

Editor's

TAKE

Sever AQI becomes the new normal

When severe AQI becomes routine, complacency turns deadly. Clean air is a constitutional right demanding urgent policy action

The description may be clichéd, but it remains apt – Delhi in winter turns into a gas chamber, leaving the elderly, children, and the ill with nowhere to turn. When doctors recommend leaving the city as treatment, it is a damning indictment of governance. As Delhi's Air Quality Index (AQI) hovers around the 400 mark, the national capital once again finds itself in the grip of a public health emergency, though a routine one. Year after year, Delhiites have become so used to it that hardly any marches or placards are seen protesting on the streets. On Monday, the city recorded an average AQI of 427 – its third consecutive day in the 'severe' category – before marginally improving to 381 on Tuesday morning but still categorised as "very poor". Many areas in Delhi crossed the 430 mark, while large parts of west and north Delhi reported high pollution. The impact has not been confined to health, but its effects could also be seen in disrupted flights, closed schools, and thin attendance in offices. Every winter, it is the same old story: Delhi experiences toxic air, and every year authorities respond with short-term firefighting rather than lasting solutions. The reasons are not new and solutions are available. Toxic fumes of vehicles, industrial pollution, construction dust, and biomass burning combines with heavy air, leaving Delhi gasping for breath. As temperatures drop, wind slows down and pollutants remain close to the ground, turning the city into a gas chamber. Crop residue burning further aggravates the situation. However, it would be misleading to place the blame entirely outside Delhi's borders.

The uncomfortable truth is that Delhi produces enough pollution of its own to make winters unbearably even without stubble burning. Explosive growth in private vehicles, weak enforcement of emission norms, rampant construction activity, and polluting industries operating on the city's fringes ensure that pollution levels remain dangerously high. The repercussions are severe and far-reaching. Prolonged exposure to 'severe' AQI levels increases the risk of respiratory illnesses, heart disease, stroke, and reduced lung development in children. Hospitals report spikes in asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease cases, while outdoor workers bear the brunt with little protection.

However, solution is not impossible to find. By taking a few steps, the authorities could fight this menace effectively. First, emergency responses such as construction bans, vehicle restrictions, and industrial shutdowns must be timely, and strictly enforced.

Second, structural reforms are essential: rapid expansion of clean and reliable public transport, disincentivising private vehicle use, transitioning industries to cleaner fuels, and enforcing dust-control norms year-round. Biomass burning must be checked, if not banned completely. Above all, Delhi must stop treating 'severe' AQI as a seasonal inevitability. It is the net result of natural phenomena and human negligence. We cannot fight nature, but we can definitely bring about a change in our behaviour and actions to keep our air clean.

The age of thinking machines

As artificial intelligence moves from the margins to the centre of human life, India stands at a rare historical crossroads, uniquely positioned to shape not just how AI is built, but how it serves humanity



SANTHOSH
MATHEW

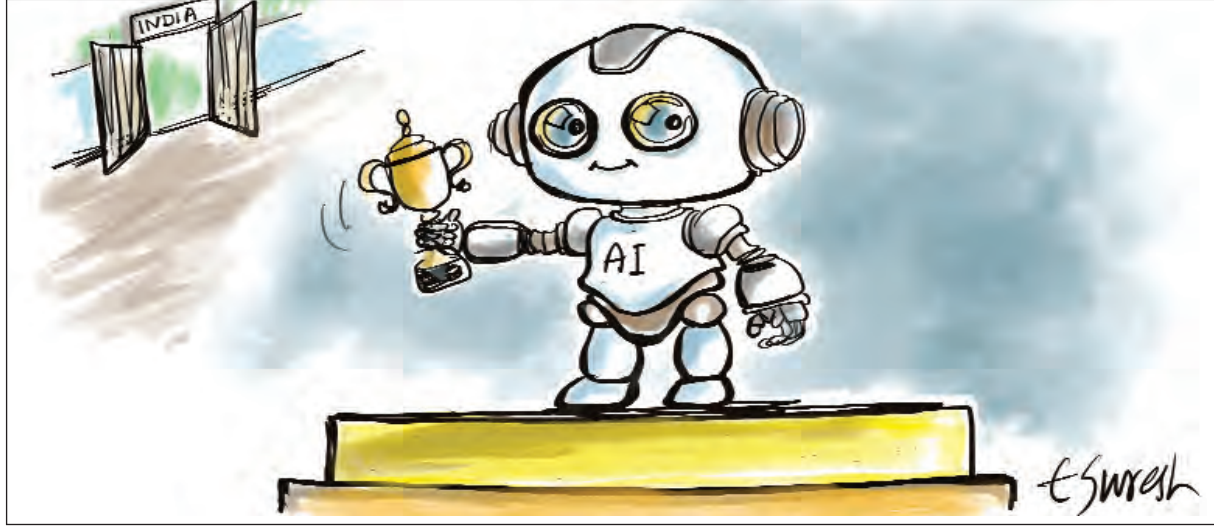
Across the long span of human history, only a few inventions have fundamentally reshaped civilisation. Fire pushed back darkness, the wheel conquered distance, agriculture stabilised societies, iron transformed labour and warfare, and ships linked continents. The printing press loosened elite control over knowledge, electricity redefined daily life, oil powered modern industry, and computers, along with the internet, rewired communication and economies. To this rare lineage, the 21st century has added artificial intelligence – an innovation unlike any before it, because it does not merely extend human strength or speed but begins to imitate the most basic human faculty: thinking.

It is therefore deeply symbolic that Time magazine chose the "Architects of AI" as its Person of the Year for 2025. By honouring a collective rather than a single individual, the magazine acknowledged that artificial intelligence is a global achievement, not the triumph of one mind or one nation. Declaring that 2025 was the year when AI's power "roared into view", Time captured a point of no return.

The age of thinking machines has arrived, and it is already reshaping the foundations of modern life. Since its inception in 1927, Time's Person of the Year has never been about celebration alone. It has chronicled influence-forces that define their era for better or worse. From Franklin D Roosevelt to transformative movements, scientists, and political leaders, the cover has reflected shifts in global power. Indians have appeared only rarely: Mahatma Gandhi in 1930, during the moral peak of India's freedom struggle, and later Prime Minister Narendra Modi, reflecting India's growing economic and diplomatic weight. That scarcity highlights how exceptional true global influence remains. The selection of the Architects of AI signals more than a technological milestone; it marks the beginning of a new epoch.




Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming the invisible infrastructure of civilisation, shaping economies, redefining warfare, influencing culture, and altering how states project power. In this moment of transition, India finds itself at a uniquely consequential crossroads. India today is not merely a large nation-state. It is the world's largest democracy, the most influential voice of the Global South, and the largest English-speaking society on the planet. Its demographic scale, technological ambition, and diplomatic reach place it in a position few countries have occupied at the birth of a new technological order.

As AI redraws global hierarchies, India has an unprecedented opportunity to shape not only markets and platforms, but also values, rules, and



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analytics are helping farmers navigate climate uncertainty. Few countries possess India's capacity to scale innovation to millions-a decisive advantage in shaping AI's real-world impact.

The AI revolution is also transforming work and human identity. Tasks are increasingly automated, offices are becoming hybrid spaces, and AI systems now assist with analysis, creativity, and research. Humans are shifting from execution to supervision, from repetition to reasoning. Productivity is rising, but so is the urgency for reskilling and lifelong learning. For India's youthful population, this transformation holds enormous promise-provided education and policy emphasise judgement, ethics, creativity, and empathy, qualities machines cannot replicate.

Geopolitically, AI is fast emerging as a new arena of competition, comparable to nuclear technology or space exploration in earlier eras.

Here, India's approach stands apart. Rather than viewing AI solely as a tool of dominance, India frames it as a shared resource for human progress.

Many nations of the Global South look to India not for dependence, but for partnership-collaboration that respects sovereignty and promotes shared growth. An India-led AI alliance could one day rival the historical significance of the Non-Aligned Movement or India's recent G20 leadership.

Time's recognition of the Architects of AI ultimately underscores a deeper truth: the future will be shaped less by borders and weapons, and more by intelligence, innovation, and values. Humanity stands at a once-in-a-century turning point, comparable to the Industrial Revolution or the birth of the internet. The AI age is no longer approaching – it is accelerating. And India, with its demographic strength, technological confidence, and ethical vision, is prepared not just to participate, but to lead this transformation with responsibility and hope.

The Pioneer

SINCE 1865

How the loss of divine qualities breeds suffering



RAJYOGI BRAHMA
KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

According to ancient scriptures, human character is shaped by a set of divine qualities-often described as the 36 *gunas*— that nurture peace, balance, and inner well-being. The absence of even one of these divine attributes gives rise to its opposite: demoniacal qualities that manifest as restlessness, disease, sorrow, and suffering. Yet most people remain unaware that their miseries are rooted not in external systems but in the erosion of these inner virtues. As a result, they search for causes in political failures, economic inequality, cultural decline, or social injustice, overlooking the deeper truth that all these spheres merely reflect human behaviour shaped by inner qualities. Positive and negative traits do not exist in isolation; they express themselves through every form of

human activity – political, economic, cultural, or social. Corruption in governance, exploitation in markets, and conflict in communities are not autonomous phenomena but outcomes of greed, anger, fear, and ambition operating within individuals.

Therefore, the real task is not merely reforming systems but transforming human behaviour by identifying and replacing negativity with positivity at its source.

Modern society presents a striking paradox. Technological and scientific advancements have reached astonishing heights, yet emotional and ethical development has lagged far behind. Humanity has learned to control nature but not the self. Impulsiveness, unchecked ambition, anxiety, and anger dominate daily life, creating a profound imbalance between material progress and inner maturity. This imbalance lies at the heart of many contemporary crises-mental distress, social fragmentation, and moral decay.

Ultimately, the quality of one's life depends on the quality of one's inner nature. Peace and happiness arise from divine qualities, while suffering flows naturally from their absence. Tragically, humanity continues to pursue happiness through external conquests-territory, wealth, power, and comfort-often at the cost of inner values. Economic prosperity is sought even through unethical means, and success is pursued even if it demands the

sacrifice of compassion, humility, and integrity. This trade-off has led to the corruption of the soul, degeneration of society, and widespread unrest. Material abundance, divorced from moral grounding, has failed to deliver lasting fulfilment. If this diagnosis is accepted, the solution becomes clear. The crisis we face is fundamentally a decline in moral and divine values, and the remedy lies in education that restores these qualities. No political reform or economic policy can create a peaceful world unless there is a qualitative change in

human nature itself. True peace emerges from inner purity and a fully developed divine disposition. Even a trace of a negative quality diminishes peace, while divine qualities reinforce and strengthen one another. Importantly, demoniacal qualities are interconnected, just as divine ones are.

Freedom from one negative trait weakens others, and even small efforts to cultivate virtues can trigger profound inner transformation. In a world increasingly driven by materialism, reclaiming divine qualities is not a spiritual luxury but a practical necessity. It offers not only personal liberation and inner happiness but also the only sustainable path towards a just, harmonious, and truly prosperous society.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and popular columnist

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GOVERNMENT RESPONSE ON NEHRU RECORDS IN PARLIAMENT

The Congress on Tuesday criticised the government following its response in the Lok Sabha, which asserted that no documents related to India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, were missing from the Prime Ministers Museum and Library during its annual inspection. The opposition questioned whether an apology would now be offered for the confusion surrounding the archival records. The controversy dates back to September, when Rizwan Kadri, a member of the PMML Society, wrote to Congress leader Sonia Gandhi seeking physical or digital access to private papers linked to Nehru that remain in her possession. Citing the government's written reply, the Congress claimed that the truth had finally been placed on record in Parliament. Union culture minister Gajendra Singh

Shekhawat informed the House that the latest inspection had confirmed the complete safety of Nehru's papers. The PMML Society, the institution's principal decision-making body, is chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh as vice-chairman. The episode highlights the enduring political sensitivity surrounding Nehru's legacy and archival material. It also underlines how history, heritage, and contemporary politics continue to intersect uneasily within India's democratic institutions, demanding transparency, restraint, and respect for historical record. Such debates require maturity, accountability, and scholarly integrity from all stakeholders involved in public discourse nationwide.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

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RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMA | CHENNAI

Gen Z redefines communication boundaries

The article on Gen Z's anxiety at a ringing phone perceptively captures a shift in communication norms, yet the issue extends beyond simple telephobia. Even messaging, once viewed as a considerate and asynchronous alternative, has increasingly come to feel intrusive and demanding. Read receipts, typing indicators, blue ticks, and expectations of instant replies have transformed digital messaging into a subtle form of surveillance. In response, younger users have adapted quietly but tellingly. Many now rely on WhatsApp Status updates instead of direct messages, sharing mood or information without obligating an immediate response. Status becomes communication without compulsion.

This behaviour is not withdrawal, but negotiation. Each notification competes for attention in an already crowded mental space. What earlier generations experienced as connection, many young people experience as constant demand. As a line from Blade Runner observes, "I don't mind the dust. I mind uninvited visitors."

The anxiety, therefore, is less about devices and more about eroded boundaries. The challenge lies in evolving communication etiquette that respects consent, pacing, and silence.

HARSH PAWARIA | HARYANA

When sporting greatness meets grace

The meeting of two legendary sportspersons-Sachin Tendulkar and Lionel Messi-during the latter's recent visit to Mumbai as part of his four-city GOAT India tour was a historic moment that will remain etched in the memory of sports fans in the Maximum City. Rarely do icons from different sporting worlds converge in a way that captures the imagination so completely.

Tendulkar and Messi share striking commonalities that extend beyond their global fame. Both are widely regarded as the greatest players in the history of their respective sports, revered not merely for records but for artistry and consistency. Each famously wore the iconic number-ten jersey for his national team, a symbol of responsibility and brilliance. Their playing styles-precise, instinctive, and elegant-redefined expectations in cricket and football alike.

Equally significant is their personal demeanour. Despite unprecedented success, both have remained humble, grounded, and deeply respectful of the games they represent. Their careers reflect a rare combination of generational talent, relentless discipline, and universal admiration. This brief meeting was more than ceremonial; it was a celebration of sporting excellence that goes beyond languages, and eras.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Renaming risks diluting rural guarantee

Apropos "Government says G RAM-G to rural employment guarantee scheme", the proposed repeal of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act marks a deeply consequential policy shift.

Introduced in 2005, MGNREGA became a cornerstone of rural welfare, guaranteeing wage employment and reinforcing economic dignity for millions. What initially appeared to be a symbolic renaming has evolved into a substantive overhaul under the proposed Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill. The complete removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name is difficult to justify, particularly when the Rural Development Minister has acknowledged MGNREGA's effectiveness over nearly two decades.

The government highlights the proposed increase in guaranteed workdays from 100 to 125, a welcome improvement. However, such an enhancement could have been achieved through a simple amendment. Instead, the new Bill introduces troubling provisions, notably the increased financial burden on states. MGNREGA succeeded precisely because it was centrally funded and aligned with cooperative federalism.

If India's soul lies in its villages, the government should reconsider weakening a proven rural lifeline.

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU

Politically incorrect: Why ‘jungle raj’ is a misnomer

What this popular metaphor overlooks is a profound truth — forests are among the most meticulously regulated, self-correcting, and sustainable systems on Earth. Far from symbolising chaos, the jungle represents an intricate order governed by ecological laws that human governance often fails to match



BKP SINHA



ARVIND KUMAR JHA

The term “jungle raj” has become a common political shorthand, hurled to describe a state or region suffering from poor governance, lawlessness, and administrative collapse. In the often-used phrase “jungle raj” in arguments about governance, “jungle” is used to mean a disorderly entity suffering from “anarchy”.

The phrase “jungle raj” was not coined by a politician. It reportedly originated as an oral observation in 1997 by a judge in a Patna court, who used it out of frustration over poor civic conditions. It was used during the hearing of a contempt case regarding severe civic mismanagement, specifically a poor drainage system and waterlogging. The judge remarked that the situation was “worse than jungle raj” and related it to blatant dereliction of duty by top bureaucrats. Politicians, for obvious reasons, lost no time in seizing upon the phrase. Stripping it of its original context (civic collapse), they weaponised it as a powerful political statement. It was used to characterise alleged lawlessness and a breakdown of order. As a catchy slogan, it has been popularised and has become an enduring political metaphor.

By the phrase “jungle raj”, people envision a place of violence and chaos where only brute force - the so-called “law of the jungle” — determines power. In sharp contrast, however, a “jungle” — a natural forest — is arguably the most systematically ordered space on Earth. Its survival and thriving are not accidental; they are governed by incredibly complex and invisible “rules” that ensure ecological balance. A jungle is an amazingly dense yet neatly woven network of interdependence. Below the ground exists a remarkable system that binds every microorganism to sustain soil health. Trees rely on soil rich in microorganisms, including fungi (mycorrhizae), for nutrients; herbivores rely on flora; and carnivores keep herbivore populations stable. Every species has a defined niche and a specific role to play in the system.



PRIMARY SUCCESSION BEGINS IN AREAS ALMOST ENTIRELY DEVOID OF VEGETATION AND SOIL, SUCH AS LAND MASSES FORMED BY VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS OR GLACIAL RETREAT

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In a jungle or forest, cooperation for resource management far surpasses human planning. Resources such as space, sunlight, water, and nutrients are not seized randomly; they are efficiently partitioned among root systems, different canopy layers, and species to optimise energy utilisation across the entire community. The system is inherently sustainable — its systems and users are arranged so that virtually every resource is recycled, producing no true waste. Use of existing resources is remarkably organised. For example, recordings from camera traps stationed at water holes reveal that animals of different species visit them at different times without disturbing others. Food is for survival, not for hoarding. Hunting is for food, not for pleasure or a show of strength.

Forest ecosystems operate on an almost precise form of inbuilt “accountability”. If carnivore populations over-

hunt or herbivores over-graze, their food sources collapse and their populations decline. Similarly, when a particular species overbreeds in an area, predators from neighbouring regions move in to access the abundant prey, and numbers are naturally controlled. Thus, a brilliantly operating, self-correcting dynamic exists within the jungle.

Ecological succession is another example demonstrating that a forest ecosystem is not chaotic but instead represents a highly ordered and predictable process of transformation over time. It is fundamentally a well-ordered, sequential process in which one community of species gradually replaces another until a stable final climax community is reached. It is Nature’s orderly blueprint, driven seamlessly by complex rules of interaction and systematic resource management.

Primary succession begins in areas

almost entirely devoid of vegetation and soil, such as land masses formed by volcanic eruptions or glacial retreat. This systematic, non-random process starts with the Pioneer Stage, where specialised organisms such as lichens and mosses colonise bare rock, chemically breaking it down and creating the first soil particles and organic matter. This foundational work paves the way for the Intermediate Stage, in which grasses and small shrubs take hold. The nascent soil is stabilised by fibrous roots, water retention increases, and richer nutrients accumulate.

The sequence then progresses towards the stable Climax Community, during which large trees and complex forests develop. This stage is characterised by a self-sustaining system that optimises resource use while maintaining long-term ecological equilibrium.

This progression clearly demonstrates how an orderly system of soil-creators precedes soil-stabilisers, with a disci-

plined movement towards the creation of the climax forest. The entire sequence follows Nature’s laws and establishes a stable, energy-efficient ecosystem that maximises biomass and ecological niches. It is driven by predictable competition for resources, determined by natural laws, demonstrating Nature’s systematic movement towards maximum stability unless disturbed by external agents such as humans. The “jungle raj”, which is a fair and naturally sustainable system operating in forests, is antithetical to poor governance in human societies and man-made organisations burdened with chaotic, unsustainable, and destructive management practices.

The introduction of invasive species by humans damages existing food webs and fuels forest degradation. Pollution and illegal poaching shatter population dynamics, resulting in the collapse of trophic levels. Humans intrude into forest areas and wildlife habitats, block natural corridors, disturb natural processes, and increase the potential for human-wildlife conflict. Disorder in natural systems today is the direct consequence of interference by the modern super-predator — human beings — who exhibit severely eroded eco-sanity and a disastrous tendency to dominate Nature, a rapidly growing global pathology.

Labelling poor governance characterised by lawlessness and anarchy as “jungle raj” is an insult to the remarkably efficient systems of forests, which are in fact Nature’s masterpiece. Depicting forests — models of complex, systematic order and sustainability — as chaotic and lawless reflects grave misunderstanding and ignorance. Given its ethical flaw and biological inaccuracy, it is time to discard the “jungle raj” fallacy, which perpetuates the false narrative that Nature lacks order.

A true jungle represents complex, self-sustaining order and sustainability. The phrase “jungle raj” must not be used to describe lawlessness, corrupt rule enforcement, administrative failure, or the collapse of justice and governance systems. One may instead use terms such as kushashan and refrain from insulting forests, which are among Nature’s most meticulously managed spaces. A forest is a triumph of order, and the operational reality of Nature must not be misrepresented or maligned by using the phrase “jungle raj” as a political metaphor or otherwise.

Towards a ‘Naxal-free India’ by 2026



SARRA SHARMA

For decades, Left Wing Extremism (LWE) was one of India’s most pressing internal security challenges. Over the past decade, however, a unified and sustained counter-insurgency strategy has fundamentally altered the trajectory of the Naxal insurgency. The Narendra Modi government has combined sustained security operations, improved intelligence coordination, advanced surveillance technologies, and targeted development interventions in tribal regions to weaken Naxalism in the country. As a result, the number of LWE-affected districts has sharply declined, pushing the insurgency into its final phase. With violence continuing to fall, the government has set the goal of achieving a “Naxal-free” India by March 2026. As this timeline approaches, the challenge lies in ensuring security, sustainable livelihoods, and better alternatives for communities affected by Naxal violence.

At its peak in 2010, the “Red Corridor” spanned nearly 17 per cent of India’s landmass and had an estimated cadre strength of around 20,000. Today, the movement has been confined to a few forested pockets. Government data show a sharp decline in violence over the past two decades. Between 2004 and 2014, there were 16,463 Naxal incidents, compared to 7,744 between 2014 and 2024 — a drop of 53 per cent. By 2022, total casualties linked to Naxal violence fell below 100 for the first time in three decades. At the same time, the number of LWE-affected districts has reduced from 126 in 2014 to just 11 this year, primarily concentrated in parts of Chhattisgarh.

This decline reflects the Naxals’ growing inability to operate under a tightening counter-insurgency grid. High-profile attacks such as the 2010 Dantewada massacre or the 2013 Chhattisgarh political ambush have become rare. While isolated incidents still occur, including the April 2023 IED blast in Chhattisgarh, they no longer signal a broader resurgence. This shift highlights a clear transformation in India’s LWE strategy since 2014.

The earlier reactive and fragmented approach has been replaced by a coordinated and proactive model anchored in “Dialogue, Security, and Coordination”. The strategy combines sustained pressure on armed cadres with parallel development initiatives. Home Minister Amit Shah has explained the government’s “carrot-and-stick” policy against LWE: Naxals who surrender will receive “a red-carpet welcome”, but those who continue with violence will face a resolute security response. This clarity of intent has reshaped both operational outcomes and the psychological balance between the state and insurgents.

Earlier counter-Naxal efforts produced limited gains due to coordination issues. The difference this time lies in the unified command and multi-agency approach led by the Union Home Ministry, which ensures coherence, intelligence integration, and sustained operational momentum. Shah confirmed in a speech that the Modi government has adopted a “unified and ruthless approach” against Naxalism rather than a scattered one. Special forces from states and central paramilitary units such as the CRPF and its elite CoBRA battalions now regularly train together and carry out joint anti-Naxal operations.

In recent years, security forces have targeted the top Maoist leadership, supply lines, and forest bases with increasing precision. A major breakthrough came this year with the killing of CPI (Maoist) general secretary Nambala Keshava Rao, alias Basavaraju, along with 27 others in Chhattisgarh’s Abujmah forest. Another senior leader, Madvi Hidma, was killed in Andhra Pradesh in November. These losses have severely disrupted Maoist command structures and regrouping efforts. Official data indicate that this year alone, 317 Naxals were killed, 862 arrested, and 1,973 surrendered. The scale of arrests and surrenders underscores the effectiveness of coordinated security operations and the steady dismantling of LWE.

Furthermore, advanced technology has become a key force multiplier in counter-insurgency efforts. Security agencies now rely on forensic laboratories, modern surveillance tools, and real-time intelligence to track and disrupt Naxal activities. This includes monitoring social media to counter information warfare, using drones and satellite reconnaissance to map movements, and applying AI-driven data analysis to identify patterns and predict threats.

At the same time, financial crackdowns have severely weakened the insurgent movement. Central and state agencies have seized assets, frozen accounts, and targeted Maoist financiers, with nearly ₹100 crore reportedly seized. These measures have crippled logistical and financial support networks, making sustained insurgency increasingly unviable.

Alongside security operations, the central government has prioritised Centre-State coordination to strengthen local security infrastructure and improve governance in LWE-affected areas through schemes such as Security Related Expenditure, the Special Infrastructure Scheme, and Special Central Assistance.

India’s counter-insurgency successes are not measured solely by the number of casualties or arrests of Naxal leaders and cadres. A central pillar of the strategy has been addressing structural neglect by extending governance and development to long-isolated regions. Roads, electricity, schools, healthcare facilities, and access to banking have expanded across former Naxal strongholds. For example, under the Road Connectivity Project for LWE districts, nearly 12,000 km of roads have been constructed over the last

decade, even through dense forests, to link remote villages. Where travelling 50 km once took days of walking through Naxal-held jungles, villagers can now drive on new roads. Telecommunications infrastructure has expanded rapidly, with near-complete 4G coverage expected soon. This means people can now access information, banking, and emergency services where there was once complete network darkness. A cornerstone of the Modi government’s approach is pairing hard security with a softer hand for those willing to abandon violence. The surrender policy has prompted thousands of Naxalites to leave the jungles, join the mainstream, and take advantage of rehabilitation schemes. Thousands of cadres have laid down arms in exchange for financial assistance, vocational training, housing, and employment support. In Chhattisgarh alone, over 2,100 Naxals surrendered in the past two years. Nationally, surrenders now exceed fatalities among insurgents, reflecting declining morale and faith in the Naxal cause.

As violence recedes, democratic participation has returned to areas once considered “no-go zones”. In November 2024, Gadchiroli (Maharashtra) recorded a historic 74 per cent turnout in village polls after years of Naxal threats. Similarly, in February 2025, Kerlapenda village in Sukma district, Chhattisgarh, witnessed a historic moment when residents cast their first votes in 75 years since India’s independence. These developments strike at the ideological core of Naxalism, which rejects parliamentary democracy. As citizens assert their constitutional rights in former LWE-affected areas, accountability shifts back to elected representatives rather than banned armed groups.


The progress achieved over the past decade must now be secured through sustained engagement with affected communities. Eliminating Naxal violence is not merely about silencing the last gun; it requires long-term trust-building, stronger Centre-State coordination, and a clear focus on tribal welfare. This includes ensuring land rights, employment opportunities, access to education and healthcare, connectivity, and the protection of forest rights.

The government’s goal of a “Naxal-free India” by March 2026 is attainable, provided hard security measures continue until the remaining leadership surrenders and governance and development improve simultaneously. Durable peace will ultimately depend on whether the state can translate security success into lasting improvements in the lives of affected populations. Only then can the violent legacy of the “Red Corridor” be permanently replaced by stability, opportunity, and faith in India’s constitutional order.


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The power of vulnerability

PRATI KSHA VATS

In today’s fast-paced world, being “strong” is often celebrated as a virtue. From a young age, we are taught that strength means enduring hardships silently, carrying burdens alone, and never showing weakness. We admire those who “take it all in stride”, rarely complain, and appear unshakable. But equating strength with silent endurance can be misleading - and even harmful.

Sometimes, being strong makes us harsh — towards ourselves and towards others. Take Asha, a working mother of two. She wakes up at 5 am, manages the household, and heads to work. Outwardly composed, inwardly she feels exhausted, overwhelmed, and lonely. She hesitates to share her struggles, thinking it is her duty to manage everything. Over time, this silent pressure manifests as chronic headaches, irritability, and tension in her relationships. Despite her best intentions, the very act of appearing strong begins to chip away at her emotional and physical well-being.

It is important to recognise that not all humans are the same. Some process stress naturally, while others struggle silently. Raj, for example, started a small business while caring for his ailing father. He set aside weekly time to reflect, journal, and speak openly with a mentor. This conscious processing helped him manage stress without harming his relationships or health.

Similarly, Anjali, a teacher caring for her elderly mother, found that sharing her daily challenges with a colleague allowed her to vent frustrations safely. This small step prevented emotional exhaustion from building up into resentment or burnout. For many, unaddressed struggles quietly accumulate as internal wounds - real, potent, and invisible. Neha, a college student preparing for competitive exams, constantly pushes herself but never shares her anxieties. Over time, her fear of failure affects her sleep, appetite, and confidence. Without expressing these emotions, she begins to withdraw socially, feeling isolated even in a room full of peers. Over months and years, these hidden pressures can manifest in irritability, tension, or physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, or digestive issues. Silent endurance often masquerades as strength, but in reality, it quietly erodes resilience.

These internal wounds eventually surface in ways that affect relationships, work, and overall well-being. A person carrying years of unspoken pain may struggle to trust others, react harshly over minor conflicts, or feel lonely despite being surrounded by people. In striving to appear strong, we inadvertently weaken our own capacity to cope. True strength, contrary to popular belief, is not silent endurance. It is the courage to acknowledge struggles and share them with someone trustworthy — without burdening

others, but with empathy and care. This could be a close friend, family member, or a trained professional such as a therapist or counsellor. The key is trust: the confidence that you can be fully seen without ridicule or dismissal.

Sharing struggles consciously transforms us. Sameer, a software engineer, carried anxiety about his job performance for months. When he finally opened up to his mentor, he experienced relief and received practical guidance. Emotional pain begins to lose its grip when it is acknowledged and addressed. Talking about feelings allows us to process them, understand their origin, and integrate the lessons they offer. Vulnerability becomes a vehicle for healing, not a sign of weakness.

Healing requires more than speaking — it involves reflection, self-compassion, and sometimes structured practices such as journaling, nature walking, meditation, or mindful movement. Pausing to recognise emotions helps untangle complex patterns that shape behaviour and reactions. Self-awareness, combined with intentional expression, lays the foundation for lasting emotional health.

Sharing with care also strengthens relationships. Priya shared her stress with her partner without blaming him. Their openness deepened their bond, allowing him to support her rather than feel attacked. Similarly, for children or teenagers, creating a safe space where they can express fears and frustrations without judgement builds resilience and emotional literacy. Vulnerability, when approached mindfully, heals both the self and relationships.

Transitioning from silent endurance to conscious vulnerability is not always easy. Many of us are conditioned to believe self-reliance is strength. Asking for help can feel uncomfortable or even shameful at first. It may require courage to admit being overwhelmed, anxious, or afraid. But courage — the courage to be seen as you truly are — is a profound act of strength. It signals a commitment to growth, well-being, and authenticity. Life’s challenges are inevitable. Struggles, setbacks, and losses are part of the human experience. What distinguishes those who thrive is not the absence of difficulty, but the presence of emotional awareness, empathy, and self-care. Strength rooted in vulnerability helps us navigate hardships with grace, recover from pain without lingering resentment, and approach life with both compassion and clarity.

True strength is not defined by the weight we carry silently, but by the courage with which we confront our inner world.

Please read the complete article online at <https://www.dailypioneer.com>

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RAMNATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

In terror’s wake, Australia’s diversity is its strength

IN DEMOCRACIES and open societies, the public square is a place of commerce, discussion, leisure and, most importantly, where identities are worn — and respected — in all their diversity. The heinous attack by two gunmen that killed 14 people and wounded at least 40 others at Bondi Beach is terrorism at its most horrific, meant to transform the public space from a site of expression of unselfconscious trust, freedom and pluralism to one marked by suspicion, fear and violence. It is Australia’s deadliest shooting since the 1996 Port Arthur killings and has, understandably, shaken the country. India, which has often been a victim of terrorism, will understand better than most the challenges that emerge in its wake. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expressed his condolences and condemned the terror act. One of the two shooters who was killed after the attack holds an Indian passport, and in days to come, New Delhi will undoubtedly assist Canberra in the investigation if any part of the trail leads here.

That the attackers targeted a Jewish gathering celebrating the first day of Hanukkah suggests that they were motivated by anti-semitism. Initial reports also indicate that they were “inspired” by ISIS. In the internet age, tackling such radicalisation is one of the most pressing challenges for nation-states. The first line of defence against such attacks is a robust intelligence-gathering framework, and the establishment of protocols for containing the threats. Australia’s intelligence agency reportedly examined one of the attackers six years ago over his ties to a terrorism cell connected to the Islamic State. If there were holes in the country’s intelligence framework or if actionable information was ignored, these issues must be addressed. At the same time, it is important to guard against excessive or extreme action. The provocative words of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about Australia’s Labor government and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese are an example of how not to politicise the act of terrorism.

In this moment of tragedy, Australia faces a larger and deeper reckoning. The government must strengthen its anti-terror infrastructure. At the same time, it should not let the terror attack compromise its core values; it must maintain the vibrancy and diversity of the public square. Australia is a multicultural society and a destination for higher education and work for many, including and especially Indians. This is the idea of Australia that must be protected.

Heed AQI despair that is making itself heard

OVER THE last decade, Delhi winters have acquired a ritual as predictable as the turning of the calendar: The air thickens with particulate matter; arguments harden into political whataboutery, ad hoc measures are put in place, and then, as the season turns, things roll on, the issue is relegated. This year, though, that trajectory has seen welcome disruptions — from citizens asserting their right to clean air. On Monday, in the smog-laden evening of what was the third day of “severe” pollution, as Chief Minister Rekha Gupta stepped out to share the stage with the Argentinian football superstar Lionel Messi at the national capital’s Arun Jaitley stadium, chants of “AQI, AQI” came as a reminder of what is truly at stake.

Delhi’s latest descent into “severe” air pollution — the Air Quality Index (AQI) has been well over the range of 400 — has arrived without many of its usual culprits: Smoke from stubble burning or unusual winter chill. Instead, the city has been caught out by a near-total drop in wind speed and a shallow atmospheric layer trapping pollutants closer to the ground, leaving the city’s own emissions — from vehicles, construction and industry — to accumulate unchecked. Between 2015 and November 2025, the average annual AQI in Delhi has been 235, much higher than the WHO-mandated safety levels. The Lancet Countdown 2025 Report pegged the number of pollution deaths at 1.72 million in 2022.

The political response to the crisis, however, continues to waver between panicked half-measures and partisan deflections. Since she came to power, CM Gupta has given assurances of treating pollution control as an “emergency mission”, but meaningful action is yet to take shape. Earlier this month, the government said in Parliament that the WHO’s Air Quality Guidelines are merely advisory, meant to assist countries in establishing their own independent parameters. What Delhi needs is not obfuscation but robust, credible data to guide policy; bold interventions to curb vehicular emissions; serious investment in cleaner public transport; and an honest reckoning with the city’s appetite for cars, concrete and convenience. LoP Rahul Gandhi’s call for a parliamentary debate on the issue is a step in the right direction. Toxic air is everyone’s problem. The solution will need to involve all — and urgently.

At FTII, cinema has many languages

IN AN institute devoted to teaching young people the craft of visual storytelling, here are some numbers that tell their own story. In 2023, of a batch of 10 student diploma films, only one was made entirely in Hindi. Three were in Marathi; one each in Malayalam, Gujarati, Haryanvi and Santali; one brought together English, Marathi and Hindi; another braided English and Hindi with Mizo and Nagamese. Taken together, these films form a chorus of many tongues finding their way to the screen.

As a report in this newspaper shows, this is part of a deeper, two-decade-long shift at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. At one of the country’s most prestigious film-making schools, students are beginning to trust the textures of their own languages, to draw from the sounds and rhythms that shaped them and tell their own unique stories. In doing so, they offer a reminder of what creative resilience looks like at a moment when Indian cinema — across regions and industries — appears increasingly formulaic. This fresh efflorescence, like the parallel cinema movement of the 1950s-70s and the indie surge of the early 2000s, holds the promise of renewal. Of cinema rediscovering relevance by widening, rather than narrowing, its field of vision.

This moment acquires added significance amid renewed state enthusiasm for India’s “orange” or creative economy, a theme foregrounded at last month’s 56th International Film Festival of India. The multilingual flowering of student cinema offers a gentler, but more enduring, lesson in cultural value. It reminds us why spaces like FTII must be protected from homogenisation and cultural thinning: Because institutions that allow young filmmakers to wander freely across language, form and voice do more than produce skilled professionals — they keep alive the plural imagination on which India’s creative future rests.

The Editorial Page

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2025

At 100, Indian communism has unfinished business, too early to write its obituary



RAJA MANDALA

BY C RAJA MOHAN

THIS YEAR marks the 100th anniversary of two very different organisations that have shaped modern India: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The contrast in their centenary moments could not be starker. The RSS, now the establishment, celebrated its milestone with fanfare. The CPI, once a formidable force in national life, passed its 100th year almost unnoticed — too diminished even to mount a modest commemoration.

That silence invites a larger question: Has Indian communism reached the end of its long political journey, or is its apparent eclipse merely another phase in a turbulent history?

Few political movements in India have experienced such a rapid reversal of fortunes over the last two decades. Back in 2005, the Indian communists were riding high.. They had a big say in the decisions of the UPA government, ruled West Bengal and Tripura with unchallenged authority, and remained a powerful force in Kerala. At that moment, the Left seemed poised for renewed relevance across India. It threw this away when it withdrew from the UPA coalition in July 2008 and backed the BJP in trying to pull down the Manmohan Singh government.

Since then, it has been a precipitous fall for the Left. In the 2004 general elections, Left parties commanded around 60 seats in the Lok Sabha. They now hold barely 10. Their vote share has collapsed from about

8 per cent to under 3. Regionally, the Left Front has been ousted from power in both West Bengal and Tripura and governs only in Kerala.

Does this mark the end of a century-old political tradition? Not necessarily. Political ideas rarely disappear simply because parties espousing them decline. If a self-declared socialist like Zohran Mamdani — derided by US President Donald Trump as a “communist” — can win the mayoral race in New York, in a country historically hostile to left-wing politics, it would be premature to write the obituary of communism in India.

The story of Indian communism — its dramatic rise and rapid decline — is far older and richer than its recent electoral setbacks suggest. Sectarianism and internecine warfare have arguably been a major source of its decline. Even the origin story of communism in India is disputed. The CPI(M), which split from the CPI in 1964, traces its founding to October 1920 in Tashkent, when a small group of Indian radicals, including MN Roy, formed a party at a Comintern-sponsored gathering. The CPI dates its birth to a December 1925 convention in Kanpur organised by leaders such as Singaravelu Chettiar, SV Ghate, and S A Dange.

Looking beyond the dispute over dates, there is no doubt that Indian communism emerged from the great global political and intellectual churn unleashed by World War I. The crisis of capitalism, the collapse of empires, the Russian Revolution, and the rise of nationalist movements across Asia created fertile ground for some powerful ideas — nationalism, socialism, and communism. In India, these global currents intersected with intense domestic debates about both the struggle for independence and the nature of the post-colonial state.

The CPI drew strength from a remarkable convergence of revolutionary streams: Ghadar activists

The conditions that once gave rise to communism — deep inequality, agrarian distress, precarious labour, the persistence of feudal values, and global economic turbulence — are sharper than ever

Dear students, wait, your teacher is on election duty



KRISHNA KUMAR

Since Independence, schoolteachers have obediently served the duties assigned to them. They form a literate, reliable labour force, the government can easily access. They have kept democracy functioning

IF YOU are not familiar with the code of conduct that governs the work life of school teachers in India, you can’t make much sense of news items about the pressure under which teachers are fulfilling their extra-professional duty as “booth level officers” (BLOs). They are updating electoral rolls and preparing the final lists of eligible voters. The deadlines are stringent, the task is tough and demands accuracy. It has nothing to do with teaching. The stress caused by this is compounded by the risks involved in delay. Some of the teachers doing this work are reported to have fallen sick and died.

Teachers and parents are often blamed for the stress and anxiety among children, but stress among teachers is seldom acknowledged. It is a common belief that teaching is a leisurely job. Equally common is the perception that government school teachers don’t work as hard as their counterparts in private schools. That’s why no one questions the use of government school teachers for election duty. Children who study in government schools constitute a national blind spot. How do they cope with their teacher’s absence when they are placed on non-teaching duties?

Every election brings schoolteachers out of school for substantial periods of time. School heads have no choice when the order comes to relieve some of their staff for election duty. It is not the only extra-professional responsibility government school teachers carry out. Various kinds of enumerative work and supervisory duties shape the haphazard lives of teachers.

Their counterparts in private schools are free from this clutter. This dual approach has persisted since colonial times, when village teachers came in handy for all kinds of official work, including the sale of postal stationery. To this day, the government sees nothing wrong in using teachers for “office duty”. They are perceived as *sarkari karamcharis*, not as professionals. Although someone who wants to become a teacher must possess special qualifications and go through in-ser-

vice training, the perception of teaching as a soft profession has not changed. Why the government does not use this perception to rope in private school teachers for official work is a valid question that is never asked.

Children who attend private schools are not supposed to suffer any loss of classes. That fate is reserved for children who study in government schools. Depriving them of regular classes evokes no concern. A former student who teaches in a primary school in Delhi said bluntly: “Sir, no teaching is recognised. No teaching is possible. No teaching is expected.” For officers, teaching is not a priority; documentation, digital record-keeping, testing, rehearsing children for events and functions, uploading and online communication are. When teachers are absent, the principal has to “manage” without them. And so must children, even if it is examination time. Their loss is not considered a national loss, though that is exactly what it is. No officer seems to realise that when primary school children face a gap in their learning, it can’t be covered up. It is also discriminatory as their private school cohorts don’t suffer.

Since Independence, schoolteachers have obediently served the duties assigned to them. They form a literate, reliable labour force the government can easily access. They have kept democracy functioning. The cost of this contribution has been paid by the children. Over the past few decades, teacher shortages in various states have meant that the cost paid by children has gone up.

When the Right to Education (RTE) Act was being drafted, there was hope that it would outlaw the assignment of non-teaching work to teachers. However, it included Section 27, which permitted the use of teachers in election-related work. Later, a court verdict permitted teachers’ deployment for various duties in an election before it is notified. The glimmer of hope that RTE would establish teaching as a serious profession faded with time.

Kumar is a former director of NCERT and the author of Thank You, Gandhi

in Punjab, associates of Bhagat Singh, Bengali revolutionaries, militant trade unionists in Bombay and Madras, radical peasant leaders fighting landlordism, and social reformers challenging entrenched hierarchies. Colonial repression was relentless, and the communists paid a heavy price for their activism. Yet at its most creative, the CPI turned adversity into opportunity. The Peshawar, Kanpur, and Meerut conspiracy trials of the 1920s became platforms for popularising Marxist ideas among students, workers, and intellectuals.

By the 1930s and 1940s, the party had built an impressive network of mass organisations mobilising workers, peasants, artists, writers, journalists, and students. This gave the communists an influence far exceeding their numerical strength. Their appeal among urban youth, in particular, ensured an outsized impact on India’s intellectual and political discourse.

Despite India’s relatively permissive democratic environment, the communist Left never realised its full potential. Its failures are often attributed to an inability to adapt to moments of profound change: The shifting great-power dynamics of World War II, the trauma of Partition and the nationalities question, the Sino-Soviet split, and later, the rise of the BJP. Equally damaging was the persistent difficulty communists faced in building durable coalitions with other democratic forces, including Congress.

Indian communism struggled to reconcile nationalism with internationalism, caste with class, religious sentiment with secular imperatives, revolutionary violence demanded by the doctrine with the reality of parliamentary democracy, and ideological purity with the pragmatic demands of building broad united fronts. These unresolved tensions repeatedly weakened the movement at critical junctures.

Stop AQI blame games, Delhi is choking on its own emissions



GUFRAN BEIG

When the air stands still, stagnation sets in, ventilation collapses, and the system is left with no buffer to protect public health. When the weather naps, there is nowhere left to hide. Yet, we continue to blame the weather instead of our emissions

THERE IS no stubble burning in Delhi’s neighbouring states, no firecrackers accompanying festivals, and the winter chill has not yet peaked. Yet, Delhi’s AQI surged to Severe (from December 13 onwards). This may soon recede to Very Poor, but it will return, playing hide-and-seek for at least another month. Despite the hourly capping of PM_{2.5} at 380 µg/m³ (equivalent to AQI 500), software glitches, and other much-discussed constraints, the AQI nearly hit 500, revealing a grim reality and offering a sobering lesson.

Such extremes occur when pollution consistently persists at peak levels for prolonged periods (24-48 hours or more), irrespective of the time of day. Put simply, wind speeds across Delhi and its wider airshed dropped close to zero. This meant nothing was coming in and nothing was going out. Vertical dispersion was also restricted by a shallow inversion layer, approximately 500-700 metres deep. As a result, emissions from fixed point sources linger where they were released, creating localised pollution hot-spots instead of spreading, simply because there was almost no wind. But it’s the dynamic sources of pollution, widespread across the city, that are driving the sharp dip in Delhi’s air quality.

Scientifically, the Severe AQI episode reflects the city’s condition. It represents Delhi’s true picture, its own emissions, laid bare. It reveals how heavily Delhi relies on daily atmospheric dilution to maintain AQI below Severe, and how this dependence creates an illusion about the true culprit: Local source emissions. Stagnation episodes are projected to become more frequent due to climate change. When the air stands still, stagnation sets in, ventilation collapses, and the system is left with no buffer to protect public health. When the weather naps, there is nowhere to hide. Yet, we blame the weather instead of our emissions.

When the atmosphere temporarily loses its capacity to clean itself — even for just a couple of days — the true magnitude of Delhi’s emissions becomes starkly apparent. It is a monumental and self-inflicted crisis. Our estimates for Delhi NCT show that nearly half the emissions of PM_{2.5}, the particles that inflict the greatest harm, come from transport (43 per cent), with waste burning at 15 per cent, residential and industrial emissions each at 13 per cent, and only 8 per cent from resuspended dust, besides others. The priority for action is, therefore, clear for policymakers.

The maths is simple. In extreme stagnant conditions, if Delhi cuts its local emissions by 50 per cent, pollution levels drop by roughly 50 per cent. When the weather changes, the same logic applies — but emissions must be reduced across the entire airshed. To do so effectively, focus on coordinated, sustained, long-term action on source emissions, not short-term optics such as smog towers, cloud seeding, water sprinkling, or air purifiers.

The writer is chair professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, IISC-Campus and founder project director, SAFAR

40 YEARS AGO

December 17, 1985



Record turnout in Assam

HEAVY POLLING for the 125 assembly and 14 Lok Sabha seats in Assam and moderate turnout in the seven Lok Sabha and nine assembly by-elections was reported. Reports from Guwahati said 75 to 80 per cent of the 10 million voters exercised their franchise, in contrast to the 1983 polls, which not only had extremely low voter turnout but were also marked by violence.

Bhajan Lal holds his ground

THE CHIEF Minister, Bhajan Lal, said that Haryana would not be bound by any decision under the Punjab accord till the Satluj-Ya-

muna Link (SYL) Canal was completed. In a major development, indicating the adoption of a tough posture on the stoppage of work on the canal for three months now, the Haryana CM told a news conference that the state government would not agree to any transfer of territory, including Chandigarh, to Punjab, till the canal was completed.

Parliament officer row

THE DISPUTE between the opposition parties and the Congress (I) over the eviction of three parties from their offices in Parliament House last week came close to a settlement after a third round of talks between the two sides. Parliamentary Affairs Minister H K L Bhagat

offered Room 125 on the third floor to the opposition parties. Opposition leaders said they were prepared to accept the room as accommodation for the three displaced parties — Congress (S), DMK and Lok Dal — and not for all recognised parties which do not have office space in the building.

Gavaskar eyeing century

THE FORMER Indian captain, Sunil Gavaskar, is within sight of his 31st Test century at stumps on the fourth day of the first Test against Australia at Adelaide Oval. At stumps, Gavaskar was at 94 and Roger Binny 34 with India 391 for seven in its first innings. India now has a lead of 10 runs with a day to play.

● WORDLY WISE

Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth.

— *Albert Schweitzer*

● **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
Netanyahu's support for settlements is sabotaging Trump's plan for a stable Middle East.
— *Haaretz, Israel*

The Ideas Page

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2025



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Behind smokescreen, SIR 2.0 could be biggest exercise in voter exclusion



RAHUL SHASTRI AND YOGENDRA YADAV

IT'S WORSE than Bihar. With the ECI beginning to release the draft voters' list for the second phase of the SIR, it is clear that voter exclusion this time will be higher and more damaging. If we combine the official data for five states with news reports from the rest, as many as 11 crore names on the existing voters' list face potential erasure in the 12 states and UTs covered under the present round of the SIR. The final figure in this round will be much smaller. But by the time the SIR is completed in the entire country, we could be looking at nearly 10 crore deletions.

If this looming disaster has not yet made headlines, it is because the information is scattered, staggered and shrouded. After the Bihar election, the SIR disappeared from national headlines and was pushed to regional media or the local pages. The repeated and state-wise extensions of the deadline by the ECI ensured that the final figures would arrive in four instalments, thus masking the big picture.

The ECI has done its best to create a smokescreen by starting a new practice of releasing fantastic but meaningless figures about the percentage of data "digitised". This obfuscates the two sets of data we need: The number of those who did not fill the enumeration form and will face exclusion from the draft list, and the number of those whose names could not be connected to the older voters' list and will face potential deletion.

The release of draft electoral rolls for five states and UTs (Rajasthan, West Bengal, Goa, Lakshadweep and Puducherry) has begun the unveiling of the real picture. And for other states, we have "source-based" information in the news media. These reports seem to be fairly robust, since the official figures of Rajasthan and West Bengal have confirmed similar reports from these states. Statements by state election officials and political leaders have confirmed these reports. In UP, the CM has publicly confirmed the unofficial figures we draw upon.

● POTENTIAL MASS EXCLUSION IN DRAFT ROLLS (SIR PHASE II)

STATE	PROJECTED ADULT POPULATION (CRORES) 27.10.25	VOTERS (CRORES) 27.10.25	DRAFT SIR EXCLUSIONS (CRORES, PROVISIONAL)	VOTERS ON DRAFT ROLLS (CRORES, PROVISIONAL)	EP RATIO ON 27.10 (%)	EP RATIO AFTER DRAFT ROLLS (%) (PROVISIONAL AND DRAFT ROLLS 16.12.2025)
Chhattisgarh	2.1	2.1	0.28	1.8	99	86
Gujarat	5.3	5.1	0.72	4.4	96	82
Kerala	2.8	2.8	0.21	2.6	101	93
Madhya Pradesh	6	5.7	0.33	5.4	96	91
Rajasthan	5.6	5.5	0.43	5.1	98	90
Tamil Nadu	6	6.4	0.8	5.6	107	93
Uttar Pradesh	16.1	15.4	2.93	12.5	96	78
West Bengal	7.7	7.7	0.58	7.1	100	92
Total	51.6	50.7	6.28	44.5	98	86

NOTES: THE DATA FOR THE SECOND AND THIRD COLUMN IS FOR OCTOBER 27, 2025, THE STARTING DATE OF THE SECOND PHASE OF THE SIR. IN THE COLUMNS MARKED PROVISIONAL, DATA FOR STATES OTHER THAN RAJASTHAN AND WEST BENGAL IS SUBJECT TO CORRECTION WHEN THE ECI RELEASES DRAFT ELECTORAL ROLLS FOR THE REMAINING STATES. **SOURCES:** ADULT POPULATION ON OCTOBER 27 IS CALCULATED FROM THE REPORT OF THE TECHNICAL GROUP ON POPULATION PROJECTIONS, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, JULY 2020. ELECTORS AS ON OCTOBER 27 IS FROM ECI PRESS RELEASE. DATA FOR THE REMAINING COLUMNS FOR RAJASTHAN AND WEST BENGAL IS BASED ON ECI'S DRAFT ROLLS AND FOR THE REMAINING STATES BASED ON NEWS REPORTS.

The accompanying table brings out the extent of mass exclusion that we can expect. Adding data of exclusions from smaller states, Goa (1 lakh), Puducherry (1 lakh), Andaman and Nicobar (0.6 lakh), as many as 6.3 crore names that figured on the pre-SIR voters' list face exclusion from the draft voters' list, since their enumeration forms have not been received. Uttar Pradesh leads the pack with 2.93 crore persons whose forms were not returned by the original deadline, followed by Tamil Nadu at 80 lakh, Gujarat at 72 lakh, West Bengal at 58 lakh, Rajasthan at 43 lakh, Madhya Pradesh at just 30 lakh, Chhattisgarh at 28 lakh and Kerala at 21 lakh. The average exclusion from the draft list will be higher than it was in Bihar.

There is nothing natural about these exclusions. Except for Tamil Nadu (and marginally Kerala), there is no state where the pre-existing voter list was larger than the eligible population. Two columns in the table confirm this by comparing the number of persons on the

It provides for another avenue of deletion of names — the 'unmapped' electors. These are persons who have submitted their forms, but without providing proof that they or their 'relative' featured on the voters' lists of 2002 or 2003

pre-SIR voters' list with the eligible adult population. The table also shows that each state is going to experience a decline in its elector-to-adult population ratio. The overall decline is as much as 12 percentage points, higher than the eight-point contraction caused by Bihar's draft SIR list. The staggering 18-point decline in UP — from an already low 96 per cent to a shocking 78 per cent — may be corrected somewhat in the days to come. But the 13 to 14-point fall in TN, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh is no less shocking.

These figures could come down in the coming days, but are unlikely to change drastically, since the ECI has already recorded most of these under the category of "uncollectable" forms and assigned them reasons for exclusion: Absent, Shifted, Dead or Duplicate (ASDD, in ECI's language). We don't have official figures for these categories for most states. But the available information shows a clear pattern. While the proportion of names identified as "dead" or "duplicate" is fairly stable across

these states, the proportion of "absent" or "shifted" is alarmingly high in Chhattisgarh (9 per cent), Gujarat (10 per cent) and Uttar Pradesh (13.7 per cent) and unusually low in West Bengal (1.6 per cent). The abnormally high proportion of "absent" and migrants in a high out-migration state like UP, as well as a high in-migration state like Gujarat, defies all logic. The SIR could be creating a new category of Indians — born in and residents of India, but voters neither in their place of origin nor in their place of work.

The ongoing SIR provides for another avenue of deletion of names — the "unmapped" voters. These are persons who have submitted their forms, but without providing proof that they themselves or their "relative" (a term still undefined) featured on the voters' lists of 2002 or 2003. Their names will be included in the draft list, but only provisionally. They will be served a notice and asked to submit proof of their citizenship, failing which their names will be deleted from the final voters' list.

How many "unmapped" names do we have currently? No state has released this data officially, and we don't even have unofficial data from Kerala and Chhattisgarh. Yet the available data shows massive variations — from shockingly high "unmapped" voters (compared to received forms) in UP (27.1 per cent) and Gujarat (16 per cent) to moderate in Tamil Nadu (10 per cent) and oddly low in West Bengal (4 per cent), Rajasthan (3 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (2.4 per cent). In all, we are looking at 5.25 crore persons — as many as 3.39 crore just in UP — who face potential deletion from the final voters' list.

These two types of potential disenfranchisement — 6.3 crore for not submitting enumeration forms and 5.3 crore for not proving citizenship — add up to a whopping 11.6 crore, over one-fifth of the existing electors in these states. We should expect a significant reduction in this figure over the next few days, especially in UP, though there may be an addition to the figure of "unmapped" voters in West Bengal. True, only a small proportion of those who receive notice will eventually be deleted. Yet, assuming that the final figure of deletions is half of the provisional numbers presented here, this will still be the largest ever disenfranchisement in the history of democracy.

Shastri is a researcher associated with Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Yadav is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan

After terror, a reminder of the common ground



K G SURESH

WITH ANOTHER antisemitic attack unfolding in Australia's Bondi beach, I would like to share some reflections from my recent visit to Israel as part of a distinguished Indian delegation focused on art, culture, and film. We were invited by Israel's foreign ministry, and the primary aim was to strengthen people-to-people relations, especially in the realms of cinema and culture.

I saw immense scope for collaboration. One of the highlights was participating in the Jerusalem Sessions, a platform for cross-cultural dialogue that brought together filmmakers, scholars, journalists, and thought leaders from across the globe. We discussed not only the craft of storytelling but also the responsibilities we carry as communicators in today's polarised world.

Walking through Jerusalem's Old City was a profoundly spiritual experience. I traversed the narrow stone streets leading to the Wailing Wall, the holiest site of prayer for the Jewish people. Standing before those ancient stones, etched with centuries of devotion, I felt humbled. At the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, I marvelled at the overlapping layers of religious significance. The Old City prompted deep reflection on India's millennia-old tradition of coexistence.

One of the most emotionally charged moments came during

At the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, I marvelled at the overlapping layers of religious significance. For me, the Old City prompted deep reflection on India's millennia-old tradition of coexistence

our visit to the Nova festival massacre site. It was devastating to stand where so many young lives were cut short. Meeting survivors and families of the victims was heart-wrenching; their stories reminded me that human suffering transcends borders, politics, and ideologies.

In Haifa, paying respects at the Indian Soldiers Memorial, which commemorates the heroic role of Indian troops in the 1918 Battle of Haifa, filled me with pride. We also visited the Bahá'í Gardens, one of the most peaceful places I have ever experienced. It instantly reminded me of the Lotus Temple in Delhi — a shared symbol of harmony the world desperately needs today. My visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance Centre, evoked a silence that pierced the soul. Walking through those rooms — seeing the photographs, diaries, and the children's memorial — shook me to my core. It reinforced my conviction that we in

India need a memorial of a similar scale to educate future generations about the atrocities inflicted on our forefathers over the centuries.

The experience also underscored the vital importance of responsible media, ethical storytelling, and actively countering hate. Throughout the trip, I was overwhelmed by the warmth and affection Israelis showed towards India.

Ordinary citizens were familiar with our classic songs and legendary actors like Raj Kapoor and Amitabh Bachchan. We met many Israelis who had travelled to Goa, Kerala, and other parts of our country.

Our visit to Sapir College also opened promising avenues for cooperation in media and cinema education. We had the honour of meeting J P Singh, Ambassador of India to Israel, along with his wonderful team at the Indian embassy, as well as senior officials from Israel's foreign ministry. Reflecting on the entire journey, I can say it was more than a diplomatic or cultural engagement. It was a voyage across centuries of faith, moments of unimaginable human suffering, and inspiring stories of courage and coexistence.

Such exchanges open new doors for deeper India-Israel cooperation. Through films and cultural performances, we must showcase to the people of Israel that there is so much more to India beyond Goa, Manali, and Kerala. And yes, we have valuable lessons to learn from Israel. As fellow victims of terrorism, we too must sensitise global audiences to our concerns. At the India Habitat Centre, we are soon going to unveil the best of art, culture, film and culinary experience in our galleries, auditoriums, restaurants and open spaces. Shalom till then.

The writer is director, India Habitat Centre, and former director general, IIMC

Sholay's restored print asks us to see feudal worldview

plate, the moral geography is preordained. The lone lawman or settler protects a fragile community from marauding outsiders. *Sholay* casts Sanjeev Kumar's Thakur in this mould. The retired police inspector, the benevolent patriarch of Ramgarh, the man who hires mercenaries Jai and Veeru to exorcise the "disease" named Gabbar Singh.

But the Western, as a genre, has been morally dismantled. The civilised cowboy versus the savage Native American is now widely understood as a colonial myth, designed to justify land theft. *Sholay* replicates the same ideological structure. Gabbar is not shaped by hunger, dispossession, or injustice, the traditional roots of the Indian dacoit in cinema and folklore. He is presented as an abstraction: An emblem of pure evil. Sippy stripped him of a sympathetic backstory,

even dressing him in army fatigues, to mark him as an aberration, something almost un-Indian. He is not a rebel; he is a virus.

In much of Indian history, and in the dacoit films that preceded *Sholay*, dacoits emerged from the fractures of feudal India; land alienation, caste violence, the brutal extraction by landlords who owned both earth and law. This was later articulated with devastating clarity in *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012): "*Beehad mein*

By severing dacoity from land injustice, 'Sholay' converts a social conflict into a moral fairy tale

toh baaghi rehte hain, dakait toh Parliament mein hain." The ravines house rebels; the real bandits sit in power. *Sholay* inverts this idea. Ramgarh's order is feudal, presided over by Thakur, a title that literally means "lord" or "master". By severing dacoity from land injustice, *Sholay* converts a social conflict into a moral fairy tale. The rebel is demonised so the landlord can be sanctified.

That this story landed so powerfully in 1975 is no accident. *Sholay* was released at the height of the Emergency, when order was prized over dissent, authority over democracy. Its fantasy of a strong patriarch restoring control by outsourcing violence resonated with a nation being asked to trust power without question. The state needed to be seen as the final arbiter of violence.

The feudal hero was acceptable; only the procedural ending needed correction.

The restored ending, where Thakur kills Gabbar himself, strips away the illusion. What remains is not justice but revenge, raw, and feudal to the core. To recognise this is not to diminish *Sholay*'s artistry, or its cultural impact. It remains one of the most influential films in Indian cinema. But reverence for a classic lies in re-examination. Fifty years later, the restored print asks us to see what was always there. A masterpiece that also canonised a feudal worldview. The embers of *Sholay* still burn. Perhaps finally, we are ready to ask who they were meant to consume.

Motlekar is the writer of the Amazon Prime series Call Me Bae

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Burden on states

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'NREGA needs reform but changes fray safety net' (*IE*, December 16). The proposed Bill to replace MGNREGA may be timely in context, but it is ill-conceived in substance. The increased burden on already strained state finances, the shift from a demand-driven to a supply-driven framework, and the move from flexible budgeting to a capped funding model point to dubious intent on the part of the executive.

Dewang Ganesh Thosar, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'NREGA needs reform but changes fray safety net' (*IE*, December 16). The reforms introduced through the new Bill may be viewed by many as a covert attempt to rename the scheme at the whims and fancies of the government. This is evident in the removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name and the introduction of the "Viksit Bharat" tagline. Further, the proposed 60:40 funding formula would defeat the objective of ensuring rural employment, as many states would struggle to mobilise the additional funds required for the scheme's effective functioning.

Jiji Panicker K, Alappuzha

Maintain decorum

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Rahul, Priyanka name-calling ECs is a new low' (*IE*, December 16). The recent remarks by Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, in which they openly named and threatened Election Commissioners, mark a worrying decline in political discourse. While questioning institutions is a democratic right, personal attacks and the rhetoric of retribution undermine the very framework that sustains free and fair elections. The Election Commission, despite criticism, remains a constitutional body that warrants institutional and procedural engagement, not public vilification.

Angel Gupta, Ambala



SAMINA MOTLEKAR

RAMESH SIPPY'S *Sholay* (1975) is back on the big screen, complete with its original ending where Thakur Baldev Singh crushes the bandit Gabbar Singh with his spiked boots. For decades, we have revered this film as our cinematic Mahabharata, a foundational epic of good versus evil, friendship, and sacrifice. To question its moral compass feels like sacrilege. But 50 years on, we must ask: Whose justice does it truly serve?

The genius of Salim-Javed was to graft the DNA of the American Western onto the Indian badlands. *Sholay* is, famously, a "Curry Western". In this transplanted tem-

A Bill that takes us back to the days before MGNREGA



NIKHIL DEY AND ARUNA ROY

ON DECEMBER 15, with no prior consultation, the Centre scheduled the introduction of a Bill to repeal the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and replace it with the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) — VB-G RAM G Bill, 2025. This Bill should have been two different pieces of legislation, because the MGNREGA and VB-G RAM G are fundamentally different in scope and objective.

The Bill replaces MGNREGA's basic entitlement to ask for work — there is no element of the right to work. G RAM G undermines the fundamental guarantees that MGNREGA provided: A central government-funded, demand-driven employment programme, guaranteeing 100 days of work per household, anywhere in rural India. The Bill repeals the MGNREGA and its statutory guarantees, and replaces it with a central government scheme that provides no guarantees at all. It takes us back to the days before MGNREGA.

Four provisions of the proposed law will make clear how false the statutory guarantee is. With Section 4 (5) of the Bill, the MGNREGA bottom-up demand-based employment programme, guaranteeing 100 days of work per household by legislation, has been replaced by an allocation-based scheme, where the Centre is at liberty to alter and determine the quantum of allocation. The norms and reasons are prescribed by itself.

Second, Section 5 (1) demolishes the idea of a universal entitlement across rural India. The Centre has made it clear that this scheme will only run in those parts of the country that it may notify. Even in those areas, it is the state government that is made responsible for providing 125 days of work as per central government norms. The enhancement from 100 to 125 is a hollow promise because MGNREGA has suffered from being squeezed due to allocations that fail to meet demand for work. As a result, even the MGNREGA was only able to provide roughly 50-55 days of employment per year in the last five years.

Third, if the states were to decide to provide their own resources to run an employment scheme that was more universal and robust, in order to reduce rural unemployment and distress, any money spent by the states would be subject to the norms decided by the Centre according to Section 4 (6). Money provided by the states — norms decided by the Centre.

Fourth, Section 22 (2) states, "For the purposes of this Act, the fund sharing pattern between the central government and the state government shall be... 60:40." This is apart from the Northeastern states, hill states and Union Territories where the Centre's share will be 90:10. Under Section 22 of MGNREGA, the Centre provided 100 per cent of the labour component (thus guaranteeing a national employment guarantee) and 75 per cent of the material component. In other words, the Centre's share was at least 90 per cent of the total expenditure. Responsibility for unemployment allowance and compensation for delayed payment of wages in case of a paucity of resources could clearly be placed on the Centre. It is doubtful that the states would want to provide the 40 per cent to fund a scheme where all the controls lie with the Centre. The scheme will likely become a damp squib with neither employment guarantees attracting people nor sufficient central funds.

This Bill must be comprehensively rejected. There is nothing in it in terms of "reform" that makes it more attractive or effective for the rural poor. Most problems MGNREGA has have stemmed from poor implementation. It has served rural India well, and served India well in times of economic distress. Much could have been strengthened within its own framework to help India deal with climate distress and better water and resource management.

MGNREGA is a people's law that came in with the popular slogan "*har haath ko kaam do, kaam ka pura daam do*". It was passed in 2005 with a historic consensus between all parties. It provided entitlements beyond 100 days of work, helped reform rural governance, and provided at least 10 entitlements that empowered people to secure their right to work. Barring transparency in implementation and social audits, this law undermines most of the entitlements of MGNREGA, including decentralised planning. The Bill should be withdrawn, and MGNREGA should be enhanced to 125 days at enhanced minimum wages. Only then will we move closer to the most reasonable demand of every Indian getting work, and all work getting a just reward.

The writers are social activists and founder members of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan

● GLOBAL

‘Inferred intent’: Jimmy Lai’s conviction sets new contours for China security law

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, December 16

HONG KONG media tycoon Jimmy Lai was found guilty of collusion with foreign forces and conspiracy to publish seditious material on Monday, concluding one of the most consequential prosecutions under the Beijing-imposed National Security Law (NSL). The verdict, by a three-judge bench, marked the first time the NSL of 2020 was applied in full force against a prominent media figure, testing not only its outer limits but its core purpose.

Who is Jimmy Lai?

Lai, 78, moved from mainland China to Hong Kong as a teenager. In 1995, he founded *Apple Daily*, a newspaper that blended sensationalist reporting with political commentary. It became one of the few mainstream outlets consistently critical of Beijing’s growing influence. As the founder of *Apple Daily*, Lai wrote columns and gave interviews. He openly supported the pro-democracy movement, particularly in 2019. He also met foreign lawmakers, arguing that international pressure was necessary to safeguard Hong Kong’s autonomy. Before 2020, such conduct was controversial but lawful. After the NSL came into force, it was recast as a national security threat.

Hong Kong’s National Security Law

Beijing imposed the NSL on Hong Kong in June 2020, following months of pro-democracy protests, bypassing the city’s legislature by inserting the law into the Basic Law. The NSL elevated national security as a paramount constitutional value, enforced through designated judges, special procedures and broadly defined offences. Since its enactment, the NSL has been used for hundreds of arrests, disqualifications of election candidates, and closures of civil society groups and media outlets.

Lai was first arrested in August 2020 and charged under two legal regimes. One was the colonial-era sedition provision. The other was Article 29 of NSL which criminalises collusion with foreign forces, including “hostile activities” against China or Hong Kong.

The NSL does not require proof of violence, espionage or material harm. Prosecutors may rely on inferred intent, patterns of conduct and cumulative speech. In June 2021, authorities froze *Apple Daily*’s assets under the NSL, forcing the paper to shut down. Lai’s trial became a test of whether media ownership and editorial direction could constitute criminal conspiracy.

The court’s findings

In its judgment, running over 800 pages, the court described Lai as the “mastermind” behind the charged conspiracies. On the sedition charge, the court held that Lai was “a very hands-on boss” who exercised deep editorial control, and that the articles published were “objectively seditious”, intended to “bring into hatred and contempt” the Hong Kong government.

Direct authorship, the judges said, was unnecessary, and editorial direction was sufficient. On collusion, the court found that Lai’s conduct did not change even after the NSL came into effect. His campaign, urging foreign governments to impose sanctions on China and Hong Kong authorities, it said, continued in substance.

The judges treated indirect statements, interviews and rhetorical questions as legally equivalent to explicit requests when assessed cumulatively.

The judges treated indirect statements, interviews and rhetorical questions as legally equivalent to explicit requests when assessed cumulatively. Lai’s defence, that he would have acted differently had he known the legal consequences, was rejected.

Most significantly, the court concluded that Lai’s objective went beyond democratic reform. It held that his “only intent, whether pre or post NSL, was to seek the downfall of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party)”, and that his “end game was regime change”. That finding gives the verdict its wider significance. It establishes that under the NSL, political advocacy, editorial influence and foreign engagement can be aggregated into a national security offence based on inferred intent — a standard that extends well beyond Lai himself, and redraws the legal boundaries for journalism and dissent in Hong Kong.

● AUTHOR’S 250TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

Behind Jane Austen’s enduring popularity: Craft, commerce, common sense

Yashee
New Delhi, December 16

IF SCREEN adaptations, bestseller lists and book club favourites are anything to go by, Jane Austen, dead for 200 years, is having a career many living authors would die for. While her novels are seen as love stories, Austen is an equally compelling “hater”, a cool, critical and eviscerating social commentator. On her 250th birth anniversary, her genius continues to be “universally acknowledged” on the strength of her themes.

Love, money and beyond

Austen wrote about love and money, themes relevant across time and space, but that is just one part of her appeal. She was not the first author to centre her works around

these themes. She was one of the best.

Austen is scientific about her writing. She employed to spectacular effect many techniques: close interiority, precise point of view, calibrated pacing, and sparkling dialogue that advances character and plot.

In fact, her own words describe her process the best. Of her themes, she said, “Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on.” And of her style, “A little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with a brush so fine...”

She understood that her stage — English country houses with guests coming and going — was limited (two inches), but as valuable as ivory to show what is most valuable to the heart. And she showed them with a biting wit and a sizzling sense of romance. She is behind some of ro-

● ECONOMY

NREGS may not be cause of farm labour shortage



HARISH DAMODARAN

THE NARENDRA Modi government’s Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission Gramin (VB-G RAM G) Bill, introduced in Parliament on Tuesday, has a provision to restrict the undertaking of rural employment generation works under the planned new law during the “peak agricultural seasons of sowing and harvesting”.

The curbs on commencing or executing any such work, for a period aggregating 60 days in a financial year and to be notified in advance by state governments, have been proposed in order to “facilitate adequate availability of agricultural labour” during the peak planting and picking time of crops.

The existing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005 — which the VG-G RAM G Bill seeks to repeal and replace with a new statutory wage works programme — has been criticised by many (including the Union Agriculture Minister during the previous UPA administration, Sharad Pawar) for contributing to labour shortages in farms. Pawar had, in fact, written to the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, demanding that the MGNREGA scheme be paused for at least three months during the peak agricultural seasons; the VG-G RAM G Bill provides for only a two-month (60-day) break.

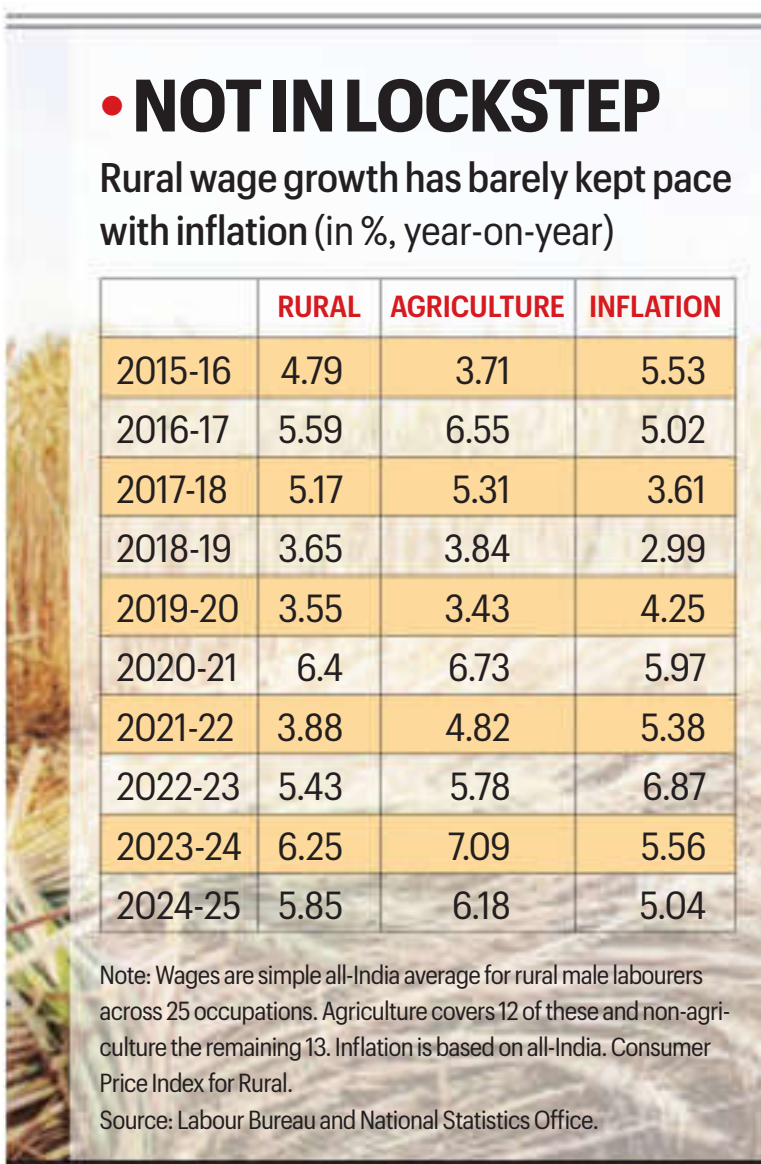
The wage effect

MGNREGA is believed to have led to a tightening of the rural labour market and enhanced the bargaining power of both farm and non-farm workers. This does not, however, seem to be reflected in wages.

The accompanying table shows the growth in rural wages for the ten years ended 2024-25 (April-March). It is based on daily wage rate data for 25 occupations, compiled by the Labour Bureau and collected from 600 sample villages spread over 20 states of India.

From the table, it can be seen that the year-on-year growth in rural wages, taking a simple all-India average for male labourers across all the occupations, has ranged between 3.6% and 6.4%.

In four out of the 10 years (2015-16, 2019-20, 2021-22 and 2022-23), the growth in nominal



inal rural wages has trailed consumer price inflation. This means that wages have actually fallen in real terms.

For the other years, real wage growth (nominal minus inflation) topped 1% only in 2017-18.

Interestingly though, the growth in agricultural wages has been higher than that of overall rural wages for eight out of the 10 years. Only two years (2015-16 and 2019-20) saw rural wages growing at a faster rate than farm wages.

The Labour Bureau has 12 occupations categorised under agriculture (ploughing/tilling, sowing/planting, watering/irrigation, plant protection, harvesting/threshing/winnowing, picking of commercial crops, horticulture labour, animal husbandry work, crop/produce packaging, logging/wood cutting, inland fishing and coastal/deep-sea fishing).

The remaining 13 non-agricultural occupations are: Plumber, electrician, mason, weaver, blacksmith, carpenter, tractor/light motor vehicle driver, beedi maker, bamboo/basket maker, handicraft worker, porter/loader, construction labourer and sweeper/cleaner.

What is clear from the above is that agricultural wages have grown more than overall rural wages. But even in this case, the growth in nominal wages has just about



ROHIT JAIN PARAS/FILE

kept pace with inflation. The data does not point to any significant surge in wages — at least during the past 10 years under the Modi government’s term. This was in spite of MGNREGA.

Why has rural wage growth been tepid?

One reason could be the rising Labour Force Participation Rates (LFPR) among women in rural India. LFPR refers to the percentage of the population aged 15 years and above that is either employed or actively seeking to work for a relatively long part of any particular year.

According to the official Periodic Labour Force Survey (July-June period), the all-India rural female LFPR was a mere 24.6% in 2017-18. That rose to 26.4% in 2018-19, 33% in 2019-20, 36.5% in 2020-21, 36.6% in 2021-22, 41.5% in 2022-23 and 47.6% in 2023-24.

The Finance Ministry’s Economic Survey for 2023-24 had attributed the sharp jump in the rural female LFPR mainly to the Modi government’s schemes such as Ujjwala, Har Ghar Jal, Saubhagya and Swachh Bharat.

These flagship programmes, the survey claimed, had not just substantially expanded household access to clean cooking fuel, electricity, piped drinking water and toilets. They also freed up rural women’s

time and efforts that went into collecting firewood and dung or fetching water.

Cooking faster using LPG cylinders or even electric mixer grinders has enabled them to deploy their energies towards more productive outside employment, instead of only mundane household tasks.

What the above freeing up of women’s time and increase in female LFPR has, at the same time, ended up doing is also boost the aggregate size of India’s rural workforce. The resultant “rightward shift of the labour supply curve”, as economists would call it — basically more people willing to work at the same or lower rates — has then exerted downward pressure on rural wages.

Simply put, the evidence of MGNREGA creating an all-round shortage of labour in farms is, perhaps, rather weak. If anything, more women entering the rural labour force and engaging in agricultural activities closer to their homes would have offset the large numbers supposedly pulled out of the farms by MGNREGA.

Farmers may be right about not getting enough labour on time, whether for transplanting paddy, picking cotton, spraying insecticides or removing weeds. But whether MGNREGA is to blame — and thereby justifying the proposed curbs on undertaking works during “peak agricultural seasons” — requires more ground-level evidence.

● CLIMATE

Climate change, deforestation worsened impact of SE Asia cyclones

Alind Chauhan
New Delhi, December 16

RISING GLOBAL temperatures, rapid urbanisation and deforestation exacerbated the impact of floods triggered by cyclonic storms in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand last month, leading to the death of at least 1,600 people in the four countries, according to a new study. While Cyclone Ditwah struck Sri Lanka on November 27, Cyclone Senyar made landfall first on November 26 in Indonesia and then in Malaysia on November 27.

The study, ‘Increasing heavy rainfall and extreme flood heights in a warming climate threaten densely populated regions across Sri Lanka and the Malacca Strait’, was published on December 11. It was carried out by a team of researchers with the World Weather Attribution (WWA) group.

The analysis highlighted that although the affected countries experience annual floods during the monsoon season, this year, the proportions of the flood reached unprecedented levels.

Role of global warming

The researchers found that extreme rainfall events, such as those triggered by Cyclones Ditwah and Senyar, had become

more intense in the affected regions in recent years.

For instance, in Sri Lanka, heavy five-day precipitation events are now about 28% to 160% more intense, according to the report. In the Malacca Strait region, where Cyclone Senyar formed, extreme rainfall has increased by 9% to 50%.

This has primarily happened due to rising global temperatures — the world has become about 1.3 degrees Celsius warmer since the mid-1800s. Higher temperatures cause evaporation of water not only from land but also from oceans and other water bodies, meaning a warmer atmosphere holds more moisture. For every 1 degree Celsius rise in average temperature, the atmosphere can hold about 7% more moisture. This makes storms more dangerous as it leads to an increase in precipitation intensity, duration and/or frequency, which ultimately can cause severe flooding.

The new study also said that at the time when Cyclones Ditwah and Senyar caused extreme rainfall in the affected regions, the sea surface temperatures (SSTs) in the North Indian Ocean, where the storms originated, were 0.2 degrees Celsius higher than the 1991-2020 average. This would have added to the energy available for tropical

Weather warning

● Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand witness flooding every monsoon. November’s floods, however, were unprecedented, causing widespread damage and killing 1,600 people.

● A study, published on December 11, highlighted a rise in the frequency of extreme rainfall, its outsize effect on areas that saw loss of tree cover, and the role of rapid urbanisation.

storm development and evaporation, leading to the heavy rainfall. “Without the trend related to the 1.3 degrees Celsius rise in global temperatures, the SSTs would have been about one degree colder and below the 1991-2020 normal,” the study said.

Deforestation

The study found that the impact of extreme rainfall was exacerbated in the affected regions due to an increase in deforestation. For instance, in Sri Lanka, where rain and landslides caused by Cyclone Ditwah killed more than 600 people, forest cover declined from 90% in 1900 to 20% in 2002 (‘Land use in Sri Lanka: past, present and the future’, 2002).

The key drivers of decline were encroachments for plantation crops, such as tea, rubber, and coconut, cinnamon cultivation, at the forest fringes, infrastructure development projects, as well as illicit timber felling, according to the WWA study.

Loss of forest cover accelerated runoff, which occurs when there is more water than land can absorb, exacerbating flood peaks.

Something similar took place in Indonesia, which lost 25% of its old forests to palm oil production between 1991 and 2020 (‘Land in limbo: Nearly one third of Indonesia’s cleared old-growth forests left idle’,

PNAS, 2024). This diminished the protective barrier that Indonesia had against floods. Deforestation also reduces slope stability in rugged terrains (like in Indonesia’s Sumatra region, which was severely affected by Cyclone Senyar), intensifying the floods and landslides that usually follow extreme storm events.

Rapid urbanisation

The study revealed that rapid urbanisation was also a key player in the large-scale devastation triggered by extreme rainfall in the affected regions.

It found that Sri Lanka and Indonesia had seen an increase in the number of people living in high-intensity flood-risk zones. Critical infrastructures such as roads, railways, and cropland have also increased in these areas.

That’s why when Cyclone Senyar hit Indonesia, it not only killed hundreds of people but also led to economic losses worth \$4.13 billion.

Sri Lanka is estimated to have sustained economic losses of between \$6 billion and \$7 billion, nearly 3% to 5% of the national GDP. More than 137,000 acres of agricultural land are said to be destroyed by the floods, partly due to destroyed dams and canals, according to the study.

mance’s most enduring tropes: the brooding hero with a heart of gold, the spunky heroine, misunderstanding then love after self-growth (*Pride and Prejudice*); friends to lovers after self-growth (*Emma*); giving love a second chance after self-growth (*Persuasion*). Austen sells because her works are readable — funny, smart and sexy, without being overbearing.

It is a woman’s world

Austen’s heroines have traits pop culture is still struggling to give to women — agency, wit, conviction. In all her books, she makes sure to mention her heroine’s wit more than she talks about her beauty. In her men, one of the first desirable qualities she highlights is “good sense”. But beyond the pairing of bewitching

woman and bewitched man, are strong, female bonds — sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, friendships in *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey*, and to a degree even in *Mansfield Park*.

The screen obsession

Jane Austen’s books are very easy to adapt to the screen. Her plots move forward mainly through sparkling dialogue, which can be lifted for the screen. Her characters’ personalities and morals are modern by any standards and radical by none.

By now, the adaptation-game is a self-sustaining loop. Because she is so popular, more movies and TV shows are made about her, and because so many movies and TV shows exist, her popularity is ensured generation after generation.

OUR VIEW



US strategy: Let us take its signals in our stride

America's 'National Security Strategy' reflects Trump's priorities. The Quad's relatively low rank is not really a surprise. India must work to serve its interests on its own terms anyway

President Donald Trump's vision of how the US should engage the rest of the world, as outlined in America's *National Security Strategy 2025*, is unapologetically America First. It views non-first countries as potential markets, partners and allies in keeping the world open for the pursuit of US interests. To echo Adam Smith, it is not from the benevolence of Uncle Sam's army, technology or ideals of democracy that the world should expect peace and prosperity, but from its regard for its self-interest. The US may part with some of what it has to offer, but as part of a deal; it wants free and open access to resources and markets. The document makes a passing mention of a rules-based global order, but its main emphasis is on US sovereignty—cultural and economic, besides political—rather than what's good for the globe. It views multilateral bodies and forums with suspicion, in line with the US withdrawal from the Paris climate pact and World Health Organisation. In short, it reflects a Trumpian shift. It also leaves a question mark above the Quad—the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among India, Australia, Japan and the US. A Quad summit of top leaders was supposed to be held this year, as earlier reported, but we now have just a fortnight's window for it. America's strategy outline speaks of the need to keep the Indo-Pacific "free and open" and refers to improving "commercial (and other) relations with India to encourage New Delhi to contribute to Indo-Pacific security, including through continued [Quad] cooperation..." Other mentions of India suggest a role envisioned for us as a US partner to help secure its allies' joint position in the Western Hemisphere—and also in Africa, "with regard to

critical minerals." Plus, our cooperation would be sought to keep the South China Sea's shipping lanes free of a "toll system" imposed by a "potentially hostile power," given how we too may suffer. While China is not always named, it is cast as a rival trader that unfairly runs up huge surpluses with the US, subsidizes domestic industry for dominance of critical supply chains, steals intellectual property and seeks hegemony. Acknowledgement of India as the only weighty counter in the region may seem natural in this context, but given a triangular link drawn with Pakistan—one that's denied by New Delhi—in its triumphal section on peace, US silence on that was perhaps foreseeable. As a country sworn to autonomy, India need not respond to another nation's stated strategy. But we cannot shrug it off either. It could have various effects. Its dismal view of immigration, for example, could reduce India's role as a talent source for America Inc, though the latter's rush to set up AI data and global capability centres here may accelerate. As for US power projection, a modestly named 'Trump Corollary' to the 1823 Monroe Doctrine—which declared the rest of the Americas a US backyard—claims the right to set a policy agenda for more or less half the globe. Europe is expected to reconcile with Russia and dispel thoughts of Nato expansion; Ukraine will have to curb its enthusiasm on that front. In many ways, the US has opted for geopolitical realism over a high horse. What we must puzzle out is the extent to which the Quad agenda might get set adrift. Trump called India an "important strategic partner" in the Indo-Pacific, as cited by a US Embassy post on X. Whether or not the Quad weakens, India must build strategic muscle and stay in pursuit of all that's within its control that suits our interests.

THEIR VIEW

Oil, gas and gallium can explain America's new security strategy

Washington's world view is being reshaped by material conditions that enlarge the space for peace



JAMES K. GALBRAITH is co-author of 'Entropy Economics: The Living Basis of Value and Production'.

The new National Security Strategy of the US seeks "strategic stability" with Russia. It declares that China is merely a competitor, that the Middle East is not central to American security, that Latin America is "our hemisphere" and that Europe faces "civilizational erasure." India barely rates a mention; one might say, as Neville Chamberlain did of Czechoslovakia in 1938, that it's "a faraway country... of which we know nothing." Well, so much the better for India, which can take care of itself. The realpolitik of this document is breathtaking, yet the underlying logic is not stated. It is a logic of resources. With oil flowing thick and fast from Texas and reserves in Canada and Venezuela, the US can exit the Gulf in West Asia and even (in principle, not in practice) leave Israel to its own devices. Russian gas, more precisely the lack of it, has sealed the fate of Europe: Germany is de-industrializing while Britain and France, their empires long gone, sink toward irrelevance. Sanctions having failed, Russia's eventual victory in Ukraine is now assured. With China, the resource issue is rare earths, especially gallium, a byproduct of refining bauxite into alumina. China controls rare earths through a near-monopoly on refining, which could erode with determined efforts over time. Gallium is different; US aluminium capacity peaked in 1980 and China's

advantage in the underlying process of refining is now estimated at 90 to 1. The US cannot own-source gallium on any timescale. As there is no substitute for gallium in advanced microchips, the US military cannot now confront China and prevail. A *détente* is therefore necessary for America, as desired by and acceptable to Beijing. As strategy, the new order is not iron-clad and should not be taken too seriously until military bases are closed, aircraft carriers decommissioned and nuclear weapons mothballed. It is also hedged in several unrealistic ways, such as the notion, quickly quashed by China, that perhaps Japan (and Korea) might defend the "first island chain," a euphemism for Taiwan. As economics, it is a mass of contradictions, in particular its quest for US re-industrialization while simultaneously protecting the financial system and the dollar's global role. The syndrome is of the child who wants every shiny package under the tree. One may expect a tantrum once the reality dawns that one can't have it all. Then there is the undisguised notion that the nations of Latin America are not really countries, but dependencies and satrapies—colonies in all but name—run by *caciques* (local leaders). That there have been (and still are) such countries in the region cannot be denied. But Mexico and Brazil, not to mention Colombia and Venezuela, not to mention Nicaragua and Cuba, have other ideas. The brazen, Miami-mobster tone of this document is its most retrograde feature, scarcely removed from the years before the American Civil War, when Cuba and Mexico were seen as new frontiers for southern slaveholders. Still, for all its defects, as an assault on the previously sacrosanct, unipolar and Eurocentric world order, the new US strategy is an ice-breaker. It opens up policy space not seen in 40, 50 or perhaps 60 years—not since Reagan and Gorbachev, Nixon and Mao, or Kennedy

and Khrushchev, who each in their own way tried to forestall a final nuclear confrontation. The panicky reaction of European political leaders and US foreign policy, media and Democratic Party elites portends a colossal struggle to keep the old order going. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's pastiche of cringe and cope is a telling example of what to expect. Previous efforts at peacemaking all came eventually to naught. Kennedy's overtures of 1963, notably the test-ban treaty and his decision to exit Vietnam, ended with his assassination. Nixon's opening to China led to deep a relationship that only lapsed into hostility as China emerged as a leading economic power while the 1990s-era illusion of an 'end of history' convergence to 'liberal democracy' fell apart. The end of the Cold War engineered by Gorbachev and Reagan gave way, under George H. W. Bush, to claims of 'victory' with an inevitable repercussion—revanche. Yet, in each of those episodes, the material conditions of the US were stronger and its need to dominate the world greater than is true today. The US is now self-sufficient in energy; it can get along without Europe or the Gulf, and it can prosper without antagonizing Russia or China. At the same time, US military capacity has eroded; an era of missiles and drones has superseded that of aircraft carriers and bases. The material conditions, in short, favour peace. One cannot be optimistic. No doubt, those committed to unilateral American hegemony will make every effort, in the months ahead, to reverse any move towards balanced peace. But they would be defending a global order that no longer exists, whereas the new conditions really do call for regional consolidation and multi-polarity in a world where peace and stability are paramount. India, nicely balanced among great powers, will benefit if a peaceful system prevails. And its diplomacy can help, if it chooses, to make it happen.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The ability of a country to spread its imports and exports equally over a large number of countries affects in an important way its 'economic independence.' This point is especially important for smaller countries.

ALBERT HIRSCHMAN

MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

Asymmetrical trade: Beware its political consequences

NIRANJAN RAJADHYAKSHA



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The year that's drawing to a close will be remembered as the point at which US President Donald Trump overturned the global trading system that had been in place since World War II. India has been a major target of Trumpian whimsy. It is now hard to believe that the world will go back to the old multilateral trading system even after Trump exits office. We are in untested territory, with all its inherent uncertainties. India's big question is how best to adapt to the evolving global arrangements, with the worrisome prospect of rising protectionism, militarism and regionalism. The government is busy trying to close a trade deal with the US and has voices within that want the country to join at least one of the regional free-trade agreements that we have assiduously stayed out of. Are there any relevant lessons from the past? In that context, one book written at the end of World War II deserves to be read again. The theme of Albert Hirschman's *National Power and the Structure of Foreign*

Trade (1945) is inseparable from his early political life. Before becoming one of the 20th century's most original political economists, Hirschman played an active role in resistance to Nazism. A German-born Jew who fled Hitler's Germany, he fought in the Spanish Civil War, then worked with the French Resistance against fascism. He helped smuggle hundreds of anti-Nazi intellectuals and artists out of Vichy France. He is one of the central characters in a 2023 Netflix series, *Transatlantic*, on the underground operation to sneak refugees out of Europe. His experiences shaped his understanding of how political power operates through channels far more subtle than armies alone. When Hirschman later turned to international trade, he viewed it not as a neutral economic relationship between two countries, but as a potential instrument of coercion. His message resonates today. In the abovementioned book, Hirschman challenges the dominant view that trade is always mutually beneficial, symmetrical and peace-promoting. Instead, he argues that trade relationships can become asymmetric: one country may depend disproportionately on another for imports, exports or access to markets. The two key mechanisms are what Hirschman calls "supply effects" and "influ-

ence effects." If a country relies heavily on a single trade partner, it becomes vulnerable to its threats, incentives or sudden withdrawal of trade. Even without explicit coercion, the dependent state may adjust its behaviour to align with the stronger one's interests, goaded by what Hirschman calls "commercial fifth columns." Hirschman devotes one part of his book to explain how Nazi Germany used a foreign trade strategy to increase its leverage in Eastern Europe, which is quite separate from the better known story of its marching armies. The Nazis constructed a network of bilateral trade agreements, clearing arrangements and commodity-specific deals that locked smaller economies to its east into relationships of dependency. Germany achieved a stranglehold over its smaller neighbours by becoming the primary purchaser of their agricultural produce and their main supplier of industrial goods. These smaller countries increasingly oriented their production, financial systems

and even domestic politics to suit the German economy. This process did not require overt threats; their structural dependency itself generated political accommodation. Trade became a weapon of national power. Two clarifications need to be mentioned. First, Hirschman does not argue that there are no gains from trade, but makes the more nuanced point that these gains are sometimes asymmetric. Second, using trade as statecraft is more than the mercantilist strategy of exporting more than importing. A large country may gain leverage by running trade deficits that make other countries dependent on its domestic demand. Hirschman asks what smaller countries can do to protect their autonomy in an asymmetric world. His recommendations are strikingly relevant to our times. First, nations should diversify their trading partners to avoid a crushing reliance on any single dominant power. Second, they can build domestic capacity—industry, infrastructure or alter-

native suppliers—to reduce exposure to coercive shortages. He developed this theme in greater detail in his subsequent work as a development economist, especially the importance of forward and backward linkages in any industrialization strategy. Regional cooperation among small states can counterbalance the influence of larger ones, creating a unified market less susceptible to domination. And multilateral institutions can help prevent the coercive leverage that bilateral trading relations may promote. It is now fashionable to run down the multilateral trading system, but the symmetry that is fundamental to its design—as evident in the principle of 'most favoured nation' which provides equal trade opportunities for all countries—is a response to the dangerous asymmetries that arose in the era of imperial powers. International trade should liberate rather than shackle countries. Hirschman's early confrontation with totalitarianism taught him that economics is inseparable from politics. *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* reveals how asymmetries in commerce can evolve into asymmetries in sovereignty. The book was written in a particular historical context, but has useful clues on how countries can negotiate trade turbulence in the Trump era.

Hirschman's argument that trade does not always promote peace is relevant in the Trump era

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the Friends of India -founded 1818*

Defiant Return

Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Corina Machado's sudden appearance in Oslo was not simply a personal triumph after months in hiding; it was a calculated political act that reopened Venezuela's unresolved democratic question. By defying a travel ban, slipping past military checkpoints, and surfacing on the world stage under threat of arrest, she turned a tightly controlled narrative upside down. The message was unmistakable: repression may silence voices temporarily, but it cannot erase legitimacy.

Her arrival came too late for the Nobel ceremony itself, forcing her daughter to accept the prize earlier in the day. That detail matters. It underscores the abnormality of Venezuela's political reality, where even international recognition for peaceful democratic advocacy must be mediated through exile, secrecy, and family separation. Yet when Ms Machado finally reached Oslo hours later, the symbolism only deepened. Her first public moments were not triumphalist but human - marked by tears, prayer, and the simple act of greeting supporters face to face after more than a year of isolation.

What followed was equally deliberate. Sitting alongside senior representatives of the Nobel Committee, she framed Venezuela's crisis not as a conventional dictatorship but as a system sustained by criminal economies and impunity. That framing shifts the debate away from ideology and towards structure. It suggests that elections alone cannot resolve Venezuela's paralysis unless the incentives that protect the current order are dismantled. Her insistence that the responsibility for a peaceful transition lies with those holding power was a pointed inversion of the regime's narrative, which routinely accuses the opposition of courting violence.

Equally significant was her refusal to position herself in permanent exile. She stated clearly that she intends to return to Venezuela, fully aware of the risks. In the same vein, she spoke of the Nobel Peace Prize not as a personal possession but as something she accepted on behalf of Venezuelans - and which she intends to take back to the country at an unspecified but appropriate time. That phrase, carefully chosen, carries weight. It implies that the prize belongs symbolically to a future Venezuela where such an act would no longer be dangerous or subversive.

This blend of restraint and defiance explains why her re-emergence unsettles the authorities more than years of louder rhetoric ever did. She is not calling for upheaval in abstract terms; she is exposing the cost of the status quo through her own lived experience - missed weddings, unseen graduations, years without physical contact with loved ones. That personal ledger of loss gives moral force to her political claims. Yet the risks ahead are stark.

The Venezuelan government has already branded her a fugitive and a criminal. Her international visibility may offer some protection, but it also raises the stakes. Whether this moment becomes a catalyst for negotiation or a trigger for harsher repression remains uncertain.

What is no longer in doubt is that Ms Machado's appearance in Oslo has shifted the frame. Venezuela's crisis can no longer be reduced to a contested election or a geopolitical standoff. It now stands as a test of courage and legitimacy.

Digital Borderline

The United States is preparing to widen its security net once again, this time by asking millions of prospective visitors to surrender five years of their social-media history as part of the routine travel authorisation process. It is framed as a modest adjustment to an existing system designed to keep the country safe. Yet the scale and intrusiveness of the proposed requirement point to something far more consequential: the quiet normalisation of digital exposure as the price of entry.

The Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) was created to make transatlantic and trans-Pacific travel easier for citizens of friendly nations. For years, it was held up as a model of how security screening could be made both rigorous and frictionless.

Now, the shift from limited personal details to an archive of online identities marks a fundamental redefinition of what governments believe they are entitled to know. It is not merely the volume of information that stands out, but the intimacy of it. Social-media activity captures the unguarded moments of people's lives - opinions, humour, associations, even political leanings - none of which were ever meant to be inspected by immigration officers.

The proposal arrives at a time when Washington is already expanding security vetting for student and skilled-worker visas and debating fresh travel bans for certain regions. Officials insist that these steps flow from public expectations that the government must prioritise safety above all else. But safety cannot be an unexamined mantra, invoked to justify ever-growing state access to personal data. A balance between security and liberty is not merely aspirational; it is the core of any democratic system.

There is also a practical dimension that risks being overlooked. ESTA was successful because it was simple, predictable, and swift. Burdening travellers with the obligation to collect online handles, phone numbers from the past decade, and email histories is likely to introduce delays, errors, and confusion. The threat of visa denial for incomplete or forgotten information will only amplify anxiety.

For an economy that relies heavily on international tourism - and expects millions more arrivals for major events in the next few years - any perception of heightened hassle can have tangible economic consequences.

Most importantly, the proposed rules raise a larger question about norms. If a global power insists on access to the digital footprints of foreign citizens as a precondition for travel, it sets a precedent that others may feel emboldened to follow. Once established, such demands rarely recede; instead, they become part of a broader architecture of surveillance that travellers everywhere must learn to navigate.

The United States is entitled to safeguard its borders. But it must also recognise that trust and openness are strategic assets. Asking visitors to unlock five years of their digital presence risks undermining both - and diminishing the country's appeal at a moment when its global standing is already under strain.

Airline crisis and after

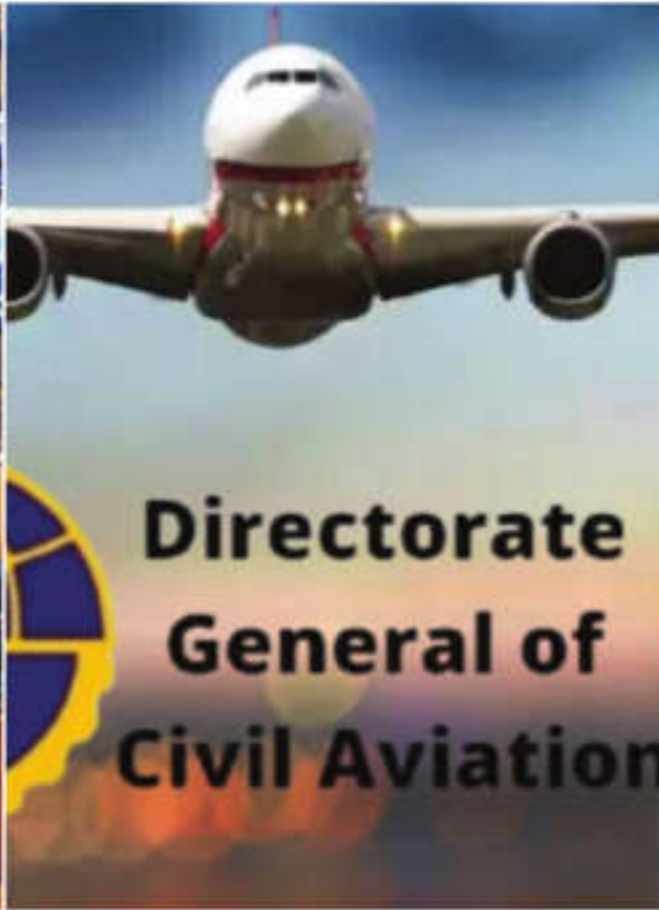
After the liberalisation of 1991, the Government replaced controllers with regulators in most sectors. They were expected to guide their respective sectors to accelerated growth by promoting competition ~ with the additional mandate of protecting the interests of all stakeholders. Sadly, none of these goals has been realised, with virtual duopolies emerging in many sectors, including critical ones like telecom and aviation

Cancellation of around 5,000 flights in a week's time in peak season, resulted in widespread chaos, with irate passengers venting their ire on hapless airline staff in impossibly crowded airport terminals, mountains of luggage clogging airports, airfares skyrocketing for flights that were taking off, tariffs of hotels going through the roof - leading to disruptions in wedding celebrations, concerts, meetings, conferences, sports events, and the like. Strange scenes unfolded, like a bride and groom attending their own wedding reception virtually, and glitterati, who would rather die but not travel by train, begging for train tickets.

The fact that this nation-wide mayhem was caused by a minor change in pilot rest rules, and the cancelled flights were of only one airline, Indigo, points to a deeper malaise. To recount: the Directorate General for Civil Aviation (DGCA), the designated regulator for civil aviation sector, notified an amendment in Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) rules in January 2024, that provided for more rest period for pilots. The amended rules were supposed to apply from 1 June 2024. All airlines opposed DGCA's move, and it was decided that the new rules would be rolled out in two stages - partly on 1 July 2025, and the rest on 1 November 2025. Again, an extension till December was given.

It appears that during the last two years, Indigo had added more routes and aircraft, but instead of hiring more pilots to implement the new rules, Indigo lobbied to roll back implementation of the rules, or at least have them delayed. With no advance preparation, implementation of the new rules was not possible for Indigo; faced with a greatly reduced availability of pilots, Indigo had no option but to cancel thousands of flights.

The corporate greed of Indigo - an attempt to operate more flights, with fewer pilots - can be easily understood, but the present crisis brought into sharp focus the failure of institutions, specifically designed to see that things ran smoothly. At the first stage, the star-studded Board of Directors of Indigo airlines, failed to provide proper guidance



to its CEO, and other top executives, to implement regulatory directives. However, this does not absolve DGCA of not monitoring the implementation of its own directions, that were issued in consequence of an order of the Delhi High Court. Because, long before the actual crisis, it should have been crystal clear to the DGCA that with no plans of hiring extra pilots, Indigo would not be able to maintain its schedule once the new FDTL rules kicked in.

As the airline crisis grabbed headlines, many organisations, individuals and busybodies jumped into the fray. Parliament debated the issue, with the Aviation Minister promising strict action against Indigo; a Parliamentary panel reminded everyone that it had flagged this issue much earlier; the Competition Commission promised an anti-trust inquiry; a pilots' body moved the Delhi High Court against DGCA; and someone approached the Supreme Court by way of a PIL. Meanwhile, to buy peace, DGCA instructed Indigo to process refunds for cancelled flights expeditiously, and other airlines to cap fares; DGCA also exempted Indigo from the new FDTL rules till 10 February 2026. In what may provide a better understanding of the crisis, everyone in the aviation regulatory sphere, the aviation secretary, and the DGCA downwards - all are from a generalist, non-aviation background and the top management of Indigo is almost totally non-Indian.

A similar lame duck regulatory regime turned a blind eye to non-observance of fire safety norms that precipitated the tragedy at Birch by Romeo Lane nightclub, in Goa, leading to the death of 25 people. This was a tragedy waiting to happen; the club's structure was largely built of wood with a thatched roof, which caught fire when fireworks were set off inside the building.

It emerged that the nightclub had been served with a demolition order by the local Arpora-Nagoa Village Panchayat for violation of multiple rules several months before the tragedy. The demolition order had been stayed by the Deputy Director of Panchayats,

allowing the club to continue its operations. Significantly, the local MLA had raised the issue of continued operation of the club, without mandatory permissions, and with multiple demolition orders against it, in the Goa Legislative Assembly in August 2025. Environmentalists had also petitioned the Goa Government, on similar lines. However, contrary to evidence, authorities claimed that only after the disaster, did they realise that the high-end nightclub was operating without licences and lacked mandatory safety infrastructure.

Post-tragedy, along with the club's staff, and the erstwhile Deputy Director of Panchayats, the police moved to arrest the Sarpanch of the Arpora-Nagoa Village Panchayat, who was rescued with difficulty by incensed villagers. Meanwhile, owners of the nightclub went intocommunicado, having boarded an Indigo flight to Phuket, which departed on time. It has also been reported, that the nightclub had been shielded from action against it by a former top officer of

Goa police. Another example of poor regulation was pointed out by the Chief Economic Advisor, in the presence of the SEBI chief, namely that promoters of IPO-bound companies were making a killing by offloading their shares to the public at hundreds of times of their cost (Killing Fields, 25 November 2025). With a slight modification, the aforesaid con is still on.

After the liberalisation of 1991, the Government replaced controllers with regulators in most sectors. They were expected to guide their respective sectors to accelerated growth by promoting competition - with the additional mandate of protecting the interests of all stakeholders. Sadly, none of these goals has been realised, with virtual duopolies emerging in many sectors, including critical ones like telecom and aviation - in which Indigo, controls 64 per cent of the



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Philippines' provocations will avail it nothing

In a statement issued on Friday, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Southern Theater Command urged Manila to immediately stop provoking incidents in the South China Sea.

Spokesman Tian Junli made the remark in a news release after multiple Philippine light aircraft illegally intruded into the airspace of China's Huangyan Island.

The Chinese navy and air force conducted tracking, monitoring, warning and resolute expulsion of the intruding Philippine aircraft in accordance with relevant laws and regulations.

On the same day, the China Coast Guard condemned the Philippines for its provocative behavior under the pretence of "fishing" in waters off China's Xianbin Reef after it was forced to take necessary control measures in accordance with the law and relevant rules to drive intruding Philippine vessels away. Both Huangyan Island and

Xianbin Reef are China's inherent territory, and the country will firmly safeguard national sovereignty and security no matter what forces Manila tries to play and how hard it attempts to portray itself as the victim.

Since Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr took office in June 2022, the Philippine government has been constantly making waves over the South China Sea disputes.

It has further escalated its infringements on China's maritime rights and interests by sending vessels and personnel to intrude illegally into the waters of Huangyan Island, Xianbin Reef, Ren'ai Reef, and other Chinese islets and reefs, at times even causing collisions with China Coast Guard vessels. Such pernicious actions of the Philippines

are detrimental to China's interests and China-Philippines relations.

The Philippines began claiming "sovereignty" over Huangyan Island in April 1997, shifting from its previous stance where it acknowledged the island was outside its territory. Philippine Official Map No 25 clearly shows Huangyan Island is outside the territorial boundaries of the Philippines.

As for Xianbin Reef, which is a part of China's Nansha Islands, China maintains indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and its adjacent waters, including Ren'ai Reef and Xianbin Reef. Manila's antics surrounding Xianbin Reef since last year prove nothing but part of its geopolitical scheme that centers on the Philippines acting as a pawn of some external forces to provoke China. In September last year, Philippine Coast

Guard vessel Teresa Magbanua finally withdrew from Xianbin Reef and returned to a Philippine port, after nearly five months of illegally anchoring in the lagoon of the Chinese reef. The months-long ordeal fully exposed Manila's role as the troublemaker in the South China Sea.

In his meeting with China's newly appointed ambassador to the Philippines, Jing Quan, on Thursday, Marcos said he was ready to work with China to manage differences and enhance cooperation. Considering that his remarks were made almost the same time the Philippines staged its latest Huangyan Island and Xianbin Reef provocations, Manila was again saying one thing and doing another.

The widespread domestic protests against the Marcos government accusing it of corruption and power abuses might partly explain the timing of Manila's latest provocations.

Contrast it with the SOP for cancelled or delayed flights in the EU; under Regulation 261 of 2004, a passenger is entitled to claim compensation, ranging between €250 and €600, for flight delays, cancellations, and overbooking on EU territory. Additionally, food and meals have to be provided for severe delays, and accommodation and transportation for overnight delays.

Other sectoral regulators have similarly failed to protect the interests of consumers; the RBI started the Banking Ombudsman (BO) scheme with much fanfare, but it hardly takes cognisance of customer complaints; statistics show that in FY 2016-17, BO offices across the country received over 1,19,758 complaints, but there was an award in only 24 cases - that is only 0.02 per cent of complaints. The number of complaints increased to 2,90,567 in FY 2024-25, but the number of awards increased only to 36.

Ombudsman posts in many other sectors, like insurance, suffer from vacancies. Tribunals, established to provide quick and inexpensive justice, have withered away, with eight tribunals abolished at one go in 2021. Despite frequent directions by the Supreme Court, most tribunals continue to suffer from debilitating vacancies.

Recently, in a scathing indictment, the Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the Tribunal Reforms Act, 2021 deeming them unconstitutional for giving the Union Government excessive control over tribunals, and thereby undermining judicial independence.

In the coming days, the Indigo crisis will be discussed threadbare; solutions would emerge, but a lasting solution could be only one, that puts the interests of citizens first. Otherwise, similar crises would recur, and citizens would continue to suffer - caught between corporate greed, bureaucratic apathy and corruption.

Finally, what Edward Kennedy, US President John F Kennedy's younger brother, and a US Senator from 1962 to 2009, had said about US regulators, appears to hold true about Indian regulators: "Regulation has gone astray. . . Either because they have become captives of regulated industries or captains of outmoded administrative agencies, regulators all too often encourage or approve unreasonably high prices, inadequate service, and anti-competitive behaviour. The cost of this regulation is always passed on to the consumer. And that cost is astronomical."

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Paying spectators

Sir, Kolkata boasts of its sporting culture and crowd management at high-voltage matches at the Salt Lake Stadium. But what happened at the stadium on Saturday over the football legend, Lionel Messi's visit dealt a heavy blow to this reputation.

The event exposed a basic failure of planning leading to an utter mess, chaos and shame for West Bengal government. Poor management of a hyped-up event, lack of coordination, and gaps in the security arrangement converted the stadium into a battlefield as the spectators showing patience for hours were denied a glimpse of their favourite footballer.

In fact, Messi was lost to the crowd after being ring-fenced by officials, celebrities and

security men on the field. Administrative ineptitude is an important factor in the episode of shame. But the penchant for violence on the part of a passionate collective can not be denied.

The incident teaches us a lesson. Future events need clear protocols that put paying spectators first, not as an afterthought once chaos and confusion erupt.

Yours, etc., Narayan Chandra Ghosh, Madanpur, 15 December.

Lesson from Kannur

Sir, Lack of organisation and improper crowd management led to complete chaos and unruly scenes at Kolkata resulting in a nightmare for thousands of Lionel Messi fans. Hardcore foot ball fans who paid big cash for the once-in-a-life time spectacle



had to leave the venue disappointed and frustrated due to utter chaos and confusion.

It is here I reminisce about the visit made by Diego Maradona, the God of football to the small, coastal city of Kannur (Kerala) thirteen years ago. Even now the people of this city cherish the day when Maradona came, saw and conquered the hearts of soccer-crazy fans.

It was a private visit sponsored by an

international jewellery company. The whole city was in a frenzy but fully under control. Even though thousands thronged outside the hotel for hours to have a glimpse of star, the situation was excellently controlled by the police and volunteers.

Later at the Jawahar stadium, which is much smaller than the stadium where Messi came, the organisers conducted a special function. Maradona mesmerised the biggest crowd the city ever saw with his football stunts, dance and songs.

Maradona left Kannur with golden memories the people will cherish forever. Room number 309 at 'Hotel Blue Nile', in which the Soccer God stayed has been turned into a 'shrine' where all the things he used during his stay have been kept intact.

Yours, etc., M Pradyu, Kannur, 15 December.



If I don't fight, who will?

PRAVIN KAUSHAL

It is with great pleasure I would like to announce that I am now a father. Both mother and child are fine. Thank you to anyone who sends their blessings and keeps us in their prayers.

But as I hold my newborn in the sterile safety of the hospital room, looking out at the grey haze of Delhi, my joy is tempered by a terrifying reality. For the past few days, my world has shrunk to these corridors, and while awaiting this miracle, I have been haunted by what I see in the wards around me.

I watch doctors rush to attend to newborns who are too small, too fragile, and struggling too hard for every breath. I see parents, their eyes hollow with exhaustion, peering into incubators where their babies are fighting a battle they did not choose. It is a stark realization: in Delhi, our children are not just born into a polluted world; they are being shaped by it in the womb.

The Silent Emergency in the Womb: We often talk about air pollution as a "winter menace" or a "respiratory irritant." But standing here with my baby, I see it for what it truly is: an obstetric emergency. Recent reports and medical experts confirm what is unfolding before my eyes—air pollutants are crossing the placental barrier, impacting foetal development in real-time.

The statistics are no longer just numbers on a page; they are the tiny faces I see in the nursery. Studies indicate a 70 per cent increase in the chance of premature birth when pregnant women are exposed to high levels of air pollution, with North India faring the worst. These are babies born before their lungs are fully developed, forcing them into longer, agonizing stays in the nursery just to survive. We are seeing a generation entering the world with a deficit, their biological start compromised by the very air their mothers breathed.

A Legacy of Vulnerability: The damage does not stop at birth. The medical consensus is chilling: exposure to fine particulate matter (PM2.5) during pregnancy is linked to low birth weight and restricted growth. These are not temporary setbacks. Low birth weight is a harbinger for a lifetime of health challenges, from reduced lung function to an increased risk of chronic diseases later in life.

As a new father, this terrifies me. We did everything right - we followed the diet charts, we attended the check-ups, we took the vitamins. But how do we protect our children from the air? We cannot ask our wives to stop breathing. The "gas chamber" of Delhi is not just an outdoor hazard; it is infiltrating our biology. We are witnessing a slow-motion health catastrophe

where the most vulnerable - the unborn and the newborn - are paying the highest price.

A Demand for Accountability: This is not a plea for sympathy; it is a demand for a radical shift in how we handle this crisis. We can no longer treat air pollution as a seasonal inconvenience to be managed with 'odd-even' schemes or temporary construction bans. We need a Health Action Plan that treats this as the medical emergency it is.

First, we must demand accountability from our healthcare systems. Just as blood pressure and sugar levels are recorded, air quality exposure data should be integrated into prenatal and patient medical records. Doctors need to treat respiratory distress in newborns not just as a clinical symptom, but as a direct result of environmental toxicity.

Second, we need immediate, strictly enforced Low Emission Zones (LEZs) around hospitals and schools. It is unconscionable that the very places where life begins and thrives are engulfed in idling exhaust and road dust. Our hospitals should be sanctuaries of clean air, not islands in a sea of smog.

A Father's Promise: They say a parent's instinct is to protect. Right now, holding my child, I feel a fierce resolve rising above the helplessness.

We, the parents of India, are done waiting for "better AQI days" that



never come. We are done listening to politicians make vague promises while our children struggle to breathe. We demand city-specific clean air action plans that are executed, not just announced. We demand a future where "survival" does not depend on how many air purifiers you can afford.

To the policymakers, I say this: Do not come to us for votes if you cannot promise our children the

basic right to breathe. To my fellow parents, I say: Wake up. This fight is for their survival.

I look at my newborn, and I make a promise: I will not be silent. I will fight for your blue skies. Because if I don't fight for your breath, who will?

(The writer is Director - Strategic Partnerships, Mrikal (Data/AI Center) and a Young Alumni Member, Govt. Liaison Task Force, IIT-Kharagpur.)



Front page of The Statesman dated 17 December 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE struggle between the French Cabinet and the Finance Committee continues. Again the Committee has rejected the proposals put before it, and one more Finance Minister has gone, M. Loucheur having resigned. The two problems of internal politics that face every French Premier are to form a Government that can last and to frame financial proposals that will be acceptable. The latter seems impossible and apparently attention is for a time to be concentrated on keeping in office—in the hope presumably that something will turn up. The belief is growing that a cure can be effected only by taking financial control out of the hands of politicians and leaving it to experts. Finance, however, is both a science and an art. A body of experts might be able to handle the difficulty with more mathematics and less passion than excited politicians, but what guarantee is there that the public will be more ready to pay taxes proposed by bankers than by politicians? In this welter the Government, says a cable of yesterday, has decided to remain in office and make the best of a bad job. But what will happen to the franc if all attempts to help it are abandoned?

Weaponisation of trade policy must end

MOTOSHIGEITOH

A phenomenon known as the "weaponisation" of trade policy is spreading around the world.

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has been using the threat of higher import tariffs to force concessions from foreign countries in negotiations, an effective tactic because those countries would suffer if they lost their profits from the massive U.S. market.

Japan's ultimate goal in the tough negotiations with the United States over Trump's tariffs was to avoid losing the key export market for Japanese cars due to Trump's plans to impose sharply increased tariffs on them. The United States achieved a major success in the bilateral negotiations by making Japan increase its U.S.-bound investments. In other words, Trump successfully earned profits by utilizing trade policy as a weapon.

The United States is not the only country to do this. China has used restrictions on exports of rare earths, known as the strategically important "vitamins of industry," thereby ensuring that trade negotiations with the United States would go in its favour. If China's rare earth shipments were to stop, the immediate consequence would be that the manufacturing of many products in the US would come to a halt.

China has a high share of the global output of rare earths, so it has resorted to using this choke point as a weapon. When the issue of the Senkaku Islands came to the fore in 2010, China wielded the threat of restricting rare earth exports to pressure Japan.

The advancement of globalization has heightened many countries' dependence on exporting their goods abroad and importing raw materials. This, in turn, has made them vulnerable to significant

economic harm from restrictions on exports and imports.

The weaponization of trade policy is rampant, therefore, as nations take advantage of this situation. Major powers like the United States and China are especially prone to using trade policy this way.

The fundamental idea behind the World Trade Organization is to prevent countries from unilaterally imposing trade restrictions. When this rule functioned effectively, global trade kept growing, with each country benefiting from it.

It is ironic that as countries have become increasingly dependent on foreign trade amid globalization, major powers have found the leeway to weaponize their trade policies.

The progress in economic globalization has become a double-edged sword, simultaneously leading to increased cross-border trade on the positive side and to the greater risk of weaponizing trade policy. It is not easy to stop the major powers from engaging in such weaponization.

The concept of "optimal tariffs," which has been employed by the Trump administration in tariff negotiations, is noteworthy in terms of the strategic use of trade policy by a major power.

Optimal tariffs are an economic theory that describes a situation in which a major power can influence trade prices in its favour if it can restrict imports through tariffs. Let's look at Japan-U.S. trade in automobiles as an example.

The United States initially announced plans to impose a 27.5 per cent tariff on Japanese cars. In theory, Japanese automakers had a variety of options, ranging from maintaining their cars' export prices while adding the tariff rate to those cars' U.S. prices, to lowering their export prices by the amount of the tariff to keep their U.S. sticker prices unchanged. So, how did Japanese

companies respond in their pricing strategies?

Many chose to reduce export prices and leave their U.S. prices unchanged, in an apparent bid to not put themselves at a competitive disadvantage in the U.S. market. Additionally, Japanese automakers opted not to change U.S. sticker prices too often because while Japan-U.S. tariffs negotiations were underway, it was believed that the 27.5 per cent rate was only provisional.

For the United States, the Japanese companies' decision to forego price increases in the U.S. market meant the burden on the U.S. consumer would not increase and higher tariff revenue would go to U.S. government coffers. In other words, the United States was able to make a profit from increased tariffs. Of course, if this situation continues for a long time, Japanese manufacturers may finally raise their U.S. prices.

The tariff rate on Japanese cars was eventually cut to 15 per cent following further rounds of negotiations. Even so, it is unlikely that the U.S. prices of Japanese cars will be raised by a full 15 per cent. According to the theory of optimal tariffs, only part of the tariff rate will be passed on to prices in the US because Japanese makers will lower export prices by trimming their profits. Therefore, the increase in the burden on U.S. consumers will be limited, and the tariff revenue will benefit the United States.

Trump then drew the public's attention by floating the idea of paying \$2,000 to every American from the tariffs collected. Regardless of whether the money will be actually paid, the revenue from Trump's tariffs is that large.

The point of the theory of optimal tariffs is that for major powers, free trade with zero tariffs cannot be said to be the best choice. Major powers feel tempted to impose tariffs for various reasons.



If a foreign country levies retaliatory tariffs in response to a major power's move to raise its tariffs, both countries will end up suffering harm. In the case of small countries, it is not realistic to charge retaliatory tariffs on U.S. goods.

Thinking in terms of the theory of optimal tariffs, the best situation for small countries is one in which every country keeps tariff rates low. If this is what is conceived as free trade, it can be said to be the most desirable situation for both small countries and the world economy as well.

However, China is not a small country. If Washington weaponizes trade policy, it is possible for Beijing to retaliate against the United States. Using such choke points as rare earth shipments, China can maintain negotiating power with the United States.

The problem with free trade is that major powers can benefit by breaking its rules. This is called the beggar-thy-neighbor policy, as a country seeks to gain profits by forcing sacrifices on other countries. The Trump tariffs fall into this category, and there are similar aspects to China's policy of disrupting global competitive conditions through excessive subsidies to domestic firms.

If major powers take the beggarly approach, prompting the entire world to lean toward protectionism, many small countries as well as major ones will face adverse effects.

This is exactly why international organizations such as the WTO were established, setting rules to prevent the implementation of the beggar-thy-neighbor policy by any country and playing an important role in protecting free trade. Thanks to these rules, world trade continued to expand. The US was for many years instrumental in running the WTO.

However, the expansion of free trade has given rise to the weaponization of trade policy, leading to the adoption of the beggarly policy. The Trump administration is implementing policies that undermine the WTO system.

The weaponization of trade policy and the beggar-thy-neighbor policy bring short-term benefits to major powers, but they cannot generate long-term prosperity. It will not be an easy thing to do, but we must strive to rebuild a free and fair trade system, including restoring the function of the WTO.

The Japan News-Yomiuri Shimbun/ANN.

News Items

DISARMAMENT

PROGRAMME OF LEAGUE COMMITTEE

GENEVA, DEC.

A PRIVATE sitting of the Council of the League of Nations has approved the programme of the Preparatory Committee for a disarmament conference.

One of the outstanding items on the agenda of the conference has been disposed of amid universal satisfaction. All details of the constitution of the Disarmament Commission, together with the procedure and programme have been completed, and will undoubtedly be approved at to-morrow's sitting of the Council. The Commission will probably meet in Geneva in February. The States represented on the Council are all agreed to serve on the Commission. Invitations will now be sent to other Powers, including Germany, Russia and the United States,—Reuter.

END OF POST-WAR DEPRESSION ?

BRIGHTER INDUSTRIAL PROSPECTS

(“TIMES” SPECIAL SERVICE.) LONDON, DEC. 16.

“I FEEL that we are nearing the end of the post-war trade depression” de-clared Sir Arthur Dorman, speaking at the annual meeting of Messrs. Dorman, Long and Co., Ltd.

He regretted that the application for, aid in safeguarding the steel trade was likely to be rejected and that they would have to continue the battle unaided. “We will do it,” he added “and I believe we shall win through, but trade may suffer severely before the struggle is over.” He urged an understanding with Continental makers which, he declared, “would be to their advantage as well as to ours.”

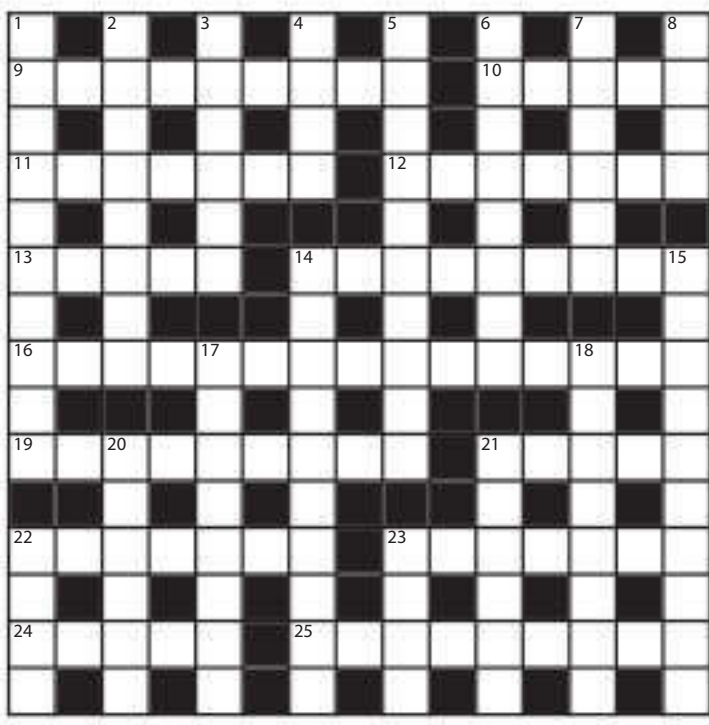
TRIBUTE TO LORD READING

INDIA'S ECONOMIC PROGRESS

LONDON, DEC.

HEADED “India's Recovery,” the Daily Chronicle, in a leading article, says that Lord Reading was entitled to point with pride to the economic side of his great Viceroyalty as reviewed in his address to the Associated Chambers of Commerce. The Daily Chronicle believes that India's national growth must increasingly seem to depend upon her economic up-building, and there Lord Reading's fame is secure as a master of architects.—Reuter.

Crossword | No. 293324



Yesterday's Solution

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ACROSS

9 Study as hard after year given 100 pounds to spend? (5,4)

10 Excellent defending one bishop on line (5)

11/8 Bluish ground shields railway next to evil 23 mound (7,4)

12 Accident close to fatal in church area (7)

13 Comes up against objection when giving coverage (5)

14 Very old man needing time to follow a TV show (4,5)

16 Military event ought to tire band in formation (9,6)

19 Back injury — ending for female's mum? (9)

21 Mike entering unconscious state — this gives pause (5)

22 Forecaster to make gain according to report (7)

23/24/7 Buy liver and consecrate for (9)

cooking in henge (7,5,6)

25 Rudely treat us as soaks (9)

DOWN

1 Lobster perhaps reddish-brown: serve in tin (10)

2 One theologian upset eating old Cypriot cheese (8)

3 Such sweet solutions could make us spry (6)

4 Change made by video assistant referee? Yes, initially (4)

5 Dances in series repeated never popular with Charles (3-3-4)

6 Section Semite coming into old Italian province (8)

7 See 23 Across

8 See 11 Across

14 Broadcast international, shooting unknown player? (6,4)

15 Revelation in ballad shortly penned by a writer (10)

17 Leader that was Zulu embraced by elevated Archdeacon Basil? (8)

18 Tiny pop star needing dollar also heard in Mali city (8)

20 Poseidon banishing east and north winds to find 1 (6)

21 Red blubber that woman slices (6)

22 Contribute online column (4)

23 Composer William has no tips for singer (4)

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 }

R&D boost to nuclear energy

The new nuclear energy Bill is a step forward for India’s nuclear goals, but managing public perception about safety will be key

The new nuclear energy Bill, presented in Parliament on Monday, comes at a time when India needs to deploy low-emission alternatives to coal-based thermal power. Growing power needs must be balanced against long-term climate goals. While renewable energy is very much a part of the arsenal, it faces specific hurdles at present in meeting the demand — riverine hydel projects in the upper reaches are exacting punishing ecological costs and solar generation still wrestles issues such as grind integration, land availability, scale, and lack of adequate storage options. Thus, nuclear energy generation, if managed with utmost care, can be a supplementary source of cleaner electricity.

Against this backdrop, the Safe Harnessing of Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill opens up the sector for private participation; it also does away with the supplier’s liability provisions of Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act 2010 and provides for a graded liability structure commensurate to generation capacity. The suppliers’ liability clause in the 2010 Act, industry players have long argued, dissuaded companies from participating in the Indian nuclear energy space. More importantly, the new Bill creates a framework to encourage indigenous research in nuclear energy, by amending the Patents Act 1970, that barred any invention in the nuclear energy space from patent recognition. Inventions may be granted patents if the Union government doesn’t deem these to be related to activities that are of a sensitive nature or have implications for national security. Given India aims to install 100 GW of nuclear capacity by 2047 — a ten-fold-plus growth from the current capacity of close to 9GW — growing local competence in the space is an imperative. Recognising intellectual property created and giving it legislative cover will go a long way in this pursuit.

The real challenge for India’s nuclear endeavours, however, will be shaping favourable public perception. Given the country’s experience with industrial accidents, and the scale of the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters, concerns about nuclear generation and its management can only be answered by convincing the public about the robustness of the safety regime the law proposes.

Sustaining export cheer needs FTA support

India’s merchandise exports in November 2025 were the highest in at least a decade. A healthy annualised growth rate of 19.38% for the month indicates resilience despite punishing tariffs imposed by the Donald Trump administration, given the US remains India’s top export destination. Beyond the role a softer rupee could have played, some experts believe that rising US-bound shipment of products that were spared the high Trump tariffs have also contributed to the export performance.

The fact that China has displaced the Netherlands as India’s third-largest export destination suggests nimble diversification by Indian exporters, who may have tapped alternative markets or transshipment hubs for the tariff-hit segments. This pivot has been reported for segments such as marine products. And any capacity to absorb the tariffs in shipments to the US would also suggest underlying strength in the segments affected, irrespective of how long the levies stay.

That said, safety nets are still needed. Trade has been weaponised by the US, and that sets a precedent for other nations to push their interests. With global trade governance now rendered toothless, India will need to actively protect its trade interests. Apart from domestic export promotion schemes, India’s efforts to secure its trade interests with various economies, including the US, through free trade agreements (FTAs) will be central to maintaining healthy export growth. Concerted efforts at further diversification of markets is also an imperative, given Trump’s US could remain a source of uncertainty.

Resilience needs both protection and reinforcement.

The path before India as Bangladesh transitions

New Delhi’s approach must balance immediate pressures with longer-term vision and tactical adjustments with strategic consistency

South Asia today presents a study in contrast. While India’s polity and economy have maintained resilience, our immediate neighbourhood faces profound transitions that will shape the regional architecture for decades to come. Bangladesh, our largest land neighbour, stands at such a crossroads. After a student-led uprising ousted the Sheikh Hasina government last year, it is scheduled to hold its first general elections on February 12, 2026. How we navigate this moment will define not merely bilateral relations, but the broader question of what kind of regional and global power India aspires to be.

Over the past 15 years, Bangladesh emerged as one of India’s most successful partnerships in South Asia, a template for what neighbourhood cooperation could achieve. This led to improved border infrastructure and connectivity, and resulted in a 600% increase in bilateral trade from 2009 to 2024. Dhaka’s decisive action against insurgent safe havens in its territory directly contributed to improved security conditions in India’s northeastern states.

What has transpired in Bangladesh since mid-2024 merits careful analysis. The economic indicators are stark. GDP growth, at 6.1% in 2023, has declined to an estimated 3.3-4% in FY25. Inflation, around 5.6% under the previous admin-

istration, surged to 10.87% by September 2025. Between July and December 2024, Bangladesh lost an estimated 2.1 million jobs. With approximately 32 million young people either unemployed or outside the education system in a population of 170 million, the World Bank projects that an additional three million Bangladeshis could be pushed into poverty in 2025. Economic distress of this magnitude creates conditions for political volatility and, historically, ideological radicalisation.

In August 2024, the interim government revoked the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir. These organisations — restricted from political activity since 2013 on grounds that their charters conflicted with Bangladesh’s secular constitution — now operate without constraints. Such developments, combined with the rising interest of Pakistan and its security agencies in Bangladesh, can have serious consequences on peace and stability in Bengal and our North East.

Concurrently, the Awami League, supported by an estimated 30% of the electorate, has been systematically removed from political participation. One need not endorse every policy of the previous administration to recognise that the effective elimination of Bangladesh’s largest secular-democratic party from the political arena represents a profound reconfiguration of the country’s institutional balance.

The treatment of religious minorities carries particular resonance for India. Between August 4-20, 2024, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian (Aikio Parishad) Unity Council documented 2,010 incidents of attacks on minority

communities across the country. An independent investigation by Prothom Alo identified 1,068 attacks in 49 districts during the same period. While subsequent months saw some decline in “reported” incidents, the pattern continuing, albeit in lower numbers, raises concerns about the security of Bangladesh’s constitutional commitment to minority protection. While current circumstances differ significantly from the refugee crisis of 1971, the potential for even a fraction of such displacement, given Bangladesh’s population, would have serious implications for India’s eastern states.

No analysis would be complete without acknowledging the broader geopolitical context. During the Beijing visit of Muhammad Yunus, the chief advisor to the interim government, in March this year, China committed \$2.1 billion in loans, investments, and grants to Bangladesh, building upon its longstanding engagement. Over the past decade, Beijing has emerged as Bangladesh’s largest trading partner and has pledged infrastructure financing that various estimates place between \$24-50 billion.

India has consistently maintained that Bangladesh’s external partnerships are matters of its sovereign choice. However, the concentration of strategic assets such as ports, telecom infrastructure, energy facilities under external financing arrangements should engage India’s interest, which lies in maintaining a balanced regional security architecture, particularly in the Bay of Bengal.

It is within this comprehensive context that the question of extradition of Sheikh Hasina, should Bangladesh’s current authorities formally request her



Harsh Vardhan Shringla



The manner in which India handles this situation will be observed not only in Dhaka but in capitals across South Asia.

AFP

return, must be considered. India would naturally examine any such request through appropriate legal and diplomatic channels. The India-Bangladesh Extradition Treaty provides the relevant framework. This is not a matter for unilateral decision-making or political expediency; it is a question of legal process, treaty obligations, and sovereign discretion. That said, extradition treaties universally recognise that States retain discretion, particularly in cases involving political persecution or capital punishment, given the questions of legal standards, humanitarian concerns, diplomatic implications, and crucially, regional stability.

Nations develop reputations not merely through what they do in moments of alignment, but through how they respond when partners face adversity. The manner in which India handles this situation will be observed not only in Dhaka but in capitals across South Asia.

India’s response in this moment, therefore, carries significance beyond the bilateral relationship with Bangladesh. It concerns the kind of predictability and reliability that India projects as a regional partner and the degree to which our partnerships are understood to have durability even when political fortunes shift.

As India considers its approach in the months ahead, several elements might inform a balanced strategy. Its approach

must, therefore, rest on a calibrated and principled engagement that is both legally sound and strategically far-sighted.

At the same time, New Delhi should continue to encourage conditions that allow Bangladesh to have a credible and inclusive electoral process, recognising that the exclusion of its largest secular party poses serious questions about the legitimacy and the sustainability of post-election stability.

Economic considerations must also remain central, knowing that rising unemployment, inflation, and social pressures create fertile ground for radicalisation and instability that would inevitably spill across borders.

Above all, India’s conduct should aim to signal continuity and principle: Balancing legal obligations with humanitarian concerns, treaty commitments with strategic foresight, and bilateral sensitivities with the broader need to preserve stability across South Asia.

India’s approach to a neighbourhood in transition must balance immediate pressures with longer-term vision, tactical adjustments with strategic consistency, and the recognition that how we treat partners during moments of adversity shapes the partnerships available to us in moments of stability.

Harsh Vardhan Shringla is a Rajya Sabha MP and former foreign secretary. The views expressed are personal

Tagore’s role in adoption of India’s National Song

The 150th anniversary of *Vande Mataram* — India’s National Song penned by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee — is being celebrated with much fanfare. While the song is being extolled for its patriotic and cultural virtues, the narrative being forwarded about its truncation in 1937 — which is silent about Rabindranath Tagore’s role in this — is flawed.

It was indeed Tagore who set the first stanza of *Vande Mataram* to tune while Chatterjee was still alive. Tagore mentioned in a letter in October 1937 to Jawaharlal Nehru about singing it in the presence of the latter. He added that he was also the “first person” to sing *Vande Mataram* “before a gathering of the Calcutta Congress,” most likely in 1896. While this has found mention in the many pieces that have been published in the past few weeks, Tagore’s critical role in truncating the song has either been ignored or glossed over.

Tagore’s intervention occurred against the backdrop of the growing antipathy of the Muslim League towards *Vande Mataram* in the 1930s. In 1938, at the Calcutta session of the Muslim League, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, declared in his presidential speech that the Congress, then in government in several provinces, was trying to “impose the *Vande Mataram* song in the legislatures” causing “bitterness and opposition.” The same year, at Karachi, Jinnah asserted that *Vande Mataram* was “not only idolatrous but also its origin and conception a hymn of hatred to Muslims.”

The Congress was aware of these sentiments with Rajendra Prasad writing to Vallabhbhai Patel in September 1937, noting that many Muslims object to *Vande Mataram* on the ground that it was an “invocation to a Hindu Goddess” and akin to “idol worship.”

The public controversy over *Vande Mataram* made Nehru and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose — both members of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) — turn in 1937 to the only person who they felt had the authority to decide the controversy, namely Tagore. Bose had also got in touch with Ramananda Chatterjee, the editor of *Modern Review*. Ramananda Chatterjee published a strong editorial in the journal in support of *Vande Mataram* in light of what he called its impending “trial” by the Congress.

Tagore was well aware of not only the Muslim sentiments against *Vande Mataram* but also the anti-Muslim rhetoric of *Anandamath*, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s novel, of which the song was a part.

Tagore came up with a nuanced solution when he wrote to Nehru distinguishing the first section of the song from the rest, saying the “spirit of tenderness and devotion expressed in its first portion, the emphasis it gave to beautiful and beneficent aspects of our motherland,” could be dissociated “from the rest of the

poem and from those portions of the book of which it is a part.” Tagore added that the second part of the poem and the novel also contradicted his and his family’s “monotheistic ideals.” In effect, he dissociated the first portion of *Vande Mataram* from both its remainder, but also from the novel by conceding that the entire poem “read together with its context, is liable to be interpreted in ways that might wound Muslim susceptibilities.”

He concluded by offering a compromise where he suggested a truncated version where a “national song though derived from it, which has spontaneously come to consist only of the first two stanzas of the original poem, need not remind us every time of the whole of it, much less the story with which it was accidentally associated.” This, he felt, had “nothing to offend any sect or community.”

Tagore’s letter, which was published in Calcutta’s popular dailies, triggered outrage among some people in Bengal. The *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, in an editorial published the same day Tagore’s letter was published, noted that the Congress had “succumbed to communalism and communal elements.” The next day it ran another editorial asking why the truncated version of the song was the accepted version of the Congress as the National Song. Some of those disgruntled by the Congress’s decision took to the streets, singing *Vande Mataram* even as the Congress’s senior leaders like Nehru, Bose and Mahatma Gandhi were still in the city.

The November issue of a popular Bengali journal carried a strong editorial against the Congress and was critical of Tagore too. It quoted Tagore’s letter to Nehru and said that Bengalis as well as other Indians who loved *Vande Mataram* were dissatisfied with the poet’s views. It contended that Muslims too had sung *Vande Mataram* with enthusiasm and noted that the mere mention of gods and goddesses in a poem or song did not amount to idolatry. It also argued that all members of the CWC, with the exception of Bose, were ‘non-Bengalis’ and unlikely to have any sympathy for *Vande Mataram*. It ended with a ringing endorsement of *Vande Mataram*, exhorting Bengalis to sing the song at all functions. The editorial ended with the words “*Vande Mataram*”.

Tagore’s solution was, however, readily accepted by the CWC, which met in Calcutta in end-October, and passed a resolution declaring that the “first two stanzas” of the song are “a living and inseparable part of our national movement,” adding that the other stanzas “contain certain allusions and a religious ideology which may not be in keeping with the ideology of other religious groups in India.” Nehru himself noted that *Vande Mataram* had become “a slogan of power,” but felt it was “never sung as a challenge to any group or community.” A little less than a century after Tagore’s intervention, it’s his compromise solution that is at the centre of a controversy with the ruling dispensation likening it to a division of the country. However, the truncation of the song is being blamed solely on the Congress under whose watch this had happened. The complex history behind the shortening of the song and Tagore’s reasoning behind it are entirely missing from this narrative.



Ronojoy Sen

Ronojoy Sen is with the National University of Singapore. He is currently working on an intellectual history of Hindu nationalism. The views expressed are personal

{ PARVATHANENI HARISH }

PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF INDIA TO THE UN

The current UNSC configuration is largely frozen in time. Reforming it to make it fit-for-purpose to tackle contemporary challenges is an urgent global imperative

Remarks made during the UNSC open debate on “Leadership for Peace”

Set targets for clean air in the national Capital

Amid rapidly deteriorating air quality, the Delhi government recently announced a series of emergency measures, including the formation of a high-level committee tasked with finalising an air-pollution control plan for 2026. A serious health hazard, toxic air is also choking India’s economic potential — reducing labour productivity, impacting businesses and driving up health care expenditure.

Air pollution does not respect administrative boundaries. The formation of the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), which looks at Delhi-NCR and adjoining areas, was a step in the right direction. This approach needs to be augmented with coordinated action across different departments — transport, urban development, agriculture, industry and municipal bodies — bolstered by clear roles, generous incentives and firm penalties.

A 30% reduction in PM2.5 across Delhi-NCR over the next three years must be set as a regional goal to push the system to go beyond incremental improvements. An integrated cross-sectoral monitoring framework that measures actions across departments can strengthen horizontal coordination among agencies and vertical alignment of policies and actions. Achieving these goals calls for well-defined, annual measurable responsibilities mapped to relevant departments and backed by a strong political consensus across NCR.

While disaggregated monitoring can ensure stronger accountability, the institutionalisation of targeted, local-level enforcement is also needed. With hyperlocal air quality data, authorities can identify pollution hotspots in real time and take rapid corrective action.

To reduce emissions from the transport sector, governments must expand mass transit systems such as electric buses, walking and cycling, along with making clean transport alternatives more affordable and accessible. A segment-wise mandate for zero-emission vehicles recognises that different types of vehicles face different technological and economic challenges. Setting specific targets for different categories of vehicles will send clear market

signals and hasten a shift to clean mobility. NCR needs a unified data system that monitors and audits pollution sources. A single portal to aggregate data from sensors across construction sites can also ensure the information is simultaneously relayed to the relevant departments for on-ground action. Standardised audit processes, across NCR, will also ensure uniform accountability and quicker responses across the region.

There is also a need to address dust-intensive activities through technological innovations. Promoting “prefab” and making clean construction methods more affordable and widespread can cut particulate matter pollution.

Open burning of municipal solid waste is another contributor to air pollution. The lack of adequate waste processing infrastructure is a critical gap and cities must invest in creating a network of decentralised waste management and compost systems.

For tackling air pollution, behavioural change is key — whether it is discouraging burning of waste, limiting the use of personal vehicles, or adopting best practices in industrial settings. This is aligned with the government’s Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment).

Governments must set realistic behaviour-focused goals and pursue them through a sequence of targeted actions: public appeals, sustained engagement, clear targets, enabling infrastructure, continuous monitoring, and recognition for positive outcomes. Companies should proactively identify emission sources within operations and supply chains, assessing the business benefits of reducing pollution and implementing mitigation measures. Regular monitoring and transparent reporting are critical to building credibility and driving improvements.

With a clear three-year plan, measurable targets, strong enforcement and citizen participation, India can rewrite its pollution story.

Pawan Mulukutla is executive programme director (Integrated Transport, Clean Air and Hydrogen), and Sree Kumar Kumaraswamy is programme director (Clean Air Action), WRI India. The views expressed are personal



Stepping stone

India's nuclear governance needs regulatory independence

Nuclear power contributed only around 3% of the electricity generated in India in 2024-25. The government has set a target to install 100 GW of nuclear capacity by 2047, including from at least five indigenous small modular reactors by 2033. In this picture, the SHANTI Bill proposes to change who can legally build and operate civil nuclear facilities. By allowing the Centre to permit nuclear energy activities through licences to government entities, joint ventures and “any other company” (subject to conditions), SHANTI indicates that the intended new class of operators is domestic private capital rather than foreign plant owners. India being able to meet its 100 GW target will indeed require large capital mobilisation, and allowing licensed non-government entities expands the roster of entities that can share the construction risk. SHANTI also seeks to keep the most sensitive fuel cycles in state control while holding room for private participation in plant delivery and parts of the supply chain, reducing scope of commercial entry to those segments most relevant to scale power generation and keeping functions sensitive to nuclear proliferation with the state. The Bill could also mitigate the legal ambiguity new entrants face by putting safety, enforcement and dispute resolution and the terms of participation in the same statute. This could also reduce transaction costs for developers and shrink site approval and commissioning timelines.

However, the Bill's liability and governance provisions warrant caution. The maximum operator liability for a nuclear incident is ₹3,000 crore. The Centre is liable for nuclear damage beyond the operator's cap and can also assume full liability for a non-government installation if in the public interest. These choices make investment risk easier to price but also ask whether the capped operator amount is adequate for victims and for environmental remediation. Second, SHANTI requires operators to maintain insurance or other financial security, but exempts the Centre's nuclear installations, rendering clear public accounting very important. It also allows operator recourse only when expressly provided in a written contract or when an incident is due to an act or an omission with the intent to cause nuclear damage. This makes supplier accountability depend largely on what the operator secures by contract, which means how much recourse the operator has against suppliers can vary across projects. Finally, India's nuclear governance needs to address its regulator's independence. While SHANTI creates a statutory framework, it also vests significant influence in appointments with the Centre and the Atomic Energy Commission. This is still not conducive to increasing public trust and may also deter investor confidence.

Blatant foul

U.S.'s militarised approach to Venezuela is a violation of international law

In line with a series of hostile moves, the U.S. seized a Venezuelan oil tanker, *Skipper*, on December 10. Venezuela called it the latest example of Washington's “piracy, kidnapping, theft of private property, extrajudicial executions in international waters”. The tanker was part of Venezuela's ongoing efforts to support Cuba through subsidised oil shipments, with proceeds from resale to China providing Havana crucial revenue. For decades, Venezuela has sent oil to Cuba at highly subsidised prices, with Cuba sending doctors and security professionals to Venezuela. The seizure represents a troubling escalation in U.S. policy toward Venezuela under President Nicolás Maduro. It is also clear that the U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, a major hawk on U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba, has sought to disrupt one of the island nation's economic lifelines. The overt moves to engineer regime change in Venezuela and other brazen acts mark a new low in U.S. foreign policy, recalling the interventionist era of its Monroe Doctrine in Latin America.

Before the seizure of *Skipper*, the U.S. had also conducted strikes in Caribbean waters on boats that Washington alleged were used by drug traffickers. These attacks appear to constitute acts of war carried out without clear legislative authorisation. The Trump administration insists that the operations are part of its “war on drugs”, but has not presented credible evidence to link Mr. Maduro to cartels or to drug trafficking networks. To be clear, Mr. Maduro is credibly accused of manipulating the results in the 2024 presidential elections and his government also bears substantial responsibility for Venezuela's crippling economic collapse. But, acknowledging its failures does nothing to justify the Trump administration's hostile approach. Be it the disproportionate economic sanctions that hurt Venezuela's ability to sell its crude oil, covert actions to take down the Maduro presidency, the ill-conceived recognition of an opposition politician, Juan Guaidó, as President, or the extrajudicial killings in the Caribbean and the seizure of the oil tanker, these actions are tantamount to flouting the rules of the international order that the U.S. purports to uphold. The parallel with U.S. policy towards Cuba since the Cuban Revolution in the 1950s is instructive. The U.S. has maintained an embargo on trade to force regime change in the island nation. The world must condemn these moves, even while maintaining the critique of the Venezuelan regime. A principled defence of international law that applies equally to all actors, including the rich and the powerful, is an imperative so that the world does not descend further into anarchy.

Hope is not a strategy. For most of this year, European leaders have hoped that the Trump Administration has not actually meant its President's oscillating support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), its Vice-President's berating his European hosts in Munich over their liberal values and immigration policies, President Donald Trump's tirade against migration at the United Nations, and of course his mercurial support for Ukraine. The hope was that, all things considered, America would ultimately stand with Europe.

The Trump Administration's National Security Strategy – a 33 page document that spends much time congratulating the President for saving America from apparently terminal decline as it charts an unapologetically MAGA-esque America-first mercantilist position – appears not to notice Africa, Australia and New Zealand. It sweeps by Asia as it focuses strongly on perceived trade imbalances with China and lands squarely on a defence of the ‘Western Hemisphere’ according to American interests while lamenting the decline of Europe. Europe is a problem, not an ally.

The stand on Europe

In ‘Promoting European Greatness’, the NSS warns of Europe's ‘civilizational erasure’, precipitated by the European Union (EU)'s policies on migration and freedom of speech, ‘the suppression of political opposition’, and the ‘loss of national identities and self-confidence’. In case there was any doubt about which migrants were unwelcome, the NSS declares that if Europe continues on its present trajectory, ‘within a few decades ... certain NATO members will become majority non-European’. The U.S. will help Europe regain its ‘former greatness’ by choosing ‘patriotic European parties’ to promote what this administration views as ‘genuine democracy’ and ‘unapologetic celebrations of European nations’ individual character and history’. To most Europeans, at best this reads as a meddling in the internal politics of sovereign nations, and at worst as regime change.

Europe, the NSS states, needs to stand on its own feet, assume ‘primary responsibility for its own defense’ and re-establish ‘strategic stability with Russia’. NATO ‘cannot be a perpetually expanding alliance’, a warning of course to Ukraine, but also an interesting glossing over of Sweden and Finland's accession to the alliance after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. In this document, the threat is not Russia and its



Privanjali Malik

writes on nuclear politics and security

With the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy making it clear that American support to Europe is now faint, it remains to be seen how Europe responds

invasion of a sovereign nation, but Europe's cultural decay. The tramp of the jackboots of 1930s Europe echos with every mention of civilisational decline.

Of course, an administration's national security strategy is not policy, but a guide to its thinking. They can and have been over-ridden by events, most notably George H.W. Bush's 1990 NSS, which was overtaken by the fall of the Berlin Wall, German reunification and the first Gulf War. Observers could chart the evolution of the administration's thinking in the two subsequent iterations of 1991 and 1993.

As a high-level document, the NSS often provides the lens through which to interpret an administration's foreign policy goals and is assumed to set the tone for the administration's national defence strategy, its Quadrennial Defense Review and national military strategy. Mr. Trump's famously mercurial nature might caution against viewing it as declared policy. However, given that this is a Congress-mandated document, it is more than just a rhetorical exercise: while it should not be taken literally, it should be taken seriously.

What Europe's response could be

As the dust settles, Europe now faces three options in responding: it can ignore the NSS and hope that it will go away; its leaders can dial up their flattery of Mr. Trump in the hope that he will change his mind on Europe; or Europe can face up to the prospect that Mr. Trump's America is not a reliable ally and that they will need to fend for themselves.

Europe tried a mixture of the first two strategies after J.D. Vance's outburst at the Munich Security Conference. After some tepid talk of needing to pull together to see off Russian President Vladimir Putin's ‘imperialist’ ambitions in trying to ‘rewrite history’ or the need for Europe to wean itself off U.S. dependence, Europe doubled down on doing whatever it would take to keep America in NATO and Europe. Britain flattered Mr. Trump with an invitation for an unprecedented second state visit. Germany's Friedrich Merz forgot about his observations of February this year as Chancellor-in-waiting that his ‘absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe ... so that ... we can really achieve independence from the USA’.

Germany has since abandoned half-explored plans of developing European capabilities and ordered more American military kit, which is



dependent on American intelligence to work. NATO's Hague Summit of June this year will be remembered as much for European states agreeing to raise their military spending to 5% of GDP as for Secretary-General Mark Rutte's calling Mr. Trump ‘Daddy’.

The third option will not be easy. Europe has never defended itself as an entity and there is no concept of integrated European defence. Even limited projects of joint development of military kit tend not to get very far, as the stalled Franco-German project on sixth generation fighter jets demonstrates. If the U.S. pulls American troops out of Europe – as this administration has periodically hinted it might do – then Europe will have a serious manpower problem that experiments in ‘voluntary’ conscription will not even begin to address. Then there is the question of nuclear deterrence and Britain's uneasy post-Brexit relationship with the EU and Europe.

The state of the world order

How Europe responds will have implications beyond the continent. Mr. Trump's NSS, with its attack on transnational institutions (that he insists ‘undermine political liberty and sovereignty’), its dismantling of the post-war trading order in favour of a mercantilist America-first policy; and the signalling of a U.S. retreat into its own ‘Hemisphere’ (however that might be defined, and

with the implication that China and Russia are free to carve up the rest of the world as long as they do not impinge on America's trading footprint) have profound implications for the rest of the world. The post-war world order that America helped shape and uphold is imperfect and crumbling. The power imbalances at the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions that help anchor expectations of peace, security, development and trade reflect an outdated world order. But, however imperfect this rules-based system might be, it is still a bulwark against a descent into a Hobbesian free-for-all, where might makes right.

The debate about this National Security Strategy is, therefore, not about a document that might shed light on an administration's thinking. It is about whether Europe chooses to defend a rules-based liberal order or defers to a President whose transactional and racist view of the world will have consequences that stretch far beyond his borders.

The three revolutions reshaping American power

When United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio proposed restructuring the G-20 into an elite “inner caucus” of powerful states, it should have dominated the week's geopolitical news. It signalled a major reordering of global economic governance, shifting rule-making to a narrower group and weakening emerging economies. Yet, the proposal barely registered. It was immediately eclipsed by the release of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), that embodied the same underlying ideological shift. Days later, the Heritage Foundation, the intellectual core of U.S. President Donald Trump's MAGA project, issued its own blueprint, Restoring America's Promise: 2025-26.

The alignment between the G-20 restructuring, the NSS, and Heritage 2026 reveals three simultaneous revolutions in American statecraft: a transformation of political morality, a recasting of foreign policy, and a restructuring of global economic governance. The common thread is the institutionalisation of exclusion and the acceptance of unequal burdens as policy design rather than error. In this sense, cruelty functions as an analytical term, capturing a system in which harm is anticipated, normalised, and strategically deployed.

Shrinking of civic space

The first revolution is internal. Mr. Trump's political project dismantled the traditional moral architecture of American public life. Norms of restraint, institutional deference and civic responsibility gave way to an ethos where transgression signalled authenticity and the erosion of shame became a political asset. The NSS integrates this shift into formal doctrine by treating internal cultural cohesion, ideological alignment and demographic stability as national security requirements.

The Heritage document demands bureaucratic remaking, ideological vetting, and mass personnel turnover. The NSS echoes this through sovereign autonomy, institutional suspicion and domestic culture as security treating independent institutions not as correctives but as obstacles to political will.

Cruelty here takes the form of permissive



Anil Raman

is Research Fellow, Takshashila Institution and a retired brigadier

The central thread around the internal, external and economic policies is an ‘architecture of cruelty’, where harm is anticipated, normalised, and strategically deployed

indifference: hardship from administrative purges, narrowing civic space, or punitive regulatory change is not acknowledged as collateral damage but folded seamlessly into the architecture of governance.

Foreign policy around conditionality

The second revolution is external. The U.S. traditionally relied on predictable commitments and institutional stability. Even Mr. Trump's first-term disruptions occurred within recognisable boundaries. The 2025 NSS departs sharply from this tradition.

Alliances are reframed as conditional transactional contracts with obligations justified continuously. The Western Hemisphere displaces Europe and the Indo-Pacific as the primary theatre, reviving the Monroe Doctrine. Migration, a domestic concern, is elevated into the central security threat, while institutions once amplifying American power are described as constraints on sovereignty.

The Heritage document provides the ideological framework. It frames multilateral bodies as infringements of sovereignty, border control as geopolitics, and allied compliance as contingent on ideological alignment, not shared interest.

The result is neither isolationism nor traditional realism. It is selective dominance: assertion where leverage is high, retreat where obligations are costly, and judging partnerships by conformity not capability. The structural effect is fragile alliances, revisionist adversaries and a fragmentation of global order.

The third revolution is economic. Mr. Rubio's G-20 proposal is not an administrative adjustment but the formalisation of a tiered global economy, an architecture of privileged rule-makers and peripheral rule-takers. Decision-making on debt relief, trade standards and climate finance will consolidate within a narrower circle of states with the capacity to shape outcomes.

The NSS fits precisely within this trajectory. Its emphasis on reshoring, tariff leverage and industrial sovereignty promoted toward a hemispheric economic model centred on North

America. Heritage 2026 expands on the logic: globalisation is treated as a strategic vulnerability and multilateral economic systems as threats to national autonomy.

The consequences will be felt disproportionately by countries with limited negotiation power. Debt restructuring will become more conditional, supply chain diversification more politically selective, and access to global capital more closely tied to geopolitical alignment. The predictable hardship that follows, from inflationary pressures to disrupted export markets, will fall on global and domestic workers.

Cruelty here is systemic: unequal distribution of economic pain is treated as a mechanism for stabilising a more hierarchical global order

A return of imperial logic

Across these three revolutions runs a common thread: the restoration of a colonial-imperial mindset. Not territorial colonialism but a structural world-view built on hierarchy, entitlement, and the presumption that the strong may impose costs while the weak absorb them.

The NSS provides bureaucratic vocabulary; the Heritage supplies the ideological foundations.

The analytical utility of cruelty lies in naming this organising logic. It captures a system where the suffering generated by policy is neither incidental nor unfortunate but integrated into the functioning of the political and economic order.

The G-20 restructuring and the 2025 NSS are manifestations of the same deeper shift. The world is entering an era where the U.S. seeks to protect its sovereignty through contraction, assert influence through hierarchy, and reshape global governance through exclusion.

The final irony is that the victims of this reordering are not confined to distant shores. They live in Maputo and Dhaka, yes, but also in Harlan, Kentucky. The architecture of cruelty is global, but its consequences are intimate. It reaches the world, but it also circles back home.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MGNREGA replaced

Twenty years since the initiation of MGNREGA, a welfare policy that assured 100 days of guaranteed employment has seen an erosion and the addition of political colour. Welfare schemes, irrespective of political differences, should be left untouched and all-out efforts must be made to continue and

improve the schemes, which should be the foremost priority for effective governance. The name change is inappropriate; equally so the increased financial burden on States. **Balasubramaniam Pavani,** Secunderabad

The proposed restructuring of NREGA, shifting nearly

40% of the funding onus to States, is a major alteration of a consequential social safety net. The Bill warrants scrutiny by a Parliamentary Standing Committee, given its implications for rural livelihoods, fiscal federalism and constitutional balance. States differ vastly in fiscal capacity. So, transferring expenditure responsibility without assured revenue

devolution risks hollowing out the programme where it is needed most. The Finance Commission ought to append clear recommendations on compensatory devolution, either through enhanced tax shares or a dedicated fund pool for employment guarantees.

R. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Renaming/replacing the MGNREGA Act with the ‘Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin)’ Bill marks a shift from a proven, rights-based employment guarantee to political rebranding. While increasing workdays is welcome, it could have been done through amendments. By altering funding responsibilities and

weakening central commitment, the move risks undermining rural livelihoods, cooperative federalism, and the credibility of a long-standing social safety net.

N. Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

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

India and the U.S.: 2005 versus 2025

In 2005, when I served on the Prime Minister’s Task Force on Global Strategic Developments chaired by K. Subrahmanyam, India and the U.S. stood at the threshold of a historic transformation. Washington had declared that it wished to “help India become a major world power in the 21st century.” It was an extraordinary statement, not merely because of what it promised but because of the confidence it reflected. The U.S. then still believed that strengthening responsible rising powers would strengthen the world. That belief seemed to form, for many, the bedrock of the civil nuclear breakthrough and of a strategic partnership built on a shared sense of possibility.

The U.S.’s retreat
Reading the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) is therefore an unsettling experience. The document is saturated with self-praise. It claims to have “brought our nation – and the world – back from the brink of catastrophe and disaster” and asserts that “no administration in history has achieved so dramatic a turnaround in so short a time.” But this assertiveness feels defensive. It projects a nation unsure of its place in a world it no longer fully comprehends, yet unwilling to concede that uncertainty even to itself. The result is a strategy that is less a map for global action and more an exercise in national reassurance. The contrast with the intellectual spirit of 2005 could not be sharper. Then, Washington spoke the language of partnership. Today, it speaks the language of burdens. “The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over,” the strategy declares. Global leadership, once embraced with ease, is now treated as a cost to be minimised. The overriding imperative is not to elevate the international system but to lighten America’s load. Nowhere is this shift more stark than in the treatment of India. Cooperation is acknowledged but



Amitabh Mattoo

Dean and Professor, School of International Studies, JNU; and former Member National Security Advisory Board

is instrumental. India is framed less as a civilisational actor and more as a component in America’s China calculus. The NSS states that the U.S. must “continue to improve commercial (and other) relations with India to encourage New Delhi to contribute to Indo-Pacific security, including through continued quadrilateral cooperation with... ‘the Quad’.” In this framing, India is not an end in itself but a means to a balance-of-power arrangement the U.S. seeks to preserve. In 2005, India’s rise was an objective; now, it is a function. This narrowing is part of a broader retreat from internationalist confidence. The so-called Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, declaring an intent to “assert and enforce” hemispheric exclusivity, speaks to a nation turning inward. The irony is difficult to miss. In 2005, when India spoke of strategic autonomy, many in Washington bristled. In 2025, when America claims an expansive and unilateral autonomy, it calls it realism. The document’s tone reinforces this inwardness. It catalogues a series of claimed diplomatic triumphs, resolving multiple global conflicts “from Cambodia and Thailand” to “Pakistan and India”. These read less like diplomatic achievements and more like political assertions crafted for domestic effect. Strategy becomes performance, and performance becomes a substitute for engagement with the world’s real fissures. For India, the implications are clear. The U.S. that sought to create strategic space for India in 2005 is not the U.S. reflected in the NSS – it is preoccupied with its own vulnerabilities, identity, and hierarchy of burdens. It demands more from partners yet offers less in return. It speaks of shared interests while retreating from shared responsibilities. It calls for burden-sharing but often means burden-shifting. This does not diminish the importance of India-U.S. cooperation. It simply changes its

foundations. India cannot rely on the assumption that Washington will invest in India’s rise as a matter of strategic design. India’s rise will depend on India. Partnership will endure where interests converge and remain measured where they do not. As the NSS itself insists, partners must increasingly “assume primary responsibility for their regions,” a polite but unmistakable signal that U.S. support will be conditional and limited. **The path forward**
The lesson of 2005 remains valuable because it reminds us of the conditions under which strategic transformations occur: confidence on both sides and a belief that the other’s ascent strengthens one’s own. The 2025 strategy lacks that confidence. It is shaped by grievance at past overreach, suspicion of institutions, and a preoccupation with restoring an earlier notion of American primacy. India therefore must resist the temptation to interpret this document through the lens of earlier hopes. The era that produced the civil nuclear breakthrough was an era of widening horizons for both India and the U.S. The era that produced this strategy is one of contracting horizons for the U.S. and expanding responsibilities for India. If India is to be a major world power in the 21st century, it will not be because any external actor wills it. It will be because India possesses the strategic confidence and material capacity to act independently within a fragmented global order. Paradoxically, the 2025 strategy makes that reality clearer than its authors intend. By reducing the scope of American commitments, it widens the space for others. For India, the challenge is not to fill a vacuum but to craft a role suited to its scale, interests, and civilisational temperament. The assumptions of 2005 cannot return, but the aspiration that animated them is ours to pursue.



In a state of political flux

Leadership issues plague the two major parties in Karnataka

STATE OF PLAY

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Karnataka politics seems to be undergoing a churn with leadership tussles in two national parties emerging prominently in public discourse. If the tussle in the ruling Congress over the last few months has taken the focus away from governance issues to the so-called “secret understanding” over the sharing of power, the fractured State unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is losing out on opportunities to corner the Congress both on governance and political issues. In the Congress, a recent breakfast meeting in Bengaluru between Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, who is also the president of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee, was believed to have brought temporary truce between them and their factions ahead of the ongoing winter session of the Assembly at Belagavi. The conversation on the yet-to-be-publicly-acknowledged power-sharing agreement between the two leaders, and public statements by their followers, had threatened to embarrass the party and provide fodder to the BJP attack the government during the session. However, the fragile understanding arrived at during the breakfast meeting, after a nudge from the party’s high command, gave way at the very start of the session. MLC Yathindra Siddharamaiah, who is the son of the Chief Minister, rekindled the issue by stating his “personal view” that his father would head the government for the full term, spawning a series of reactions. While both Mr. Siddaramaiah and Mr. Shivakumar

have deferred the leadership decision to the high command, several party leaders are keen on an early resolution, so the party can move forward. Ambitious second-rung leaders are also quietly making their moves to further their political careers. Some have even said that they are anxious that the government’s image is taking a beating because of the unresolved leadership issue and may impact the next Assembly elections – still two and a half years away. The constant chatter about whether or not there will be a Cabinet reshuffle or expansion – with the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister camps divided on the issue – is only adding to the atmosphere of confusion. Amid the unending debate on leadership, the government is accused of falling short in carrying out developmental work. It is also facing the burden of spending about ₹60,000 crore annually to implement the Congress’s five flagship guarantee schemes. Despite these issues, the BJP’s ability to put the government on the mat is dented due to the friction in the party over B.Y. Vijayendra’s leadership in the State unit. A section of BJP legislators and leaders have been opposed to the elevation of Mr. Vijayendra, son of Lingayat strongman and former Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa, as the State BJP president. Senior lawmaker Basannagouda Patil Yatnal has been ex-

pelled from the BJP for repeatedly expressing in public his views against the party chief, but Mr. Vijayendra has more detractors within the party. With a new BJP president, Nitin Nabin, set to take office at the national level, the party is hoping for an early end to dissidence. In the legislature in the ongoing Belagavi session, the BJP also appears to lack the teeth to attack the Congress. The Congress top leadership has been in the Assembly for over three decades and the party also has a large number of second-rung leaders. On the other hand, the saffron party’s senior leadership has limited presence in the legislature. For example, two former Chief Ministers from the party – Jagadish Shettar and Basavaraj Bommai – are now in Parliament. Only a few leaders are capable of holding fort in the Assembly. Meanwhile, the BJP’s National Democratic Alliance ally, Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], the regional party that celebrated its silver jubilee this year, is looking to elevate Nikhil Kumaraswamy, the grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, in the party’s hierarchy. As the JD(S) fights to hold on to its turf, Mr. Nikhil Kumaraswamy’s father is for the most part tied up in New Delhi as a Central Minister. The party has recently recast its committees, but is holding back on announcing the State president. There are reasons for this: G.T. Deve Gowda, a senior Vokkaliga leader who has a sizeable following in the Old Mysore district, is now ignored and a few other legislators too are believed to be unhappy in the party. The JD(S) appears to providing the family’s scion, who has faced three electoral defeats, a chance to cut his teeth in politics.

Women more willing to donate organs posthumously in India

In 17 out of 21 major States, more women were willing to donate organs posthumously than men

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

India belongs to a small cluster of nations where living organ donations vastly outnumber deceased organ donations. Ironically, this is not due to a lack of intent; data indicate that posthumous organ donation intent among Indians is relatively high. Crucially, women showed a greater willingness to donate organs after death. This sentiment aligns with the reality that women continue to shoulder the burden of donations. However, men significantly outnumber women among organ recipients – a trend that data suggest is driven not only by social factors, but potentially by a higher need among men. These insights stem from an analysis of Indian driving license applications submitted in 2024, which explicitly asked applicants if they were willing to donate their organs or tissue in the event of death. **Chart 1** illustrates the State-wise percentage of men and women who answered ‘yes’. This trend holds true even in populous States such as Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, where willingness among women ranged from 17% to 21%, while men lagged behind in the 12% to 19% range. The highest level of willingness among women was seen in Delhi (approximately 27%). This far outstripped the male share of 16%. Meanwhile, Odisha led the charts for men with a national high of 20%; yet even in that State, women were more willing, at 22%.

However, there are caveats. First, stated intent differs from action. Second, the data are skewed towards a younger demographic typical of new license applicants, though they do include renewals. Yet, the potential is undeniable: if even a fraction of these pledges

translated into reality, it would transform India’s donation landscape, where transplants from deceased donors have only been fewer than 24,000 in the last decade. **Chart 2**, which plots the 2024 data across 77 countries, lays bare this disparity. While India ranks a respectable 20th globally for living donors (10.8 living donors per million), it plummets to 67th for deceased donors (0.8 deceased donors per million). When read together, Charts 1 and 2 raise a pertinent question. We know that public willingness is high, and the robust figures for living transplants prove that the medical infrastructure is capable. This suggests that the failure lies somewhere in the middle, in the systemic disconnect between a citizen’s intent and the hospital’s ability to execute it. The gender skew in Chart 1 is noticeable. Of the 21 major States for which data were considered, more women were willing to donate organs in 17. So, higher willingness could also explain why women donate more organs than men. In 2023, over 60% of donors were women (**Chart 3**). In sharp contrast, when we look at organ recipients, in 2023, nearly 65% were men. This is a lopsided ratio that reflects a long-standing and persistent skew in India’s transplant ecosystem. **Chart 3** details the organ-wise breakdown of recipients in 2023. The share of male recipients was distinctly higher than that of women across every category. In the case of liver transplants, men accounted for a staggering 70% of recipients in 2023. Does this reflect a higher medical need? An earlier analysis by us revealed that in 2022, 4.5 times more men than women died of liver disease – a gap that has widened over the last decade (**Chart 4**). Crucially, these deaths were concentrated among middle-aged men, pointing to alcohol-related complications as a primary driver.

Skewed donor gap

The data for the charts were sourced from NOTTO’s annual reports, the Global Observatory on Donation and Transplantation, and MCCD reports

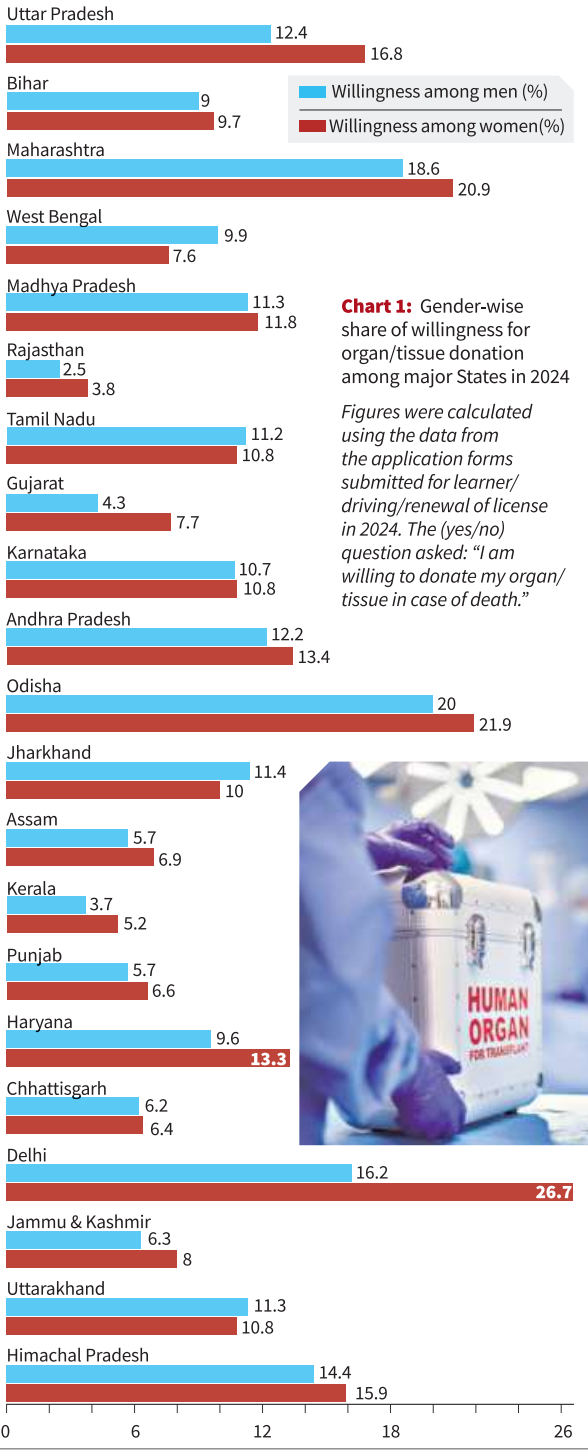


Chart 1: Gender-wise share of willingness for organ/tissue donation among major States in 2024. Figures were calculated using the data from the application forms submitted for learner/driving/renewal of license in 2024. The (yes/no) question asked: “I am willing to donate my organ/tissue in case of death.”

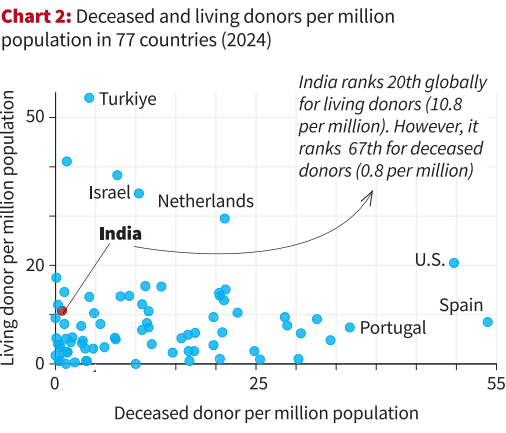


Chart 2: Deceased and living donors per million population in 77 countries (2024). India ranks 20th globally for living donors (10.8 per million). However, it ranks 67th for deceased donors (0.8 per million).

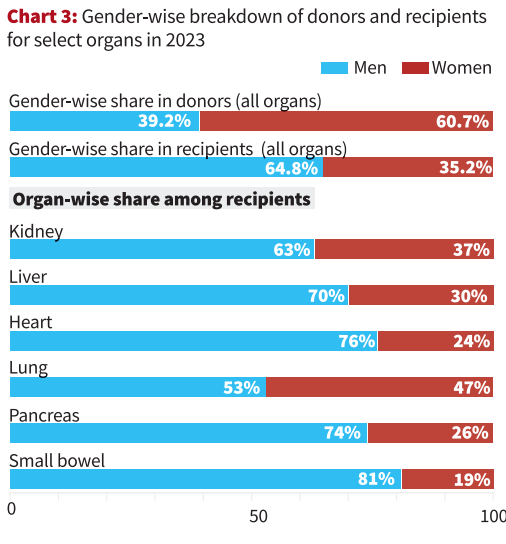


Chart 3: Gender-wise breakdown of donors and recipients for select organs in 2023

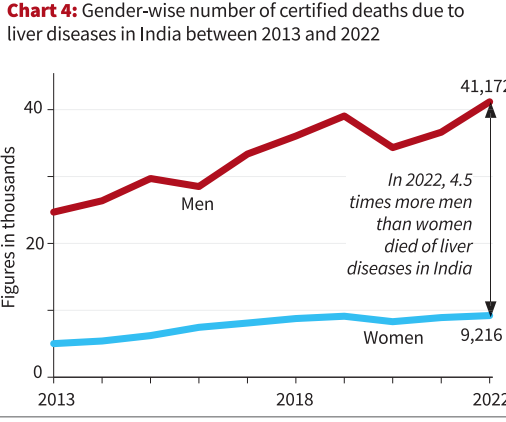


Chart 4: Gender-wise number of certified deaths due to liver diseases in India between 2013 and 2022

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 17, 1975

British-time silver bars seized in Madras

Madras, Dec. 16: Four pre-Independence silver bars bearing the stamp “H.M. Mint, Bombay 1945” each weighing 40 kgs and valued at Rs. 1.75 lakhs were recovered recently from the house of an unregistered pawnbroker in Madras by a special squad of the Central Excise Department. Also found were primary gold and gold ornaments valued at over Rs. 15 lakhs. Disclosing this at a press conference to-day, Mr. I.J. Rao, Collector of Central Excise, said “this idle hoard of wealth” might have been in the family for a long time but the Gold Control Rules of the Union Government required that any person having in his possession more than 4,000 grammes of gold ornaments should declare it to the Government. Mr. Rao pointed out that the investigation personnel raided the house in the city and located the hoarded wealth buried under the floor of an unused kitchen. The pawnbroker later confessed his guilt. The Collector has further intensified the drive to detect undeclared wealth and smuggled goods. He deployed senior detective personnel in three districts of Salem, North and South Arcot. The strategy paid dividends and these officials caught a person at Attoor in Salem district and seized 1.430 grammes of gold ornaments valued at over Rs. 1.45 lakhs. At Namakkal, the party raided another house and recovered gold ornaments valued at over Rs. 37,000, concealed in rice bags. Mr. Rao said another squad detected about Rs. 34,000 worth of jewellery hidden inside the hollow bottom of a table, at Namakkal.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 17, 1925

English emigrants to Canada

Leafield (Oxford), Mid. Dec. 16-17: Very cheap passages for emigrants to Canada were announced in Parliament by Major Ormsby-Gore, Under-Secretary for Dominions. He said that under the agreement reached between His Majesty’s Government and the trans-Atlantic shipping companies, persons proceeding to Canada next year under assistance under the Marine Settlement Act would be able to travel to eastern ports of Canada for £3 instead of £15-5s and to Winnipeg for £5-10s instead of £20-10s.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of arrests on the India-Bangladesh border in 2025

2,556 In a written reply, the Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai gave the data on infiltration attempts and arrests of infiltrators across the Indian borders with Bangladesh, China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. PTI

China's anti-dumping tariffs on pork imports from the EU

18.9 In per cent. Beijing also levied anti-dumping duties on European brandy, most notably cognac produced in France, though major brandy producers received exemptions. Imports of dairy products from the EU were also subject to anti-dumping probes. PTI

Global economic losses from natural disasters in 2025

220 In billion dollars. Natural disasters caused an estimated \$220 billion in global economic losses in 2025, according to reinsurer Swiss Re. This marks a 33% decline compared to the previous year, mainly due to a much milder North Atlantic hurricane season. AFP

Deaths caused by a fog accident on the Mathura expressway

13 At least 13 people were killed and 43 injured after multiple vehicles collided due to dense fog on the Yamuna Expressway in Mathura. The pile-up involved several buses and smaller vehicles, some of which caught fire, leaving passengers trapped. Police said low visibility caused the crash. PTI

Voter names deleted from draft electoral rolls in Rajasthan

41.85 In lakh. According to the state Chief Electoral Officer Naveen Mahajan, around 11 lakh voters will be issued notices seeking their documents. He said the highest number of voter deletions were in Jaipur. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The future of governance in post-Maoist India

India's Fifth Schedule areas became the hotbed of Maoist insurgencies due to administrative neglect, exacerbating discontent and a lack of representation of tribal groups in local bodies. Effective governance is crucial to address these issues and mitigate the ongoing challenges in these regions

FULL CONTEXT

Niranjan Sahoo

A key element missing in the dominant discourse around the evolution and growth of the Maoist movement is governance. An overwhelming volume of empirical literature accounts the rapid growth of the Maoist movement in the 1990s and early 2000s to underdevelopment, and structural socio-economic issues. This is evident from the scores of official, non-official and scholarly articles which have attempted to study the “root causes” for insurgency in central and eastern India (popularly called the Red Corridor). These articles have argued for an accelerated development push to address the acute material needs of an impoverished population which includes many vulnerable tribes. As a result of these articulations, the Indian state has been relying on a “two-pronged” approach (combining security and development) to counter the Maoist threat.

This does not mean other factors such as governance, justice redressal and other issues have been completely neglected in the official discourse. On several occasions, policy makers and official reports have sought to bring attention to creating good governance frameworks and quicker justice redressal mechanisms to address the long-standing grievances of the affected population. But there has been little effort to understand the governance challenges that intensified the Maoist insurgency in different cycles.

Unpacking challenges of governance

While the Maoist insurgency has evolved in different phases since the Naxalbari uprising (1967), the movement in its current avatar has largely been concentrated around the Fifth Schedule areas of central and eastern India – States with substantial tribal populations.

The Fifth Schedule was conceptualised and offered as a new social contract to the *adivasis* in these regions, by the framers of the Constitution, taking into account the special needs of the population. The Schedule provided a legal framework and instrumentality for governance of these tribal homelands. It offered special provisions such as the Tribal Advisory Council with three-fourth of members from the *adivasi* population and a special financial provision via the tribal sub-plan. Further, the Governor of each State was given discretionary powers to oversee the enforcement of these provisions, particularly with respect to checking land alienation.

However, extensive provisions notwithstanding, the local populations were subjected to the severest forms of discrimination and exploitation in everyday life. As recorded in the Planning Commission's Expert Committee Report (2008), a vast region with abundant natural resources was reduced to penury due to state neglect and poor governance. That these special provisions were of little use is evident from tribal populations' persistently low social and economic status compared to other social groups. The Oxford University Multidimensional Poverty Index in 2010 ranked the region worse than Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, for tribal populations, the far bigger challenge was how to exercise their rights over the land and forests. Despite legal safeguards and constitutional protection against arbitrary land acquisition, millions of them were dispossessed to penury. In his seminal study, writer Walter Fernandes



Returning home: Maoists with copies of the Constitution of India, after they surrendered at the police lines in Jagdalpur in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district, on October 17. PTI

found that “more tribals have lost their land since the commencement of economic liberalisation than any time in the post-independent history”.

Thus, while the Constitution makers imagined a new lease of life for the *adivasis* under the Fifth Schedule, successive governments failed to bring up appropriate governance structures to transform this lofty vision into reality. The same colonial structures and administrative forms, rules of business, and justice system were retained for Scheduled Areas, which made tribal groups, with very low literacy, barely able to understand these rules and the modern justice system.

A lack of representation

What deepened the alienation was the complete absence of locals in the administrative units implementing provisions enumerated in the Fifth Schedule. B.D. Sharma, the then commissioner of the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Commission, succinctly put that “the personnel who are overwhelmingly outsiders carried their attitudes, bias and lived experiences while performing day to day tasks”. Importantly, apex bodies such as a separate Ministry of Tribal Welfare, and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes created to oversee the execution of special provisions for the tribal population, as vividly observed by the Mungekar Committee (2009), did very little to stop the exploitation.

Moreover, while the Governors are constitutionally assigned to protect the interests of *adivasis* in Schedule areas, not a single Governor has acted since Independence in these regions. These institutions have been further

handicapped by weak and ineffective service delivery institutions such as health, education, revenue, police, and the judiciary.

The lone exception was the Panchayat Extension to Schedule Areas Act (PESA), 1996. PESA was enacted to address *adivasi* underrepresentation and alienation in the form of “self-governance”. These democratic forums were envisioned to create space for *adivasis* to take their own decisions on welfare issues, land, natural resources, livelihood and preservation of culture and their way of life. While PESA made some substantial changes by improving political representation at the lower level of governance, key provisions were routinely violated. The Expert Committee Report (2008) found flagrant violations of PESA by the appointed officials. One of the most abused provisions has been with regards to land acquisition.

To sum up, governance maladies and relatively low political priority accorded to the Fifth Schedule in many ways created a fertile ground for the Maoist leadership to mobilise the aggrieved *adivasi* population against the Indian state. The growing governance deficits which directly impacted development, welfare functions and mitigation of local grievances created an opportunity for the Maoists to spread their ideologies of a people's government (*Janatan Sarkar*). There is a rich body of evidence that indisputably credits tribal frustrations, anger and low trust in governance institutions as the reasons that drove many *adivasis* to support Maoist ideology and revolutionary missions. Many relied on the Maoist movement as some sort of instrument to get justice from state agencies such as the police, forest and

revenue departments (which they often viewed as corrupt and oppressive). For instance, the entire Dandakaranya region largely characterised by extreme underdevelopment and poor governance was easily captured by the underground Maoists in the 1990s with the promise of providing ownership to *adivasis* over lands, and the forest (under the broad slogan of *Jal, Jungle and Zameen*). Persistent governance and development deficits created a space for Maoists to run parallel governments (offering critical services such as paramedics, schools, food rations and speedy justice through kangaroo courts) in many of their strongholds.

Need for a new imagination

Going forward, India must pay close attention to governance paradoxes that continue to plague most regions under the Fifth Schedule. In recent years, there has been visible improvement in key service functions, particularly with respect to welfare schemes and critical infrastructure (roads, electricity, telecom) in Maoist affected regions. Both the Centre and affected States have found ways to improve service delivery functions via digital technology and cash transfer. However, critical service delivery institutions such as justice, health, education, policing, and revenue functions remain thin and unsatisfactory. Persistent structural bottlenecks (under-representation of locals) in the existing governance system have a significant bearing in their effectiveness.

On the other side, crucial rights-based legislations like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and PESA need greater political push from the Centre as well affected States. The FRA which remains a key legal tool to protect the rights of *adivasis* and forest dwellers to access forest resources for their sustenance is batting for its survival today. While many core provisions have been violated by state institutions, there have also been amendments and judicial interventions in recent years which have diluted its original mandate and effectiveness. In addition, the enactment and expansion of the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act, 2016 has grossly diluted legal safeguards, apart from affecting the livelihoods of forest dwellers in India. Similarly, PESA despite initial promises faces growing resistance from the States concerned. Under pressure to unlock huge mineral deposits, most State governments in Fifth Schedule Areas have undermined the powers granted to Gram Sabhas under PESA, particularly on the issues of granting consent for mining/land acquisition. Incidentally, the most widespread violations of PESA has been in the most Maoist-affected State of Chhattisgarh.

Thus, going forward priorities must include the reversal of political and administrative under-representation of *adivasis*. While there are mandatory quotas at the local levels, considering these self-governing bodies lack real autonomy and financial power, representation remains largely performatory. The permanent bureaucracy (overwhelmingly non-tribal) still calls the shots. Given the persistent alienation and trust deficits among the local population, the post-Maoist Fifth Schedule Areas governance vision can benefit by borrowing some feathers from the Sixth Schedule Areas which are governed by Autonomous Districts/Zonal Councils. In short, post-Maoist India needs a new governance charter.

Niranjan Sahoo is Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, Delhi.

THE GIST

While the Maoist insurgency has evolved in different phases since the Naxalbari uprising (1967), the movement in its current avatar has largely been concentrated around the Fifth Schedule areas of central and eastern India – States with substantial tribal populations.

As recorded in the Planning Commission's Expert Committee Report (2008), a vast region with abundant natural resources was reduced to penury due to state neglect and poor governance.

Going forward, India must pay close attention to governance paradoxes that continue to plague most regions under the Fifth Schedule.

FULL CONTEXT

Inside a teacher’s exhausting day as a booth level officer

Kusum, a Mathematics teacher, has traded her classroom for a grueling role as a BLO since November 4. She now spends her days in an office scrutinising hundreds of voter forms, often working late into the night

Mantasha Ahmed

Kusum (name changed on request of anonymity), a Mathematics teacher at Government HSS Dudhia, Indore, lives in the Saket area with her husband and mother-in-law. Ms. Kusum’s husband has taken early retirement from a government job, she has no children and has lived for several years with chronic vertigo. Every morning, she rides her scooter for half an hour to reach her school in Dudhia, where she teaches Mathematics to Classes 10 and 12. But for the past month, her daily routine has completely changed, due to her role as a Booth Level Officer (BLO) at Booth No. 95, Saket.

Since November 4, when the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) work began across Madhya Pradesh, Ms. Kusum has not stepped into her school. Every morning, around 9-9.30 am, she used to leave for school and come back at 4:30 pm. Now, though she leaves at the same time every day, she stays in the booth till 10 or 11 at night, sometimes more.

I spent a day with her to see the conditions BLOs go through in a day.

The daily routine

As recorded on November 30, 2025, Ms. Kusum’s day began at 6 am. She had *chai* with her mother-in-law, and cooked breakfast and lunch. She left home around 9:00 am and reached the Saket BLO office, set up inside an old Public Works Department (PWD) building, by 9:30 am, the latest allowed arrival time.

9:30-11 a.m: I joined her at 9:17 am at the building gate. When we entered the office together, most BLOs had arrived. This is not the first time I had visited the office; everyone is familiar with my presence. This time, however, they were sceptical and scared that the article in the media might take away their jobs.

Ms. Kusum and everyone’s job is to scrutinise nearly 700 forms and check for incomplete details, missing photographs, unreachable phone numbers, and incorrect entries. She processes about 50 forms a day. She tells me Saket, being a posh area, is “the toughest zone” because residents ignore calls, don’t open doors, block numbers, and often refuse to cooperate. She is busy with digitising the forms and getting the faulty ones right.

Mr. Chiranjeev told me that 80% of the work is done, and they are just “winding up” these last days. He said it is not as much pressure as it used to be when the BLOs had to go to colonies and distribute the forms. But the WhatsApp reporting cycle is relentless – from 8 am to the next day’s 8 am, even during nights. He often stays up working till 1 am.

12-2 pm: By noon, BLOs stand in the sun in the corridor to escape the cold indoor rooms; it is a long corridor, and the rooms are old and chilly. Everyone has made a fixed place for themselves, with their papers and belongings scattered. Ms. Kusum’s phone data pack had just reached its limit; the building has no WiFi. All the BLOs use their own internet data to digitise the forms. She asked a younger colleague to recharge her regular ₹299, which is a 1.5 GB daily plan.

2-4 pm: I noticed no one has had lunch yet, and thus I asked if there is a designated time slot given as a lunch



Intense process: Ongoing verification of voter SIR Forms in Chennai on December 8. RAGU. R

break. There were five people in the room, excluding me; they all said there is no assigned time for lunch, and they eat lunch whenever it is convenient. I saw that Ms. Kusum had a tote bag with two water bottles, a three-box warm lunch, and a small *sev* packet.

The floor’s five to six rooms were all busy, tables stacked with forms, phones, laptops, tablets. Around 3 pm, some BLOs stood in the sun chatting, while others were on calls or helping visitors with queries.

Ms. Kusum finally said she can take time to have lunch and talk to me. She took out a china cup, poured warm water, added her medicines, and joined the room’s laughter. She added she needs to take these medicines all her life; if she skips them or sits too long in one place, her vertigo flares up, triggering nausea and spinning.

Meanwhile, a confused resident with his scanned papers in hand was speaking to a BLO in the outer corridor. I immediately went to see him, and he told me he is searching for his form; his wife’s form was completed, but his own has not reached his house, as he had shifted from Durg, Chhattisgarh, to Indore in 2002. The case boiled down to sending the man back because his form “might have come to the old Durg office”. Despite trying multiple databases, the BLOs could not find his EPIC number. He was eventually told to contact the Durg office. He left

anxious, after 20 minutes of uncertainty.

The impact on day-to-day tasks

4-6 pm: We had lunch with fellow BLOs at another table. When asked about her schoolwork, Ms. Kusum said “*phase hue hein* (we are stuck).” She teaches Mathematics to Classes 10 and 12, and pre-boards are around the corner for Class 10. For one month, she has not gone to school or taught online. She thought she would make videos of herself explaining the lectures, like during COVID times, but she does not really get time for that. Her school principal had sent three applications from September to November to exempt Ms. Kusum from BLO duty, citing Class 10 board exams and her role as exam in-charge. The Election Commission acknowledged receipt but never responded. Finally, she was forced to join BLO duty on November 2.

She said her students still call her seeking help with syllabus doubts; she helps them over the phone, but she regrets missing regular classroom teaching. In her school, six teachers have been pulled into SIR work as BLOs or supervisors.

This is Ms. Kusum’s first time as a BLO. She doesn’t know what compensation, if any, they will receive; she simply has no choice but to do the duty.

6-8 pm: Around 6 pm, a well-dressed man wearing a kurta-pyjama and a Nehru jacket walked in. He turned out to be

Nitish Jain, Indore BJP’s *mandal adhyaksh* (board president) for the area. He interacted with the BLOs, asking about their issues, such as people not answering calls, and half-filled, pending forms to be collected from houses.

When introduced to me, he urged me to write about “Bangladeshi infiltrators.” We spoke for about 40 minutes about the “infiltrator” and “migration” issues in the country. He avoided the core issues of overwork, tech and health strain, saying, “It’s a matter of country interest... It’s just a matter of a month.” Mr. Jain, after one hour of being in the office, asked my name and learning that I have a Muslim name, abruptly ended the conversation and left, saying his father was hospitalised.

The sixth round of *chai* started around 7 pm. Some BLOs were again out, in fog this time; some were busy with papers; some were with people who had come regarding their forms; some were chatting or busy with the digitisation; others had gone to the Collector’s office to submit the forms. By 8 pm, the sixth round of WhatsApp reports was also done. Mr. Chiranjeev avoided detailing the WhatsApp reporting chain but confirmed there’s a mandatory report at 11 pm, which forces everyone to stay till late.

8-11 pm: Ms. Kusum had her second batch of medicines, one tablet and warm water with a few drops. She looked exhausted but kept working silently. I had spoken to almost everyone in the office by 8 pm, and they are all tired of the process that goes on all day.

I asked Ms. Kusum if she was planning to go home or have dinner. On the family front, she said her mother-in-law is unhappy with her long work hours since dinner gets delayed. Her husband, however, is supportive – he helps digitise forms at home, occasionally drives her to school, and now picks her up from the booth office. “If he didn’t come on time, I would be here all night. The work just doesn’t stop,” she said. I saw most of the people having dinner at around 9-10 pm, wearing more woollens than before. Most had their boxes packed from home; a few did not eat. I am assuming a few even went out to a restaurant or their homes to have dinner, mostly male BLOs.

Everyone was sorting papers into bundles of filled, faulty, unfilled, problematic, and completed forms, tying them with a rubber band and handing them to Mr. Chiranjeev. “I even remember the names of everyone assigned to the BLOs,” he said as he took the stacks.

By 10:30, nearly two hours had passed without Ms. Kusum and me speaking. I didn’t want to interrupt her, and I sensed others were a bit cautious talking around me. When I finally asked if she would have dinner, she immediately stood and asked me to join her at another table where several women were seated. She reopened her lunch box. She saves some for dinner, so she doesn’t have to carry extra. We ate till 11 pm, and Ms. Kusum then wound up her papers. Others were winding up too. Mr. Chiranjeev was tired and wanted to speak to me separately.

Around 11:30 pm, Mr. Chiranjeev, Ms. Kusum, and another male BLO stood outside the office, chatting as they wrapped up the day. Mr. Chiranjeev shared an honest thought, almost like feedback, that instead of assigning election-related duties to everyone, the government could deploy newly appointed staff on probation for tasks like electoral roll revision, to relieve people of the burden. We spoke for about 20-30 minutes. By 12 am, Mr. Chiranjeev had to send another update on the WhatsApp group. Ms. Kusum left in her vehicle, and I left soon after.

Mantasha Ahmed is an independent journalist based in Indore with five years of experience.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the difference between ‘invent’ and ‘discover’? (M. Murugan) When you invent something, you use your mind to create something new; something which had never existed before. For example, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone. The Wright Brothers invented the aeroplane. If, on the other hand, you discover something, you find something that had already existed. You are not creating anything new, you are merely finding it. For example, Columbus discovered America. He did not invent it. The land existed even before Columbus was born and all that Columbus did was to find it. He discovered it. Similarly, Madame Curie discovered radium. In her case, she deliberately set out to discover radium. Sometimes, we discover things by accident as well. For example, while digging in the garden we may discover hidden treasure.

What is the difference between ‘murder’ and ‘kill’? (Dr. N. S. Ramasubrahmanyam, Jannapura) Both ‘murder’ and ‘kill’ result in the death of someone. When you ‘murder’ someone, it is done intentionally and is usually well thought out. A great deal of planning takes place. For example, Shobha was planning to murder her husband so that she could get his money. The politician is suspected to have murdered his rival. When you ‘kill’ someone, it can be accidental or deliberate. For example, you may run over a total stranger quite accidentally. You had no plans of running over the man, but it happened. In this case, you killed the man, you did not murder him. But you could plan to kill someone and carry out that plan. For example, the convict planned to kill the warden at 7.00 the next morning. So a ‘kill’, like ‘murder’, can be well thought out/planned. Unlike the word ‘murder’, the word ‘kill’ can be used with both animals and people. You can kill a cat or a man. You can murder a man, but not a lion. The word ‘murder’ cannot be used with animals. Animals can only kill, but people can kill, as well as, murder.

What is the meaning of ‘to throw in the towel’? What is the origin of this expression? (Vidhya Raman, Chennai) When you throw in the towel, you give up doing something because you realise that you cannot succeed. In other words, you accept defeat. For example, when Sekhar’s experiment failed the tenth time, he realised it was time to throw in the towel. The dejected bowler said that he was going to quit playing the game. The coach, however, convinced him that it was too early to throw in the towel. This informal expression comes from the world of boxing. In boxing, two people are allowed to stop a fight – the referee and the fighter’s manager. During a fight, if the manager finds that his man has no chance of winning and he is getting unnecessarily punished, the manager can end the fight by throwing the boxer’s towel into the ring. This action of throwing the towel indicates that the manager is willing to accept defeat. Published in *The Hindu* on January 5, 1999.

THE DAILY QUIZ

The final season (Volume 1) of ‘Stranger Things’ premiered on November 26. Volume 2 is slated for December 25. Here is a quiz on the show

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1
Here’s an easy one. Who are the show’s creators?

QUESTION 2
What is the name of the creature that abducts Will Byers in the first season?

QUESTION 3
What was the series originally called?

QUESTION 4
What is the name of the artist and her song that comes in season 4, featuring Max?

QUESTION 5
Hashtags grew in popularity after the series’ release, such as “#ImWithBarb” and “#JusticeforBarb”. Who was Barb?

QUESTION 6
What is the food product that Eleven liked?



Visual question: Identify this monster from season 4. COURTESY OF NETFLIX

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. This British law was the immediate cause of the Boston Tea Party. **Ans: The Tea Act of 1773** 2. The Tea Act was seen as a threat because of this. **Ans: It implicitly affirmed the British Parliament’s right to tax the colonies without their consent** 3. This organisation carried out the Boston Tea Party. **Ans: The Sons of Liberty** 4. The estimated monetary value of the destroyed tea in 1773. **Ans: £9,659 sterling** 5. These were the ships from which the tea was dumped during the Boston Tea Party. **Ans: The Dartmouth, the Eleanor, and the Beaver** Visual: Identify this pioneering American filmmaker. **Ans: Edwin S. Porter** Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Erfanally Oosmany| Tito Shiladitya| Mohan Lal Patel| Ambarin Aslam

Word of the day

Comport: behave well or properly; behave in a certain manner; show a certain behaviour

Synonyms: acquit, act, bear, behave, carry, conduct, deport, do

Usage: He comported himself with dignity.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/comportpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /kəmˈpɔː(ɹ)ʔ/

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

Selling season

Deft management of rupee can spur FPI flows

The year 2025 has been marked by relentless selling by foreign portfolio investors. They have net sold ₹1.61 lakh crore of Indian equity this year. The selling began in the last quarter of 2024, as pricey valuation of Indian equity made foreign funds gravitate towards other emerging markets such as China, Taiwan and South Korea. While there was a hiatus in the second quarter of 2025, the selling resumed in July as the US slapped heavy tariffs on Indian exports. FPIs have been net sellers in 141 out of 234 trading sessions in 2025; the second highest in two decades.

₹

That said, there are several reasons why the FPI selling is unlikely to impact Indian equity markets too much. One, domestic institutional flows have been at a record ₹7.2 lakh crore so far in 2025. Consistent SIP inflows into mutual funds and money from insurance and pension funds continued into the equity market. Domestic individual investors remain active, helping prevent a sharp slide in prices. These domestic flows have helped take the Nifty50 9 per cent higher since the beginning of this year. Two, the out-performance of stocks in other emerging markets such as South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, China and Taiwan in 2025 has helped reduce the gap in valuation between India and these markets. As a result, Indian stocks appear more competitive now. Three, the FPI sell-off appears largely led by a perception regarding the negative impact of US tariffs on earnings of Indian companies. With companies reporting strong growth in earnings in the third quarter of FY25 and the exports numbers for November displaying buoyancy, the sentiment towards India could undergo a change.

While the equity market is well placed to weather this fund outflow (largely on account of sentiment), the impact is seen on the currency. The rupee is already down 6 per cent against the dollar this year, and down by a far higher 20 per cent against the Euro and 14 per cent against the pound, largely due to FPI fund outflows. A vicious cycle may well be at work, where the currency weakness triggers FPI outflows, leading to more of the same. Of concern is the fact that foreign portfolio investors have begun pulling money out of debt markets too. While ₹70,686 crore had come into Indian debt market through the global bond indices, these flows turned adverse in December. Net outflows of ₹8,587 crore were recorded through the fully accessible route in December. The stress on Centre’s finances due to lower tax revenue as well as currency depreciation could be weighing on these flows.

Subtle management of the rupee could stem some of this outflow. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been intervening judiciously in the foreign exchange market so far, and should continue in the same vein. However, RBI should not actively defend the currency, or be seen to be doing so.

POCKET: AI Now!

RAVIKANTH



A PAUL WILLIAMS
NUPUR TEMANI K

In the complex world of global finance, the line between strategic financial planning and aggressive tax avoidance is often drawn in the sand of a distant shore. A significant body of research has illuminated a pervasive trend — the strategic use of tax havens not just to hide profits, but to issue debt.

While the public imagination often pictures tax havens as repositories for illicit cash, for modern multinational corporations, they function more like high-efficiency conduits for capital.

This phenomenon is particularly visible in emerging markets like India, where major conglomerates in sectors such as telecommunications and renewable energy (to name a few) have historically utilised subsidiaries in tax haven jurisdictions (like Singapore and the Netherlands) to optimise their tax liabilities and access global capital markets.

OFFSHORE DEBT ISSUANCE

The primary motivation for issuing debt through a tax haven is often a potent mix of tax arbitrage and capital accessibility. When a company borrows money, the interest it pays is typically tax-deductible, reducing its overall taxable income. This tax shield is a standard feature of corporate finance.

However, multinational firms can supercharge this benefit by routing the debt through a low-tax jurisdiction. In this model, a subsidiary is established in a tax haven to act as the primary borrower. This subsidiary issues bonds to international investors or takes loans from global banks. It then on-lends this capital to the parent company in the high-tax home country. The parent company pays interest to the subsidiary, claiming a tax deduction in its high-tax home jurisdiction, while the subsidiary receives that interest income in a jurisdiction where it is taxed lightly or not at all.

This structure creates a distinct financial advantage that goes beyond simple interest rate differentials. If the parent company were to borrow directly from foreign investors, it might face significant withholding taxes on the interest payments sent abroad. However, by inserting a subsidiary in a jurisdiction that has a favourable tax treaty with the home country, the company can significantly reduce or eliminate these withholding taxes.

This creates a smoother, less costly flow of capital. For companies in capital-intensive industries, like building telecom towers or wind farms, saving even a fraction of a percentage

How tax havens really help in raising debt

TAX MOVES. Large companies in capital intensive sectors such as telecom and renewables benefit from tax arbitrage and access to a pool of global liquidity at lower rates



GETTY IMAGES

point on debt costs can translate to millions of dollars in savings over the lifespan of a loan.

MECHANICS OF ‘DEBT SHIFT’

The operational mechanics of these transactions are sophisticated. A typical structure might involve, for example, an Indian parent company creating a subsidiary in Singapore. This Singaporean entity issues dollar-denominated bonds to international investors. Because the subsidiary is located in a high-rating financial hub, it might secure capital at competitive rates. The proceeds from this bond issue are then lent to the Indian parent company. The Indian parent pays interest on this intra-company loan. In India, this interest payment is treated as an expense, lowering the company’s taxable profit.

Meanwhile, the interest income received by the Singapore subsidiary is

Companies’ subsidiaries in tax havens raise debt at low interest rates and lend to parent companies, which pay interest to their subsidiaries and save substantially by claiming tax deduction in their home country

taxed at a low rate (or effectively shielded through various exemptions and incentives available to global trading companies).

This mechanism allows the corporate group to effectively shift profits out of the high-tax jurisdiction (India) and into the low-tax jurisdiction (For instance, Singapore or Netherlands). The academic literature highlights this as a form of base erosion, where the tax base of the developing country is eroded by deductible payments sent offshore.

For the companies involved, however, this is presented as a legitimate tool for balance sheet efficiency. It allows them to hedge against currency risks and tap into a pool of global liquidity that might not be available domestically. In sectors like infrastructure or telecommunications, where upfront capital expenditure is massive and revenue generation is spread over decades, this access to efficient global debt is often cited as a critical survival mechanism.

THE INDIAN LANDSCAPE

Regulators have not been blind to these practices. Over the last decade, the Indian government and global bodies like the OECD have tightened the screws on such structures. The introduction of the General Anti-Avoidance Rule (GAAR) in India and the global Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) framework aims to curb treaty shopping i.e., the practice of routing funds solely

to take advantage of tax treaties.

Under new norms, companies must demonstrate “substance” in the subsidiary wherein it cannot just be a mailbox in Amsterdam or a file folder in Singapore. It must have actual employees, office space, and genuine economic activity. This has forced many Indian companies to restructure their offshore operations, moving away from purely tax-driven vehicles to more substantive international holding structures.

The use of tax havens for debt issuance is a testament to the fluidity of global capital. It highlights a fundamental tension in the global economy i.e., the friction between national tax laws and the borderless nature of modern finance. For the companies involved, routing debt through tax havens to some extent remains a rational economic decision driven by the imperative to minimise costs and maximise shareholder value.

However, as scrutiny intensifies and regulatory nets tighten, the free pass of the offshore conduit is disappearing. The future of corporate finance will likely demand more transparency, forcing companies to justify their offshore presence not just with tax returns, but with genuine economic purpose.

Williams is the Head of India at Sernova Financial; Nupur is a PhD scholar at Kiel Institute for the World Economy

Why not tap into ‘demographic dividend’ of elders?

The elderly looking to rewire their lives should be able to get jobs. This effort will not cut into jobs for the young

Subodh Mathur

The focus on the young has obscured another demographic dividend: the emergence of a subset of experienced, fit, and capable retirees who want to remain productive, often in something different than their careers. Call this subset as “rewirees” — people who are looking to “rewire” their lives by doing something different and meaningful.

Unlike the young, rewirees have valuable experience and maturity. Even start-ups may benefit from links with rewirees. Some of them may accept below-market wages or work for free. Their major downside is that they are unlikely to accept rigid, punishing work schedules.

It’s time for motivated Indian groups to create a system for making rewirees accessible to and used by private firms and non-profit groups. The rewirees will not reduce jobs for the young because the skills and aptitudes of the two groups are quite different.

RETIRED ARMYMEN

There is one significant group of rewirees who are more ready than others to be used quickly: retired

Defense senior and junior staff. Several retired Lt-Generals, Maj-Generals, Brigadiers, and a Rear-Admiral have told me they are ready, even eager, to work on civilian-originated social impact schemes, and they are open to working with civilians to develop new schemes.

And they are confident that they can bring in retired JCOs and NCOs with them. The retirement ages of these lower-rank personnel have not increased proportionally with increases in life expectancy. Today, the junior-most NCOs retire at around 45 years of age, while the senior-most JCOs retire at around 54 years of age.

That’s too young to give up working. They are distributed across India, including small towns and villages. In short, the rewiree JCOs and NCOs are a resource that can contribute significantly to India’s progress.

India’s Defence forces do provide some pre-retirement training. And there are job fairs where thousands of Defence retirees meet with private firms. For example, the Army organised job fairs in Pune and Patna in March. Over 2,000 ex-Servicemen participated in each fair. It was expected that many of them would find jobs as supervisors, managers, planners, and project directors.



RETIREEES. Valuable human resource
EMMANUEL YOGINI

These efforts do not reach the retired JCOs and NCOs in small towns and villages, where corporate jobs are hard to come by. An alternative approach is needed to utilise them productively.

One such approach is for social impact groups to make these the rewirees as agents of social, economic, and technical change in the area where they live. This effort would include their family members, particularly the families’ women — wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law.

These people would need hands-on training for the work they would do. The nature of their work would depend upon the social impact groups’ aims for the

local area and the aptitudes of the local rewirees.

Such an effort would benefit from an explicit approval and involvement of senior Defence rewirees. This arrangement would assure local rewirees that the civilian work is legitimate and worth doing. Further, it would be helpful to have a senior officer, such as a Brigadier, rewiree to guide the local people.

These days, it is easy to provide such guidance and approval remotely from a large city, such as the State capital. However, it would be good for the senior people to visit the relevant small towns and villages occasionally.

It will not be straightforward for a social impact group to absorb these rewirees. The scheme would have to start small, which is not difficult, as this is not a costly effort. It would then expand, with adjustments as needed.

In the end, with Defence personnel, India would have found a way to take advantage of a part of the rewiree dividend and make better economic and social progress. The next step would be to find approaches to take advantage of the civilian rewiree dividend.

The writer is an economist with extensive practical public policy experience

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

Job scheme tweak

The Centre’s decision to replace the MGNREGA with the proposed Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Gramen (VB-GRAMG) Bill has drawn sharp criticism from the Opposition. Although the Bill proposes to provide 125 days of guaranteed wage employment annually and incorporates technological measures such as biometric authentication, GPS tracking, mobile-based monitoring, and AI-enabled fraud detection, its 60:40 Centre-State funding pattern places an excessive burden on States. Further, the shift to a centrally determined normative allocation undermines the principles of

cooperative federalism and may weaken the scheme’s responsiveness to local needs.

M Jeyaram
Sholavandan (TN)

The proposed repeal of the MGNREGA, to be replaced by the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill, represents a substantive ideological and structural departure rather than a cosmetic reform. The conspicuous removal of Mahatma Gandhi’s name, despite official acknowledgment of MGNREGA’s proven efficacy over two decades, signals political rebranding overriding policy continuity. Although increasing

guaranteed workdays from 100 to 125 is commendable, it could have been secured through a limited statutory amendment. The more troubling shift is the transfer of greater fiscal responsibility to states, diluting central commitment, straining cooperative federalism, and imperilling rural livelihood security.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Higher Education Reset

This refers to ‘UGC, AICTE to come under new regulator’ (December 16). The new Bill aims to reduce overlaps and delays in higher education. Through this reform, issues like faculty shortages, low

salaries, and slow approvals must be addressed. Job security and fair pay for teachers should be a key ethical focus. Monitoring must look not only at infrastructure and teaching strength, but also at students’ academic development. With this approach, a single regulator can support equity and steady growth in education.

S Balasubramaniam
Villupuram (TN)

Robust export growth

This refers to the news report “Strong 19.4% export growth in Nov ‘evens out’ dip in Oct” (December 16). The sharp rebound in exports is a reassuring signal at a time of global trade uncertainty. Gains across

engineering goods, pharmaceuticals, petroleum products and chemicals suggest that India’s export base is diversifying. The narrowing trade deficit also offers short-term relief on the external front. Still, one strong month should not invite complacency. Volatility in shipments, tariff pressures in key markets, and logistics costs remain real constraints. Sustaining momentum will depend on deeper market diversification, faster trade facilitation, and steady support to MSME exporters. Policy focus must now shift from headline numbers to consistency.

SM Jeeva
Chennai

AI versus the artist

India’s proposed copyright fix falls short

Rohit Kumar
Mahwash Fatima

The rise of generative AI has pushed copyright law into the centre of global policy debate. AI models are built on vast datasets drawn from books, articles, images, music, and countless other creative works — much of it protected by copyright. This pits a data-hungry technology against the economic rights of millions of creators. Around the world, governments are grappling with the same questions: How should creators be compensated? And how do we balance the urgency of innovation with the rights of those whose work powers these systems? India, too, is grappling with this dilemma and the government convened a Committee to chart a way forward.

BLANKET LICENCES

The Committee proposes a ‘hybrid model’ with a mandatory blanket licence that grants AI developers a right to access lawfully obtained copyrighted works for model training. In exchange, creators are granted a statutory right to remuneration, paid for by developers as a percentage of their gross global revenue generated from commercialisation. This payment is collected into a central pool managed by a government-designated body and distributed to rights holders. The ‘hybrid model’ is believed to eliminate the need for individual negotiations or permissions, preventing holdouts and ensuring broad availability of data.

On paper, this mechanism aims to balance access and fairness. In practice, however, it is far from straightforward. How should ‘revenue’ be defined for global companies where only a fraction of the training data is sourced from Indian content? And how should revenue be computed for companies where AI is not a standalone product, but integrated into their other offerings such as search, cloud and operating systems? Not only does this proposal create jurisdictional overreach by attempting to impose an Indian statutory levy on economic activities occurring outside the country’s borders, it also risks producing arbitrary outcomes by tying royalties to a company’s overall commercial success rather than to its actual use of copyrighted works.

Another challenge is the ‘lawful access’ requirement, which restricts AI developers from using



A CHALLENGE. Rewarding human creativity

content that is not legally accessible (such as paywalled material or pirated copies). While well-intentioned, this means that even with statutory royalties in place, large publishers or aggregators can continue to lock their content behind paywalls, effectively forcing developers to negotiate separate access deals. In practice, royalty payments become mandatory, but access to the underlying data does not, leaving substantial bargaining power with data-rich entities.

Complications also arise for fine-tuned models that are built for specific tasks. The Committee suggests payments for such models through verifiable self-declarations from AI developers on the categories of content used for training. While this appears light-touch, it creates real risks: weak enforceability and a high likelihood of missed/ misallocated royalties.

To distribute royalties, the Committee proposes a new, not-for-profit collective — CRCAT. The Committee offers two pathways: a simple pro-rata model, where royalties are split based on the number of registered works, and a more complex value-based model, where works are graded using indicators such as website traffic, licensing history, citations, awards and even social engagement.

But this seemingly neat architecture conceals serious operational tensions. Rights holders in music, news, books, visual arts, film and academic publishing do not merely operate in different markets, they inhabit different universes. And within each class of work as well, a weighting formula will inevitably privilege some kinds of visibility over others. In practice, therefore, the promise of “neutrality” in distribution will be continually contested.

India now faces the urgent task of shaping a framework that is not only principled but practical, one that truly balances the promise of AI with the rights of creators.

Rohit is Founding Partner and Mahwash is Manager at the The Quantum Hub (TQH)

THE WIDER ANGLE.



PARAN BALAKRISHNAN

The 1952 Great Smog of London lasted barely five days, yet it shocked policymakers into action. Visibility dropped to five feet, making crossing the road perilous; soot filled the air, people collapsed in the streets struggling to breathe, and hospitals were overwhelmed. At least 4,000 lives were lost. Crucially, the deadly pollution was a turning point that forced Parliament to pass the Clean Air Acts, changing how cities were heated by restricting coal-burning and switching to natural gas, electricity, and smokeless fuel.

Delhi isn’t as grim yet, but the warning signs cannot be ignored. The air quality index (AQI) has stayed above 450 for days, with grey-brown skies showing no sign of clearing. International indexes suggest the AQI may be closer to 700. Anything over 300 is hazardous, making conditions extremely serious by any measure.

Air pollution has become a fact of life across vast swathes of north India. In winter, Delhi’s poisonous air comes from various sources. A third comes from smoke and gases mixing in the air from vehicles and factories, a fifth from crop stubble and wood burning, and vehicles themselves add another 17 per cent. Coal, household fuels, and dust make up the rest.

What’s alarming, however, is the absence of a credible clean-up plan. The problem is chronic and seasonal, returning each year with seeming greater intensity. Worst affected are Delhi and the National Capital Region, the urban agglomeration at the heart of north India. Delhi alone has 22 million residents; adding Gurgaon (Gurugram), Noida, Greater Noida, Ghaziabad, and Faridabad brings the total to 35 million. There are also 10 million vehicles in the capital.

The immediate consequences of the smog are most visible on Delhi’s roads, already among the world’s most treacherous. This week alone, several fatal vehicle pile-ups occurred as drivers struggled to see through the haze. Meanwhile, doctors warn Delhi’s toxic air damages lungs, triggers asthma and COPD, raises the risk of heart attacks and strokes, weakens immunity, and



Can authorities find the political will to clean the air, or will the city continue to lurch from one pollution season to another?

harms brain development in children. Even those who feel “fine” are affected, as fine particles enter the bloodstream and can shorten life expectancy.

When pollution worsens in Delhi, government action follows a predictable pattern: minimise exposure rather than fix the problem. Schools have returned to online classes reminiscent of the Covid years, while government offices have limited staff attendance to 50 per cent. Even the Supreme Court has resorted to virtual hearings.

Other parts of north India, and Pakistan, where the bad air stretches as far as Rawalpindi, are in no better shape. The AQI in Kanpur has been stuck above 400, while Delhi and Lahore routinely compete for the unenviable title of the

Doctors warn Delhi’s toxic air damages lungs, triggers asthma and COPD, raises the risk of heart attacks and strokes, weakens immunity, and harms brain development in children

world’s most polluted city. This shared environmental crisis has led many experts to argue that air pollution is one area where India and Pakistan should cooperate.

The pollution seen over the last few months may be the worst stretch the region has experienced. Dangerous air has hung over Delhi since October 15, even before Diwali, when the Supreme Court dismayed public health experts and environmentalists by lifting a ban on firecrackers.

In a desperate act, the State government vainly attempted cloud-seeding at a cost of ₹3 crore. Cloud-seeding requires moisture-laden clouds and specific atmospheric conditions, and even under ideal circumstances it rarely works. In this case, it was attempted under unfavourable conditions.

CHINA’S PATH

China’s experience shows that dramatic improvements are possible. Beijing, once notorious for thick smog, has seen sustained improvements in recent years. China shut or relocated heavily polluting factories, imposed strict emissions standards, limited coal use, converted to

cleaner heating, expanded electric public transport, and enforced construction dust controls. Vehicle ownership was curbed through licence plate restrictions backed by heavy penalties. The measures were unpopular at times but consistently enforced.

Delhi could, in theory, follow a similar path, but that would require politically difficult decisions. The most obvious problem remains the four-wheelers and two-wheelers that multiply daily. At the same time, a building boom means construction dust blankets the streets. Builders could be forced to cover sites, use dust suppressants, and follow strict work-hour rules, but enforcement has been patchy. Other challenges remain unresolved, including the contentious matter of crop-stubble burning.

Until recently, many politicians believed environmental issues weren’t vote-winners. However, public anger has been mounting, which may finally force action. The question is not whether action is needed — everyone knows it is. The question is whether governments are capable of taking the tough, sustained steps required, or whether Delhi will continue lurching from one smog season to the next.

STATISTALK.

Compiled by Dhuraveil Gunasekaran | Graphic KS Gunasekar

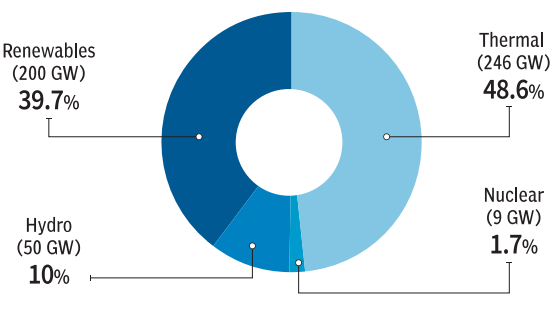
From coal to clean: India’s November power sector snapshot

India’s power capacity stands at 505 GW, with a cleaner mix emerging, setting the stage for accelerated renewable buildout and greater system flexibility, Elara Capital reports. However, power generation in November slipped 0.9% y-o-y to 134.2 BU, as output from coal and nuclear plants weakened, even as hydro and renewables surged. Peak power demand rose 4.1% y-o-y to 215.5 GW in November, underscoring demand resilience despite lower overall generation. Valuations returning to long-term 5-year averages for companies, with NTPC and Power Grid near historical means, while JSW Energy and Torrent Power trade below past peaks

India’s power generation mix

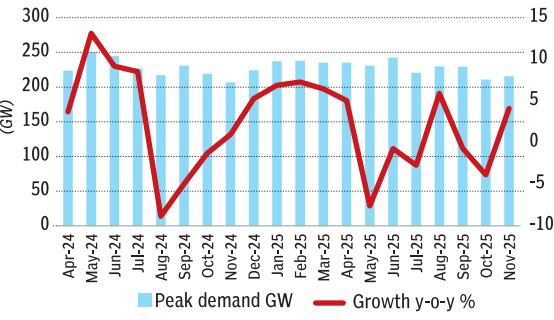
Cleaner mix is emerging, setting the stage for accelerated renewable buildout

Share in installed capacity (%)



Peak electricity demand rises even as generation dips

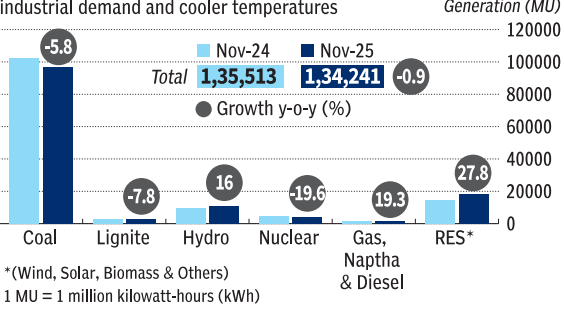
Signaling gradual normalisation in electricity needs



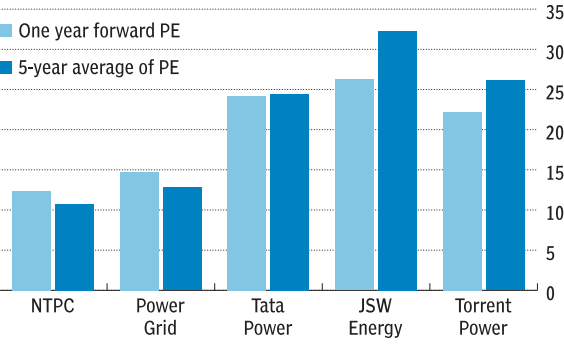
Source: Elara Capital

Power generation contracts in November y-o-y after 5 years

Due to weaker thermal output amid softer industrial demand and cooler temperatures



Valuations normalising towards long-term averages



thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 17, 2005

CCEA strikes down ONGC plan to invest in Nigeria

The Government has shot down a proposal of ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) to pick up stake in a Nigerian oil and gas field, while at the same time permitting downstream public sector oil companies to partner Oil India Ltd (OIL) in scouting for oil and gas assets abroad. The CCEA decided against giving permission to OVL to buy South Atlantic Petroleum’s 45 per cent stake in the Akpo oil and gas field in Nigeria on the grounds of “risk element”.

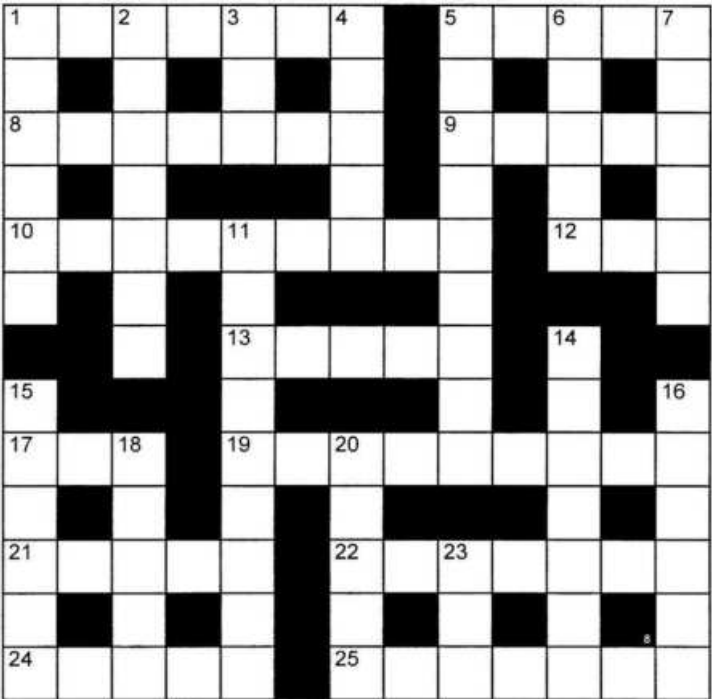
HLL plans more unified functioning

HLL is to have a CEO supported by an extended management committee and a more unified functioning of the separate businesses. Effective March 1, 2006, Mr Douglas Baillie, will be CEO of HLL and Group Vice-President overseeing the Unilever business in South Asia. This is the first time in several years that HLL is getting an expatriate CEO.

CST phase-out: States seek full Central compensation

The States have now made it known to the Union Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, that full Central compensation of central sales tax (CST) losses was an essential pre-condition for phasing-out this tax from April 1 next year.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2847



EASY

ACROSS

- A session (7)
- Easy walk (5)
- Sound happy, amused (7)
- Cover-girl picture (3-2)
- Place one lives (9)
- That woman (3)
- Bird such as sandpiper, snipe (5)
- Provide guns (3)
- Trio (9)
- Housey-housey (5)
- Come to grips with (7)
- Long beams on masts (5)
- Bright orange-red (fabric) (7)

DOWN

- Firmly fixed (6)
- Prepared for cooking (bird) (7)
- Be wearisome (3)
- Colour between blue and yellow (5)
- Fruit-bearing plant (5-4)
- Settle (5)
- Highly skilled person (6)
- Refuse to work (4,5)
- One out to get provisions (7)
- Malt liquor grain (6)
- Feel contrition (6)
- Engine (5)
- One of Lear’s daughters (5)
- Discharge of electricity across gap (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2846

- ACROSS** 1. Homes 4. Abandon 8. Demur 9. Backlog 10. Oil 11. Cormorant 12. Loss 13. Lava 18. Celebrate 20. Sic 21. Rangers 22. Gloom 23. Cheated 24. Sedan
DOWN 1. Hydro-electric 2. Mumbles 3. Strict 4. Auburn 5. Anchor 6. Delta 7. Night-watchman 14. Abscond 15. Abject 16. Passed 17. Merges 19. Lance

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- An easy target, being a model like this (7)
- Take risks and lose head - stroll on! (5)
- Get rid of the French and sound amused to do so (7)
- Picture the girl who will hurry back when at university (3-2)
- Dwelling with rice, needs to make a pudding of it (9)
- Ambassador has the right to belong to a woman (3)
- High boot for a bird that gets feet wet (5)
- Branch of service one will give means of fighting to (3)
- Trio has its number, and gets a part (9)
- There’s much to finish off, it being like bingo (5)
- Instrument for holding Greek crab (7)
- Enclosed spaces were spread with square sails (5)
- Orange-coloured tin given back to a deserter (7)

DOWN

- It is fast, but one may get hold of it (6)
- Prepared, like bird, to have faith in what one is told (7)
- Distress one by removing top of highland dagger (3)
- Ground for putting on the inexperienced (5)
- Use peat and repel one in an orchard (5-4)
- Assembly of magistrates, as marked by surveyors (5)
- Boffin found previous partner to be cheeky (6)
- To strike now, lots do it differently (4,5)
- One getting provisions pops out with a woman (7)
- Get real by misapplication of bearded woman (6)
- Be sorry for the traveller who got ‘X’ brand wrong (6)
- Limousine to tie up around end of crescent (5)
- She appeared in Lear in amateur theatre gang-show (5)
- Round part in music rarely given up (3)

Rural employment revamp

The new law will bring significant changes

The Union government on Tuesday introduced the Viksit Bharat- Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill (or VB-G RAM G Bill) in Parliament to revise the rural employment-guarantee programme, currently run under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). It has been argued that the rural economy has changed significantly since the MGNREGA came about two decades ago and that the new law takes into account the changed realities and needs of rural India. It indeed proposes to make significant changes in the way employment is provided, some of which are being contested, including by various state governments.

The Bill proposes to increase the number of guaranteed days of employment to 125 per household. This should benefit those seeking work in rural India. However, it is worth noting that, on average, only about 50 days of employment has been provided under the MGNREGA over the past two decades, against the mandate of 100 days. Thus, increasing the number of days will help only if enough employment opportunities are created and provided. It has been reported that workers seeking work under the MGNREGA did not always get employment. In this context, it is worth highlighting that the new scheme, unlike the MGNREGA, will not be demand-driven. There will be normative funding as in most central schemes. This will allow better planning and ensure predictability. It will be a centrally sponsored scheme, and the financial burden, as in the case of other central schemes, will be shared by the states.

Under the MGNREGA, states provided 25 per cent of the material and 50 per cent of the administration costs. Thus, sharing 40 per cent of the overall costs by most states will likely increase their financial outgo. It can be argued that this will improve monitoring and implementation of the scheme because the states will now have a bigger stake. However, it's possible that some states may not be in a position or willing to increase expenditure. In fact, it raises bigger questions about the centrally sponsored schemes in general. As the Reserve Bank of India's last state finance report (2024) rightly noted, too many central government schemes affect the flexibility of state governments in spending. There is a case for rationalising central schemes. In the spirit of federalism, states should have more freedom to spend. It would be interesting to see how the Sixteenth Finance Commission has approached the issue.

The other important aspect of VB-G RAM G is that it takes into account the requirements of labour in the farm sector. States may notify periods of up to 60 days in aggregate during sowing or harvesting when work under the scheme will be suspended to ensure the availability of labour for agricultural work at reasonable wages. Further, the new law aims to provide rural employment and create durable infrastructure by focusing on areas such as water security, work to mitigate extreme weather events, and core rural infrastructure. It envisions a localised planning for work integrated with national spatial systems. More broadly, while the proposed law contains both improvements and contestable provisions, it should not be viewed as an answer to the employment challenges India faces. The MGNREGA proved to be an excellent support system during the pandemic, and demand for work under it is reported to be falling, which is a positive sign. Irrespective of the name of the employment-guarantee scheme, the policy focus should be on creating better-paying jobs so that dependence on such schemes reduces progressively. Finally, it's worth debating whether dropping "Mahatma Gandhi" was necessary in framing a new law providing guaranteed rural employment.

Harnessing nuclear energy

Bill seeks to address key investor concerns

The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, 2025, which was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday, opens the pathway for the entry of the private sector into producing nuclear power by responding to major concerns that have hindered investment in the area for 15 years. The umbrella Bill replaces the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, which prohibited private participation in nuclear energy, and more crucially the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act (CLNDA), 2010, which had legislated for operators' right of recourse on suppliers of nuclear equipment in the case of accidents. A government statement says the Bill, which allows up to 49 per cent foreign direct investment in certain nuclear activities, intends to provide a "pragmatic" civil-liability framework for nuclear damage. Pragmatism principally lies in the removal of a contentious clause on suppliers' liability and the delineating of operators' liabilities. Removing suppliers' liability from the legislation does not, however, imply a blanket exoneration if nuclear accidents occur. In the normal course, however, such liabilities are explicitly incorporated in commercial contracts, usually under a liquidated damage clause, which specifies a mutually agreed percentage of the contract value that the operator can recover from the supplier or contractor in the case of damage or defects. By explaining that such a right is expressly provided for in a contract in writing, the Bill reverts to a global standard.

Changes in the provision on operator liabilities can be expected to encourage investment. The SHANTI Bill retains from the CLNDA the maximum amount of "no fault" financial liability of a nuclear operator in the case of a nuclear accident as the rupee equivalent of 300 million Special Drawing Rights (SDRs). The "operator liability" in this case refers to the immediate assistance that the operator must pay victims without waiting for the investigation that fixes responsibility for the accident. The Bill also specifies that an operator must obtain an insurance policy or other such financial security (or a combination of both) covering the liability. One question that will need clarification is whether premium costs can be loaded on to the tariffs nuclear plants charge buyers. The significant addition under the SHANTI Bill is a clause stating that any compensation amount exceeding the specified limit of 300 million SDRs would be met by the government. This would include access to funds under the International Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage, a global framework to increase compensation for victims by establishing an international fund to supplement national limits. India signed the convention in 2010 and ratified it in 2016. This clarification, too, addresses a significant hurdle for foreign investment in the nuclear sector.

These key amendments are likely to attract an interest from the private sector in at least small modular reactors, which are being seen as a quicker way to reach the target of 100,000 Mw of nuclear power by 2047 from 8,900 Mw now. One potential pain point, however, lies in the sensitive parts of the nuclear-fuel cycle such as mining and enrichment (beyond a certain threshold). These functions, plus spent-fuel management and producing heavy water, will remain the exclusive preserve of the government, principally to meet international obligations. Whether this limitation will deter investors eyeing vast opportunities in this nascent sector is an open question.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Trump 2.0: Redrawing US strategy

The updated National Security Strategy signals a retreat from global leadership, and continuity in India's role in the Indo-Pacific

It was reported several weeks ago that the Trump administration was working on a National Security Strategy (NSS) document that would reflect its foreign and security policy intent for the rest of the presidential tenure. Its release was delayed as the document's propositions were contested by different constituencies, including the Maga (Make America Great Again) base, the traditional Republican Party elite, and the foreign policy and security establishment — which continues to wield influence, though this has diminished under the administration.

The ideological imprint of the Maga constituency is clear, for example, in the brazen attacks on European allies, targeting current governments as ideological adversaries. This is virtually a repeat of the vituperative criticism of governments of European mainstream political parties by United States Vice-President J D Vance at the Munich Security Conference in February this year. He accused them of undermining democratic principles by suppressing right-wing political parties such as the AfD in Germany. Europe is said to be in danger of "civilisational erasure", particularly for not following the anti-immigration policies of the Trump administration and thus being in danger of losing its European identity.

The European allies of the US are also accused of hampering the pursuit of peace in Ukraine, even though the people of Europe are said to support an end to the war. The NSS states as a key objective the need for "re-establishing strategic stability" between Europe and Russia. No wonder that Russia has welcomed the NSS as being aligned with its interests.

While the NSS cannot be taken as a guide to US foreign and security policy except in very broad terms, it does reflect a certain altered mindset in engaging Europe. The notion of a coherent West has ceased to exist, confronting Europe with an existential crisis.

The NSS confirms the shift of strategic focus to the western hemisphere. Uncontested hegemony over the western hemisphere, from the Arctic to Antarctica, branded as the "Trump corollary" of the Monroe doctrine, is presented as key to the US remaining a front-ranking power. This doctrine was established by President James Monroe in 1823 to exclude any European or external power from exercising influence in the Americas. Mr Trump is claiming to resurrect that policy. The ongoing show of massive military force against Venezuela is a demonstration of that intent.

Alongside this hemispheric shift is an explicit rejection of the objective of retaining a position of global dominance for itself; instead there is an embrace of a balance of power in other geopolitical theatres and this would include the Indo-Pacific.

"As the United States rejects the ill-fated concept of global domination for itself, we must prevent the global, and in some cases even regional dominations of others (note: making an implicit exception for itself in the western hemisphere)."

Then follows an extraordinary statement, reflecting hopes of co-opting other major powers, in managing world affairs:

"The outsize influence of larger, richer and stronger nations is a timeless truth of international relations.



SHYAM SARAN

India needs Indian banks

The arc of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) policy on bank ownership has changed over time. Just over two decades ago, the regulator attached primacy to *skin in the game*. The thinking thereafter evolved, and the central bank saw merit in *diversified ownership* with the "promoter shareholders" having limited or no ability to influence the board. The recent approvals to Tokyo-headquartered SMCB to acquire a 24 per cent stake in Yes Bank and to Dubai-based NDB to acquire around 60 per cent in RBL Bank suggest that the RBI now favours ownership by regulated institutions as its preferred mode.

The early evolution of this policy is seen through Kotak Mahindra Bank Limited (KMBL). KMBL received its banking licence in 2001, through the conversion of a non-banking financial company (NBFC), where promoters held 61 per cent of the equity. The licence required that the promoter holding be reduced to 49 per cent of the paid-up capital. Tellingly, the licence did not prescribe reducing share ownership, just the minimum threshold.

The policy shifted meaningfully in 2013 when the RBI revised its ownership guidelines. These required banks to be set up only through a wholly-owned non-operative financial holding company ("NOFHC"). The RBI still saw some merit in the argument that a "promoter" with a higher stake will run the banks better but began balancing this with the argument in favour of disbursed ownership — an idea it began socialising from 2005. The guidelines mandated that promoter's initial 40 per cent stake be locked in for a period of five years. And that shareholding in the NOFHC be brought down to 15 per cent of the capital within 12 years from the date of commencement of business.

Following this, the RBI asked Kotak Bank to bring down its promoter shareholding to 40 per cent by September 2014 and to 30 per cent by December 2016. The promoter holding was brought down to 34 per cent

through the merger of Kotak Bank with ING Bank. Thereafter, the bank sold shares to qualified institutional investors and other investors in the open market to reduce the promoter stake to 29.79 per cent to be fully compliant with the regulations.

The RBI by now seemed committed to diverse ownership. This was reinforced in its Master Direction on Ownership in Private Sector Banks of May 12, 2016. The proposed shareholding — even in existing banks should be at 15 per cent, consistent with the 2013 guidelines on licensing of universal banks. Following this, in 2017, Kotak Bank was asked to bring down its promoter stake to 20 per cent by December 2018 and to 15 per cent by March 2020.

The bank's promoters were upset at further reduction — given the timelines and sums involved. Their solution: Issue non-convertible perpetual non-cumulative preference shares worth ₹500 crore. As preference shares generally do not carry any voting rights but are a part of paid-up capital, the Bank argued that Uday Kotak's ownership had been brought down to 19.7 per cent. The RBI had a different read of the regulations; it interpreted paid-up capital as voting equity capital, and the promoters continued to hold 30.03 per cent of the share-holder vote, giving them "control" in the bank's affairs.

The matter ended in court and thereafter the two sides arrived at a negotiated settlement. Uday Kotak was allowed to hold up to 26 per cent of the bank's share capital, with his voting rights in the Bank capped at 15 per cent. The voting cap has subsequently been raised to 26 per cent following a two-step revision in the RBI's guidelines.

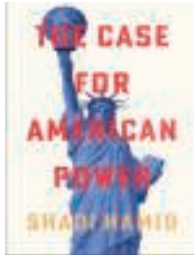
Even after the Central bank changed its stance from skin in the game to more wide-spread shareholding, it has permitted concentrated ownership in special situations — in seemingly weak banks. Fairfax Financials' ownership in CSB Bank, and DBS Bank's ownership in Lakshmi Vilas Bank can both be



THE OCCASIONAL ASIDE
AMIT TANDON

evolving dynamic in international relations by underlining that "political power is a shared power".

The author is a die-hard democrat and goes on to contrast its merits with the demerits of autocracy. The sense of accountability to their electorates in democratic countries is said to be the reason that wars do not escalate beyond a point, he reasons. The political theorist David Runciman argues that democracy is better aligned with human nature, while autocracy is misaligned with their own people, even under enlightened despotism. The US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, an expert on Russia, aptly captured this dynamic: "The longer a democratic regime survives, the less likely it will collapse while the longer an autocracy survives, the more likely it will collapse." Mr Hamid harnesses this logic to reiterate that the sort of full democracy that exists in America makes it resilient. The 19th



The Case for American Power
by Shadi Hamid
Published by Simon & Schuster
241 pages \$28

century diplomat and historian Alexis de Tocqueville grasped its essence to highlight the importance of people believing in democracy for it to be successful.

The long history of American hypocrisy, according to Noam Chomsky, is the gap between words and deeds. The self-contempt, known as Oikophobia, cast long shadows on American policies. In West Asia, America projects the rhetoric of freedom and democracy but behind its efforts for peace in the region it only seeks to remove potentially existential threats to Israel. Ukraine is said to be simply a pawn in America's imperial designs that deliberately encouraged the eastward expansion of Nato, even as the current president condemns Russian invasion as a criminal war of aggression.

The author recognises these hypocrisies and argues that they should serve as a constant reminder of America's unfulfilled commitments towards the

This reality sometimes entails working with partners to thwart ambitions that threaten our joint interests."

This is the backdrop to the repeated calls by Mr Trump for reinstating Russia into the G-7 and inviting China into the grouping.

The NSS has no separate section on the Indo-Pacific, unlike the NSS adopted in the first Trump administration in 2017, which articulated an elaborate Indo-Pacific strategy, in which the revival of the "Quadrilateral (US, Australia, Japan and India)" played a critical role. Instead we have a section entitled "Asia: Win the Economic Future, Prevent Military Confrontation." There is a recognition that the Indo-Pacific is "already and will continue to be among the next century's key economic and geopolitical battlegrounds". The US has to compete successfully in the Indo-Pacific and for this purpose, President Trump is credited with "building alliances and strengthening partnerships in the Indo-Pacific that will be the bedrock of security and prosperity long into the future."

It would be reassuring to India and its Quad partners that the NSS commits the US to "improve commercial (and other) relations with India to encourage New Delhi to contribute to Indo-Pacific security, including through continued quadrilateral cooperation with Australia, Japan and the United States ("the Quad"). Moreover, we will also work to align the actions of our allies and partners with our joint interest in preventing domination by any single competitor nation."

While China is not mentioned in this context, it is clearly the target. However, this must be tempered by the essentially economic and technological dimension of the projected competition with China, success in which would permit more effective deterrence. There is a reference to "preserving military overmatch" being a priority. This "overmatch" is spelt out in the capacity of the US and its allies to "deny any attempt to seize Taiwan or achieve a balance of forces so unfavourable to us as to make defending the island impossible."

This comes close to a commitment to defend Taiwan against attack by China. The issue of North Korea is ignored as a security concern.

In general, global challenges such as terrorism, proliferation of nuclear weapons and pandemics do not find any mention. Multilateral institutions and approaches are regarded as detractors from the exercise of national sovereignty.

What are key takeaways from the NSS?

One, there is an explicit retreat from the US's global role but an assertion of uncontested dominance of the western hemisphere, comprising the Americas and their immediate peripheries.

Two, there is a reframing of the concept of the West, not only by imagining but actively working for a Europe that is ideologically and strategically aligned with the US; it concedes a Russian role in any European security architecture.

Three, there is an expectation of great powers, who may have adversarial relations, to be partners in managing global affairs. This justifies the outreach to China and Russia as great powers.

Four, there is greater continuity in the approach to the Indo-Pacific and India's role in the preservation of security in this geopolitical space is reaffirmed.

The author is a former foreign secretary

In defence of Pax Americana



DAMMU RAVI

For some, patriotism often evokes criticism, frustration and feelings of betrayal about the state of affairs in their country. These expressions are an honest way of seeking course corrections. The acclaimed author Shadi Hamid makes a provocative case for why America, despite its many flaws, remains the best hope for the world. This self-critical book raises the most fundamental question facing the United States today: How it should think about the power it has and regain its moral purpose in a world beset by tragedy.

Mr Hamid's years of experience at

the *Washington Post* have lent him a unique perspective on America's foreign policy, as both an American and a Muslim coming of age in the shadow of the 9/11 attacks. His book confronts head-on America's failures, contradictions and resilience.

American cynics view the 9/11 attacks as a culmination in the disastrous decision to invade Iraq. Like many critics, Mr Hamid, too, disagrees with several of America's foreign policy decisions, including the Vietnam War, the misadventure in Afghanistan and missteps in West Asia. These misjudgments have, however, been framed as the fulfilment of patriotic duty rather than its negation, disregarding the erosion of America's moral fortitude. Notwithstanding these blunders, Mr Hamid argues that Pax Americana has been — on balance — good for the world after World War II because it avoided a total war. The justification for the use of force by America for the greater good and peace seems to

resonate with the Machiavellian tenet that "the ends justify the means" and the Hobbesian acclamation of individuals willing to surrender their rights to an absolute authority — the Leviathan — in exchange for security and order.

However, the construct of a unipolar world led by America in the 21st century has serious limitations, which the author seems to have overlooked. Growing multipolarity driven largely by emerging economies is a major balancing force in world politics today; the negotiating approach is mostly based on trust, tactics and consent rather than dictum; and the rapid rise of China's economic might and technological prowess is, demonstrably, circumscribing America's global leadership role. Countries of the Global South are courting alternatives forums such as Brics and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to amplify their voices and seek solutions for their problems. American political scientist Joseph Samuel Nye Jr, who famously defined "soft power", aptly captured this

very ideals it claims to cherish. Mr Hamid's defence of immigration, rooted in the belief that it induces economic resilience and strengthens democracy, is refreshing, given the rising aversion to immigrants in America.

Progress depends on human agency, where individual choices, accumulating over time, shape outcomes. In a corrupting power, the collective will of people acts as checks and balances and this intrinsic trait in the American polity, Mr Hamid believes, will help to reshape and redirect America when circumstances demand. The alternative to America could be brutal authoritarianism that can stifle peoples' potential and aspirations, he warns. Predictably, therefore, open societies are better able to manage their challenges.

Mr Hamid wants the readers to understand America's past as intertwined in a certain cyclical logic of success and failures. In this intensely personal book, Mr Hamid wills himself to optimism, realism, and calls for an America worthy of its ideals.

The reviewer is a retired IFS officer

THE ASIAN AGE

17 DECEMBER 2025

Govt needs to drop new rural jobs scheme plan

The decision of the Union government to rename and rework the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and introduce a truncated version cuts at the very roots of a scheme that helped crores of Indians become part of the nation-building process and come out of poverty. It is not that the government cannot present another scheme with its focus areas as under the proposed Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill; it's just that it appears to be bent on eliminating the legacy of a scheme named after the Father of the Nation. Indeed, every salient feature of the MGNREGA scheme is done to death in the new proposed scheme. The most important element of the scheme was that it guarantees 100 days of work for the rural poor and the government was bound to compensate the registered persons monetarily if it could not employ them for the stipulated number of days. This demand-driven scheme will now give way to a supply-driven scheme under the new bill wherein the registered persons will get the job only if the government can supply it to them; it is under no obligation to guarantee it, however. Liberalised economies have long stopped offering guarantees but such an approach by the government towards people from the lowest strata of society will hit them hard, more so when it undoes a guarantee so far in place.

Holidays during the peak agriculture season will no doubt cancel another important aim of the original scheme that liberated farm labourers from the clutches of the landlords

Next, the MGNREGS was designed as a scheme fully sponsored and funded by the Union government. It's now being transformed to yet another scheme where the Union government and states will share expenses at a ratio of 60:40. Earlier, it was a means for the Union government to help out cash-strapped state governments roll out projects that can benefit the rural economy and ensure guaranteed income for the labourers. The money in the hands of the poor entered the economic cycle and started moving it instantly. The benefits were many and could be felt across the segments of society.

It may be remembered that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government introduced the scheme in 2005 when the Union government did not enjoy the kind of control over tax revenue and purse strings as it now does thanks to the Goods and Services Tax regime. Still, the present government now wants to turn the scheme on its head and burden the already overburdened states. To add to states' woes, the excess work undertaken by them would have to be paid for by those governments themselves.

And, too, under the new scheme, it will be the Union government that will decide the programmes to be undertaken. It has in fact listed out four focus areas. This is against the grain of the original scheme which handed over the planning and execution of projects to the grassroots. It is, therefore, the duty of the government to explain why it wants to thus centralise a scheme designed to help address local, rural and remote issues. One-size-fits-all schemes are against the principles of decentralisation.

It may be argued that the increase in the number of days offered under the scheme — to 125 from the existing 100 — is a welcome feature of the bill. However, holidays during the peak agriculture season will no doubt cancel another important aim of the original scheme that liberated agricultural labourers from the clutches of the landlords.

MGNREGA is named after the Father of the Nation who proposed the idea of antyodaya, or care for the last man. But the new pared down scheme aligns more with the authoritarian principles of the Sangh Parivar. The Union government must drop this destructive bill immediately as it does have a real potential to drive crores of beneficiaries of the old scheme back into penury.

Make an example of Luthras

The Luthra brothers Gaurav and Saurabh have been brought to face the majesty of the law. This is one of the rare cases in which swift action on the part of the Indian law enforcement agencies, in coordination with Interpol and Thailand authorities, had led to the accused being deported by the terms of an extradition treaty from a foreign country and put up before the court in India.

Hardly had the night club they co-owned and operated in Arpora in North Goa started going up in flames just before midnight on December 5 — owing to a lackadaisical flirting with safety in a public place — than the brothers had scooted to Phuket and may have been planning to stay as long as possible away from the long arm of the Indian law. That they did not travel beyond Thailand to a third country from which extradition may not have been worked so efficiently may have sealed their flight from justice, restricting it to a 10-day sojourn of the guilty.

Charged with culpable homicide, which is all that the statute books can permit under the circumstances, they had an opportunity to stand up as men and be counted like the five managers and other staff of the nightclub besides other partners or investors who may have had no direct executive association with operating the club, and who were taken in by the authorities.

The Luthra Bros, seen to be overly arrogant, which is a characteristic their staff shared according to accounts of visitors to their salt pan-based club that violated more rules than it may be possible to imagine, deserved their comeuppance. It is the system of bribes and quid pro quos prevalent in the holiday paradise of Goa that got exposed by such a tragedy as that of fireworks being set off indoors amid combustible material which triggered the fire that killed 25 staff and customers.

Had there been a sense of remorse, the rich businessmen may have at least announced substantial compensation for the kin of the deceased. Not a peep came out of those who were fleeing the land at the first sign of trouble. Exemplary punishment for forsaking safety in the guise of offering entertainment for patrons of a resto-bar must be meted out to make an example of the brothers who reek of exploitation for profits.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Printer & Publisher

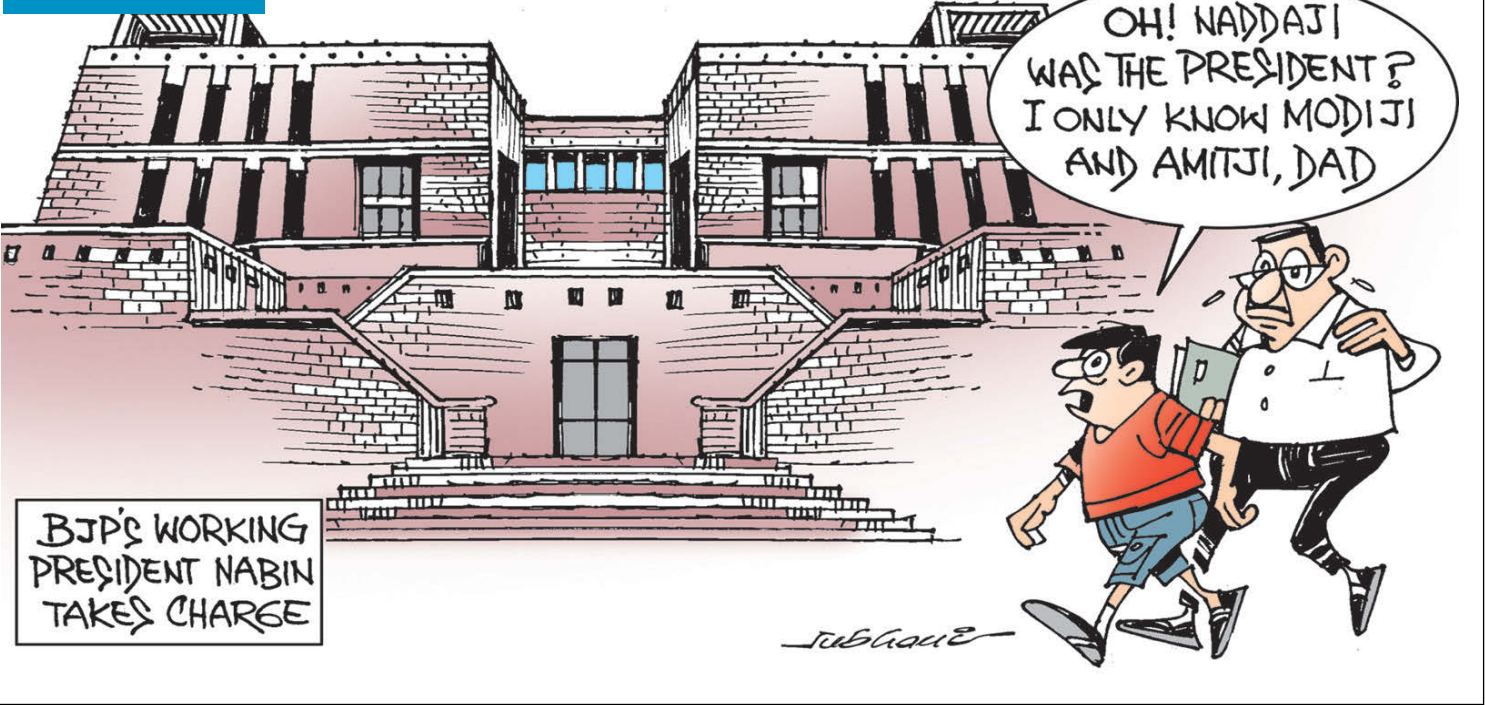
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Subhani



How rising inequality leads to distorting Indian society



Mohan Guruswamy

"The nature of the institutions determines outcomes, not the means of production or processes"

In 2013 the French economist Thomas Piketty released *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, a magnum opus on income inequality. It was an epochal book very much like Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Hawking's book sold as many as 10 million copies, by comparison Piketty's tome had 2.4 million buyers so far. Such event books are more often than not read by only a fraction of the buyers. Speaking for myself, I still have somewhere a slightly read copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, still considered by the cognoscenti as the foremost work of modern literature. It is said that an analysis of the Kindle readers of the Piketty book revealed that a typical reader got through 26 of its 700 pages. But have no fear, those first 26 pages have all that you need to know. They encapsulate the rationale and results of Piketty's monumental work.

I once asked a well-known economist who had reviewed Piketty's *Capital* about what the main proposition of the book was. He encapsulated it quite brilliantly. He just said that Piketty had set out to prove that "R" was greater than "G", where "R" is the return on capital and "G" is the growth of the economy. There is much empirical evidence to back this up. In the eight years between 2006 and 2014, the US benchmark index S&P 500 gained 45 per cent, an average simple growth rate of 5.6 pc, four times higher than the average GDP growth rate of around 1.5 pc. The consequence of this, of course, is the explosion in income

inequality, which is the hallmark of the post-Second World War era, and particularly after the advent of globalisation. Oxfam has informed us that in the past two decades 73 per cent of the growth has been cornered by just one per cent of the population. Oxfam has a known tendency to exaggerate a bit to prove its point, but this proposition, that few people benefitted the most during this period of huge economic expansion, is undisputable. Paul Krugman wrote: "What excited them was Piketty's novel hypothesis about the growing importance of disparities in wealth, especially inherited wealth, as opposed to earnings. We are, Piketty suggested, returning to the kind of dynastic, 'patrimonial' capitalism that prevailed in the late 19th century." We only need to look around us to see that most of the wealthy today are inheritors, and without doubt many of them are building on those inheritances to further accentuate the income inequality. What is really troubling about this growing concentration of wealth is the concentration of political power in the hands of very few who are able to influence politics and policies.

According to Marx, an individual's position within a class hierarchy is determined by their role in the production process, and he argues that political and ideological consciousness is determined by class position. He saw a class as those who share common economic interests and are conscious of those interests. Classes, according to Marx, were inherently antagonistic and in a state of constant struggle.

In his new book *Capital and Ideology*, Thomas Piketty argues, with far greater validity, that inequality

Thomas Piketty's study relates to how both capital and knowledge came to be inequitably allocated because of the institutional arrangements within societies

is driven by human institutions, which in turn reflect the dominant ideology. Piketty defines his thesis very succinctly thus: "Inequality is neither economic nor technological: it is ideological and political. In other words, the market and competition, capital and debt, skilled and unskilled workers, natives and aliens, tax havens and competitiveness — none of these things exist as such. All are social and historical constructs, which depend entirely on the legal, fiscal, educational, and political systems that people choose to adopt and the conceptual definitions they choose to work with. These choices are shaped by society's conception of social justice and economic fairness and by the relative political and ideological power of contending groups and discourses."

Does this mean Marx was wrong? The times in which Marx and Piketty lived are very different. Marx saw the distortions and inequity in society and wondered why. He came up with explanations. His prescriptions were limited by the knowledge and evidence available to him then. The world has moved on and moved very far since then. When Karl Marx began writing his first three volumes of *Das Kapital* (1867-1883), it was the early days of electricity. Marx couldn't contemplate the massive leaps of productivity made possible in the 1900s, when the world witnessed a monumental expansion of knowledge and, with it, capital. Piketty's study relates to how both capital and knowledge came to be inequitably allocated because of the institutional

arrangements within societies. To understand how institutional arrangements determine outcomes, just think of India's educational system. We now have two or possibly three parallel educational streams. The two urban upper classes largely benefit from a higher standard and quality of education imparted in English in schools with high quality teaching and facilities. This is the stream that produces India's managerial classes (both government and industrial). The working-class stream flows out of our government schools, with its emphasis on vernacular education and in-different standards. There is a third stream of rural education from which escape even into the next higher class becomes even more difficult, if not impossible. The flow into the upper reaches of Indian society from these three streams is vastly unequal. What Piketty is saying is just this. The nature of the institutions determines outcomes, not the means of production or processes.

Capital and Ideology is rich in references to India and draws inferences about the institution of castes (*varnas*) and the rising role of Brahmins, after the advent of Muslim rule, leading to the diminution of the role of Kshatriyas. The role of the Brahmins expanded to an even more dominant status under the British. Piketty lauds the determined "affirmative action" policies after Independence that vastly increased the upward mobility of the lower castes, like most of us do. He also notes that the benefits could not be fully realised due to the low standards of education and its unevenness in towns and the hinterland and between regions. So, what's new?

Most Indians with even an elementary understanding of post-Independence India know this. The question is: What is to be done now?

Mohan Guruswamy is a scholar and author. The views expressed here are his own.

LETTERS

MISOGYNIST LEFT?

This news highlights a deeply offensive and irresponsible remark by a Kerala CPI(M) leader who, in his victory speech, reduced women to a purely sexist and domestic role, triggering widespread outrage. The statement is not only morally reprehensible and socially regressive but also contradicts constitutional values and the very leftist ideology that claims to uphold gender equality and women's empowerment. It reflects entrenched patriarchal thinking and political hypocrisy, exposing how power often overrides principle. Public condemnation of the remark is, therefore, a necessary stand to uphold dignity, equality and the rightful social and political agency of women.

Md Asad Mumbai

WILL VBG WORK?

IN AN ATTEMPT to modify the existing employment oriented scheme that was launched in the year 2005, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) to benefit poor, women and marginalised with a basic 100-day of guaranteed employment is being replaced with the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika (Gramin) Mission. It will increase the number of days of employment from 100 to 125 days. The government has taken this decision in the service of the Atmanirbhar Bharat or Self-reliant India cause. The overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) of persons aged 15 years and above increased to 55.8 per cent in November 2025, the highest level recorded since April 2025. The increase in LFPR was primarily driven by rural areas. If the new scheme works, it could help society grow financially.

Dimple Wadhawan Kanpur

WORK SMARTER

LOK SABHA MEMBER Supriya Sule has introduced The Right to Disconnect Bill in the Lok Sabha. It brings a ray of hope for the millions of workers in the country. It proposes that no employee will be obligated to respond to calls or emails after their office hours and it imposes financial penalties on companies for non-compliance. We are living in a constantly digitally connected world where boundaries between work and family are blurring with each passing day. If enacted this law could mark a significant shift in India's work culture.

Bal Govind Noida

K.J. Jacob



Despite dramatic win in its capital, a long way to go for BJP in Kerala

If everything works according to plan, then a BJP mayor will welcome Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the tarmac when he next visits Kerala's capital Thiruvananthapuram. That will be a paradox at the same city, of richest god Sri Padmanabha, had witnessed the anointment of the first elected Communist head of government anywhere in the world 68 years ago. The current chief minister belongs to the red camp, while the mayor happens to be from the saffron one.

The BJP cadres' jubilation over the party's performance in the local body elections, particularly in the state's capital, reached 7, Lok Kalyan Marg, in India's capital and Mr Modi shared the excitement of his partymen in the southern state. The master craftsman of the BJP's electoral gains across the country, Mr Modi called the party's mandate in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation "a watershed moment in Kerala's politics". He also called his former colleague in the Union council of ministers and now state BJP president Rajeev Chandrasekhar to recall how the win in Ahmedabad's municipal elections was a similar breakthrough for the fledgling BJP back in 1987. Mr Modi said the 50 seats it won in the 101-member corporation must be the starting point in the party's campaign to fell Kerala's "red fort".

The BJP had been eyeing the corporation in

the last several elections. The NDA it leads won 35 seats in the 2015 and 2020 elections and was the main Opposition in the corporation council while the CPI(M)-led LDF was at the wheel, pushing the Congress-led UDF to the third position. The party will be able to get its candidate elected as mayor since the LDF, with its 29 candidates, and the UDF, with 19, is unlikely to mount an opposition with the help of two Independent candidates. (The election to one division was postponed due to the death of a candidate).

Mr Modi's congratulations and blessings will be a shot in the arm for the BJP for its campaign for the Assembly elections due in April-May 2026, but it is doubtful if that is sufficient for the saffron party to confidently aim big, if the performance in the local body elections across the state is a pointer. The BJP's vote share in the state elections hovers around 16 per cent, which is in fact lesser than the party's record in the Lok Sabha elections held hardly two years ago.

An analysis of the voting pattern reveals that the party has been consistent in retaining its hold in the state capital but not elsewhere. It is a fact that the party was never able to match the performance of P. Kerala Varma, a Sangh Parivar candidate in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections. The party, despite its win in more seats, lags behind the LDF by about 10,000 votes even in Thiruvananthapuram; it has lost both the

municipalities it had won last time. Among them is Pandalam, a place traditionally and ritualistically linked to Lord Ayyappa of Sabarimala, which was won by the LDF. The party managed to emerge as the largest bloc in Palakkad municipality, which it ruled last time with a comfortable majority. The party cadre was on cloud nine when actor-turned politician Suresh Gopi broke the jinx and he won the Thrissur Lok Sabha seat in 2024; the party believed the Thrissur victory will help it consolidate the base and win more seats. The party launched its campaign with an eye on the Thrissur corporation, but it ended up a poor third after the UDF and the LDF.

The data on seats in other local bodies is also not very positive for the party and its sympathisers inside and outside Kerala. It now runs 26 of the 941 gram panchayats, two of the 86 municipalities and one of six corporations. It has drawn a blank in both block panchayats and district panchayats. In fact, it has won only one of the 344 district panchayat seats, which are larger units comparable with Assembly segments. It has doubled the number of gram panchayats under it but the disturbing trend is that it was unable to hold on to those which it had won last time.

The party had banked on its new-found bonhomie with the Christian community, who comprise about 18 per cent of the state's population.

Mr Gopi's win in Thrissur was largely attributed to the support of the prominent minority community. The party also showed signs of an accommodation of the people from the community in the state leadership; several even in the state core committee are from the community. It went out of its way to comfort the community when two Catholic nuns were recently arrested in Raipur, in BJP-ruled Chhattisgarh. But the latest election results indicate that it was indeed a short honeymoon, and the sheep have gone back to the comforts of its traditional sheds in the UDF. The community looks less adventurous now, making the BJP gameplan less formidable.

The party has managed to wean away a section of the powerful Ezhava community, which forms the vote base of the Communist parties in the state. However, the election results indicate that the Communists have been able to stall any further erosion of its base.

The BJP is now at a crossroads in Kerala. It has realised that hardcore Hindutva issues cannot take the party much ahead in a state which is known for its communal harmony. Its demography — the two minority communities make up about 45 per cent of the total population — virtually limits the possibility of such a policy. The party now flashes the development card with the hope that Kerala, with its open mindedness, will give it a chance.



EDITORIAL
STRUCTURAL
OVERHAUL

The introduction of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill in the Lok Sabha is a significant restructuring of India's higher-education governance in decades. By proposing a single overarching commission with three specialised councils for regulation, accreditation and academic standards, the Bill seeks to end the long-criticised fragmentation of India's higher-education oversight. At present, the University Grants Commission, the All India Council for Technical Education and the National Council for Teacher Education operate in silos, often duplicating functions, issuing overlapping regulations and creating compliance burdens for universities. In theory, replacing these bodies with a unified architecture aligns with the National Education Policy 2020's promise of "light but tight" regulation. The ambition is clear: reduce bureaucratic clutter, harmonise standards across disciplines and allow institutions greater academic flexibility while maintaining accountability. Yet the magnitude of this reform demands close scrutiny, not only of what the Bill dismantles, but of what it concentrates in its place.

A defining feature of the proposed Adhishthan is its sweeping jurisdiction. It will cover central universities and colleges, as well as institutes of national importance such as IITs, IIMs, NITs, IISc, IISERs and IIITs—institutions that have historically enjoyed significant autonomy. The Bill envisages three councils under the commission: the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Vinayaman Parishad as the common regulator, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Guvvatta Parishad for accreditation, and the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Manak Parishad for setting academic standards. Conceptually, separating these functions makes sense. Regulation, accreditation and standard-setting require different competencies and mindsets, and their conflation has often produced rigid controls rather than quality enhancement. However, the success of this separation will depend on how independent these councils truly are in practice, and whether they function as professional bodies guided by academic judgment rather than as extensions of the executive.

That concern becomes sharper when one examines the composition and appointment structure outlined in the Bill. The commission will be headed by a chairperson appointed by the President of India, along with 12 members appointed in the same manner. Each council will be led by a president, also appointed by the President, with council members selected on the recommendation of a search-cum-selection committee of the central government. The President retains the power to remove the chairperson, council presidents and members for dereliction of duty. While constitutional propriety is maintained through presidential appointments, the heavy imprint of the executive raises questions about autonomy. Higher education thrives on academic freedom, peer evaluation and institutional independence. Concentrating appointment and removal powers risks creating a system where regulatory discretion is vulnerable to political priorities, however well-intentioned. If universities begin to perceive the commission as an instrument of control rather than facilitation, the reform could undermine precisely the innovation and excellence it seeks to promote.

One of the Bill's more thoughtful elements is the explicit separation of funding from regulation. By keeping the disbursal of grants to centrally funded institutions outside the purview of the Adhishthan and vesting it with mechanisms devised by the Ministry of Education, the Bill follows the NEP 2020's principle that financial control should not distort academic oversight. This could, if implemented well, reduce conflicts of interest and allow regulators to focus on quality rather than compliance tied to grants. However, this separation also introduces coordination challenges. Without transparent, predictable funding mechanisms insulated from political discretion, institutions may find themselves navigating new uncertainties even as old regulators disappear. Ultimately, the Bill's promise will be judged not by its architecture alone but by its execution—by whether it genuinely simplifies regulation, protects institutional autonomy and raises academic standards, or merely replaces three regulators with a more powerful centralised authority. India's aspiration to become a global knowledge hub demands reform, but it also demands restraint. The success of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan will rest on whether it empowers universities to think freely, teach boldly and compete globally, rather than merely regulating them more efficiently.

PUBLIC
FINANCE



PC JHA

THE WRITER
IS ADVISOR,
FICCI CASCADE
& FORMER
CHAIRMAN,
CENTRAL BOARD
OF INDIRECT TAXES
& CUSTOMS

India's long
experiment with
ad-valorem and
specific duties
offers clear
lessons on what
curbs evasion,
protects revenue
and avoids
market distortion

Towards Balanced Cigarette Taxation

As the compensation cess nears its end, India's debate on cigarette taxation must balance revenue, health goals and enforcement realities—drawing on decades of domestic experience and global best practices



Illicit cigarettes now account for over one-fourth of India's market, draining revenue

The 56th GST Council meeting marked a significant moment in India's indirect tax administration, bringing, inter alia, the structure of cigarette taxation back into the policy focus, especially with the compensation cess nearing its end. Given that cigarettes are a highly regulated and socially sensitive product, the choice of tax structures must rest on the reality of past experience, striking a right balance among fiscal, administrative, and public health considerations. India's own fiscal journey with tobacco and past reforms offer sound lessons on what is effective and what should perhaps be avoided.

Before 1983, cigarettes were taxed under an ad-valorem excise regime. This system led to frequent disputes between the government and assessees, particularly regarding the inclusion of Post-Manufacturing Expenses (PME) in the assessable value, resulting in protracted litigation and blocking of revenue for long periods. The ad-valorem system soon proved ineffective. In theory, ad-valorem taxes linked collections to product pricing. However, in practice, they created scope for disagreement, valuation disputes, and administrative complexity. After the resolution of the PME disputes, the government introduced an MRP-based levy on cigarettes, which led to widespread undervaluation and duty evasion. However, this system also turned out to be counterproductive on two counts. First, it created a spiralling effect on taxation, where even a small increase in tax rates resulted in a disproportionately higher increase in retail prices. Second, in order to avoid paying tax based on a higher MRP, some unscrupulous operators would show a lower MRP, while the amount charged to the consumer was transacted in cash. The regime, therefore, became distortionary, difficult to enforce, and incentivised evasion of taxes.

Subsequently, a decisive shift came in the Union Budget of 1987, when the government moved from an ad-valorem system to a specific levy based on the physical length of the cigarette. Eminent economists such as Dr Raja Chelliah and Dr Vijay Kelkar also endorsed the specific levy

model as being transparent, predictable, and resistant to manipulation. The structure was simple, easy to administer and resulted in higher tax collection. Excise duty collections from cigarettes grew more than twenty-fold over the next three decades, enabling both the government and the cigarette industry to operate in a more predictable fiscal environment. During this period, the Indian cigarette industry also evolved from a purely commoditised market into one offering differentiated, consumer-centric products catering to varied consumer needs.

However, with the introduction of VAT in 2007 and GST in 2017, the share of ad valorem taxation has become much larger again. The VAT regime coincided with a phase of strong anti-tobacco activism that resulted in several policy changes, leading to measures such as the enactment of the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA), restrictions on public smoking, and steep increases in overall tax incidence. In fact, India took the lead in this regulatory approach through COTPA, even before formally signing the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which was adopted later. While these measures advanced the much-needed health objectives, they also produced some unintended retarding effects. Regulatory overreach, such as large pictorial warnings and high taxes, led to a significant surge in the availability of illicit

cigarettes in the country, fuelling the growth of both smuggled and domestically manufactured unaccounted and tax-evaded products, including look-alike packs sold at deep discounts by fly-by-night operators. These products entered the market at price points barely covering the cost of the cigarette, further undermining the legal industry. The widening gap between legal and illicit products, a rise in ultra-low-priced alternatives, and greater enforcement challenges became visible trends.

Further, the rise of illicit cigarettes resulted in huge losses of tax revenue and posed much more serious health hazards than the legal ones. This is because the cigarettes available in the grey market are made in unhygienic conditions without any concern for the quality of tobacco and other ingredients.

Today, the rapid proliferation of multiple illicit brands across varied price points has posed serious challenges for the legal cigarette industry. A range of differentiated products offered by international players now commands a notable share of the market. For instance, products such as ESSE, positioned in slim and lower-priced formats, have gained popularity among younger consumers by creating an impression of containing less nicotine and therefore, being less harmful. It is pertinent to note the history and growth of illicit trade in the country. With the enactment of COTPA and ratification of the FCTC treaty,

anti-tobacco activism in India, led by NGOs, gained significant momentum. The NGOs were at the forefront, influencing taxation and regulations. With overactive anti-tobacco activism leading to a substantial change in taxation policy, raising the burden of tax beyond the affordability of the common citizen, coupled with gory imagery on Indian cigarette packaging, this has given a huge boost to the cheaper, tax-not-paid cigarettes, which do not carry the excessive warnings required under the law of the land. According to Euromonitor International, until 2004, the illicit trade of cigarettes stood at 11.1 billion cigarettes, forming approximately 10.3 per cent of the Indian market. With the massive increases in taxation, starting from 2005–06 to 2017–18, the illicit trade of cigarettes has grown over threefold to more than 36 billion cigarettes. Illicit trade now stands at 26.1 per cent of the total cigarette trade, i.e. over one-fourth of the market size. This has led to the market today resting in the hands of trade mafias. It is established in several international studies that anti-social elements use this money to fund ulterior motives, including destabilising countries and engaging in terrorist activities. It is also estimated that revenue loss to the exchequer on account of illicit cigarettes is to the tune of about Rs 21,000 crore per annum.

Against this backdrop, the recent decision of the GST Council to tax tobacco at the retail sales price appears to

revisit the pre-1987 model. It may be relevant to mention here that globally, taking a leaf out of India's over three-decade-long cigarette taxation policy, several countries have now adopted specific-duty structures with a view to avoiding manipulation, reducing valuation disputes, and simplifying tax administration. In fact, as of 2024, 137 out of 178 countries have adopted a blend of ad-valorem and specific structures—historically, a model that India itself had adopted in its early stages. In 2008, this number was 101, reflecting a clear global shift towards this framework.

Today, India stands at an important juncture in its economic journey, with the goal of becoming a Viksit Bharat by 2047. A stable tax framework is indispensable to fulfil this ambition since it encourages investment, reduces compliance frictions and supports long-term economic planning. As India debates the next steps in tax design under the GST for tobacco, the choice is not between change and continuity but between time-tested stability and avoidable uncertainty. It is hoped that on cessation of compensation cess, the final fiscal policy will take cognisance of the historical facts, perspectives and international experiences to adopt a balanced approach—learning from India's own history of tobacco taxation while aiming to disincentivise illicit trade without making major structural changes in the tax system and keep the tax incidence stable. Such a framework will result in a robust policy for the law-abiding industry. A policy measure of this kind, as in the process of development, views balance not as a compromise, but as the foundation for sustainable long-term growth.

Such an approach is worth consideration since, at the same time, it would serve the revenue and health concerns. Also, being easier, it would be conducive to tax compliance and would address enforcement challenges. Not giving due weightage to these important points would not be advisable, as the same would work contrary to the interests of both the public and the government.

Views expressed are personal

HARD
TRUTHS



ASIF ULLAH KHAN

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

If accountability
fails in Israel and
vigilance falters
elsewhere, the
price will not be
paid by leaders
or generals—but
by Jewish families
whose only
“crime” is existing
amid a war they
do not control

Conflict's Dangerous Spillover

As Israel's war in Gaza continues, antisemitism is rising across Western democracies, with attacks like Bondi Beach showing how anger at Israel increasingly targets Jewish communities worldwide

Thomas Friedman in his *The New York Times* column “This Israeli Government Is a Danger to Jews Everywhere,” had warned that the way Israel is fighting the war in Gaza under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could endanger Jews globally—not because Jews themselves are to blame, but because Israel's government actions might fuel backlash and rising antisemitism abroad, and could ultimately transform Israel from a source of pride into a “pariah state.”

The deadly shooting during a Hanukkah celebration at Australia's Bondi Beach, which killed more than 15 people, stands as a grim reminder of Friedman's warning. Officials said the attack was “designed to target” the Jewish community while it was celebrating the first day of Hanukkah. The violence underscored how rapidly antisemitism is spreading across societies once considered safe havens for Jews. Australia, long viewed as a secure refuge, now finds itself confronting a reality few imagined possible just a few years ago.

Even in his column, Friedman had noted that Netanyahu had pushed Israel toward pariah status. He predicted that “sane Israelis will line up to immigrate to Australia and America rather than beckon their fellow Jews to come to Israel's way.” That dystopian future, Friedman cautioned, was not yet fully realised—but its outlines were unmistakably forming. His warning was not rhetorical excess; rather, he was cau-



Wars end on battlefields, but hatred lingers on streets far away

tioning Jews worldwide about the new challenges they may soon face.

Disturbingly, Australia and Italy recorded the largest increases in antisemitic incidents globally in 2024. The Executive Council of Australian Jewry documented more than 3,700 anti-Jewish incidents in the two years following the Hamas attack—five times the annual rate seen in the previous decade. These incidents ranged from anti-Israel graffiti and harassment to arson attacks and the destruction of a Melbourne synagogue. Such acts reveal how political rage abroad is increasingly being redirected at Jewish communities with no connection to

Israeli policymaking.

Australia's experience is not isolated. Across Western democracies, antisemitism has surged alongside a broader resurgence of ideological extremism. Jewish communities, as history repeatedly shows, are often the first targets. In October 2023, hundreds of pro-Palestinian protesters stormed Makhachkala airport in Russia's Dagestan republic after a flight from Tel Aviv landed. Chanting antisemitic slogans, the mob breached security, rushed the tarmac, and attempted to identify Jewish or Israeli passengers. The incident demonstrated how anger over Gaza has split into direct hostility toward Jews and Israelis worldwide, even in

transit spaces like international airports.

Friedman warned that Jewish communities must prepare for a level of backlash many have never experienced. Events in Australia tragically validate that concern. The underlying reason is simple and dangerous: many people fail—or refuse—to distinguish between Israel's government and Jewish communities abroad. Public fury over Israel's military conduct has too often mutated into collective blame.

At the core of this crisis lies Netanyahu's megalomaniacal drive to cling to power—through relentless militarism, democratic erosion, judicial manipulation, and political repression—largely aimed at


delaying or escaping accountability for corruption charges. The damage to Israel's moral standing and to Jewish safety worldwide is immense.

Repairing that damage requires decisive action. Netanyahu must exit political life and face the legal process—no immunity, no pardon without accountability. Israel must restore judicial independence, reaffirm civilian oversight of the military, and conduct credible investigations into wartime conduct. Above all, a genuine political horizon for Palestinians—ending indefinite occupation, rebuilding Gaza under international supervision, and reviving diplomacy—must replace perpetual war as policy.

Australia, too, must act. Condemning antisemitism is not enough. Law enforcement agencies must treat antisemitic violence as a national security threat, not a fringe issue. Social media platforms must be held accountable for amplifying hate. Political leaders must draw clear lines between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism, refusing to tolerate either silence or equivocation. Education systems must reinforce historical literacy and civic responsibility, ensuring younger generations understand where dehumanisation leads.

Without accountability in Israel and vigilance abroad, the cycle will continue. And the cost will not be borne by politicians—but by ordinary Jewish families simply trying to live, worship, and belong in peace.

Views expressed are personal



CONTRAPUNTO

Well, as you know, there are 24 hrs in every day. And if that's not enough, you've always got the nights!

- RONALD GRAHAM

Markets 24x7

Nasdaq, NYSE, LSE, all want to run round the clock. They may have much to gain, but what about retail investors?

Nasdaq, America's tech-heavy stock exchange, has made it official that it wants to remain open 23 hours a day, five days a week. New York and London exchanges are on the same page. US has already granted approval to 24X, a startup exchange that will operate 23/5. The consensus is that opening and closing bells in markets are about to be consigned to history. Is it a revolution? Technologically, no. We've been booking tickets and ordering goods 24x7 for years. Culturally, yes. Around the world – Tokyo, Shanghai, Mumbai, London, New York – markets open for six or seven hours only. Operating practically round the clock will require more staff, infra upgrades and attitudinal change. But will it be worthwhile?

The exchanges think so, for obvious reasons. There's insatiable hunger for US stocks like Nvidia, Apple and Amazon worldwide. That's why US accounts for over 60% of global market cap. And foreign investors held some \$17tn worth of US equities last year. Keeping open longer breaks the day/night barrier for foreign retail investors. It also makes trading easier for working Americans – they needn't rush it during coffee breaks at work. And every trade is worth something to an exchange. Besides, brokerages already offer 24-hour trading, so exchanges need to catch up.

So much for stocks and exchanges, but what's in it for investors? Advocates say continuous trading will lead to better price discovery, there will be less volatility,

investors will be able to respond to breaking news – such as earnings reports – in real time, rather than catching up in the next session. But critics warn these 'strengths' are illusory. Little actual trading (11%) happens outside the traditional 8am-4pm window. A single big trade in these lean hours can distort price. And because banks are closed in these hours, liquidity is tight. So, it's not the best time for retail investors to try their luck against algorithms. Plus, keeping exchanges running round the clock will impose extra costs, and make maintenance of systems harder. Above all, 24/7, or even 23/5, trading will increase stress on people. But when has that ensured status quo?

Give Enough Time, EC

Commission should have empathy for those incorrectly excluded from voter rolls in Bengal & other states

Almost 8% of Bengal's voter roll of Jan 2025 has been excluded in the new draft rolls post-SIR. Lists uploaded include those dead, duplicate, permanently shifted, absent and/or 'uncollectable'. Two reasons for the removal of over 58L such names are politically charged – first, dead voters' names are allegedly used for proxy voting, and second, party claims/counterclaims that non-citizens have found their way into voter rolls.

Desi catchphrase 'baap ka naam' – invoked either in jest or from privilege – has become too real an issue to be laughed off. Election staff on ground have struggled to square various spellings and different names for the same voter – if in one voter list it's dad's 'dak

naam' (a Bengali fixation with nicknames), in another it is his actual name. Is it being criminal, or just being desi? Similar issues ailed Bihar's SIR. Uneven and inaccurate documentation – in very large numbers acquired through third party/vendors, once called touts – and the common knowledge that Aadhaar, although flawed, is all that matters, made the task of 'progeny mapping' stressful. BJP has battled for Matuas in Bengal, who do not have relevant parent-origin documents to meet EC's criteria. Matuas aren't the only group with variant documentation – a matter EC has always been sensitive to and inclusive about. Must various political parties then bat for various marginalised groups for EC to recognise that perfect documentation is a chimera? That there's too short a time for restoration of names incorrectly removed? Seasonal migrants, especially those who work in hospitality, are away and cannot afford to let go of workdays – most travel in groups from neighbouring regions. That is a fact of migration.

There is anxiety whether those incorrectly excluded will be returned their franchise in time to make it to the new voter roll. Mistakes happen. Take for instance Birbhumi's Sunali Khatun – pushed into Bangladesh and returned, because she is an Indian Bengali Muslim. What'll she need to ensure she's on the new voter roll, regardless in Bengal or Delhi, from where she was detained? Asking her to fill up Form 6 as a new voter is not what SIR needs to be.

Truth cocktail

Explaining Goa to Ahmedabad

Kannan.Somasundaram@timesofindia.com

When I returned from Goa on a transfer, my Ahmedabad colleagues looked like hungover partygoers denied water and aspirin. "Why would anyone leave Goa?" said one, eyes stuck in a dry state of disbelief. "Now you can't do what Goans do daily," said another.

Well, most Goans commute to work, then work, then return home – they do what all humans do daily. After stating this obvious fact, I added a dash of pronunciation authenticity. Tourists order Xacuti for Ex-Cutie. Their former partners may be agreeable to look at. But the correct pronunciation is 'Sha-Koo-Ti'.

Sympathy erupted in the workplace: "He's showing withdrawal symptoms." "Incoherent rubbish!" said another colleague. Listen! Goa is indeed heaven, unlike West Virginia, which John Denver admitted was 'almost heaven'. You have heard of the beaches, and Goa has unsullied forests too, where King Cobras rise in their royal hooded-ness. But Gujarat also possesses fine natural treasures.

More abuse ensued. "Don't go de-sloshing yourself here to make us jealous," a colleague said. I pounced on this stereotype with the aplomb of a Gir Lion. Good people! 90% of Goans in my circle live a teetotal life, like you do. Your notion is as ridiculous as the presumption of a Goan or a Dilliwalla that Gujaratis can talk only about bulls and bears and bees and production cycles.


Many Gujaratis have educated me about Raga Malkauns, Gandhism, and post-colonial literature. And many Goans have given me greater insights into the legend of Lord Parashuram, the genius of FN Souza, and the tiatr's edifying entertainment. You cannot compress Goa into an 'I Love Goa' T-shirt. Although, truth is the heart symbol on the T-shirt would be disturbed by my paunch, which would fashion it into a terrifying ECG squiggle.

Anyway, like you and people anywhere in the world, Goans don't think it's an existential necessity to determine whether *Hotel California* will pair well with a single or a married malt. As I said all this, my audience looked like its head was growing heavy and its sight dim. "Oh a silly pun, he's normal," a colleague said. "He could be right about Goa." Pleased, I pressed on about Paris being more than that woman whose picture was taken when she was at the 'ch' of 'cheese'. Get it? The response was A1 in cross-cultural punning: "You aren't feni, get back to work."

We Don't Think, So We Can't Breathe

Core causes of India's air pollution crisis have been clear for 25 years: burning of biomass and coal. Still, the bickering continues. And the Delhi problem spreads to Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad...

Chandra Bhushan



Every winter, Delhi's air pollution debate follows a familiar script. We look for villains, argue over blame, ignore science and solutions. This year has been no different – except that it has bordered on the absurd.

Pollution season opened with the Supreme Court allowing "green crackers", followed by Delhi govt's failed cloud-seeding experiment. Soon after came official data claiming a 90% reduction in stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana. Overnight, stubble burning was declared "not a problem". Even though scientific evidence told a very different story.

A paper from ISRO and an independent analysis by my colleagues showed that stubble burning continued widely across Punjab, Haryana, UP, and MP, significantly contributing to pollution in Delhi-NCR. Real issue was not the absence of fires, but the failure of monitoring. Govt agencies rely largely on polar-orbiting satellites that pass over India in the early afternoon. As farmers simply shift the burning to late afternoon and evening, a large proportion of farm fires is no longer being detected.

Instead of fixing the monitoring system, we wasted weeks in *tu-tu main-main* over whether stubble burning or Delhi's local sources were to blame. Lost in this noise was a far more important question: how prepared were institutions such as MCD, Delhi Pollution Control Committee, and Commission for Air Quality Management for the pollution season? As usual, we forgot to demand real solutions or hold institutions accountable.

All this is particularly frustrating because the core causes of India's air pollution crisis have been known for at least 25 years. In 1999, more than 200 scientists from across the world participated in the Indian Ocean Experiment, led by the renowned atmospheric scientist V Ramanathan. This study identified a massive brown haze – which they called the "Asian Brown Cloud" – stretching over the Indian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean from Oct to Feb.

Their findings were unequivocal. This haze was largely caused by the burning of biomass in homes and fields, and fossil fuels (especially coal) in industry and power plants. Pollution travelled thousands of kms, altered rainfall patterns, reduced agri productivity, and caused widespread respiratory and cardiovascular disease.

'My cricket got affected by my love life...like everything else, perception matters in Indian cricket'

There have been very few happy-go-lucky characters in Indian cricket like **Shikhar Dhawan**. His uncomplicated outlook has stood him in good stead, on and off the field. He has also been extremely candid about his life in his recent autobiography *The One*. **TOI's Arani Basu** spoke to Dhawan on his learnings from cricket, the baggage of a youngster, life beyond career and perception:

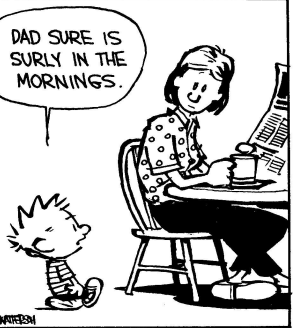
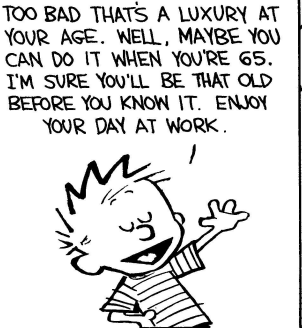
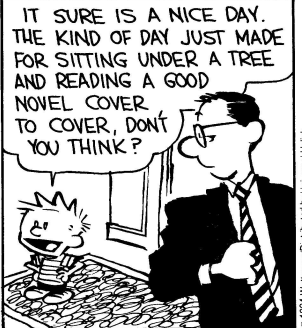
● **You have been open about how your off-field life distracted you early in your career. How difficult is it for a youngster who makes it to the glitz of IPL?**

Proper counselling is very important. You have to understand the background of the youngster and if he has been exposed to this kind of world. The seniors have taught us in their own way. In the first year of IPL with Delhi Daredevils, I had to go for practice twice a day. I asked them to give me a room in the hotel and also got into a heated argument. Then Viru bhai (Virender Sehwag) called me and said, "Play if you want to play. Don't fight. There are a lot of players around like you." Later, I understood what he meant and apologised. For a youngster, there should be focus on learning soft skills so that he can handle these situations with love. I made mistakes off the field and in my love life when I was very young at the age of 20-21. I'll be glad if people can learn from the consequences I faced.

Q&A

feel there is a role for parents and coaches to keep the young boys balanced even after they play IPL or international cricket.

Calvin & Hobbes



Patanjali Yog Sutras And Theory Of Space-Time

Anil K Rajvanshi

A new theory in Physics, as enunciated by Gunther Kletetschka, tries to unite quantum physics and gravity and has been creating waves in the scientific world. If proved correct, it will change the world as we understand it. In fact, this may be the elusive theory of everything that hopes to capture workings of the entire universe in a single equation. This was a dream of Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking. The central thesis of this theory is that time is three-dimensional and the basis for creation of matter and energy. According to this theory, the curvature of time produces space, matter, and energy. This is very different from Einstein's theory, which states that time is a separate entity that interacts with space to form a space-time matrix, which is curved by heavy mass. This is why light bends near large celestial bodies. The new theory posits the primacy

of time and explains how the universe came into being through the interplay of three dimensions of time. According to this theory, space is the by-product of three-dimensional time. It says that the fabric of the universe is made of three-dimensional time, and the space is like a painting on this fabric. This concept aligns well with ancient Indic philosophical thought, which enumerates the primacy of time. For example, the Atharv Ved clearly states that the world came into existence because of time. "Time is placed in a full pot (cosmos). Viewing it from various perspectives, it has produced all these different worlds". This description of time in the Atharv Ved is like what the modern theory states. The description of universe formation in Sankhya Philosophy follows similar lines, stating that in the beginning there was nothing, and

the interplay of prakriti and purush produced the world. Prakriti, according to some Sankhya philosophers, denotes time. Furthermore, this philosophy holds that prakriti consists of sattvic, rajas, and tamas forces and that these were in equilibrium before the birth of the universe. When this equilibrium was disturbed, the world came into existence. It can be conjectured that these three forces correspond to the three dimensions of time in modern physics. In Gita, the primacy of time is established when Kishn shows Arjun his Virat form and utters the famous words "I have become the mighty time, creator and destroyer of worlds". Interestingly, this shlok was misinterpreted by Robert Oppenheimer after the atomic bomb blast in 1945, when he quoted Gita, stating "I have become death" instead of "I have become the mighty time". In Patanjali Yoga Sutras, Ishwar, the

supreme being or ultimate reality, is defined as an entity unconditioned by time. From it originated the world, space and beings. Some interesting sutras concern space and time. For example, they state that by practising sanyam (a combination of concentration, meditation, and samadhi) on moments and sequences of moments, a yogi instantaneously attains universal knowledge and is unrestrained by space and time. This matches exactly with Einstein's gravitational theory, which states, 'events and the interval between events build space-time'. The geometric nature of space-time gives rise to gravity and is the basis of the universe and the movement of heavenly bodies. Finally, the primacy of time is implicit in the final sutra of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, which states that ultimate *kaivalya* is achieved when mutations of the *gunas* cease, causing time – the uninterrupted movement of moments – to stop.

When UNEP published the findings in 2002, some prominent Indian scientists questioned the terminology and intent. The phenomenon was renamed the "Atmospheric Brown Cloud with a focus on Asia", while the warnings were largely ignored by govts. A quarter century later, air pollution has become a pan-India crisis. Cities such as Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad, which once had relatively clean air, now routinely fail to meet national air quality standards. This deterioration is not accidental. It is the direct result of our persistent failure to address the primary sources of pollution identified decades ago.

What pollutes India? | Over the last five years, Indian scientific institutions have produced a growing body of



research that policymakers have largely ignored. A 2024 study involving researchers from prominent institutions, including earth sciences ministry, found that about 50% of PM10 and PM2.5 in Delhi during the peak pollution season comes from biomass-burning sources. Another study from IIT-Kanpur, published in 2023, showed that biomass burning (especially residential heating) is the main driver of intense and frequent night-time haze in Delhi during Jan and Feb.

Similar findings have emerged from other parts of the country. Together, they point to a clear conclusion: open burning of biomass (whether for cooking and heating in homes, in small industrial and commercial establishments, or in agricultural fields) is the single largest source of air pollution in India. Without sharply reducing biomass burning, we simply cannot clean the country's air.

The second major source of pollution is coal use in industries and power plants. A 2023 study by my colleagues estimated that around 37% of India's PM2.5 emissions come from industry and power generation. Vehicular pollution is the third largest source, especially in cities. Basically, *what we burn the most, pollutes the most*. India burns around 220cr tonnes of fuel and waste every year. About 85% of this is coal and biomass; petrol, diesel and gas together account for only 15%. Unsurprisingly, most of our pollution comes from coal and biomass. Add dust from roads, construction sites and barren land, and the picture becomes even clearer.

No short-cuts | Solving India's air pollution crisis requires a clean energy transition and an "all-of-the-above" approach.

● Biggest gains will come from the residential sector. Transitioning households to LPG, biogas or electricity for cooking and heating would eliminate a large share of PM2.5 emissions and prevent nearly 800,000 premature deaths each year from indoor air pollution. This is difficult, but achievable through targeted policies such as a strengthened PM Ujjwala programme that provides adequate incentives for low-income households to abandon biomass completely.

● Industry must be the next priority. Encouraging MSMEs to adopt cleaner fuels and technologies, such as electric boilers and furnaces, combined with strict monitoring, can substantially reduce emissions. For large industries and power plants, enforcement of strict emission standards must be non-negotiable.

● Eliminating stubble burning remains essential to reducing severe pollution episodes in Oct and Nov. In just 45 days, stubble burning emits as much PM2.5 as all vehicles in India do in an entire year. The solutions – technology, market access, incentives, penalties – are well-known and proven.

● Scaling up electric vehicles and public transport will steadily reduce urban pollution, but this requires ambitious targets and serious investment, not slogans. Finally, local sources (dust, construction, garbage burning, congestion) must be tackled by empowered and accountable urban local bodies.

Real progress on the above action plan will only begin when we stop bickering over science. So, acknowledging the true impact and sources of our pollution crisis is the first step towards meaningful action.

The writer is an environmentalist

have gone my way. I won't be bitter about the three that didn't go my way.

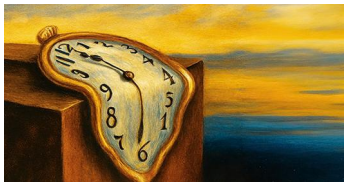
● **How important is it to prepare for life beyond cricket?**

It's a very important issue. A sportsman gives up sport by 40. There is so much energy left in me. Unlike other professions, I have to learn and do other things for most of my remaining life. I realise why a lot of sports people go through depression. If you don't handle yourself emotionally, then the habit of one life remains. Now my life has gone in a different direction. I've started a business, and I want to help out young sportspersons through my foundation. Of course, I've got a lot of people working for me. Business is a new career for me. I have to learn again. I have to do it again. Of course, I'll get the advantages of my previous career.

● **You have managed to be open about your turbulent personal life...**

I wasn't open about my personal life. When I got divorced, the news came out from the court. I have always respected everyone's privacy. If I didn't put such stories out, it wouldn't have resonated with my soul. It's a fine line. It's good to express yourself. It's important to be open. It's not like my whole personal life is out. Living openly has a different vibe.

Sacredspace



Time is a created thing. To say, 'I don't have time,' is like saying, 'I don't want to.'

Attributed to Lao Tzu

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Missing in Parliament

PM should prioritise domestic duty

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's frequent foreign visits, especially those coinciding with Parliament sessions, have triggered an intense political debate. While the government frames these trips as vital to advancing India's global interests, the criticism surrounding them cannot be brushed aside as mere political point-scoring. The issue raises questions about democratic accountability and institutional respect. Parliament is the cornerstone of our democracy. It is the primary forum where laws are debated, policies scrutinised and the government held accountable. The PM's presence during crucial sessions signals respect for democratic norms and reinforces the idea that executive power remains answerable to the legislature. Repeated absences, particularly during high-stakes sessions and the ones whose duration is already truncated, as the present one, weaken this symbolism and invite legitimate concern.

Such absences also hand the Opposition powerful ammunition. They enable the argument that debate, scrutiny and consensus-building are being sidelined in favour of headline-grabbing diplomacy. When key legislative reforms, social issues or political crises dominate the national conversation, the optics of foreign travel, regardless of its strategic intent, appear dismissive of domestic priorities. In a vibrant democracy, perception matters almost as much as intent.

This is not to deny the importance of international engagement. In an era of geopolitical flux, India cannot afford diplomatic inertia. However, foreign policy gains lose moral force when domestic democratic processes appear secondary. The PM's role is unique: he is also the leader of the House, accountable to elected representatives and, by extension, the people. The challenge, therefore, lies in balance. Strategic diplomacy must coexist with parliamentary responsibility. Better scheduling, clearer communication of outcomes of the foreign visits when Parliament is in session and a visible commitment to legislative debate would help defuse criticism.

Higher education Bill

Evolve viable roadmap through consultations

THE Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishtan Bill, which seeks to establish an overarching higher education commission, has been sent to a joint parliamentary committee. The panel will hold discussions on the legislation and submit its report in February. The Bill proposes separate councils for regulation, accreditation and academic standards in a bid to do away with the "multiplicity of regulators having non-harmonised regulatory approval protocols". As of now, the University Grants Commission (UGC) regulates non-technical higher education institutions, while the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) are overseeing their respective domains. The Acts under which these three agencies were set up are proposed to be repealed. The government aims to overhaul the regulatory system in order to "re-energise" the higher education sector. However, will the replacement of the UGC, AICTE and NCTE—which have functioned for decades—with new councils serve the purpose? These councils will come under an umbrella institution, the higher education commission; thus, it would be challenging for them to work as autonomous bodies.

Underfunding has plagued higher education institutions in India. However, the Bill gives no funding powers to the new commission. It makes the Ministry of Education responsible for disbursing grants. Some educationists fear that this provision will make the process of grant allocation more bureaucratic and politically motivated.

Global experience shows that world-class universities thrive on academic freedom, sustained public funding and institutional self-governance—not merely regulatory efficiency. Well-thought-out reforms are the way forward for India in higher education. Various stakeholders must be involved in detailed deliberations on the new Bill so that a viable roadmap can be evolved.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 1925

Congress session

WITHIN less than 10 days, the Indian National Congress will meet in Kanpur, the industrial and commercial capital of the United Provinces. In more than one respect, this year's session of the Congress will afford a striking contrast to the last three sessions. At Gaya, Cocanada as well as Belgaum, the Congress was a largely non-political body. Non-cooperation had ceased to be a working national programme in the sense in which it had been a national programme in 1920 and 1921, but officially it was still the dominating creed in the Congress. It is true that in the Congress, as in the country, the influence of the non-cooperation programme was on the wane, but at Gaya, orthodox non-cooperators were still in a majority; at Cocanada, the numbers were probably evenly balanced; at Belgaum, there was no occasion for the measuring of swords, the two parties having in the meantime arrived at a compromise, which the Congress was only called upon to and did ratify. For the first time since the Ahmedabad Congress, the ensuing session will be a preponderating political affair: Swarajism, which had been gathering strength for three years, won a decisive victory at the last meeting of the All-India Congress Committee at Patna, and succeeded in having the political character of the Congress restored. The Mahatma, who does not believe in camouflage, stated this clearly in his speech at Patna and has since repeated the statement several times in *Young India*. In his own words, which were also ours, the result of the Patna settlement was that the relative position of the two parties was reversed.

OPINION

IndiGo fiasco must spur course correction

Aviation sector's rapid expansion has not been matched by strengthening of regulatory oversight



THE Indian aviation industry has experienced turbulence this year. The Air India crash in Ahmedabad on June 12 shocked the nation; its cause continues to be under investigation. Early this month, mass flight cancellation by the country's leading carrier, IndiGo Airlines, paralysed air travel. Both incidents caused deep concern about the health of an industry that now accounts for 1.3 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

At the time of the Ahmedabad crash, questions were asked about the revival of Air India after being acquired by the Tatas from the government. Admittedly, it had become a loss-making leviathan over the past few decades, but the Tatas and their partner, Singapore Airlines, had exuded confidence that the airline would make a full recovery. The crash, however, raised doubts over the viability and safety of its ageing fleet. Yet it was notable that the top brass of the Tatas were not only visibly present throughout the disaster's aftermath but also a compensation fund was announced immediately. Though complaints from families and legal teams persist, Air India has been viewed as broadly compassionate and helpful in this dire situation.

This is in marked contrast to the latest crisis for which IndiGo is being reviled and severely trolled. Apart from harassment to passengers over the cancellations that continued for several days, there was initially a deafening silence from the top management. It was the



CHAOS: It's high time airlines accorded high priority to safety and maintenance issues. ANI

frontline staff which bore the brunt of the air passengers' ire over having to wait cluelessly for hours on end, and then to be told that flights were cancelled, leaving them in the lurch.

This included those travelling for medical emergencies, jobs, exams, weddings or funerals. The apology by the IndiGo CEO came too late in the day to provide any solace to those who faced major disruptions.

At this point, one must pause and recall that there is a reason IndiGo became the country's most popular airline and garnered such a huge market share. Despite being a no-frills budget carrier, it initially combined punctuality, efficiency and predictability in a way that brought comfort to air passengers. It was even preferred over full-service carriers simply because its systems ran like clockwork. The problem began when market dominance turned into disregard for stakeholders such as consumers and regulatory agencies.

As for the aviation sector having become a duopoly, it is actually more of a monopoly with IndiGo commanding two-thirds share of the market. Its expansion

There is a need to take a cue from airlines of other countries, notably the US, where harried consumers got compensation running into hundreds of millions of dollars.

to this level has been aided by developments such as the sudden closure of Jet Airways as well as technical and financial problems faced by smaller carriers like SpiceJet.

Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu has said that more entities are being encouraged to enter the aviation space in a bid to ensure competition. But new entrants like Akasa Air will take a while to stabilise and the dominance of a single carrier is set to

continue for the time being. The Competition Commission of India is reported to be watching the developments closely, but may remain on the sidelines for now. It has powers to break up large corporate entities that are liable to misuse their monopoly positions. But in this case, drastic action against IndiGo could cause severe discomfort to consumers, given the lack of viable options for air travel.

It is precisely this pre-eminent role of the carrier that led to the flight cancellation chaos. The spark was the decision of the regulator, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), to increase rest time for pilots between flights. Under the Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) rules, it was raised from 36 to 48 hours. In other words, airlines would have to hire more pilots to meet the demands of expanded rest hours.

Since the decision was taken in January 2024, there was ample time for airlines to enhance staff accordingly. IndiGo reportedly failed to do so. So, when the new norms were implemented in November this year, the result was mass cancellations and

mayhem, affecting nearly two-thirds of the travelling public around the country.

The big question now is about the role of the regulator in ensuring that airlines follow guidelines that have a critical impact on safety. It is evident that the DGCA was taken unawares by these developments. The reason for this is that the aviation sector's rapid expansion has not been matched by a strengthening of regulatory oversight.

On the contrary, the DGCA is hamstrung by staff shortage. As much as 49 per cent of sanctioned posts are currently vacant. Similarly, the Bureau of Civil Aviation Safety has 203 vacancies out of 598 sanctioned posts, according to replies to parliamentary questions. This shortfall in technical expertise is alarming at a time when the aviation industry is growing at a fast pace. India has become the world's fifth biggest aviation market, growing at the rate of 11 per cent annually, with demand for air travel rising exponentially. It is at this juncture that there is the greatest need to accord high priority to safety and maintenance issues.

It is also high time airlines paid for their misdeeds. IndiGo may have been an efficient and consumer-friendly airline in the past, but sadly, it has now transformed into a corporate with a laser-sharp focus on profits rather than consumer interests. It has sought to leverage its predominant market share in a manner that has caused immense hardship to the travelling public.

There is a need to take a cue from airlines of other countries, notably the US, where harried consumers got compensation running into hundreds of millions of dollars. The Civil Aviation Ministry and the DGCA are now bound to ensure that comparable penalties are paid by any carrier that assumes it is too big to be hurt by the authorities. The action must be taken sooner rather than later so that such a crisis does not recur.

“The quickest way to become a millionaire in the airline business is to start out as a billionaire. — Richard Branson”

Fonts come to the forefront

ROOPINDER SINGH

YOU look at it all the time, yet you seldom see it. No, this is not a variation of the familiar spousal gripe about hearing but not listening, but a comment on fonts—the faces of the letters we read. The Calibri kerfuffle has stirred the typographical pot, engaging the passionate, yet leaving others bemused.

President Trump's administration has waded in “where no man has gone before” in search of “woke” targets. One of them is Calibri, the font the US State Department adopted in 2023, replacing Times New Roman, to which the department has now reverted.

Calibri, a Microsoft font introduced in 2007 and designed by Dutch typographer Lucas de Groot, dominated Microsoft Office for 17 years before being replaced by Aptos. Both are sans-serif fonts—they lack the flourishes at the edges that make traditional serif fonts, like the one you are reading. Yes, the font used in *The Tribune*, like most newspapers, is a variation of Times New Roman.

With a father who owned a printing press and the *Parkash* newspaper, my exposure to typefaces was a given. We used movable lead type, and compositors were given milk as an antidote to toxicity. I saw this tradition continue at *The Tribune* long after Compugraphic systems replaced Linotype hot metal machines.

Initially meant for print, fonts were adapted for computer screens. In 1984, I saw how much it mattered. A standout feature of my Mac, other than it being gorgeous, was the Chicago font, a bold sans serif designed for the low-resolution screens of the time. It stood out both on screen and in print, even on ImageWriter dot-matrix printers that ran at just 72 dpi. A Mac printout stood out in a sea of faint dots, something that still held when I joined *The Tribune* in the 1990s and would bring my copy as a printout. My Mac and their Windows-based machines were incompatible.

In 2007, Calibri exposed the Sharif family in Pakistan. After the Panama Papers scandal, the defence documents submitted were dismissed because they used Calibri, which was not available on the claimed dates.

Coming back to Times New Roman, the font was commissioned in 1931 by *The Times* of London and designed by Stanley Morison. Aurobind Patel redesigned it in 1991 and created Times Millennium. We in *The Tribune* were to benefit from his expertise. As a consultant, he redesigned the paper and, as expected, tweaked the font too.

Most readers did not notice the change because fonts do their best work by disappearing. We read without seeing the curves, the spacing, the weight of black on white. And that is as it should be. Fonts exist to serve language, not overshadow it. Whether in a newspaper column, a government order or a school examination paper, it is the words that endure—and the work behind them that ultimately matters.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Merge regional fora into UN

Apropos of ‘Myanmar poll set to be far from free, fair’, similar lack of legitimacy ominously stares at the February poll in Bangladesh where Sheikh Hasina's Awami League has been barred from participating in the elections akin to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy not being in the poll fray. In a cherished democracy, human rights and dignity should not be camouflaged as ‘internal affair’. It is high time emerging regional fora for global cooperation and synergy are merged into the United Nations. Having said that, the international body needs to be taken seriously and given more powers.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Better ways to improve MGNREGA

Apropos of ‘VB-GRAM G to replace MGNREGA, Oppn says why remove Mahatma’, while renaming of MNREGA appears to be superfluous and unnecessary, it is the scheme's working that needs changes to align with current needs. The programme can be used creatively—for crop diversification and growing high value crops like fruits, exotic flowers, aromatic plants, medicinal herbs and other horticultural products on both government and private lands. Jharkhand has used it successfully for mango cultivation, whereby initial investment is done under the aegis of MNREGA and the mature orchard is handed over to the farmer. Such projects could be integrated with Central schemes like the National Ayush Mission for cultivation of medicinal plants or with state initiatives like HP government's SHIVA project.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

State funding may be a problem

Refer to ‘Job scheme rejig’, the problem with the new scheme is the poor fiscal design that can burden the states. In MGNREGA, the Centre was meeting the entire cost of the wages. The new scheme proposes a 60:40 Centre-State fund sharing. But due to tight fiscal situation in most states, these states will find it difficult to foot their 40 per cent share. This can create a problem similar to another scheme like the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana. The failure of many states to make timely payments led to its poor performance.

PL SINGH, BY MAIL

How to deal with AI in education

Both the Op-Ed write-ups on Artificial Intelligence are complementary to each other, one cautioning and the other guiding the modern parent and teacher on how to go about taming AI. Perhaps the situation can be compared to the one about fifty years ago when the electronic calculator came into use, which took away our multiplication tables. No one lost their brain. I think practical skills like origami (the art of paper folding), calligraphy or painting which provide numerous cognitive skills cannot be ignored. When a child learns a skill, he/she acquires knowledge. AI is expected only to assist, not replace other skills. Human qualities like joy, gratitude, appreciation are alien to a machine. Education is suffering an unprecedented overhaul which demands AI pedagogy and AI parenting.

MOHAN SINGH, AMRITSAR

Ignite the conscience

Refer to ‘Courage defies terror’, Ahmed al-Ahmed, a Syrian Muslim who risked his life to stop the Sydney attacker, shattered communal stereotypes. His courage is reminiscent of the sacrifice of Tukaram Omble, a policeman who died fighting terrorists during the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. These moments remind us that courage and conscience are individual virtues, not communal attributes. Terror thrives on binaries of faith and identity. Democracies must resist them by condemning both non-state terror and state excess with equal firmness.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

BJP's decision-making prowess

Due to internal bickering, the Grand Old Party is in deep turmoil. Barbs by Navjot Kaur Sidhu add another chapter to the history of indiscipline in the party. Be it the top leadership in Rajasthan or in Karnataka, leaders wash their dirty linen in public. The Bihar poll results show that the party has lost its link with the masses. Issues like vote chori were ignored by the public. The Congress has three pillars of power—Rahul, Sonia & Priyanka. How does the BJP take decisions that are accepted by all its leaders?

KARNAIL SINGH, KHARAR

How lobbying undermines public health



SAMIR MALHOTRA
HEAD, PHARMACOLOGY DEPT,
PGI, CHANDIGARH

A FEW years ago, as my wife and I leaned towards the idea of a quieter village life, we found ourselves speaking with farmers in Punjab. An elderly man, his face weathered by decades in the sun, said something that has stayed with me: "We trust what comes in the bottle. If the government allows it, how can it be unsafe?" His words reflected more than just farming practices. They revealed the deep reliance people place on regulatory systems and scientific authority. But what happens when those very institutions are swayed by lobbying, power or manipulation of science? Imagine this scenario — the WHO classifies a widely used agricultural chemical as "probably carcinogenic to humans." Studies show it causes cancer in animals and is linked to cancer in humans. US juries award billions of dollars to cancer patients who had been exposed. Internal documents reveal that the manufacturer knew of its risks but spon-

sored studies portraying it as safe. And when lawsuits mount, some US states even pass laws shielding companies from liability. What if this really happened? Without naming the chemical and the company — not to shield them — but because the point being made here is larger. The point is how regulation can bow to power, science is eroded and why India must pay close attention.

Global lessons in litigation
Across the world, disputes over agricultural chemicals have become battles not only about science but also about accountability and justice. In the US, thousands of people have claimed that long-term exposure to a chemical contributed to their cancer. Juries agreed and awarded staggering sums; yet, many of these victories were short-lived. On appeal, awards were reduced or overturned, with courts citing a lack of definitive proof or contradictions between jury verdicts and regulatory assessments. Meanwhile, new legislative proposals surfaced at both the state and federal levels. In some US states, lawmakers passed laws granting manufacturers immunity from lawsuits so long as their product label had been approved by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The manufacturer has also asked the US Supreme Court to



LONE BATTLE: The average person does not stand a chance without collective action. SANDEEP JOSHI

declare that EPA approval overrides state-level "failure-to-warn" claims. If the court agrees, it will set a chilling precedent; regulatory approval would become a legal shield even when harm is undeniable. **When science is not neutral** An unsettling element of these controversies is manipulation of science. Peer-reviewed journals are meant to represent the gold standard of credibility, yet investigations have revealed that some influential studies were ghostwritten by company employees and published under the names of scientists. One such paper, widely cited for decades, reassured regulators about the safety of the chemical. Only during litigation

Once flawed science enters the record, it can shape policy and lives for decades.

did the truth emerge. By then, the damage had already been done — the paper had shaped regulatory decisions across the world. Once private interests infiltrate public knowledge and flawed research enters the scientific record, it spreads across borders and informs decisions in countries with fewer resources to conduct independent investigations. The consequences are not abstract. A fraudulent study can guide regulatory assessments, influence court arguments and shape international trade policies for decades. At its core, this debate is about power. Corporations with vast resources can hire lawyers, fund studies and lobby regulators. The aver-

age person does not stand a chance without collective action. Even when they win in court, appeals often strip them of their victories. This imbalance erodes trust. Regulators are expected to be neutral guardians of public health. But when agencies appear too close to industry, citizens lose faith not only in corporations but also in science and government itself.

Why India can't look away
India is not a bystander in this story. Agricultural products under scrutiny are widely used in India. Farmers, often with little training in safe handling, are the most exposed. Consumers face risks too, through residues in food and water. India often follows the lead of developed nations in shaping its policies. Sometimes, this serves us well. Global evidence on DDT's harms eventually pushed India towards bans. But over-reliance is risky. Policy decisions based on tainted science are problematic. In practice, choices made in Washington may end up dictating health outcomes in villages across Punjab, Maharashtra or Andhra Pradesh. The economic stakes are equally serious. If global markets reject Indian produce due to chemical residues, farmers bear the cost. **Moving ahead**
The issues of weak regulation and questionable sci-

ence carry urgent lessons for India. Our regulatory system must evolve beyond product-quality checks to include long-term health and environmental safety. A comprehensive, REACH-like framework — long discussed but never fully realised — could help address these gaps. Equally vital is independent research. Public funding for toxicology studies, transparency in evaluations and open access to safety data would reduce reliance on imported science. India should also encourage innovation in safer alternatives to controversial chemicals while aligning with international standards to protect both public health and agricultural sustainability. Ultimately, the controversy is not about one company or one product. It is about whether science and regulation will rise to serve the public interest. India cannot afford to wait for global crises to spill onto its soil. By strengthening regulation, demanding transparency and investing in alternatives, India can protect its people and assert leadership in sustainable agriculture, ensuring public health is not compromised for profit. As that farmer reminded me years ago, people trust what comes in the bottle. It is up to scientists, regulators and policymakers to ensure that such trust is never misplaced.

Beyond the battle: A soldier's memory of 1971



LT GEN BALJIT SINGH (RETD)
FORMER CHIEF OF STAFF,
CENTRAL COMMAND

AT the stroke of 2000 hours on December 17, 1971, during the Indo-Pak war in the western theatre, the sudden and profound near-total quiet which had descended all across the Chhamb battle zone after 15 days of almost continuous lethal combat engagements, was to me reminiscent of the all-pervasive surreal silence in the Universe before God created life on planet Earth. But did we dance in euphoria, having brought the war to a closure? Speaking for myself, I was simply bewildered to make any sense of it all, like the two teenaged grandchildren who in all innocence had asked poet laureate Robert Southey about the "Battle of Blenheim": "Now tell us all about the war, And what they fought each other for?..." And the poem ends with the verse, "And everybody praised the Duke Who this great fight did win.

But what good came of it at last? Quoth little Perkin, "Why, that I cannot tell," said he, "But 'twas a famous victory." Looking back, this little patch of the Indian subcontinent had been a strategic obsession of the Pakistan military planners as a springboard for dominance of the southern Pir Panjal region and a potential threat to Jammu during all the three Indo-Pak wars, albeit without success. Mindful of these tendencies, the 10 Infantry Division of WW II fame was resurrected, both to bolster the defence posture in the Chhamb-Jaurian sector and to recapture the territory lost to Pakistan in the Chhamb sector in the 1965 war. But kudos to our Pakistani foes who outwitted us with an audacious pre-emptive, executed spiritedly without let, beginning at sundown on December 3, 1971. Their intent left little doubt when some 180 artillery guns of various calibres firing in unison lit up the horizon in an orange-pink wash, followed by the distant thunder of massed guns firing in rapid succession, gradually building into a never-ending roll of drumbeats. But in the next blink of an eye, even that mighty sound got downgraded by the greater, deafening lethal shell bursts all around us. And the serenity of the beautifully starlit horizon of five



FIGHT: The Chhamb-Jaurian sector was a strategic obsession of the Pakistan military planners. REPRESENTATIVE PIC

minutes earlier was completely obliterated by the mushrooming clouds of smoke and debris, turning beauty into something beastly. By nightfall on December 5, Pakistan had well-nigh neutralised most constituents of the 191 Infantry Brigade group holding defences west of the Tawi rivulet (TR), except 12 Field Regiment (Artillery), and the GOC signalled his commanders to withdraw on December 6. It appeared that our Command Radio frequency had been compromised because come 0200 hours that night, endless waves of artillery fire assaults heaped up the existing carnage of blood and gore. Around 1700 hours on December 6, 191 Brigade commenced phased with-

For all intents, we were in the bag — but luck had not deserted us.

drawal under covering fire by 12 Field Regiment. And, by 1945 hours, noticing the now totally isolated 12 Field, our foe seized the opportunity to create a horseshoe resting on TR, trapping us gunners in its constricted centre! For all intents, we were in the bag — but luck had not deserted us, as our archetypal breaching of the siege was best summed up by Lt Gen KP Candeth, the GOC-in-C Western Command thus: "Guns of this Battery (Sic. 12 Field Regiment, Q Battery) were the last organized body of troops to withdraw across the Munawar Tawi bridge with great élan and in a copy book sequence, each 25 Pounder gun leap-frogged in a retrograde action, firing at point blank range till the pursuing

enemy infantry were exhausted to stand still, before it (bridge) was blown by us as a part of our defensive plan" by 101 Engineer Field Company at 2345 hours on December 6, 1971. Even under intense combat, there are moments of comic relief. On December 7, our lookout sentries apprehend a suspect trespasser in our gun area. But fancy meeting the lanky, 6-ft Major in armoured corps overalls, after our last term together at the IMA, Dehradun, in 1956! Recognition dawned upon both of us simultaneously; friend Grover had been asleep in a trench when his tank troop acted on orders to "move at once", leaving their troop commander to recoup his sleep! And lastly, two legacy memories. Just when it seemed that we had wrested the initiative, enemy sprang another surprise with multiple shallow intrusions across the east bank, sending alarm bells ringing loud and we received orders to withdraw yet further back. Subedar Major Sant Ram Sahib bickered with tear-filled eyes: "Saab, aenaa pichhe hut-hut ke, ghar wapas jake apna moonh kime dakhawan ge!" I was struggling for an answer when, fortunately, that order was countermanded, eliciting a prompt happy response from Sant Ram Sahib, "Aah taan Rab ne fauji de izzat bucha ditti, Saab ji!" For the first time, on December 14 morning, there was a perceptible drop in demands on fire support. Around midday, every eye turned towards sentries escorting at the point of bayonet two turbaned Sikh peasants in colourful, loose-flowing Punjabi "kurtas" and billowing "tehmat" of Bhangra performing artistes to where I stood. In a flicker, they lifted me up in a tight bear hug, uttering: "Oh! Balle-balle-balle!" and the entire gun position burst in merry guffaw. A somewhat bewildered and embarrassed havildar clerk, Nimal Singh, emerged from the Regimental Command Post dugout to formally introduce his maternal uncles! After a lengthy narration of how they hitched rides from Gurdaspur onwards, and gave the slip to every Military Police check post en route, they stated "Aasaan socheya aeni ghamasan jung lagi hai, te aasaan apne bhaanjan nu zarur mil aaiye!" We entertained them to a right royal lunch, downed with stiff rum punch before escorting them back to Akhnoor. Subedar major Sant Ram Sahib and havildar Nimal Singh and their kind are the epitome of those who are attracted to the Indian armed forces. As Philip Mason surmised: "Because it is a matter of honour!" No less, no more.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Existing state of affairs (6,3)

8 Lucky accident (5)

9 Decline to vote (7)

10 Unusually talented (6)

11 Dutiful reverence (6)

12 An external renovation (4-4)

15 Powerfully illuminated (8)

18 Surrounded by (6)

20 Reach destination (6)

21 Narrow-minded intolerance (7)

22 Large northern sea-duck (5)

23 Body of research experts (5,4)

Yesterday's Solution

ACROSS: 1 Pass out, 4 Comma, 7 Lark, 8 Loophole, 10 Take in hand, 12 Dinghy, 13 Pacify, 15 For openers, 18 Untoward, 19 Mien, 20 Surly, 21 Wrinkle.

DOWN: 1 Pilot, 2 Striking, 3 Trophy, 4 Copenhagen, 5 Mood, 6 Amenity, 9 Right of way, 11 Limerick, 12 Discuss, 14 Sorrow, 16 Since, 17 Stir.

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V. HARD

FORECAST

SUNSET: 17:25 HRS

SUNRISE: 07:33 HRS

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

CITY

Chandigarh

New Delhi

Amritsar

Bathinda

Jalandhar

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Dharamsala

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Srinagar

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TEMPERATURE IN °C

Employment guarantee scheme must be free from political interferences

Revamping welfare schemes is a good idea, so changes in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, per se, are not objectionable. However, the way it is being done smacks of a desire to score political points. It begins with the name. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is proposed to be replaced with the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Grameen), or VB G RAM Priyanka Gandhi Vadra reacted with "Why are they removing Mahatma Gandhi's name? He is considered the biggest Indian leader. Whenever such a name changes, a lot of expenditure happens in stationery and

paperwork." More than that it makes the government a target for its detractors, which is increasingly coming under the influence of Gandhi haters. This does no good to the government under the Sangh Parivar, many of whose members have expressed admiration for Nathuram Godse. Enacted by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2005, the MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of work in villages. The Act has a provision for an unemployment allowance. "MGNREGA is bottom-up, people-centred, demand-driven, self-selecting and rights-based programme. It provides a legal guarantee for wage employment by providing allowances and compensation both in

cases of failure to provide work on demand and delays in payment of wages for work undertaken," an official document says. The new Bill proposes several changes. It raises the 100-day guarantee to 125. Also, the scheme will no longer be demand-driven. Further, states will bear the financial burden partially. At present, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is entirely a Centrally-sponsored scheme—that is, the Centre provides 100 per cent of wages, while states take care of a small part of the expenses in hiring skilled labour and arranging materials. Under G Ram G, the Centre's contribution will be limited to 60 per cent, whereas most states will have to spend 40 per cent. For

Northeastern and Himalayan states, this ratio will be 90:10. The new legislation proposes that work under the revamped scheme will not be available during the peak agricultural season. The government will rely on biometrics and geo-tagging for transparency. Non-availability of work during the peak agricultural season will be vehemently protested by the Left and civil society organisations. Communist leaders are no longer as powerful or influential as they were when the MNREGA came into being but Left-leaning NGOs and public intellectuals are still a force to reckon with. The government will have a tough time tackling their resistance. At any rate, this provision privileges the interests of farmers over labour-

ers; it will be interesting to see how the BJP will face the criticism of being anti-poor. Besides, states, especially those under non-BJP parties, will be loath to share the burden of the rural employment guarantee scheme. There are also states like Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Punjab, which face tremendous fiscal challenges, and it will be extremely difficult for them to finance the revamped scheme. Therefore, all stakeholders must try to sort out the matter in a spirit of cooperative federalism. The Centre should be willing to accept reasonable amendments to the proposed legislation, and states should rise above party and parochial interests to make the scheme better.

LETTERS

Use AI for maintaining peace

THIS has reference to your editorial 'AI and militancy make a potent combination' (Dec 16). It has aptly described about AI having become what it is today, which is comparable to the prevailing gun culture in the US and bullets fired by terrorists. People remain clueless about impending strikes at them. This free for all ready to use technology is fast becoming a peril to the peace-loving society due to phishing and cyberattacks. AI must be used in places where human involvement and vigil against the enemy are needed 24x7 throughout the year.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Manekshaw was one of a kind

The opinion piece on Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw 'Surrender or get wiped out', Manekshaw's ultimatum to Pak is a standout battle cry' (THI Dec 16) rightly evokes a military mind where wit reinforced, rather than diluted, authority. Manekshaw's genius lay in combining strategic patience with an unshakeable moral confidence. His famous 'I'm always ready, sweetie' was not banter but a declaration rooted in preparedness. Equally prescient was his warning that premature political orders, if issued, "may never be received," a rare assertion of professional integrity in civil and military relations. His humour, often quoted, was forged in far harsher circumstances. The surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers was not merely a battlefield triumph but an unprecedented strategic leverage. That such leverage failed to deliver a final settlement on Kashmir remains one of India's costliest diplomatic omissions. Against this legacy, Pakistan's present attempts to elevate General Munir to Manekshaw's stature appear aspirational at best. After all, history, not rank or rhetoric, confers stature.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak

Name change or a game changer?

THE decision of the Union Government to increase the guaranteed work to 125 days per rural household and focus on four areas like increasing rural connectivity, climate resilience, rural livelihood infrastructure and water security under the newly named rural employment guaranteed Act is a welcome move. But changing the name of the scheme introduced in 2005 by the UPA regime should have been avoided. The NDA government has been gradually reducing its budgetary allocation stating that the scheme had some loopholes. Although an increase to 125 days per household is good, it still falls short of the demand for 200 days work a year. The government should increase the wages and make the ratio of Union and States' contribution to 9:1 instead of 6:4 as the financial status of most of the States are not good.

A G Rajmohan, Anantapur-515004

'G RAM G' brings no cheer

The proposed revised form of MGNREGA, which will be renamed as VB G RAM G Bill, has come up with unlimited promise, but limited guarantee. The nature of supply driven job provision instead of the erstwhile demand will result in cutting the size of resources to the needy people. The proposed ban on the works under the scheme during peak agricultural season would put job seekers at a disadvantageous position regarding their negotiations of daily wages. The minimising of central share from ninety percent to sixty percent for the scheme would burden cash strapped states further. Instead of strengthening the scheme, the Centre has come up with a weakened version when it is aiming for Viksit Bharat.

Dr D V G Sankara Rao, Srikulam

Name spree continues with G RAM G

THE Narendra Modi-led Union Government has decided to replace the world's largest rural jobs programme MGNAREGA with Viksit Bharat Guarantee Rojgar Ajeevika Machine Gramin (VB- G RAM G) after earlier renaming Raj Bhavan and the PMO, among others. Though the renamed rural jobs programme is aimed at increasing the number days to 125 from 100, it has a paused provision for 60 days in a year. Further it changed the Centre and state ratio of financial commit from 90:10 to 60:40 and capped budget support. This implies that some States must shell from their coffers if they spend more than what is allotted to them. However, app-based attendance, Aadhar linked payments and geotagging workites are welcome as these become part of the law and can enhance transparency and accountability.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Congress will return to power in 2028 as well: CM

BELAGAVI: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Monday asserted that the Congress will return to power in Karnataka in 2028 with the people's mandate, just as it did in 2023, and said the BJP would continue to remain in the Opposition.

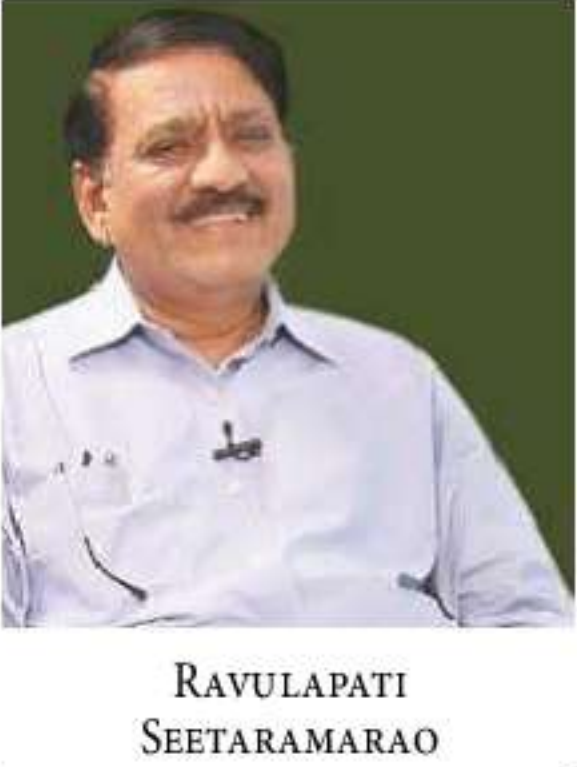
Speaking in the Legislative Assembly at Suvarna Soudha while responding to questions raised by the Opposition, the Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said the Congress government enjoys the support of 140 MLAs and that there was no need for the Opposition to create unnecessary speculation.

Referring to a popular proverb, Siddaramaiah remarked that the role of the Opposition seemed to be adding salt to a burning wound. He said that despite repeated provocations, none of the ruling party legislators would be swayed. "The people have blessed me to serve as Chief Minister for five years. We have the strength of 140 MLAs, and the Opposition need not indulge in sour commentary," he said. The Chief Minister said the Congress government clearly understands the pulse of the people. "Just as the people blessed us in 2023, they will do so again in 2028. The people of Karnataka will never bring the BJP to power," he asserted.

Siddaramaiah alleged that although the BJP has ruled the state twice, it never came to power with a clear popular mandate.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Can CBI contain cybercrime effectively?



THE Supreme Court's decision comes as a whiff of fresh air to the countless victims of cyber frauds. It is heartening that courts, when necessary, take responsible and appropriate decisions on key public issues — decisions that governments and police should be making — and even provide guidelines for their implementation. This is a wake-up call for those who uphold democracy and the separation of powers of their duty. With "digital arrest scams" proliferating across the country, the Supreme Court's directions to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for carrying out a comprehensive probe into such crimes and criminals — including seeking Interpol's cooperation and tracing the origins — should be seen as a positive development in criminal justice prudence. The

Court also issued notices to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), directing it to use artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to investigate deep-rooted patterns of funds being moved through various banks in these crimes, so that proper inquiries can be conducted and perpetrators cannot escape. Referring to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, the Supreme Court ordered online intermediaries to cooperate with the CBI and asked them to collect and hand over data and information related to digital arrests to investigative agencies. The court suggested that states and Union Territories not only set up coordination centers to thoroughly investigate cybercrime but also adopt plans to proactively prevent such offenses. The apex court also directed that the cyber-crime coordination centres be linked with law enforcement agencies so that cybercrimes can be taken up for investigation. A few days ago, under the leadership of Chief Justice Suryakant, the Supreme Court gave the CBI detailed guidelines on cybercrime—particularly digital arrests—sending a strong signal that tackling

Investigating cybercrimes is very difficult. Even though the Supreme Court has directed the CBI to take a direct role in probing these offences, the agency is bogged down with many different investigations, especially politically sensitive cases. Though it has a grand name, the CBI is struggling because it does not have adequate staff. The central and state governments keep assigning high-profile cases to the CBI, but it's regrettable that when officers within the agency are identified as being problematic, proper action is not taken.

SC entrusts CBI with pan-India probe into digital arrest cases, asks States to accord assent

these crimes is being treated as a high priority. The court identified three types of cyber scams. One involves online "digital arrests" where perpetrators, often targeting retired officers, pose as investigative agencies and extort their hard earned money and cause severe psychological distress. Although media reports show these offences are occurring across the country, they have not stopped and gullible people continue to fall prey. The Supreme Court specifically entrusted the CBI with the responsibility of apprehending those who run such scams and carrying out investigations. Scammers are running another kind of cybercrime: luring victims with attractive-sounding investments, getting them to deposit large sums, and defrauding them under the guise of "advance tax" or other pretexts. Another widespread cyber-scam involves flooding WhatsApp with ads for supposed part-time jobs, using YouTube to offer "free tasks" for small payments to gain trust, then convincing victims to pay large amounts for "premium" tasks. Many people have encountered these scams. Victims often suffer in silence, not reporting to the police, and some become so distressed that they end their lives. The central government informed the Supreme Court in a note that cybercriminals have already swindled nearly Rs 30 billion. These fraudsters, posing as digital authorities, are extorting hard-earned

money, especially from the elderly. While we celebrate technological progress, fraud enabled by that same progress is increasing day by day. Many victims are left humiliated and ashamed, unable even to confide in family or close ones, and some have been driven to suicide. Investigating cyber-crimes is very difficult. Even though the Supreme Court has directed the CBI to take a direct role in probing these offences, the agency is bogged down with many different investigations, especially politically sensitive cases. Though it has a grand name, the CBI is struggling because it does not have adequate staff. The central and state governments keep assigning high-profile cases to the CBI, but it's regrettable that when officers within the agency are identified as being problematic, proper action is not taken. Although the CBI is supposed to be an independent agency, it has no control over the recruitment of its personnel, and the central government does not seem concerned about that. The CBI takes officers on deputation from state police departments at various ranks. It appears the agency is even recruiting at the sub-inspector level for its work. But for higher-ranking positions, it inevitably relies on officers from

state and other police departments. Whatever importance an offence may have, handing over cases to the CBI has become routine for both state and central governments. The days when a CBI inquiry was regarded with respect are gone. In the past, CBI cases more often led to convictions; even if investigations were slow, they were conducted methodically. Ironically, in the US, even the government fears the FBI. Here, however, the widespread charge is that the CBI has become a puppet of the ruling party at the Centre. Previously, despite delays, CBI results were something to be proud of. Now delays have increased, and the perception is that convictions are rare or merely symbolic. Only if the CBI is truly independent and restructured across fronts can we expect it to solve modern crimes effectively. It is only when training and skills are provided to the agency that the Supreme Court orders can be implemented meaningfully. In this modern age we need systems that plan measures to produce decisive, visible results—not token actions. The CBI must be at the forefront of that effort.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

Saluting VNVK Sastry, a selfless supporter of adivasis



LITTLE boys and girls of a primary school in Nalgonda district once cried inconsolably when their beloved teacher, V N V K Sastry, was transferred. Refusing to accept the loss quietly, they walked nearly ten kilometres to the national highway and staged a protest until their voices were heard. Blessed indeed is the teacher who wins such young hearts. That instinctive affection followed Dr Sastry wherever he went. A retired senior officer, social anthropologist, and lifelong fieldworker, he habitually won hearts through devotion to duty and an unshakeable concern for the people he served. Recalling their nearly five-decade-long association around 2020, senior journalist and former editor of The Hindu (Hyderabad), Dasu Keshav Rao, summed him up in simple terms: a man who never worked for files alone, but for people.

an ashram school where conditions were appalling. The warden was absent, as usual; children were being served rotten rice and tamarind water in the name of sambar. The fine rice meant for the children never reached the school. Dr Sastry suspended the absentee warden on the spot and immediately arranged a proper meal—rice, curries, sambar and milk—something the children rarely got to toast. The following morning, as they were driving away, a group of men suddenly intercepted their vehicle, running and panting from a distant hamlet located beyond a hill. Alarmed, they asked if something was wrong. "Pani emi ledu saar. Meeru maa penta vacchaaru. Memu adiviki poyaamu. Choodaaniki vacchaamu. Antha saar." Nothing was wrong, they explained. They had only come to see and thank the officer who had visited their village.

Friends and former colleagues remember him as a gentle intellectual, a disciplined researcher, and an unwavering advocate of Adivasi dignity. He combined rigorous empirical fieldwork with rare human warmth, ensuring that tribal voices found space in policy, scholarship, and public discourse.

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ties. Reflecting on the physical price of such commitment, he once remarked with characteristic humour: "I earned malaria as a recurring deposit and amoebiasis as a fixed deposit—no regrets." Asked what "VNVK" stood for, he smiled and said, "I don't know—perhaps Very Nice, Very Kind."

20 years of service post-retirement: Joining government service in the early 1970s, Dr Sastry served for 34 years in the Tribal Welfare Department of the Government of Andhra Pradesh, retiring in 2005 as Director of Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCR&TI), Hyderabad. His postings took him deep into the tribal belts of Warangal, Adilabad, Kurnool, and the erstwhile Khammam district, where he implemented complex welfare, education, forest rights, and rehabilitation programmes. He held key positions across ITDAs, TCR&TI, TWREIS, and EPTRI Hyderabad. Colleagues remember him as a deeply field-oriented officer whose work consistently placed tribal communities—not bureaucratic convenience—at the centre of administration.

lives of tribal communities. Equally vivid are memories of Prof Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's visit to Marlawai to perform the last rites of his wife, Betty, and the vibrant Kelsapur Jatra.

Indervelli killings: Three officers from Hyderabad were among the first to reach Indervelli, where police had opened fire on protesting Gonds the previous evening, killing many and injuring several others. The administration was dazed and uncertain about the actual casualty figures. The three officers trekked through forests and hill-top habitations, braving scorching summer heat and humidity, to meet the injured and the families of the deceased. Later, when the Collector, AK Goel, informed forest officials at Mancherla that the Indervelli toll was far higher than the officially stated figure—he did mention the actual number to Keshav Rao—it became clear how deeply the truth had been suppressed.

Mentor, adviser and advocate: Even after retirement, Dr Sastry remained intellectually active and socially committed. For nearly two decades, he served as a freelance consultant and guest faculty, Institute of Tribal Development Studies, Hyderabad; contributed to NALSA Tribal Rights training modules for legal services authorities; expert investigator, Centre for Good Governance (World Bank land governance project); Course editor, PG Diploma in Tribal Development Management, NIRD; Member, National Expert Committees on Bauxite Mining (A.P) and Kolleru Lake Sanctuary; senior consultant, APARD and adviser for Andhra Pradesh Community Forest Management Project (World Bank).

His deep understanding of forest rights, land governance, and community institutions made him a sought-after expert across government agencies and academic institutions. Friends and former colleagues remember him as a gentle intellectual, a disciplined researcher, and an unwavering advocate of Adivasi dignity. He combined rigorous empirical fieldwork with rare human warmth, ensuring that tribal voices found space in policy, scholarship, and public discourse. His passing away leaves a profound void in anthropology, tribal welfare administration, and development studies. Yet his writings, training programmes, institutions, students, and the countless tribal families, whose lives he touched, stand as his enduring legacy.

(The writer is a former Central Information Commissioner, and presently Professor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)

A full moon night in Srisaalam: One incident narrated by Keshav Rao captures the essence of Dr Sastry's life. On a full-moon night in December 1988, when he was heading the Chenchu Project, they were in the core area of the Srisaalam Tiger Sanctuary, where they were treated to welcome festivities that were organised by the Chenchu community. Earlier that day, they had visited

NEW BILL DILUTES RURAL JOBS AS A RIGHT, BURDENS STATE FINANCES

A fresh controversy has been triggered by a new Bill that seeks to replace the fairly successful, two-decades-old rural jobs scheme. First, the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill proposes to extend to 125 the number of days of work guaranteed every year, from 100 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Second, it alters the funding pattern from a full central payout to 60:40 sharing between the Centre and most states; the ratio for the northeastern and northern hill states is 90:10. MGNREGA was enacted in 2005 as an answer to crushing rural poverty. It aimed to boost rural incomes and create durable infrastructure like water bodies and roads. It was a revolutionary move that made rural employment a right. It's odd of the current government to tinker with the success story when rural jobs are hard to come by. The scheme serves not only as a safety net during droughts and other crises; it also empowers rural communities because the funding is demand-driven, with the planning left to local bodies like panchayats. Neither can it be explained by the NDA government's penchant for renaming old schemes. Why drop Mahatma Gandhi's association with a rural jobs scheme? The G-Ram-G Bill's proposal to increase the days of employment is a gain. But under the existing scheme, work is to be provided for "not less than 100 days", leaving it to the states to raise the cap when necessary. The more consequential new feature is about sharing the financial burden of the ₹86,000-crore scheme with the states. At the proposed ratio, cash-strapped states will have to bear about ₹50,000 crore of the projected cost next year. Another setback is the scheme's suspension for 60 days every year during peak agricultural seasons. This weakens job guarantee as a right and takes demand flexibility away from job seekers. The current scheme is far from perfect—for one, it insists on providing only unskilled work. There is also as much as ₹9,746.39 crore due at present in wages, material payments, and administrative costs. However, these can be set right by improving the old law. Why throw out the baby with the bathwater?

GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY MUST FOLLOW MLAs' RAISE

YEAR-end celebrations arrived early for Odisha legislators as the proposal for a three-fold hike in their salary was approved by the state assembly on the last day of the winter session. Ratifying four Bills, the legislature cleared the raise for the members, the speaker, the deputy speaker, and ministers. With a paycheck of ₹3.45 lakh a month, Odisha's MLAs will now be among the highest paid in the country. The chief minister will draw ₹3.74 lakh in salary and allowances. An MLA's fixed salary will go up from ₹35,000 to ₹90,000, and allowances will rise from ₹65,000 to ₹2.55 lakh. Former legislators will be entitled to a larger pension. The last raise in the assembly was in 2017; the latest revision comes with retrospective effect from June 2024. The Bills passed unanimously in the House as, unsurprisingly, the raise found resonance among all parties. But outside, a debate was raging on the rationale behind the move. Amid this, BJD chief and opposition leader Naveen Patnaik went on to announce he would forgo the increased salary and allowances, and wrote to Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi to spend it on the poor. That gesture was called out by his political opponents, who pointed out that neither he nor his party opposed the Bills on the floor of the House. The hike in Odisha has again triggered an old question: should lawmakers not be paid handsomely to keep politics clean? Truth be told, the salaries of most MLAs were well below senior public servants'. Now consider that an MLA represents about 3 lakh people on an average. Such is the nature of politics that lawmakers have to dig into their pockets to meet the expenses of attending to constituents on a regular basis. Insulation from the lures of corruption requires that elected representatives are paid well, as Singapore ensured years ago. On the other hand, a raise in salary and allowances must entail more accountability, responsibility, and transparency on part of the legislators. It comes at a time when thousands of government teachers and contracted government employees are agitating over job regularisation and fair pay. While the legislators have revised their own remunerations, they should also look at the legitimate demands of others with the same empathy and seriousness.

QUICK TAKE

PROMISE FOR THE MARGINALISED

ONE of the first education schemes instituted by independent India's first government was to fund overseas education for a bunch of Indians. A modern-day version of it, the National Overseas Scholarship, was instituted in 2014-15 to offer full financial support to low-income students from scheduled castes and tribes, minority communities, and persons with disabilities. Numbers presented in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday showed that the scheme remains severely underserved after a decade. Out of the 106 candidates selected for 2025-26, final award letters were given to only 67, while 13 took deferrals and 23 withdrew. Only 11 candidates from the scheduled tribes in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha ever got the funds out of a nationwide total of 138. Here's hoping there will be a drive to promote the scheme in territories where it can truly transform severely marginalised communities.

QUALITY of urban life is a subject of eternal relevance. Sadly, it has also become a holy cow. No one dares to slaughter it, but no one seriously feeds it either. Parliamentary committee reports indicate that the 'hardware' of urban India—metros, housing complexes, sewage plants—is being built at an unprecedented pace. Yet the use of this infrastructure and ultimately the quality of citizens' lives depends on the 'software' of governance.

As city dwellers in Maharashtra prepare to vote in several municipal corporation elections, it is pertinent to reflect on a long list of issues crying out for attention. Here are six fundamental concerns that merit wider public discourse, consensus-building and—most importantly—honest political will. Ideally, these issues should dominate discussions as competing parties seek a popular mandate.

The list begins with linking all state and central grants to the performance of municipal bodies. Urban local bodies spend substantial funds received from higher governments, but owing to corruption and mismanagement, overall improvements in the quality of urban life remain elusive. The 15th Finance Commission made a significant attempt to reform municipal finance by tying grants more closely to performance outcomes than in the past.

One critical new metric proposed is the maintenance of 'squatter-free public areas'. Expanding this to include the proportion of encroachment-free pavements would help create a quantifiable index. Equally important is penalising non-performing corporations that allow slums or illegal shops to mushroom on streets. Such disincentives would push urban bodies to perform better.

A major reason for pervasive corruption in urban bodies is that mayors and elected representatives are left with little real decision-making power. Despite the 74th Constitutional Amendment of 1992, devolution of authority to urban local bodies has remained incomplete and largely cosmetic. Ironically, the official with power—the municipal commissioner—is not directly accountable to citizens, while the official with accountability—the mayor—lacks authority. Consequently, constitutionally mandated institutions of local self-government continue to be weakened.

Excessive concentration of power in state governments has made local gov-

Dysfunctional municipalities across India fail to vest power in those responsible for essential services. Urban life can improve by penalising non-performers, fixing last-mile gaps and institutionalising aesthetics

CRUCIAL BITES FOR TOOTHLESS CITY ADMINISTRATORS

VINAY SAHASRABUDDHE

Senior BJP leader



MANDAR PARDIKAR

ernance fragile and unresponsive. The prevailing 'strong commissioner-weak mayor' model reduces the mayor to a ceremonial figurehead. This imbalance cascades downward: councilors, left without authority, often resort to exploiting their nuisance value, leading to the accumulation of ill-gotten wealth and emboldening black-money operators in politics.

Land is the most finite and fiercely contested resource in urban India. The existence of so-called 'vacant land' in urban agglomerations presents a dual challenge—it is both a wasted asset that could host public infrastructure and highly vulnerable to encroachment, eventually spawning unserviceable squatter settlements.

Addressing this requires a dedicated institutional mechanism: a commissionerate for vacant lands.

While the impact of the Maharashtra Vacant Lands (Prohibition of Unauthorised Occupation and Summary Eviction) Act, 1975 needs reassessment, the July 2024 establishment of the Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency (HYDRAA) deserves close study. It could serve as a robust prototype. HYDRAA links asset protection with disaster management and, unlike conventional municipal enforcement—which is often toothless—operates with a dedicated force and police coordination, ensuring enforcement without political interference.

Failure to prevent illegal hutments

A GAP BETWEEN LIFE & LOUDSPEAKER

C P SURENDRAN

Author whose latest volume of poetry is *Window with a Train Attached*

That space has been created largely by default, by the failure of the Left front, inseparable from Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's persona. His undying love for himself is visible on billboards and at events. The party works as his PR machine, much like Narendra Modi and the BJP. The difference is that Modi is more skilful and his party's exploitation of identities more systematic and on a far vaster scale. Locally, the effect has been to enable the BJP to pose as an active option.



EXPRESS

In Kerala, the CPM permeates most civic institutions. As the party has become inseparable from Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's persona, local failings are also read as the state government's failure. This transference partly caused the LDF's loss of the state capital's municipality

Ward and municipal elections differ from state and national polls in that they are more intimate expressions of lived experiences. The LDF has been quick to claim credit for everything, but it failed to explain steep rises in water charges, power bills, and property transaction costs, even as it dispensed freebies, cash awards, and food kits from a perpetually bankrupt exchequer.

Local bodies increasingly looked up to the chief minister's office for direction. The failure of a corporation was read as the failure of the state government.

The LDF's loss of the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation is the clearest expression of this transference of blame. Chronic waste-management crises, infrastructural stagnation, and administra-

tive drift created conditions under which a once-remote BJP could plausibly position itself as a governance alternative—politically unthinkable not long ago.

Women voters in Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, and Thrissur prioritised everyday governance: waste disposal, waterlogging, broken footpaths, public transport, lighting, and safety. These failures affect women first and most persistently. The LDF's earlier advantage among women, built on welfare delivery and Kudumbashree, yielded diminishing returns in cities where its rhetoric became repetitive—a kind of dystopian magical realism born of the gap between life and loudspeakers.

This was not, however, a pro-BJP women's wave. Many women voted tactically—some towards the UDF, some towards the BJP—primarily to dislodge incumbents rather than to endorse ideology.

Christian voters, especially in Kochi and Thrissur, consolidated quietly behind the UDF, guided by comfort with coalition politics and unease with both CPI(M) ambiguity and the BJP's long-term intentions. This consolidation proved decisive in central Kerala city corporations.

The BJP in the state, and to a lesser extent the UDF, now paint a rosy picture of 'viksit Kerala'. They are deluding themselves. Compared to many other states, Kerala is far ahead on crucial human-development indicators. Its work culture, political values, and relatively secular approach to life mean that the model of 'development' on offer in, say, Uttar Pradesh or Bihar is not materially attractive here. Half the population is abroad; the young are migrating in large numbers to Europe and Australia. No one is seriously looking to a factory future.

Given Kerala's uniform urbanisation, high education levels, and environmental awareness, the only realistic development path is in artificial intelligence and knowledge work. This is what the CPI(M), stuck at best on techno-parks, should have pursued with clarity and urgency. Their thinking is clearly outdated. After all, how can you have a revolution without proletarians? And the answer is, there is no revolution. Move on.

(Views are personal)

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has also facilitated cross-border infiltration, with the potential to significantly alter urban demography. Unlike in villages, illegal migrants can seamlessly blend into megacities. Spaces beneath flyovers, near traffic signals and along railway tracks have become safe havens. A demographic audit is therefore a necessary governance tool to ensure urban planning is grounded in reality rather than outdated census data.

Multiple reports on land encroachments have also flagged how unchecked demographic shifts near sensitive zones—such as defence installations and railway infrastructure—pose serious security risks.

The quality of urban life is inversely proportional to commute friction. While India is rapidly expanding metro rail networks—set to become the second-largest in the world—last-mile connectivity remains the Achilles' heel. In many cities, ridership falls short of projections because the door-to-station journey is more expensive and time-consuming than the metro ride itself. The ministry of housing and urban affairs has rightly identified last-mile connectivity as a critical focus area.

One promising experiment is transit-oriented development. To solve the last-mile problem structurally, cities are encouraged to bring people closer to transit hubs. High-density, mixed-use development within walking distance of stations is promoted by allowing higher floor-space indices. This approach densifies transit corridors and reduces dependence on private vehicles.

The final imperative is the institutionalisation of art, heritage and culture committees in every municipality. A liveable city is not merely functional—it is aesthetic, culturally vibrant, and distinct in character. The Model Building Bylaws, 2016, advocate this very approach, arguing that aesthetic interventions must move beyond ad hoc beautification.

They recommend that art and culture committees vet proposals for murals and public installations to ensure alignment with local cultural contexts. Several reports have also proposed a public art fund, financed by earmarking, say, one per cent of the budget of new flyovers or metro stations for public art. This would embed aesthetics into infrastructure planning, ensuring that beauty is not an afterthought but a core element of urban development.

(Views are personal)

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MAIL BAG

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Football fumble

Ref: *Good, bad and ugly sides of Messi mania* (Dec 16). The frenzy revealed serious lapses in event planning, crowd management, and elitist entitlement. We truly remain unprepared to host world-class football events. This episode must serve as a wake-up call if India truly aspires to grow its sports ecosystem.

Abha Sarda, Bengaluru

Credit Congress

Ref: *Kerala local polls* (Dec 16). The results not only reflect voter disenchantment, but also the tactical miscalculations of the Left. The Congress-led UDF must be credited for renewed organisational strength and political adaptability. A sustainable momentum depends on how effectively it builds on these lessons.

Muhammed Yazeed, Kozhikode

Security resolve

Ref: *Shifting codes of conduct* (Dec 16). The column rightly captures a quieter but firmer shift in India's strategic posture, where restraint now coexists with resolve. Ambiguity, when managed well, can deter miscalculation without inviting escalation. Signalling must be consistent and credible.

Avinashappan Myilsami, Coimbatore

Centre-state balance

Ref: *The evolving politics of cess* (Dec 16). Health funding matters, but opacity weakens trust. Ring-fencing procedures and not being transparent toward states hinders the preparedness to grow, erodes federal balance and corrodes democratic accountability nationwide for citizens.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai

Independent campuses

Ref: *Mamata can't be univ chancellor* (Dec 16). A VC who lacks academic grounding may struggle to understand the ethos of a university and may prioritise bureaucratic compliance over academic independence. Such appointments could dilute the academic spirit of universities. This fear is neither imaginary nor exaggerated, given recent experiences in several campuses.

Muhammed Fasil, Malappuram

Dynastic pick

Ref: *Nabin takes charge* (Dec 16). The 'party with a difference' has failed to follow a democratic process by handpicking its working president. While the new appointee has grassroots experience, he also carries a dynastic legacy. On this count, the BJP can no longer target the Congress.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

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DECCAN
Chronicle

17 DECEMBER 2025

Govt needs to drop new rural jobs scheme plan

The decision of the Union government to rename and rework the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and introduce a truncated version cuts at the very roots of a scheme that helped crores of Indians become part of the nation-building process and come out of poverty. It is not that the government cannot present another scheme with its focus areas as under the proposed Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill; it's just that it appears to be bent on eliminating the legacy of a scheme named after the Father of the Nation.

Indeed, every salient feature of the MGNREGA scheme is done to death in the new proposed scheme. The most important element of the scheme was that it guarantees 100 days of work for the rural poor and the government was bound to compensate the registered persons monetarily if it could not employ them for the stipulated number of days. This demand-driven scheme will now give way to a supply-driven scheme under the new bill wherein the registered persons will get the job only if the government can supply it to them; it is under no obligation to guarantee it, however. Liberalised economies have long stopped offering guarantees but such an approach by the government towards people from the lowest strata of society will hit them hard, more so when it undoes a guarantee so far in place.

Next, the MGNREGS was designed as a scheme fully sponsored and funded by the Union government. It's now being transformed to yet another scheme where the Union government and states will share expenses at a ratio of 60:40. Earlier, it was a means for the Union government to help out cash-strapped state governments roll out projects that can benefit the rural economy and ensure guaranteed income for the labourers. The money in the hands of the poor entered the economic cycle and started moving it instantly. The benefits were many and could be felt across the segments of society.

It may be remembered that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government introduced the scheme in 2005 when the Union government did not enjoy the kind of control over tax revenue and purse strings as it now does thanks to the Goods and Services Tax regime. Still, the present government now wants to turn the scheme on its head and burden the already overburdened states. To add to states' woes, the excess work undertaken by them would have to be paid for by those governments themselves.

And, too, under the new scheme, it will be the Union government that will decide the programmes to be undertaken. It has in fact listed out four focus areas. This is against the grain of the original scheme which handed over the planning and execution of projects to the grassroots. It is, therefore, the duty of the government to explain why it wants to thus centralise a scheme designed to help address local, rural and remote issues. One-size-fits-all schemes are against the principles of decentralisation.

It may be argued that the increase in the number of days offered under the scheme — to 125 from the existing 100 — is a welcome feature of the bill. However, holidays during the peak agriculture season will no doubt cancel another important aim of the original scheme that liberated agricultural labourers from the clutches of the landlords.

MGNREGA is named after the Father of the Nation who proposed the idea of antyodaya, or care for the last man. But the new pared down scheme aligns more with the authoritarian principles of the Sangh Parivar. The Union government must drop this destructive bill immediately as it does have a real potential to drive crores of beneficiaries of the old scheme back into penury.

Make an example of Luthras

The Luthra brothers Gaurav and Saurabh have been brought to face the majesty of the law. This is one of the rare cases in which swift action on the part of the Indian law enforcement agencies, in coordination with Interpol and Thailand authorities, had led to the accused being deported by the terms of an extradition treaty from a foreign country and put up before the court in India.

Hardly had the night club they co-owned and operated in Arpora in North Goa started going up in flames just before midnight on December 5 — owing to a lackadaisical flirting with safety in a public place — than the brothers had scooted to Phuket and may have been planning to stay as long as possible away from the long arm of the Indian law. That they did not travel beyond Thailand to a third country from which extradition may not have been worked so efficiently may have sealed their flight from justice, restricting it to a 10-day sojourn of the guilty.

Charged with culpable homicide, which is all that the statute books can permit under the circumstances, they had an opportunity to stand up as men and be counted like the five managers and other staff of the nightclub besides other partners or investors who may have had no direct executive association with operating the club, and who were taken in by the authorities.

The Luthra Bros, seen to be overly arrogant, which is a characteristic their staff shared according to accounts of visitors to their salt pan-based club that violated more rules than it may be possible to imagine, deserved their comeuppance. It is the system of bribes and quid pro quos prevalent in the holiday paradise of Goa that got exposed by such a tragedy as that of fireworks being set off indoors amid combustible material which triggered the fire that killed 25 staff and customers.

Had there been a sense of remorse, the rich businessmen may have at least announced substantial compensation for the kin of the deceased. Not a peep came out of those who were fleeing the land at the first sign of trouble. Exemplary punishment for forsaking safety in the guise of offering entertainment for patrons of a resto-bar must be meted out to make an example of the brothers who reek of exploitation for profits.

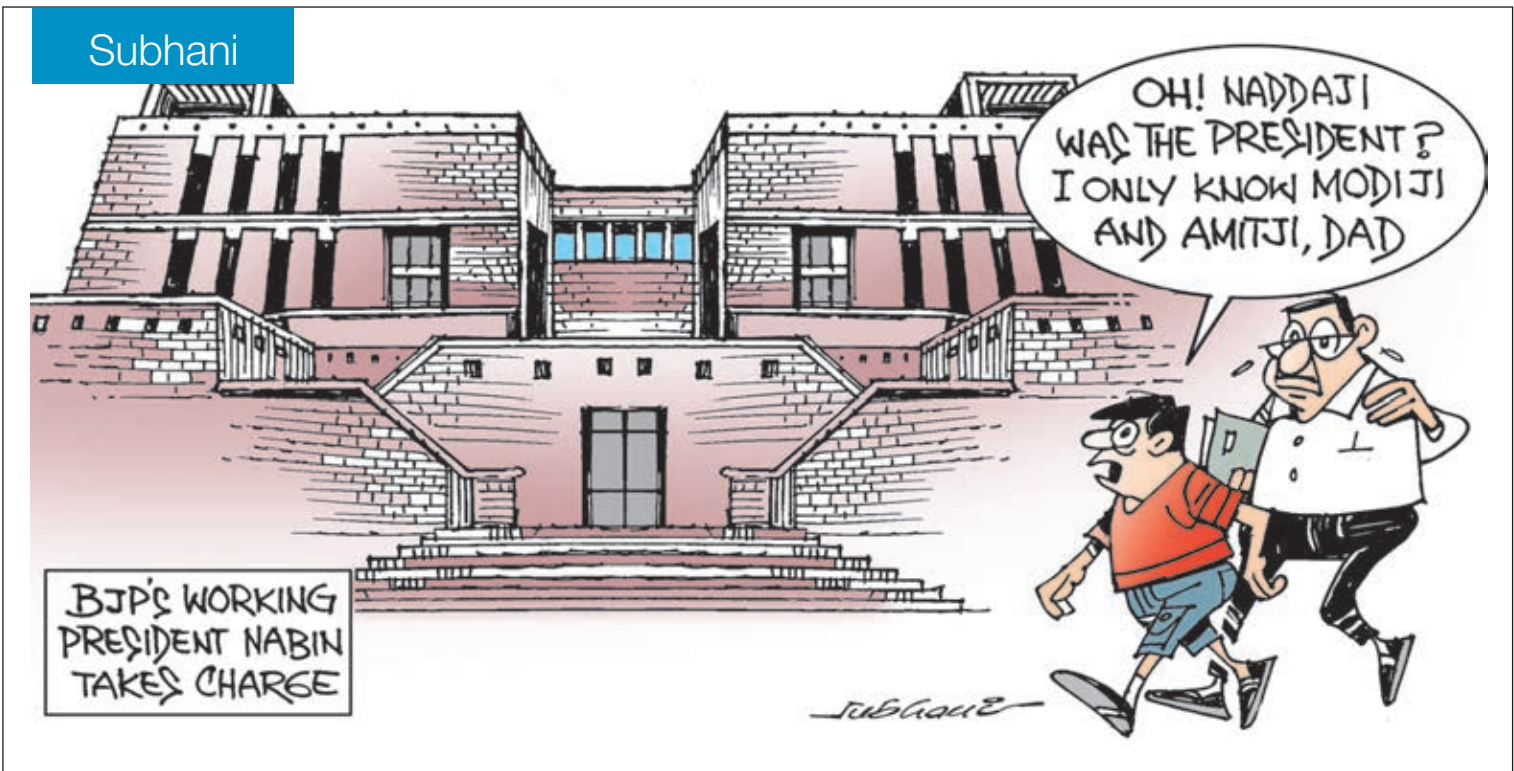
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How rising inequality leads to distorting Indian society



Mohan Guruswamy

"The nature of the institutions determines outcomes, not the means of production or processes"

In 2013 the French economist Thomas Piketty released *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, a magnum opus on income inequality. It was an epochal book very much like Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Hawking's book sold as many as 10 million copies, by comparison Piketty's tome had 2.4 million buyers so far. Such event books are more often than not read by only a fraction of the buyers. Speaking for myself, I still have somewhere a slightly read copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, still considered by the cognoscenti as the foremost work of modern literature. It is said that an analysis of the Kindle readers of the Piketty book revealed that a typical reader got through 26 of its 700 pages. But have no fear, those first 26 pages have all that you need to know. They encapsulate the rationale and results of Piketty's monumental work.

I once asked a well-known economist who had reviewed Piketty's *Capital* about what the main proposition of the book was. He encapsulated it quite brilliantly. He just said that Piketty had set out to prove that "R" was greater than "G", where "R" is the return on capital and "G" is the growth of the economy. There is much empirical evidence to back this up. In the eight years between 2006 and 2014, the US benchmark index S&P 500 gained 45 per cent, an average simple growth rate of 5.6 pc, four times higher than the average GDP growth rate of around 1.5 pc. The consequence of this, of course, is the explosion in income

inequality, which is the hallmark of the post-Second World War era, and particularly after the advent of globalisation. Oxfam has informed us that in the past two decades 73 per cent of the growth has been cornered by just one per cent of the population. Oxfam has a known tendency to exaggerate a bit to prove its point, but this proposition, that few people benefited the most during this period of huge economic expansion, is undisputable. Paul Krugman wrote: "What excited them was Piketty's novel hypothesis about the growing importance of disparities in wealth, especially inherited wealth, as opposed to earnings. We are, Piketty suggested, returning to the kind of dynastic, 'patrimonial' capitalism that prevailed in the late 19th century." We only need to look around us to see that most of the wealthy today are inheritors, and without doubt many of them are building on those inheritances to further accentuate the income inequality. What is really troubling about this growing concentration of wealth is the concentration of political power in the hands of very few who are able to influence politics and policies.

According to Marx, an individual's position within a class hierarchy is determined by their role in the production process, and he argues that political and ideological consciousness is determined by class position. He saw a class as those who share common economic interests and are conscious of those interests. Classes, according to Marx, were inherently antagonistic and in a state of constant struggle.

In his new book *Capital and Ideology*, Thomas Piketty argues, with far greater validity, that inequality

Thomas Piketty's study relates to how both capital and knowledge came to be inequitably allocated because of the institutional arrangements within societies

is driven by human institutions, which in turn reflect the dominant ideology. Piketty defines his thesis very succinctly thus: "Inequality is neither economic nor technological: it is ideological and political. In other words, the market and competition, capital and debt, skilled and unskilled workers, natives and aliens, tax havens and competitiveness — none of these things exist as such. All are social and historical constructs, which depend entirely on the legal, fiscal, educational, and political systems that people choose to adopt and the conceptual definitions they choose to work with. These choices are shaped by society's conception of social justice and economic fairness and by the relative political and ideological power of contending groups and discourses."

Does this mean Marx was wrong? The times in which Marx and Piketty lived are very different. Marx saw the distortions and inequity in society and wondered why. He came up with explanations. His prescriptions were limited by the knowledge and evidence available to him then. The world has moved on and moved very far since then. When Karl Marx began writing his first three volumes of *Das Kapital* (1867-1883), it was the early days of electricity. Marx couldn't contemplate the massive leaps of productivity made possible in the 1900s, when the world witnessed a monumental expansion of knowledge and, with it, capital. Piketty's study relates to how both capital and knowledge came to be inequitably allocated because of the institutional

arrangements within societies. To understand how institutional arrangements determine outcomes, just think of India's educational system. We now have two or possibly three parallel educational streams. The two urban upper classes largely benefit from a higher standard and quality of education imparted in English in schools with high quality teaching and facilities. This is the stream that produces India's managerial classes (both government and industrial). The working-class stream flows out of our government schools, with its emphasis on vernacular education and in-different standards. There is a third stream of rural education from which escape even into the next higher class becomes even more difficult, if not impossible. The flow into the upper reaches of Indian society from these three streams is vastly unequal. What Piketty is saying is just this. The nature of the institutions determines outcomes, not the means of production or processes.

Capital and Ideology is rich in references to India and draws inferences about the institution of castes (*varnas*) and the rising role of Brahmins, after the advent of Muslim rule, leading to the diminution of the role of Kshatriyas. The role of the Brahmins expanded to an even more dominant status under the British. Piketty lauds the determined "affirmative action" policies after Independence that vastly increased the upward mobility of the lower castes, like most of us do. He also notes that the benefits could not be fully realised due to the low standards of education and its unevenness in towns and the hinterland and between regions. So, what's new?

Most Indians with even an elementary understanding of post-Independence India know this. The question is: What is to be done now?

Mohan Guruswamy is a scholar and author. The views expressed here are his own.

LETTERS

PET OWNERS FACE FINES

Now that the Greater Chennai Corporation's ultimatum to the pet owners to get licences has ended on Dec. 14 after two extensions of deadline, the corporation's coffers are bound to be ringing with fine amounts in coming days as nearly 50% of the pet owners have failed to fall in line. While the corporation has announced that a fine of ₹500 will be levied for taking pets to public places without a leash, it has not said anything about taking them out without muzzles.

Vaithianathan Subramanian
Madurai

COURT DELAYS

The advocates particularly in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry have halted work by striking lawyers which once again derailed the proceedings and put the lawyers and litigants into enormous turmoil. Advocates are not against digitisation, but the protest happens on account of inadequate infrastructure with limited number of e-filing booths available for large number of advocates in Tamil Nadu. Adding fuel to the fire, advocates have reported massive delays and frequent server crashes which affects the timely filing of urgent cases. Also, the staff manning the centre are not trained to handle the new system. With these kinds of pitfalls, the judicial work in trial courts have been paralysed and adjournments kill the spirit of lawyers and sadly thousands of litigants indefinitely suffer on account of this.

A.P. Thiruvadi
Chennai

SACHIN MEETS MESSI

The meeting of the two legendary sports persons – Sachin Tendulkar and Lionel Messi – during the latter's recent visit to Mumbai as part of his four-city GOAT India tour, was a historic moment that will remain with sports fans forever. Tendulkar and Messi share several common factors, largely revolving around their status as icons in their respective sports, their playing styles, and their personal demeanour. Both are widely considered the greatest players in the history of their respective sports. Both players famously wore the No.10 jersey for a significant portion of their careers for the national teams. And importantly, the two iconic players are known for their humility and grounded personalities.

R. Sivakumar
Chennai

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

K.J. Jacob



Despite dramatic win in its capital, a long way to go for BJP in Kerala

If everything works according to plan, then a BJP mayor will welcome Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the tarmac when he next visits Kerala's capital Thiruvananthapuram. That will be a paradox in that the same city, of richest god Sri Padmanabha, had witnessed the anointment of the first elected Communist head of government anywhere in the world 68 years ago. The current chief minister belongs to the red camp, while the mayor happens to be from the saffron one.

The BJP cadres' jubilation over the party's performance in the local body elections, particularly in the state's capital, reached 7, Lok Kalyan Marg, in India's capital and Mr Modi shared the excitement of his partymen in the southern state. The master craftsman of the BJP's electoral gains across the country, Mr Modi called the party's mandate in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation "a watershed moment in Kerala's politics". He also called his former colleague in the Union council of ministers and now state BJP president Rajeev Chandrasekhar to recall how the win in Ahmedabad's municipal elections was a similar breakthrough for the fledgling BJP back in 1987. Mr Modi said the 50 seats it won in the 101-member corporation must be the starting point in the party's campaign to fell Kerala's "red fort".

The BJP had been eyeing the corporation in

the last several elections. The NDA it leads won 35 seats in the 2015 and 2020 elections and was the main Opposition in the corporation council while the CPI(M)-led LDF was at the wheel, pushing the Congress-led UDF to the third position. The party will be able to get its candidate elected as mayor since the LDF, with its 29 candidates, and the UDF, with 19, is unlikely to mount an opposition with the help of two Independent candidates. (The election to one division was postponed due to the death of a candidate).

Mr Modi's congratulations and blessings will be a shot in the arm for the BJP for its campaign for the Assembly elections due in April-May 2026, but it is doubtful if that is sufficient for the saffron party to confidently aim big, if the performance in the local body elections across the state is a pointer. The BJP's vote share in the state elections hovers around 16 per cent, which is in fact lesser than the party's record in the Lok Sabha elections held hardly two years ago.

An analysis of the voting pattern reveals that the party has been consistent in retaining its hold in the state capital but not elsewhere. It is a fact that the party was never able to match the performance of P. Kerala Varma, a Sangh Parivar candidate in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections. The party, despite its win in more seats, lags behind the LDF by about 10,000 votes even in Thiruvananthapuram; it has lost both the

municipalities it had won last time. Among them is Pandalam, a place traditionally and ritualistically linked to Lord Ayyappa of Sabarimala, which was won by the LDF. The party managed to emerge as the largest bloc in Palakkad municipality, which it ruled last time with a comfortable majority. The party cadre was on cloud nine when actor-turned politician Suresh Gopi broke the jinx and he won the Thrissur Lok Sabha seat in 2024; the party believed the Thrissur victory will help it consolidate the base and win more seats. The party launched its campaign with an eye on the Thrissur corporation, but it ended up a poor third after the UDF and the LDF.

The data on seats in other local bodies is also not very positive for the party and its sympathisers inside and outside Kerala. It now runs 26 of the 941 gram panchayats, two of the 86 municipalities and one of six corporations. It has drawn a blank in both block panchayats and district panchayats. In fact, it has won only one of the 344 district panchayat seats, which are larger units comparable with Assembly segments. It has doubled the number of gram panchayats under it but the disturbing trend is that it was unable to hold on to those which it had won last time.

The party had banked on its new-found bonhomie with the Christian community, who comprise about 18 per cent of the state's population.

Mr Gopi's win in Thrissur was largely attributed to the support of the prominent minority community. The party also showed signs of an accommodation of the people from the community in the state leadership; several even in the state core committee are from the community. It went out of its way to comfort the community when two Catholic nuns were recently arrested in Raipur, in BJP-ruled Chhattisgarh. But the latest election results indicate that it was indeed a short honeymoon, and the sheep have gone back to the comforts of its traditional sheds in the UDF. The community looks less adventurous now, making the BJP gameplan less formidable.

The party has managed to wean away a section of the powerful Ezhava community, which forms the vote base of the Communist parties in the state. However, the election results indicate that the Communists have been able to stall any further erosion of its base.

The BJP is now at a crossroads in Kerala. It has realised that hardcore Hindutva issues cannot take the party much ahead in a state which is known for its communal harmony. Its demography — the two minority communities make up about 45 per cent of the total population — virtually limits the possibility of such a policy. The party now flashes the development card with the hope that Kerala, with its open mindedness, will give it a chance.



Pak exposed, terror proven

The National Investigation Agency deserves appreciation for completing, in record time, a painstaking investigation into the brutal Pahalgam terror attack of April 22. The filing of a comprehensive 1,597-page chargesheet within eight months reflects both institutional capacity and a sense of urgency demanded by a crime that shocked the nation. While it is ultimately for the judiciary to examine the merits of the evidence and deliver a verdict, the investigation itself marks a significant moment in India's long battle against cross-border terrorism. Terrorists, by design, leave little behind. In this case too, there was no dramatic trail of documents or electronic proof that could, beyond all doubt, establish Pakistani nationality at the scene of the crime.

Yet, terrorism is often proved not merely by forensic crumbs but by patterns, planning, and purpose. The ruthless, emotionless killing of innocent tourists—26 people targeted in a religion-based massacre—was itself powerful evidence of a crime conceived and executed by trained terrorists. Such cold-blooded precision does not emerge spontaneously; it bears the unmistakable imprint of planning from across the border. The NIA chargesheet lays out that larger conspiracy. Pakistani handler Sajid Jatt has been named along with the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba and its proxy, The Resistance Front, as legal entities that planned, facilitated, and executed the attack. The inclusion of these organisations, long known for their Pakistan-based operations, exposes the hollowness of Islamabad's routine denials. Statements made by senior figures in the Pakistani military establishment in the past only deepen suspicions that the attack was neither accidental nor isolated.

One of the most important findings of the investigation is the formal identification of the three Pakistani terrorists killed by Indian security forces during Operation Mahadev in July 2025 as the actual perpetrators of the Pahalgam killings. Until now, this had been the subject of speculation. The chargesheet puts that uncertainty to rest. Equally significant is the naming of two locals accused of harbouring the terrorists. Their inclusion sends a clear warning that collaboration with foreign terrorists on any pretext will invite the full force of the law. National security cannot be compromised by misplaced loyalties or fear.

Pakistan has consistently claimed it has no role in terror attacks on Indian soil. The forthcoming trial promises to be a body blow to that narrative. As in several major terror attacks worldwide, where investigative trails have eventually led back to Pakistan-based handlers, this case too reinforces a grim global pattern. Reports linking recent attacks abroad to Pakistani nationals only underline the point. India's military response, including Operation Sindoor, has already degraded terrorist assets and inflicted damage on hostile infrastructure. But accountability through law is equally vital. This trial has the potential to present clinching evidence of Pakistan's complicity before the world, replacing denial with documented truth.

Old wine in a new bottle

Renaming is an art. Governments are past masters at it. The latest example is its proposal to rechristen the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Grameen) Bill, 2025—VB-G RAM-G for short. In one stroke, Mahatma Gandhi is replaced by RAM, with a reverential "G" added for good measure. In today's political climate, who will dare question such a rechristening? This is not an isolated case. The Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan became the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan; the rural LPG distribution scheme was reborn as Ujjwala. Rebranding has become a hallmark of governance, often suggesting transformation where there is little substantive change. From what is available in the public domain, the new employment guarantee bill appears to follow the same script. There is nothing to indicate any radical departure from the existing scheme. The changes are largely cosmetic, marked more by bombastic word-age than by a new vision.

In essence, the proposed law guarantees employment for 125 days to one person per household willing to do manual work—an increase from the earlier 100 days under MGNREGA. The cost-sharing pattern, however, changes significantly: states will now bear 40 per cent of the expenditure, while the Himalayan states will contribute 10 per cent. The Centre will also exercise greater control over implementation, ostensibly to plug loopholes for corruption. Whether tighter control translates into better delivery or merely greater centralisation remains to be seen. It is worth recalling that MGNREGA was a trailblazing piece of legislation when it was enacted in 2005 by the Manmohan Singh government, under pressure from the Left parties which supported the United Progressive Alliance government from outside. Politically, it paid rich dividends in the 2009 general election when the Congress returned to power for another term. More importantly, it provided employment to millions and created durable assets: public wells, rural roads, check dams, school buildings, and other infrastructure. The initial wage of Rs 100 a day may not have inspired confidence in urban India, but in rural areas it made a tangible difference. It is, of course, sobering that even after three-quarters of a century as a republic, India still needs laws guaranteeing work for just 125 days a year. With nearly 800 million Indians dependent on subsidised rations, the need is obvious. The BJP was never enthusiastic about MGNREGA, but political prudence ensured its survival. A welcome feature in the new bill is a deadline for wage payments, a long-standing grievance.

Ultimately, whatever the name, if the scheme benefits the poor and builds rural assets, it deserves support—not rhetorical renaming.



State of the Nation

ASHUTOSH

Under the leadership of Modi, the BJP has a habit of shocking people and the nation. The BJP's latest pick for the working president, Nitin Nabin, who presumably will take over as the party president, is the latest in the line. As his name hit the headlines, Delhi journalists started calling each other, with only one question: Who is this man? Many of them had no clue whatsoever.

Even the writer of this column had no idea who he was. I contacted many fellow reporters and journalists and researched him online. In fact, all the people I called were in shock. A few of them, in fact, cursed, as Delhi journalists have very big egos and feel extremely embarrassed and hurt when something happens in the corridors of power about which they are clueless. Bragging and name-calling come naturally to them. However, since Modi became the Prime Minister, these journalists have been feeling helpless and powerless. Probably because no one has any information about what is going on in the

minds of Modi and Amit Shah.

Nitish Nabin is a five-term MLA from Bihar. He belongs to the Kayastha community, which is traditionally considered caste-neutral in a caste-divided society like ours. Apparently, he has done good work as the in-charge of Chhattisgarh and was instrumental in the BJP's victory in the 2023 assembly elections. In national politics, he is an unknown entity. It is to be seen and investigated if he is also a choice of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. It is common knowledge that, for the past two years, the hunt was on for the successor to JP Nadda as the future BJP president, but no consensus could be reached, as it was believed that Bhagwat had put his foot down. It was speculated that Bhagwat wanted someone who would not be a rubber stamp of Modi-Shah. I don't know if Nitin is the right candidate, but yes, his age gives him a competitive edge over many other candidates.

He is immediately being compared with Nitin Gadkari. Gadkari was a surprise pick by Mohan Bhagwat in 2009 as the party president. Bhagwat then ignored the claims of the Gang of Four, namely,

Arun Jaitley, Sushma Swaraj, Anant Kumar, and Venkaiah Naidu, and instead brought in an outsider from Nagpur who was new to Delhi politics. Although not many would know that Manohar Parrikar was the original choice of Bhagwat, it is said that since Parrikar made a statement about Advani at that time, which was not liked by the party, he was bypassed by Gadkari.

Since Modi became the supreme leader, he has systematically bypassed old and powerful leaders of the Atal-Advani era and replaced them with young and unknown faces. He gambled with Bhupendra Patel, a first-time MLA, as the chief minister of Gujarat, ignoring the claims of stalwarts like Nitin Patel and others. A similar experiment was done in Uttarakhand when Pushkar Singh Dhami was anointed to the top post in the state.

The biggest surprise was Bhajan Lal Sharma in Rajasthan. Everyone was stunned when his name was announced. Vasundhara Raje Scindia's face turned white when Rajnath Singh disclosed his name to her. The Candid Camera was

alerted to capture that image. In MP, Mohan Yadav replaced a seasoned and popular leader, Shivraj Singh Chauhan. In Odisha, Mohan Majhi became the chief minister when Navin Patnaik was vanquished in his own territory. Many senior leaders, like Dharmendra Pradhan, had no option but to accept the Modi-Shah pick. Even in Delhi, Rekha Gupta was a new name as CM.

Even when Amit Shah was made the national party president, he was a surprise pick. Amit Shah proved his mettle and became the second most powerful leader of the party, superseding seniors like Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Vasundhara Raje Scindia, Raman Singh, and Gopinath Munde. These so-called seniors had no choice but to play second fiddle to Shah. Nirmala Sitharaman was another case. From being a featherweight leader to emerging as the longest-serving finance minister, she had surprised all. Kiran Rijju is holding the parliamentary affairs portfolio, which he would not have ever imagined. Even Om Birla was a surprise choice as the speaker of the Lok

Sabha. So far, it appears that Modi has not made a mistake in entrusting heavyweight responsibilities to relatively new faces.

So I am not surprised that another surprise awaited Delhi journalists. But Nitin's name is the boldest selection if he replaces Nadda as the party president, as is presumed in Delhi corridors and also within the BJP. He will be the youngest party president. He will require immense acumen and patience to deal with all the senior leaders who have spent decades in politics, unless he decides to be a rubber stamp. So far, he remains an unknown entity, and not many people in the party are aware of his capabilities. However, someone who has won five assembly elections consecutively cannot be a pushover and should not be dismissed lightly. Let's see how this Modi experiment pans out. Whether it is an experiment of great significance or a forgotten footnote in history only the future will tell.

The writer is Co-Founder, SatyaHindi.com, and author of Hindu Rashtra. He tweets at @ashutosh83B



As I See It

SHAILESH HARIBHAKTI

For decades, data centres have been the unseen factories of the digital age. They power our payments, our markets, our governance systems, and now, increasingly, artificial intelligence. Yet, these factories are hitting Earth's hard limits—energy, water, land, and social acceptance.

A radical idea is moving from the fringes to serious boardrooms and laboratories worldwide: data centres in space. What sounds like science fiction is, in fact, a logical next step in the evolution of compute, energy, and sustainability.

The Earthly Limits of Digital Growth: AI, cloud computing, and real-time digital services are growing at an exponential pace. Data centres already consume a significant and rising share of global electricity. Cooling alone accounts for up to half their energy use, often relying on scarce water resources. Land acquisition, grid bottlenecks, and local opposition further constrain expansion.

Put simply, the digital economy's appetite is outgrowing Earth's capacity to host it efficiently. This is not a failure of technology; it is a

triumph—one that demands a new frontier.

Why Space Changes the Economics Completely: Space offers a combination of physical advantages no terrestrial location can match.

■ First, solar power without compromise: Above the atmosphere, solar panels receive uninterrupted, high-intensity sunlight—no clouds, no dust, and no night. Energy availability becomes continuous and predictable, not intermittent.

■ Second, cooling without water: In the vacuum of space, heat can be radiated directly into the cold backdrop of the universe. The most complex, wasteful, and water-intensive part of data centre operations simply disappears.

■ Third, freedom from land and grid constraints: No zoning laws. No local grid overloads. No competition with agriculture or habitation.

When power generation and cooling—two dominant cost drivers—are structurally solved, the economics of computation change fundamentally.

From Theory to Trajectory: This is no longer idle speculation.

Global technology leaders and space startups are actively working on orbital compute platforms powered by solar energy and connected by laser-based communications. The vision is bold but clear: compute clusters in orbit, processing data where energy is cheapest and cleanest, then transmitting insights—not raw data—back to Earth.

As launch costs fall and satellite manufacturing becomes modular, these systems move steadily toward economic viability. What follows is a flywheel effect—lower energy costs enable more compute, which enables better AI models, which, in turn, optimise energy generation, thermal control, and system reliability even further. Reinforcement learning-driven autonomy will make these systems largely self-managing.

Edge Computing at Planetary Scale: The real breakthrough is not just in powering the cloud; it is in reshaping edge computing. Autonomous vehicles, industrial robots, defence systems, logistics networks, and smart cities increasingly need instant decision-making. Instead of routing everything through distant terrestrial data

centres, orbital compute nodes can process information closer to the point of action, with global coverage and low latency. A vehicle, drone, or robot could one day connect directly to a space-based compute layer—powered by the sun, cooled by the vacuum, and optimised continuously by AI.

A Sustainability Imperative, Not a Luxury: Critically, this is also a climate story. Moving energy-intensive computation off Earth reduces pressure on land, water, and fossil-fuel-dependent grids. It allows renewable energy to scale without social friction. While rocket emissions and space debris must be managed responsibly, the long-term environmental equation strongly favours this transition.

Sustainability, increasingly, is not about sacrifice—it is about superior economics aligned with planetary limits.

Why This Matters for India: For India, this moment is strategic. We are one of the world's fastest-growing digital economies, with leadership in software, fintech, digital public infrastructure, and space technology. As AI adoption accelerates, access to clean, scalable compute will become a na-

tional competitiveness issue.

India has the engineering talent, the space heritage, and the policy imagination to participate early in this frontier—whether through research, satellite manufacturing, orbital services, or AI optimisation systems. Those who shape the next layer of global digital infrastructure will not merely consume growth; they will define it.

The Bigger Picture: Data centres in space represent more than a technological leap; they signal a shift in how humanity thinks about constraints.

When energy comes directly from the Sun, cooling comes from the cosmos, and intelligence optimises systems end-to-end, abundance replaces scarcity as the governing paradigm.

This is not about escaping Earth. It is about protecting it by moving the most energy-hungry parts of our civilisation to where physics works in our favour.

The cloud, it turns out, may truly belong in the sky.

Shailesh Haribhakti is a Chartered Accountant, Independent Director, and author of Sustainable Abundance and History of the Future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Chasing Nehru

Renaming institutions to erase Nehru's legacy reflects political obsession rather than governance priorities. Universities and hospitals named after him remain vital national assets. Legislative energy would be better spent improving institutions than indulging in symbolic re-branding exercises.

Avinash Godbole,
Dewas

MNREGA Renamed

Renaming MNREGA as 'Pujya Rural Employment Scheme' is unnecessary and confusing. Mahatma Gandhi's name symbolises service and sacrifice. Replacing it dilutes legacy and creates ambiguity. Such changes neither improve employment delivery nor address rural distress.

Hema Hari Upadhyay,
Khachrod

Kerala's Political Shift

Kerala's civic polls signal a sharp erosion of faith in the Left Democratic Front. The BJP's capture of Thiruvananthapuram Corporation punctures CPM dominance, while a united UDF gains ground. With Assembly elections near-

ing, the verdict hints at a major political realignment.

K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru

Messi Visit Fiasco

Messi's India visit should have been celebratory, but poor planning and profiteering denied fans value for money. Fifteen minutes of visibility after exorbitant ticket prices triggered chaos. Such mismanagement harms India's image and may deter future global icons from visiting.

S.N. Kabra, —

Dynasty Warning

DMK's push to field more youth may be aimed at countering Vijay's TVK, but risks projecting Udhayanidhi Stalin as CM face. Dynastic elevation is dangerous. Tamil Nadu needs focus on governance issues like roads and drainage, not political grooming.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

Squash Triumph Cheers

India's maiden Squash World Cup title is a proud moment, making the nation the first Asian champion. The emphatic 3-0 win is a festive gift for the country. Adequate re-



HASAN ZAIDI

wards and recognition will boost morale and inspire future sporting excellence.

Vinay Mahadevan,
Chennai

GOAT Turned WOAT

Messi's visit turned embarrassing due to crowd mismanagement and VIP domination. Fans were sidelined while officials hogged access. Such fail-ures damage India's global image. Authorities owe an apology and must ensure better planning to avoid repeat fiascos.

Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur

Rural Jobs Bill

The proposed Viksit Bharat Rozgar Bill promises

125 days of guaranteed rural employment but imposes higher financial burdens on states. While empowerment is vital, funding patterns and implementation clarity will decide whether the

scheme truly strengthens rural livelihoods or strains federal balance.

Dimple Wadhawan,
Kanpur Nagar

Centralisation Risks

Replacing multiple education regulators with a single authority risks excessive centralisation. Uniform standards may harm rural and small institutions. True reform requires funding, autonomy and aca-

democratic freedom, not top-down control that threatens diversity and quality.

Dr Vijaykumar H K,
Raichur

Judging Judges

Criticism of Justice G.R. Swaminathan ignores his extraordinary judicial record. With over 70,000 cases disposed, his dedication is unquestionable. Judges should be assessed by integrity and performance, not politicised reactions to individual verdicts.

A.P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

Kerala Civic Shock

BJP-NDA's victory in Thiruvananthapuram Corpor-

ation ends decades of Left dominance. Urban voter erosion worries the LDF ahead of Assembly polls. The result signals BJP's growing footprint and a shifting political landscape in Kerala.

C.K. Ram Nathan Rishi,
Palakkad

Award Credibility

The Savarkar award row exposes political opportunism and selective outreach. Courting leaders like Shashi Tharoor while sidelining others erodes trust. When honours come from bodies with questionable credibility, public scepticism only deepens.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak

OPINION

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Confused about student loans? Blame Biden.

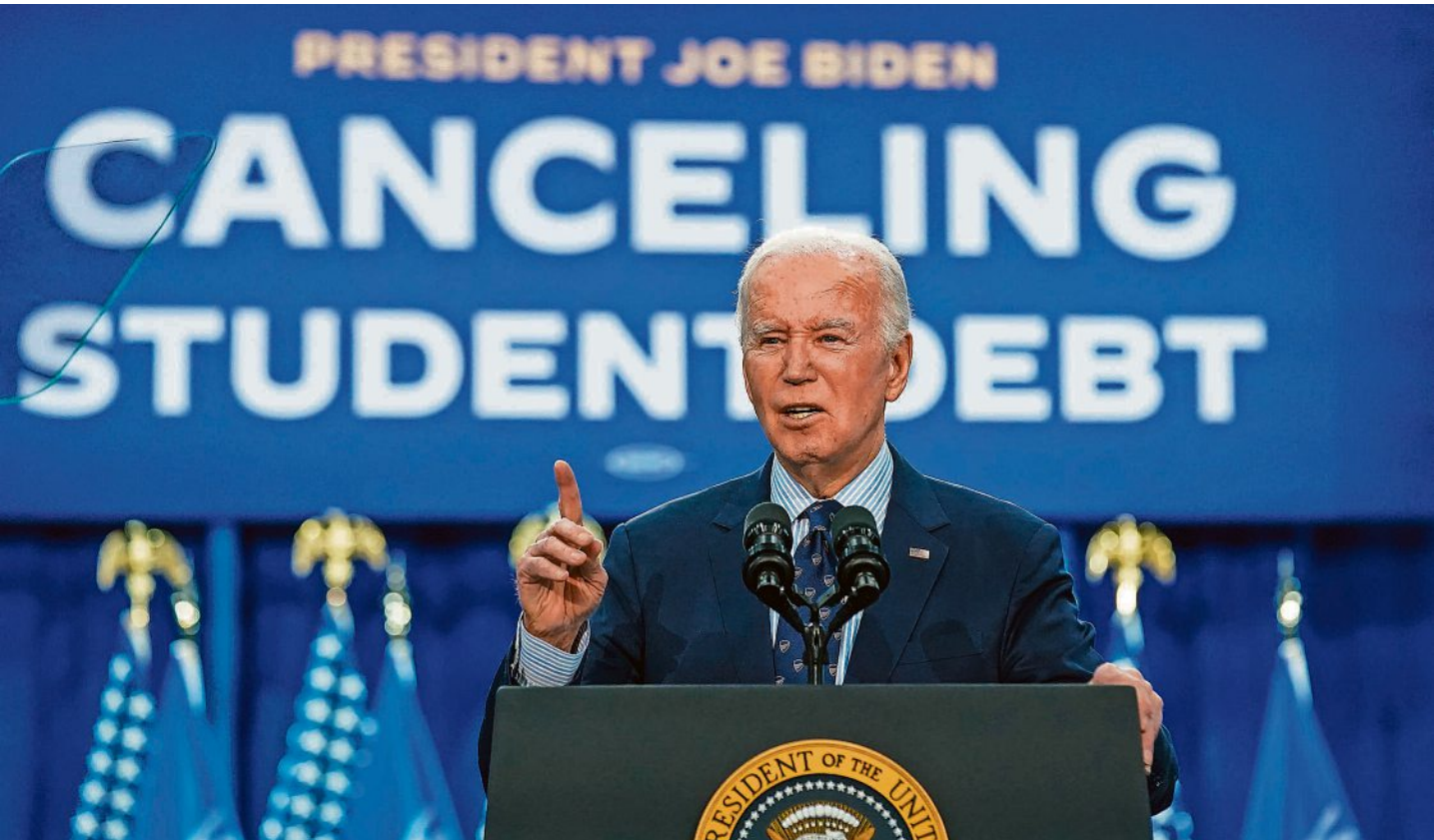


Ingrid Jacques
USA TODAY

I started out this year marking how glad I was that I wouldn't have to keep writing about student loans, with former President Joe Biden leaving office. Turns out I was wrong. This is at least the second time the issue has come up since January. And it's not because of President Donald Trump. The turmoil the Biden administration created for borrowers through failed – and illegal – programs and promises has continued months after his administration ended. The 7 million borrowers who signed up for Biden's "Saving on a Valuable Education" (SAVE) plan learned Dec. 9 that they'll have to find a Plan B, after the Education Department announced a settlement agreement that will end the program if the courts agree. Republican-led states had sued the Biden administration over the plan, arguing it was de facto massive student loan forgiveness under the guise of an income-driven repayment plan. They were right, and it was likely just as illegal as Biden's first \$400 billion loan forgiveness play that was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2023.

Biden used your dollars to give student borrowers false hope

Good riddance to the last remnant of Biden's meddling with loans. Expect the confusion to stick around, however. More on that shortly. The SAVE plan, which the Biden administration stealthily put in place in 2023, promised borrowers extremely low monthly payments – many were told they wouldn't have to pay anything – and fast-tracked loan forgiveness. The plan was estimated to have cost at least \$475 billion over 10 years – all without any approval from Congress. Other estimates were even higher. "For four years, the Biden Admini-



President Joe Biden announces a new plan for federal student loan relief in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 8, 2024.
KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

stration sought to unlawfully shift student loan debt onto American taxpayers, many of whom either never took out a loan to finance their postsecondary education or never even went to college themselves, simply for a political win to prop up a failing Administration," said Under Secretary of Education Nicholas Kent in a statement. "The Trump Administration is righting this wrong and bringing an end to this deceptive scheme. The law is clear: if you take out a loan, you must pay it back." Biden should have never given millions of borrowers false hope that he could "erase" debt they knowingly took on. And it was hugely unfair to dump that burden onto taxpayers. Back to the confusion this has caused the Americans with student loan debt. Under Biden, in addition to all the promises of loan cancellation, borrowers essentially got a five-year break in

having to pay anything on their loans. Biden kept extending what should have been a short-lived pandemic-related pause on loan payments.

Entitlement and confusion Biden created will live on

The Biden administration let student loan borrowers off the hook until October 2023 (when Congress mandated repayments begin), and even then included a year-long "on-ramp" to eliminate penalties for those who didn't make their payments. Now, these borrowers are facing reality. The Trump administration began collecting on defaulted loans this spring – the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic started. A September report from the Congressional Research Service predicted "an almost doubling of the number of

defaulted loan recipients and of defaulted loan amounts" this fall – something it dubs a "default cliff." As of June, there were about 5 million borrowers in default. The reason? They'd gotten used to not having to pay. As the CRS reports state, "A primary reason asserted by stakeholders for the default cliff is that following the COVID-19 payment pause and on-ramp policies, many borrowers may have become disconnected from the student loan system and fallen out of the habit of making monthly loan payments." While the former president's loan forgiveness programs may all be overturned, the entitlement and confusion he created will live on. Thanks a lot, Biden.

Ingrid Jacques is a columnist at USA TODAY. You can contact her at ijacques@usatoday.com or on X: [@Ingrid_Jacques](https://twitter.com/Ingrid_Jacques)

Stop criticizing the bad economy. You're making Trump sad.



Rex Huppke
USA TODAY

Guys, I'm going to have to ask you to stop making President Donald Trump feel bad about his loser-stinko economy. The guy is polling slightly better than scabies, he's swiftly losing control of his presidency (and quite possibly his mind) and he has it in his head that "affordability" – a thing American shoppers are not presently experiencing – is a hoax concocted by Democrats and not ... you know ... a real word. On Dec. 11, Trump wrote on social media: "When will I get credit for having created, with No Inflation, perhaps the Greatest Economy in the History of our Country? When will people understand what is happening? When will Polls reflect the Greatness of America at this point in time, and how bad it was just one year ago?"

Donald Trump wants you to know nobody is suffering more than him

Poor Donald. The problem isn't that grocery prices are high and scattershot tariffs have made Christmas shopping more expensive and Republican cruelty has done away with Affordable Care Act subsidies, leaving millions of Americans to face skyrocketing health insurance premiums. No, the problem is that nobody is giving the president credit for all the good things happening in the make-believe world he inhabits. You think you've got it hard trying to put food on the table? Try being Donald Trump, the billionaire saint of perpetual grievance. Trump has weighed in on the existence of the word affordability: "The word affordability is a con job by the Democrats," the president said. "The

word affordability is a Democrat scam." Well, if it's a scam, the Democrats have sold it well. The president's second term hit its lowest economic approval rating in a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Only 31% of Americans approve of the way the president is handling the economy, which makes sense when you recall Trump promised to lower prices on day one and do away with inflation on day one and usher in some mythical Golden Age.

'Go to the grocery store and see it yourself'

None of those things have happened. People do see an affordability scam, but it has nothing to do with Democrats. The scam is an administration that keeps shamelessly lying and telling Americans everything is peachy. On Dec. 11, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt lied to the press corps: "Every data point and every economic metric does in fact show that the economy is improving." That's laughable, as anyone who isn't rich can confirm. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the price of meats, poultry, fish and eggs rose 5.2% over the past 12 months. The cost of nonalcoholic beverages rose 5.3%. Electricity prices rose 5.1% over the 12 months that ended in September. Betsey Stevenson, a professor of economics at the University of Michigan, recently told NPR: "Trump's claims about inflation are false, and you can go to the grocery store and see it yourself."

'Affluent (is) doing very well'; job cuts at highest level since '20

In November, the business newsletter Morning Brew noted that the market realities in America look like this: "The



President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump greet attendants at the White House Congressional Ball in Washington, DC, on Dec. 11. AL DRAGO/REUTERS

affluent (is) doing very well along with the booming stock market and the appreciation of their homes in the inventory-crunched real estate market. Nearly everyone else (is) faltering due to a shaky job market, high interest rates, and/or inflation." A Dec. 4 report from the consulting firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas found: "Through November, employers have announced 1,170,821 job cuts, an increase of 54% from the 761,358 announced in the first eleven months of last year. "Year-to-date job cuts are at the highest level since 2020." That was the year that the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Things are not going well for the average American, and President Affordability-Is-A-Hoax is less connected to re-

ality than I imagined if he thinks he can pee on consumers' legs and tell them it's raining. Trump's overall approval rating, according to the AP-NORC poll, is 36% – with 61% of Americans disapproving of his performance. Even among Republicans, who generally worship the ground Trump walks on, only 69% approve of how he's handling the economy. The president and his dancing minions can say affordability is a hoax, they can claim prices are down and the economy is booming, they can regale the president with unctuous praise of his economic genius and tell the rest of us up is down. But none of that is true. None of that makes the grocery bill lower. None of that makes up for a monthly insurance premium that's poised to double.

If you're not making Trump feel like a failure, try harder

Trump can whine and woe-is-me all he wants. He can wail fictitious tales like, "When will I get credit for having created, with No Inflation, perhaps the Greatest Economy in the History of our Country?" It won't make people like him, nor will it disguise the disaster his presidency has already become. It's the holiday season, so maybe we should stop making Trump feel so bad about the mess he has made, at least for a few moments. He already seems to be falling apart before our eyes. On second thought, forget that. Trump promised Americans a rose garden and delivered a plot of weeds. That was the real scam. Holidays or not, he deserves to find out that karma is no hoax. You can follow USA TODAY columnist Rex Huppke on Bluesky at [@rexhuppke.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/rexhuppke.bsky.social) and on Facebook at facebook.com/RexIsAJerk



ESTABLISHED 1855

Starmer has time to drop the farm tax

The Liaison Committee of the House of Commons brings together the chairmen of two dozen parliamentary bodies to question the Prime Minister on a wide range of subjects. It took on this role under Tony Blair in 2002 and does so three times a year, often to little avail. The Prime Minister is usually too well-briefed and evasive to end up trapped by an often muddled interrogation by politicians with different agendas.

For much of his appearance on Monday Sir Keir Starmer managed to bat away criticisms of the Government, notably about leaks of the Budget and briefings against his potential rivals in the Cabinet. But on one issue he looked distinctly uncomfortable – the reforms of inheritance tax (IHT) to remove the exemption for family farms.

The attack was led not by a Tory or Lib Dem MP but by Cat Smith, the MP for Lancaster and Wyre. She was joined on the Labour benches last year by dozens of other MPs who found themselves representing rural voters after the general election landslide.

Ms Smith told the Prime Minister: “Many of the 950 farm holdings in my constituency feel like they were misled around the changes to inheritance tax which are going to pull the rug from underneath farming communities and obliterate the family farm for many farmers.”

She said farmers with a terminal illness were contemplating suicide before a deadline next April because if they die afterwards the potential of their family farm would be rendered completely unviable.

Ms Smith’s courageous stance was followed up by the veteran Lib-Dem MP Alistair Carmichael, who pointed out that a succession of Labour-dominated select committees had called for this policy to be withdrawn.

Earlier this month, the Labour MP Markus Campbell-Savours lost the party whip for voting against the IHT plan while around 30 abstained. There is clearly deep unhappiness in the Government’s own ranks over this pernicious policy, let alone in the countryside where farmers face restrictions on tax planning to which others are not subject.

The Treasury fatuously claims that taxing farm estates is a fair way to raise money to fund public services like the expansion of welfare. It would be good to think Sir Keir’s bruising experience will lead to a belated reprieve for farmers. He has changed his mind before and needs to do so again as a matter of decency and justice.

Where is the money?

Blaire Metreweli, the head of MI6, is hardly the first chief of the Secret Intelligence Service to identify the Russians as the biggest threat to UK security. For much of the post-war period, the bulk of the organisation’s work involved monitoring the Soviet Union.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist state, Russia became less of a priority as it was welcomed into the comity of nations, until the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s disruptive activities around Europe and the Middle East have once again made Moscow the main target for our secret watchers. Ms Metreweli, the first woman “C”, used her debut public outing to warn of the acute threat posed by an “aggressive, expansionist, and revisionist” Russia.

She reaffirmed the policy of the Government that “Ukraine will not be abandoned”. In a separate speech, Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, the chief of the defence staff, said “the situation is more dangerous than I have known during my career”. Even as they were speaking, talks continued in Berlin on a US-brokered peace deal that would give Vladimir Putin much of what he wants.

The big question remains: what is Britain actually doing militarily to confront the Russian threat? Where is the timetable for increasing defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP that the Government promised, before watering it down with a vague “when resources allow” pledge.

Moreover, even if a ceasefire is agreed in Ukraine – with one US official claiming a deal is “90 per cent done” – this cannot be an excuse to drop our guard. As the chief of MI6 points out, Russia will remain a threat that needs to be faced down.

Red on the outside

Father Christmas may dress in red but does that make him a socialist? Apparently, many people think he is a Left-wing progressive, albeit not one who would vote for Sir Keir Starmer. Given the chance, he would be backing the Green Party’s leader Zack Polanski, according to a survey of 2,000 voters for Parliament’s *House Magazine*. In fact, traditionally Father Christmas did wear a long green hooded cloak and a wreath of holly, ivy and mistletoe, symbolising ancient winter traditions and nature. His now-familiar red suit was adopted as part of a Coca-Cola marketing campaign in the 1930s, so you couldn’t get more capitalist than that. An eco-populist Father Christmas may well stake a claim to be carbon neutral on his reindeer-drawn sleigh; but imagine how boring his presents would be.



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Words that stoked the hatred behind the atrocity on Bondi Beach

SIR – The attack on Jews on Bondi Beach (report, December 15) was devastating but not surprising.

Governments in Britain, Australia and Canada need to understand that calls such as “globalise the intifada”, “from the river to the sea” and “death to the IDF” are not expressions of free speech. They are incitements to hatred, violence and murder, the consequences of which we saw in Sydney on Sunday and before that at Heaton Park synagogue in Manchester.

Melvin Berwald
Chairman, Israel, Britain and the Commonwealth Association
Herzliya, Israel

SIR – As we mourn the loss of innocent lives in Sydney, I wonder how many pro-Palestine protesters will reflect on how their actions have helped to legitimise and even normalise violence against Jewish people.

Richard Hughes
Googong, New South Wales, Australia

Isolated fathers

SIR – The Duchess of Sussex’s father, like myself and many other fathers, has lost meaningful contact with members of his family, including his grandchildren (report, December 14). Such partings invariably lead to regret and sadness.

Christmas is a time of hope, love, peace and new beginnings. Forgiveness is the first step, and I would urge others to take it. Being on your own as an isolated parent during the festive period is a torrid situation.

Jeff Smith
Skenfrith, Monmouthshire

Rules for riders

SIR – As a pedestrian, I would like to offer the following advice to those who travel on two wheels (Letters, December 15).

First, please take the time to read the Highway Code, particularly Section 64, which states: “You must not cycle on a pavement.” This applies equally to electric scooters. It is essential not only to be aware of this rule, but also to comply with it.

Secondly, when riding on a bridleway or a shared-use path, please use your bell to alert pedestrians when approaching from behind. My wife and I have repeatedly found ourselves startled by cyclists who pass by within inches of us, often at high speeds.

David Brinkman
Poole, Dorset

SIR – On my regular cycle rides along the lanes and tracks in my part of rural north Norfolk, an increasing number of walkers respond to the ding of my bell by checking their mobile phones for an incoming message.

It is often their dog, if they have one, that turns to look over one shoulder at my pedal-powered approach.

Michael Blakey
Reepham, Norfolk

The singing of birds

SIR – I was touched by recent letters (December 15) on birds, which reminded me of when my father died in the spring of 1972.

He was deeply religious and an ardent nature lover. As he lay dying, he and my mother exchanged words from the Song of Solomon: “The time of the singing of birds is come”.

These were inscribed on his gravestone, which lies in the beautiful setting of High Bradfield churchyard in the Peak District.

Wesley Hallam
Batheaston, Somerset

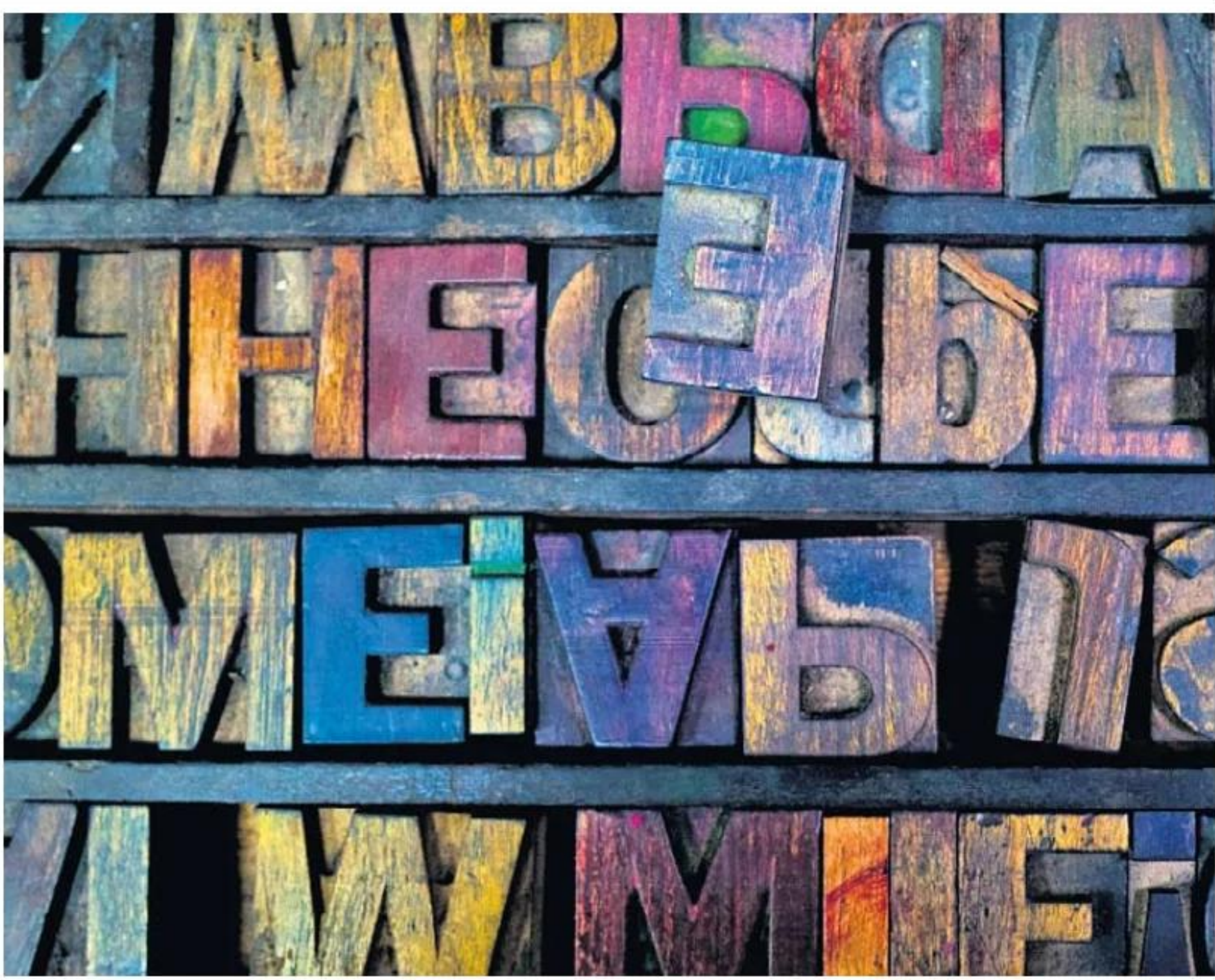
SIR – The current surge in anti-Semitism is fuelled by political equivocation: the repeated undermining of Israel’s right to defend itself, combined with a reluctance to speak explicitly about Islamist extremism.

The attack in Australia is a stark reminder of where such equivocation can lead. Past governments there, as in Britain after 7/7, were clearer: extremist ideology was named and organisations proscribed. That moral clarity mattered.

Today, governments should be explicit and active: affirm Israel’s right to self-defence; prosecute anti-Semitic incitement; proscribe jihadist-linked groups; resource police protection for Jewish institutions; and state clearly that anti-Semitism disguised as “anti-Zionism” is still anti-Semitism.

Words set boundaries. When leaders blur them, extremists take advantage, and Jews pay the price.

Eli Cohen
London SW1



True to type: ink-stained antique wooden letterpress blocks stored in a printers’ tray

The perils of using the wrong font at work

SIR – Christopher Howse’s article (“Departing from the script – what your choice of font says about your character”, Features, December 13) brought to mind a certain financial institution where I worked.

I was there during this century, by which point dress code mattered hardly at all (Letters, December 13). However, I remember two things being deemed egregiously

unprofessional: pie charts and Comic Sans.

The use of this font on a notice saying that a laser printer had been out of action for a few days triggered a major inquisition. I believe the perpetrator (it was not me) covered their tracks sufficiently well to escape unscathed.

Robin Schoolar
London SW19

The best route to an elected House of Lords

SIR – Turning the House of Lords into an elected senate (Letters, December 15) does have its attractions.

However, I would avoid proportional representation, as this gives power to party machines over voters. The d’Hondt system used to select UK MEPs in the European Parliament, for example, involved closed party lists. Voters only had the choice of a party, which had put candidates in rank order.

If the Lords is to become an elected chamber, voters should be able to select candidates on their merits, regardless of party label (or none).

John Barstow
Pulborough, West Sussex

SIR – At a general election the country chooses a set of individuals to represent it in the making of law. In so doing, the country lends sovereignty to the House of Commons, and what that House decides is law. To allow some other group of people to then change that law is to subvert the democratic process

and render voting pointless. The use of terms such as “revising” or “scrutinising” to describe the activities of the House of Lords conceal the fact that its members are legislating without any democratic consent.

Even the Parliament Acts, often cited as evidence that the Commons remains sovereign, do not prevent undemocratic manipulation by delaying legislation, often to the point of it being killed. Choosing the timing of law is just as much the right of a democratically elected government as deciding on its content.

If the country does not like what the Commons does, then it can change the House’s composition next time round. Until then, the electorate must accept responsibility for its decision.

Civilised societies such as Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark enjoy genuine parliamentary democracy via a unicameral legislature. It is time that the UK followed suit.

John Sheridan Smith
Southampton

Another doctor strike

SIR – It is sad that junior doctors are to proceed with strike action (report, telegraph.co.uk, December 15), particularly as illness is rife among the population.

The root of the labour shortages hasn’t been addressed by either Labour or the Tories. It stems mainly from our myopic capping of medical places for students in this country. It has remained the same for several years, despite rising population levels.

We should withdraw the cap and encourage the training of British doctors, particularly as the Boomer generation edges into retirement and requires more care.

Henry Bateson
Whittingham, Northumberland

SIR – After 42 years in the NHS, I am personally disappointed but not surprised that resident doctors have voted to strike. The erosion of professional autonomy over decades, combined with a continual deterioration in working conditions and remuneration, are some factors contributing to the current action.

We all need dedicated and highly motivated doctors to look after us, and I hope that the Health Secretary and the British Medical Association can reach agreement soon on a long-term strategy to improve terms and conditions for all doctors in the NHS.

Dr Michael Copp
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

The Russian threat

SIR – The chief of the Army, the First Sea Lord and the head of the Secret Service and have all expressed concerns about the threat from Russia (report, December 15).

Sir Keir Starmer has promised money to rebuild our Armed Forces and other security sectors, but it is clear that this is only talk. Aircraft are being retired early, vital warships and armoured vehicles are delayed and recruitment is at a standstill.

Vladimir Putin is not going to wait until the mid-2030s to cause more problems for Europe. Nor can we rely on our old friends in the United States.

Labour’s socialist dreams for the country will be meaningless if Russia does attack. The Government’s first duty is defence of the realm. It must get on with it.

Paul James
York

Tories or Lib Dems?

SIR – The current parliamentary Conservative Party is certainly Left-leaning (Letters, December 15).

Kemi Badenoch and most of her shadow cabinet could be described as truly Conservative, but a substantial number of other Tory MPs are Liberal Democrats posing as “One Nation” Conservatives.

To have a chance of winning a majority in a general election, Mrs Badenoch (if she is still in post) will have to cull these imposters and replace them with true Conservatives.

John Wilson
Hill Head, Hampshire

Carving a swede

SIR – The recent discussion about swedes (Letters, December 12) reminded me of growing up in the late 1970s. One Halloween, my brother and I asked for a pumpkin to carve, having seen them on television for the first time. My resourceful mother bought the closest alternative she could find: a large swede from the local greengrocers. Carving it out by hand with a spoon kept us occupied for quite a while.

Kate Pycock
Ipswich, Suffolk

The conviction of Jimmy Lai shames Britain

CHARLES MOORE
NOTEBOOK



Jimmy Lai, who was convicted in Hong Kong’s High Court on Monday of sedition and “colluding with foreign forces”, is a British citizen. All he ever committed were daily acts of free speech, both from his own lips and through ownership of his independent and best-selling Hong Kong newspaper, *Apple Daily* (now suppressed).

Mr Lai was convicted under the trappings, but not the reality of English law. Three Hong Kong judges found him guilty of these “crimes”. All began their legal careers under the English law which applied in Hong Kong. Two of them, Esther Toh and Susana D’Almada Remedios, were called to the bar in London. Indeed, the Hon Madam Justice Remedios was educated at the Sacred Heart School in Tunbridge Wells and the University of London.

All three judges have betrayed the independent, non-political legal system which was the foundation of their careers. They wear English judges’ wigs, but they risk looking like they are taking political orders from the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing.

The continuation of the English system was an important feature of the Sino-British Agreement on Hong Kong which came into force when Britain handed the territory over to China in 1997. The deal was constructed round the concept of “One Country: Two

Systems”. The continuity of law was supposed to guarantee freedom of speech, of contract and of commerce in general.

To this day, the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal operates, according to the agreement’s Basic Law, “free from any interference”. It contains “non-permanent” judges from Common Law jurisdictions, pre-eminently Britain. One of these is Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury, the former president of our own Supreme Court.

China, however, imposed a National Security Law on Hong Kong in 2020 and has held Mr Lai in prison since August of that year. The interference is legion. The whole Common Law fairness notion has become a mockery, but one that earns Lord Neuberger something in the region of £40,000 for each visit he pays to the territory.

Throughout this period, British governments have made only feeble representations about Jimmy Lai and the corruption of the system. Next month, Sir Keir Starmer will fly to Beijing to do further homage.

I find the whole thing shameful. Part of the shame is that the world now assumes Britain will make no serious protest, let alone act. Almost all political pressure against Chinese oppression now comes from the United States.

Last week, Maria Balshaw announced her resignation from running the Tate galleries. Attendances at Tate Britain have fallen, under her rule, by 32 per cent below pre-Covid levels. Ms Balshaw’s tenure has been notable for the extreme weakness of

her attitudes, including her preference for didactic messaging and social activism over great art. A friend who walked into Tate Britain last week reports that the kiddies’ area is awash with books of diversity propaganda. One picture shows a drawing of a brown girl, aged about six, who tells her multi-racial class: “My Arabic teacher exclaims, ‘Beau-ti-ful Beautiful hijab!’” Even fanatical Muslims do not tell girls that they to wear hijabs.

One reason woke has ruled the roost for so long is that it seemed to offer career advancement. As time passes, this wanes. Audiences and customers are bored or offended, and staff often find working in a woke environment unpleasant. It carries an atmosphere of threat to those who do not toe the line. It particularly persecutes workers who like the subject matter of their jobs – caring for heritage, teaching history, serving parishioners, and so on.

It has already been stated, as a business rule, “Go woke, go broke”, notably in relation to net zero and DEI. A similar principle may apply even in organisations where profit is not the driving force. There are now several examples of leaders whose capitulation to woke forces helped encompass their fall. Ms Balshaw’s is only the latest.

Others include Stephen Toope, former vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, who tried to curb free speech and had to resign; Penny Mordaunt, whose chances of leading the Conservatives fell away because of her insistence that “trans women are women”; Justin Welby, who lost his natural support base in the Church of

England because of his efforts to disparage monuments to people allegedly involved in slavery and to find a back-door way of blessing same-sex marriages; Tim Parker, who stepped down as chairman of the National Trust after its tendentious and inaccurate report about its properties’ connections with slavery and “colonialism”; Alison Rose, former chief executive of NatWest, who pretended that her bank had not discriminated against Nigel Farage on account of his politics; Tim Davie, who never quite confronted the blatant bias of his BBC journalists, especially over Israel/Gaza.

By contrast, those great institutions which have not grovelled to wokery are in better shape. As Tate flounders, the National Gallery flourishes and has just collected two enormous donations amounting to £375m.

“Globalise the intifada,” shouted pro-Gaza crowds after the most recent version of it on October 7 2023. Many raised this cry as they marched through the streets in London, unhindered by police. That intifada (uprising) murdered well over a thousand people, and kidnapped about 250 hostages. That is what they want globalised, and that is what they started attempting in Manchester last month and on Bondi Beach on Sunday.

They want a fight about small bits of land in the Middle East to threaten the life of every Jew everywhere. If only the leaders of the Western world were prepared to see this, they might be prepared to unite to stop it. But they aren’t, so they won’t.

Trump Confronts a Backlash of the Reasonable

E.J. Dionne Jr.
A contributing Opinion writer and the author of “100% Democracy,” with Miles Rapoport.

BELIEVING in democracy does not require faith that majorities are always right. It does mean having confidence that most of your fellow citizens will, over time, approach public questions with a basic reasonableness. Abraham Lincoln, tradition has it, said it more pithily: “You cannot fool all the people all the time.”

A corollary to Lincoln’s rule, that you can’t fool all the people who voted for you all the time, explains the sharp decline in President Trump’s approval ratings.

A significant share of the voters who backed Mr. Trump have decided that he has largely ignored the primary issue that pushed them his way, the cost of living. A billionaire regularly mocking concern about affordability only makes matters worse. They see him as distracted by personal obsessions and guilty of overreach, even when they sympathize with his objectives. Many of his former supporters see him breaking promises he made, notably on not messing with their access to health care.

Some abuses are too blatant to be ignored. A recent Economist/You Gov poll found that 56 percent of Americans said Mr. Trump was using his office for personal gain; only 32 percent didn’t. A similar 56 percent saw Mr. Trump as directing the Justice Department to go after people he saw as his political enemies; just 24 percent didn’t.

The upshot: A great many Americans who helped put Mr. Trump in office have absorbed what’s happened since. They may not be glued to every chaotic twist of this presidency, but they do pay attention and have concluded, reasonably, that this is not what they voted for.

How many? Let’s take Mr. Trump’s 49.8 percent of the 2024 popular vote as a base line and compare it with his approval ratings. A New York Times analysis of public polling this month found his net approval rating had dropped to 42 percent. An A.P.-NORC poll and a Gallup poll pegged it at 36 percent. This suggests that 15 to 25 percent of his voters have changed their minds.

I think of these shifts as the triumph of reasonableness — and not because I agree with where these fellow citizens have landed (although I do). I’m buoyed by the capacity of citizens to absorb new facts and take in information even when it challenges decisions they previously made. It turns out that swing voters are what their label implies. The evidence of their own lives and from their own eyes matters.

All this is obviously good news for Democrats, who extended their 2025 hot streak by winning the mayoralty in Miami last Tuesday. But it’s more than that. It dispels myths about Mr. Trump’s having magical powers to distract and deceive. It shows that for all the legitimate concerns about the breakdown of our media and information systems, reality can still get through.



ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHITNEY/THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER DAZELEY AND BLACKRED/GETTY IMAGES

The decay of Mr. Trump’s standing is a rebuke to widespread claims a year ago that his victory represented a fundamental realignment in American politics, akin to those led by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s or Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Never mind that Mr. Trump’s 49.8 percent of the popular vote fell far short of Roosevelt’s 60.8 percent in 1936 and Reagan’s 58.8 percent in 1984. Never mind that Mr. Trump defeated former Vice President Kamala Harris by just 1.5 percentage points nationwide.

The case for a Trump realignment was built in large part on Republican wishcasting and Democratic despondency, married to a few facts, including substantial Trump gains among Latinos and young men. True, the Republicans secured majorities in the Senate and the House. But the G.O.P. won two fewer seats in the House in 2024 than it did two years earlier — far from the sweeping gains

The president’s own voters think he’s distracted by his personal obsessions.

typically yielded by realigning elections.

One of the most emotive factual artifacts of the election was an excellent New York Times county-by-county map that portrayed a sea of red arrows across the nation, reflecting the increase in Mr. Trump’s share of the vote from four years earlier in nearly 90 percent of the nation’s 3,144 counties. Some of his largest gains were in solidly blue states such as New York, New Jersey, California and Massachusetts.

But a nationwide trend in a single election is not the same as a realignment, and the president’s mercurial extremism squandered whatever opportunity the G.O.P. might have had to expand its map. My hunch is that Republicans will regret what they allowed him to throw away.

The Times again produced those fine county maps for the 2025 governor’s races in New Jersey and Virginia and for the recent special House election in Tennessee. But this

time, nearly all the arrows were blue, pointing toward the Democrats, and G.O.P. gains among Latinos and young men were largely wiped out. Genuine realignments don’t collapse so quickly.

Another response to 2024 was a backlash against Trump voters. Mr. Trump does better with voters who lack college degrees, and he once declared, “I love the poorly educated.” Some who were aghast at his victory blamed the outcome on the irrationality of low-information voters.

But to view some large share of the electorate as irrational is wrong and ought to be anathema to anyone who claims to hold a democratic worldview. Far more persuasive is the analysis that the political scientist Samuel L. Popkin offered in his 1991 book, “The Reasoning Voter.” He provided a wealth of data to show, as his title implies, that voters “actually do reason about parties, candidates and issues.” They draw on “information shortcuts” to “think about who and what political parties stand for” and “what government can and should do.” They engage in “low-information rationality.”

That so many swing voters used a Trump vote to express their dissatisfaction with the 2024 status quo has certainly had calamitous consequences. What should hearten friends of democracy is how many voters have weighed what Mr. Trump has done and found him acting, well, unreasonably.

Especially striking are the findings of a Public Religion Research Institute poll this fall that asked whether Mr. Trump had gone “too far” in a variety of his actions. Among respondents, 54 percent said he had gone too far on tariffs, as did 55 percent on cuts to grants to universities and 60 percent on cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act. Mr. Trump and the G.O.P. are especially vulnerable on cuts to enhanced Affordable Care Act subsidies: A KFF survey last month found that 74 percent of Americans said they should be extended, not eliminated.

Even on immigration, Mr. Trump’s signature issue, his radical approach was unpopular: In the Public Religion Research Institute poll, 65 percent of respondents opposed deporting undocumented immigrants to foreign prisons, 63 percent opposed arresting undocumented immigrants who have resided in the United States with no criminal records, and 58 percent said that Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers should not conceal their identities with masks or use unmarked vehicles.

Mr. Trump’s opponents have no cause for complacency. In the wake of the 2008 financial implosion, the pandemic and postpandemic inflation, volatility and unhappiness have been hallmarks of public opinion. Poll numbers are fickle.

But in 2025, Trumpian flimflam hit its limits — even in the G.O.P. when a majority of Republicans in the Indiana State Senate defied the president’s demand for a midterm congressional redistricting. His power to intimidate is ebbing. A reasonable majority exists. It’s searching for alternatives to a leader and a movement it has found wanting.

The Humanity Amid the Horror at Bondi Beach

Sharon Brous
The founding and senior rabbi of Ikar, a Jewish community based in Los Angeles, and the author of “The Amen Effect.”

THERE is a particular horror in violent attacks on holy days and in holy places. This is terror in its purest form, not only rendering a people fearful to express their faith, but also causing them to forever associate those sacred days with loss and sorrow.

The holiday of Simchat Torah, the Jewish celebration of the joyful embrace of Torah, will be permanently tied to images of death and destruction after the attacks of Oct. 7, 2023. And now, just over two years later, another Jewish holiday has been linked with terror: Hanukkah, the miracle of the persistence of light in dark times, as Jews gathering to celebrate on a beach in Sydney, Australia, a crowd of children, parents and elders, were gunned down without mercy.

I’m tired of looking for the silver lining after such tragedies. I no longer want to hear, after a mass shooting, of the remarkable ways a community came together. I don’t want platitudes and pieties. I want justice. I want accountability for the rhetoric and the policies and — in our own country — the obscenely easy access to weapons of war that endanger us all. I don’t want to celebrate resiliency; I want to see reform.

But as a spiritual matter, I urgently need the silver lining. I need the hints of humanity that remind us that what is is not what must be. The quiet insistence that there is more light than darkness in this world, that tenderness and love can prevail over even the most virulent hatred. Give me the counterfactual that makes it impossible to fall into despair, that will keep me from slipping into the self-defeating certainty of our impending doom.

A great 20th-century Hasidic rabbi, Shalom Noach Berezovsky, known as the Netivot Shalom, argues that “all the miracles and wonders that have occurred for the Jewish people over the generations have been drawn forth through their refusal to accept their circumstances.”

This is what he calls the kusta d’chiyuta — the small, holy spark of vitality that contains the light of hope and possibility for a better future.

After Sydney, after witnessing the raging gunmen — allegedly a father and son, united in their animus toward my people — after reading of the Holocaust survivor who died protecting his wife, and the 10-year-old girl and a rabbi, and so many more; after all of this, I need that spark of vitality. I need the reminder, small as it may be, that we must not succumb to the darkness.

And here it is, that hint of humanity, that spark of vitality: I see it in Ahmed el Ahmed, the fruit vendor who risked his life to tackle one of the gunmen, no doubt saving lives.

And there are more. I see that spark of vitality in the vibrancy of the worldwide Jewish community that immediately rallied in solidarity, reminding us that when one limb is struck, the whole body is unwell. As far



MATTHEW ABBOTT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

I see hope in the fruit vendor who risked his life to stop a gunman.

apart as we might be — geographically, politically, religiously — we are family.

I see that spark of vitality in how immediately, and without reservation, the grand mufti of Australia condemned “in the strongest and most unequivocal terms the terrorist attack” targeting Australian Jews.

I see that spark of vitality in all those good people around the world who reached out with concern to their Jewish neighbors, colleagues and friends.

Last week, videos were released of six of the hostages abducted from the Nova festival and the border kibbutzim on Oct. 7. These six were held deep beneath the earth in Gaza for nearly a year before they were executed by their Hamas captors in August 2024.

In the videos, the hostages say Hanukkah blessings and light candles. Together they sing “Ma’oz Tzur” (often translated as “Rock of Ages”), the song that accompanies Hanukkah candle lighting, a testament to Jewish survival through the ages and the strength found in our faith in God. The hostages make one another laugh as someone asks: Where are the sufganiyot, the Hanukkah doughnuts?

Then Hersh Goldberg-Polin, 23 years old, reminds the group of the famous photo of a Hanukkah, a Hanukkah menorah, on the windowsill in Kiel, Germany, taken in 1931 through open drapes, revealing in the background a swastika banner on the building across the street. It is a hint, a prayer. A symbol of eternal defiance.

On the back of that photo, it is written: “Hanukkah 5692 / ‘Death to Judah,’ so the flag says. ‘Judah will live forever,’ so the light answers.”

When I light the Hanukkah candles this year, I will think of six Jews, holding one another many feet beneath the shattered earth of Gaza, smiling and joking and singing quietly, even as they must have feared that they would not make it out alive.

And I will hold the image of the Hanukkah on the windowsill in Germany, a sign of defiance against the forces of darkness. And I will think of Ahmed el Ahmed, and thank God for planting such a courageous and decent soul in this world. And I will remember that light is born from the midst of the deepest, most impenetrable darkness. That has always been true, and it is today, too.

A Hong Kong Publisher’s Conviction Puts The Resolve of Western Leaders on Trial

Mark L. Clifford
The author of “The Troublemaker: How Jimmy Lai Became a Billionaire, Hong Kong’s Greatest Dissident, and China’s Most Feared Critic.”

JIMMY LAI, the Hong Kong newspaper publisher who spent decades fighting for the territory’s democratic freedoms, has been convicted of national security charges and may spend the rest of his life behind bars.

He may not have much time left. Mr. Lai marked his 78th birthday in prison on Dec. 8. Once a large and robust man, he has lost a significant amount of weight and suffers from diabetes and heart trouble.

Mr. Lai is the most consequential dissident in China since Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who died in a Chinese prison in 2017. Mr. Lai’s conviction on Monday is a severe blow for the future of civil liberties in Hong Kong. It’s also now a critical test of whether the United States and other Western democracies will stand up for the values they profess to hold dear.

President Trump and Prime Minister Keir Starmer of Britain have in the past called for Mr. Lai to be freed. But piecemeal pro forma appeals are not enough. Mr. Lai could face life in prison (his sentence is yet to be announced). At a time when liberal values are under assault globally, Western leaders must meet the moment by acting swiftly to apply pressure on Chinese trade and economic weak points to win Mr. Lai’s release on humanitarian grounds.

Mr. Lai’s is a remarkable rags-to-riches story: He fled Mao-era China for Hong Kong as a 12-year-old stowaway and worked for years in factories before building a clothing empire.

China’s brutal suppression of the 1989 Beijing pro-democracy demonstrations inspired him to move into publishing, which Mr. Lai saw as the best way to advocate Hong Kong’s civil liberties. Beijing had pledged to uphold those freedoms after Britain returned the territory to China in 1997, but it has systematically rolled them back. Mr. Lai’s publications, including the Apple Daily newspaper, became wildly popular for their brash, entertaining style and frequent harsh criticism of Chinese and Hong Kong authorities.

Hong Kong was seized by huge protests in 2019 against Beijing’s tightening grip on the city. That same year, Mr. Lai discussed the protests with Mike Pence, then the vice president, and other U.S. officials during a meeting in Washington. In 2020, China passed a national security law that gave authorities in the city sweeping powers to curtail dissent. Mr. Lai is the law’s highest-profile victim: He was charged with colluding with foreign forces — a charge that he denies — for discussing the Hong Kong protests with the Americans, culminating in his conviction on Monday. He was also convicted of a charge of conspiracy to produce and distribute seditious materials.

Mr. Lai has spent much of the last five years in solitary confinement, a violation of the U.N.’s Nelson Mandela Rules, which state that more than 15 days amounts to torture or inhumane treatment. Hong Kong’s government has denied that Mr. Lai, who has both Hong Kong and British citizenship, is being mistreated and says he has requested to be kept apart from other prisoners.

Even before this week’s verdict, international support for Mr. Lai was growing. In October, Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada called for his release, Pope Leo XIV met the wife and daughter of Mr. Lai — who is Catholic — in a rare show of Vatican sup-



ANTHONY WALLACE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

The verdict in Jimmy Lai’s foreign collusion case is a test for us all.

port for a Chinese dissident, and President Trump is reported to have pressed China’s president, Xi Jinping, on the matter when the two leaders met in late October.

Mr. Trump said on the presidential campaign trail last year that it would be “easy” to free Mr. Lai. Mr. Trump should deliver on that boast by leveraging the global groundswell in Mr. Lai’s favor and the recent reduction of American tensions with China after Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi agreed to pause their trade war.

Mr. Xi is the most hard-line Chinese leader in decades, but there is reason to think that an intensified pressure campaign could work.

Allowing Mr. Lai to go abroad would be relatively cost-free for China. Although Mr. Lai’s past suggests that he would continue to speak out about the destruction of Hong Kong’s civil liberties, his advancing age and the loss of his media empire — which has been liquidated under government pressure — would limit how much influence he could exert in the city from overseas.

Mr. Trump and other Western leaders can even make the case that freeing Mr. Lai

would yield tangible benefits for Beijing.

China is keen to restore Hong Kong’s image as a leading financial center governed by the rule of law, a reputation tarnished by the national security legislation and the wider assault on basic freedoms.

China could also avoid the public relations disaster it suffered through its treatment of Mr. Liu. Jailed in 2009 after calling for political reform in China, Mr. Liu died of liver cancer in a prison hospital eight years later, after Beijing refused to allow him to travel overseas for medical treatment. That made him the first Nobel laureate to die in captivity since Carl von Ossietzky in 1938 under the Nazis, prompting harsh international criticism of China and undermining its push to be seen as a responsible global player.

Mr. Starmer is planning a state visit to China, possibly as early as next month, and Mr. Trump has said he’ll visit in April. China has every reason to want those meetings with important trade partners to go smoothly, as its economy faces significant challenges. Western leaders should use that leverage to warn Beijing that Mr. Lai’s continued imprisonment would harm relations and that it cannot continue flouting global norms without repercussions.

Acting to secure the freedom of a man who has bravely defended democracy and free speech would demonstrate to China — and the world — that those values are still worth fighting for.

LETTERS

After Mass Shootings, Grief and Resilience

TO THE EDITOR:
The mass shootings this past weekend at a Hanukkah celebration in Sydney, Australia, and at Brown University in Providence, R.I., are horrific reminders that the confluence of gun violence, racial hatred and deranged, evil perpetrators knows no borders and can manifest itself anytime, anywhere, to deadly effect.

There are seemingly no answers to the scourge, least of all in the United States, where common-sense gun control legislation — including a renewal of the federal assault weapons ban, which expired in 2004 — is much talked about, but never implemented.

At the news conferences that follow these tragedies, officials give updates on death tallies and the status of the criminal investigation. They also express their deepest condolences to the victims and their families. What they are never able to say with any real conviction, however, is that the latest senseless mass shooting to befall their community will be the last.

MARK GODES, CHELSEA, MASS.

TO THE EDITOR:
Antisemitism has been in my life since I was growing up in the 1960s. Back then, it consisted of vandals painting a swastika on my religious

school, antisemites littering my synagogue’s parking lot with blood-libel screeds before Passover and local hoods screaming “Jew boy” at me. I learned not to be afraid. Instead, I basked in a proud heritage, thousands of years old, that also gave birth to two other world religions.

The horrific murders in Sydney, Australia — like the attacks at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh in 2018, and synagogues in Poway, Calif., in 2019 and in Manchester, England, this year — are examples of the violent turn that antisemitism has taken in the 21st century.

Even after these acts of raw hatred, though, I’m not frightened away from attending services or visiting Jewish institutions. That is a lesson to be learned from the story of the Maccabees and of Hanukkah. Be proud of your Judaism, and don’t be afraid.

PAUL L. NEWMAN
MERION STATION, PA.

TO THE EDITOR:
We planned to take our 18-month-old granddaughter to her first Hanukkah lighting, the big menorah in Midtown Manhattan. Because of the massacre in Sydney, Australia, we did not go. Instead we lit the candles at home. The joy of the celebration remained, but something communal was lost.

In the age of hatred we must guard against shrunken lives.

GEORGE KLAS, NEW YORK

What Is Old?

TO THE EDITOR:
Re “At What Age Are You Old? It Depends,” by Ken Stern (Opinion guest essay, Nov. 30): Having once thought 30 was old, at 71, I now define people as old only if they are more than 15 years older than I am.

People age so differently. Some in their late 70s still outperform me at the gym; others struggle with everyday tasks. Age is far more about energy, health and engagement than a calendar number.

Treating 65 as a universal cutoff undervalues experience and encourages unnecessary ageism. Let’s start judging people by what they can do, not by the year they were born.

ENDA CULLEN
ARMAGH, NORTHERN IRELAND

TO THE EDITOR:
Ken Stern’s guest essay caught my attention. He is 62.

I am 77, and every day I go to a job site where I am remodeling a house for my son. All my subcontractors are a fraction of my age. They all respect me, and I respect them.

My husband is 76 and still works more than full time as a physician-scientist.

What is old?

KRISTINA CANNON-BONVENTRE
BOSTON

TO THE EDITOR:
I can’t stop thinking about all the high school seniors across the country who this fall carefully chose to apply to Brown University. The visit, the talks with their parents, the talks with their favorite teacher. The dreams.

Yes, they can still apply to Brown and maybe attend. But nothing will ever feel the same.

NINA BUTTS, DENVER

East Wing Teardown

TO THE EDITOR:
Re “Preoccupied With ‘Renovating?’” (Sunday Styles, Dec. 14):

Yes, Americans love a makeover. You might say it’s in our genes and the foundation of our origin story. But the East Wing’s teardown is not just another D.I.Y. For one thing, it’s not the president’s house to remodel. It’s ours. Our heritage. Its beauty is in its simplicity.

We’re not talking about a celebrity’s facelift here. What we’re seeing is the physical embodiment of lawless destruction — of a house and of a democracy.

SUSAN BODIKER, WASHINGTON

Britain’s Woes Are the Future Of America

Binyamin Appelbaum
A domestic correspondent in Opinion who covers economics and business.

ASK Americans to close their eyes and imagine the future, and they probably won’t picture Britain. That’s the land of yesterday: castles, warm beer, an actual king. But a new paper argues that events on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean — specifically Britain’s post-Brexit struggles — offer a preview of what tomorrow may hold for the United States.

The 2016 decision to exit the European Union has been nothing short of an economic disaster. The paper, published last month by the National Bureau of Economic Research, estimates that Britain’s annual economic output is about 6 percent to 8 percent smaller than it would be if British voters had chosen to remain in the European Union. That’s a bigger loss of output than Britain experienced at the nadir of the recession that followed the 2008 financial crisis. It’s a bigger hit than if every bank, brokerage and hedge fund in London were suddenly to disappear.

The authors, a group of five American and European economists, describe their findings as a warning to the United States. There aren’t a lot of examples of developed nations pulling back from global markets. The British experience thus offers one of the few points of comparison for President Trump’s restrictionist trade policies. “In the case of Brexit,” the paper dryly concludes, “there was a substantial economic impact on the United Kingdom.”

The back story is by now familiar. During the second half of the 20th century, the



MARK POWER/MAGNUM PHOTOS

United States led a global effort to reduce barriers to trade. By any reasonable reckoning, the benefits outweighed the costs. But political elites made little effort to minimize those costs, and we are living through the backlash.

The paper describes Britain’s departure from the European Union as an instance of “reverse” trade reform.” Mr. Trump, during his first presidential campaign, called it a preview. In August 2016, two months after Britain’s surprise vote to leave the European Union, Mr. Trump posted on Twitter, “They will soon be calling me MR. BREXIT!”

The president and the Brexiters shared a fear of strangers. Mr. Trump has built his political career on the argument that the rest of the world is taking advantage of the United States. Trade, in his view, is other countries draining our wallets. Immigration is other people stealing our jobs. International treaties are handcuffs limiting America’s sovereignty.

Even now, as the downsides of Brexit have become impossible to ignore, Mr. Trump has remained a fan. Asked this summer whether Britain had made the most of its departure from the European Union, Mr. Trump said the execution had been “on the sloppy side, but I think it’s getting straightened out.”

To assess the consequences of Brexit, the new study draws on a regular survey of businesses, including thousands of companies that employ about 10 percent of private-sector British workers.

The most interesting finding — and the most significant for the United States — is that uncertainty caused more damage than changes in the rules of trade. Businesses can adjust to a new set of barriers; what has really bedeviled companies in the decade since Brexit is confusion about what they are supposed to be adjusting to.

Mr. Trump’s erratic trade policy has sown confusion, too. By one measure, the first big round of tariff announcements in April sent

The downsides of Brexit are impossible to ignore. But Trump is still a fan.

uncertainty about economic policy in the United States to the highest monthly average in at least four decades, exceeding even the peak reached during the Covid-19 pandemic. Eight months later, that index of economic uncertainty remains at a higher level than at any time between 1986 and 2019 — a period that includes the dot-com crash, the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks and the global financial crisis.

Smaller businesses have been hit hardest. They find it more difficult to adjust. They lack the political power to secure special exemptions. Even the paperwork of new rules weighs more heavily. Shannon Bryant, the president of Trade-IQ, a Wisconsin firm that helps companies navigate trade rules, recently told Bloomberg that small companies were facing “death by a thousand paper cuts.” One example: a new requirement that importers document the origins of metal content in their products.

A second takeaway from the Brexit paper is that damage accumulates gradually. Predictions that Mr. Trump’s tariffs would strike the American economy like a hurricane have not come to pass, but that was never the danger. Brexit has caused damage slowly and quietly, as companies have invested a little less, hired a little less, innovated a little less. It’s the cumulative effects that have been profound.

There are differences between the economic situation of Britain in 2016 and the United States today. Britain’s economy was sagging even before Brexit; the American economy is riding an A.I. boom. The British economy is also more than twice as dependent on trade as the American economy, and thus more vulnerable.

And there is one more difference, which could yet be the most important.

Brexit was a one-way street. Britain can’t simply vote to rejoin the European Union; a campaign to assert British sovereignty has ironically left the nation even more dependent on the good will of its European neighbors. By contrast, American voters retain the power to check Mr. Trump’s political project by installing a Democratic congressional majority next year, and to reverse it by electing a different president in 2028.