parts of the healthcare system in developing economies are ripe for disruption due to AI? Is it tricky in places like India, where many people may not have a high degree of technical proficiency?

I think the greatest opportunity lies at the community level. AI has the potential to strengthen health literacy, improve patient navigation, and democratise access to reliable medical information.

Technical proficiency is no longer the main barrier. Few people were trained to use messaging apps like WhatsApp; they learned intuitively.

The more pressing challenge is not user proficiency but model proficiency: accuracy in low-resource languages, sensitivity to accent, and cultural nuance.

### With general purpose generative AI platforms readily available to a wide audience, including children, what are some risks you foresee?

I worry that we do not yet know how much to worry...We lack systematic evidence about how these tools influence health decisions, delay care, shape mental health, or alter help-seeking behaviour. Without evidence, policy risks swinging between overly restrictive and dangerously

has billed the summit as the biggest so far, and had last month said the government had received a phenomenal response from across the world.

Governments, industry leaders, researchers, civil society organisations, and international institutions are set to attend the event. It is expected to see participation from over 100 countries, including 15 to 20 heads of government — including French President Emmanuel Macron and Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. More than 50 ministers from various countries, and more than 40 CEOs of leading global and Indian companies, such as Google's Sundar Pichai, Anthropic's Dario Amodei, Microsoft's Brad Smith, and Adobe's Shantanu Narayen (**see box**) will attend. PM Modi will inaugurate the event, and is also likely to host a dinner and address a CEO roundtable. A Chinese delegation is also attending after India sent a formal invitation to Beijing.

The event will culminate on Friday, with the adoption of a declaration statement. New Delhi may have to be careful in its language as the US and UK declined to sign the declaration at the summit in France last year, due to concerns over Europe's regulatory approach to AI.

There has already been a minor damper to the event, with Nvidia's CEO Jensen Huang cancelling his India visit and pulling out of the summit at the last minute due to "unforeseen circumstances". Huang, whose company and the graphics processing units that it designs are at the heart of the AI revolution, was among the biggest summit attractions.

India is also likely to see some companies launch domestically developed AI language models. Of the 12 applications to build Large and Small Language Models that India has approved, some are expected to see official launches. This includes sovereign AI models being built by Sarvam AI and BharatGen. There could also be some hardware-related announcements, centred around expanding India's data centre capacity.

The event will include deliberations on multiple themes, with working groups for AI and its impact on work, trust and safety protocols for AI models, and the usage of AI in specific industries.

The summit will feature a startup showcase of more than 500 AI startups and host around 500 sessions alongside the main programme, making it one of the most comprehensive AI-focused global convenings, it said in a press statement.

permissive.

### Global health research bodies and NGOs have often faced criticism for being one-sided or even extractive. Where do you see this debate headed?

The debate has shifted from whether to use AI to who controls it, who benefits, and who is accountable. That is progress.

Criticism of extractive AI models is often justified. Too often, data leaves a country, models are trained elsewhere, and local health systems receive a finished product without ownership, capacity building, or governance authority. This pattern concentrates power while externalising risk. Public data should serve the public good. That requires infrastructure designed for transparency and shared control. This is where fully open models matter.

Initiatives such as Apertus, developed through a collaboration between the Swiss Institutes of Technology (ETH Zürich and EPFL) and the SwissAI initiative, demonstrate that high-quality AI can be built and released as public infrastructure. Fully open means more than publishing results. It includes clear documentation of training data sources and limitations, open model weights, reproducible training pipelines, licensing that permits adaptation, and the ability for independent groups to audit, fine-tune, and redeploy systems locally.

FULL INTERVIEW ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED)

● CULTURE

## The four stanzas of Vande Mataram: A truncated song, a long-running row

Asad Rehman  
New Delhi, February 15

THE CENTRE'S recent directive on singing all six stanzas of the National Song, *Vande Mataram*, at official functions has sparked objections.

The directive, which notified the first set of protocols for singing the National Song, stated that the full version of *Vande Mataram* — lasting 3 minutes and 10 seconds — must be played before *Jana Gana Mana* when both are part of official functions, and that the audience shall stand in attention when it is performed.

So far, at public functions, only the first two stanzas of *Vande Mataram* have been sung. Later parts of the composition con-

tain religious imagery, which have been a source of contention.

### The composition

*Vande Mataram* (meaning 'mother, I bow to thee') was written in Sanskritised Bangla by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1875. Seven years later, it was included in his novel *Anandamath*, which tells the story of the late-18th century Sanyasi Rebellion, a series of armed uprisings against the East India Company overlords and their puppet rulers.

*Vande Mataram* emerged as a rallying cry during the Swadeshi movement, becoming closely associated with the freedom struggle.

While the Constituent Assembly ac-



Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote *Vande Mataram* in 1875. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

corded the song equal respect alongside the National Anthem, there was no compulsory etiquette, posture, or legal

requirement associated with singing or reciting it.

### The objections

The opposition to *Vande Mataram* from Muslim scholars is rooted in the interpretation that the song's imagery of "Mother India" as a goddess violates the basic Islamic tenet of strict monotheism, which forbids followers from worshipping anyone other than Allah.

Then comes the issue of the latter stanzas. The fourth stanza says the motherland's image is carved out in every shrine, and the fifth likens the motherland to goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

This invocation of Hindu goddesses has sparked objections from Muslim scholars.

### What Muslim organisations have said so far

The Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind and All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) have condemned the directive. The Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind said the direction was a "blatant attack" on the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution.

The AIMPLB said it was against secular values, contrary to Supreme Court judgments, and directly conflicting with the religious beliefs of Muslims.

### The political debate

In December, Parliament held a debate to mark 150 years of the National Song.

In Lok Sabha on December 22, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused Jawahar-

lal Nehru of truncating the song under pressure from the Muslim League.

"In 1937, Mohammad Ali Jinnah opposed it. Instead of condemning the slogans of the Muslim League and expressing loyalty towards *Vande Mataram*, he [Nehru] wrote to Netaji Subhas Bose, agreeing with Jinnah. He wrote that the context of *Anandamath* can irritate Muslims," the PM said.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi countered him by quoting additional lines from the same letter, in which Nehru said the "outcry against *Bande Mataram* is to a large extent a manufactured one by the communalists". Nehru also criticised the Muslim League's "low type of communalism" in the letter.

# The Editorial Page

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## Global South must seize its AI moment



AKASH KAPUR AND ARVIND NARAYANAN

**S**OME 35,000 delegates will arrive in Delhi this week for the fourth Global AI Summit. It is the first time the summit is being held in the Global South. Many of its themes reflect that orientation.

India has been eager to frame the summit as a marker of a new approach to AI. Through its work on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), India has argued that it is pioneering an alternative model for digital transformation: One that highlights public purpose over private profit. Many observers have suggested that DPI could offer lessons for building more inclusive and representative AI.

Questions about the role of the state are central. In principle, DPI is not only about government: It emphasises public interest rather than public ownership, and its goal is to create more competitive markets. In practice, the state plays a decisive role, whether through policy or funding.

The apparent tension in a framework that emphasises markets yet relies on the state is particularly acute when it comes to public investments. AI is capital intensive, and it emerges at a moment of global fiscal constraint. How much should taxpayers underwrite the development of public AI systems, and how should policymakers weigh the risks of crowding out private investment against the benefits of building shared capacity? As governments around the world consider alternatives to proprietary AI, does DPI offer guidance on how to finance these systems?

Our answer, in brief, is that DPI does offer a useful framework for thinking about public investment in AI — but only to a point. We encourage governments, including India's, to draw seriously on the lessons of DPI, but we caution against treating DPI as a comprehensive blueprint or checklist. Another pitfall is for investment to focus exclusively on fostering AI innovation; often, it is the rate of diffusion that will ultimately determine AI's impact.

Much of the conversation around DPI emphasises its public dimension. But when considering its lessons for AI, the infrastructural component is equally important. At its core, the DPI argument is that some technologies are foundational and cross-cutting: They support a wide range of downstream uses and function as neutral, open platforms for innovation. Analogies are drawn to roads and bridges; the World Bank describes DPI as "digital plumbing".

Many elements of AI do lend themselves to this infrastructural interpretation — but that does not necessarily make them all suitable candidates for public investment. We are particularly sceptical of two categories often favoured by governments: Large frontier language models and data centres.

Governments typically justify investments in domestic compute on grounds of strategic autonomy or digital sovereignty. The impulse is understandable, especially in an unstable geopolitical environment, but the actual autonomy granted is illusory. The AI stack is complex and multi-layered; control over one element — compute — does not translate automatically into control over downstream components like models, data, or applications. Moreover, demand for inference is variable and unpredictable, making the quest to secure autonomy through domestic compute at best partial, prone to both underutilisation and shortages.

**Infrastructure-based investments offer the highest leverage, especially when they embrace lighter forms. But governments must also step outside the DPI framework to make targeted interventions**

## Artificial intelligence's larger promise — together, let's keep it



GUY PARMELIN

**T**HIS WEEK, I travel to India for the AI Impact Summit, and I do so with a deep sense of purpose. This gathering represents a meaningful opportunity to shape technology in the service of humanity, guided by an inspiring theme: *Sarvajana Hitaya, Sarvajana Sukhaya* (welfare for all, happiness for all). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of India for hosting this landmark event.

What makes AI technology revolutionary is not just its speed or application potential, but also its direct impact on our daily lives — for example, in education, healthcare, and how we work and communicate. When we govern AI wisely, it can drive innovation, reduce inequality, and create prosperity that reaches beyond privileged circles. But this outcome requires deliberate choices, shared principles, and sustained cooperation.

With an approach based on the needs of diverse populations, India is a major force in AI development. Its work on AI applications in agriculture, rural healthcare, and multi-lingual education reflects the understanding that technology must serve real people facing real challenges. These solutions, developed in one of the world's most complex democracies, offer lessons for us all.

Switzerland is committed to multilateralism in AI governance. With a view to fostering international cooperation and dialogue, we participate in various international fora and processes on AI governance. We partner with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) on its annual AI for Good Summit, where representatives from over 30 UN and other institutions meet in Geneva to discuss concrete projects where AI can meet UN development goals. At the Council of Europe, Switzerland led the negotiations on the first legally binding convention on AI, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The treaty lays the common ground for all countries wanting to foster innovation while respecting our shared values.

AI offers enormous opportunities for society and the economy; to seize them, we need to foster trustworthy use of AI. Switzerland

believes in a balanced regulatory approach that supports innovation while addressing challenges with precision. To this end, regulation must be as technology-neutral as possible — targeting the negative consequences of specific AI applications rather than the technology itself. We therefore need to tackle the technological, geopolitical, and societal risks around AI with care as well as with international cooperation.

This is where International Geneva plays a vital role. Geneva, with its rich ecosystem of multistakeholder actors in the field of new technologies, is ideally placed for discussions around AI governance. The ITU addresses the intersection of AI with telecommunications infrastructure. The International Organisation for Standardisation and the International Electrotechnical Commission are currently working on global AI standards. The WIPO tackles IP questions, the ILO examines effects on the labour market, and the WHO oversees data governance related to health. This unique ecosystem and Switzerland's desire to further strengthen international AI governance is also the reason we plan to host the next AI Summit in Geneva.

Switzerland and India share important values. Both our countries recognise the delicate balance between innovation and responsibility. Technological change can transform entire sectors. The question is always: Who benefits, and who bears the cost? With AI, we have an opportunity to answer that question more equitably than in past technological revolutions, but only if we build the right framework conditions now.

From Bletchley Park to Seoul, from Paris to Delhi: Each builds on the last, deepens our shared understanding and strengthens our collective commitment. Switzerland is honoured to continue this journey alongside India and all our other partners to ensure that AI serves as a force for human flourishing, economic opportunity, and social progress for all. This is the promise of *Sarvajana Hitaya, Sarvajana Sukhaya* — a promise we must keep together.

The writer is President of Switzerland

## Maternity Benefit Act is progressive. Empathy is key



VIJAYA KISHORE RAHATKAR

**F**OR DECADES, India has celebrated the academic brilliance of its women. They consistently top school boards, civil services, medical entrances, and university examinations. And yet, when we look at corporate boardrooms or senior decision-making spaces, their presence thins out sharply. Motherhood, for many women, is the point at which this quiet exit begins.

The Maternity Benefit Act, with its provision of six months of paid leave, is undeniably progressive and among the more generous protections globally. But no law can legislate the emotional reality of a new mother. Many return carrying guilt, anxiety, and exhaustion, and are seen as less reliable. A new mother needs reassurance both at home, where she must be encouraged to believe that seeking professional growth is not selfishness, and within her organisation, where she must feel confident that thinking about her child does not diminish her capability or commitment.

Although the Act extends to almost all wage-earning women except the self-employed, the quality of support they receive varies dramatically. A woman in a permanent government post enjoys not only maternity leave but access to long-term childcare leave of up to 730 days, with full pay for the first year and partial pay thereafter, providing her with a relatively structured path back into her career. In smaller private establishments, while employers may comply with the Act, this does not equate to acceptance. Many women return to find their responsibilities reassigned, their promotion prospects diminished, and their growth trajectory slowed. For the Act to succeed, empathy needs to be woven into organisational behaviour. Women need workplaces that believe ambition and motherhood can coexist with dignity.

One of the most significant barriers for new mothers is the lack of dependable, affordable childcare. Yet this challenge presents an extraordinary opportunity. Millions of unskilled and semi-skilled women in India are seeking employment. Through training, certification, and skilling modules, they can form a new, formalised workforce of caregivers. It has the potential to become a major employment generator for women and a critical support pillar for working mothers. Importantly, empowering one woman to work should not come at the cost of another's exploitation.

In recent years, the rise of "DINK" (Double Income, No Kids) couples has often been portrayed as a lifestyle preference. But for many women, it is a choice born of fear of career stagnation and societal expectations that motherhood is a woman's sole responsibility. While laws can protect wages and jobs, they cannot dictate how families behave. The burden of motherhood grows heavier when a woman is expected to project an image of "effortless coping" as she balances childcare and work pressure. Unless families and workplaces share this load, women will continue to drop out quietly, painfully, and permanently.

**For the Act to succeed, empathy needs to be woven into organisational behaviour. Women need workplaces that believe ambition and motherhood can coexist with dignity**

The writer is chairperson, National Commission for Women

## 40 YEARS AGO

February 16, 1986



### New Delhi riots

NEW DELHI was quiet under a strict curfew but there were signs of tension in several areas. The police said they had made 180 arrests, raising the number of people taken into custody in connection with the violence to 260. The curfew was clamped after mobs protesting against the opening of a place of worship in Faizabad went on the rampage, stoning police and buses and forcing shops to close.

### Barnala on extremists

PUNJAB CHIEF Minister Surjit Singh Barnala

warned that his government would not hesitate to take "some very harsh steps" against extremists who he said had declared a war against the state. The CM said a "wounded and bleeding Punjab" had been bequeathed to him by the previous government.

### Violence in municipal election

ELECTIONS TO THE Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad were held amidst widespread impersonation of voters and violence. The election was marred by booth capturing, and in two places the police fired in the air to disperse warring groups of workers. In two different incidents, bombs were hurled by TDP

workers injuring five persons. Over 65 per cent of 15.16 lakh voters exercised their franchise in the election held after a lapse of 22 years on a directive from the AP High Court.

### Hegde's dilemma

THE LEADERSHIP OF the Karnataka Janata legislature party is likely to be thrust once again on Ramakrishna Hegde despite his reluctance. Hegde, in a final bid to convince his party men, decided to stay away from the meeting of the legislature party in Bangalore. State party president Chandra Shekhar said the central leadership would not issue any directive to the MLAs.



## FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



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## Trade pact opens doors with caution, and with quota systems, in agriculture



**FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH**  
BY ASHOK GULATI

**L**ET ME state at the very outset that anyone who thinks exports are always good but imports are bad does not understand trade policies. There has been a lot of noise and commotion in Parliament over the India-US trade deal. The opposition parties, led by the Leader of Opposition, feel that the deal is a total surrender. But the government benches projected it as the best deal under the given circumstances. The truth may be somewhere in between. There is always give-and-take in any trade deal. This one is no different.

India had to give in to the US demand that it buy more energy, aircraft, and high-tech equipment. We had to agree to show our "intent" or "commitment" to buy \$500 billion worth of goods from the US over the next five years. That looks huge as our current goods imports from the US are well under \$50 billion a year. But in return, India got the US to slash its import tariffs on Indian goods to 18 per cent, which is very much in line with our competitors in South and Southeast Asia, and almost half of what is being imposed on China. This, the government says, is the biggest victory and opens doors for significantly higher exports from India to the largest economy in the world — the US.

There are also strong apprehensions expressed by opposition parties as well as by some farmer groups on the agricultural segment of the deal. Let me dwell on that and try to remove some misgivings, although I know that those who are bent to oppose will always oppose, no matter what the empirical evidence suggests.

What are the fears on the agri-trade front? First, the US will flood the Indian market with its agri-produce and our farmers will be severely hurt. Second, it will

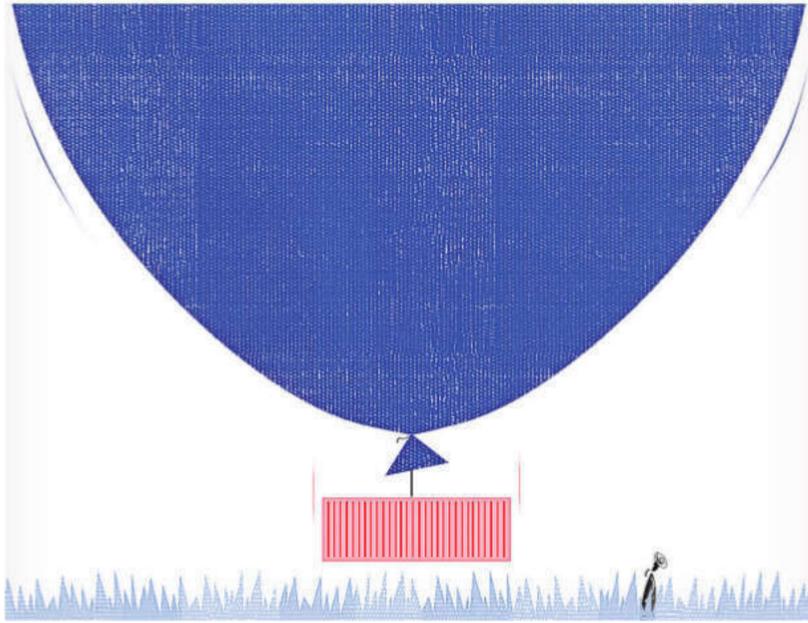


ILLUSTRATION: CR SASIKUMAR

throw its genetically modified (GM) crops or their derivatives like soya oil and dried distillers' grains (DDGs) into our food system, which will put the health of millions of our citizens at risk. Third, farms in the US are very large, mechanised, and receive large subsidies — our small farmers cannot compete with them and will thus lose their livelihoods on a large scale. Let me discuss each of these fears, and how much truth there is to them.

In the calendar year 2024, India exported goods worth roughly \$81 billion to the US and imported goods worth \$43 billion, leading to a trade surplus of about \$38 billion. Out of this, agri-exports were about \$5.7 billion and imports roughly \$2.1 billion, giving India an agri-trade surplus of \$3.6 billion. In the trade deal, India has largely opened crops that are

**Although more will be known only when the fine print is out, my understanding is that lowered duties will be accompanied by import quotas, safeguarding our farmers adequately**

either not grown in the country or grown on very small areas, like tree nuts and berries. Almonds have already been coming to India at low duty of about 10 per cent in ad-valorem terms (Rs 42/kg). Walnuts, pistachios, pecans, cranberries and blueberries are likely to attract similar duty (10 to 15 per cent) and there will be some imports of those. But they are not going to impact our farmers much. Concerns are raised about apples, and their duties are likely to come down from 50 per cent to 25 per cent or so, although more will be known only when the fine print is out. My understanding is that lowered duties will be accompanied by import quotas, safeguarding our farmers adequately.

The other concern when it comes to agri-imports is that of GM crops or their derivatives like

soya oil and DDGs. It may be noted that India has not allowed direct import of GM corn or GM soya, which are living modified organisms, and which can be seeded to grow GM crops in India. But soya oil or DDGs, which are permitted to be imported, actually have been coming for quite some time. It may be noted that when GM soya or GM corn are processed into oil or DDGs, traces of GM are either absent or negligible, but more importantly, they are no longer living modified organisms. They cannot be germinated, and there is no adverse health impact either on poultry, cattle or human beings as per the US Food and Drug Administration. Some scientists and many NGOs have reservations on this, but the fact remains that GM crops are being grown in 76 countries over 200 million hectares and these crops range from papaya and brinjal to corn, soyabean, etc. And the people of those countries are not dying by consuming these GM crops.

The third point is about competition: Whether our small farmers can compete with large US farmers, who are subsidised. It may be noted that our small farmers have done reasonably well in global competition. Our overall agri-exports to the world were about \$52 billion and imports about \$37 billion in 2024. The US is a net importer of agri-products (\$59 billion in 2024). We also give a lot of input subsidies to our farmers, be it in the form of fertiliser subsidy, credit subsidy or insurance premium subsidy, and even direct income support in the form of PM-KISAN. If we want to retain the competitive strength of our smallholders, we need to invest much more in agri-R&D. It may be worth noting that US GM corn and soyabean productivity is three times higher than in India. It is better that we make smart choices in our domestic expenditures related to agriculture.

Overall, I find the trade deal a smart move by India, at least in the agri-segment. It has avoided major concerns, and opened the doors with caution and with quota systems. Farmers need not worry much today. However, more revelations may come by March-end.

*Gulati is distinguished professor at ICRIER. Views are personal*

## Beyond the deal: US-China relations impact India-US ties



ISHAN BAKSHI

**T**HE BROAD contours of the India-US trade deal have been agreed upon. Never mind that the granular details are sketchy, the announcement itself is noteworthy. With agreements with the US, the EU and the UK, India is now more closely integrated with the Western world than ever before. There is, after all, a convergence of economic and strategic interests.

The contentious issue of Russian oil, however, remains. Agreeing to stop or even drastically cut down its crude imports would mean that the government has concluded that the cost-benefit ratio of buying large quantities of Russian crude has now turned adverse. Perhaps the pain of the imposition of the tariffs and the penalty, the dwindling of foreign capital flows and the sharp decline in the rupee was simply too much to bear. There is also the visa issue and the implications of US President Donald Trump's policies for services exports and remittances — the two bright spots in the economy — to contend with. Domestic concerns on these issues had been mounting.

The question now is whether the agreement is a whole-hearted or hesitant embrace. Have long-held ideological positions been cast aside?

It does appear that both sides are moving ahead with caution. There is a trust deficit. India won't find it easy to paper over the bitterness of the last several months. It has also underlined its strategic options by affirming strong relations with Russia — whether falling crude imports will affect the relationship with its top defence supplier is unknown — and improving equations with China.

But therein lies the conundrum. US-China relations lie at the heart of the India-US relationship.

Decades ago, the US facilitated China's entry to the WTO. American companies shifted their manufacturing to China in search of greater efficiency. They provided the capital and technical assistance, in part, to build up the Chinese economy. While the US benefited greatly from this, it has turned

out to be a strategic mistake. Propped up by enormous subsidies and an undervalued currency, Chinese manufacturing has done immense damage to the economic and social fabric of the US. The China shock has rendered millions unemployed, destroying communities. In recent years, faultlines between the two countries have only deepened. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the US-China economic clash will be the



major global contest over the coming decades.

Against this backdrop, the question is: Will the US government and American firms make the same huge bets on India as they did decades ago with China? And that too without any guarantees that history won't repeat itself? The strategic choice that is now likely being exercised is almost forced by the US. Moreover, in today's fractured geopolitical environment, where resilience of supply chains is being prioritised over efficiency, where investment flows are driven by friendshoring, will the transfer of capital and technology from the US to India be at the same level as it was in the case of China? More so when the US is trying to strengthen itself and rebuild its industrial base?

While long-term trends may well point towards greater strategic and economic integration between India and the US, it's difficult to say how this will play out in the immediate future. But from an investor's perspective, what will certainly not help India's case is issues like the Tiger Global tax ruling, especially when there seems to have been a fundamental reassessment of India's growth prospects by domestic as well as foreign investors. Lacklustre investments, the outflow of capital, a sluggish stock market and the sharp fall in currency all point towards this. The existing engines of growth have been looking shaky. Just the release of 11 new plugins of an AI model was enough for investors to question the prospects of the Indian IT sector. The strategy of higher public capex and providing incentives via the PLI scheme also seems to have run its course. When sections of India Inc publicly complain about not feeling the 8 per cent growth, the anxiety runs deep.

But, as it happens, the government now has a growth strategy. The building blocks of an export-oriented growth model that has powered the rise of many nations are now in place. China plus one may now be a real possibility. But this requires liberalising on the domestic front as well.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Funding the WHO

TODAY, THE World Health Organisation is facing a significant funding crisis ("WHO needs a financial model less vulnerable", IE, February 13). This is primarily driven by its heavy reliance on volatile and earmarked voluntary contributions. Developing alternative funding mechanisms to focus its transition toward diversified, multilateral, and regional models can plug this gap. Also, diversifying financial partnerships from the EU and China, besides utilising South-South cooperation channels such as the BRICS Health Fund or India-Africa initiatives to pool resources among low- and middle-income countries, can fill this void.

*Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh*

### A pricy reality

INFLATION, ONE of the most closely watched macroeconomic indicators, is something most people deal with in their daily lives and routine expenses. For the common man, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) reflects the changing cost of basic needs such as food, rent, and fuel ("New inflation series is a welcome update", IE, February 13). CPI-based inflation is also the primary indicator guiding the RBI's interest-rate decisions. Therefore, when the CPI reflects reality, policies respond better to what people are truly experiencing.

*SS Paul, Nadia*

### The shared past

THE DISCOVERY of Tamil Brahmi inscriptions in Egypt is a reminder of India's early global links through trade and travel. ("I was here", wrote ancient Tamils in Egypt," IE, February 13) Such findings deserve careful study and wider public awareness. Our institutions should invest more in collaborative research and ensure proper documentation and preservation. Universities can also integrate these discoveries into history curricula to encourage informed interest rather than narrow pride. A balanced, evidence-based approach will deepen understanding of our shared past.

*Abbharna Barathi, Chennai*



SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

TARIQUE RAHMAN, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia, is poised to become Bangladesh's next leader.

In his maiden speech after his return to the country after 17 years of self-imposed exile in England, Rahman recalled the famous "I Have a Dream" speech of American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. However, he remarked that while MLK had a dream, he himself had a plan to build a nation that is safe and inclusive for all citizens, irrespective of faith and region. The moment has now arrived to test whether that plan can translate into reality.

On the domestic front, Bangladesh today faces deep polarisation along political, cultural, and religious lines. The new regime must therefore undertake bold, innovative interventions during the initial "honeymoon period" of governance. Despite his electoral success, Rahman is nowhere close to the mass popularity once commanded by Bangladesh's founding prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who faced his first public protest in September 1972, merely eight months into office. Public expectations today are no less demanding than those at the birth of the nation.

Beyond the familiar challenges of corruption, unemployment, and law and order, the most pressing issue confronting Tarique Rahman's government is how to deal with Sheikh

## Under Tarique Rahman, Bangladesh has a choice

Hasina and the Awami League. There is an uncomfortable truth in Hasina's recent assertion that "a government born of exclusion cannot unite a divided nation". Although the 2026 elections may be the most credible since 2009, their legitimacy would have been far stronger had the Awami League participated.

Rahman now faces a critical choice: Pursue a path of political vengeance, as has often been the case in Pakistan, or adopt a reconciliatory approach inspired by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation initiatives. The latter could involve granting Hasina a pardon, allowing her return to Dhaka but barring her and her family from future political participation while reintegrating the Awami League into the democratic process.

One of the major structural obstacles to democracy in Bangladesh, as in much of South Asia, is dynastic politics. Denying future political roles to Hasina's family would mark a significant step toward de-dynastification. However, such reform would require Rahman to initiate similar internal reforms within the BNP. Without dismantling dynastic dominance, Bangladesh's democracy will remain incomplete.

On the geopolitical front, the harsh reality is that most nation-states today are compelled to navigate great-power rivalries, often at a heavy cost. Venezuela, Ukraine, and Iran offer stark examples. Bangladesh is no exception. Rahman's challenge will be balancing

relations with key regional and global actors, particularly India, China, Pakistan, and the United States. During his tenure as interim head of government, Muhammad Yunus signalled a shift toward closer ties with China and Pakistan, a move that has not gone down well with India. Meanwhile, in her first interview after arriving in Delhi, Hasina alleged American involvement in her exit, though her own governance failures were significant.

For Rahman, repairing India-Bangladesh relations must be a top priority, perhaps even drawing lessons from aspects of Hasina's earlier diplomacy. Two issues will be decisive: the treatment of religious minorities, particularly Hindus, and Bangladesh's posture toward militant groups operating in India's Northeast. Never has it been clearer that minority rights across South Asia are deeply interconnected. South Asian leaders must reflect collectively on how to address the issue in a long-term fashion. Under Yunus, Dhaka not only failed to curb violence against Hindus but at times appeared complicit, despite his conciliatory rhetoric.

The only durable guarantee for minority safety lies in restoring Bangladesh's secular constitutional ethos — an ambition that appears increasingly difficult given the growing influence of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Yet without this foundational shift, any democratic transformation in Bangladesh will remain elusive.

*The writer teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and is the author of the forthcoming book Dhaka Is Burning*

**The critical choice: Pursue a path of political vengeance, as has often been the case in Pakistan, or adopt a reconciliatory approach inspired by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation initiatives**

## I don't know my neighbour, and that's ok



RITUPARNA PATGIRI

I REGULARLY oscillate between two neighbourhoods, one where I grew up and the other on the campus where I work. I have become a regular commuter between the two ends of the city, divided by the mighty Brahmaputra. Both neighbourhoods present intriguing ideas, similar yet different at times, but mostly revolving around my gendered identity.

In the neighbourhood I grew up in,

casual strolls and visits to the local grocery stores were occasions to start a conversation. However, their main interest lies either in my marriage prospects or my life on the IIT campus. I often think about how many of these neighbours used to notice boys visiting my home. A similar curiosity marks their gaze when male friends are seen walking with me in the neighbourhood. The enquiries about marriage are driven by the notion that I am of marriageable age and "settled" in my career.

During my three-year stay in a flat in Delhi, I managed to evade these questions. While the gaze on male friends is constant across cities, my posi-

tion as a migrant in Delhi created a sense of anonymity.

Later, during my stay in Patiala, I realised that this anonymity was not connected to a migrant status. My landlady had no hesitation in asking me who the male friend was when she saw a colleague dropping me off one day. I had come a little late to my rented apartment — 9 pm, very late by her standards. However, she couldn't say anything as she got to know that my

**Neighbourhood relations, for me, are determined by avoidance and not getting to know each other better**

parents had no "problem" with it.

In Patiala, it was difficult to find a rented house with a separate entrance, which meant that the landlords could monitor the tenant's entry and exit. It was one of the reasons I chose a house with a separate entrance. Avoiding the gaze was key. But even then, I was "caught."

In Guwahati, often, on hearing that I live on the IIT campus, which is almost 30 kilometres from my parents' house, most neighbours ask why I chose to live on my own. They also express curiosity about the frequency of my home visits. Here, the neighbour's gaze is even sharper as it is my own city. Therefore, when I moved to the campus, I was relieved that I would get some privacy. But, as I have gradually real-

ised, even campus life is surveilled. That is why, when my parents said that I should get to know my neighbours, I hesitated. I didn't want to become too familiar with them as I anticipated intrusion into my personal life. As young, independent women, we have this anxiety that familiarity will invite unsolicited comments. I have deliberately avoided getting to know my neighbours more as a survival strategy. Sometimes I ask myself, should I know my neighbours better? But then, at what cost? Neighbourhood relations, for me, are determined by avoidance and not getting to know each other better.

*The writer teaches Sociology at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Guwahati*

## NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

## WHY ABHISHEK SINGH

Abhishek Singh, Additional Secretary at the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and CEO of the IndiaAI Mission, is one of India's foremost voices on artificial intelligence (AI) and technology policy. An alumnus of IIT Kanpur and the Harvard Kennedy School, last year, he featured in *Time* magazine's list of the 100 most influential voices in AI globally. Spearheading the India AI Impact Summit 2026, which opens in Delhi today, he is at the centre of the country's efforts to shape its AI ambitions

# 'Whether it's Nvidia, Anthropic, OpenAI or Google, companies are looking at India to hire AI engineers'

Ahead of the AI Impact Summit that opens in Delhi today, Abhishek Singh, CEO, IndiaAI Mission, spoke on democratising artificial intelligence for the Global South and preparing India's workforce for an AI-driven future. This session was moderated by Soumyarendra Barik, Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express*

APIs, coupled with GenAI services, we are looking at a scenario where voice-enabled services will be possible. If through voice people can query information by unstructured data input and get their output, it will be transformational because the majority of the governance challenges in the last mile is because of asymmetry in access to information.

**Aanchal Magazine: Can stronger privacy rules coexist with innovation in AI?**

Definitely. AI is trained on data and you can't use personal data to train AI applications. You need to allow only anonymised non-personal data for training AI applications... otherwise, if AI models start getting to know about each individual, the risks of misusing the information goes up.

Having a global governance framework becomes very important. Having empowered institutions with the regulatory capacity, the tech capacity to be able to test such things with regard to privacy norms, becomes very important. That's where summits like this also become very important because it brings everyone together.

**Sukalp Sharma: Beyond the IT sector workforce, how challenging would it be to make the legacy workforce in other sectors ready for a future that will have heavy AI use? What is the government's plan and vision?**

AI skills will be required in almost every sector. I'll give you an example. Last year, under the future skills pillar of the AI Mission, we launched a fellowship programme for AI projects for undergraduate,

postgraduate students and research scholars. When we announced it in July, only engineering students were eligible. Within two months, I received queries from five students at AIIMS who were working on AI projects. When we examined their work, it was fully justified. This shows that AI cuts across domains and disciplines.

Students graduating today need basic AI skills. That is why we have worked with the UGC and AICTE to ensure AI, data science and data analytics become part of the curriculum, so graduates are job-ready. At the school level, CBSE has introduced AI from Class V onwards and already has it in Classes 10 and 12. We also launched the Yuva AI programme to provide basic AI skills to everyone.

**Harikishan Sharma: Math education is necessary for anyone entering the field of AI. As the CEO of IndiaAI Mission, how do you see the current status of math education in India, particularly in schools? What should be done to improve the quality of math education, given India's ambitions in AI?**

Essential math statistics skills for building AI applications and math skills are required in almost every domain. What we need to do for improving math education is to first ensure sufficient numbers of math teachers and that they are trained with the relevant pedagogy skills, ensuring that the curriculum remains balanced.

I foresee that AI tutors will address the challenges of shortage of quality teachers, especially science teachers, math teachers, not only in the remotest parts of the country but even the best of the schools where the teachers don't have the ability to personalise their teaching to the ability of the students.

**Soumyarendra Barik: Since G20, India has aspired to be the leading voice of the Global South. Yet, we compete with China but we are miles behind in most sectors. Even in AI, China appears to have a significant lead. How can India begin to close this gap?**

When we built digital public infrastructure and the India stack, the whole world at the end of G20 was looking at India. India has built the MOSIP platform to provide ID to 28 countries and several countries are replicating our UPI models, Digilocker models. The advantage that we have over other countries is trust. Many countries trust our digital capabilities. We are regarded as an IT superpower and Indian engineers enjoy a very strong reputation.

We do realise that there are countries like China also who might be doing the same thing, but our goal is not to compete with China. Our goal is to build production solutions that work in India, and then we make it available for the global community. Just like the world embraced India's DPI at G20, I am sure they will be looking at India's AI innovations.

**Soumyarendra Barik: What are your expectations from the AI Impact Summit in India?**

This is the first summit that is being held in the Global South and in a developing country. The previous three summits were held at Bletchley Park in the UK, Seoul in Korea, and last year we co-chaired the French AI Action Summit. Naturally, with the first summit in the Global South, the issue of democratising AI, involving the Global South in the way AI is shaped, developed, deployed and regulated becomes very important. The AI that we are using presently is such that it's developed in and by a few countries and the majority of the world are just AI users. If the datasets are not inclusive, bias will be there in the output. The issue with regard to democratising AI resources in the form of datasets of compute, models, algorithms and applications becomes a key theme for the summit.

The second is to showcase India's prowess in AI — the ability of Indian engineers, human resource, IT companies. The real value from AI will come in building agentic AI, integrating AI agents with legacy IT systems and what can be called AI transformation services.

India has been at the forefront of providing IT and IT-enabled services, and people of Indian origin are part of almost every major big tech company globally. Given this advantage, we want to position India as a country where when anyone thinks of AI, they think of India.

Third is to attract the attention of investors towards India's AI ecosystem, which includes setting up data centres, investments in data centres, AI startups and AI applications. We are expecting to source a lot of investment for companies in India. If Indian talent is able to get funds, then we will be able to create IP also in India.

**Soumyarendra Barik: One conversation slowly eroding from public discourse is AI governance and regulation.**

Why are you thinking this is going down? In fact, what I feel is that the discussion is not centred only around regulation, safety and security, primarily because some of these issues, which were flagged at Bletchley Park, have been addressed in many ways. That led to the setting up of AI safety institutes in the US, the UK, Japan, Canada and France.

**P Vaidyanathan Iyer: Where does India currently stand in the global AI order and what leverage does it have to play a meaningful role in AI governance?**

If you look at rankings and various indices, the most prominent is the Stanford AI Index, which places India at number three in the AI Vibrancy Index. We are behind the US and China and I must say that the difference, the delta between where the US and China are and where India is, remains huge. Our prime strength is talent, AI skills, our workforce and our AI startups.

The other advantage we have is infrastructure because AI requires data centres and energy. The third advantage that we have is in building AI applications, as we have traditionally been very strong in developing software and writing code.

The elements where we needed to work were compute, with regard to having our own GPUs (Graphics Processing Units), our design capabilities, fabrication capabilities and frontier AI models. Frontier AI models were invested as part of the IndiaAI Mission because we believe we have the talent and the capability of building our own sovereign LLM, which will be hosted in India. It will be trained in Indian languages, Indian context and cultural heritage and traditions. We have supported around 12 projects in the IndiaAI Mission and a few of them have come out with their models.

The model which Sarvam AI has released this week has been ranking very high on various indices, especially related to Indian languages, whether it's for OCR, reading or speech-to-text or text-to-text. It has ranked much better than even OpenAI and Google's Gemini.

The only area where we don't have our own presence right now in the sovereign AI stack, is probably the GPUs, the ability to design our own AI compute and fabricate it in India. But we do believe that we have a very strong design strength in India. We are working towards a DLI scheme which will allow us to tap into this talent and ensure that we are able to design chips which can take AI workloads. Globally, only TSMC in Taiwan is the foundry where all these chips are taped out. We are much behind, at 28 nanometers right now, but we do believe that in three to five years we will be able to start designing our own chips.

## ON THE NEED TO UPSKILL FOR AI

*Our engineers and skilled workforce in the IT sector will have to think of how to compete against \$20 bots. We'll need to use coding agents to become better coders ourselves. It will require a massive amount of reskilling*



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

**Anil Sasi: When Anthropic released Claude Code and Cowork a few weeks ago, it had a significant impact on listed tech companies here. How do you envisage the risks posed by such innovations emerging in other markets, and how prepared are we as we move towards building our own sovereign large-language model?**

This is a very real risk and this is what we need to guard against because the ability of Claude Code to write software is surely going to impact entry-level software coders. We have six million people who are employed in this sector and many of them are at basic entry-level. Routine jobs will be done ultimately better by these coding agents. Our engineers and skilled workforce in the IT sector will have to think of how to compete against \$20 bots. We will need to use these coding agents to become better coders ourselves. It will require a massive amount of reskilling.

We are upgrading the curriculum in our engineering colleges. Engineers who are coming out from engineering colleges are not coming with just basic coding skills. They are coming with skills that can help them use these coding agents to build agents for specific use cases. It will require skills to be able to work on edge AI systems, because that is what the future is. If we are able to prepare our workforce for that, we'll be able to survive.

**Soumyarendra Barik: We have discussed the immediate harms of AI, such as deepfakes, misinformation. But beyond these, India's IT services sector clearly**

**needs to course correct; the Anthropic launch was a strong signal. What scares you most about AI in the long term?**

Of course, this whole ability of AI being able to take on the jobs that humans do. For example, take SAP implementation. A task that required large teams 15 years ago can now be done by just three or four engineers. While we talk about skilling, reskilling and upskilling, we also have to think even if people reskill or upskill, will there actually be enough jobs for them?

Second is this whole quest for Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). While we're investing a lot in building AGI, we're investing trillions of dollars in frontier AI labs, how will they monetise it? If suppose AGI comes in and we are able to find a cure for cancer or something, maybe that's something worth aspiring for. But without any such goal, if we are blowing up trillions of dollars, then it's very difficult to see how it will pay back.

One doesn't know how sustainable this model is and we have to guard against it. Luckily, for us, the leadership that we have, the direction that we got was to focus on using the technology for bettering the lives of people, ensuring that we are able to make the majority of Indians more efficient and productive by leveraging AI. So my fear, of course, is twofold. One, jobs and second, of course, the investments. How will they pay off?

**Siddharth Upasani: While Indian companies are still playing catch-up, much of the global AI investment**

**boom has bypassed them. Could this have long-term implications for India? Second, with reports that OpenAI has disbanded its mission alignment team, which focused on ensuring AGI benefits humanity, does this raise concerns about the direction in which we're headed?**

AGI was never our goal and I never felt that AGI is something that is worth aspiring for. There are many elements in AI, machine learning, deep learning, and natural language processing that have too much value within India, which can help us move forward.

With regard to the AI investment boom having missed India, I think that's a very short-term assessment. A lot of Indian startups, Indian entrepreneurs, are in fact relocating to India because of the investment climate. Every fund that I speak to, they are earmarking certain quantum of their funds for investing in Indian AI startups. You have already heard about big tech announcements by companies like Google, Microsoft and Amazon, which will invest almost \$70 billion in data centre infrastructure. As we move forward, I foresee many such investments coming into the Indian AI ecosystem, not only in infrastructure, energy and compute, but also for Indian startups working on foundation models, application layer and use cases.

**Sandeep Singh: You had said that the majority of the skills that we have are at basic coding level. In that case, do you think we are prepared to position**



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# Opinion

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2026



## AI BENEFITS FOR ALL

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres

“It's absolutely essential that AI develops itself to the benefit of everybody, everywhere and that countries in the Global South are part of the benefits of AI”

## Code and conscience

The first Global South AI summit should focus on inclusive innovation and shared global rules

**W**HEN INDIA CONVENES its first global summit on artificial intelligence (AI) today, it will signal that the conversation on AI governance is no longer the preserve of Silicon Valley, Brussels, or Beijing. For the first time, such a summit in the Global South seeks to place emerging economies not at the receiving end of rules, but at the rule-making table. AI is rapidly reshaping productivity, public services, and geopolitics. From generative models that draft contracts to algorithms that diagnose disease, the technology is already embedded in everyday life. Yet the frameworks governing it remain fragmented and dominated by advanced economies. India's moment, therefore, carries weight. As one of the world's largest digital societies, India has both scale and stakes. Its digital public infrastructure—from Aadhaar to the Unified Payments Interface—has shown how technology can be deployed inclusively and at a population scale. The challenge now is to ensure that AI builds on this foundation without deepening inequality or compromising rights.

The summit's significance lies in three broad areas. First, AI models are trained on data—and data reflects power. Languages, cultures, and contexts from the Global South are underrepresented in training datasets, leading to bias and exclusion. If India can rally countries across Africa, Latin America, and Asia around the need for linguistic and cultural diversity in AI, it would make the technology more equitable and more accurate. Second, for many developing countries, AI is about leapfrogging constraints—improving crop yields through predictive analytics, expanding telemedicine, streamlining welfare delivery, or strengthening disaster response. Yet these gains require affordable computing power, access to datasets, and skill development. A meaningful summit must move beyond declarations to mechanisms: shared compute pools, open-source collaboration, and financing models. Third, the world faces a widening gap between AI's capabilities and the guardrails to manage them. Issues of data privacy, algorithmic bias, misinformation, and job displacement are universal. But developing economies confront them with fewer institutional resources. India can help articulate a middle path: innovation-friendly but rights-respecting; open but secure; globally interoperable yet sensitive to domestic priorities.

There is also a strategic dimension. AI is fast becoming the new arena of technological rivalry. Semiconductor supply chains, cloud infrastructure, and foundational models are increasingly tied to national security calculations. By convening the Global South, India can push for a multipolar AI ecosystem—one that resists technological monopolies and ensures that standards are not dictated unilaterally. Yet ambition must be matched with credibility. This is also an opportunity for India to link AI with its broader development narrative. Having championed climate justice and digital public goods on global platforms, New Delhi can now argue that AI, too, must serve inclusive growth.

At its core, the summit seeks to expand the conversation beyond technology for its own sake to technology for social good. Organised around seven thematic “chakras”, the sessions will focus on inclusion, safe and trusted AI, human capital development, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. Such a breadth of focus underscores an essential truth: AI cannot be separated from the societies it serves. The AI summit should emphasise solutions that anticipate real-world challenges rather than abstract technical advances so that there is a shift from technological dependency to technological agency. That could help ensure that the next wave of algorithms reflects the diversity of the societies they serve. The future of code should not be written by a few, but shaped by many.

## Affordability crisis should have been over by now

**THE LATEST CONSUMER** price index makes one thing clear: Without the White House's tariff experiment, President Donald Trump would almost certainly have lower interest rates and stronger inflation-adjusted wages, and he probably wouldn't be spinning his wheels about affordability heading into midterm elections. Instead, he's scrambling to address a crisis of his own making.

The report on Friday showed that core CPI, excluding volatile food and energy, rose 2.5% in the past year—neither terrible nor sufficiently good. But a decomposition shows that core services inflation is now essentially back to pre-2020 trends, and core goods—the category most influenced by the 2025 levies—is the main culprit behind the still-warm CPI. Without tariffs, CPI would probably be 30-50 points lower and the Federal Reserve would have already made deeper rate cuts. Furthermore, without the tariffs, inflation-adjusted wages would also be accelerating. Instead, they're languishing at the same lacklustre pace of growth that we experienced in 2024.

The past 12 months should have been an economic layup for the Trump administration. When Trump entered office, inflation was already on a downswing; the Fed was starting to normalise policy rates; and growth was strong thanks, in part, to the tailwind from artificial intelligence. And though the tariff shock didn't cause a major resurgence in inflation, it has put enough upward pressure on prices to keep consumers off balance and monetary policy authorities cautious.

Now, the White House is churning out a list of often ineffective affordability proposals to solve a problem that may have solved itself. In the housing arena, the ideas include trying to ban institutional investors from buying single-family homes and ordering Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to buy \$200 billion in mortgage-backed securities to help lower mortgage rates. Elsewhere, they include trying to guilt-trip Jamie Dimon into lowering JPMorgan Chase & Co.'s credit card interest rates. An easier solution would have been simply not implementing a tariff policy that almost every credible economist advised against.

In Friday's report, core goods prices exhibited broad inflation. On a month-over-month basis, some of the largest jumps came from recreation commodities (+0.6%), household furnishings (+0.3%), and apparel (+0.3%). Bear in mind that many of these categories tended in the past to have extremely flat prices or even exhibit deflation. One popular theory is that companies used the start of the new year as an excuse to push through a final burst of tariff-related price adjustments. A decline in used car prices helped offset some of the inflation elsewhere in core goods.

The optimistic interpretation, to which I'm sympathetic, is that tariff inflation probably won't last much longer. Core goods prices started to rise in earnest around June 2025, a couple months after the so-called “Liberation Day” tariff announcement. Since the most popular statistics compare today's data to the year-earlier period, we may start to see much cooler goods inflation as we move into mid-year comparisons.

Whether that's enough to green-light additional rate cuts is an open question, especially now that we're seeing preliminary signs of a stabilising labour market. The policy outcomes will also depend on Fed chair nominee Kevin Warsh and his powers of persuasion on a rate-setting committee that may be inherently sceptical of the newbie. (Trump has actively tried to bully the Fed to lower rates, and some voters may dig in their heels if his hand-picked new chairman appears overzealous to do his bidding.)

For now, the bond and stock markets are taking Friday's report as a positive. Yields on two-year Treasury notes fell 0.05 percentage point to 3.41% and the S&P 500 Index rose, while the odds of a rate cut by June edged higher. That's the right interpretation of the data from a market standpoint, but it shouldn't distort the broader message: The affordability outlook may be finally improving, but it would have done so several quarters ago if the White House hadn't insisted on this ill-advised tariff gambit.



JONATHAN LEVIN

Bloomberg

**U**SING A BASIC feature phone, a Marathi-speaking farmer can now consult a chatbot for advice on soil, seeds, and irrigation in his own language. In government schools across several states, an artificial intelligence (AI) tutor helps children learn to read in their mother tongue. The potential is clear. So is the challenge: how do you move from these promising examples to systems that work reliably, every day, across thousands of institutions with vastly different capacities?

India has answered this question before. Over two decades, we built shared digital rails through public-private collaboration that now reach more than a billion people. Aadhaar has authenticated identities over 1.64 billion times. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) processes around 20 billion transactions every month. These systems succeeded because they created trusted, reusable building blocks. A small bank could offer digital payments because the UPI existed. A rural hospital could verify identity because Aadhaar worked. We didn't ask every institution to reinvent the wheel. We gave them the road.

AI demands the same thinking, but the problem is structurally harder. The UPI moves money. The protocol is stable; the outcome is binary: the payment went through or it didn't. AI systems give advice, make predictions, and generate content. They require ongoing evaluation and adaptation in ways traditional software does not. Procurement frameworks, audit processes, and accountability structures built for fixed-price software purchases assume you can specify requirements upfront and verify com-

## AI TESTING GROUND

HOW INDIA CAN DO FOR AI ADOPTION WHAT UPI DID FOR PAYMENTS

# Turning capability into impact

## NANDAN NILEKANI

Co-Founder and Non-executive Chairman, Infosys



pliance once. AI adoption requires different institutional mechanisms. Every institution discovers this mismatch. The question is whether each must learn these lessons independently or whether we can build shared infrastructure that compresses the learning curve.

Citizens trust institutions rather than algorithms. When the monsoon is delayed, a farmer wants to know who stands behind a recommendation. If AI is to be adopted at population scale, it must carry the credibility of recognised institutions—agricultural universities, government departments, co-operatives—with traceable sources and advice that can be questioned or corrected. Safety, in this context, means technical reliability coupled with institutional accountability.

This is where diffusion infrastructure matters. It provides reusable components for recurring adoption challenges so that institutions can focus on their mission rather than reinventing implementation from scratch. Maharashtra's MahaVISTAAR provides agricultural advice in Marathi for more than 15 million farmers, powered by

Bhashini, the government's AI language platform serving more than 300 million users. The PM-Kisan chatbot lets farmers check eligibility and payment status by voice in their own language. Over 500,000 farmers used it on launch day. Researchers from AI4Bharat at IIT Madras collected over 12,000 hours of speech and 783 million translated sentences across all 22 official languages, creating open datasets that give India's AI ecosystem an unmatched linguistic base. Nobody writes headlines about procurement templates or evaluation frameworks. These determine whether AI moves from isolated pilots to systems improving millions of lives.

India's earlier digital successes worked because services and information could move freely across open rails. AI needs to work the same way: allowing models to be swapped, data to be verified, and services to be seamlessly combined. Interoperability, not just sheer scale, converts isolated success stories into a national ecosystem.

This requires building the infrastructure that makes adoption possi-

ble. Standards that let institutions trust AI outputs. Benchmarks that measure what actually matters for real-world deployment. Governance frameworks that work across sectors. Procurement models that accommodate systems that improve continuously. AI systems that are frugal and affordable to implement at population scale. Countries that build these adoption enablers will see AI spread broadly across institutions. Countries that don't will find AI is something that happens to them, not something they shape.

More than 30 countries have adopted elements of India's Digital Public Infrastructure. If India builds the infrastructure that makes AI adoption work at scale, it becomes a playbook for every developing country facing similar challenges. India has become one of the largest markets for the world's leading AI firms and the place where the technology's possibilities and limits are most acutely tested. I invite global companies, academics and innovators to test their systems here, at national scale, with safety and accountability built in.

Trust drives adoption, and adoption provides feedback that improves systems. That is the virtuous cycle India must build. Our greatest contribution will be proving that AI works when it solves real problems at scale. Not in controlled pilots, but in how a district hospital actually operates, how a teacher teaches, how a farmer gets timely advice. The places where AI is hardest to deploy are also where it matters most. If AI can work in India's classrooms, clinics, and farms, it can work anywhere. AI will transform India. And India will help shape how AI transforms the world.

## FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

# Indo-US trade deal is not a surrender



## ASHOK GULATI

Distinguished Professor, ICRIER

In the agricultural segment, India has avoided major concerns and opened the doors with caution and quota systems

**LET ME STATE** at the very outset that anyone who thinks that exports are always good but imports are bad does not understand trade policies. There has been lot of noise in the Indian parliament over the Indo-US trade deal. The opposition feels that the deal is a total surrender. But the government benches projected it as the best deal under the given circumstances. The truth may be somewhere in between. There is always a give and take in any trade deal. This one is no different.

India had to give in to the US's demand for buying more energy, aircraft, and high-tech equipment. Also, we had to agree to show our “intent” or “commitment” to buy \$500 billion worth of goods from US over the next five years. That looks huge as our current imports of goods from the US are well under \$50 billion a year. But in return, India got the US to slash its import tariffs on Indian goods from 50% to 18%, which is very much in line with our competitors in South and Southeast Asian countries, and almost half of what is being imposed on China. This, the government says, is the biggest victory and opens doors for significantly higher exports from India to the largest economy in the world.

Opposition parties as well as some farmer groups have also expressed strong apprehensions about the agricultural segment of the trade deal. Let me dwell on it and try to clear some

misgivings.

What are the fears on agri-trade front? First, the US will flood the Indian market with their agri-produce and our farmers will be severely hurt. Second, they will throw their genetically modified (GM) crops or their derivatives like soya oil and dried distillers' grains (DDGs) in our food system that will risk the health of millions of our citizens. Third, US farmers are very large in size, mechanised, and receive large subsidies, and our small farmers cannot compete with them. Let me discuss each of these.

In 2024, India exported total goods worth roughly \$81 billion to the US and imported goods worth \$43 billion, giving India a trade surplus of about \$38 billion. Out of this, India's agri-exports were about \$5.7 billion and imports roughly \$2.1 billion, giving India an agri-trade surplus of \$3.6 billion. In the trade deal, India has opened largely those crops which are either not grown in the country or grown on a very small area—like tree nuts and berries. Almonds have already been coming to India at a low duty of about 10% in ad-valorem terms (₹42/kg). Walnuts, pistachios, pecans, cranberries, and blueberries are likely

to attract similar duty (10-15%) and there would be some imports of those. But they are not going to impact our farmers much. Concerns are raised about apples, and their duties are likely to come down from 50% to 25% or so, although more would be known only when the fine print is out. My information is that lowered duties will be accompanied by import quotas, safeguarding our farmers adequately.

The other concern on agri-imports is that of GM crops or their derivatives like soya oil and DDGs. It may be noted that India has not allowed direct import of GM corn or GM soya, which have living modified organisms and can be seeded to grow GM crops in India. But soya oil or DDGs, which are permitted to be imported, actually have been coming for quite some time. It may be noted that when GM soya or GM corn are processed into oil or DDGs, traces of GM are either absent or negligible, but more importantly they are no more living modified organisms. They cannot be germinated, and there is no adverse health impact either on poultry, cattle or human beings according to the Food and Drug Administration. Some scientists and many non-governmental organisations have reservations about

this, but the fact remains that GM crops are being grown in 76 countries over 200 million hectares and these crops range from papaya and brinjal to corn and soya bean. The people in these countries are not dying by consuming these crops.

The third point is about competition. It may be noted that our small farmers have done reasonably well as far as global competition goes. Our overall agri-exports are about \$52 billion and imports about \$37 billion in 2024. The US is a net importer of agri-products (\$59 billion in 2024). We also give a lot of input subsidies to our farmers—be it in the form of fertiliser, credit, or insurance premium subsidy—and even direct income support in the form of PM-KISAN. If we want to retain the competitive strength of our small holders, we need to invest much more in agri-R&D. It may be worth noting that US GM corn and soya bean productivity is three times higher than in India. We must make smart choices in our domestic expenditures related to agriculture.

Overall, I find the trade deal a smart move by India at least in the agri segment. They have avoided major concerns and opened the doors with caution and quota systems. Therefore, farmers need not worry much as of now.

*Views are personal*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Resetting ties with Bangladesh

Apropos of “India's Eastern test” (FE, February 14), the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's landslide victory proves that the people of Bangladesh wanted a stable government that can bring peace and prosperity and strengthen its economy. People had lost confidence in the interim leadership of Muhammad Yunus. The congratulatory message from PM Modi shows India's

interest in rebuilding strategic ties between the countries and reviving bilateral trade. The new leadership of Tarique Rahman, who avoided anti-India rhetoric in his poll campaigns, signals Dhaka's intention in strengthening a relationship that took a hit after Sheikh Hasina's exit. India's exports to Bangladesh have slipped and unfortunately it had to halve the development assistance due to strains in ties. The Teesta river water-sharing negotiations are yet to reach a

conclusion. It is a testing time for India to realign its Eastern strategies.

—RV Baskaran, Pune

### Critical opportunity

Apropos of “India's Eastern test” (FE, February 14), Dhaka's new leadership under Tarique Rahman presents a critical opportunity to reset bilateral relations. New Delhi and Dhaka must prioritise reconciliation, rebuild strained institutions, and restore mutual strategic trust. The most vexed issues—

insurgency control along the border and transit access to the Northeast—require sustained cooperation and transparent mechanisms. Addressing them pragmatically can reduce friction and unlock shared economic and security gains. A stable, forward-looking Bangladesh could become a transformative anchor to the evolving mutual understanding and partnership.

—PV Prakash, Mumbai

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

# Give AI Investment The Big Come Hither

Diversify funds to hyperscale for infra

AI Impact Summit starts in New Delhi today at a time when AI investments globally are now in uncharted territory, with the US, China, the EU and Asia-Pacific entering the hyperscaler range. The five biggest AI infra providers — Amazon, Alphabet, Microsoft, Meta and Oracle — are committing nearly \$700 bn in investments in 2026, twice the amount they spent in 2025. Apart from this, the US's Project Stargate has a \$500 bn strategic investment plan involving OpenAI, SoftBank and Oracle. In China, Alibaba is committed to investing \$53 bn over a 3-year period, ByteDance has \$13 bn earmarked for AI infra in 2026 while Tencent has trimmed its investments.

China's AI investments, although not on the US scale, are climbing as it pursues a less capital-intensive development model. The EU has unveiled a €240 bn (about \$260 bn) action plan for AI infrastructure. Japan has allocated 1 tn yen (about \$6.5 bn) annually for AI and semiconductor development and South Korea has lined up 9.9 tn won (\$6.8 bn) in its national AI budget. Besides these, a clutch of sovereign wealth funds in West Asia are investing huge amounts to kit out local AI infra. Economies that have hyperscaled their AI investments are reporting that capacity is being absorbed quickly. Energy requirements for AI data centres are emerging as a key constraint. This makes the case for investment diversification.

India has tweaked its tax regime to plug into the AI investment tsunami. The budget announced a 20-yr tax holiday for foreign cloud service providers operating through India-based data centre infra. Investments of \$70 bn in Indian data centres are in various stages of implementation, and \$90 bn more has been announced. The AI policy is meshed with other GoI initiatives to push semiconductor and electronics manufacturing. The country is positioning itself as a long-term destination for AI investments, from all sources. This holds the key to its emergence as an AI power.

# Rubio Gets Nostalgic In Imperial Cosplay

You gotta admire the Trump regime's talent for cosplay. Going by Marco Rubio's Valentine's Day speech at the Munich Security Conference, the secretary of state's good cop routine dripped of a Mar-a-Lago School for Boys sketch complete with togas and imperial horseplay. With all the solemnity of a man-boy clutching the prequel to Ed Gibbons' 'The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', he lectured about civilisational values shared by the White people of Europe and the US, along with warnings against 'evil empires', and the 'climate cult'.

The reich minister insisted the West must 'reindustrialise' and 'control borders', sounding like a mash-up of Reagan and Sir Lancelot. There was, however, no mention of bringing back powdered wigs or slave trade. Rubio warned of 'mass migration' as if millions of Europeans had moved to the US, and later Israel, because they wanted a change of scenery in the '30s-40s. This was foreign policy as Lone Ranger, Europe as trusted Tonto and everyone else a scalp-collecting Comanche. You don't have to be a 19th-20th c.

Austrian psychoanalyst to figure out that Trump wants to recreate a world in the image of American TV shows and movies he watched as a boy in the 1950s.

The Munich audience applauded politely, perhaps out of relief that the rhetoric was at least familiar and confirmed the Trump regime's deep nostalgia for an era when anti-colonial movements could be seen as communist-fuelled eddies against the historical tide of western supremacy. While this may have tickled many attendees in the Bavarian capital, one suspects they left wondering whether Washington had mistaken the conference for a production pitch for a sequel of a film a teenage Marco must have enjoyed: Back to the Future.

# JUST IN JEST

How to spot an AI expert from all the AI bullshitters out this week

# Go On, Try Out the Delhi Turing Test

In case you didn't know via neat dissemination and/or propaganda platforms, this week, Delhi's hosting the AI Impact Summit. It's the perfect setting for a Turing Test — not to check if machines can pass off as humans, but to check if humans can get away by pretending to know about AI. When you hear a panelist solemnly declare today, 'We must synergise quantum blockchain with generative intelligence,' you'll know he or she has read three buzzwords in this paper this morning. Real experts are muttering about gradient descent and hallucination rates, only to be drowned out by someone insisting that AI will soon replace 'all jobs, including politicians'. (Spoiler: AI still can't nail a punchline without it sounding like a dad joke.)

The summit promises 'impact', but the real impact will be on coffee machines, which must withstand the stress of fuelling 500 conversations that begin with, 'Actually, ChatGPT is just auto-complete'. The true test will be spotting the difference between those who can explain neural radiance fields and those who think it's a spiritual thing. So, let's run the Delhi Turing Test:

- ▶ If you say, 'AI is the new data,' you're bullshitting.
- ▶ If you say, 'AI models collapse under distribution shift,' you're probably legit.
- ▶ If you say, 'AI will soon achieve consciousness,' you're a Keanu Reeves fan who should be at a comic con.

Speed of scientific discovery has itself become a strategic asset, with AI as the super-accelerator

# India, Get Fast & Furious



Nishant Sahdev

Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Last week, the US Department of Energy announced 26 'science and technology challenges of national importance' to advance the Genesis Mission, an initiative launched last November by the US to accelerate scientific research through AI. More than this being about using AI to speed up research, it's about letting machines build how science is imagined, tested and advanced, reducing years of discovery into weeks. When the pace of science changes, the balance of global power changes with it.

What Washington announced last week was not another AI policy. It was a declaration that speed of scientific discovery has itself become a strategic asset. New Delhi should heed this. As it hosts AI Impact Summit 2026, it needs to confront a harder truth: when it comes to infrastructure that determines how discovery actually happens — how quickly ideas are tested, validated and scaled — India remains anchored to a 20th c. institutional model.

Genesis Mission's most radical idea is also its simplest: science is a system that can be accelerated, not by individual brilliance alone, but by computation, automation and integration. AI systems will design experiments, optimise energy grids, digitise nuclear data, accelerate growth of materials discovery and reduce years of trial and error into weeks. The explicit goal is to make parts of scientific discovery 20x-100x faster. Historically, nations competed on who discovered more. Now, they will compete on who discovers faster. In such a world, countries that move slowly will not just lag, but will also become dependent.

India's scientific apparatus is not designed for speed. Its research ecosystem is fragmented across ministries, councils, autonomous institutes, public sector



You have to take that jump now



labs and universities. Data standards are inconsistent. Collaboration depends more on personal networks than shared infrastructure. Funding cycles are slow, compliance-heavy and risk-averse.

In 2023-24, India's total public R&D spending hovered around 0.65-0.7% of GDP. China spends about 2.4%, the US around 3.4%. More tellingly, a fraction of US R&D is concentrated in mission-oriented, high-performance computing. India's is dispersed thinly across thousands of institutions, many of them digitally underpowered.

India speaks of AI in governance, startups, ethics, skilling, policy. But rarely does it treat AI as core national scientific infrastructure on par with power grids, highways, or space launch facilities.

The US Genesis Mission does exactly that. It integrates supercomputers, national labs, datasets, sensors, experimental facilities and AI models into a single discovery ecosystem. This is not about apps or chatbots. It is about putting intelligence into the physical sciences themselves.

When AI systems trained on decades of national data begin proposing new materials, reactor designs, or quantum algorithms, sovereignty changes its room. It moves from labs

planning because it understands this coupling. India does not.

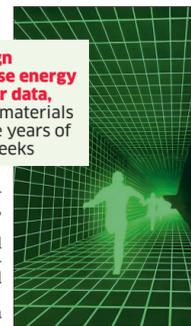
India's peak power demand crossed 250 GW in 2024, with shortages still routine in several states. Data centres already consume 3-4% of national electricity, a figure expected to rise sharply. Yet, AI strategies and energy planning are rarely discussed in the same breath. You can't build an AI-driven scientific economy on an energy system designed for yesterday.

Genesis also forces a rethink of scientific education. If AI systems increasingly design experiments and analyse data, what does a scientist trained only in traditional methods look like in 2035? India produces vast numbers of science graduates. But curricula often lag frontier practice by a decade or more. Systems thinking, computation-first experimentation and AI-guided modelling remain peripheral in many institutions.

Without reform, India risks training excellent scientists for a world that no longer exists. India does not need to replicate the US Genesis Mission. Its priorities differ: Its constraints are real. But ignoring the shift it represents would be strategic negligence. At the least, India needs a national debate on three hard questions:

▶ Should India build an AI-science platform connecting

AI systems will design experiments, optimise energy grids, digitise nuclear data, accelerate growth of materials discovery and reduce years of trial and error into weeks



IISc, IITs, national labs, strategic agencies and industry into a shared computational and data backbone?

▶ How does India ensure scientific sovereignty in an era where discovery emerges from AI systems trained on national data?

▶ Is its funding, institutional design and education system prepared for machine-accelerated science?

The US has decided that the future of science will be faster, and that speed itself will be weaponised. India can choose to respond. Or it can continue organising committees while discovery still accelerates elsewhere.

The writer is a physicist, University of North Carolina, US



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Loving Doom And Gloom

NARAYANI GANESH

A new word I learnt from Anu Garg's A World A Day post, is 'doomscroll'. Which means to scroll through the news or other online material compulsively, especially negative or distressing stories. I know someone who simply loves disaster news and movies like Earthquake, Twister, The Day After Tomorrow, The Great Flood and Burning Train — she watches them over and over again. In fact, the newspaper was often described as gloom bearer, as it carpet-bombed any news of disaster, disease, death, doom and despair, the five Ds. That is sought to be changed, as more and more readers say they like to be entertained rather than be made to feel distressed. Thence came about the concept of infotainment. Some say they read the sports pages first, but even that gets sullied by reports of match-fixing and drug use.

Precisely because we are drawn to bad news that terms like rage-bait have gained so much currency that it has been chosen as 2025 word of the year: It refers to content that tries to provoke anger as a means of gaining attention or making money through online popularity via number of viewings. Rage-bait is usually inflammatory content posted online to gain revenue through clicks as it gathers momentum with strong reactions and trolling. Spiritual masters say do not begin or end the day consuming bad, sad news, just think happy thoughts. Some TV channels and newspapers have started offering segments titled Good News.

# MELODY FOR MONDAY

# Respect Yourself The Staple Singers

'Respect Yourself', released by the Staple Singers in 1971, is one of those rare songs that feels less like a pop single and more like a sermon set to funk. Emerging from the fertile ground of Memphis' Stax Records, it carries the grit of civil rights era and urgency of Black empowerment into mainstream consciousness. Written by Luther Ingram and Mack Rice, the track

was both a warning and a rallying cry: if you don't respect yourself, how can you expect anyone else to? Delivered with Pops Staples' earthy guitar and Mavis Staples' commanding, gospel-trained voice, the message cut through with unshakable authority.

The song is a fist-bump in restraint and groove. There's no wasted motion — every note is in service of the song's moral clarity. What makes 'Respect Yourself' powerful is its dual edge: it speaks to personal dignity while simultaneously indicting societal hypocrisy. In the early '70s, that meant confronting racism, sexism and political cynicism. Today, it still resonates as a timeless anthem of self-worth. It's a commandment you can live to.

# Chat Room

# Repair the Rupture

Apropos the article 'BNP's Return Opens Window for Reset in India-Bangladesh Ties' by Pankaj Saran (Feb 15). PM-elect Tarique Rahman's biggest challenge would be to steer Bangladesh's economy through high inflation and rising unemployment besides restoring law and order. BNP's approach towards India will be keenly watched. Rahman's government will need to act fast on illegal border crossings and ending atrocities on minorities. Bangladesh needs India for connectivity and regional market access while India needs Bangladesh to advance its Act East policy. In working together as partners, it is possible for the two countries and region to benefit. Bal Govind, Noida

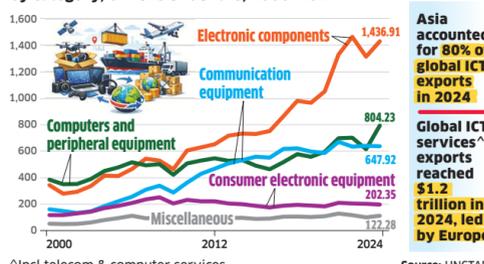
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

A boss from Air India showed his face At the AI Impact Summit near Connaught Place, Once there, he said, 'Is Campbell Wilson ahead?' Poor chap, it was a mix-up of 'AI' case!

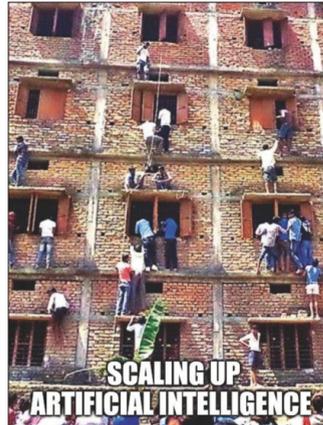
# GROWING TRADE IN ELECTRONIC PARTS

Information and communications technology (ICT) products accounted for more than 12% of total global merchandise exports in 2024. That means more than one in every eight dollars earned from trade in goods came from computers, telecommunications equipment, electronic components and other digital-enabling hardware. Growth has been driven by electronic components — including chips, circuit boards and sensors...

Imports of information and communication technology goods, by category, billions of dollars, 2000-2024



# MEME'S THE WORD



# It's Manoeuvring, Not Capitulating



Amit Kapoor

The easiest way to misread a trade negotiation is to treat it as theatre. What matters isn't the noise around a deal, but the numbers in it. Calling the India-US tariff arrangement a 'cave-in' — as Swaminathan Sankararaj Aiyar does in his article, 'Cave-In, Not Breakthrough', (Feb 11) on this page — confuses political rhetoric with economic reality. Trade has always been intertwined with politics. But the balance has shifted. Tariffs act as leverage, sanctions reshape energy flows and supply chains are redesigned for resilience. In such a landscape, the relevant test isn't whether a country resists pressure theatrically, but whether it protects its core interests while adjusting intelligently.

▶ **Energy** Russian crude was a discounted commercial opportunity. When prices fell after the Ukraine war broke out, Indian refiners moved in because the margins made sense — and this aligned with western policy design. EU and G7 price caps were meant to keep Russian oil flowing while limiting Moscow's revenues, a dual objective the US stated plainly. The goal was to avert a price spike while squeezing Russian earnings. Buyers like India were not undermining that system by purchasing capped oil. They were operating

within it. India's petroleum ministry warned that removing Russian supply could increase prices to \$120-140 a barrel.

Russian oil isn't sacred but conditional, its relevance determined by price and risk. Discounts once near \$12 a barrel have narrowed to about \$3. Trade now relies on opaque shipping and shadow logistics, raising insurance and compliance costs. European Commission is moving beyond the price cap toward broader maritime service bans, proposing restrictions that could redirect flows to India and China. As enforcement tightens and freight volatility rises, risk-adjusted delivered cost shifts.

Europe matters beyond sanctions headlines. The Netherlands is India's largest merchandise export destination in Europe, with refined petro products routed through Rotterdam. India doesn't just import crude, but also refines and re-exports to European markets. As the EU tightens maritime and financial channels, compliance costs and insurance premia squeeze refinery margins. So, sanctions 'plumbing' shapes downstream competitiveness, and rising freight, insurance and compli-

ance risks force a reassessment of discounted crude in light of export exposure. So, the operative question isn't sovereignty, but whether the trade.

▶ **Agriculture** Tariff commitments being discussed centre largely on products India imports in rising quantities. Almond imports have grown from roughly \$55 mn in 2018-19 to about \$85 mn in 2024-25. Pistachios have risen from around \$92 mn to over \$200 mn in the same period. These are not subsistence crops. They are consumption goods driven by urban preference. Tariffs influence price, but they cannot manufacture appetite.

An industry is threatened only when imported goods consistently land at prices lower than what domestic producers can match. A zero tariff does not make a sector unviable; it merely removes a price cushion. Where India has a genuine cost advantage, lower tariffs don't wipe it out.

Take dairy: Producing a kg of milk here costs roughly ₹60, compared with about ₹97.5 in the US and ₹123 in New Zealand. This is a sector that rests on cost advantage. Sensitive staples such as rice, wheat and maize remain outside the liberalisation envelope, so the core of the agricultural economy remains intact.

Even if one extends the argument to commodities traditionally deemed sensitive, such as wheat, maize, or rice, cold arithmetic in the backdrop of a weakening rupee suggests that India would not necessarily face a comparative disadvantage even under a zero-tariff framework. Exchange-rate dynamics, freight



Moving deftly

The writer is chair, Institute for Competitiveness. Inputs by Meenakshi Ajith



## CONTRAPUNTO

Real stupidity beats artificial intelligence every time  
- TERRY PRATCHETT, HOGFATHER

# Mission AI Impossible

India has built an LLM, has good startups & upcoming data centres. But that's not enough

Big things happen when people put their heads together. In Feb 1974, a handful of Taiwanese engineers and officials met for a breakfast meeting. Taiwan's economy depended on labour-intensive factories at the time, but the breakfast group saw competition from neighbouring countries ahead. They decided it was time to go high-tech. Four years later, Taiwan was not only making semiconductors, but was also third in terms of digital watch exports. It's Feb again, and world's AI captains, along with armies of delegates, are gathered in Delhi. At *India AI Impact Summit 2026*, there will be many opportunities to put heads together. But what does India want from these meetings?

There's the official manifesto that says AI should develop keeping people, planet and progress first. A laudable aim, but far removed from reality at present. As to people, talk over the past few days has dwelt on the coming jobocalypse – annihilation of entry- and middle-rung white-collar jobs. Regarding planet, AI's water and energy demands are well-documented. Progress under these conditions is questionable. So India cannot realise its vision if all it brings to the table are high moral principles. What it needs is the underpinnings of AI: its own research, data centres, foundational models, and popular applications.

True, US seems to have an unassailable lead in AI today. But so was the case with semiconductors, and rare earths, at various points last century. It gets off the blocks fast with a combination of wealth, cutting-edge research, and first-mover advantage. That doesn't mean the race is over. And AI, especially, is still in its infancy. While US firms hog headlines, India has quietly built BharatGen, its own LLM that supports 22 languages. States like Andhra have drawn multi-billion data centre commitments. IIT Madras has emerged as a cradle of startups, drawing over \$2bn in VC investments. But it's time to shift gears now.

As the accompanying article says, GOI and the private sector must invest more in R&D. It doesn't cost as much as the infra buildout, or the long-term operational costs, but is the bedrock of true aspiration. Because AI infra requires tens of billions of dollars, we will need foreign capital, but good projects shouldn't be held up because of funding gaps. Govt must play enabler, sitting down with researchers and industry to spot obstacles, and remove them. Taking care not to entangle them in red tape. We have a vision, let's put heads together to execute it.

# No Storm In A Cup

Food research is addictive, but also disorienting.  
Often common sense is a better guide

Now, another toast to coffee by a study of 130,000 people that suggests that two to three cups a day can protect the brain as it ages, and lower risk of dementia. Square that with a 10-year study published last year of nearly 10,000 women aged 65+ that found that drinking coffee daily could be linked to lower bone mineral density, potentially increasing the risk of osteoporosis. So, was old Bill's real question, then, to drink or not to drink coffee?

As difficult as it is to keep up with the endless stream of food-based research that swings the pendulum from good to bad and back again on whatever food intake is under the microscope, it is way more stressful to be none the wiser about nutrition despite so much research and funding. That, too much of nothing does any good isn't food research but common sense and lived reality. Yet reading about food research is wildly addictive, and spawns industry – oils to spices & nuts, the full organic range, and herbal concoctions minus gin. Food research has defined kitchen shelves, stocked fridges, lined pockets, minted boutique businesses.

Perhaps nothing has been more polarising for our collective cholesterol – good, bad and everything in-between – than ghee. If in 2026, experts are inclined to see god in ghee, it was devil incarnate mere years ago. If one study said it raises LDL tut-tut, another found it helps metabolism; problematic for gallbladder, but supports gut lining. Close behind ghee is eggs – high protein or bad cholesterol? And soy: hormonal interference or cancer prevention? Artificial sweeteners have as many studies as lobbies for and against. What are we to do? Arguably, we choose to follow research that suits our palate, and ignore those that kill the vibe. For now, let's go with coffee's got cause.

# Alyyo Doctor

Friendly family GP has got competition

Anil Abraham

Every time I water the bougainvillea near the compound wall, my next-door neighbour will lean over for some medical advice. But many people who used to visit the friendly family physician for their health issues, have nowadays replaced their GP with ChatGPT: "I have a headache doctor – I'm sure I have cancer. I'm wondering whether I should do an MRI or plan directly for brain surgery?" I dread the day when instead of depending on a doctor for a second opinion after self-diagnosis, patients will do their own surgery after watching a neurosurgeon on YouTube. And I gently suggest to Hypochondriac Harish that he get his eyes checked before making a spectacle of himself. AI in healthcare is like the Indian politician – jumping to conclusions but completely lacking in vision.

AI is making its presence felt in every field and in healthcare it's promising incredible things. Imagine that as soon as the patient sits on a sofa in the doctor's waiting room, the seat will record weight, body fat percentage, and potential need for hip replacement. A visit to the restroom will be even more informative – it will reveal blood sugar, cholesterol, and an untreated infection from the last trip to Bangkok. AI will help you order cheese-burst pizza as you wait and inform the doctor that your diet is contributing to your clogged coronaries. Your X-ray will reveal more than your fractured femur – it will also alert the I-T cell about your stash of cash in Cayman Islands.

But what the patient will find lacking is the human touch – empathy and emotional intelligence. Recognising from non-verbal clues the stress that is causing the backache from a 70-hour week. The friendly neighbourhood doctor hearing the tremor in the voice of an ageing parent and picking up the depression of loneliness and old age. Even though the patient jokes that no one can read the doctor's handwriting, the doctor is reading more than the average patient expresses in words. Like the viral video of Pedestrian Prabhavathi in Kozhikode, we need the doctor to firmly re-direct the patient onto the right path.

If you've already made a diagnosis, then why do you need a doctor, I asked Harish. It's because we need someone to blame when things go wrong – we can't possibly beat up a computer. Alyyo!



**Tanweer Alam**  
Columnist based in Oxford University

Geopolitical uncertainty triggered by Trump has sharply shifted other nations' AI focus from 'safety' to 'sovereignty'. This is more than evident in Delhi's AI summit, where India is pitching for a global leadership role. The shift comes at a time when US-based companies are miles ahead of Europe, and certainly India, on the AI chain – from data capacity, design and manufacture, to development of applications. Per Stanford AI Index 2025, US led with 40 notable AI models in 2024, followed by China with 15, and Europe with 3.

If Europe is focused on 'safety' and 'sovereignty' to reduce dependency on American AI companies, India has framed AI in terms of 'impact' and 'sovereignty', but de-emphasised safety, even though there have been warnings about AI since 2022, and Anthropic's research paper on risks of AI rang alarm bells last month. It said AI interactions may be "reducing individuals' ability to form accurate beliefs, make authentic value judgments, and act in line with their own values."

The inaugural AI Safety Summit in 2023 had concluded that AI holds the "potential for serious, even catastrophic, harm, either deliberate or unintentional." But Washington sees questions of safety and accountability of US-based AI systems as "attacks", and has pushed back against Europe's attempts to fix accountability – European Commission fined Musk's X \$140mn for alleged regulatory violations, while UK is probing xAI's sexualised imagery.

Meanwhile, New Delhi's approach to AI has been largely reactive. Even the push to develop a homegrown LLM comes after the success of China's DeepSeek that showed an alternative model of AI development.

Unable to compete at the cutting edge, GOI's approach achieves two objectives: 1) a discourse of technological sovereignty that positions India as a player on its own terms; 2) pushing away challenges about safety in a nation as diverse and complex as India, where stakes of AI deployment, particularly in healthcare, finance and surveillance have implications for millions.

India has been a key player in the global software industry and has cultivated a strong services-led tech ecosystem. What's needed is rewards for genuine

innovation. Why, despite existing foundational work, has it not built anything concrete in this space?

The numbers tell a sad story: India's R&D spend stood at just 0.7% of GDP in 2024, compared with 2.7% in China and 3.5% in US. The picture is even more disheartening in absolute GDP terms. In the 2026 Budget, GOI cut this year's allocation to ₹1k cr from ₹2k cr; after India AI Mission reportedly used only ₹800cr. India's private investment in R&D also remains low compared with China, Japan, or US. Huawei alone spent nearly \$23bn on R&D in 2023, more than India's combined public and private spending.

depends on reliable health records, but India's system lacks both comprehensive patient data and accurate information on healthcare providers – inputs needed to train AI models.

Even basics like the number and distribution of hospital beds and health workers are uncertain. And while public health programmes collect vast data, often at high cost and sometimes at the expense of service delivery, this data rarely guides decisions.

Limited usable data, compute capacity, talent shortages and absence of an effective AI regulatory framework are structural limitations in India's AIEcosystem. That's why India ranks 72nd among 174 nations on IMF's AI index.

At the Summit, India must place safety at the centre of its AI agenda. Because, left unchecked, AI can amplify bias, entrench discrimination, compromise safety, erode rights and exploit systemic vulnerabilities.

While GOI wants voluntary commitments, even though they haven't worked in sectors like medical and finance, the Economic Survey makes a case for an AI Economic Council to "calibrate the pace of AI adoption", and "light, incentive-based, and risk-weighted" governance approach.

An effective risk assessment framework would show which risks are addressed. Its scope should include labour displacement, environmental costs, democratic accountability and cultural impacts. India should also use the Summit to push for institutional tools such as an incident reporting system and a public database of AI harms.

Structural challenges must be made a priority if, at all, the concept of 'sovereign' AI is to have legs. 'Sovereignty' allows national pride to take centre stage in domestic politics, while its ambiguous interpretation enables flexible understanding of national interest that facilitates transactional foreign policy.

GOI should instead offer a roadmap to retain and attract top talent by building ecosystems that better support and fund technological innovation. An AI summit hosted by a Global South country with reasonable negotiating abilities can use this opportunity to reframe geopolitical conversation around AI, but only if focus shifts from performative sovereignty to substantive investment in research, talent and infra that true technological leadership demands, with safety being the guiding science.

The writer is a tech researcher

# TECH SOME RISKS, GOI

For AI sovereignty, investments and safety must necessarily be at the core.  
Govt needs to take a leap of faith to make this possible



So, GOI must take a leap of faith to connect risk-taking research to commercial applications. It must also drop the assumption that India's vast population creates ample data to train AI models. When most healthcare and employment are informal, they do not generate usable datasets. So, India struggles with data quality, integrity and interoperability. AI in healthcare

# Memo To Bezos: Share The Pain, Share The Post

Revive Washington Post, don't kill it, begin by giving employees stake in ownership

Michael Pierson

Sign outside Washington Post HQ read: Democracy Dies with Billionaires. It echoed the paper's own motto and captured a new discomfort – one of America's most storied newsrooms now lives at the mercy of a single balance sheet and a single temperament.

When Jeff Bezos bought the Post in 2013, his early message was pragmatic: you cannot shrink your way to relevance.

And yet, last week, the Post shrank. The scale and symbolism of the cuts felt like a great institution amputating its own limbs and calling it preventive care. Days later, the publisher resigned. Proof that the crisis is also about trust and leadership.

But can the Post preserve its mission without pretending the business model will magically repair itself?

Here's a pragmatic proposal: Bezos should create an employee trust and transfer, say, 25% of the Post's ownership into it. This will be an incentive-aligned, governance-aware structure. Employees will have skin in the game. Bezos will retain control.

If employees are asked to absorb pain – through salary freezes, benefit trims, reskilling, redesign or buyouts – some of that pain should convert into stake.

Why would Bezos do this? Because his problem is not just financial loss but legitimacy loss. The Post's most valuable asset is the trust premium embedded in its name. So, an employee trust is reputational collateral.

What might a 25% employee trust look like?

**Step one:** Transfer 25% of equity into a perpetual trust for all employees – journalists, technologists, product and commercial teams.

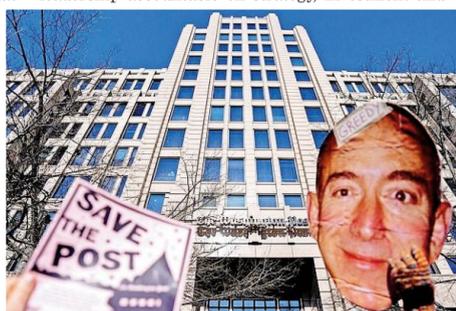
**Step two:** Offer a structured salary-to-equity programme for 36-60 months. Employees can voluntarily take a pay cut, including variable pay, and the forgone amount converts into equity units within the trust, at a valuation fixed upfront by an independent process.

Shares vest over time. Employees who leave retain their holdings. Liquidity comes through a future listing event. The goal is alignment, not gambling.

Valuation in a private company is messy. So make it boring. Use a conservative third-party method. Make the number binding. Disclose the logic internally and freeze it for the programme's duration. Prevent valuation from becoming another endless argument.

**Step three:** Make the structure progressive. Exempt the lowest-paid employees. Ask more from executives and senior stars whose compensation already reflects a premium. Shared sacrifice works only when it feels fair.

**Step four:** Attach governance, not just economics. The employee trust should hold one or two board seats alongside independent trustees. Its role is not to interfere in daily editorial choices but to hold leadership accountable on strategy, investment and



culture. Bezos keeps control; employees gain voice and share responsibility for the P&L.

**Step five:** Make the editorial firewall sacred. The trust must not vote on story selection or opinion columns. The Guardian's Scott Trust demonstrates how ownership can shield editorial mission from shareholder pressure.

Subscriptions lost amid perceptions of owner interference are part of the Post's business problem. Many readers felt shortchanged by what they saw as abdication of editorial responsibility, including decisions

around endorsements and opinion columns. So, the firewall protecting editorial independence must be explicit and guaranteed.

What would such a trust achieve?

● First, it converts "cuts done to us" into "changes designed with us." People endure hardship when sacrifice feels fair and the future shared; they disengage when treated as line items.

● Second, it creates direct incentive to rebuild subscription value, product innovation and operational efficiency. Success would show up in ownership outcomes. When the P&L recovers and the Post wins, employees should win more than applause.

● Third, it creates speed. AI and platform volatility punish slow organisations. Every industry is being forced to rationalise costs, pivot strategy and upgrade skills simultaneously. That is hard enough without a trust deficit between owners and employees. Partial ownership reduces friction and accelerates reinvention.

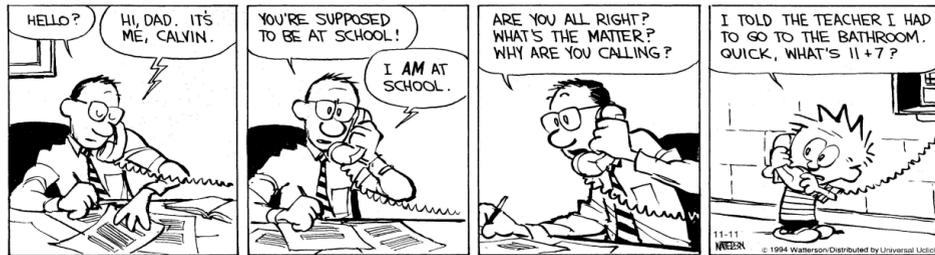
The obvious objection is that employee ownership is what companies attempt when they are bankrupt. But the Post sits in an uncomfortable middle zone – too important to treat as a hobby, too weakened to assume recovery, too politically exposed to pretend ownership is neutral. The post-layoff backlash showed that public outrage is about fear that a great institution can be diminished by a single owner's shifting priorities.

Will this guarantee revival? No. The Post still needs a coherent editorial strategy – what it will uniquely own; a serious product strategy – what audiences will habitually pay for; and commercial imagination that does not confuse engagement with impact. Metrics matter, but they are mirrors, not maps.

Yet trust is the precondition for all of it. Without trust, you get compliance. With trust, you might get commitment. In journalism, commitment is the only renewable energy source.

If Bezos wants to be remembered as a steward rather than a demolition man, he should do something both modern and old-fashioned: share ownership, share pain, and when the Post regains its footing, share the upside. Share the Post.

## Calvin & Hobbes



## Sacredspace

When I run after what I think I want, my days are a furnace of stress and anxiety; if I sit in my own place

of patience, what I need flows to me, and without pain. From this I understand that what I want also wants me...

Shams-i Tabrizi

# Your Valentine: After The Week Of Love

Partha Sinha

The week of love has just slipped past us. Roses have begun to wilt, dinner reservations have returned to their weekday anonymity, and the language of affection has retreated from timelines and shop windows. The seven-day procession of roses, proposals, chocolates and promises has quietly folded back into ordinary life. This is usually where Valentine's Day ends. Perhaps this is where its meaning begins.

Once the performance fades, a quieter question remains. What exactly did we celebrate?

The origins of the day suggest something far gentler and braver than the choreography we have grown used to. In the third century, Rome saw love as a logistical problem. Emperor Claudius II believed unmarried men made better soldiers. Marriage created attachment. Attachment created hesitation. Hesitation weakened empire. Love, in this logic, interfered

with efficiency. Marriage was discouraged and perhaps even forbidden.

Valentine continued to perform weddings in secret. He did not lead protests or write manifestos. He simply protected the human instinct to belong to another person. For this quiet defiance, he was imprisoned and executed on Feb 14.

Before his death, legend says he signed a note to the jailer's daughter with the words, *From your Valentine*.

Civilisations are shaped by small sentences that survive time. These two words endured because they carry the philosophical heart of the day. Not just Valentine. Your Valentine.

The movement from abstraction to belonging changes everything. Love in poetry is universal. Love in philosophy is expansive. Love becomes transformative only when it becomes particular. When it moves from humanity to one human

being. The Upanishads speak of the journey from the vast to the intimate, from Brahmn to Atman. Meaning is completed in the inward turn.

To call someone yours is not possession. It is participation. It is the acceptance of a quiet responsibility. It is the willingness to witness another life

closely enough that their joys and sorrows begin to echo within you. In loving one person deeply, we begin to understand humanity more fully.

Valentine's defiance was therefore philosophical. He protected the right of human beings to choose connection over conformity. Love became an act of freedom.

History, however, enjoys irony. The martyrdom of a man who protected quiet commitment has evolved into a global choreography of affection. Roses follow pricing cycles. Restaurants follow reservation grids. Love arrives pre-packaged in curated gestures.

Commerce gathers wherever emotion gathers. This is neither surprising nor entirely cynical. Markets recognise what we value and attempt to give it form. Commerce multiplies gestures while philosophy deepens them.

Choice sits at the centre of love. It is repeated, ordinary, and deeply sacred. To choose someone daily is to resist disposability. To remain curious about a familiar soul. To keep discovering what routine threatens to hide. In a world of endless options, commitment begins to look like rebellion. In a culture of performance, quiet loyalty becomes radical. In a time devoted to self-expression, deep attention begins to feel sacred.

Now that the week of celebration has passed, the invitation feels clearer. Not to celebrate love, but to practise it. Not to announce it, but to sustain it. The philosophy of Valentine's Day hides in a single word. Love becomes real the moment it becomes yours.



THE SPEAKING TREE

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Urban challenge

Onus on cities to pull up their socks

**T**HE Union Cabinet has finally approved the Rs 1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund (UCF), a year after it was announced in the 2025-26 Budget. Under this ambitious scheme, Central assistance will cover 25 per cent of a project's cost, provided that the city concerned raises at least 50 per cent of the funding from the market, including through municipal bonds, bank loans and public-private partnerships. The remaining 25 per cent can be covered by state governments or local bodies themselves. According to the Modi government, the move marks a paradigm shift in India's urban development approach from grant-based financing to a market-linked, reform-driven and outcome-oriented infrastructure creation. The message is clear: cities have to substantially generate financial resources for their own growth; their authorities cannot afford to take things easy.

It's noteworthy that the 2026-27 Budget has reduced the allocation for AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation) by 20 per cent, while no funds have been earmarked for the Smart Cities Mission for the second financial year in a row. These measures, coupled with the UCF, indicate that private investment is expected to play a bigger role in building cities that are resilient and future-ready. The UCF leaves no room for profligacy: cities that implement sustainable financial models are better placed to flourish as engines of economic growth. A key aspect of the scheme is that it extends monetary support to cities with a population as small as one lakh through a Rs 5,000-crore Credit Repayment Guarantee Scheme. This initiative will help smaller cities access the market, fostering financial independence.

The UCF would serve its purpose if it's able to improve ease of living in urban areas. City residents face myriad problems: air pollution, water contamination, poor drainage, broken roads, rampant concretisation. Greater accountability and transparency can give urban governance a new lease of life.

### Deadly potholes

Accountability missing on Punjab's roads

**P**UNJAB's roads are claiming lives in a manner that should shame any government that speaks the language of development. Recent disclosures show that 414 people have died in pothole-related accidents in Punjab between 2020 and 2024 — the highest toll in North India. Across the region, 743 lives were lost during the same period. Nationally, the figure crosses 9,400. These are not isolated mishaps but a consequence of infrastructure neglect playing out on open roads. A pothole is a failure of planning, execution and maintenance. Monsoon rains expose weak pavement structures, water collects in depressions and heavy traffic accelerates deterioration. In such conditions, two-wheelers and cars alike are left vulnerable — skidding, swerving or losing balance when they encounter deep craters, especially during night or low-visibility conditions. Repairs, if undertaken, are often cosmetic and temporary.

That Punjab has emerged as the worst-affected state in the region should prompt urgent action. Building new road stretches without ensuring a robust, routine maintenance mechanism defeats the purpose of connectivity. Infrastructure must not only be constructed but also kept safe. Yet, defect liability clauses in contracts are frequently unenforced, timelines for repairs are often delayed indefinitely and accountability mechanisms are weak. The remedies are neither complex nor unaffordable. Time-bound repair mandates, independent third-party audits, public geo-tagging complaint systems and strict blacklisting of negligent contractors can drastically reduce risk. What is required is political will and administrative seriousness.

Development cannot be measured merely by the length of roads built. A truly developed transport network is one that protects lives. Until road maintenance is taken as seriously as road expansion, Punjab's highways will continue to be measured not by kilometres completed, but by lives lost.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1926

### Bengal regulation

It was a lively and well-sustained debate which took place on Amarnath Dutt's Bill to repeal Regulation III of 1818. For the first time in many months, a genuine attempt was made from the official benches to meet the arguments on the popular side with arguments instead of mere ipse dixit. The credit for this attempt belongs principally to JT Donovan, an Irishman, who, speaking on behalf of the Government of Bengal, made an excellent maiden speech. The excellence of the speech may be judged from the fact that the House as well as the President listened to the speaker with patience for more than half an hour; that the most important of the non-official speeches were directed to answering him, and that almost everyone who spoke after him began by paying a tribute to him. However familiar such events may be in other countries, it is but seldom that they occur in our legislative bodies, where ultimate success does not depend upon superiority in eloquence or argument, but upon entirely different considerations. This does not mean, of course, that Donovan was able to make out anything like a good, not to speak of a convincing, case. His speech, in fact, is chiefly notable because of his failure, in spite of so much eloquence and so much ingenuity, to make out a case. Not one of his arguments can stand a moment's serious scrutiny. Most of them were effectively answered on the floor of the House. To this category belong his arguments that Sir Abdur Rahim, who was the law member of the Government of Bengal at the time of the use of the regulation, had since been elected unopposed to the Bengal Council.

# The long wait for indigenous engines

Mastering the technology of "prime movers" holds the key to self-reliance in the defence sector



ADMIRAL ARUN PRAKASH (RETD)  
FORMER CHIEF OF NAVAL STAFF

**A** major dampener on India's enthusiastic claims of *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance) has been the persistent absence of domestically designed and manufactured "prime movers" — the engines that power major military platforms. Whether installed on Indian-built fighters, destroyers, submarines or tanks, none of these critical power plants — gas turbines, diesel engines or electric motors — are fully indigenous.

A long-awaited breakthrough has been the DRDO's recent development, in collaboration with Bharat Earthmovers Ltd, of a 1,500-horsepower diesel engine. While this may pave the way for India's future tanks and armoured vehicles to be powered by an indigenous engine, the failure to develop families of aviation and marine gas turbine engines will severely limit its military aviation and naval capabilities. The consequences are serious: heavy dependence on foreign suppliers and heightened operational vulnerability during times of conflict.

All aircraft in the IAF's current inventory — fighters, transports or helicopters — are powered by aero-engines that are either imported or built/assembled by Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd under foreign licences. Of greater concern is the fact that all versions of the indigenous Tejas fighter as well as future projects like the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) are currently tethered to US-built engines.

In the Indian Navy (IN), smaller warships and submarines are driven by diesel engines, but all frontline destroyers, frigates and (one) aircraft carrier are now powered by gas turbines. While



PLAIN TRUTH: Various versions of the indigenous Tejas fighter are tethered to US-built engines. ISTOCK

marine diesel engines are built in India under French, German and US licences, all gas turbine engines are imported from just two sources; Ukraine and the US. Since Ukraine's reliability as a supplier has been seriously diminished by the ongoing conflict with Russia, the US may become the sole source of gas turbines for future IN warships.

This abject reliance on foreign sources represents a critical Achilles' heel for India's strategic autonomy. In the context of indigenous R&D, a brief review of the DRDO's Kaveri aero-engine project should serve as a sobering case study.

In 1986, the DRDO's Gas Turbine Research Establishment (GTRE) was tasked to initiate the GTX-35VS Kaveri aero-engine project, meant to power the Tejas Light Combat Aircraft (LCA). Full-scale development began in 1989 with 17 prototype engines budgeted at \$55 million. The first engine was tested in 1996, but a 2004 airborne trial on a Russian flying testbed yielded disappointing results — a thrust shortfall as well as overheating issues.

While the GTRE was still struggling with Kaveri's design and engineering challenges, the prototype Tejas urgently needed an engine, and the choice fell in

We must acquire or purchase arcane technologies from wherever available, regardless of cost.

2004 on the US-made General Electric F-404 turbofan. As this engine was duly installed and successfully flown on the Tejas in 2008, the project became inexorably committed to the US F-404 engine family.

Reports in 2014-15 indicated that the DRDO, having spent over Rs 2,100 crore without attaining performance targets, had decided to close the Kaveri project. All this while, reports had been circulating about the GTRE's opaque and unsuccessful quest for obtaining technical consultancy from French and British engine manufacturers. Talks reportedly collapsed over costs and quantum of technology transfer being sought/offered. The MoD and service HQs remained silent observers throughout.

At one point, the IN had proposed a marine derivative of the Kaveri to power its future warships. After a brief consideration, this proposal was rejected, and in 2016, the DRDO decided to revive the project in the form of a less powerful version for powering the indigenous Ghatik unmanned aerial vehicle. A glimmer of hope has emerged from recent reports that the IN has revived a project for the design and development of a marine gas turbine engine, to be taken up by a consortium of DRDO laboratories and private sector firms. While this vital initiative is unlikely to deliver results in less than a decade, it would be a case of "better late than never".

The failed Kaveri project bears an interesting comparison with China's achievements in the field of aero-engines. Recognising their pivotal role in military aviation, Chairman Deng Xiaoping initiated a jet engine project in 1986. China managed to transform its military-industrial complex (from a 1950s industrial baseline, akin to India's) through a long-term, visionary campaign, encompassing a reverse engineering programme, unhampered by regard for intellectual property rights.

After spending billions and

encountering many failures, China's WS-10 aero-engine project, based on the licence-produced French-American CFM-56 engine, was crowned with success. The WS-10 and subsequent versions now power the bulk of the People's Liberation Army Air Force's current fighter fleet, and more powerful types are on the way.

So, what lessons should India learn from the dismal Kaveri saga, especially when placed alongside China's reported success? In my opinion, this unhappy situation can be attributed to a number of institutional shortcomings that need to be addressed on priority.

Firstly, there has been insufficient appreciation at the political level of the vital importance of R&D as well as the long gestational periods involved and heavy funding demanded by military-industrial projects. This is manifest in political indifference towards vital projects like Tejas, Kaveri and the Arjun battle tank, which were allowed to drift for decades. Secondly, there has been failure on the part of DRDO scientists to show long-term vision and pursue, with resolve, engine-related R&D for military platform projects like fighters, ships, submarines and tanks. Thirdly, the military's leadership has consistently failed to take "ownership" of such projects and impart necessary impetus to their urgent pursuit.

Fourthly, as a nation, we need to face the fact that arcane technologies are hard to come by, and it may be more cost-effective, in national interest, to acquire or purchase them from wherever available — regardless of cost — rather than to struggle ineffectively, wasting time. Finally, it is time to shed our embedded bias against the private sector, and force R&D out of the "silo" of DRDO labs and into a collaborative model with private industry in the larger national interest.

Without mastering the technology of military "prime movers", India's claims of self-reliance will remain hollow, rendering its strategic autonomy hostage to foreign powers.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Technology absorption and institutional transformation are critical to future force readiness. — Gen Anil Chauhan

## Caught on the wrong foot

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA

**I** was among the three candidates shortlisted for the post of principal in a prestigious college in the National Capital Region. On reaching the campus at the stipulated time, I was made to wait inside a furnished glass cabin. Restlessness kept me on tenterhooks for three long hours, with no sign of a call. I strolled around for a while until an old man in a khaki uniform came to escort me to the interview room.

Nine board directors, sitting majestically, welcomed me with beaming faces. I was offered a seat politely. The room was large and well-lit. Polished admirals showcased glittering trophies, books and crystal souvenirs. The shine and sheen of the office were mesmerising. A gavel and magnifying monocle lay near the chairman, as if he were a judge.

Shuffling papers, the chairman looked at me and said: "We appreciate your academic credentials. Tell us what inspired you to apply for the principal's post in this college."

"Its location and growth potential, Sirs," I replied.

"Please share your vision for this college," he asked.

Having completed international research assignments at Fudan University and Blindern University, I was quick to say, "I will sign MoUs with these two and maybe more universities. There will be a seamless exchange of students and faculty, a step towards enrichment and capacity enhancement."

Piqued at my assertion, the chairman pressed a button and asked me to look back. Turning my head, I saw a digital screen. To my embarrassment, it displayed a long list of international institutions, including the ones I mentioned, with which the college had signed MoUs decades ago.

I felt like the proverbial Prufrock who had seen "the moment of my greatness flicker". I imagined reading a unanimous question writ large on the faces of the board: "Should we carry on the interview?"

"Thank you, Sirs," I said before rushing towards the elevator. On my way back, someone handed over an envelope. "Your travelling allowance, sir!"

Without opening the envelope, I put it in my overcoat pocket. It contained something hard and round. Seated in the train, I tore it open and found a compact disc. I played it on my laptop. To my astonishment, the disc contained footage of my meandering during the three hours of waiting, followed by the interview inside the boardroom. Absence of calm, poise and focus made me unworthy of running this renowned college. I learnt a life lesson: Never go unprepared before your prospective employers.

The writer is a retired college principal

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Conduct audit of subsidy schemes

Apropos of 'A strategy forged from revenue deficit' (*The Great Game*); Himachal can plug the RDG gap by widening its own tax base and unlocking non-tax streams by boosting its own tax effort i.e. tighten GST compliance, expand the tax net on services and tourism, and periodically revise property and motor vehicle taxes. Even a 6.8% annual growth in own tax revenue can save a few thousand crores off the deficit. The state should leverage its own natural assets — renegotiate hydropower royalty rates, impose a modest green cess on hydel projects and market forest-based products. The state must conduct a quick audit of power, water and food subsidies. The central schemes need to be tapped fully. There is an urgent need to improve fiscal discipline by setting clear budget borrowing limits, publish quarterly fiscal reports and adopt a medium term fiscal framework to reassure investors and lenders.

ARVIND PANDE, PAONTA SAHIB

#### Debt, an indicator of development

Refer to 'Agri debt burden'; the states with higher agricultural debt per agricultural household than the all-India average of Rs 74,121 are Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Punjab and Haryana. All these states have much higher productivity per unit area than their counterparts. Among the non-agricultural households, the families with higher outstanding loans may be the big industrial households. More number of loans are given by banks to the creditworthy people only. Availing more bank and other credit may be an indicator of development rather than debt burden.

SS SANGWAN, ROHTAK

#### Youth reject communalism

Refer to 'Bangladesh verdict'; the election verdict after the July 2024 uprising shows that the Gen Z has rejected communal politics by not voting for the hardliner Jamaat-e-Islami. The BNP government must not betray the hopes of young Bangladeshis and should formulate policies that aim at a job-creating economic growth. A country whose young generation rejects communalism and focuses on the real challenges before them and their country

is bound to progress and prosper. Bangladesh and India should both try to reset bilateral relations for their mutual benefit.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

#### Snatching rights of the needy

Refer to 'Creamy layer quota'; the Supreme Court has repeatedly asked the Centre to review exclusion of the creamy layer from SC and ST reservation benefits so that these advantages reach the vulnerable strata who deserve them in every respect. Children of the SC and ST creamy layer snatch the rights of the underprivileged. Addressing the issue requires long-term, targeted action — changing social narratives, ensuring the benefits reach the needy and implementing inclusive policies.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

#### Voting is a sacred duty

Our electoral system calls for immediate remedial measures and reorientation. Poll rolls have been revised in a hasty, haphazard and unplanned manner. Indeed, haste has made waste. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has been unfair so the issue needs reappraisal, revision and review. There is a tendency to win an election by hook or crook. Ideas and ideology do not matter, but men with pelf and political power do. In such a scenario, voters are faced with a Hobson's choice. There is still time, aware citizens must stem the tide of ignorance by democratic values like liberalism, secularism and scientific temper. Voters must eschew parochial considerations and unsavoury allurements in order to clean the Augean stables.

JARNAIL SINGH BRAR, BATHINDA

#### Immigration for earning livelihood

The Election Commission and the ruling party at the Centre are adamant on exclusion of illegal immigrants from the electoral rolls and then from the country. Looking for greener pastures is a natural human urge, so these people too should also be allowed to make a living for their sustenance. In our country, even the most authentic identification documents — ration cards, Aadhaar cards, voter cards — can be craftily managed. In the current situation, I see no end to this problem.

SAMHITA, BY MAIL

# Small AI may matter more for jobs than Big AI



**KP NAYAR**  
STRATEGIC ANALYST

At the global summit on artificial intelligence (AI) held in Paris last year, in which India participated at the Head of Government level, Prime Minister Narendra Modi posed a riddle which suggested the innocent curiosity with which billions of people worldwide approach the subject of AI.

Modi's riddle at the AI Action Summit was this: If an AI application — app for short in common parlance — is commanded to draw an image of someone writing with their left hand, will the app follow that command? The PM then gave his answer. "The app will most likely draw someone writing with their right hand. Because that is what the training data is dominated by."

Slightly more than a year has passed and India is hosting the mammoth AI Impact Summit in New Delhi this week. Yet, as far as can be ascertained, no one has contradicted Modi. He proceeded to complain in his address to the Paris summit

about the many biases which are widely prevalent in this medium, although AI is not human and therefore cannot be prejudiced. "While the positive potential of AI is absolutely amazing, there are many (inherent) biases that we need to think carefully about. That is why I am grateful...to co-chair it", ie, the Paris Summit.

It is interesting — intriguing for the uninitiated — that none of the wizards in high technology from Silicon Valley to Seoul, where the AI summit had been held nine months before the one in Paris, has solved or explained Modi's riddle. Modi is not one of those wizards. He is not a genius for the digital world. He is like me and most of you, readers of this column, who are looking askance at the pace at which AI is taking over our lives.

In one recent briefing, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri took a somewhat sceptical media by surprise when he spoke of the impact that AI is already having on everyday lives. "You are probably all holding an AI app in your hands, on your phones, or on your laptops. Artificial intelligence is bound to have and is already having a profound impact across all sectors of the economy, polity, society, and governance. And therefore, AI summits are both significant and timely."

In strategic terms, the most significant long-term gain so



**ADVANTAGE:** Small AI can also help in healthcare, agriculture and education in India. PTI

far from participation in AI summits is that it has enabled India to advance its one foot in the door of one of the most exclusive macro-economic and business clubs in the world — the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), of which India has been a founding member since its launch in 2020, is located at the OECD headquarters in Paris.

India became a "key partner" of the OECD in 2007. But it has not been able to advance its standing within the OECD since then, despite growing from the ninth largest economy in the world by GDP in 2010 to the fourth largest now. Indonesia and Brazil, which

Caution needs to be exercised at the AI Impact Summit and not to be infatuated with Indian-origin IT CEOs.

also became key partners in 2007, are both "candidates" for OECD membership now. The OECD is a very prescriptive organisation, steeped in the free market.

That India has lagged behind its contemporaries Indonesia and Brazil for full accession to the organisation is an indictment of lagging reforms and neglect of equality, among other factors, by governments in New Delhi and in the states. Deepening its involvement in the GPAI during the AI Impact Summit may help in advancing the goal of the OECD accession because this Paris organisation has wholeheartedly embraced AI.

At this week's New Delhi summit, India, which sought and secured the GPAI Chair

in 2023, will push for expanding this partnership of 44 countries and attempt to make it India's AI lobby.

Going forward, India would be more comfortable with the World Bank's involvement in domestic AI rather than with the rich man's club, the OECD. One reason for this is that the World Bank Group is willing to work with India on 'Small AI' more than the global private sector technology giants. This is especially so on the issue of job crisis, which India and the Global South dread as a result of the unrestrained AI expansion.

Small AI does not need the huge infrastructure, which technology giants are advocating and building. Small AI can be run on smartphones and laptops while the conventional AI model — Big AI — needs supercomputers, more electricity, highly trained manpower and huge resources to operate.

World Bank President Ajay Banga said last month that 1.2 billion young people will be looking for jobs in emerging market countries in the next 12 to 15 years. His predictions are that only 400 million jobs are available there. Banga said only Small AI can help alleviate this big job crisis. In fact, he predicted an adverse fallout in developed countries from the bigger versions of AI. In addition to unemployment alleviation, Small AI can help in healthcare, agriculture and

education in India and similarly placed countries.

Caution, therefore, needs to be exercised at the AI Impact Summit and not to be infatuated with Indian-origin information technology CEOs like Sundar Pichai, Satya Nadella, Arvind Krishna or Shantanu Narayan. Their public relations machines will be in overdrive during the summit. But these ethnic Indian CEOs are fundamentally responsible to their shareholders and not to jobless youth in India, South Africa or Brazil, who need help from AI.

Which is why Modi emphasised at the AI Action Summit last year that "loss of jobs is AI's most feared disruption. But history has shown that work does not disappear due to technology. Its nature changes and new types of jobs are created. We need to invest in skilling and re-skilling our people for an AI-driven future." This should be the focus of India's private and public sectors after this week as a follow-up to the New Delhi conclave.

Chasing the mirage of investment in India by global technology giants is futile, even if they make big promises to grab today's headlines and sign MoUs that will be mostly forgotten. Previous AI summits in the UK and South Korea were driven by fears about AI. The Paris Summit balanced fears with opportunities. This week in New Delhi, opportunities will be the leitmotif.

# Making climate action intelligent with AI



**KAVITA BHATIA**  
SCIENTIST G, COO INDIA AI & GROUP COORDINATOR, MEITY

India stands at a crossroads in its climate journey, where the scale of environmental stress collides with the speed of technological change. From choking urban air and disappearing groundwater to climate-vulnerable coastlines and heat-stressed agriculture, the country's challenges are vast, complex and deeply interconnected. Yet, India also has an unprecedented opportunity: to deploy artificial intelligence not as a futuristic add-on, but as a core instrument of climate action. When fused with policy intent, local data and community participation, AI can shift India's response from reactive crisis management to anticipatory and precision-driven solutions.

Historically, climate action in India has relied heavily on retrospective data. While disclosure frameworks and action plans have expanded, they often remain disconnected from day-to-day operational decisions. This gap is evident in sectors such as power, manufacturing, buildings and urban services, where emissions and resource use are still managed after the fact rather than optimised in real time.

AI enables a decisive shift. By analysing continuous streams of data from sensors, satellites, smart meters and operational systems, AI can detect inefficiencies, forecast risks and recommend interventions before environmental damage or resource loss occurs. This transition is essential for India to align its development trajectory with its climate goals.

Talking about shifts, AI-driven Digital Twins mark a decisive turning point. By creating living, virtual replicas of physical assets, supply chains and buildings, continuously fed by sensor data and powered by AI, India can move from observing emissions to controlling them. AI enables these systems to detect hidden inefficiencies, predict failures before they waste energy and simulate what-if pathways that optimise cost, carbon and resilience. In this model, sustainability is no longer a cost-of-doing-business, but a driver of efficiency, competitiveness and long-term climate leadership for India.

In thermal power plants, AI-enabled digital twins are being used to monitor heat rates and combustion efficiency in real time. By identifying subtle thermodynamic losses that are invisible to manual monitoring, these systems allow operators to fine-tune boiler operations instantly, reducing coal consumption per unit of electricity generated and cutting emissions without compromising grid reliability.

India's cities are on the frontline of heat stress and air pollution. Buildings alone account for a rapidly growing share of



**CRUCIAL:** AI will solve the climate challenge when embedded into policy, infrastructure and markets. ISTOCK

electricity demand. Traditional building management systems respond only after conditions change, switching on cooling once temperatures rise or occupancy increases.

AI transforms this paradigm. In Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Pune, advanced building management platforms now integrate weather forecasts, occupancy patterns and user comfort preferences to proactively manage HVAC and lighting systems. Cooling loads are adjusted before peak demand hits, reducing emissions and strain on urban power grids.

In the agricultural belt of Telangana, the Saagu Baagu (agricultural advancement) project illustrates the benevolent face of AI. Partnering with global forums, the state deployed AI tools to support chili farmers. By analysing soil health and weather data, the system provided precise, timely advice on pesticide and fertiliser usage. This led not only to environmental protec-

The transition needed is not just green, but intelligent — one where climate action is guided by real-time insight, predictive capability and systemic optimisation.

tion through reduced chemical load but also a 21% increase in yields. Here, AI was a bridge between climate science and traditional farming wisdom.

Similarly, in Bihar, the Google Flood Hub initiative has used AI to process satellite imagery and hydrological data to forecast floods up to seven days in advance. But technology didn't stop at the server. It relied on trans-intermediaries — village volunteers — to interpret the alerts and warn their communities. This human-in-the-loop model saved livestock, assets and lives.

The next leap is to build a structured pipeline where such solutions can be discovered, tested, validated and scaled across geographies. This is the intent of the India AI Application Development Initiative (IADI), under which the India AI Innovation Challenge has taken up climate as a core theme, identifying deployable, field-relevant solutions that can move beyond pilots into

public-impact pathways.

Under the Climate theme, multiple solutions have been selected that demonstrate how AI can strengthen environmental surveillance, forecast climate-linked health risks and generate real-time intelligence for disaster response and resilience planning. Four such solutions illustrate the breadth of climate-AI app, spanning health security, flood response, heat resilience and multi-hazard risk management.

Climate change is also a health security issue. Rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns and increased humidity change mosquito breeding cycles and transmission patterns, intensifying risks of dengue, malaria and other such diseases. The Moskeet solution, selected under the IADI Climate theme, targets this intersection directly. The solution reports strong outcomes: 60% reduction in mosquito populations and 40% decrease in disease burden in areas of implementation. It also claims surveillance cost reductions of up to 85%, and fumigation cost savings of Rs 20-22% through more strategic targeting, while reducing pesticide overuse and resistance risks. This represents the shift India needs: from reactive fogging and post-outbreak response to anticipatory, evidence-guided prevention.

Flood response depends on speed, coverage and confidence. Conventional optical satellite approaches are often constrained by cloud cover and limited daylight, precisely when floods are most intense.

The DeepFlood solution addresses these gaps by using Synthetic Aperture Radar with deep learning models.

The Heatwave Resilience concept proposes an AI-driven platform that integrates advanced climate forecasting with health data to create a heat-health risk classification system, providing predictions up to 10 days ahead at sub-district levels. It also includes risk communication through existing channels and Indic-language AI tools.

Climate stress increasingly manifests as compound risk floods triggering landslides, extreme rain destabilising terrain and rapid urban development increasing exposure. The Multi-Hazard Susceptibility Mapping solution takes a systems approach.

AI will not solve the climate challenge on its own. But when embedded into policy, infrastructure and markets, it can increase the effectiveness of every rupee spent and every tonne of emissions reduced. The transition needed is not just green, but intelligent — one where climate action is guided by real-time insight, predictive capability and systemic optimisation. States that embrace this shift early will position themselves as leaders in a low-carbon, tech-enabled future.

The India AI Innovation Challenge pipeline demonstrates that climate-AI future will be built through deployable solutions. AI works best when it becomes part of governance workflows, designed for scale, tuned to local realities and accountable to public outcomes.

**QUICK CROSSWORD**

**ACROSS**

- Guiding principle (6,4)
- Stimulus (4)
- Audibly (5)
- Brazen (9)
- Series of military operations (8)
- Person staying at an hotel (5)
- A salad vegetable (7)
- With an expressionless face (7)
- Happening now (7)
- Breathtaking (7)
- Stuck (5)
- Keep under control (8)
- Notice (9)
- Craftiness (5)
- Sudden rapid movement (4)
- The go-ahead (5,5)

**DOWN**

- Tiny biting fly (4)
- Take care of (4,5)
- Find oneself finally (3,2)
- Fidgety (7)
- Erudite (7)
- Chessman other than pawn (5)
- Optimistic (4-6)
- Capital of Serbia (8)
- Absolute scoundrel (10)
- Interminable (8)
- Likely to turn out well (9)
- Small dog used by hunters (7)
- Lack (7)
- Speak (5)
- Kingly (5)
- Noteworthy achievement (4)

**Saturday's Solution**

**Across:** 1 Lodging, 5 Sum up, 8 Done thing, 9 Spa, 10 Ease, 12 See about, 14 Covert, 15 Please, 17 Manually, 18 Blur, 21 Owe, 22 White flag, 24 Fishy, 25 Drought.

**Down:** 1 Ladle, 2 Don, 3 Iota, 4 Guinea, 5 Signally, 6 Most of all, 7 Prattle, 11 Seven seas, 13 Broadway, 14 Come off, 16 Allied, 19 Right, 20 Veto, 23 Lag.

**SU DO KU**

**SATURDAY'S SOLUTION**

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

**CALENDAR**

**FEBRUARY 16, 2026, MONDAY**

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Marghashirsh Shaka 27
- Phalgun Parvishite 5
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 14, up to 5:35 pm
- Variyan Yoga up to 1:50 am
- Shravan Nakshatra up to 8:48 pm
- Moon in Capricorn sign

**FORECAST**

SUNSET:	MONDAY	18:11 HRS
SUNRISE:	TUESDAY	07:01 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	25	12
New Delhi	28	12
Amritsar	24	10
Bathinda	26	09
Jalandhar	24	10
Ludhiana	26	12
Bhiwani	27	11
Hisar	26	12
Sirsa	26	12
Dharamsala	24	07
Manali	17	03
Shimla	18	08
Srinagar	18	-01
Jammu	24	11
Kargil	04	-07
Leh	03	-07
Dehradun	28	07
Mussoorie	17	09

TEMPERATURE IN °C

## India must shed global south myth for AI Summit's success

The India AI Impact Summit 2026, which begins in New Delhi on Monday, is not just a high-profile event with top global CEOs and international celebrities gracing the occasion but their deliberations during the meeting could shape future developments across spheres, including economy, geopolitics, technology and environment. India has defined the three sutras that should shape a sustainable AI future: people, planet and progress. The first is about AI serving humanity in all its diversity, preserving dignity and ensuring inclusivity. The second one is about AI innovation aligning with environmental stewardship and sustainability, while the third emphasises sharing of benefits equitably, advancing global

development and prosperity. The Narendra Modi government has seven chakras, or themes, for global cooperation. "The seven chakras translate the guiding sutras into concrete areas of multilateral action. These themes—spanning human capital, inclusion, trust, resilience, science, resources, and social good—channel global collaboration towards measurable outcomes." These are noble sentiments, which have succeeded in attracting French President Emmanuel Macron and his Brazilian counterpart Lula da Silva, Google's Sundar Pichai, OpenAI's Sam Altman, Nvidia's Jensen Huang and Reliance's Mukesh Ambani, among others. Around three dozen top CEOs will be attending the Summit. Prime Minister Modi will address

the plenary on February 19. India hopes to secure \$100 billion in investment commitments during the five-day event. Of course, the potential is there, as India boasts of the second-largest AI workforce in the world and more than 700 million internet users. If China is the factory of the world, India is its back office. Besides, India, the fastest-growing major economy in the world, generates almost one-fifth of the world's data. Some of the potential has also been realised. For instance, Andhra Pradesh has received a \$15 billion commitment from Google to build its largest AI infrastructure hub outside the United States. Another \$11 billion is being invested by a joint venture involving Reliance Industries, Brookfield, and Digital

Realty to develop an AI-focused data centre in Visakhapatnam. Along with the potential is the danger of the Summit losing its purpose and salience from the assault of a shibboleth—that of the global south. This relic from the heyday of Nehruvian non-alignment has done tremendous harm to the nation. The reflexive invocation of the south as the organising principle of India's AI diplomacy warrants careful scrutiny. The phrase carries historical resonance, evoking the era of post-colonial solidarity. In those days, it was a meaningless slogan; today, it is a drag. Artificial intelligence is not structured along north-south binaries; it is organised around ecosystems of capital, talent, compute power and regulatory agility. All

countries that will shape AI's future are those able to mobilise investment, protect intellectual property, ensure data security, and cultivate cutting-edge research. While developmental cooperation remains important, India's primary objective at a forum of this scale should be to embed itself in the most advanced global innovation networks. If Summit 2026 succeeds in aligning its lofty sutras and chakras with hard-headed economic strategy, it could mark a decisive step in India's technological ascent. But to do so, it must resist the temptation to substitute symbolism and misplaced nostalgia for substance. In the age of AI, influence will accrue to those who invest in innovation and the future, not to those who rehearse old shibboleths.

## LETTERS

### Great news for pensioners

Propos the news report "Govt's balm for staff: New EHS to be rolled out within 15 days" (THI Feb 13). I am a septuagenarian pensioner, who is fully aware of the chronic health issues one faces at this age. A considerable portion of my pension is spent towards medical expenses. I am elated to read that the government is set to roll out a revamped employees' health scheme within fifteen days coinciding with the budget session. It is indeed a balm especially for thousands of pensioners like me. As per this scheme, employees, teachers and pensioners are required to pay 1.5 per cent of their basic pay every month towards subscription, while the government will sanction matching funds that would entail an outlay of Rs 1,000 crore annually. However, it is distressing to note that some members of the Telangana State United Teachers Federation (TSUTF) have voiced concern and demanded that monthly contributions be reduced and have fixed slabs of Rs 250 to Rs 1,000. My point is when one can get assured unlimited health insurance coverage, the token 1.5 per cent of basic pay monthly subscription should not be unaffordable. The need of the hour is hassle-free cashless treatment in the empanelled hospitals unlike the health card issued by the previous govt which are not being honoured and the 'beneficiaries' are footing the medical bills from their pockets. Let this revamped scheme be rolled out on priority basis.

Dinanath Shenolikar, Hyderabad

### AP Budget ignores many poll promises

Finance Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Payyavula Kesavaiah presented the 2026-27 Budget on Saturday. It is worrying to note that tax revenue and open market loans and other liabilities are competing among themselves, as their share in every rupee is at 38 paise and 30 paise, respectively. Though the government made several promises to employees, pensioners, unemployed and women in the run-up to elections, the budget has failed to make any specific mention of PRC, pending DAs, retirement benefits, unemployment dole and ₹1500 to women's accounts every month. It is a tragic irony that many retirees are dying even before getting their earmarked benefits from the government. I urge the government to resolve all such issues, especially those concerning retirees at the earliest.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramala, Tiruvuru (AP)

### Ray of hope for stray dogs

Propos "30 stray puppies find homes at adoption drive" (THI Feb 15), the report is heartening. Finding families for 30 Indie puppies in a single event shows that many citizens are willing to choose adoption over purchase. Such efforts deserve appreciation, especially when our cities continue to struggle with rising stray dog numbers. At the same time, adoption drives must be backed by sustained measures. Regular sterilisation, vaccination, and public awareness on responsible pet ownership are essential. Local bodies can partner with resident welfare associations and schools to promote the message: "Be a hero. Adopt, don't shop." Simple follow-up systems to track adopted pets would also help ensure their well-being. If citizens and authorities work together, humane and practical solutions are well within reach.

A Myilsami, Coimbatore-641402

### Allow Rahul to speak in LS

Let Rahul Gandhi speak, let the record show, and let the rupees expunge—Parliament's dignity lies not in silencing voices, but in disciplining words. In a democracy, the chamber's strength is not measured by how many voices it suppresses, but by how firmly it upholds its own standards. By allowing speech yet striking what violates rules, the parliament will demonstrate openness without surrendering discipline. This balance preserves both freedom of expression and the sanctity of the institution. Let the people assess Rahul's speeches and reflect their opinion in the next elections. Let the LoP demean himself.

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

### Odisha prioritising medical education

Propos the news item in Odisha page of THI Visakhapatnam edition (Feb 15), it is gratifying that the State Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi laid a foundation stone on February 13 for a Govt medical college and hospital at Nabarangpur with a capacity of 100 MBBS seats and 420 beds in an area of 50 acres at Patalaguda in the district. In his 20-month tenure three medical colleges became operational in Jaipur, Kandhamal and Talcher, while three are on the anvil in Dhenkanal, Jagatsinghnagar and Bhubaneswar. Like in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, Odisha too would soon boast of a University of Health Sciences as a common umbrella for all medical colleges in the State barring the autonomous AIIMS.

Dr T Ramadas, Visakhapatnam

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Two workers killed in chemical tank explosion

MANDYA: Two migrant workers from Bihar were killed in a massive chemical tank explosion at Keerthi Chemical factory near Karekatte, close to Basaralu in Mandya district, on Sunday. The blast occurred while the factory was in the process of being shifted to a new location. According to preliminary reports, the relocation work had been underway for nearly a month. On Sunday, workers were dismantling and removing a chemical storage tank when it suddenly exploded, killing two workers on the spot. The deceased have been identified as Kalu Khan (27) and Ashok (26), both natives of Bihar. Police said the force of the explosion was so intense that the bodies of the two workers were severely mutilated. Four other workers — Khasim, Ravi, Mahantesh and Rajeev Kumar — sustained serious injuries and have been admitted to the Mandya Institute of Medical Sciences (MIMS) hospital.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# Don't allow erosion of democratic values



RAVULAPATI SEETARAMARAO

Of late, we all have been under the mistaken notion that the foundations of Indian democracy are very strong. However, on a closer scrutiny we find that those foundations are seemingly limited to elections, and anyone who cares about democracy may not last many more years. There's no need to over-analyse to find the reasons for that fear. Just step into the parliament that we treat as a temple or the state legislative assemblies, and the causes become obvious.

Meaningful debates do not take place in the Lok Sabha. There are no effective decisions. Legislators do not engage collectively in thinking about laws that would benefit the public. Opposition members hurl abuses at the ruling party; the ruling party retaliates with even more furious attacks. The Speaker, as if asking where the complaints raised by the opposition should be heard, tilts to the right and refuses to look left.

In some Assemblies,



**Those in the Chair, who should ensure fairness for all sides, often act as if they must protect only the ruling party, as if legislators had no obligation to resign when they leave their party. Some may even brazenly insist on continuing to act as party representatives while holding the speaker's chair. If politicians sink to the point of thinking that winning elections is all that matters, then the word "democracy" is forced to take on a different meaning**

the opposition members show up only on the day of swearing-in, and after that are present merely to sign attendance sheets with pride. Who cares about what happens inside, if their demands are met whenever made? Debates? Aren't there media microphones outside for that? Are the microphones in the House only meant to be torn apart, and not to convey the carefully chosen words of the people?

The debate over whether the Lok Sabha ever previously approved a vote of thanks to the President's address without the Prime Minister being present is

redundant at this juncture. When passing resolutions without discussion is becoming parliamentary practice, do we need to abandon older customs? The Speaker took his advice seriously and the Prime Minister did not attend the House. The issue is not whether the Speaker advised this because of alleged disrespect to MPs' dignity or because the opposition's proposed no-confidence motion against the Speaker created new precedents—those are side issues. The real question everyone in a democracy should consider is why our constitution-

makers enshrined Parliament and assemblies as forums of dignity. The Prime Minister was unable to attend to move the vote of thanks to the President's address because the Speaker, by order, dispensed with a concluding debate. Likewise, the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, could not speak on the vote of thanks because the Speaker would not permit him to read an excerpt from the preface of a yet-to-be released book by former chief of army General M M Naravane.

When the leader of the ruling party and the leader

of the opposition are both unable to speak on a crucial resolution for any reason, should that be taken as senior leaders abdicating their democratic responsibilities? How acceptable is it for the Lok Sabha Speaker to claim helplessness? The executive and the Parliament discharge responsibility through debates and answers.

Is it reasonable to ignore parliamentary conventions and avoid responsibilities by saying, "I'm not the one accountable," simply because you can anticipate what will happen in the House? How can we say that representatives elected by the people are fulfilling democratic processes and constitutional duties when debates and resolutions are passed without discussion? Is not that overstepping democratic bounds? Whether knowingly or not, or because of personal or intra party ego issues, when basic principles are being cast aside and the polity is being discarded, who should be blamed? When a low level official exceeds his or her authority, does the machinery give up on holding them accountable and punishing them according to law? Has the Constitution given licence to apply one kind of justice to government employees and another to elected representatives?

There have been many instances in India where elected representatives chosen by the people have switched parties after the election,

and even where presiding officers—legislative speakers and parliamentary chairpersons—have repeatedly delayed making decisions despite clear evidence of such defections.

Those in the Chair, who should ensure fairness for all sides, often act as if they must protect only the ruling party, as if legislators had no obligation to resign when they leave their party. Some may even brazenly insist on continuing to act as party representatives while holding the speaker's chair, pretending there is nothing wrong with it. If politicians sink to the point of thinking that winning elections is all that matters and that anything goes to secure the next victory, then the word "democracy" is forced to take on a different meaning.

Despite many setbacks elsewhere after independence, our country has earned a reputation for upholding democratic values and serving the people to some extent.

At this stage, when we have largely succeeded in preserving those values, it is unacceptable to cavalierly abandon responsibility and trample those principles. It is essential for the nation's well-being that power remains accountable and firmly within democratic bounds. Rulers, opposition parties, and citizens alike must take that responsibility seriously.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

## Impact of women's World Cup and WPL on young girls

DR HYMA MOORTY

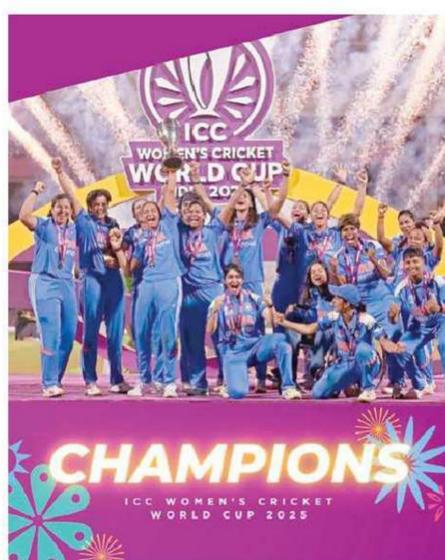
Winning the ICC Women's World Cup -2025, triggered national euphoria characterized by massive street celebrations across India. The World Cup generated huge respect for girls and women's cricket became quite popular in the country, including among young and old. The triumph elevated the winning team's players as national icons, while the players started getting brand ambassador and endorsement offers, a rarity in India. It boosted sponsorships and inspired a 'cricket as my career' zest among girls, who also took to playing 'gulli' cricket. The players are recognized and cheered at airports and huge malls in cosmopolitan cities as well as in towns.

With the massive success of women's World Cup and the Women's Premier League (WPL), the interest and enthusiasm among girls, including those staying in gated communities, increased manifold.

The World Cup victory has inspired a new generation of female cricketers, with many girls now dreaming of representing India as the career pinnacle. The WPL has played a significant role in this, providing a platform for women cricketers to showcase their skills. The

WPL has also brought about a cultural shift, with cricket no longer seen as a 'man's game'. The girls enjoyed an identity of their own. The league helped increase their visibility and recognition, with the turnout at venues and viewership reporting an overwhelming increase marking the women's cricket was here to stay in India. This has created new opportunities for women cricketers, including lucrative endorsements and deals and sponsorships, which makes for a significant upward march from the days of Shanta Rangaswamy and Diana Eduljee.

I have been noticing that young girls in my society were super excited watching the live telecast, and screaming "out", "not out" "super shot". One day I decided to join them. I was amazed by their passion. They had pinned women cricketers' names and jersey numbers on their tees—Jami, Harman, Mandana, Shefali and even the injured Pratima Rawal, who scored 308 runs in the World Cup. Since they could not afford multiple tees, they got creative with paper and colours, switching numbers and names for different matches. I was impressed by their knowledge—they knew everything about the WWC and WPL. Tamanna though the youngest, but a dominating player in the group and the self-declared



**The girls were proud to see the true camaraderie between the best of friends. They appreciated Jamimah's gesture when she walked all the way up to Smriti after RCB won the WPL title. Their warm hugs and emotional reactions were heart-touching, indeed. The best friends became each other's support after the WPL final. It taught the girls that winning and losing are part of life, and humility goes a long way. You learn by watching your heroes**

captain was wearing a tee with both numbers 23/7. On being asked, my good friend Tamanna explained that Harmanpreet had changed her jersey number from 7 to

23 based on the advice of a numerologist. Following this advice in late 2024, Harmanpreet Kaur won the WPL title for Mumbai Indians and won the World Cup in 2025.

Incidentally, the number 7 jersey is a tribute to former India captain M S Dhoni, who wore it during his playing days. The number represented her aggressive, fearless playing style for many years before she switched to number 23 for better luck. Though she wore 23 for the World Cup, she is recognized globally for wearing number 7.

It's shocking and amazing to see Tamanna rattling off so much information at a stretch. I saw another fragile little girl in the team, named Tripti, with Mandana's number 18 with a style similar to her idol. They all were united in their admiration for Smriti's, 'legend', 'destroyer' and 'Queen'.

There was another tiny cute little girl in the team fitting the personality of Jamimah and wearing the jersey number 3. The group calls her 'petite dynamite', for her high energy, explosive and aggressive style. Her paddle sweep and strong strokes are almost like that of Jamimah. All girls agreed that the little one is a strong hitter and sometimes they must go in search of the ball in the adjoining compound, which is a corporate office. They were all very excited to talk about the way Nandini saluted whenever she took a wicket. These girls adore Harmanpreet, admire the magical Mandana and adulate Jemi-

mah. The girls would jump into each other's arms, mimicking the players' celebrations after a player from the rival team gets dismissed. It was heartwarming to see them all raring to go!

The girls were proud to see the true camaraderie between the best of friends. They appreciated Jamimah's gesture when she walked all the way up to Smriti after RCB won the WPL title. Their warm hug and emotional reactions were heart-touching, indeed. The best friends became each other's support after the WPL final. It taught the girls that winning and losing are part of life, and humility goes a long way. You learn by watching your heroes.

Players like Harmanpreet, Smriti, Jemimah, Deepti Sharma, Shefali Varma, Amanjot Kaur and the rest of the squad, have become household names, inspiring young girls to look up to them as role models. More girls are taking up cricket, with many schools and academies reporting a surge in female enrolment. WPL has provided women cricketers with a means to earn a living, giving them financial independence and security. The women cricketers' long sixes and fours guarantee that their brand of cricket is poised for greater glory in India.



## OUR VIEW



## Our macro data update will improve outcomes

India's vastly improved consumer price index for measuring retail inflation should lead to better policy formulation and therefore superior results. It matters to India in multiple ways

India's new consumer price index (CPI) series, released last week by the statistics ministry as part of a huge two-year long exercise to revise key macroeconomic variables, is a marked improvement over the one it has replaced. The CPI's base year, methodology and coverage have been updated to better reflect what Indian households consume. Its base year is now 2024, far more recent than the old series' 2012. Its basket of items whose retail prices are tracked has been churned in line with findings of the 2023-24 Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES). The weights assigned to various items represent actual spending patterns across the country far better than before. Consider. Back in 2012, India was only a \$1.83 trillion economy. By 2024, it was \$3.91 trillion. Yet, despite this more-than-doubling of our GDP and nearly 90% increase in per capita income—from \$1,429 in 2012 to \$2,695 in 2024—retail inflation numbers were based on an outdated basket. That this has been rectified is a relief.

Not only has the number of items gone up, so has the CPI's count of data collection points. The most significant change in the new series is the weight of food items, which has fallen below 37% from nearly 46% earlier. With growing prosperity, as income levels rise, people spend a smaller part of their earnings on food, while spending more on other stuff—especially services like health, education and transport. The new series reflects this reality. Inevitably, comparisons will be made between inflation numbers from the old and new series. The latter has put retail inflation at 2.75% in January, year-on-year, while the former recorded 1.33% for December. Given the revisions made, that gap tells us little. One could, of course, work out historical numbers using new weights and a 'linking factor' given by the ministry, but that would be of academic rather than policy interest. What matters is whether the CPI update helps formulate policy better. The answer, clearly, is 'yes.' Evidence-based policymaking is superior to intuition-based, which is how policy often gets made in the absence of reliable data. As India's Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran has said, the CPI reset will help calibrate monetary and fiscal policy better since updated data reflects current consumption patterns and economic conditions. The hope now is that with volatile food prices losing CPI basket weight, headline inflation will be more stable. Note that monetary policy is more effective in dealing with demand than supply shocks; so, to the extent that food prices are driven up by shortages, we can expect this update to serve us better.

Any policy is only as good as the underlying gauge on which it is based. Granted, we could conceivably adopt an even more sensitive tracker of inflation. More frequent purchase patterns from sources other than the HCES, for example, may let us use a 'chain-weighted' basket for dynamic readings. But what we have in place today offers conceptual continuity. So long as it offers a more accurate picture of the price situation, India's central bank will be able to target inflation better in meeting this part of its mandate. As for the statistics ministry, it must stick to its plan to revise the base year of key economic indicators every three to five years, instead of 10. In a fast-growing economy, structural changes are inevitable, and unless these are captured by economic data, policy formulation and hence outcomes suffer.

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architecture: applications, models, chips, infrastructure and energy.

Also, for leadership in AI, extensive investments need to be made in R&D and building an AI-ready talent pool. Entities with property rights to innovations have premium valuations. Hence Indian industry and startups should make good use of the Research, Development and Innovation Fund that was announced by the government to come up with breakthrough applications.

Early evidence on potential job losses due to AI may be a worry in the near term, especially for a labour-abundant economy like India's. Nonetheless, given our large workforce, we need to have skilling, reskilling and workforce redeployment avenues to ensure a smooth tech-led transition.

With AI changing the way global economies and societies operate, India stands at yet another pivotal juncture to create a new chapter in its economic and development history.

The AI revolution offers us a chance to rewrite the software industry's script as it represents an opportunity to transform a service provider into an AI innovator. From the semiconductor mission to data centre incentives, our policy framework is designed for India to act as an architect of this tech revolution rather than just a participant.

The AI Summit in New Delhi brings together the world's foremost technologists, investors and policymakers. It is an opportunity to translate vision into action, forge valuable partnerships, build collaborations and get investments. Most importantly, it offers a platform for the world to arrive at a framework consensus on ethical, responsible and inclusive AI.

By 2030, AI is projected to add nearly \$15.7 trillion to global GDP. Its adoption advocates expect it to unlock unprecedented productivity gains and accelerate innovation across sectors. India could use the summit to drive the global AI agenda and seize the massive opportunity it presents.

## THEIR VIEW

## Can India aim for AI leadership? We should go by a strategic plan

The AI Impact Summit must converge attention on how best to leverage key resource endowments



ANANT GOENKA  
is president, Ficci.

India AI Impact Summit 2026 comes at a crucial time. Global benchmarks indicate that India is emerging as a relatively well-positioned economy for artificial intelligence (AI) readiness. India ranks third in Stanford University's 2025 Global AI Vibrancy Ranking.

Apart from political leaders, some of the biggest names of the technology world are descending for the summit, reposing confidence in India's promising tech market and capabilities while also elevating our global relations. Further, the last few weeks witnessed some major trade deals that India clinched with the EU and US. This sent a strong signal to the global business and technology community about India.

India has grown from an agrarian developing economy into one that will soon rank as the world's fourth-largest. As a technology services powerhouse, India created an industry that employs millions of people and dramatically changed the direction of its economy.

Indigenous AI companies are demonstrating India's capacity for innovation at scale. Indian agritech innovators are deploying solutions in local dialects, solving challenges unique to the Indian landscape. Homegrown enterprises are serving clients worldwide with AI solutions. Numerous AI-based startups are revolutionizing healthcare, banking, education, services, defence and virtually all other sectors.

But the opportunity is massive and fast-evolving. The Niti Aayog's just-released *Frontier Tech Hub* report on 'Technology Services—Reimagination Ahead' outlines how India's \$265 billion technology services sector can scale to \$750–850 billion by 2035 while strengthening global competitiveness in the AI era. The roadmap highlights that AI marks a structural shift in the industry: value will move from labour-arbitrage services to intellectual property-led, outcome-oriented and platform-driven delivery models. India has an opportunity to evolve from services leadership to global leadership in the creation of AI-native systems.

Turning ambition into leadership requires strategic intervention. Over the past year, it has become evident that while the use of AI tools can be widespread, the frontier of AI is highly concentrated. The development and training of advanced foundational models is increasingly capital, compute, data and energy intensive. Some announcements made recently clearly reflect India's intention to build a strong AI ecosystem. These measures expect AI infrastructure to act as an engine for achieving Viksit Bharat by 2047. A tax holiday extending till then for foreign companies providing cloud services globally using Indian data centres is aimed at building critical data infrastructure for digital leadership. Similarly, extension of the Semiconductor Mission reflects an ambition to become an AI compute hub and achieve self-reliance in related physical infrastructure. The doubling of the Electronics Components Manufacturing Scheme's allocation will enable self-sufficiency across the country's technology stack—from AI-optimized processors to foundational models and applications.

This integrated vision recognizes that AI leadership requires owning critical layers of the value chain and not just participating in isolated segments. Our AI-readiness rank reflects systematic progress across all five layers of the AI

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

An agentic system that is supposed to take actions in the world cannot work reliably unless it has a world model to predict the consequences of its actions. Without it, the system will inevitably make mistakes.

YANN LECUN

## MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

## Why 'kirana' stores have survived quick commerce apps

MANU JOSEPH



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There is a Tamil film in which a man runs the most famous *idli* shop in the region because of the way he makes the batter, with

an old-fashioned pestle and all the grime. His son wants to modernize and make batter with an electric grinder, but the old man resists. I felt it was not so much about *idli* at all, but the old man's fear of being a castaway in the ocean of time. Time is precious for modern people, but not like how money is precious for the poor. It is more like what money is for the rich.

The affluent old, especially, are lost in an abundance of time. They throng my *kirana* store. They go there, and there is a lot of lifting of apples and shaking of coconuts. They talk to the guy there. They mutter about the poor quality of something, never say a good word, as though that would not take enough time, and haggle with him for a few rupees here and there.

Once, at the VFS visa centre, I saw an old man who was baffled that his visa application process was over so fast. He looked like he was hoping it would take a few hours, like it used to at one time, and that there would be a fuss over missing documents. But it was all over quickly and he had to go back home, into the ocean of time. I even suspected that he really didn't need a visa. He just applied because he needed something to do. It was like walking into a *kirana* store and lifting some apples and shaking some coconuts.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Will the US Fed stay independent if Kevin Warsh takes charge of it?

He's Trump's nominee to succeed Powell but the irony is that he may well be remembered as a defender of the Fed's autonomy



**BARRY EICHENGREEN** is professor of economics and political science at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author, of the forthcoming 'Money Beyond Borders: Global Currencies From Croesus to Crypto'

Now that US President Donald Trump has chosen Kevin Warsh as his appointee to succeed Jerome Powell as Federal Reserve chair, it is time to take Warsh's ideas seriously, if not literally. Much of the discussion about Warsh has focused on his interest-rate recommendations, which have swung with the political wind. But this is to make a mountain out of a molehill. The Fed's interest-rate policy is decided by a committee, where the chair is only one voice among many.

The chair's voice is the loudest, but that is no guarantee. G. William Miller was outvoted in 1979 when he opposed an increase in the Fed's discount rate. Miller was outvoted by the Federal Reserve Board, not the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), since it is the Board that makes the final determination regarding the discount rate. The highly regarded Fed Chair Paul Volcker was briefly outvoted in 1986 when he opposed an interest-rate reduction.

Neither split tarnished the Fed's reputation, although both episodes diminished the influence of the chair. Both Miller and Volcker exited their positions not long thereafter, which is a cautionary tale for Warsh. The next chair will have to build a consensus to avoid becoming another Miller.

This makes Warsh's ideas about forecasting the course of the economy a matter of keen interest, because his ideas will be the vehicle for his influence on other Fed governors. At times Warsh seems to have advocated depending less on complicated economic models, career staff and incoming data, favouring a more discretionary approach resting on the tenor of markets.

This sentiment-based approach to investing has been known to work when in the hands of seasoned practitioners, such as Warsh's mentor, the billionaire investor Stanley Druckenmiller, who came to prominence at George Soros's Quantum Fund. But it is unlikely to work as a guide to forecasting the medium-term evolution of inflation and employment.

At other times, Warsh seems to be arguing for relying less on trailing economic indicators and more on real-time sources of economic data available, courtesy of the digital revolution. Here, he is onto something. But so are Fed staff members who, in their research, already cite data from the likes of the Billion Prices Project and the HBS Pricing Lab.

Aside from Druckenmiller, the American financial operator who Warsh resembles most closely is J.P. Morgan Sr, who was intimately involved in managing the major banking and financial crises that erupted periodically in the US prior to the Fed's establishment. Morgan's preferred approach was to organize lifeboat operations in which



stronger banks provided the liquidity needed to keep their weaker brethren afloat and calm financial markets. In one famous episode in 1907, Morgan summoned the heads of leading New York banks and locked them in his private library until they agreed to provide funds to bail out other solvent but shaky financial institutions.

Warsh, for his part, played a significant role in brokering the acquisition of Bear Stearns by JPMorgan Chase in 2008. Ultimately, this selective triage did nothing to stem a systemic financial crisis. For that, large-scale liquidity injections by the central bank were required, the very kind of credit injections about which Warsh has expressed reservations.

Back in 1907, participants in financial markets similarly worried about relying on J.P. Morgan's private-sector approach to resolving financial crises. Those concerns led directly to the establishment of the Federal Reserve in 1913 (Morgan died the same year).

Relatedly, Warsh argues that the Fed should focus on its dual mandate ensuring price stability and maximum employment while avoiding mission creep. This would appear to come perilously close to abjuring the Fed's responsibility for banking supervision and financial stability, which could encourage additional loosening of the Fed's regulatory reins.

Warsh's view indicates a preoccupation with moral hazard, the concern that Fed balance-sheet expansion encourages risky behaviour by banks, inflates asset prices and promotes profligacy on the part of an already deficit-prone federal government. But while moral-hazard risk is a valid concern, so is meltdown risk. The key to successful central banking is not to privilege one over the other.

The strongest argument for the Fed to focus on its core mandate—understood to encompass stable prices, full employment and financial stability—is that preserving the monetary authority's independence depends on it. Independence is politically viable only when paired with accountability—i.e., only when the individuals and agency to which public functions are delegated are required to explain and justify their actions.

The more complex the mandate, the more difficult it is for the agency's political masters—US Congress and the public—to evaluate the correspondence between those decisions, on one hand, and its mandated goals, on the other. The harder it then is for independent policymakers to defend their actions credibly.

The irony is that Warsh, nominated by a president who values fealty above all else, may be remembered as a key protector of central-bank independence.

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# What silver's surge says about the prospects of solar energy

Some believe that solar has peaked but silver prices say otherwise



**DAVID FICKLING** is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering climate change and energy.



Silver may be headed for a glut even as its use in cleantech endures.

Did we just pass peak solar? That's the claim now circulating among many analysts. Hitting net zero will require 630GW of panels to be installed every year between 2030 and 2050, the International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates. But we already blew past that target with 654GW built last year, according to BloombergNEF.

China's installations have hit a permanent peak, Sam Wilkinson, head of renewables at S&P Global Commodities, told the Redefining Energy podcast recently. With that one country making up nearly half the global market, the world will see connections drop in 2026, he added. Strip out the 'buffer' of entirely unexpected demand that BloombergNEF built into its forecasts to account for the way solar routinely outperforms, and it looks like we're never going to get past the 633GW connected in 2025.

For an alternative view, look at the past year's hottest commodity. Even after a slump from a record \$121.65 per troy ounce in late January, silver prices are up 154% from a year earlier. Trading at \$81.60 last Wednesday, the metal has notched more than double gold's gain.

As with any commodity price spike, that's the result of speculation as much as anything fundamental. But even speculators ground their bets in the physical market, where 60% of silver consumption comes from industrial users and most of the action over the past decade has come from solar.

Silver's conductivity makes it essential to photovoltaic modules, where thin printed contacts boost electrical output. About 196 million ounces were used by solar panel manufacturers last year. That's equivalent to every gram used in jewellery and represents about 17% of the global market.

Much of the recent run-up can be explained by a shift toward TOPCon, a new solar technology that requires more silver. Because the metal is so expensive, though, module makers are experts at reducing the amount they use. Such thrifting cuts consumption per watt by about 15% a year, to 8 micrograms last year from 73 micrograms in 2011. Silver-coated copper powder, or SCCP, a composite material that's becoming widespread in the industry, uses 30% to 50% less silver with minimal losses in electrical efficiency, according to the Silver Institute. The current price spike is only going to accelerate those efforts.

Assume ongoing thrifting at the 15% annual rate we've seen since 2011, and silver consumption for photovoltaics may be about to fall off a cliff. An industry installing a third more panels in 2035 will only need about a quarter of the silver used last year.

On that basis, we're heading into a silver glut and prices should slide accordingly.

Silver has plenty of other uses, but none look sufficient to make up the shortfall. Electric vehicles have more contacts than conventional cars, but even then the Silver Institute only sees usage increasing to 94 million ounces in 2031 from around 80 million ounces this year—a drop in the ocean next to the 150 million ounces or so disappearing from the solar market. AI is another hot field, but usage in semiconductors is still a relatively modest 30 million ounces or so. Even that consumption may diminish as SCCP becomes more widespread.

Given the historic gains from thrifting, it's hard to argue that silver prices belong at anything like current levels. At least 80% of mine production comes from pits that would still be making money below \$30 per ounce. Many also produce gold or copper—hot metals in their own right. That will keep the bullion pouring, even if demand for silver itself suffers.

If you believe that solar installations have more or less peaked, there is an immense opportunity in shorting the long end of the curve right now. Contracts for delivery next January on the Shanghai Futures Exchange are priced at 19,500 yuan per kg (\$87 per ounce), higher than the spot market.

What if current forecasts of peak solar turn out to be as illusory as all the previous forecasts? The IEA has famously been underestimating solar's potential for almost as long as it has been a significant industry. Photovoltaic panels have spread to all sorts of places once thought implausible. In rich countries, they've become so cheap that they're finding use as fencing panels and plug-in devices that can be hung off a balcony.

Entire national markets have sprung up unexpectedly in places such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on scales sufficient to transform the grid. The same process is now repeating itself in sub-Saharan Africa. Plummeting battery prices are even extending solar generation outside of daylight hours, storing energy for the evening and morning peaks. The world's demand for energy is still nowhere close to being sated. Almost everywhere, solar is the cheapest way of meeting it. Silver's surge suggests this boom is nowhere close to petering out.

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THEIR VIEW

# New AI rules: What kind of digital society do we want?

VIVAN SHARAN



is a public policy expert and partner at Koan Advisory Group, New Delhi.

Starting Monday, India will host the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi with heads of state, global tech leaders and policymakers in attendance. Just days earlier, the ministry of electronics and information technology had notified a legal framework to govern synthetically generated or AI-driven content. The timing seems deliberate.

Announcing new AI rules on the eve of a high-profile global gathering allows India to signal that it takes AI harms seriously. But beyond the optics, the substance of these rules deserves attention.

At their core, the amendments focus on "synthetically generated information," which is content created or materially altered using AI and made available online via digital services like social media. Over the past few years, the world has witnessed an explosion of AI-generated political memes, deepfakes and morphed images, including sexually explicit fabrications involving real individuals. These have caused India's political and societal fabric significant harm.

The government's initial response was blunt, as most early drafts of technology rules tend to be. Previous proposals sought sweeping restrictions that evoked industry concern and even alarm. To the ministry's credit, much of this has been rationalized. The definition of 'synthetic content,' for instance, has been narrowed to exclude routine editing, such as quality enhancement or the use of assistive AI. This carve-out addresses a big industry fear: that everyday tools like photo filters could face a heavy compliance burden.

Earlier drafts also leaned towards rigid specifications for watermarking all synthetic content. The final rules step back from this approach. Instead of prescribing that 10% of visible content be watermarked, as the previous rules did, they require content labels that are "prominent, noticeable and perceivable." This leaves room for industry-led labelling standards to evolve.

These are welcome changes. But content takedown timelines have been drastically shortened—for example, from 36 to 3 hours after a platform such as a social media service receives a notice from the government or a court. This could mean access cut-offs, content removal or even account suspensions on the assumption of wrongdoing.

There is a big problem here. The rules do a bad job of imagining or accommodating the future. Let us fast forward to a projected 2030 scenario to discover why.

The internet we inhabit a few years hence is unlikely to look like today's. It will increasingly be populated not by humans, but by AI agents acting on our behalf. They will draft our posts, respond to messages, generate images, summarize news, argue online and even maintain our digital presence while we sleep. The line between 'authentic' and 'synthetic' will blur to the point of irrelevance.

We may not be comfortable with that vision. But cognitive outsourcing to machines is already taking place. The idea that most content online could soon be AI-assisted or entirely AI-generated is not science fiction. In fact, the internet as a whole is becoming self-referential—machines learning from machines and generating material for machines. In such a world, what does a 3-hour content takedown window mean?

Such a short time-span allows businesses no space to assess the legitimacy of requests, particularly from government departments. Today, platforms may pause, examine content, weigh legal risk or even challenge executive notices. Tomorrow, a delay could imply a legal liability. The incentive will be to comply first and scrutinize later.

Governments are not infallible. Decisions on political speech, satire and dissent are not straightforward. In a 2030-internet saturated with AI, the volume of such decisions will likely multiply. So what comes next? There are, broadly, two paths.

The first is of a subtle convergence. Digital platforms and governments become comfortable with each other. The arrangement suits both. Platforms exercise no judgement on the nuances of AI-generated online speech—particularly on posts that could be construed as political—because the government acts as the final arbiter. The state, on its part, acquires the capacity to monitor and direct online speech at scale in a govern-

ment-mediated digital environment.

The second path is harder but healthier. Society demands that platforms invest meaningfully in online trust and safety, especially in vulnerable geographies. Platforms respond with better detection tools, stronger contextual review systems and human-in-the-loop safeguards. At the same time, they ask for a regulatory posture that is future-ready and adaptive, rather than one that defaults to command-and-control when faced with uncertainty.

The future-proofing question is not limited to AI rules alone. Consider data protection. By 2030, we will likely live in an IoT-saturated environment, with internet-connected devices embedded in public spaces, workplaces and homes. In such a world, will the model of obtaining granular informed consent for each act of data processing, as is the case under our data protection law, remain workable? We will move through immersive digital environments, surrounded by sensors and digital artefacts. The idea that individuals can meaningfully read, understand and consent to every notice is implausible. Laws and platforms will not be able to deliver a perfectly secure or just online world. The basic question we face is: What kind of digital society do we want?

**A good way to answer that question is to ask how these rules would work as the internet evolves**

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Protect your hearing from vulgarity with the same care you protect your speech from it; after all, those who listen share the guilt of those who speak.

Omar bin Al-Khattab  
(The second caliph)

# Opinion

## Jordan's growing role in Turkish foreign policy

DR. SINEM CENGIZ



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Turkiye and Jordan were significantly affected by the Syrian civil war that lasted more than a decade. Now, with the collapse of the Bashar Assad regime in December 2024, a new dynamic has emerged along Turkiye's southern and Jordan's northern borders — one that calls for closer coordination between the two states.

Jordan, a relatively small state known for its neutral regional policy, has not traditionally occupied a prominent place in Turkish foreign policy. But its geopolitical importance is far too significant to neglect. It has crucial potential when it comes to countering shared regional security challenges. Recent high-level meetings between Ankara and Amman, therefore, merit a closer look to better understand the possibility for Turkish-Jordanian cooperation.

Jordan's King Abdullah paid an official visit to Turkiye last week at the invitation of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who

received him at the Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul. King Abdullah's last visit to Turkiye took place in February 2019. Back then, the regional picture looked very different. Now, the region has been reshaped by a series of major events — from the Oct. 7 attacks to the Iran-Israel war and the fall of the Assad regime — that have fundamentally shifted the political and security dynamics surrounding these two countries.

With the fall of the Assad regime, Jordan has emerged as a key partner in Turkiye's regional policy, particularly regarding Syria and Gaza. For Turkiye, Jordan represents both a stabilizing actor on its southern periphery and a practical partner in managing the post-Assad regional order.

Amman and Ankara have found themselves on the same page in regard to regional crises. Jordan therefore became part of a regional cooperation mechanism established between Turkiye, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, which is aimed at coordinating responses to shared security challenges.

Amman has hosted high-level regional security meetings led by Turkiye, bringing together foreign ministers, defense ministers and intelligence chiefs to discuss counterterrorism efforts and broader regional threats.

It was through Jordanian-Turkish cooperation that a joint mission to support Syria's fight against terrorist organizations, particularly Daesh, was established. At the request of the new leadership in Syria, this joint mission was set up to operate in Damascus, marking a concrete step toward institutionalized regional security cooperation. Jordan and Turkiye are also part of US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace, further highlighting their shared role in the Gaza peace process.

In their joint statement, King Abdullah and Erdogan underscored the importance of preserving the territorial integrity, sovereignty and national unity of all regional states. This emphasis reflects a shared outlook. Jordan has long pursued a status quo-oriented foreign policy, prioritizing stability along its borders. Turkiye's support

for a centralized and territorially unified Syria closely aligns with Jordanian interests in this regard. Both countries view fragmentation and instability in Syria as a direct threat to their security, making their policy convergence not only strategic but also necessary.

Turkiye and Jordan are also collaborating on a road corridor that will allow Turkish trucks to reach Jordan and the Gulf countries via Syria. The corridor is expected to become fully operational next year, once remaining issues in Syria are resolved, and it is projected to significantly boost regional trade. Bolat emphasized the importance of this route, stating: "Once we revive these roads and railways as they existed before 2010, trade and people's prosperity will rapidly increase." His reference to the pre-2010 period is particularly significant.

Ankara views coordination with regional states as a crucial element of its regional policy and, within this context, Jordan appears to be a key potential partner in Turkiye's regional outlook.

With the fall of the Assad regime, Jordan has emerged as a key partner in Turkiye's regional policy



COURTESY AMALAO RASMA ASHARQ AL-AWBAT

The building collapse was the predictable outcome of years of neglect by local authorities and successive governments

## Tripoli deserves better than its current leaders

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB



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A building collapse in Tripoli, Lebanon, last week killed 14 people. The building was in Bab Al-Tabbanch, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Tripoli, which is in turn one of the poorest cities in Lebanon and even in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The fall of the building makes us ask the question: Why did this happen to these people? Many do not know the rich history of the precious city. Tripoli was once a capital of trade, culture, and art in the Ottoman Empire. Why this degeneration? And who is responsible?

The building collapse in Tripoli was not an accident, nor was it the first tragedy this year to take innocent lives. It was the predictable outcome of years of neglect by local authorities and successive governments. The dangers posed by these buildings are widely known, yet no preventive action has been taken. Lebanon has a proven record of corruption. Lebanese officials have always acted with impunity.

Relying on the blind allegiance of their constituencies, the welfare of the people has never been their primary concern.

According to Raymond Mitri, an activist who heads Lebanon's anticorruption task force: "The justice system also bears primary responsibility, as those in power have grown accustomed to acting with impunity." He added: "This culture of no accountability has enabled repeated failures and avoidable deaths."

It is time for the prosecutor general to open a thorough investigation and hold the heads of the relevant authorities accountable for this week's tragic incident. Without real consequences, this tragic pattern will continue and more lives will be lost.

The collapse of the building in Tripoli is the result of decades of negligence. It is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the city's problems. I went to Tripoli a few years ago and I was shocked by the poverty, lack of infrastructure, and lack of employment. The city's inhabitants face huge health risks because of unregulated trash dumps that also

pollute the Mediterranean Sea. Tripoli mirrors the problems of Lebanon. In Tripoli, however, they are more concentrated and more severe.

Historically, the city has not been lucky with its leadership. In fact, Lebanon as a whole has not been lucky with its political class, but Tripoli has suffered particularly badly. During the civil war, various Islamist factions coalesced and created Harakat Al-Tawhid (the Islamic Unity Movement), which controlled the city. The state has been barely present. Each neighborhood has a "kabaday" (strongman) running the show. There is no real law enforcement in the city.

According to a lawyer friend of mine, the city is run by mafia-like organizations. The most important people are those who control the power generators. The generators' owners divide the areas among themselves. Citizens of each neighborhood are thus compelled to buy electricity from the designated generator owner for that specific area. It is sad to see this historic city languishing. It is sad to see its historic monuments unattended. It is sad to see the

kind, generous, and skilled people of Tripoli struggle with poverty and a lack of opportunity.

The irony is that Tripoli is home to some of the wealthiest people in Lebanon and even the entire Arab world. The political class is rich and prosperous and it surrounds itself with fences to protect itself from the ire of the people that it controls. According to Amine Bashir, a lawyer and political activist from Tripoli, members of the city's traditional political class do not care about the people. On the contrary, it is in their interest to keep the people poor. The poorer they are, the cheaper it will be to buy their vote on election day. They use the people as an "election reservoir."

Tripoli has suffered from negligence and impunity — this week's tragedy is a warning that this needs to stop. The people in power need to be held accountable. The people of Tripoli deserve that. They need to rise and the system governing the city needs to fall. If the system does not fall, more buildings like the one in Bab Al-Tabbanch will do so instead.

## Opinion

## Starmmer is learning the lessons of politics the hard way

YOSSI MEKELBERG



Few could have foreseen that merely 17 months after Keir Starmer led the Labour Party to victory in the UK general election, winning a 174-seat majority in Parliament, that he would find himself fighting for his job.

While the British prime minister must take much of the blame for being in this situation — and in his defense, he does admit responsibility — the underlying difficulties of UK politics and society go far beyond one leader's shortcomings. The country has had six prime ministers in the past decade, which is hardly a sign of a functioning political system. Part of the predicament that Starmer finds himself in is how he sees his role; part of it has to do with the way British politics is conducted; and, more generally, the unforgiving nature of modern politics, which in an age of instant communication, constant scrutiny, and unbearable impatience, means that governments can be judged too harshly and too quickly.

The latest storm that threatens to unseat the current British prime minister is not unjustified, as his decision to appoint Peter Mandelson as ambassador in Washington was a total lapse of judgment. There was

never any doubt that Mandelson's political skills and wealth of experience in government, including on the international stage, would stand him in good stead in dealing with a major and challenging ally. Yet this was also someone who was nicknamed the "Prince of Darkness." He was also one of the original spin doctors in British politics, and was twice forced to resign from government for failing to live up to the ethical standards of public life.

For a prime minister whose election campaign relied heavily on a promise to rid the country of years of Conservative sleaze, appointing Mandelson was extremely unwise. The resignation of Starmer's chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, the mastermind behind Mandelson's appointment, has given the

prime minister breathing space. Yet, in the fast-paced world of modern politics, he still might be only a misstep or two away from losing his job. With Labour lagging far behind Reform in the polls and only just edging the even less popular Conservatives, and the prime minister's approval ratings plummeting, he has his work cut out to convince the electorate that they should still trust him as leader. In the short term, he must convince those Labour MPs who can decide his future almost instantly.

It is a truism that nothing genuinely prepares a person for the most powerful job in the country, a position that depends on learning extremely fast, a strong sense of direction and values, and healthy political instincts. Winning an unassailable election victory should have given Starmer the self-belief and confidence to go against his cautious nature.

For many Labour MPs, more than half of whom have been elected for the first time, the impressive showing at the ballot box created the expectation of a radical Labour agenda — not unreasonable in light of voters comprehensively rejecting the legacy of the Conservatives' 14 years in power. Moreover, for the more left-leaning of the Labour Party, Starmer and his policies were too middle-of-the-road to begin with, and he was not their first choice to lead the party, let alone the country. However, Labour's decisive victory left them with little ammunition to criticize those who masterminded it, including their ideological arch-nemesis McSweeney. Yet they still held high expectations for a new, radical agenda, only to be disappointed or, possibly, to have their suspicions confirmed.

Labour received a mandate to set an

agenda that could change the country's direction, and especially rebuild trust with its traditional voters. Instead, Starmer took a far too cautious and incremental approach, failing to stamp his authority on the party, and making too many U-turns. This was all the ammunition that his rivals and doubters from all parts of the political spectrum needed, and, worse for him, exposed divisions in his own party early on.

Starmer is learning some of the lessons of modern British politics the hard way. You might think that winning a huge majority

in a general election allows you five years to build success until the next time of asking, but it does not. Those who covet your job, your ideological rivals, and the media will constantly

scrutinize you, and you will get more flak for your mistakes than praise for your successes.

A crucial by-election in the north of the country at the end of the month, followed in May by municipal elections, as well as local assembly elections for Scotland and Wales, might seal Starmer's political fate. The next few months will show whether the government and its leader have been given the time and space to successfully ride out the storm, or whether the Labour Party will look for an alternative.

### The latest storm to engulf the PM is not unjustified

### This was all the ammunition that his rivals needed

## Africa pays a high price for dollar dependence

HAFED AL-GHWELL



Governments across Africa are rightfully questioning the wisdom of anchoring their countries' futures to the US dollar. The instinct grows from patterns that have shaped the continent's financial stability, trade resilience, and growth prospects for decades.

A currency that once promised predictability now functions as a vehicle for volatility that African policymakers never signed up for. Each Federal Reserve rate hike, for instance, tightens African credit conditions as if Washington were running monetary policy for Nairobi, Accra, and Lusaka.

Dedollarization — reducing reliance on the US dollar for trade, reserves, and financial transactions — speaks to a desire for insulation, bargaining power, and policy autonomy in an era where external shocks arrive with unprecedented regularity.

While talk of dedollarization is not exactly new, it has gained traction in recent years, after several African currencies lost nearly half of their value against the dollar. Such depreciations erode tax bases, inflate debt burdens, and push countries toward International Monetary Fund programs

that come with significant political costs.

Moreover, roughly 70 percent of Africa's external debt is dollar-denominated. As the dollar strengthens, debt service costs balloon without any new borrowing. In one year alone, African governments paid more than \$60 billion in interest on external debt, and a third of that stemmed from dollar appreciation rather than fundamentals.

A continent seeking structural transformation cannot tolerate a global monetary system that amplifies domestic vulner-

abilities. Naturally, leaders see a mismatch: African economies are diversifying, yet currency arrangements still resemble the 1980s. The dollar's dominance magnifies inflation

pass-through because the region's import dependence makes exchange rate shocks automatically inflationary even where fiscal discipline is relatively decent. Food imports alone cost Africa more than \$35 billion annually, so a stronger dollar can quickly turn a food security issue into a macroeconomic crisis.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Washington benefits from African markets that function predictably and from finance ministries that do not spiral into crisis whenever the Federal Reserve

tightens monetary policy. A modest reduction in dollar exposure could actually stabilize African economies in ways that support long-term American strategic objectives.

Investors also worry that dedollarization could inject uncertainty into Africa's financial architecture. Yet investor behavior already reflects a deep discomfort with the current setup. Eurobond spreads for many African countries sit hundreds of basis points above comparable emerging markets because dollar volatility amplifies default probabilities.

What is more, local-currency bond markets remain underdeveloped partly because domestic institutions have little incentive to expand markets when external borrowing in dollars seems cheaper in the short term. Dedollarization, if accompanied by credible reforms, could nurture domestic markets into stable sources of long-term capital. Investors prefer certainty over habit, and Africa's dollar dependence has delivered anything but certainty.

Ultimately, none of this signals an abrupt wholesale transition. Over 80 percent of Africa's reserves remain in US dollars. The currency will remain central to trade finance, sovereign lending, and

commodity markets for years. African countries are only trying to dilute the risks attached to its dominance because even modest shifts can yield outsized benefits. If Africa settles even 10 percent of intracontinental trade in local currencies, for instance, the continent could save hundreds of millions annually in transaction costs. Small gains cascade through supply chains in ways that enhance competitiveness.

The biggest challenge is credibility. Local currencies cannot anchor trade if

inflation remains high and fiscal anchors wobble. Central banks must strengthen independence, revamp policy communication, and modernize payment infrastruc-

ture. Governments must improve data transparency to reduce the risk premium embedded in African financial markets. Dedollarization without reforms becomes symbolic; dedollarization with reforms becomes transformative.

In Africa's context, dedollarization is less about the dollar itself and more about the continent's long-term positioning in a rapidly changing global order. The dollar will remain indispensable, yes — but Africa would rather prefer to shape its financial future rather than inherit it.

### Policymakers are reducing exposure in incremental steps

### Local currencies cannot anchor trade if fiscal anchors wobble

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## COMMENT

Guan Lixin

## Rush reveals consumption potential

When Xiaomeng returned to her hometown in a county in Henan province for the Spring Festival this year, she was bewildered. The postgraduate student from Beijing had planned a relaxed get-together with a few friends. But the huge Spring Festival rush was overwhelming. "Restaurants had to be booked three days in advance," she complained. "The only two milk tea shops had sold out and shut early, and food delivery from most supermarkets and restaurants took more than three hours." It was a far cry from the "30-minute delivery" Xiaomeng had grown used to in Beijing.

The Spring Festival hometown return rush is not just a migration of people, but a concentrated release of consumption demand. When millions come back home, there is an enormous surge in high-frequency, small-ticket consumption such as dining out, instant retail and in-store services. This consumption boom not only reflects the vitality of county-level markets, but also shows their development gap with first- and second-tier cities. This gap is an indicator of the enormous potential of these lower-tier markets.

Notably, this increase in consumption at the county level is not visible only during holidays such as the Spring Festival. Counties have registered steady and regular growth and emerged as a new blue ocean in China's consumer market.

Rising incomes and upgraded consumer preferences have unleashed vitality in county-level consumption. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that the per capita disposable income of rural residents more than doubled from 11,422 yuan in 2015 to 23,119 yuan in 2024.

During this period, the per capita consumption expenditure of rural residents rose from 9,223 yuan in 2015 to 19,280 yuan in 2024, with an average annual growth rate of 8.5 percent, 3 percentage points higher than that of urban residents in the same period. The share of service consumption expenditure increased from 36.2 percent to 40.3 percent as a growing number of county residents pursued high-quality and diversified consumption experiences.

The inflow of private investment has further boosted the supply. In recent years, well-known brands such as Starbucks and Haidilao, as well as others including China Resources Mixc Lifestyle and Aegean Group, have expanded their presence in county-level markets. Chain catering, branded supermarkets and convenient services are moving to third- and fourth-tier cities and counties.

With solid depth and breadth and strong economic resilience, county-level markets have become increasingly attractive. The expansion of these brands into lower-tier markets has not only brought standardized products and services, but also fostered new consumption habits among county residents that are increasingly in step with those in big cities.

Policy support has further strengthened this trend. In areas with the necessary conditions, commercial outlets at the county, township and village levels have basically achieved full coverage. Express delivery coverage has reached 95 percent in eligible townships.

Despite the enormous potential of the county-level consumer markets, they still lag behind first- and second-tier cities in both structure and experience.



SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY

For example, the commercial formats at the county level are still dominated by traditional catering and supermarkets, and most businesses close after 9 pm. Experiential consumption scenarios such as cultural, sports and leisure entertainment are relatively scarce. The same-city distribution network lags behind and slow delivery efficiency affects the consumption experience. Meanwhile, the low level of chain operations and uneven quality standards remain persistent problems.

To unlock the full potential of county-level consumption, efforts are needed on three fronts. First, upgrade and improve the quality of supply and promote chain operations and standardization.

E-commerce platforms and other enterprises should be encouraged to transform traditional outlets at the county level through digital tools and supply chain integration. At the same time, innovation is needed to create consumption scenarios and enrich consumption experiences.

Counties should encourage qualified catering, cultural and entertainment enterprises to extend business hours, improve supporting facilities for nighttime consumption and develop new formats, models and scenarios that expand service consumption.

Second, consumption facilities also need to be improved. Counties should continue upgrading commercial facilities, with a focus on building township-level commercial and trade centers and village-level

convenience stores. Improvements in supporting facilities such as parking lots and public toilets are also important to enhance the convenience and comfort of consumption.

Logistics is even more crucial. A three-level distribution network covering counties, townships and villages should be developed to solve the "last mile" delivery problem. Enterprises should be encouraged to recruit county residents and returning young people for delivery services.

Third, the consumption environment needs to be optimized. Management should be made more inclusive and approval processes for nighttime business operations should be simplified.

There should be stronger market supervision to regulate pricing, ensure food safety and safeguard the rights of consumers.

At the same time, financial capital should be channeled into the county-level consumption sector to provide financing support for the expansion of chain enterprises and the construction of convenient facilities.

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*The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

Gu Xiaolong

## Galas embracing tech prowess and rich cultures

As the Year of the Horse approaches, a vibrant showcase of Chinese culture is in the offing. In recent years, Chinese festivals have been marked by cultural heritage galas, sparking growing interest among young people to engage in and promote the traditional arts.

In doing so, young practitioners have made innovations to the content of cultural events, making them resonate better with the times and earn greater public appreciation.

Technological innovation and context from everyday life have given birth to more contemporary forms of Chinese culture, reaching a wider, and often younger, audience.

Technological tools such as augmented reality, artificial intelligence and digital twins have evolved to become essential vehicles for revitalizing traditional cultural heritage and innovating the presentation of intangible cultural heritage.

These technologies enable the creation of virtual environments, the generation of digital content, and the development of new artistic vocabularies.

For instance, the 2023 Henan TV Spring Festival Gala employed digital technology to recreate the mythical scene of the giant Pangu creating heaven and earth. This ancient myth, which explores Chinese imagination on the origins of the universe, was once confined to abstract dance performances.

Moreover, bringing culture back to real-life contexts has facilitated mass participation and large-scale emotional resonance, thereby attracting wider audiences.

When traditional Spring Festival customs transition from abstract, ritualistic expressions to the living contexts from which they originated — reconnecting people with the emotional roots of their ancestors — young people naturally become more engaged.

From wearing the *hanfu* and the rise in crafting intangible cultural heritage items to the viral reimagining of classical dances and adapted folk music, young designers, dancers, and online content creators are reinterpreting cultural classics through a contemporary lens using digital tools.

This movement is making *guochao*, or China-chic, a leading force in cultural promotion.

Intangible cultural heritage originates from distant times and places, and the key to revitalizing it lies in identifying points of convergence with contemporary life. Cultures with profound historical depth can resonate powerfully and experience a vibrant revival when

## The fusion of technology and real-life context unleashes remarkable vitality.

they address certain modern needs and renew their relevance.

This approach allows for the reinterpretation of intangible cultural heritage. For example, many traditional crafts demand meticulous, immersive workmanship — a process that can help alleviate stress and anxiety in a fast-paced environment.

A prime example is dough sculpting, which involves shaping dough mixed with plant pigments into imaginative forms. Even mixed adaptations of this craft can shift attention from fragmented video consumption to an immersive, focused activity.

Similarly, embroidery and Cloisonné enamel are now accessible through do-it-yourself kits. Traditional techniques such as mortise and tenon joinery have also gained public attention in forms reminiscent of assembling Lego bricks. Through these hands-on experiences, participants not only engage with the essence of Chinese craftsmanship but also find aesthetic satisfaction and emotional release.

This kind of participation allows Chinese culture to maintain its vitality across generations, transforming intangible cultural heritage from something preserved by a few inheritors into a treasure shared by society as a whole.

The fusion of technology and real-life context unleashes remarkable vitality. *The Fantasy Market of Intangible Heritage in Yantai Mountain* was an innovative example. In this digital content of Henan TV's Spring Festival Gala last year, online influencer Li Ziqi guided viewers through an enchanting bazaar where inheritors of intangible cultural heritage stepped into their own stalls to showcase the allure of their techniques and crafts. From dough sculpting to fish lanterns and traditional cuisines, almost everything was drawn from daily life.

Although part of a provincial Spring Festival gala, this fantasy market brought together dozens of intangible cultural heritage items from across the country. Its innovation lies in using technology to seamlessly integrate diverse elements into a single, immersive experience. This approach provides a vibrant showcase of the rich and diverse intangible cultural heritage.

The integration of culture and technology is reshaping audiences' expectations for holiday galas. People increasingly seek content that combines cultural depth, visual splendor and emotional resonance.

Galas can respond by exploring the essence of traditional festivals, historical narratives, and folk rituals, using artistic and technological means to effectively tell China's stories. Through their engagement and feedback, audiences are prompting galas to return to content that is culturally rich, refined, and time-honored.

When technology serves cultural expression and tradition is presented in youthful and internationally resonant forms, Chinese culture gains a timeless vitality. Led by the China Media Group's Spring Festival Gala, galas are charging forward in the Year of the Horse.

AR-powered virtual steeds and digital avatars perform classic roles, seamlessly integrating intangible cultural heritage patterns, classical architecture, and folk symbols into the shows. The intricate details of embroidery stitches, woodcarving textures and opera masks are going to be revealed in stunning 8K ultra-high definition.

*The author is an associate professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Henan University, and has contributed to Henan TV's Spring Festival Gala.*

*The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

An Jiaran and Zhou Yuting

## Demand outpacing safety in pet-care rush

With China's Spring Festival travel rush underway, millions are heading home or taking long-planned trips. Left behind in cities are another group of "dependents": pets temporarily separated from their owners. To bridge that gap, services such as pet boarding, in-home feeding, and dedicated pet transport have surged. But along with them has come a steady stream of disputes over safety, responsibility and accountability.

Reports of pets being injured, lost, or even dying from stress during boarding or transportation are no longer rare. In the rush of a fast-growing pet economy, basic questions remain unresolved: What are the safety boundaries of boarding and in-home services? Who bears responsibility for quarantine certification and regulatory compliance during transit? How far do the obligations of platforms and service providers extend? And what can pet owners — the primary and ultimate guardians — do to reduce risk?

Two stories show where the fault lines are. "Mango", a two-year-old cat, spent her first Spring Festival as a "left-behind city cat". Her owner did all the homework — comparing schedules, environments, past reviews, and recommendations. Yet the deeper she researched, the more uneasy she felt. Pet-care services — whether boarding or door-to-door —

raise hard questions: can staff truly maintain disinfection and disease isolation? If an emergency occurs, is there a clear plan to intervene immediately and get the animal to a vet?

From a risk-prevention standpoint, pet owners should focus on a few concrete steps. First, verify the other party's identity: exchange real names and phone numbers, and where applicable, business license information or ID numbers. Second, cross-check the basics — confirm the actual service address, the people involved, and the exact scope of services promised. And remember this: WeChat is not "informal" in the eyes of the law. Text and voice promises can constitute a valid oral contract. What feels casual may still carry legal weight.

The case of 8-year-old "Northwest", a border collie, was more telling. His owner booked transport through a major e-commerce platform.

But shortly before departure, small details triggered alarm bells. Customer service refused to disclose information about other animals on the same route. Staff also kept emphasizing holiday pressure and slipped in a supplementary agreement to delay departure.

The reason soon surfaced: the company had begun offering transport services without proper quarantine certificates and transport filings. After

being investigated and penalized by agricultural authorities, its business was effectively halted.

This case points to a broader issue: when platforms list and promote these services, how rigorously do they vet qualifications?

Do they supervise service models in practice, or only on paper? Enforcement has increased, and platforms are starting to respond by tightening merchant entry, requiring clearer disclosures, and standardizing pricing and service details. But the gaps are still visible.

Even with better screening, operational risk remains — especially "lost pet" incidents. The most practical safeguard is also the simplest: a reliable GPS tracker. If an escape happens, location data can cut search time dramatically. Staff should also tightly control feeding and play schedules, ensure leash management, and limit handlers to no more than two pets at a time.

Beyond the holiday rush, the pet economy is booming because pets are not accessories; they are family. What owners want is quite basic: to return and find their dog or cat safe, healthy and ready to slip back into daily life.

The holiday noise will fade, but the industry's future depends on systems beyond seasonal demand. Every entrusted animal is more than a transaction — it is a life. When consumers defend their rights with legal tools, and platforms filter merchants by compliance rather than convenience, the law stops being optional. It becomes the price of entry.

The law does not obstruct business. It protects those who do their work properly — and helps ensure that trust, once placed, is not betrayed.

*The authors are both lawyers at Beijing Kaiyao Law Firm.*

*The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

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# BUSINESS

## GDP target 'reasonable' in key phase

High-quality growth, strong domestic demand pivotal in 2026-30 period

By OUYANG SHIJIA  
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China can reasonably target nominal GDP growth of around 5 percent during the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period, a pace that would support its 2035 goal of reaching the per capita GDP level of moderately developed economies, according to a renowned economist.

"Aiming for such a target will require a shift toward higher-quality growth, stronger domestic demand and renewed confidence among private businesses," said Betty Wang, head of Northeast Asia Research at British think tank Oxford Economics.

Wang said in an exclusive interview with China Daily recently that the next five years will be a critical transition phase for China as external pressures rise and structural challenges at home intensify, making it harder to rely on the growth model that dominated past decades.

She identified a lack of effective demand as the core constraint on China's economic recovery.

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that China's fixed-asset investment decreased by 3.8 percent year-on-year in 2025, while in the first 11 months, it declined by 2.6 percent. And retail sales, a key metric of consumer spending, increased by 0.9 percent in December versus the 1.3 percent growth recorded a month earlier.

On the investment side, Wang said the prolonged downturn in the property sector has significantly weighed on private investment and household spending. At the same time, infrastructure investments led by local governments and State-owned enterprises have lost momentum in recent months, leaving overall investment growth subdued.

Consumption has also remained under pressure, despite a range of policy measures introduced to stabilize demand. These include consumption vouchers and trade-in programs, which Wang described as positive but largely short-term in nature.

Looking ahead, Wang said China's policy focus should move away from rigid growth targets toward improving the quality of expansion. Key areas to watch for include policies aimed at raising the share of consumption in GDP and strengthening support for private enterprises as engines of innovation, employment and growth.

"Over the next five years, the

most important goal will be a successful transition from a property- and investment-led model toward one driven by consumption, services and a revitalized private sector — supported by effective markets and better governance — which would leave room for further upside in China's growth potential," Wang said.

She expects China to maintain a relatively accommodative mix of fiscal and monetary policies, noting that the official fiscal deficit ratio was raised to around 4 percent in 2025 and that this stance is likely to continue through 2026.

On the fiscal front, Wang noted that part of last year's budget has already been directed toward boosting consumption, but there is scope for stronger support from the central government. And monetary policy still has room to ease further, with the possibility of additional interest rate cuts in the near term, she added.

Meanwhile, she emphasized that restoring confidence in the private sector is critical to reviving demand, particularly household consumption.

According to Wang, weak consumer spending is closely tied to concerns over job security and future income growth. As private firms contribute more than 60 percent of GDP and 80 percent of urban employment, stronger policy backing for private enterprises would help stabilize employment expectations and household income prospects.

She also highlighted the importance of longer-term structural reforms, including continued fiscal support for low-income groups, social security reform and the development of a more affordable and sustainable housing model following the property sector's deep adjustment.

Despite current challenges, Wang said China's consumption potential should not be underestimated. "China has increasingly shifted from being primarily a supply-side player in global value chains to becoming a major source of demand, particularly in electronics and high-tech products, where it now drives regional export growth more than the United States."

Wang's views were echoed by Robert Koopman, former chief economist of the World Trade Organization, who noted that "over the next five to 10 years, an important shift in China's role is likely to be toward becoming a major center of demand."



Betty Wang



A shopper takes a snapshot of MarvelLab's collectible toys at an outlet in Beijing. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

## AI collectible toys to buoy consumers

By LI JIAYING  
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As China's collectible toy market continues to gain momentum, the sector is expected to approach a turning point where artificial intelligence is poised to redefine how consumers engage with trendy toys, said an industry executive.

"Past collectible toys relied on aesthetics and scarcity to make people willing to buy, share and collect them," said Jing Linyan, cofounder of domestic AI collectible toy manufacturer MarvelLab.

"But we believe future collectible toys will take a different path. They won't just make you happy in a single moment. More important, they will keep you engaged, interacting and looking forward to what comes next over a much longer period of time," Jing said.

The year 2025 is being talked about as a banner year for trendy toys, with brands such as Pop Mart enjoying heavy exposure on social media platforms.

Data from market research company AskCI Consulting show that China's collectible toy market expanded rapidly to 76.3 billion yuan (\$11.03 billion) in 2024 from 22.9 billion yuan in 2020, a compound annual growth rate of 35.11 percent. Figures from Frost & Sullivan also estimate that the market size would have further grown to 92.6 billion yuan in 2025.

According to Jing, the experience offered by traditional collectible

toys often peaks at the very beginning — when consumers unbox the product, take photos and share them online — before the item settles into the role of a static display.

"Static figurines or accessories are perfectly valid, and many people like them. But as collectible toys become more abundant, users' expectations are shifting from 'looking' to 'playing,' and from 'owning' to 'interacting,'" he said.

As a result, the limitations of traditional collectible toys are becoming more apparent. "It's difficult for them to extend the user experience over time," Jing said.

"So we believe that static collectible toys have reached their ceiling, and AI collectible toys represent the second half of the industry."

In contrast, Jing argued that AI collectible toys will help address a different question: whether users will grow tired of them.

"AI collectible toys can combine trendy aesthetics and strong IPs, while using AI to give characters personality, memory and the ability to grow," he said. "This allows collectible toys to evolve from static objects into living characters that can interact with users over the long term."

"In the past, repurchase was driven by scarcity. In the future, it will be driven by the vitality of the character itself."

Official data show that China's AI toy market reached about 24.6 billion yuan in 2024 and is expected to have grown to 29 billion yuan in 2025. The growth is further support-

ed by a central government action plan released in November, which listed collectible toys as a priority consumption category for the first time, targeting the segment to exceed 100 billion yuan by 2027.

"AI collectible toys are by no means about simply layering AI functions onto static figurines; they are about enriching the entire content ecosystem," Jing said, adding that rather than treating AI as a stand-alone function, the company positions it as the engine behind a character.

"If a product is described as 'like a real person,' with its own temper and personality, that is the experience collectible toy users truly expect," Jing said.

"Moving AI away from a singular focus on efficiency and toward giving characters vitality is why we talk about AI collectible toys, not AI hardware," he added.

The company recently completed an angel funding round, led by Jinqiu Capital, with co-investment from Shoucheng Holdings. Wave Capital acted as the exclusive financial adviser.

The company said the funds will be primarily used to further build out its content ecosystem through regular content updates, and to expand its product portfolio around its core character, RAGUS & WHITE, by exploring diversified product forms, gameplay innovations and potential collaborations with established artists to enrich its character network.

### Briefly

#### Home price declines ease in January

China's housing market showed signs of improvement in January as home price declines in 70 large and medium-sized cities generally narrowed from the previous month, official data showed on Friday. In the four first-tier cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, prices of newly built homes edged down 0.3 percent month-on-month in January, while prices of second-hand homes slipped 0.5 percent, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

#### Yuan strengthens against greenback

The central parity rate of the Chinese currency renminbi, or the yuan, strengthened 59 pips to 6.9398 against the US dollar on Friday, according to the China Foreign Exchange Trade System.

XINHUA - CHINA DAILY

## Zeiss deepens investment in China

By ZHENG YIRAN in Shanghai  
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With favorable government policies, high-quality talent and an innovative market, German optics giant Zeiss Group is optimistic about the Chinese market, and will continue to invest in the country, said its top executive.

Zeiss recently kicked off construction of Zeiss Greater China headquarters campus in Shanghai, marking the largest single infrastructure investment that it has ever made in China.

Andreas Pecher, president and CEO of Zeiss Group, said: "This marks another significant step forward in localization in this promising land. The strategic investment is not just financial, it is a commitment to future growth in China and innovations that will benefit the world."

He noted that China is embarking on its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), while Zeiss has just launched its next five-year global agenda, charting its course to 2030. In pursuing its strategy, Zeiss is expanding innovation and localization in China.

The new campus is positioned as a key global innovation hub, which will enhance its research and development capabilities, foster closer collaboration with local customers and partners, and accelerate the development of new technologies.

Zhang Xi, deputy director of the administrative committee of China (Shanghai) Pilot Free Trade Zone, said: "We look forward to Zeiss actively seizing the new opportunities presented by China's development, using the construction of the new campus as a catalyst. On one hand, it should continuously enhance its operational space and capability in China. On the other hand, it should leverage its global experience to empower local innovation and the local ecosystem, making positive contributions to the development of industries such as technology innovation in Shanghai and Pudong."

Martin Fischer, president and CEO of Zeiss Greater China, said: "The new campus will host the largest customer center ever established by Zeiss Greater China, which will function as a platform for customer enablement. Additionally, we will set up advanced laboratories and research centers on campus, aimed at enhancing innovations customized for the local market and cultivating a dynamic innovation ecosystem."

Gao Chengyuan, president and CEO of Guangzhou TY Marketing, said that the establishment of the new campus represents a typical upgrade to the "in China, for China, for the world" model adopted by multinational enterprises.

## Folklore behind vegetarian dumplings

By YAN DONGJIE in Tianjin  
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Ahead of this year's Spring Festival, two Egyptian students in Tianjin discovered one of the city's most iconic culinary traditions by learning how to make vegetarian dumplings with friends, getting to know firsthand the food culture that is rooted in Tianjin's 600 years of canal transportation history.

Walking through the old streets and alleys of Tianjin, they went from buying special ingredients such as red vermicelli sheets and Chinese cabbage, to rolling dough, mixing fillings and making dumplings with local young people, before finally tasting Tianjin-style vegetarian dumplings with laba vinegar.

Faced with red vermicelli sheets, a key ingredient for Tianjin-style vegetarian dumplings, Ahmed Mohamed Saleh, one of the two students, was full of curiosity. "I've never seen this ingredient in Egypt. I heard it's essential for Tianjin's vegetarian dumplings, which makes me realize every place has its own unique set of New Year customs."

Saleh and the other student, Hassan Sameh Hassan Elsayed, used their hands to mix fillings with the right ratio of sesame paste, fermented bean curd and sesame oil, rolled the dough to the right thickness, and pinched delicate folds to shape the dumplings. They gradually mastered the skills of making the dumplings through repeated attempts.

"Homemade vegetarian dumplings must be eaten at midnight on Chinese New Year's Eve. The filling includes red vermicelli sheets, Chinese cabbage, chives, fermented



bean curd, vermicelli and more, with no meat allowed at all," said Huo Qingyou, a national inheritor of Yangliuqing New Year paintings, who explained the folklore of Tianjin's vegetarian dumplings to the international students.

"Pomegranate flowers are stuck on the wrapped vegetarian dumplings and thrown away when the dumplings are boiled at midnight, which symbolizes casting away bad luck. The dumplings are eaten with laba vinegar, and they are first used to offer sacrifices to express wishes for purity and peace. Only after the sacrifice does the whole family enjoy the dumplings together," he added.

"The sour aroma of laba vinegar blends with the fresh taste of the vegetarian filling. I finally understand the beautiful wish of Tianjin people to 'ring in the New Year in a pure and peaceful way,'" Elsayed said as he tasted the dumplings he had made himself.

The two students recorded the whole process of making dumplings by taking pictures, planning to share them with their families and friends in Egypt so they too could experience some of the unique charm of China's Spring Festival.

A local senior resident of Tianjin explained the city's culinary New Year customs with the international students: "Tianjin people have certain traditional customs they must follow

for eating dumplings during Spring Festival. We first eat meat dumplings at around 7 pm on New Year's Eve, and then serve a pot of steaming vegetarian dumplings when the bell rings at midnight. Some families even wrap a clean one-fen coin in a dumpling and whoever gets it will have good luck for the new year."

Tianjin-style vegetarian dumplings are more than just a festival food. With solid historical records to back them up, they are a folk custom deeply rooted in Tianjin's canal transportation culture. Passed down for hundreds of years, they have become one of the most representative parts of Tianjin's Spring Festival traditions.

This custom embodies Tianjin people's simple wish for a pure, peaceful and disaster-free new year, and is a concentrated reflection of the integration of northern and southern Chinese cultures and the wisdom of urban folklore.

Feng Jicai, a renowned writer and cultural scholar, has a unique insight into Spring Festival folk customs and cross-cultural communication. He believes the core of Spring Festival lies in a strong emotional cohesion.

Regarding the seemingly simple custom of eating dumplings, Feng defined it as a "sense of ritual in daily life."

Elsayed and Saleh believe that with the growing upsurge of international students coming to China, more and more young foreigners choose to stay in China to experience authentic New Year customs.

Jia Yunge and Cai Muzi contributed to this story.

## Power safety



Staff members of Taiyuan Communication Section in Shanxi province inspect power supply equipment in the machine rooms under its jurisdiction, in order to ensure safe and stable operation of the railway communication system. During its recent annual work conference, Chinese railway operator China Railway promised to strengthen awareness among employees so as to continuously consolidate the safety of the railways.

NIU HUIYU / FOR CHINA DAILY

## SUNDAY OPINION



Outside the White House on Sept. 2.

MEHMET ESER/MIDDLE EAST IMAGES/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

## The Epstein files expose a corrupt elite. And a dark hatred.

BY MATTHEW SCHMITZ

The scourge of rising antisemitism in recent years has found its latest manifestation in the government's release of millions of files about sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Though many people regard the files as a window on the workings of a corrupt elite, others have seized on them specifically to promote antisemitism. A hatred once confined to the fringes is working its way closer to the center of public life, reflecting declining trust in institutions and the rise of conspiratorial thinking.

The latest batch of files, released on Jan. 30, contains a great deal of interesting information. But in many quarters, careful weighing of evidence has given way to wild speculation and barely concealed expressions of animus.

Denunciations of out-of-touch elites and the "money power" are a recurring feature of American politics. But in response to the Epstein files, antie-establishment voices have advanced the claim that Jewish networks and interests are corrupting American society.

In doing so, they have revived two ancient slanders against the Jewish people: the medieval blood libel, which states that Jews engage in ritual killings of children to advance their power; and the 1903 hoax "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which asserts that Jews use blackmail to subvert democratic societies.

Both claims are false, but that has not kept them from spreading. Candace Owens, who has a top 10 podcast on Spotify, responded to the Epstein files by accusing Jews of "ritualistic murder" — a reference to the blood libel. "We are ruled by satanic pedophiles who work for Israel," she told her audience.

Tucker Carlson, speaking to an even larger audience, presented child sex abuse as a modern form of ritual murder. "There are rituals involving children underway ... rich and powerful people, sexually abusing young people," he said. Carlson's guest responded, "our government has been blackmailed on behalf of a foreign, malign, malignant interest."

*Though many of the new antisemites make a show of being religious, none evince much interest in the statements of their church hierarchies.*

The listener is left to understand that the foreign interest is Israel, a frequent target of Carlson and his guests.

Progressive influencers got in on the act. Ana Kasparian, the host of a popular left-wing online news show, described Epstein's network as a "pedophile ring/Israeli blackmail operation." The month before, she asked an Israeli interlocutor, "Why are you monsters always slaughtering innocent children and shaking us down for money?" Brianna Joy Gray, former press secretary for Bernie Sanders, called Epstein's network a "ring of billionaire pedophiles with ties to Mossad" engaging in "full-on blackmail."

Conspiracy theories about Jewish power are not confined to the ideological fringe. One of Britain's most important papers, the Times, published a story about Epstein's supposed links to Mossad, using the files as evidence. The story turned out to be based on claims from Charles C. Johnson, a Holocaust denier. As if that weren't bad enough, the author of the story shared it with her followers on X alongside an AI-generated image that falsely showed Epstein standing next to Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

It was not an isolated incident. The Epstein case has made it possible for people with some strange beliefs about Jews to have their claims treated seriously by the mainstream press. One example is Maria Farmer, an alleged Epstein victim who received an admiring profile in the New York Times despite making statements such as "All the Jewish people I met also happen to be pedophiles that run

the world economy."

Farmer isn't the only one playing with this sort of rhetoric. Leftists who have long prided themselves on opposing all forms of racial hatred while pursuing class-based politics increasingly describe class differences in racial terms. The change is observable not only in the positions of New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani, who has promised to raise taxes on "richer and whiter neighborhoods" (while declining to condemn the phrase "globalize the intifada"), but also in the way politicians such as Rep. Ro Khanna (D-California) have begun to talk about the "Epstein class." The phrase can be taken as an association of exploitative wealth with Jewish identity.

Today's antisemitism differs from the kind that flourished in the middle of the 20th century. Nazis justified their hatred of Jews in racial and supposedly scientific terms. This emphasis distinguished their outlook from an older tradition of anti-Judaism, which had focused on real and imagined differences between the beliefs of Christians and Jews. Now the older form of anti-Judaism is making a comeback. Given widespread secularization, this may seem surprising. But with their baseless talk of pedophile rings and selective condemnations of Israel, the new antisemites have updated theological anti-Judaism for the era of unbelief.

Indeed, the new antisemitism may be best understood as a symptom of the breakdown of religious authority. Conspiracist thinking flourishes when people are alienated from institutions. The decline of religious attachment has cleared the way for wilder sorts of speculation. Though many of the new antisemites make a show of being religious, none evince much interest in the statements of their church hierarchies. Tucker Carlson may be an Episcopalian, but no Episcopal bishop would endorse his views. Candace Owens's Catholicism bears little resemblance to what Pope Leo proclaims. This reflects the anti-institutional nature of the new antisemitism. It also suggests that the cure lies in stronger and more trustworthy religious bodies.

Matthew Schmitz is the editor of Compact.

DAMIR MARUSIC

## How a filmmaking revolution sparked the slow march to YouTube

Two weeks out from the Super Bowl, the trusty old plasma-screen TV I bought in 2008 gave up the ghost. I had purchased it because I loved movies: At the time, plasma screens were capable of rendering a more film-like image than competing liquid crystal displays, or LCDs. Heartbroken (and in a hurry, since I had a Super Bowl party looming), I went and bought a new OLED — which stands for organic light-emitting diode, a much more modern technology, also known for delivering a cinema-like experience to the living room.

But as I sat down to put the new set through its paces, I realized that in the past few years I had stopped watching movies at home. I also never really cottoned to the binge-watchable TV series revolution; multi-episode, multi-season storyline arcs of prestige series frequently just lost me. While I still head to the movie theater with friends to consume and discuss the latest it-film, settling into my couch to watch a movie over the weekend rarely happens these days.

It's easy to curl into a conservative crouch about popular culture: Things obviously used to be better. Especially in film. The blockbusters of my youth, the Star Wars and the Indiana Jones films, may have been overcommercialized franchise operations. But they had a warm glow missing in today's equivalents, like the distended and bewildering Marvel Cinematic Universe (which has made an eye-watering \$32 billion in global box office gross to date). And the 1970s ... now that was the real golden age of American cinema! Sweeping and gritty dramas like "Chinatown," "Taxi Driver" and "Apocalypse Now" managed to say something visceral about America in ways that today's auteur efforts struggle to match.

Right? Sort of. Paul Fischer's sprawling new history, "The Last Kings of Hollywood: Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg — and the Battle for the Soul of American Cinema," provides plenty of biographical texture for

what surely *was* a golden age. It traces the intertwined careers of a group of young men who first barged into Hollywood, determined to make more "personal" films just as the old studio system was running out of steam. They largely succeeded in the 1970s, but paradoxically end up recreating the very system they had sought to replace.

Fischer quotes Walter Murch, the award-winning editor and sound designer who also came up in that era: "It's the trajectory of every revolution, you know. As Eric Hoffer said, every great idea starts as a movement, becomes a business, and winds up as a racket." By the end of the book, my cranky conservatism was giving way to an appreciation of just how cyclical Hollywood has always been — and what that means for today.

The three main protagonists, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, end up in different places, though all three prove Murch right in their own way. Coppola, the self-destructive auteur, crashes spectacularly and repeatedly after every towering success — losing his studio, going bankrupt, even burying his son after a freak accident. But he keeps circling back to the independent, personal filmmaking he always aspired to. He ends up, almost in spite of himself, closest to the original revolutionary vision.

Spielberg, the perennial outsider who studies every move the insiders made, eventually becomes the establishment — co-founding DreamWorks in 1994 with Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen, who at the time owned former studio titan Jack Warner's house. And Lucas, who railed against the studio system louder than anyone, sells his franchise empire to Disney for \$4 billion and builds himself a gated compound as opulent as anything the old moguls ever owned.

Of the three, Lucas is the most perceptive and farseeing. In 1996, he sketched out his vision to

Randall Lane of Forbes magazine. The future was digital, he said. Films sets would be designed for computer-generated imagery. Producers could download "digital images of actors" and place them as extras. And delivery would be via internet rather than in theaters. Instead of theatrical releases where the whole world would get to partake in a shared experience, each "product will have small market niches."

Early in the book, in 1968, Arthur Knight — Lucas's own former film professor — sits on a panel alongside his former student and complains that film schools are oversubscribed and the craft is being debased. "All you have to do today to be a moviemaker is put your eye behind a camera," he says. Lucas, still young and furious, fires back in defense of the new generation.

The irony is that Knight's nightmare came true beyond anything he could have imagined — and Lucas's own generation kicked off the revolution in personal filmmaking that helped get it there. YouTube, which pulled in \$60 billion in revenue last year and now commands more total TV viewership than any other platform, has helped make filmmaking so democratic that over 500 hours of new video are uploaded every minute.

I turn on my new television and scroll through the apps. Yes, some of them are streaming services delivering movies directly to my couch. But a surprising amount of the real estate is given over to self-produced independent creators with audiences numbering in the millions, making exactly the kind of personal work that Lucas and Coppola once dreamed of — just not in a format anyone from 1968 would recognize as cinema.

Anyway, I put on "Raiders of the Lost Ark" — a film that epitomizes the revolution-to-racket pipeline. Lucas-produced, Spielberg-directed, it spawned four sequels, a television series and several theme park rides. By any honest accounting, it's the prototype for the franchise machine that eventually gave us the MCU.

And yet there's something in it that the MCU can't touch — a handmade quality, a sense that two absurdly talented people are having the time of their lives. Two hours later, the credits roll and I'm sitting there grinning. Meanwhile, somewhere out there, someone with a cellphone camera is probably getting started on the next revolution.

## These American businesses are footing the bill for Trump's tariffs



CRAIG HUDSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

President Donald Trump on Feb. 6.

BY SCOTT LINCICOME AND INU MANAK

An Illinois supplier of nuts, bolts and screws could be all that keeps President Donald Trump's national security tariffs from escalating into a torrent of government overreach.

Since the president announced sweeping tariffs last year, American businesses have worked diligently to navigate a confounding maze of new and overlapping trade regulations — but additional government obstacles keep popping up, often without notice, and businesses are left facing a gargantuan and unexpected tax bill.

That's what happened to Express Fasteners, LTD, which is now suing the administration in a case that reveals the opaque and arbitrary nature of Trump's tariffs, the dramatic expansion of the administrative state behind them and a desperate need to reform the laws governing these levies.

Trump's "emergency" tariffs — which imposed taxes on nearly all imports from almost every country in the world — have made headlines, but he continues to deploy his first-term tariff sweetheart: Section 232 of the 1962 Trade Expansion Act. The law, which authorizes the president to "adjust" imports that threaten to impair national security, was rarely invoked before Trump — just 26 times in 54 years. By contrast, Trump initiated eight investigations during his first term and applied broad tariffs on steel and aluminum. Last year, he launched 12 more investigations and imposed new tariffs on automotive goods, trucks, copper and wood products. In just five years, Trump has been responsible for 43 percent of all Section 232 investigations and almost all Section 232 tariffs.

The president's Section 232 adventurism hasn't stopped there. In 2025, Trump increased his first-term steel and aluminum tariffs to 50 percent and eliminated various exemptions. He also invoked the law's ambiguous mention of "derivative[s]" products to apply the metals tariffs to downstream items and created a process for U.S. companies to petition the government to expand protection. As a result, hundreds of new metal products — such as utensils, canned foods, exercise equipment and appliances — are now subject to tariffs. Today, steel derivatives account for most of the imports affected by the Section 232 taxes.

That's where Express Fasteners comes in. U.S. businesses that import items containing steel or aluminum now pay a tariff on their embedded amount, by value. Many U.S. companies had never considered the precise metal content of their imports, but they nevertheless adapted to follow the new regulations.

Express Fasteners is among those firms. It says it carefully followed U.S. Customs and Border Protection instructions to determine its imports' steel and aluminum content. For things unrelated to the steel and aluminum inputs, such as the costs of machining and fabricating and the seller's profit, the company applied the lower reciprocal tariff rate for the finished item's country of origin — in this case, Taiwan.

Yet when Express Fasteners received its bill from CBP, the entire value of its imports were hit with the 50 percent Section 232 tariff. CBP attributes this to an unsigned internal memo that interpreted the original presidential proclamation more stringently than what the agency communicated in June 2025. That memo was never filed in the Federal Register and received no public comment. This blatant regulatory overreach is what Express Fasteners is now challenging in court.

The court's ruling will matter for many other American firms that have seen increased costs due to Trump's complicated Section 232 tariffs. The bigger issue, however, is not the agency's guidance, the administration's manipulation of the regulatory process, or even Trump's deep and abiding love of tariffs; it's in Section 232 itself. As we warned years ago, Section 232 lacks clear limits on the president's tariff authority and contains numerous provisions, such as those for derivatives, that are so vague and discretionary as to invite blatant manipulation. With Section 232 investigations expanding rapidly in Trump's second term, the abuse will surely grow.

That problem can't be fixed by the courts, in this case or any other. Section 232 must be amended, at least to require legislative sign-off on any new or expanded tariffs implemented under the law. In a divided Congress, changing the law has found advocates on both sides of the aisle. But until any revisions become law, thousands of American companies like Express Fasteners will be subject not only to new tariffs but to endless and ever-changing rules on how they apply.

Scott Lincicome is vice president of general economics and the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. Inu Manak is a senior fellow for international trade at the Council on Foreign Relations.

## OPINION

## The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

## EDITORIALS

## Dr. Oz has a point about retirement

IT'S RARE TO SEE a politician say something obviously true but politically difficult. So kudos to Mehmet Oz, the administrator of the agency that runs Medicare and Medicaid, for saying the country would benefit if healthy people delayed retirement by a year.

It's easy to caricature his remarks as lacking empathy, but there's plenty of evidence that staying in the workforce longer has an upside for the person who does it as much as society at large.

Retiring at 65 is an arbitrary convention, not a biological reality. Most people don't follow it anyway. The average retirement age in the United States in 2024 was 62.6 for women and 64.6 for men. It has been trending upward slowly since the mid-1990s.

That makes sense given who is working today. When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, 52 percent of employed workers were in agriculture, manufacturing or construction. Today, 63 percent are in management, professional, sales or office occupations. These are largely not physically taxing jobs, and healthy people can continue to do them into their late 60s with little issue.

The government shouldn't set different retirement ages for different jobs based on how difficult they are. Retirement timing is a question of personal responsibility, and every individual is different.

That said, entitlement programs for retirees (and interest payments from the borrowing that they require) are the largest line items in the federal budget. And the country could benefit from trillions of dollars worth of economic activi-



MAXINE WALLACE/THE WASHINGTON POST  
Mehmet Oz at his office in Maryland.

## SPENDING HEALTHY YEARS IN IDLENESS ISN'T GOOD FOR YOU.

ty if more Americans stayed in their careers longer. Oz isn't speaking out of turn to discuss retirement as a public concern.

People are living healthier lives in old age as medicine has advanced and smoking has declined. Health problems factor into determining when to retire for only 29 percent of retirees. The most common reasons are "a desire to do other things" or reaching a "normal

retirement age."

Some people who retire earlier wind up realizing that retirement isn't all it's cracked up to be. Humans were not designed to live in idleness. Research shows that working longer can help prevent cognitive decline and is associated with lower depression and diabetes risk. One-third of retirees report still having labor income, showing that many want to keep working.

It's not as though workers hate their jobs as they approach retirement. In fact, 72 percent of workers 55 and older say they are satisfied, the highest rate of any group.

Yet some government policies discourage seniors from working. The Social Security benefit formula is structured so that working past the age of 62 does little to increase future benefits, but the payroll tax rate is the same as for younger workers. Eliminating the payroll tax for people over 62 would remove that disincentive. The government would make up most of the loss in revenue by taxing more income for longer, and workplaces would benefit from retaining experienced employees with institutional memory.

Americans in poor health or physically taxing jobs, of course, can make a different calculation. Yet Oz, himself 65, isn't talking to them. Millions of America's near-retirees don't fit those categories and would be better off working a little while longer.

It's nice to see an official encouraging this, but it'd be even better if government stopped discouraging it with misguided policy.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Warning: Listening to Bondi can be harmful to your brain

Regarding the Feb. 12 front-page article "Combative Bondi lobs insults under questioning":

CNN should have warned viewers that watching Attorney General Pam Bondi testify Wednesday carried the same risk as President Donald Trump's daily ingestion of 325 milligrams of aspirin: intracranial hemorrhaging. Since America's chief law enforcement officer promptly diagnosed Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Kentucky) with "Trump derangement syndrome" — for questioning her handling of the Epstein files — I feel free to add "Bondi-induced exploding-head syndrome" to the DSM of Trump-era diagnostic categories.

Bondi offered the following argument to Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Maryland): "You don't tell me anything, you washed-up loser lawyer. You're not even a lawyer!" As the attorney general was presumably taught at law school: When you can't argue the facts, argue the law; when you can't argue either, impugn the character of the witness.

In one respect, Bondi was absolutely correct: Her predecessor Merrick Garland's glacial incompetence and indifference allowed Ghislaine Maxwell to accept a prison sentence without compelling or inducing her to name names. Garland also could have released the Epstein files, especially after Maxwell's conviction. Bondi, like Garland, has presided over the abandonment of an untold number of Jeffrey Epstein's victims.

**Eric Radack, Santa Fe, New Mexico**

Attorney General Pam Bondi had an audience of one, and that was President Donald Trump. She was unresponsive to pointed questions about the Epstein files but came prepared with a list of allegations against the members of Congress who tried to pin her down. Kudos to Jared Moskowitz (D-Florida) for seeing through her shtick and asking for her best shot.

The irony is that callous ad hominem attacks meant to please Trump, as FBI Director Kash Patel and others have employed, don't help the president politically. Throwing red meat to an ever-decreasing MAGA crowd doesn't inspire sympathy in the majority of the voting public.

**George Magakis Jr., Norristown, Pennsylvania**

## From Black history to painful present

I share the outrage reported in the Feb. 7 front-page article "Bipartisan fury follows Trump clip of Obamas."

February is Black History Month. In the hall outside my fourth-grade classroom, I have hung posters of Thurgood Marshall, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Katherine Johnson, among others. I read "The Story of Ruby Bridges" to my class. A diverse, lively group of 27 fourth-graders listened with real concern. They couldn't comprehend how an angry mob could hurl racial slurs at a 6-year-old who was just trying to go to school.

I'd like to tell students that this hate is in the past. I'd like to tell them that the United States, like our classroom, embraces diversity. But when our president's social media account broadcasts a video of Barack and Michelle Obama's faces superimposed onto the bodies of apes, I cannot tell them that. I can only hope that they will judge our president, to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character.

**Diane B. Norton, Fairfax**

Though some Republicans have condemned the racist social media clip of the Obamas, many are still circling the wagons or remaining mum. White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said, "Please stop the fake outrage and report on something today that actually matters to the American public." Well, character still matters — at least to some of us.

**David Berry, Annandale**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I have a confession. There was a time when I supported Donald Trump simply because he carried an "(R)" after his name. I told myself the policies mattered more than the person. But then someone I trusted asked me a question that cut through all my justifications: *What about his character?*

If "character matters" was our rallying cry during Bill Clinton's impeachment, then character still matters when the president is someone we prefer politically. It matters when constitu-

tional safeguards — like the foreign emoluments clause — are brushed aside.

This is not about relitigating the past. It is about moral consistency in the present. We cannot claim to follow Jesus and then avert our eyes from behavior that contradicts what he taught. To do so is to gain the world and lose our soul.

**Bruce Lampley, Raytown, Missouri**

## An elusive higher power

In his Feb. 1 Sunday Opinion essay, "I've reported on UFO sightings for decades — and come to this conclusion," Michael Shermer wrote that "aliens are sky gods for skeptics, deities for atheists and a secular alternative to replace the rapidly declining religiosity in the West." I agree. I've felt for a long time that the search for extraterrestrial intelligence was just a search for a missing god.

Even if we find an alien civilization, what will we learn? Stop killing? Stop wars? Conserve your planet? Love one another? Jesus, whom believers consider God, asked for this, as did the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets and others. If we don't listen to them, why would we listen to aliens from a distant world?

**Michael Hoyt, Silver Spring**

## Buddhist monks' walk to remember

Regarding the Feb. 11 Metro article "Monks arrive in D.C., bringing solace with them":

We've all heard or read stories of miracles performed by gods. One story tells of a god parting a sea. In another, a god lifted an entire mountain on his little finger. More than one story has a god ascending bodily into the air before disappearing forever from Earth. And one god, we're told, walked on water.

Today, with our own eyes, we are witnessing a miracle that no all-powerful god has ever accomplished: self-disciplined monks walking into D.C. 108 days and 2,300 miles after leaving Fort Worth. In mindfully living and walking in peace every day, the only prize they seek is to end human suffering.

**Reggie Regrut, Phillipsburg, New Jersey**

Mindfulness, stripped of mysticism, is disciplined awareness of how we think. Whether one approaches mindfulness spiritually or scientifically, the proposition that healthier minds contribute to healthier societies is not fringe; it is foundational.

At a time when violence — international and domestic — seems increasingly normalized, the psychological roots of conflict deserve serious attention. Wars begin long before the first shot is fired. They begin in the mind: in distorted concepts, in ambiguous language, in narratives that frame domination as security and dehumanization as necessity.

Descartes wrote, "I think, therefore I am." The human mind's creativity is remarkable, including its ability to rationalize mass violence with chilling sophistication. That dual capacity may be our greatest vulnerability. Descartes might now say, "I think, therefore I am . . . probably wrong. Where can I get a fact check?"

At minimum, the Buddhist monks' winter walk for peace invites a conversation about whether the prevention of violence begins not only in treaties and arsenals but also in the architecture of thought itself.

**Chuck Woolery, Rockville**

Following the Feb. 1 letters package "Flirting is trickier than ever. Here's how to approach it," **Post Opinions wants to know:** How soon do you bring up politics when getting to know someone? Is a first date too soon? Share your response, and it might be published as a letter to the editor. [wapo.st/discuss\\_politics](https://wapo.st/discuss_politics)

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## Statism comes for social media

THE RUSSIAN government's decision this week to ban WhatsApp and throttle Telegram is not a surprise for an authoritarian regime. Yet it also serves as a cautionary tale for westerners clamoring to regulate social media companies.

Thugs like Vladimir Putin perceive privately owned messaging services like WhatsApp (97 million monthly users in Russia) and Telegram (93.5 million) as threats to their power. The Kremlin cannot stand ordinary Russians having access to free services that render their conversations invisible to the security services.

Yet even a public accustomed to routine clampdowns on dissent reacted poorly. As the Telegram throttle went into place, Russian soldiers and pro-war military bloggers posted panicked pleas online. Earlier in the week, Ukraine persuaded Elon Musk to block Russian frontline access to his company's satellite communication technology. One soldier complained: "The front is in shock. Starlinks are gone, now they're jamming Telegram too. How are we supposed to fight? With carrier pigeons?"

## RUSSIA UNDERCUTS WHATSAPP AND TELEGRAM TO PUSH A GOVERNMENT-CREATED ALTERNATIVE.

Russia banned most Western social media companies in 2022, shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. By August of last year, it started blocking phone calls through WhatsApp and Telegram while directing users to its homegrown "everything app" called Max.

The state-run app, modeled after China's WeChat, launched last year and is required to be preinstalled on every phone and tablet sold in the country. It's also insecure by design.

Max does not have end-to-end encryption for its chatting services, and researchers have noted that it asks for permission to access the phone's camera, microphone, contacts and location. This makes mass surveillance remarkably easy. Unsurprisingly, because it's

designed by a government and not a profit-driven company, it's also quite buggy and unstable.

At the other end of Europe, Spain's socialist government is proposing a ban on social media for minors and floating criminal liability for tech executives who fail to suppress "disinformation." Spain is not Russia, but its rulers are tempted by the same impulses for control over communications technology.

While reasonable people can debate limits on teen social media usage, the threats to executives are in another category. Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez floated the proposals days after Musk criticized his immigration policies on X. Sánchez is pushing to enact a law that would make the "algorithmic amplification" of that kind of criticism a criminal matter.

The very concept of "disinformation" implies the state gets to decide who may speak, to whom and on what terms. The machinery of control is the same, and more often than not, it's used to protect a regime. This is the beginning of a road that ends where Russia now is.

## America's nuclear future

AS AMERICA'S energy demands grow exponentially, the country won't be able to keep up without more nuclear power. For decades, the climate-friendly industry has been held back by overly burdensome regulations, but that's beginning to change.

In the 1960s, plants took about four years to build, and they cost, in today's dollars, about \$1,500 per kilowatt of electricity generated. Now the idea of building a reactor in less than a decade is unheard of, and the cost of construction is six times greater.

The Energy Department took steps this month to exempt certain advanced reactors from duplicative environmental reviews. It's also flirting with relaxing radiation standards and eliminating some over-the-top security requirements at nuclear plants.

Defenders of the status quo try to prey on people's fears of nuclear technology. NIMBYs and radical environmentalists pretend that overregulation is not actually the reason for the industry's malaise and is instead necessary to instill public confidence.

This ignores the many undue burdens that federal agencies have placed on projects. Sometimes, regulators have even forced changes to designs mid-con-

## THE COUNTRY CAN'T COMPETE ON AI WITHOUT A TRULY ALL-THE-ABOVE ENERGY POLICY.

struction, as happened in 2009, when they required containment buildings for reactor developments in Georgia and South Carolina to be able to withstand direct aircraft strikes, driving up costs and delaying construction.

It's no surprise that regulatory costs surged after the 1979 accident at Three Mile Island, but the pendulum has swung too far. Nuclear developers have a point about onerous documentation rules. The administration would do well to emphasize regulatory stability, as well as explore how technology such as artificial intelligence can help alleviate paperwork burdens.

Capital is already pouring into the nuclear industry from big firms like Meta, Microsoft and Amazon, which was founded by Post owner Jeff Bezos. Yet billions in new investment won't mean much if the regulatory state refuses to challenge long-held norms.

Take, for example, the government's overly stringent radiation standards.

The Trump administration has indicated it will reform a decades-old rule requiring nuclear power plants to keep levels of exposure to radiation "as low as reasonably achievable."

The rule has led hypercautious regulators to mandate that plants minimize exposure to well below levels that people experience annually from the natural world, such as from the sun. That has forced operators to incorporate concrete shields into their reactor designs, which raise costs and limit how long employees can work at a given time.

The science underpinning the radiation rule is mushy, at best. It's based on a theory that because radiation poses a serious cancer risk at high doses, it must also pose a low risk at lower doses. But researchers have hotly debated whether this is true, which is hard to measure given how many factors contribute to cancer risk. Meanwhile, coal plants are subject to no standards on radiation, even though they release far greater levels of radioactive material to the public than nuclear plants.

No standard should be a sacred cow, especially as new designs for advanced reactors promise greater safety. Everyone loses when bureaucrats snuff out nuclear innovation.

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## OPINION

MARC A. THIESEN

## Kari Lake is making Trump's job harder in Iran

If President Donald Trump takes military action in Iran, he will need help from the Iranian people. The U.S. military can decapitate the regime from the air. But what happens on the ground will be up to Iranians, who bravely took to the streets this winter to demand their freedom — and are now waiting for the bombing to return and finish the job.

To play their part, they will need access to information they can trust about the U.S. military campaign and what is happening in their country. The regime knows this and will seek to deny Trump the ability to communicate directly with ordinary Iranians.

Unfortunately, Iran's leaders have an unwitting ally inside the U.S. government — Kari Lake, the hapless acting head of U.S. Agency for Global Media. For a year, Lake has worked tirelessly to cripple the U.S.-backed “freedom radios” — including Voice of America and Radio Farda — that broadcast into Iran to counter regime propaganda. As an unpaid volunteer member of the board of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which operates Radio Farda, I have seen the chaos she's unleashed up close.

To succeed, kinetic warfare must be accompanied by information warfare. The United States needs a plan to surge news and messages into Iran through multiple means: Medium wave AM radio broadcasts to reach Iranians in their cars and homes; shortwave radio broadcasts over multiple channels; satellite news transmissions; and virtual private networks and other tools that allow Iranians to defeat the regime's internet censorship and communicate with each other and the world safely through secure messaging. The goal should be to overwhelm the regime's ability to keep people in the dark.

In an interview Wednesday, Lake told me: “We're ready for whatever the president does in Iran, we are ready to tell that story.” Unfortunately, the facts speak otherwise. Instead of developing a plan to break the regime's information blockade, Lake has done the opposite: She has undermined the ability of VOA and Radio Farda to reach the people of Iran. Here is the troubling timeline:

In March, Lake put all of VOA's Persian service staff on administrative leave. That decision backfired three months later, when in June the United States and Israel launched their military campaign to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program. Lake scrambled to recall roughly 40 terminated staff in the Persian division, but the damage was done. During Operation Midnight Hammer, Axios reported, VOA “broadcast just 75 minutes of content targeted to its audience in Iran over ... 72 hours.” Before Lake's arrival, VOA broadcast in Iran 24/7. “We may not be doing as many hours, but the hours we're doing are impactful,” Lake said.

Radio Farda, which Lake was stopped from dismantling in court, helped fill the void — despite her withholding of congressionally appropriated funds that forced it to furlough half its staff.

In March, Lake abruptly cut off Radio Farda's access to U.S.-owned transmission facilities in Kuwait — facilities Congress funded for decades specifically for this purpose — and then denied it permission to use appropriated funds to contract with private vendors for shortwave capacity.

Radio Farda still managed to broadcast via shortwave using non-grant funds. Its social media teams also flooded key channels with news, videos, and statements from Trump and reached millions of Iranians via Instagram — debunking Iran's false narratives about Trump's historic military operation, exposing regime propaganda and informing the Iranian



Kari Lake, head of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, on Capitol Hill on Tuesday.

*Getting accurate information to the Iranian people could mean the difference between the success and failure of a military strike. But if Kari Lake has her way, millions of Iranians will be left to the mercy of regime propaganda.*

people about America's motives in striking Iran's nuclear weapons program and personnel.

After undermining Trump during one of the most courageous moments of his presidency, Lake ought to have been chastened. Not so. When mass protests erupted across Iran, Radio Farda continued to be denied access to the U.S. transmitter in Kuwait. Despite that, it was able to broadcast statements from Trump on the internet. During the height of the protests, Radio Farda's Instagram content was viewed at least 30 million times per day — until internet access was cut off by the regime.

After three weeks, Radio Farda was finally given access to one shortwave frequency from the Kuwait transmitter (multiple frequencies are needed to overcome jamming) but was still denied access to medium wave AM radio frequencies. But by then, the protests had died down.

In our conversation, Lake insisted that she did not deny Radio Farda access to the Kuwait transmitter. “The transmitting station has been shut down,” she said, “so it wasn't like we're blocking RFE/RL. As it's been open, we've allowed them to use it.” Asked how many of the last 11 months it was not operating, she said, “It might have been 10 or whatever.” In July, however, USAGM officials told RFE/RL, “US-AGM does not agree to the use of the tower or for grant funds to be used for this purpose.” At no point over the past 11 months did her agency inform RFE/RL that the transmitting station was down, and RFE/RL officials told me that the entire station has not been offline due to technical issues during Lake's tenure.

Lake promised to get back to me with specific dates the transmitter was supposedly down. But 24 hours later, she instead texted a statement that said, “Trying to recycle last year's narrative is misleading, outdated, and grossly inaccurate. USAGM is stronger and more efficient today than it was under the previous administration. VOA Persian has expanded operations and recently added an hour of programming, and Radio Farda is actively broadcasting through the US-AGM transmitter in Kuwait.”

I also asked Lake about that single shortwave frequency for Radio Farda. Lake answered that she would be willing to give it more for a fee. “I've told my team that if they're willing to pay the expense of it, to let them have access to it.” Let's see if she follows through.

Lake is also throttling the ability of Radio Farda to reach the Iranian people through virtual private networks supported by the Open Technology Fund (OTF), a U.S. nonprofit authorized and funded by Congress in 2021 to help America's freedom radios overcome internet censorship.

Over 90 percent of Radio Farda's Iranian audience get their content through OTF-supported VPNs. To help keep these critical channels open, Republican Sens. James Lankford (Oklahoma) and Lindsey Graham (South Carolina) recently worked with the State Department to identify \$10 million in additional funds that could be transferred to support millions of VPN users in Iran. The State Department asked Lake to transfer the funds to OTF using a well established channel — an interagency agreement

used for years to get resources to OTF.

But according to OTF officials, Lake would not accept the funds from State and insisted that OTF pay for Iran operations through an advance on its existing regular budget — which would require it to cut VPN access in China and Cuba to provide it in Iran. Without the additional money, OTF said it will have to start cutting off Iranian users this month.

Lake denies she is an impediment to giving OTF the money. “That is the most absurd thing I've ever heard,” she said. “If the State Department wants to give \$10 million to OTF, I run this agency. Marco Rubio runs the State Department. ... You need to be on the phone with them.” But OTF officials said that State Department officials met with USAGM on Feb. 2 to arrange transfer of the money, and Lake wouldn't agree. An OTF official tells me Lake has made clear that they will have to find a way around her.

In Lake's telling, the operational limits hamstringing these critical tools have nothing to do with her. So I asked her to share her plan to surge information into Iran and get Trump's message to the Iranian people. “We have been surging,” she insisted, but added, “I'm not in the Department of War.”

“We have given Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Middle East Broadcasting Network, as well as the Open Technology Fund, every single penny that was appropriated to them,” she said. “Every. Single. Penny.” She leaves out that this is only because she was forced to do so in court.

Getting accurate information to the Iranian people could mean the difference between the success and failure of a military strike. But if Kari Lake has her way, millions of Iranians will be left in an information vacuum and at the mercy of regime propaganda. If Trump decides to act, he might want a new director of U.S. Agency for Global Media who is serving his interests rather than unwittingly serving the interests of the regime he is trying to topple.

Perhaps Marco Rubio needs another job?

GEORGE F. WILL

## Consign the Stalinist in the Kremlin to a grim future

*“Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” — George Orwell, “1984”*

When the 105-day war ended, almost 400,000 Soviet soldiers had been killed or wounded or were missing. The Kremlin reported minor losses. Vladimir Putin, a Stalin admirer, should have studied the actual past that Stalin falsified.

Stalin began the Winter War, a.k.a. the Russo-Finnish War, on Nov. 30, 1939, as his then-ally Adolf Hitler had begun World War II in Europe three months earlier: by staging a fraudulent border incident. Stalin, dictator of a nation of 170 million, expected to quickly subdue Finland, a nation of 3.5 million.

When Putin invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, his troops were told to pack dress uniforms. There would be a victory parade a few days later in Kyiv. In “The Winter Warriors,” a just-published novel by Olivier Norek, Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's close aide, tells a Red Army colonel that Stalin wants to celebrate his next birthday on the steps of Finland's Parliament, “in precisely 20 days.” A Soviet general had told Stalin 10 days should suffice.

The war ended on March 13, 1940. The Soviet Union settled for about 10 percent of Finland's territory.

As the fifth year of Russia's war to subdue Ukraine approaches, Putin has learned that the past is easier to control than the present. He has a grim future if the United States and Europe press their advantages.

A much-diminished Russia occupies just 20 percent of Ukrainian territory that Kyiv controlled four Februaries ago. Europe, which has not yet even completely weaned itself from Russian energy, is at least accustoming itself to the vocabulary of military seriousness.

In 2024, every Swedish household received a booklet stating: “From the year you turn 16 until the end of the year you turn 70, you are part of Sweden's total defence and required to serve in the event of war or the threat of war.” Finland and Norway have long had military conscription. Other nations are preparing infrastructures for mobilization. Donald Trump has endorsed legislation that would provide crushing economic penalties for nations that buy Russian oil.

Last year, Putin would not — crippled by his Ukraine misadventure, he could not — try to rescue his client regime in Syria as it was being swept away. Iran's regime, Putin's most important ally other than China, is preoccupied with suppressing Iranians. Putin's only sympathizer in the European Union, Hungary's Viktor Orban, might now have firmer support among American authoritarians (“national conservatives”) than among Hungarians.

Putin's “special military operation” in Ukraine (calling it a war can mean imprisonment) has lasted longer than Russia's involvement in World War II. By now, Putin has surely defined success down: a negotiated armistice that provides Ukraine with security “guarantees” even more gossamer than those of the infamous 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances.

In it, Ukraine agreed to give up the almost 2,000 Soviet-era nuclear weapons (and ballistic missiles and strategic bombers) stationed on its soil. Russia gave “assurances” that it would “respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine,” and would “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine.” Russia seized Crimea in 2014, and invaded Ukraine eight years later.

Choices by Ukraine's friends can deliver condign punishment to Putin for his Ukrainian blunder. These friends can at last choose to fund Ukraine with the approximately \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets. They can intensify interdiction of the shadow fleet of tankers getting Russian oil to foreign buyers. And they can deny Putin a veto over security guarantees for Ukraine, including permanent troop deployments there. Otherwise, any agreement will be a sizzling fuse.

In Norek's novel, before Russia attacked, Molotov explained that negotiations with Finland “have never been anything but a long fuse.” And if Finland accepts Soviet demands, “We'll only ask for more until we've taken the whole country.” Today's Stalinist in the Kremlin is no sphinx.

Writing in Foreign Affairs (“Russia's Descent Into Tyranny”), Nina Khrushcheva of the New School reports that in 2023, “1984,” George Orwell's dystopian novel about a regime resting on mass surveillance and incessant propaganda, was, according to a Russian bookstore chain, its most stolen book.

In the first half of 2025, the most stolen item was the Russian constitution, which guarantees free speech and forbids censorship. Hence, a Russian joke: “We read Orwell for his reflection of reality, and the constitution as a beautiful utopia.” Negotiate accordingly.

KATHLEEN PARKER

## Alex Murdaugh's murder appeal could hang on a silenced juror

Alex Murdaugh may be the only person involved in this exhausting saga in South Carolina who would vote for a redo of his murder trial. But judging by the state Supreme Court's questioning during a hearing Wednesday, he might get the new trial he's seeking.

Murdaugh was convicted in 2023 for the murders of his wife, Maggie Murdaugh, and his younger son, Paul, at the family's estate. Judge Clifton Newman handed him two life sentences. During a six-week trial, prosecutors argued that Murdaugh shot his wife and son out of desperation as his world was unraveling. Prosecutor Creighton Waters referred to events that would ruin Murdaugh and the family legacy he valued above all else.

These included a boating accident that killed a local girl and was blamed on Paul, who was driving the boat. Lawsuits piled up. Murdaugh's financial crimes, bilking personal injury clients of millions of dollars in insurance money, were coming to a head, along with revelations that the opioid-addicted Murdaugh was stealing money from his law firm. The state argued that these pressures drove him to kill, to shift attention from his sins and earn sympathy as the devastated husband and father.

It's a theory. Apparently, it worked.

The detailed evidence was overwhelming. The high court must decide if the state's case was strong enough to override serious questions about possible jury tampering by the clerk of court and potentially prejudicial evidence the state presented with the permission of a respected but prosecution-friendly judge.

Murdaugh's lawyers filed two appeals that were considered together at the hearing. One, filed immediately after the trial, challenges the prosecution's presentation of evidence related to financial crimes ascribed to Murdaugh, specifically the inclusion of emotionally packed victims' statements that defense lawyers say were prejudicial. One justice noted that Newman had a duty as gatekeeper but “the gate here was just left open.”

The other appeal concerns the shocking behavior of the Colleton County clerk of court, Mary Rebecca “Becky” Hill, who, according to at least two jurors, tried to influence the verdict with her anti-Murdaugh commentary. She was also responsible for getting Juror 785, known as the “egg lady” (for bringing eggs to the jury room), booted from the proceedings for allegedly talking about the trial out of court against the judge's orders. This occurred minutes before jury deliberations were to begin and is at least theoretically the reason for the guilty verdict. The egg lady was disinclined to convict.

A 2024 hearing before Justice Jean Toal examined whether comments Hill allegedly made to jurors and to another clerk justified a retrial. Only one juror, identified as Juror Z, the alternate who replaced the egg lady, said that she was influenced by comments Hill had made — to “watch [Murdaugh's] body language” when he testified and to “not be fooled” by evidence presented by the defense attorneys.

In other testimony before Toal, Barnwell County Clerk of Court Rhonda McElveen said that Hill, who was planning to write a book about the trial, had told her she needed a guilty verdict for book sales so she could buy a lake house. This is not an unreasonable wish that someone might secretly harbor — or jokingly tell a friend in confidence.

After her focused questioning of jurors, Toal delivered a written ruling in about 15 minutes against a retrial. The judge did not cite Juror Z's comments. Murdaugh's lawyers are also appealing this decision.

Few if any people think Murdaugh deserves a second chance because he's innocent or because he's such a swell guy. He's an awful human being who has admitted to stealing his clients' money. The only reason, as the defense is claiming, is that Murdaugh was denied his Sixth Amendment fair trial protections

because of Hill's actions and comments.

The egg lady's importance to the appeal isn't only that she was dismissed at the last minute but also that she wasn't allowed to testify at the 2024 hearing. It was clear during Wednesday's hearing that the justices had read her affidavit even though it wasn't included in the defense's brief and led to key questions. Justice George C. James asked Waters, “Can we consider that affidavit? What was the rationale for [Toal] not allowing the ‘egg juror’ to testify?”

Chief Justice John Kittredge asked, “What do we do about the order [from Toal] that doesn't even mention that Juror Z did in fact testify about the comment ‘Don't let the defense confuse you?’”

Kittredge added that when Hill's comments are taken together, in context, they “take on a very nefarious message.”

Finally, Kittredge asked Waters: If Hill's alleged statements to jurors were true, “Do you still have a path to victory?”

Waters answered yes, saying that though such remarks would have been “improper,” and even if one juror had been swayed, the overwhelming evidence outweighed everything else. When I asked Murdaugh's attorney, Dick Harpootian, to comment, he said, “There's no ‘overwhelming evidence’ exemption in the Sixth Amendment.”