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INDIA AI IMPACT SUMMIT 2026

India's challenge: From AI summit to substance

The global AI huddle in New Delhi offers us a splendid chance to forge linkages in pursuit of an inclusive agenda. Yet, overall, we need substantive talks to outperform its spectacle

Governments love global summits. They signal ambition, draw CEOs and leaders, and create the impression of shaping the future rather than chasing it. India's ongoing Artificial Intelligence (AI) Impact Summit fits that template. New Delhi has sought to position it as a platform to cement AI leadership across the Global South—developing economies that seek both access to AI and strategic autonomy. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared in an X post: "Bringing the world together to discuss AI!" Leaders and tech executives are expected to advance AI software and infrastructure partnerships, formalize new collaborations and deepen existing ties. The agenda includes how AI can accelerate development, from agriculture and healthcare to education and governance, while also confronting the carbon cost of the data centres that power these systems. That said, AI is geopolitically sensitive and commercially guarded, with countries posturing as much as they collaborate. Done well, such gatherings can shape agendas and influence policy. The UK's 2023 AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park produced the Bletchley Declaration and made a clear case for the oversight of frontier models. The G-7 Hiroshima AI Process sought voluntary guardrails for advanced AI developers. The EU translated years of debate into its AI Act.

India hopes to embark on a different pathway with inclusive policies anchored in open-source models and digital public infrastructure (DPI). The country sees itself as an emerging AI power, even if it trails the US and China. Stanford's Global Vibrancy Tool ranked India third in 2025. The government estimates that AI adoption could add $1.7 trillion to the economy by 2035 by lifting productivity and efficiency across industries, strengthening its ambition to become a global innovation hub. Moving up the value chain is a key aim. It has approved 10 semiconductor plants, is pursuing advanced chip-design partnerships and has an AI chip subsidy for startups building Indian-language and voice models—critical in a nation where millions remain non-literate. The AI Kosh repository hosts nearly 10,000 local datasets and 273 models, offering a data backbone linked to our DPI. We could expect our large technical workforce, expanding R&D base and growing digital capabilities to all chip in.

Yet, we must keep our optimism tempered. As the UNDP cautions, while AI could lift global GDP growth by around two percentage points and raise productivity by up to 5% in major sectors, these gains are unlikely to be evenly shared. India, the UN believes, is well placed to push inclusive AI adoption. We have initiatives such as the Digital ShramSetu Mission, which deploys AI tools to boost the productivity and resilience of informal workers while widening access to healthcare, education and finance. Indian policy has also been tightening. Alongside the AI Governance Guidelines and Digital Personal Data Protection Act, the amended IT Rules of 2026 impose some of the world's strictest compliance timelines. Still, summits can easily slip into spectacle with headline speeches, choreographed fireside chats and promises of 'inclusive innovation' without budgets, timelines or enforcement. Smaller firms, civil society, independent researchers and AI critics must also be heard at such summits. Else, even the grandest AI show risks becoming just another memorable example of pageantry.

Europe's regulations must ease for India to score on trade with it

New Delhi should press beyond the trade pact to resolve challenges such as its unfair carbon tax

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It was a momentous day: 27 January saw the signing of the EU-India Security and Defence Partnership, conclusion of trade negotiations for the India-EU free trade agreement (FTA), adoption of an MoU on an EU-India Comprehensive Framework on Mobility, launch of negotiations on a Security of Information Agreement and endorsement of a EU-India Education and Skills Dialogue. Close on the heels of India's Republic Day celebrations, where EU representatives were state guests, this was a moment of high symbolism in the shifting tides of global geopolitics. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed it as a "tide-turning moment" and start of a new era for India-EU relations. The FTA has been hailed as the "mother of all deals" by both sides.

The EU and India are moving towards cooperation through trade, defence and security partnerships at a time when international rules are being undermined and rewritten. Underlying this is the recognition that trade and economic security are intrinsically linked with peace, security and defence. The uplifting spirit of this moment must be carried forward to ensure that it works well for both India and Europe. This requires addressing the real impediments and challenges on both sides in a sustained and committed manner.

For India, steps towards customs reform, investment facilitation, deregulation and labour reform are all significant in making the country an attractive destination for trade and investment. The FTA's success will also be measured by whether Indian businesses have sustained market access to the EU. Effective tariffs in the EU are only in a range of 4-5%. The real challenge is the high cost of compliance with its regulatory labyrinth.

Take services. Despite India's competitive strengths, our exports to the EU are in a modest range of €37 billion, led by IT and consulting services but with a low EU market share. A regulatory impediment for IT services is that India does not yet have "data secure" status under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). With India's Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act coming into force, it is time to revisit this aspect. The DPDP Act applies to all digital personal data processed in India and provides a robust framework for privacy protection. Recognition of India as "data secure" could play a big role in boosting our IT and ITeS exports.

Indian exporters of goods will have to contend with several EU regulations. The 2024 report on the future of European competitiveness by Mario Draghi, former president of the European Central Bank, identified over-regulation, high compliance costs and complex and fragmented regulation as problems for EU industry, especially small businesses. Many of those dampeners could get in the way of our exports.

The Draghi report highlighted the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and its rules for the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals as amounting to regulatory over-reach. Each of these applies to EU imports as well. Additionally, India's farm exports often struggle with EU's Maximum Residue Limits that often exceed global norms. The EU's recent Deforestation Regulation will add further burdens.

Indian industry, particularly small enterprises, will need to be equipped to handle the EU's complex traceability, reporting, monitoring and verification requirements.

The FTA reportedly provides a unique 'Rapid Reaction Mechanism' to address concerns that may hamper bilateral trade. This will need a responsive domestic system for exporters to raise concerns with the government.

The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will have an immediate impact on India's aluminium and steel exports and is expected to extend progressively to other sectors. This levy will likely burden Indian exports of affected products. It works on the principle of price equalization of carbon emissions; so imports from India will have to pay the EU the difference in the price of embedded emissions. It does not value the actual quantum of embedded carbon and focuses entirely on the carbon price—any difference has to be paid for market entry, even if embedded emissions are exactly the same as a domestic product's. It is estimated that even after India's carbon market becomes functional under the recently announced Carbon Credit Trading System, the price difference will be in the range of over €60 per tonne of carbon. This will significantly dilute the benefits of any tariff reductions under the FTA. A government release on the FTA suggests that India's CBAM focus is only on support for carbon verification and calculation of its price, but not on the principle of our exports paying the carbon-price difference. Note that India has complied with its commitments under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and Paris Agreement. A basic question of fairness thus remains unanswered.

The success of the India-EU deal will be determined by its implementation, which needs to be just and equitable. The "mother of all deals" awaits its true test: How it helps us achieve our goals.

These are the author's personal views.

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Govt warns Vodafone of asset seizures

Bony Bansal's to-do list

Flipkart, to Flipkart, so Flipkart

"You must be dreaming if you think AI will generate employment.

VINEET NAYAR

AI rivalry has strengthened as software services get hit

SIDDHARTH PAI

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The emergent 'QuitGPT' movement is an interesting blip in the evolution of the AI sector, where user allegiance is increasingly shaped not merely by technical superiority, but by perceived ethical alignment and institutional transparency. Launched recently through initiatives such as QuitGPT.org, it calls for a mass departure from OpenAI's ecosystem. Its impetus stems from public disclosures of executive political affiliations and campaign funding, alongside broader unease over what critics see as a shift towards more closed research practices.

OpenAI is formidable by any objective metric. As of early 2026, it reported an estimated 810 million monthly active users. At this scale, even marginal defections matter. Some 700,000 subscribers have reportedly signed up to 'quit' its ChatGPT and other tools. The deeper significance of this movement, however, lies not in its numbers, but in the structural conditions that make exits feasible. A capability convergence among large language models (LLMs) allows users to quit. For much of 2023 and 2024, OpenAI's GPT-4 maintained a defensible lead in reasoning quality and multimodal performance, which kept switching costs high for enterprises and individual users. But that moat narrowed considerably. Rival models are reaching parity in core zones of competence, letting users switch. Market data reflects this. ChatGPT's share of the Generative AI chatbot market declined from over 86% in 2024 to about 64.5% by early 2026 (bit.ly/4coOLwQ). While this contraction does not portend collapse , given OpenAI's brand equity and reach, it signals the rise of a multi-polar AI economy.

Competitors have been swift to capitalize on market fluidity. Google's Gemini is the most dramatic beneficiary. Its market share expanded from 5.7% to 21.5% within a year and it claimed 750 million monthly active users by February (bit.ly/4kx9Ua5). This surge is closely tied to the rollout of Gemini 3 and its integration across Android and Workspace, which has embedded it into daily workflows; Google Search has begun using Gemini too. By leveraging its existing user base, Google has converted ecosystem depth into rapid scale.

Other entrants have pursued differentiation rather than ubiquity. DeepSeek, for example, has disrupted pricing by offering reasoning-intensive models such as R1 at a fraction of prevailing costs, amassing over 96 million monthly active users by mid-2025 (bit.ly/4qupGDy). Perplexity AI has consolidated a niche as a research-oriented engine, sustaining 45 million monthly active users. Together, the trends indicate that OpenAI's lost share is not merely about ideological migration, but also the appeal of specialized value propositions made by rivals—cost efficiency, research precision or ecosystem integration.

Also, OpenAI is not the only one being 'quit' too. Platform churn is now common across the sector. Even Gemini's ascent is tempered by a distinct form of attrition, as some users revert to traditional search tools or explore local-first AI models amid concerns over latency and the expanding footprint of AI-generated 'overviews.' So quitting has evolved into a recurring strategic recalibration rather than a singular act of protest. Platform hopping does little to mitigate

The market for AI tools is better contested now but competitive intensity also threatens other business models

the structural threat these systems pose to Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) providers and the IT service firms that implement SaaS. As models evolve into active work participants, they begin to subsume functionalities that previously justified discrete software layers. The recent market reaction to Anthropic's Claude CoWrk puts this in sharp relief. Atlassian, producer of widely used team productivity and development tools such as Jira, has experienced a roughly 20% decline in market value since that launch. Snowflake, a data cloud platform, saw a decline of roughly 13%, reflecting investor concerns that AI systems reduce the frequency of direct data queries. Rather than use multiple discrete interactions with a data cloud, CoWrk promises to retrieve information, analyze it and deliver finished outputs—tables, charts or structured summaries—in a single context-aware sequence. By retaining memory across tasks and re-using prior results, such systems diminish the transactional intensity upon which many current revenue models depend. The stocks of various IT service providers, including major Indian firms, have seen a big sell-off in what has been dubbed the 'Claude Crash.' Such a sudden market response usually represents a credible power shift.

What appears to have unsettled investors most was not Claude's raw capability, but its architectural trajectory. Anthropic signalled an evolution from tools that merely assist discrete human tasks to systems capable of retention and acting with a degree of autonomy over time. The rise of AI that does not simply answer, but remembers and executes tasks poses a more profound challenge than incremental improvements in reasoning accuracy. It threatens to compress entire layers of software and services into a unified intelligent substrate.

Within this transformation, the QuitGPT movement is best seen not as an isolated boycott, but as a manifestation of a better contested AI market. Users are discovering that loyalty is negotiable, switching costs are falling and alternatives are viable. Investors are recognizing that as AI systems gain persistence and agency, the value chains built atop traditional software may erode. Both consumers and capital are recalibrating their assumptions in real-time this year.

Decline of the American Empire? What current signs of it suggest

America's biggest threat arises not from external but internal forces that may wreck its big advantage. Can it auto-correct?

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Even as US President Donald Trump imposes his will at home and abroad, there is talk about various stages of imperial decline and how the American Empire is now at one of its last few—fifth out of seven by one estimate.

Empires as commonly understood were based on force and political control. These, however, ended with the rise of civil society, nationalism and anti-imperialism. 'Empire' is now proxy for American global hegemony, referring to its power to enforce its will through a consensual global order of its own making. With that caveat, let us examine the proposition through the lens and arc of history.

Empires in the past ultimately yielded to superior powers beyond their borders. Rome fell to 'barbarians' from western Europe, Islamic empires to Mongols, the Chinese and Indian empires to newly industrialized Europe and an overstretched British Empire to the US.

Paul Kennedy argued several years ago that modern empires (since 1500) declined not through military collapse, but through 'imperial overreach' that stretched resources beyond fiscal breaking point. Attention is drawn to America's tendency to repeatedly get entangled in wars overseas and to the dramatic deterioration in US public finances.

The rapid rise of China with its unstoppable trade competitiveness is seen as a symptom of US decline. A possible alliance of middle powers in response to the Trump onslaught, as proposed by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the World Economic Forum in Davos, could also conceivably contain US imperialist tendencies.

But how much is history a guide for the decline of the American Empire?

Before the Industrial Revolution, there were few technological gaps between empires. Despite the rise of China, a big technological gap now exists between China and Europe on one hand and the US on the other. It is difficult to see the US defeated militarily anytime soon. A global alliance of middle powers would not change this reality.

The argument then turns to the decline of the US dollar through debasement. In the past, the intrinsic value of a currency was measured in relation to its extrinsic anchor, namely bullion. Currency debasement altered the metal content, resulting in a growing difference between its intrinsic and extrinsic value. Currencies debased by precious-metal dilution eventually collapsed.

Currencies, however, no longer have a bullion anchor. They have been pegged on a fixed basis to the US dollar (or allowed to float against it), which gave up its gold convertibility in the early 1970s and has been a fiat currency ever since. The dollar's status as a global reserve currency and its use for trade explain why the US printing excessive dollars, as seen during the global financial crisis of

2008-09, has had little effect on its strength. The global appetite for dollars (or dollar assets like US Treasury bonds) seems endless, like gold in the past; this has prevented the ill effects of imperial overstretch. Today, though, we are in uncharted territory. History offers little guidance.

Is the steep rise in the price of gold over the last two decades a canary in the goldmine auguring the demise of the dollar as the top reserve currency? Since all currencies are linked to the dollar, this may augur the death knell of fiat currency *per se*. Currencies have had anchors all through history; fiat money has been around for only half a century. If printing money to finance huge deficits is akin to debasement, it is not just the dollar that's at risk.

The strategic depth of the American Empire is based on its technological superiority, as reflected in theatres of war. This, in turn, is anchored in the dynamism of its unparalleled university system. Despite its aged infrastructure and countries like Japan and China moving ahead in applied sciences, the US university system straddles cutting edge fundamental research that drives future tech applications like a colossus. About 70-80% of STEM Nobel laureates were at some point associated with this system. For any assessment of the US Empire, we need to look at the health of its university system.

President Trump's unprecedented attack on the American university system and use of federal authority to constrain intellectual freedom and deprive it of the best young minds from abroad is a monumental self-goal. It is akin to what might have happened had the Romans taxed or banned road building, Mongols mounted archery, Spanish

ship-building or Britain the steam engine.

This attack represents more than the whim of an idiosyncratic president. It reflects the resentful mindset of a bigger social underclass of which the 'MAGA' phenomenon is symptomatic. This underclass is a byproduct of neo-liberal capitalism, untempered by the kind of redistributive social policies characteristic of European capitalism. US capitalism has dealt a body blow to the 'American Dream' and created a sizeable underclass with shrinking access to new technologies and the university system needed to get ahead in life. This soured dream has generated resentment against America's privileged elite, with spillovers not just for its university system and aspects of liberal democracy that are seen to be associated with privilege, but also for US foreign relations. It threatens to transform the American Empire from a relatively benign one enforced through a consensual global order into a malign one increasingly relying on hard power both at home and abroad.

The biggest threat to the American Empire arises not from 'barbarians' beyond its borders, but from political forces within. The jury is still out on whether the famed US system of institutional checks and balances would auto-correct to restrain executive excess—as seen in civil society's push-back against ICE in Minneapolis and the rise of leaders like Zohran Mamdani in New York promising a Roosevelt type 'New Deal'—or result in a broad collapse that makes it hard for this empire to recover over the decades. A malign empire is inherently unstable in an age where both civil society and nationalism remain strong.

Blame the upper middle class for America's 'unfair' economy

Adjusting to a sharp increase in upper-end affluence can be hard

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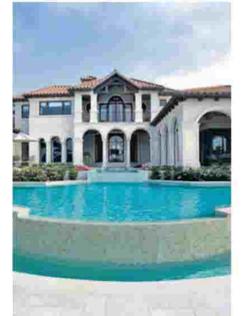
America's enlarged wealthy class has put things out of reach for many. ISTOCKPHOTO

Billionaires are now Public Enemy No. 1 in America. Most voters across party lines think the gap between the rich and poor is a big problem and that the rich have too much power. To be fair, this economy does seem to be making a lot of people anxious and unhappy, but it's not Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg's fault. If anyone is to blame, it is the upper middle class. In other words, if you are reading this — or, come to think of it, writing it—you. Us. We are the problem.

An unsung story of the last few decades is the rise of the upper middle class. In the 1960s and 70s, the US had a robust middle class, and the national income distribution looked like a bell curve. The middle class has since been hollowed out, not because people got poorer, but because many families joined the ranks of the affluent.

The shape of the distribution of income changed as more households out-earned the median income: The curve flattened because there were more higher earners. That translates into earnings between $150,000 and $300,000, or even $400,000 if you live in an expensive city. There is also a small cohort of Americans who became very very rich. The top 1%—and especially the 0.01%—moved even further apart from everyone else.

This is all mostly a positive development. Some Americans got super rich, many more became more prosperous and fewer overall are poor. But it feels like a crisis because the economy has not fully adjusted to this new income distribution. Too many affluent people are chasing a limited number of high-end goods and services that feel like necessities: city apartments, an elite-university education, luxury vacations, innovative health care, concert and sports tickets, and so on.

Consider housing. A popular narrative is that a lack of supply is why home prices have increased 70% since the 1980s. While supply is certainly an issue, there is also research showing that there are more affluent buyers whose wealth has grown faster than the number of available homes. There is also a study saying that much of the increase in housing costs in cities between 2000 and 2020 can be explained by an increase in income. Income growth explains why homes are bigger and have more amenities too.

Granted, none of this makes anything more affordable. If you are not a member of the new mass affluent class, then you are getting outbid on a house that you may want, or you may have to settle for a smaller home with fewer features, or maybe there

just isn't anything for you on the market at all. Even if you are mass affluent (or on your way), you might have trouble finding a house you can afford.

The same dynamic helps explain why so much else feels so expensive. It's easy to blame algorithms and the secondary market for expensive concert tickets, but a market exists for $1,000 Taylor Swift tickets because many families are willing and able to pay that much for an event with a limited number of seats.

Higher incomes also mean more demand and thus higher prices for less discretionary goods and services such as private schools (or homes in areas with good public schools) or even health care.

Some people are genuinely struggling with affordability because they aren't mass affluent, and more of the economy is now geared toward goods and services out of their price range. Less deserving of sympathy (though still somewhat sympathetic) are the affluent frustrated when their expectations don't match reality. A family with an income of $300,000 may feel like it should be able to afford a great home in an expensive area, send their kids to private school and take nice vacations. But in many areas of the US, it isn't.

The mismatch between affluent demand and supply will probably work itself out. Either the market will find a way to offer more high-end goods and services for cheaper, perhaps through technology, and the trappings of elitism will become less elite—or it won't. In that case, some people will adjust their expectations by moving to a cheaper area, taking cheaper vacations or cooking more at home.

Economies evolve. When they change quickly, the allocation of resources can be thrown out of equilibrium. Sometimes the government steps in and sometimes the market adjusts. That becomes less likely when the frustrated mass affluent turn to populism, which promises to fix the problem with price controls, punitive taxes on the very rich or industrial policy. This will reduce innovation and create shortages, making the problem worse.

And billionaire hatred certainly doesn't help, especially if they are the ones who are making things cheaper. At the very least, you're not competing with them for concert tickets.

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Earn the trust of farmers for AI diffusion across farms

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Last week, Amul launched Sarlaben, an AI-powered digital assistant for dairy farmers in Gujarat. It will benefit over 3.6 million milk producers, most of them women, across more than 18,500 villages. Sarlaben answers queries on dairy farming, animal husbandry and milk procurement in real time, and is accessible through the Amul Farmer mobile app and via voice calls in Gujarati by those using basic feature phones.

The challenges were remarkable. The system must be able to understand farmers speaking Gujarati and local dialects, work amid intermittent connectivity in rural areas and give advice they can stake their livelihoods on. It draws from over 50 years of verified cooperative data, including 2 billion milk procurement transactions annually, veterinary treatment records of 30 million cattle and farmer-wise cattle census data.

Maharashtra's Vistaar agricultural advisory system took nine months from commitment to deployment in 2025. The state wanted AI-powered advice for farmers in

Marathi and local dialects, accessible via basic phones and available even when connectivity drops during the monsoon season. Ethiopia's OpenAgriNet took three months to deploy earlier this year, addressing the same core challenge of agricultural advice at scale, but with a pathway already mapped by Maha Vistaar.

Amul's Sarlaben took just three weeks. This time compression happened because deployment know-how became transferable. The technical architecture, governance frameworks, evaluation protocols and deployment playbooks that took nine months to build for a pioneer like Maharashtra could be re-used and adapted rather than rebuilt from scratch.

Most AI pilots succeed in controlled environments with clean data, engaged users and vendor support. Then organizations try to scale them and encounter systematic failures that pilots did not reveal. A farming advisory could work perfectly with 500 farmers during a pilot test. But when it expands to cover 50,000, farmers find it hard to connect during the rainy season when they need advice the most. The system struggles with dialects and recommendations often contradict local agricultural universities. So farmers quit using it.

These failures are visible in India because the scale required leaves no room for workarounds. A service in 22 official languages that must account for seasonality and intermittent electricity means every infrastructure gap becomes apparent. A Marathi-speaking farmer using a chatbot on a basic feature phone represents the actual AI frontier, far from the controlled demo environment where all of it works.

India's approach focuses on ensuring people can adopt AI systems in real conditions. An adoption pathway is a reusable route that combines technical architecture, data and safety governance with evaluation benchmarks and deployment playbooks, maintained in a way that lets others adopt it without starting from scratch. This pattern enabled Amul's three-week deployment.

The work began much earlier, though. AI4Bharat at IIT Madras spent years collecting speech data across 400 districts to build datasets that reflect India's actual linguistic reality. That foundation enabled the govern-

ment's Bhashini language platform, which serves countless people, and EkStep Foundation's AXL that personalizes learning for millions of students in government schools.

These systems have moved beyond pilot projects to reliable production infrastructure, serving populations larger than many countries. Vistaar provides agricultural advice in Marathi and local dialects because it can draw on Bhashini and AI4Bharat's multilingual models. Without these shared building blocks, every agricultural system would need to rebuild language capabilities from the ground up. With them, deployment becomes repeatable, costs drop and timelines compress.

The real friction in the adoption of these tools may have more to do with risk exposure than technical capability. Institutions hesitate because adoption could fail publicly, disrupt workflows, result in compliance burdens or create accountability gaps should recommendations go wrong. Every pathway includes specific mechanisms to address

> **AI can expand its Indian reach if systems are set up that work at scale well enough to win cultivators over**

adopter risk. Evaluation and testing protocols ensure systems behave as expected before they are deployed. Human oversight makes space for escalation channels in special cases. Monitoring tracks performance in real conditions. Institutional backing creates accountability structures. These reduce reputational, political and compliance risks for adopters. Weak diffusion capacity creates a strategic risk: when only a few actors have the capability to deploy AI at scale, resilience and public trust are hard to acquire. India's digital infrastructure avoided this trap.

Creating these pathways takes time and investment. The innovation is largely done; models work. What matters now is diffusion infrastructure to enable adoption across sectors: agriculture, education, healthcare and governance. The creation of this infrastructure requires governance mechanisms that can help generate institutional trust and interoperability, apart from the data pipelines, safeguards and accountability mechanisms that let AI work under real constraints.

AI diffusion demands that an invisible framework be trusted across India. The difference between controlled pilots and population-scale infrastructure will determine whether AI works for a billion people who face real constraints and challenges.

Editorial

Cities of debt

ULBs need more administrative capacity before they can tap the market

The government's updated 'Urban Challenge Fund' has rendered the attention of urban local bodies (ULB) an even more precious resource as they struggle to complete unfinished work under other schemes, including AMRUT, Swachh Bharat Mission Urban 2.0, 'Smart Cities', and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, which also suffer from chronic underutilisation. The government has pitched the fund as a move towards "market-linked, reform-driven and outcome-oriented" urban infrastructure, with the Centre covering 25% of project cost if cities raise at least 50% through bonds, loans, and PPPs. This is an attempt to incorporate fiscal discipline in a system that has never properly devolved fiscal powers to ULBs. Many Indian cities cannot credibly borrow without first fixing the political economy of local taxes and transfers, which are shaped by State-level issues and under-investment in municipal capacity. Requiring cities to "earn" their growth risks sidelining weaker ones and shifting the focus from services such as formalising settlements to developing monetisable assets. The ₹5,000 crore guarantee may ease borrowing for smaller cities, but proper accounting and administrative capacity are essential. When a Parliamentary Standing Committee asked about the Fund's eligibility criteria and application process, the Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry said that it was still "under examination", a possible recipe for politically coloured spending.

Across sectors, the Centre has, since 2014, increasingly reduced the share of public support while asking public systems to fill the gap using private finance. The CSIR was among the first casualties and urban development could be the latest. In higher education, the move towards infrastructure loans turned public universities into debt-laden entities that were expected to recover costs by increasing fees, affecting poor students. Studies of the National Health Mission's financial management have documented long delays to move funds through treasuries to implementing agencies, so in practice, hospitals have been asked to maintain services first and receive money later. Audits under the Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana have exposed significant non-adherence and implementation gaps in the power sector. Private capital is not illegitimate and public systems should sometimes raise revenues; the issue is that the Centre increasingly conditions public support on market access instead of ensuring minimum service guarantees first. Thus, while the Fund's instruments are legitimate, it will increase the risk of becoming insubordinate to "bankability" if land records are a mishmash, ULBs routinely violate 'master plans', and renters and low-income households do not receive additional protections.

Transatlantic strains

Europe should engage with the wider world to reduce dependence on the U.S.

The international rules-based order "no longer exists", Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz said at the annual Munich Security Conference. French President Emmanuel Macron called for greater European "military autonomy", arguing that the continent must become a stronger pillar within NATO. While these remarks reflected Europe's growing anxiety over the U.S.'s receding security commitments, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio promised a path of cooperation. He advocated a stronger alliance rooted in shared history and Christian cultural linkages rather than shared strategic interests. The speeches by European and American officials underscored both the strains in transatlantic ties and Europe's mounting challenges. Last year, at the same venue, U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance had slammed Europe's democratic model and its refugee policies. Mr. Rubio, though conciliatory, also echoed the American far-right's central talking point of "civilizational erasure". The Trump administration wants Europe, at a moment of crisis, to join its culture wars and its push to reassert western dominance.

Today's Europe faces a trifecta of challenges. First, the largest land conflict since the end of the Second World War has been raging on its eastern flank for four years. Europe's principal response has been to arm Ukraine and hurt Russia through sanctions, but this has not produced decisive results on the battlefield. Second, Europe has relied on the U.S. for its security since the Second World War, a dependence that deepened after the Cold War. This lopsided partnership is no longer sustainable as the U.S., where a new far-right movement seeks to recast transatlantic ties, appears increasingly less committed to European security. Mr. Trump's remarks about taking control of Greenland risk undermining the alliance's collective defence principle. Third, resurgent far-right movements across Europe are challenging the idea of an inclusive European Union. As the global order shifts – as Mr. Rubio said ahead of Munich – Europe risks being squeezed by these crosscurrents. Instead, Europe has to reduce its reliance on the U.S. and build greater strategic autonomy. And if it is worried about the breakdown in the international order, it should help rebuild that by working with countries beyond the West. In the near term, Europe must also work towards ending the war in Ukraine and establishing a workable new normal with Russia. Finally, European leaders must address public resentment towards the political establishment, which continues to fuel the rise of the far-right. Continental peace and stability and cooperation and engagement with the wider world should guide Europe while it reimagines its role in the emerging world order.

India's federalism is in need of a structural reset

M.K. Stalin

is the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu

The Constitution of India, while federal in structure, was designed with a pronounced centralising bias. Drawing heavily from the Government of India Act, 1935, it concentrated significant authority in New Delhi while assigning a comparatively modest sphere to the States. This architecture was shaped by the circumstances of its birth – the trauma of Partition, the integration of 14 provinces and over 500 princely States, and the pervasive fear that centrifugal forces might threaten national unity. In that climate, centralisation appeared not merely prudent but also indispensable.

Yet, even in those anxious deliberations, there were voices of rare clarity. K. Santhanam cautioned the Constituent Assembly that the Union's strength lies not in the indiscriminate accumulation of functions, but in the disciplined refusal of responsibilities that do not properly belong at the national level. "It is in this positive as well as negative delimitation of powers that a real federal system rests...," he observed.

In that single formulation lay two enduring principles: first, authority is most effective when exercised closest to knowledge and accountability; and second, excessive centralisation breeds fragility by overburdening a single authority with tasks that it cannot efficiently discharge. A government that attempts to supervise everything – from space exploration to rural sanitation – may expand in reach but this inevitably diminishes its effectiveness.

Reinforcement of dominance

History demonstrates that power assumed in the name of necessity rarely retreats when necessity fades. In the decades that followed, centralising tendencies were reinforced by the dominance of a single national party at the Union and State levels, fostering a "high command" culture that attenuated the autonomy of State leadership. Later, the emergence of coalition governments at the Union and the rise of regional parties in States led to a more balanced federal order without endangering unity. One may reasonably surmise that had today's politically mature and linguistically consolidated States existed in 1950, the constitutional design might have evolved along a more decentralised path.

Just as an individual cannot remain perpetually captive to the neuroses of childhood, so too a nation cannot forever labour under the anxieties of its formative years. India's unity is no longer fragile, and the idea of India now rests on firm and enduring foundations. Yet, 76 years later, constitutional practice continues to reflect the reflexes of the late 1940s. Centralisation, once defended as a necessity, has hardened into habit.

Through successive constitutional amendments, expansive Union legislation in Concurrent List subjects, conditional Finance Commission transfers, and centrally sponsored schemes with rigid templates, the balance of power has tilted even further toward the Union. Large ministries exist in New Delhi that duplicate State functions and often attempt to steer State priorities through micromanagement and procedural oversight. In an inversion of democratic hierarchy, the Union Executive is attempting to override plenary State laws in Concurrent List subjects through subordinate legislation.

It is a principle

Such a drift sits uneasily with constitutional doctrine. In *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* (1994), the Supreme Court of India declared federalism part of the Constitution's Basic Structure and affirmed that States are not mere appendages of the Centre but are supreme within their allotted spheres. Federalism, the Court held, is a principle rooted in India's history and diversity; not a matter of administrative convenience. Despite this judicial affirmation, State autonomy has continued to erode – through legislative expansion, executive overreach, and certain other judicial interpretations that privilege uniform national solutions over contextual diversity.

Underlying this trajectory is a persistent illusion – that the Union becomes stronger by diminishing the States. In truth, the Union and the States are not competitors in a zero-sum contest; they are partners in a shared constitutional enterprise. India's size and heterogeneity render centralised policy design inherently limited. No authority in New Delhi, however enlightened, can tailor policy with equal sensitivity to every linguistic region, agricultural ecology, industrial cluster, or labour market.

Decentralisation addresses this limitation by enabling parallel experimentation. States can design and test policies at manageable scale, contain failures without national disruption, and allow successful innovations to diffuse horizontally or be adopted nationally. Many of India's most effective programmes followed precisely this path. Tamil Nadu's noon meal scheme, Kerala's achievements in public health and literacy, and Maharashtra's employment guarantee initiative all began as State experiments before informing national policy. Over-centralisation suppresses the very diversity of strategies from which innovation and discovery arise.

Centralists often argue that States lack administrative or technical capacity and, therefore, require Union intervention. Yet, such intervention stunts the very capacity it claims to remedy, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of dependence. Parents who do not entrust their children with responsibility, and leaders who refuse to delegate authority, inevitably breed dependence. Governments are no exception.

Capacity arises from responsibility, accountability, and the freedom to make, and correct, mistakes. To suggest that India's States – many comparable in scale to sovereign nations – are inherently incapable and must, therefore, be subjected to intrusive central control is incompatible with national self-respect.

> There is a need for balanced federalism in the form of autonomous States, an efficient Union, and accountable governance

Centralisation might still be defended if it had delivered superior outcomes. But by comparison with decentralised federations, global benchmarks, or India's own aspirations, the record is unpersuasive. The centralised model has struggled to deliver universal access, sustained quality, genuine equity, or global competitiveness. Instead, it has produced regulatory complexity, chronic underfunding as resources are stretched across expanding mandates, blurred accountability, and gradual erosion of State capacity.

Tamil Nadu recognised these dangers at an early stage. In 1967, C.N. Annadurai observed that the Union must indeed be strong enough to maintain the sovereignty and integrity of India. But that did not mean that it should assume control over every subject, such as health or education, which bore no direct nexus to national defence.

His successor, Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, advanced this philosophy with the maxim, "Autonomy to the States, Federalism at the Centre", and in 1969 established the first independent Committee on Union-State Relations under Justice P.V. Rajamannar. The Committee's 1971 Report became a landmark in India's federal debate. Later national commissions – the Sarkaria (1983-88) and Punchhi (2007-10) – acknowledged the need for rebalancing, though they stopped short of recommending fundamental structural reform.

Time to right-size

India now stands at a constitutional juncture that calls for recalibration rather than complacency. The objective is not to weaken the Union but to right-size it, allowing it to concentrate on genuinely national responsibilities while restoring to States the autonomy essential for effective governance. Such recalibration would not diminish national unity; it would deepen it by aligning authority with responsibility.

In this spirit, the Government of Tamil Nadu constituted a High-Level Committee on Union-State Relations in April 2025 under the chairmanship of Justice Kurian Joseph (a retired Supreme Court judge), with K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty (a retired IAS officer) and Dr. M. Naganathan (former State Planning Commission vice-chairman) as members. Thought of as a non-partisan exercise, the Committee undertook a comprehensive review of contemporary federal challenges.

Part I of its Report, which was submitted on February 16, 2026, addresses issues that range from the role of Governors and language policy to delimitation, elections, education, health, and Goods and Services Tax.

The Government of Tamil Nadu presents this report to the public in the hope that it will stimulate informed debate, restore balance to the Union-State relationship, and contribute to a constitutional settlement in which the Union is strong because it is focused, and the States are strong because they are trusted.

A budgetary signal as banks cannot bear it all

Saumitra Bhaduri

is Professor, Madras School of Economics

Budget 2026 has initiated, albeit limited, some important shifts in India's approach to financial-sector reform. There are proposals to introduce a market-making framework for corporate bonds, develop total-return swaps and bond-index derivatives, establish an Infrastructure Risk Guarantee Fund, and recycle Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSE) real estate assets through dedicated Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT). But all these reflect an implicit recognition of a deeper structural problem: Indian banks are shouldering risks that functioning markets absorb elsewhere

Overburdened balance sheets

When Indian banks struggle, weak governance, political interference, and poor risk management are the usual explanations. Each contains some truth. Taken together, however, they miss the larger issue. Over time, India has asked its banks to bear risks that, in more mature systems, are priced, traded, and distributed through markets. This has quietly overburdened bank balance sheets and made the financial system more fragile than it needs to be.

The problem begins with a structural imbalance. India has built a reasonably deep government bond market, supported by the Reserve Bank of India and a predictable issuance framework. Government securities outstanding are close to 90% of GDP, comparable to many large economies. The same cannot be said of corporate bonds. At around 15%-16% of GDP, India's corporate bond market is less than half the size of China's and barely a quarter of that in the United States or Germany.

This gap matters because economies do not stop needing long-term finance simply because markets are missing. When bond markets are shallow, someone else must step in. In India, that "someone" has been banks.

Today, banks carry roughly 60%-65% of all non-financial corporate debt, compared with about 30% in the U.S. and 40% in Europe. The difference is not managerial skill or prudence; it is architecture. Where markets can price and redistribute credit risk, banks lend selectively. Where they cannot, banks become the default warehouse for risk.

Vulnerability and recapitalisation

This is not what banks are designed for. Banks fund themselves largely through short-term deposits and are sensitive to confidence. Yet, they are expected to finance projects such as highways, power plants, ports, and telecom networks that take 15 years or 20 years to generate cash flows. This mismatch in duration forces banks into extreme maturity transformation, increasing vulnerability to shocks.

The consequences have been visible and costly. When projects stalled or cash flows disappointed, losses were not absorbed gradually by markets. They landed abruptly on bank balance sheets. The fiscal cost followed. Since 2017, the government has injected more than ₹3.2 lakh crore into public sector banks. These recapitalisations stabilised the system, but they also quietly transferred private credit losses onto the public balance sheet. This is the hidden tax of a bank-centric financial system.

There is also a less visible opportunity cost. Capital tied up in long-term corporate loans is capital that is not available to small firms, exporters or first-time borrowers. This helps explain a familiar paradox that even after repeated clean-ups and capital injections, bank credit to small and medium enterprises remains constrained.

India's corporate bond market remains shallow by international standards. Bonds outstanding amount to less than 15% of GDP, compared with over 80% in the U.S., around 55%-60% in Germany, and 45%-50% in China. Issuance is overwhelmingly through private placements,

> There is an attempt in Budget 2026 to rebalance India's financial system by moving risks away from banks and into markets

ownership is concentrated among a narrow set of institutional investors, and secondary market liquidity is weak. Households and foreign investors play only a marginal role, and issuance is heavily skewed toward top-rated firms. With such limited depth and participation, the bond market cannot meaningfully absorb or price credit risk.

The concentration of risk in the balance sheets of banks also weakens monetary policy transmission. When interest rates rise, banks already burdened with long-term credit exposures are reluctant to pass on higher costs fully; when rates fall, impaired balance sheets constrain fresh lending. The uneven adjustment of long-term borrowing costs despite changes in policy rates reflects this distortion. In contrast, deep bond markets transmit policy signals more smoothly as yields reprice across maturities and portfolios rebalance.

No corporate debt market

The core issue stems from the absence of a corporate debt market that can effectively distribute long-term credit risk. Without a deep bond market to distribute exposure across institutional and long-term investors, credit risk remains concentrated on bank balance sheets.

Thus, the measures announced in Budget 2026 are an attempt to correct a long-standing structural imbalance. By improving corporate bond market liquidity, introducing hedging instruments such as total-return swaps, providing partial credit guarantees through the Infrastructure Risk Guarantee Fund, and expanding the stock of market-ready assets through REITs, the Budget gestures towards reallocating risks away from banks and into markets. Whether this shift gathers momentum will determine whether India's financial system becomes more resilient or continues to rely on banks as the economy's shock absorber of last resort.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Viability challenge

The SHANTI Act has revived debates on nuclear liability, but the real question is whether opening nuclear energy to private players is financially viable (Text & Context, February 13, 2026). With huge capital costs, long timelines, and uncertainties — including technology, human resources, and geopolitical risks — economic returns are unlikely to attract industrial giants. While liability concerns dominate discussion, analysis should also consider whether prestige in high-end technology is enough incentive to mobilise the enormous investment needed. Criticism due to understandable concerns on nuclear liability should be supplemented by economic viability analysis and associated information to present the full picture.

N. Ramamoorthy,
Mysuru

In Colombo

With a combination of explosive batting and incisive bowling, India proved too strong for Pakistan on a high-stakes stage, making a statement of intent for the remainder of the tournament. But is this cricket rivalry overhyped, propped up by slogans such as "war minus the shooting" — a phrase George Orwell coined in 1945 to criticise excessive nationalism in sports?

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

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

Transitioning to green steel

India's path to net-zero emissions by 2070 will depend heavily on how quickly it scales production and consumption of green steel, as steel remains one of India's largest industrial sources of emissions. The materials we use to build our future must strengthen our progress, not undermine it.

With this in mind, the Ministry of Steel constituted 14 task forces bringing together industry leaders and technical experts to systematically map the sector's decarbonisation levers. Their work covered the full spectrum of transition pathways, which helped create a roadmap for accelerating low-carbon steel production.

But many members saw a barrier: the "green premium." Producing green steel carries high upfront costs for manufacturers. Bridging this gap requires targeted fiscal support for producers in the early years. GST rationalisation and time-bound fiscal incentives can help producers manage the transition. Does this mean that using public procurement to boost demand for premium green steel is an unworkable strategy?

A manageable increment

It is important to distinguish between the producer's additional cost and the actual burden on public procurement. Our analysis showed that even when green steel carries a premium, the effect on large infrastructure projects is minimal. Steel typically accounts for about 18% of large infrastructure projects, which form the bulk of public sector capex in India. As a result, even a 30% premium on green steel, and exclusive use of green steel by public sector infrastructure, translates into an increase of roughly 5.5 % in overall project costs. Not all public infrastructure projects will switch to green steel in the medium term, assuming a 20% rise only results in a 1.1% rise in the budgets of public works such as highways.

This is a manageable increment, especially when seen

Nagendra Nath Sinha
Former Secretary, Ministry of Steel

Alfahad Sorathia
Policy analyst

India possesses a clear opportunity: the technology exists, the green premium is manageable, and the market is ready

as insurance for national economic security. India faces dual pressures from the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and volatile prices of coking coal imports, which exceed 50 million tonnes annually and expose us to price shocks that affect trade balance and industrial stability. Transitioning to green steel helps bypass carbon tariffs while insulating national projects from fossil fuel price volatility.

Global experience offers a clear template for aligning policy with market reality. Japan's Green Purchasing framework shows that green procurement must work alongside fiscal incentives, pairing demand mandates with production support so industry can respond at scale. California's Buy Clean model highlights how strict carbon benchmarks and verified disclosures create traceability and reduce administrative risk. Building on these lessons, India has introduced a dedicated Green Steel Taxonomy with a 3-, 4-, and 5-star rating system that ranks steel by emission intensity, providing the carbon "nutrition label" the market lacked.

Building on the taxonomy and stakeholder consultations, the Ministry undertook initial steps to institutionalise green steel public procurement mandates. However, the proposal awaits final approval from key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Finance, largely due to concerns around the green premium and verifiability.

The way forward

At the heart of this delay is a trust deficit. Today, a procurement officer has no reliable way to distinguish a certified green TMT bar from a conventional one. Addressing this challenge is possible. By leveraging the existing Made in India QR code infrastructure alongside the Quality Council of India's accreditation system, Green Star ratings could be embedded into product verification. This would allow procurement officers to

instantly confirm the carbon credentials of a product.

Other administrative hurdles can be addressed through targeted reform. For example, procurement frameworks should shift the focus from the lowest upfront price to a broader definition of value for money that recognises sustainability and national economic interest. In parallel, the Schedule of Rates, which guides public works estimates, must explicitly include certified low-carbon steel. Today, green steel may be treated as a deviation because carbon intensity is not recognised as a standard quality parameter. Codifying it would enable officers to procure sustainable materials without administrative risk. Building the capacities of the procurement official, handholding them and evangelising the need for GPP with the States are critical.

Second, our Production Linked Incentives and green hydrogen missions must be aligned with procurement tenders. If the state is subsidising the production of green steel, it must also act as the anchor customer for that output. This alignment ensures that private incentives are harmonised with the public for good.

While a 3-star benchmark provides a practical starting point for adoption, procurement policy should also clearly signal a shift towards 4- and 5-star steel over time. A roadmap that progressively tightens standards after 2030 would encourage industry to invest in higher-grade low-carbon production.

India possesses a window of opportunity: the technology exists, the green premium is manageable, and the market is ready. A practical strategy is to launch focused pilots through centralised purchasers such as the Indian Railways. The procurement scale can create a living lab for green steel. Now, the Ministries of Steel, Finance, and Environment must coordinate to link climate ambition with financial and procurement power.

Inclusive politics in an age of division

Voting is not only about endorsing ideas; it is also about ensuring representation

STATE OF PLAY

Peerzada Ashiq

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J&K

Of late, polarising narratives have dominated headlines from Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Last month, the National Medical Commission withdrew the MBBS course from the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence in Jammu after protests erupted over the fact that a majority of the students who qualified through NEET were Muslim rather than Hindu. Last week, BJP MLA Vikram Randhawa described residents from the Kashmir Valley as "land grabbers" who had illegally occupied land in Jammu. Students have hit the streets demanding that the National Law University be established in Jammu rather than Kashmir.

Amid this din, however, the stories of Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi and Shammi Oberio – both National Conference (NC) parliamentarians – provide a glimpse into a less-discussed story – that of J&K's inclusive politics.

For the first time since the 1990s, none of the Abdullahs, who have long administered J&K, managed to make it to either House of Parliament in the 2024 general elections. There were also other notable changes during the elections. Shammi Oberoi, an eloquent Sikh from Srinagar, became the first from the community from the Kashmir Valley to enter the Rajya Sabha, in 2025. His two speeches in Parliament have won him accolades even from Opposition leaders in Kashmir, a rare gesture in present-day politics.

In the 2024 elections, Syed Aga Ruhullah Mehdi, a Shia cleric from an influential family, also became the first from the community to win parliamentary elections by a huge margin of 1.88 lakh votes. Earlier too, Shia leaders from Kashmir have represented the community, but only in the Rajya Sabha. Notably, it was a majority of Sunni Muslim votes that catapulted Mr. Mehdi to the position, enabling him to represent the Kashmir Valley against the backdrop of the dilution of Article 370 and the downgrading of J&K into a Union Territory in 2019.

Mian Altaf Ahmed Larvi became the first Gujjar leader from J&K in the Lok Sabha. The only region left unrepresented was the Chenab Valley. But with Sajjad Ahmad Kichloo from Kishtwar winning the Rajya Sabha elections, that gap was filled too.

Representation was the defining feature of the 2024 Assembly elections as well. The numerically upscaled 90-member J&K Assembly went to the polls after a decade. It was a moment for all the political parties to seize. The JKNC won 42 seats – 35 from the Kashmir Valley and seven from the Pir Panjal and Chenab Valleys, including two Hindu representatives. None came from the Jammu plains.

During the process of government formation, the NC's strength rose to 54 with the support of Independents and the Congress (6 seats each). However, it was not numbers alone that defined gover-

nance. In a careful balancing act, the region's smallest-ever Cabinet of six members comprise Chief Minister Omar Abdullah from Central Kashmir; Sakeena Itto from South Kashmir; Javid Ahmad Dar from North Kashmir; Javed Rana, a Pahari from Poonch in the Pir Panjal Valley; Satish Sharma from Jammu's Chhamb; and Surinder Kumar Choudhary from the Pir Panjal Valley.

There were many firsts. Mr. Choudhary became the first Hindu Deputy Chief Minister from the Pir Panjal Valley and also the first without a coalition government in place. In the past, J&K had Hindu Deputy Chief Ministers only when political parties allied with either the Congress or the BJP. If not for numerical necessity, it was the compulsion of inclusive politics that led the government to allocate two Cabinet berths to the Pir Panjal Valley. Jammu would have been excluded from this model had Mr. Sharma not been inducted. He became the first Independent MLA to serve as a Cabinet Minister.

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 helped define the architecture of the modern nation-state and the idea of sovereign geography. Yet beyond sovereignty, the treaties also underscored the principles of balance of power and collective security – ideas that continue to shape democratic systems.

In modern democracies, voting is not merely about endorsing or opposing a political idea; it is also about ensuring that diverse communities and regions find representation within that sovereign framework. At a time when exclusionary politics is gaining ground everywhere, J&K's political landscape serves as a reminder that inclusion is central to the legitimacy of governance.

Can India overtake Bangladesh in EU textile exports?

As Bangladesh prepares to lose its Least Developed Country trade advantage, India's new EU deal could help level the tariff playing field in the sector

DATA POINT

**Anwesha Basu
Arnab Chakrabarti**

India's textile sector has been steadily losing ground in global export markets. In contrast, Bangladesh has woven together a remarkable export success. Given the recently signed India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and with Bangladesh poised to lose its Least Developed Country (LDC) status, this is an opportune moment for India's textile industry.

Within the textile value chain, India's exports to the EU remain concentrated in intermediate products – particularly yarns and fabrics – rather than in finished garments such as T-shirts, shirts, and trousers. Bangladesh's exports far exceed India's in two readymade garment categories in particular – knitted or crocheted garments (such as T-shirts, jerseys, pullovers, sweaters, and cardigans) and woven garments (such as suits, jackets, trousers, dresses, and shirts). For knitted/crocheted garments, India's share of the EU's total imports declined from nearly 6.5% in 2009 to about 4.4% in 2023 **(Chart 1A)**. Bangladesh's share rose from just 6% in 2000 to 13% in 2009 and 26% by 2023.

A similar pattern is seen in the woven garments trade too **(Chart 1B)**. For woven garments, India's nominal export value to the EU fell in absolute numbers from a peak of about $3.5 billion to $2.9 billion.

To understand why Indian garments have not been able to compete with Bangladesh in the EU market, we compared the average per-unit price of Bangladesh's major export commodities. From **Table 2**, it is clear that India's unit values are consistently higher across all products. This may indicate the following: First, India may be exporting more value-added, better-quality garments, which allows it to charge higher prices. However,

its low market share reveals that the EU's demand for such products is limited relative to mass-market apparel, suggesting that 'premium positioning' (if at all) alone cannot drive volume. Second, and more likely, is that higher prices may reflect structural disadvantages: higher production costs, less integrated supply chains and logistical inefficiencies.

Furthermore, the tariffs faced by Indian and Bangladeshi products are radically different **(Chart 3)**. Bangladesh, as a LDC, has enjoyed duty-free, quota-free access to the EU under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme. Crucially, this zero-tariff access applies even when garments do not meet the EU's standard 'double transformation' requirement. This means Bangladesh can import fabric from anywhere in the world, stitch garments domestically, and export them to the EU at zero duty. India, lacking such preferential treatment, has faced EU Most Favoured Nation (MFN) tariffs of around 12%.

Internal factors also matter. Over the past three decades, Bangladesh has unilaterally and consistently promoted the garment sector. India's approach, by contrast, has been fragmented. Yet, the balance may be poised to shift. Two major structural breaks are on the horizon.

First, Bangladesh is set to lose its EBA benefits in 2029. This would mean the end of automatic duty-free access to the EU, with apparel exports potentially facing MFN tariffs of around 12%. Bangladesh is then expected to seek entry into the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), which offers zero tariffs on roughly two-thirds of tariff lines, including textiles. However, GSP+ comes with stricter rules of origin (RoO) and safeguard provisions. As Bangladesh is heavily reliant on other countries (including India) for fabrics, this could mean that Bangladesh's garments may not satisfy GSP+ RoO for duty free entry. Bangladesh, will of course, try its

best to negotiate its way out of this clause. Historically, EU has maintained its stance on the double transformation criteria. In case it continues to do so, Bangladesh will be at a serious disadvantage. If competition is price-driven, then Bangladesh may lose its market share. If, on the other hand, Bangladesh's primary advantage comes from supply-chain integration, then it could still retain dominance in the face of higher tariffs.

The recently finalised agreement grants India duty-free access to the EU's textile markets, subject to the double-stage processing requirement. Since India's textile industry is already relatively vertically integrated – most of the yarn and fabric used in apparel production is manufactured domestically – the double-stage requirement is not likely to be an impediment for Indian textile exports. As a result, Indian exporters are well-positioned to meet stricter rules of origin without major restructuring.

Taken together, these changes create a rare window of opportunity: narrowing of Bangladesh's preferential advantage and reduction of India's tariff disadvantage. Textiles remain one of the largest employers in Indian manufacturing, spanning both formal and informal enterprises, yet the sector has failed to create employment opportunities in recent years. Reviving textile exports, particularly to high-income markets like the EU, could act as a much-needed tonic for India's employment crisis. The question is whether India is finally ready to tailor a strategy that fits, capturing market share with cost-competitive production, vertical integration, and a coherent industrial policy. The recent experience of Vietnam's apparel exports, which saw a surge post the signing of the EU-Vietnam FTA in 2020, is indicative of the opportunities on the horizon for India.
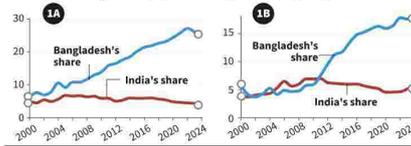
Anwesha Basu and Arnab Chakrabarti are Assistant Professors in the Department of Economics, FLAME University

A looming shift?

The data for the charts were sourced from the World Integrated Trade Solution by the World Bank

CHARTS 1A & 1B: India's and Bangladesh's shares in the EU's import basket for knitted/crocheted garments (1A) and woven garments (1B) (in %)

1A Bangladesh's share / India's share (y-axis 0–30, x-axis 2000–2024)

1B Bangladesh's share / India's share (y-axis 0–15, x-axis 2000–2024)

TABLE 2: Unit value comparisons of major export commodities (in $ per unit)

Commodities	Year	Bangladesh	India
T-shirts (knitted/crocheted)	2023	2.6	3.35
T-shirts (knitted/crocheted)	2024	2.4	2.9
Jerseys (knitted/crocheted)	2023	6.4	7.5
Jerseys (knitted/crocheted)	2024	6.02	6.3
Men's suits, jackets, trousers (woven)	2023	9	13.4
Men's suits, jackets, trousers (woven)	2024	9.2	12.5
Women's suits, jackets, dresses (woven)	2023	7.5	9.5
Women's suits, jackets, dresses (woven)	2024	7.5	9.6
Men's shirts (woven)	2023	7.5	10.4
Men's shirts (woven)	2024	7.4	10.14

CHART 3: Tariffs (in %) imposed by the EU on India and Bangladesh for garments

Tariff on India's knitted garments / Tariff on Bangladesh's knitted garments / Tariff on India's woven garments / Tariff on Bangladesh's woven garments (x-axis 2000–2024)
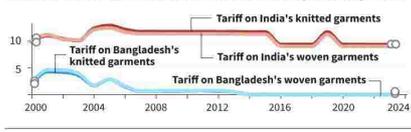
Campaign in China initiated by Mao

Hong Kong, Feb. 16: China's current political struggle, which appears to be spearheaded against the Vice-Premier, Mr. Teng Hsiao-ping was "personally initiated" by the Communist Party Chairman, Mr. Mao Tse-tung, Shanghai Radio reported to-day.

The campaign began as a debate over education policies. Recently it has turned into a vehement attack on leaders purged during the Cultural Revolution and who have been restored to power but have refused to make proper penance.

Mr. Teng, host to the U.S. President, Mr. Gerald Ford, during his December visit to Peking, is the most prominent leader in this category.

The Shanghai broadcast reported that a mass rally was held in China's largest city last Friday under the sponsorship of the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee. About 1,800 people attended mainly committee cadres and officials of scientific and technological institutes in the city.

That rally was believed to be one of the first – if not the first – mass meetings not confined to a college campus since the criticism heated up against Mr. Teng.

The broadcast said the current struggle against the "right deviationist wind" was significant. In addition to denouncing alleged attempts by rehabilitated persons such as Mr. Teng, to restore other Cultural Revolution victims to power, it also attacked the economic policies they are pushing.

League's anti-malaria campaign

Rugby, Feb. 16: The Health Organisation of the League of Nations has arranged to hold next summer in London, Paris and Hamburg, special laboratory courses on malaria, which will be reserved exclusively for medical officers. During its tours of the Eastern and Southern Europe, the League's Malaria Commission discovered that several countries were prevented from conducting systematic anti-malaria campaign owing to the shortage of specially trained physicians.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

Number of private hospitals' licence cancelled in U.P.

178 Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak said that the licences of 178 private hospitals in the State were cancelled, of which the licences of 59 hospitals were revived after a hearing. Mr. Pathak said, "Around 500 complaints were received..". PTI

The amount paid to farmers affected by rains in Gujarat

9,610 in ₹ crore. Gujarat governor Acharya Devvrat said the State government has disbursed ₹9,610 crore as part of a special agricultural relief package to more than 33 lakh farmers affected by unseasonal rains last year. PTI

Quantity of sugar India has exported till February 2025-26

2.01 In lakh tonnes. India has exported 2,01,547 tonnes of sugar through February in the current 2025-26 marketing year, with the UAE being the top destination. Sugar exports remain under government control through quotas distributed proportionally among mills. PTI

Number of tourist arrivals recorded in Kerala in 2025

2.58 In crore. Kerala tourism Minister P. A. Mohammed Riyas said that 2025 witnessed the highest number of tourist arrivals in Kerala's history. Compared to 2024, an additional 28,95,002 tourists visited Kerala in 2025. Domestic tourist arrivals increased by 12.64%. PTI

Indian fishermen apprehended by the Sri Lanka Navy

25 The Sri Lanka Navy apprehended 25 Indian fishermen for allegedly poaching in the island nation's territorial waters. The fishermen were apprehended and seized in Sri Lankan waters off Kankesanthurai, Jaffna, the Navy said. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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A separate classification for denotified tribes

Why were Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes classified as 'criminal' groups in the colonial era? What did the Idate Commission recommend? What was the problem with the SEED scheme rolled out by the Social Justice Ministry? Why do community leaders demand a separate classification for DNTs?

EXPLAINER

Abhinay Lakshman

The story so far:

On January 30, the Union government assured community leaders from Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) that the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India had agreed to enumerate these communities in the upcoming second phase of the Census due in 2027. However, with no clarity on how this enumeration will be conducted, leaders of these communities are organising to push for their demand for a "separate column" for DNTs in the Census form. This demand has found support from academics and scholars, who have noted that the demand for a Census count of DNTs has been reiterated time and again by successive Commissions that have been set up to examine their condition in society.

Who are the DNTs?

The communities referred to as denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes were, at one point, classified as "criminal" by colonial administrators, who had concluded that there were certain communities "addicted" to committing crimes. This was codified in the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), first introduced in 1871, the same year that synchronous Censuses began in India.

The CTA, 1871, was introduced for the "registration, surveillance and control of certain criminal tribes and eunuchs", describing "criminal tribes" as a "tribe, gang, or class of persons" that are "addicted" to committing non-bailable offences. While introducing the legislation, then Member of Law and Order, T.V. Stephens had said that, "the special feature of India is the caste system... Keeping this in mind, the meaning of professional criminal is clear. It means a tribe whose ancestors were criminals from times immemorial, who are themselves destined by the usages of caste to commit crime and whose descendants will be offenders against law..."

It was only in 1952, that the Government of India officially repealed the CTA, which had by that time been amended a couple of times. The repeal of the Act had led to the denotification of communities classified as "criminal" under the CTA, leading to these groups becoming known as the DNTs.

However, in the same year, India saw the introduction of various habitual offender laws throughout the States, which, while doing away with the hereditary definition of people being compelled to commit crimes, classified certain people as "habitual offenders", leading to the continued targeting of these communities – this time not as "criminal" but as "habitual offenders".

What is the history of their enumeration?

While both the CTA and synchronous Censuses in India began in 1871, it was from 1911 onwards that Census reports started discussing "criminal tribes" specifically. Provincial Census reports from 1911 and 1931 provide an insight into the enumeration of these communities, where they were specifically classified as such. The 1931 Census was, however, the last time these communities were accounted for in the Census exercise. Since the repeal of the CTA and the denotification of the communities,

New group: A demonstration demanding de-notified tribes community certificate in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, in 2025. G. KARTHIKEYAN

specific enumeration of these communities was done away with in subsequent Censuses, given the Republic's conclusions at the time that it was not necessary to enumerate castes (apart from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)) in Censuses.

But the state's effort to account for these communities had begun even before their official denotification, with the establishment of the Ayyangar Commission in 1949. Since 1952, by which time the concept of backward classes apart from SCs and STs had been introduced, several of the denotified communities were accommodated in these lists as "*Vimukt Jatis*". Eventually, the decades after India's Independence saw a majority of the denotified communities being assimilated into the SC, ST, or the Other Backward Classes (OBC) lists.

In 1998, author Mahasweta Devi and scholar G.N. Devy constituted the Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes-Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG), the work of which had led to a technical advisory group on DNTs, and the eventual formation of the first National Commission for DNTs, headed by B.S. Renke. The Commission submitted its report on recommendations to uplift DNTs in 2008. Following this, another national Commission was set up under the leadership of Bhiku Ramji Idate, which submitted its report in 2017. All Commission reports on the subject of DNTs began with the question of identifying and classifying them, before noting that a full, accurate classification and identification exercise was not possible until a Census count was conducted for these communities.

The latest assessment of the communities in the Idate Commission's report had identified close to 1,200 communities that were DNTs, noting that all of these communities had been assimilated into the existing classifications of SCs, STs, and OBCs. Apart from this, the Commission had identified about 268 other denotified communities that had

not been classified at all. A NITI Aayog-commissioned study conducted by the Anthropological Survey of India on these 268 communities had recommended their classifications. But this report has gone into cold storage.

What is their status now?

While in many States, DNTs have been incorporated into backward classes lists, and in SC and ST lists, where certain benefits of policies like reservations may have trickled down to them owing to selective application of sub-classification, State governments have formulated policies specifically targeting them as well. However, community leaders have argued that despite this, the stigma they had been subjected to continued even after their denotification, through the operation of laws like the Habitual Offenders Act. They argue that this led to their continued discrimination, and that they remained largely socially, economically, educationally, and politically backward, except for a few denotified communities that were settled and had used available resources to uplift themselves to a certain extent.

Even though the Idate Commission report had recommended a permanent National Commission for the DNTs, the first Narendra Modi-led government had decided that, since most of these communities had already been included in SC, ST, and OBC lists, a Welfare Board would be sufficient to address their concerns.

The Social Justice Ministry, eventually, also rolled out the SEED scheme for livelihood, education, housing, and health interventions for DNTs. But the government has been able to spend only a fraction of its intended ₹200 crore spending over the last five years. A principal problem with implementing this scheme was that it required an identification of a beneficiary as a DNT, which required them to have a DNT certification that need not be exclusive of the SC, ST, or OBC identities (if they were already included in these lists). The

loudest complaint of the community across States has been that they are not being issued DNT certificates despite continuous reminders and letters from the Central government, with government data showing that only select districts in about half a dozen States issue these certificates.

This has only fed the movement of DNTs across many parts of India seeking a separate classification for themselves on par with the SC, ST, and OBC categorisations, arguing that this would then lead to uniform issuance of DNT certificates. Further, this movement has also called for sub-classification within the specific DNT list to recognise uneven backwardness of communities within this grouping.

Moreover, community leaders and associations like the All India Denotified Nomadic Tribes Development Council have been framing their struggle for a separate classification as the need to have their specific discrimination and stigmatisation recognised by the State. In doing so, they have argued that the only reason colonial administrators labelled them "criminal" was because of their insistence on resisting foreign aggressors. Many community leaders have also noted that they had been the first line of defence even before colonialism, and had histories of resisting Islamic rulers as well.

What now?

Apart from assurances to community leaders that they will be counted, there has been no indication as to how this enumeration will take place.

DNT associations have made their demand clear that they want a specific column or question in the Census forms to classify people as DNTs. This demand has found support from scholars like Mr. Devy, who have consistently argued for a separate Census for the DNTs.

However, so far, the Union Government's public statements have indicated that it is not considering any proposal for a separate classification for the DNTs.

THE GIST

■ The communities referred to as denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes were, at one point, classified as "criminal" by colonial administrators, who had concluded that there were certain communities "addicted" to committing crimes.

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CACHE

GETTY IMAGES

How district cooling can ease India's climate and urban planning troubles

District cooling is a centralised system that supplies air-conditioning to a cluster of buildings. Instead of every building running its own chillers, one large plant makes chilled water and sends it through insulated underground pipes to many buildings

Manish Dubey
Prasad Vaidya

With rising temperatures, longer heatwaves, and a rapidly growing urban economy, cooling in India is rapidly shifting from a lifestyle choice to a basic need, driving up air-conditioner use in homes and workplaces. This surge is now a major part of cities' power demand, in turn raising concerns about blackouts and higher emissions and about keeping urban areas livable. In this context, planners and experts are looking at district cooling as a way to keep people comfortable while using less electricity and emitting less carbon.

A central cooler
District cooling is a centralised system that supplies air-conditioning to a cluster of buildings, like a shared air-conditioner for an entire neighbourhood or campus. Instead of every building running its own chillers or rooftop units, one large plant makes chilled water and sends it through insulated underground pipes to many buildings, much like a public utility such as piped natural gas or electricity.

Inside each building, this water passes through heat exchangers, cools the indoor air by absorbing heat, then returns slightly warmer to the central plant, where it's cooled again and sent back into the network. Buildings therefore don't need to install or operate large cooling systems. They simply draw 'cooling as a service' from the network.

Like other utilities, district cooling usually follows a multi-part tariff: a one-time connection charge to join the network, a fixed demand charge based on the maximum cooling capacity, and a consumption charge based on actual cooling energy used.

Efficiency gains
District cooling plants use large, high-efficiency chillers and cooling towers to deliver more cooling from each unit of electricity than individual building systems. They typically supply chilled water at about 6-7°C and receive it back at around 12-14°C, after it has absorbed heat. Many systems use thermal storage so that 20-40% of the cooling can be produced at night, when demand and tariffs are lower.

Together, these choices allow well-run systems to operate roughly twice as efficiently as many stand-alone building chillers, cutting electricity use for cooling by 30-50% and reducing peak demand on the grid by 20-30%. These efficiency gains translate into important environmental benefits. Lower electricity use means greenhouse gas emissions can fall by roughly 15-40% while concentrating equipment in a one unified plant can cut refrigerant volumes in buildings by up to 80%, reducing leak risks. At the street level, fewer small outdoor units spewing hot air outside can also mitigate the urban heat-island effect.Some districts abroad have already reported local temperature drops of 1-2°C where such systems operate.

Water use is often raised as a concern, especially in water-stressed cities. In district cooling systems, the chilled water circulating between the plant and buildings runs in a closed loop and consumes very little water. A district cooling plant of about 10,000 tonnes of capacity typically requires a little over one kilolitre of make-up water during cooling tower operation. Because these systems are built at scale and centrally managed, they can also be designed to use treated sewage or wastewater.

Making sense
All of this connects directly to India's National Cooling Action Plan. Using less power for cooling and shifting part of the load to the night eases pressure on the grid, improving energy security and reducing the risk of outages during heatwaves, when people most need cooling.

Lower emissions and easier use of low/zero global warming potential refrigerants in central plants support India's climate goals and its Kigali commitments to phase down hydrofluorocarbons while reliable, high-quality cooling underpins the growth of services, IT, hospitals and data centres in dense urban areas. By freeing up rooftops and indoor space otherwise taken up by cooling equipment, district cooling can also help cities use urban land better, making it a tool of comfort as much as climate action and smarter urbanisation.

District cooling works best where cooling demand is high, dense, and predictable. This makes it suitable for commercial districts, transit-oriented corridors, airports and aerocities, hospitals, universities, and IT parks. In India, Navi Mumbai, Hyderabad's financial districts, Ahmedabad's GIFT City, and parts of Bengaluru are often cited as strong candidates because they combine new development, dense commercial loads, and planned infrastructure.

Business case
For operators, district cooling is a utility-style business with revenue typically coming from a one-time connection charge, a fixed demand charge, and a variable consumption charge. The model can be financially attractive if there are enough long-term customers and city planning offers certainty about future demand.

For customers, cooling can account for 30-50% of electricity use in many commercial buildings, and by using energy more efficiently and sharing infrastructure, district cooling can cut operating costs by about 20-40% over the life of a project.

Not having to install separate chillers and cooling towers in each building can also save developers 5-10% of project cost and unlock 1-2% extra usable or saleable space. Utility-grade reliability (often above 99.9%) is also a major plus for hospitals and data centres.

The main concern is the fixed demand charge: customers pay for reserved capacity even if the building is partly empty.

If they over-estimate their needs or have inefficient internal systems that waste chilled water, bills can feel high, making good building design and right-sizing of contracts crucial.

For electricity utilities, the primary benefit is lower peak load from air-conditioning during hot afternoons. District systems use large, efficient chillers, benefit from diversity where different buildings peak at different times, and often include thermal storage to shift 20-40% of cooling production to the night, helping flatten daytime peaks. This allows utilities to avoid or defer new peak load plants and reduce purchases of expensive peak power.

Economy of scale
To move to a real network of district cooling systems, many players need to work together. Urban authorities should demarcate district cooling zones in master plans, set aside land for plants and pipe corridors, and coordinate underground utilities.

Municipal bodies need to be empowered and strengthened to introduce clear concession rules, service standards, and long-term frameworks so private players know how they will recover investments.

Likewise, state electricity regulators and DISCOMs can consider shifting loads from day to night as a formal demand-side resource, link it to tariff design, and recognise the value of avoided peak capacity. Central agencies can also issue standard technical guidelines and model PPP contracts while developers design new buildings with ready connection points and compatible internal piping.

GIFT City in Gujarat has already demonstrated district cooling. Studies here have suggested full deployment could reduce power demand by around 6,100 MW, save about 7,850 GWh annually, and avoid roughly 6.6 million tonnes of CO2 emissions each year.

With effective coordination and clear governance frameworks, Indian cities can replicate and expand such examples, transforming cooling from a climate vulnerability into a cornerstone of sustainable, resilient urban infrastructure.

Prasad Vaidya is Advisor, Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS). Manish Dubey is Chief-Practice, IIHS.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

As the T20 World Cup is in the middle stage of the group matches, here is a quiz on the coaches of the participating nations

Soorya Prakash. N

QUESTION 1
Which country has the maximum number of coaches in the ongoing T20 World Cup?

QUESTION 2
Which country's current coach has won the T20 World Cup title twice, both as captain?

QUESTION 3
Who played in the inaugural ODI World Cup in 1975 but is now coach of another country?

QUESTION 4
Out of the 20 participating countries, only seven nations have a coach who has played for their country. Among these seven, only two have not played any international matches. Who are they?

QUESTION 5
Out of the 20 participating countries, only six nations have retained the same coach who was also in-charge of their team in the 2024 World Cup. However, there are three other coaches who have moved from one country to another when compared with 2024. Who are they?

Visual question:
He was the manager of the World Cup winning Indian team in 2007 and is now coach of this participating team in the 2026 T20 World Cup. Name him. TH

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. McEnroe was born in this European country. **Ans: Then West Germany**
2. McEnroe's first Slam success came at the French Open in 1977 with this partner. **Ans: Mary Carillo**
3. McEnroe beat this player in 1983 to win his second crown at The Championships. **Ans: Chris Lewis of New Zealand**
4. He holds the record for best single-season win-loss record among men in the Open Era in this year. **Ans: 1984**
5. McEnroe claimed 57 titles with this player. **Ans: Peter Fleming**
6. This phrase is the title of one of his autobiographies. **Ans: 'You Cannot Be Serious'**
7. This actor played John's role in the 2017 film *Borg vs McEnroe*. **Ans: Shia LaBeouf**
Visual: Name this Oscar-winning actress. **Ans: Tatum O'Neal**
Early Birds: Neil Lall|| Arun Kumar Singh|| Sumana Dutta| Sukdev Shet| Abhiroop Bose

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Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of "hors-de-combat"?
This rather formal French expression has appeared quite frequently in newspapers, thanks to the conflict in Kargil. If a soldier is "hors-de-combat", it means he has been wounded and will therefore be unable to take part in the fighting. If a player is "hors-de- combat", his injury prevents him from taking part in an event.

What is a brother born to the same father, but a different mother called?
A boy who has the same father or the same mother as you, is your "half-brother". You and he are related by blood because you have a parent in common – it could be the mother or the father. In the case of a "step-brother", on the other hand, you and your brother do not share a common parent. You and he are not related by blood because your biological father and mother are different from his biological father and mother. When two people who have children from an earlier marriage tie the knot, the kids get either a step-brother or a step-sister, not a half-brother or a half- sister.

What is the meaning of "flummox"?
Remember the last time somebody asked you something and you were so confused that you didn't know what to say or do? Well, you were flummoxed. The word "flummox" means to be totally confused about something.

Here are a few examples: The Minister was flummoxed by the reporter's question. During the interview little Anirudh looked flummoxed.

The first syllable "flum", which has the main stress, rhymes with the words "slum", "glum" and "plum". The "o" in the second syllable is like the "a" in "China".

Is it O.K to say, "Cats, dogs, and cows, etc. are domestic animals"?
No, it is not. The word "etc" means "and other things". Since "etc." includes the meaning "and" you do not put an "and" before it. The correct way of writing your sentence would be: Cats, dogs, cows, etc. are domestic animals.

Here are a few more examples. Cheetahs, lions, tigers, etc. belong to the cat family. We need napkins, paper plates, etc. for the party.

What is the meaning and origin of "an albatross round the neck"?
An albatross is a large bird which you usually find at sea. Sailors believe that it is very unlucky to kill one of these birds. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" written in 1798, tells the story of a sailor who kills an albatross. As soon as the bird is killed, things begin to go terribly wrong on the ship. The wind dies and the sailors soon run out of water. The angry shipmates hang the dead albatross round the sailor's neck as a sign of his guilt. Although the sailor repents and is forgiven, the killing of the bird haunts him all the time; it becomes a heavy burden. So when you say you have an albatross round your neck, it means you have a great burden, a sense of guilt that you like to get rid of.

Published in The Hindu on August 10, 1999.

Word of the day

Delectation:
a feeling of extreme pleasure or satisfaction; act of receiving pleasure from something

Synonyms: delight, enjoyment

Usage: *Here is some ice cream for your delectation.*

Pronunciation:
newsth.live/delectationpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˌdiːlɛkˈteɪʃən/, /ˌdɪlɛkˈteɪʃən/

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Single genome-editing strategy can help treat multiple disorders

Nonsense mutations account for about a quarter of all known disease-causing genetic changes; each one halts a different protein at a different point, creating a range of disorders; developing a separate treatment for each is a slow and expensive process; a new study has found a way around this

Manjeera Gowravaram

Genetic disorders often stem from small errors in the DNA sequence with major consequences. Many diseases like cystic fibrosis and Batten disease can be traced to changes disrupting the cell's ability to build a complete, functional protein. One particularly common culprit is the nonsense mutation, where a single incorrect DNA letter inserts a premature stop signal. When the cell encounters it, protein production ends too early, leaving the body without important enzymes, transporters or structural components.

Nonsense mutations account for about a quarter of all known disease-causing genetic changes. Each one halts a different protein at a different point, creating a wide range of disorders that, at present, require separate treatments. Each therapy needs to be designed, tested and approved on its own. This is a slow and expensive process.

A study in *Nature* recently revealed a way around this challenge. Instead of crafting a therapy for every mutation, researchers from the Broad Institute, Harvard University, and the University of Minnesota have developed a method to address many nonsense mutation diseases using a single genome-editing strategy. Their approach, called Prime-Editing-mediated Readthrough of premature Termination codons (PERT), reprogrammes one of the cell's own genes into a tool to override premature stop signals, allowing the cell to ignore the faulty instruction and complete the protein.

"This study offers an intriguing proof-of-concept for a gene-agnostic therapy that could, in principle, benefit many rare diseases caused by nonsense mutations," Debojyoti Chakraborty, senior principal scientist at CSIR-Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology, New Delhi, and who wasn't involved in the study, said.

Repurposing genes

Cells make proteins by transcribing the DNA into mRNA, written in a sequence of three nucleotides at a time; each set of three is called a codon. Then tRNA acts like a translator: each one recognises a specific codon and transports the matching amino acid, like making a photograph from its negative. Finally, a cellular machine called the ribosome strings these amino acids together, one by one, to make proteins.

The tRNA genes number in the hundreds. Many of them are redundant because they perform overlapping functions, so the loss or alteration of one of them is often harmless.

The researchers used this redundancy to test whether a non-essential tRNA gene could be edited into a suppressor tRNA – a molecule that reads through premature stop signals and inserts an amino acid there instead. Laboratories have used natural suppressor tRNAs for decades but they have been unsuitable for therapies thus far due to concerns about their safety and durability.

Using a precise genome-editing approach called prime editing, the team

Nonsense mutations account for about a quarter of all known disease-causing genetic changes. GETTY IMAGES

showed that a human tRNA gene can be rewritten to permanently operate as a suppressor tRNA while also producing tRNA at safe, natural levels. This allowed the edited cell to override premature stop codons and make full-length proteins without disrupting global protein production.

Finding effective candidates

Human cells contain 418 tRNA genes. With the help of prime editing, the researchers found that four tRNAs – called leucine, arginine, tyrosine, and serine – showed promise to suppress a premature stop codon called *TAG*. However, the natural versions of these tRNAs weren't good enough for therapeutic use.

To increase their effectiveness, the researchers engineered thousands of variants of the four tRNA by adjusting their DNA sequences and by making small changes to the tRNA structure itself. These improvements made the tRNAs more stable and better at decoding premature stop signals. This multi-step engineering effort produced several optimised suppressor tRNAs.

The next challenge was to install them efficiently into the genome. However, editing a tRNA gene is difficult because that part of the DNA is often compact and tightly folded, making it harder for genome-editing enzymes to access it.

To overcome this, the researchers turned to the specifics of prime editing. This technique uses a specialised molecule called a prime-editing guide RNA, or pegRNA, to lead the editing machinery to the correct spot on the DNA and hold the template needed to write the new genetic code.

Because the success of this process depends heavily on the precise design of the pegRNA, the team created a library of more than 17,000 different ones and tested various configurations to identify the ones that could successfully access the tightly folded DNA and rewrite the native tRNA gene into its optimised suppressor form. Based on the results of this screen, the team identified a prime-editing enzyme that they named PE6c. It proved especially effective at rewriting the targeted DNA sequence, and became more efficient when paired with a strategy called PE3 – which uses an additional guide RNA to steer the cell's repair machinery to adopt the edited sequence.

In cultured human cells, this combination had 60-80% editing efficiency, which is unusually high for multi-base genomic edits. To compare the standard method for precise gene insertion, called homology-directed repair, is typically 10-20% efficient, or below, in similar contexts.

Safety tests indicated the process didn't accidentally alter unrelated parts of the DNA, didn't disturb the cell's overall activity or normal protein production, and it distinguished between faulty and correct instructions. In particular, it ignored the premature stop signals causing the disease while still respecting the natural stop signals that mark the actual end of a protein.

The researchers called this complete package PERT. To evaluate its therapeutic potential, they tested the method in cell models of Batten disease, Tay-Sachs disease, and Niemann-Pick C1 disease, all caused by premature stop codons.

After installing the engineered suppressor tRNA, enzyme activity in the

> ❝ The authors present strong laboratory evidence showing that their engineered tRNA approach can restore protein function in multiple models, which is an important advance
>
> **DEBOJYOTI CHAKRABORTY**
> Senior principal scientist at CSIR-Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology

Batten and Tay-Sachs models rose to 17-70% of their normal levels. In Niemann-Pick C1 models, cells produced measurable amounts of full-length NPC1 protein, which is otherwise absent when there's a nonsense mutation.

Results in mice

To evaluate PERT in a living organism, the team used AAV9 to deliver the prime-editing components into newborn mice. AAV9 is a common gene-therapy vector, a harmless virus repurposed as a microscopic delivery vehicle to ferry genetic cargo into cells. The goal was to use it to convert a natural mouse tRNA gene into a suppressor tRNA *in vivo* and assess its ability to restore protein production.

In the Hurler syndrome mouse model, PERT restored 1.7-7% of normal enzyme activity in the brain, heart, and liver. While modest, these levels are known to meaningfully reduce disease severity. Treated mice also showed better cellular pathology and no signs of toxicity.

"The authors present strong laboratory evidence showing that their engineered tRNA approach can restore protein function in multiple models, which is an important advance," Dr. Chakraborty said. But he also emphasised the practical limitations: "Key challenges remain, particularly around delivery, long-term safety, and performance across different tissues, before this strategy can realistically move toward patients."

Yet these early successes have offered some momentum. The first clinical use of base editing in an individual reported earlier this year involved a *TAG* stop codon. The case showed that established delivery methods like viral vectors can carry gene-editing tools into the necessary tissues. This means PERT has a viable path to the clinic.

(Manjeera Gowravaram has a PhD in RNA biochemistry and works as a freelance science writer. gmanjeera@gmail.com)

A parishioner of Yatsurugi Shrine cracks the ice with an axe on Lake Suwa in Nagano prefecture, January 29. AFP

'Godless' lake in Japan warns of climate crisis

Agence France-Presse

The Japanese priest and his parishioners gathered before dawn, hoping that climate change had not robbed them of the chance to experience an increasingly rare communion with the sacred.

The few dozen men, most in their sixties, were headed to Nagano's Lake Suwa in search of a phenomenon called "God's Crossing" that has gone from reliable to elusive in recent decades.

Known as "*miwatari*" in Japanese, it occurs when a crack opens up in the frozen lake surface, allowing shards of thinner ice to break through and form a ridge where local deities are believed to cross.

For centuries, the priest of the nearby Yatsurugi Shrine has led an annual watch for the crossing, contributing to a unique record of a changing climate.

This year's watch began on January 5, with Kiyoshi Miyasaka – a priest in Japan's Shinto religion – leading the flock. One man carried a worn flag, another a giant

The God's Crossing has not appeared since 2018, and a study indicates that this is because morning temperatures have failed to fall enough for the lake to freeze over

axe. They set out with hope, despite a seven-year stretch in which the God's Crossing has not appeared once.

"This is the start of the decisive 30 days," Miyasaka told them.

But as they neared the water, dark and choppy in the pre-dawn light, Miyasaka's staple smile disappeared. "How pitiful," he said, lowering a thermometer into the water.

Miyasaka's predecessors noted when the entire lake surface froze, and when the *miwatari* appeared. More recently, priests have added temperature readings and ice thickness. Consecutive records date all the way back to 1443.

"The chronicle shows data taken at a single location over hundreds of years, and thanks to it, we can now see what the climate was like centuries ago," said Naoko Hasegawa, a geographer at Tokyo's Ochanomizu University. "We find no other meteorological archive comparable to it."

The God's Crossing has not appeared since 2018, an absence that both scientists and believers attribute to climate change.

Traditionally, the ice ridges were believed to represent the path of a god crossing the lake to visit his goddess wife. Scientists explain there a little differently: they appear if the lake surface freezes entirely, which requires several days below minus 10°C.

The ice lid contracts and expands with temperature fluctuations between night and day, opening cracks that fill with shards of newly frozen lake water. They crash against each other, producing a distinctive roaring sound, and sometimes rise to eye level.

Takehiko Mikami, who has studied the phenomenon with Hasegawa, remembers seeing it in 1998: "The surface froze completely to about 15 cm thick. We could walk all the way across the lake to the other shore," said the professor emeritus at Tokyo Metropolitan University.

His research shows the crossing appeared almost every winter until the 1980s, but since then morning temperatures have often failed to fall enough for the lake to freeze over.

For a time, this year's season brought hope. On January 26, after weeks of frigid dawn observations, Miyasaka and his flock recorded a full freeze, smiling in delight as a chunk of ice was carved for the priest to measure. But the surface melted days later before the God's Crossing could appear.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

The science hidden in proverbs and idioms

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1
What's the proverb based on the following fact? Fresh-cut grass is mostly water, and if you bale it while it's still too wet, the bale can grow mould, lose nutrients, and sometimes become warm enough to catch on fire. So before it is baled, it's typically dried under sun and dry air.

QUESTION 2
When you constantly monitor the passage of time, it can seem to pass more slowly. Psychologists call this _____ time perception. Its 'opposite' is retrospective time perception, and it's the basis for the saying "a watched pot never boils". Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 3
The saying "cold hands, warm heart" refers to the fact that when you're cold, the X nervous system narrows

small blood vessels in the fingers, reducing warm blood flow to the extremities and keeping hands from losing heat to the environment. As a result, your hands cool down but your body maintains the temperature of vital organs. Name X.

QUESTION 4
"Bad money drives out good" because when two forms of money have the same face value but one has higher real value, e.g. a note that people trust more, people tend to spend the worse one. Over time, the better money disappears from everyday transactions because it's hoarded. What is this economic principle called?

QUESTION 5
"The straw that broke the camel's back" is akin to _____ _____ in climate systems: when they're crossed, the system starts to accumulate changes faster and in irreversible ways. Fill in the blanks.
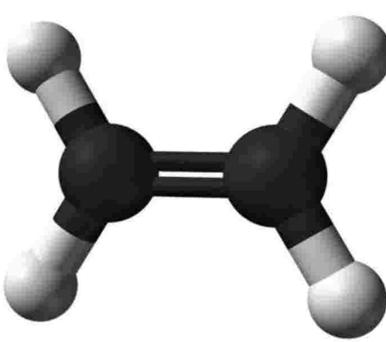
VISUAL: Name this hydrocarbon. It's the reason "one bad apple spoils the bunch": as an apple ripens, it releases more of this compound, which causes nearby fruit to ripen faster. PUBLIC DOMAIN

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IT's opaque

IT companies should disclose AI impact

For the top four players in the Indian IT services industry, the last three years have been among the worst in over three decades. Impact on stakeholders like employees and others in the ecosystem apart, it has also been a challenging time for shareholders. In the last one year alone the shares of TCS, Infosys, HCL Technologies and Wipro are down by around 31, 26, 14 and 30 per cent, respectively, reflecting fears of AI disruption.

Yet managements' communication to stakeholders has been poor at best and misleading at worst. The press releases and analyst conference calls of most IT services companies present a positive picture. Any acknowledgment of AI driven disruption has been scant. The communication is loaded with adjectives like 'stellar results', 'strong performance', 'resilient execution', 'differentiated value propositions in enterprise AI'. But the numbers reflect the contrary. Three years of weak numbers is long enough for everyone to believe them over statements. As a result of this divergence, a trust deficit has come into being — one between what managements say, and what other stakeholders interpret. But now the moment of truth is near at hand. There has been a global run on IT stocks in the last two weeks following the launch of multiple AI tools by Anthropic. Since these can automate many white collar tasks, they have also starkly shown up how disruptive AI could turn out to be. This has been underplayed so far. Indian IT CXOs must respond to the situation by being open about their IT services business model. It really matters to employees, investors, policymakers and the broader ecosystem.

Over the last two weeks stakeholders have been bombarded with divergent views from industry experts, analysts and others — some saying the Indian IT industry will adapt as they have in the past, and others quite the contrary. It can be said in favour of the first lot that the cloud/digital disruption that upended the legacy business model of IT services firms (FY16 to end of FY18) was successfully overcome. This time, it is three years since the AI disruption began to unfold, yet the industry is mired in difficulty. During the cloud disruption, the top four players actually increased their headcount by 18 per cent to nearly 8.8 lakh employees. In the last three years it is marginally down at around minus 3 per cent to 14.33 lakh employees. This may be the tip of the iceberg. More AI disruption could mean uncertainty for employees and graduates entering the workforce.

So, this is not the time for frantic optimism. Let us not forget how the great handset companies of the past bit the dust on the arrival of the iPhone in 2007, even as their initial response was sanguine. Today, while companies talk about AI business they do not disclose the numbers. To give just one example, TCS has said that its annualised AI revenue was $1.8 billion as of end Q3FY26. This represents a mere 6 per cent of its revenue. The question of how non-AI business will be impacted remains unaddressed. All stakeholders — employees, investors, graduates, universities coming to grips with curriculum — need more transparent communication from IT CXOs.

OTHER VOICES.

The Observer

Save our students: The debt trap must be fixed

In the early 1990s, fewer than one in five school leavers in England and Wales went on to higher education. Now about half do. In the interim, Labour, coalition and Conservative governments introduced fees and loans to expand access to universities and create a new way of funding them. At first it worked. Not any more. Nearly 6 million graduates are burdened with loans whose interest rates hit middle earners hardest. For two-thirds of this group, their student debt is rising faster than they can pay it off. Two million more graduates are on a new scheme with lower interest rates but a longer and more regressive repayment schedule. These loans represent income for universities, but not enough. Half are in deficit, laying off lecturers and struggling to maintain standards. (LONDON, FEBRUARY 15)

讀賣新聞
THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Revitalise shipbuilding through tech innovation

Can Japan's shipbuilding industry launch a counteroffensive and regain its position, having been overshadowed by Chinese and South Korean competitors? Japan must chart a path to revival as a major shipbuilding nation with technological innovation. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi intends to advance strategic investments that enhance resilience against potential crises under "responsible and proactive public finances" and views shipbuilding as a key sector. To revitalise Japan's shipbuilding industry, the government late last year formulated a roadmap through 2035. It set a target to boost annual shipbuilding output to 18 million gross tonnes by doubling the 2024 level. The government will establish a fund of about ¥350 billion and proceed with public-private investments totaling ¥1 trillion. (TOKYO, FEBRUARY 16)

Digital capex has a huge multiplier

UNDERSTATED. While the returns on Digital Public Infrastructure are huge, these are not captured in the Budget

RAVI POKHARNA
KUNTALA KARKUN

STRATEGIC ASSET. India needs a medium-term DPI investment framework ISTOCK

As Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman unveiled Budget 2026-27, public debate gravitated to the usual markers: capital expenditure (capex) scaled up to ₹12.2 lakh crore, fiscal deficit pegged at 4.3 per cent of GDP, and renewed emphasis on manufacturing. Yet amid these headlines, India's most productive public investment of the last decade continued to slip through the accounting cracks.

This investment does not appear as a highway, semiconductor fab, or industrial corridor. It exists instead in code, standards, and interoperable platforms. Collectively described as Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), this "invisible asset" has become a core driver of India's economic velocity.

Budget 2026 marks a clear turn towards technology-led growth, with policy attention and funding flowing to semiconductors, AI data centres, electronics manufacturing and cloud services. But DPI, the infrastructure that binds this ecosystem together — the rails that let chips power applications, AI reach the last citizen, and manufacturing capacity generate economy-wide gains — continues to remain fragmented.

REFRAMING CAPEX
In the industrial age, general-purpose infrastructure meant roads, power plants, and ports. These assets were characterised by high upfront costs and linear returns. In the digital age, however, identity (Aadhaar), payments (UPI), and data rails (account aggregator) function as the new highways. The economics, however, are fundamentally different. Traditional infrastructure faces capacity constraints and physical depreciation. DPI exhibits increasing returns to scale: the billionth UPI transaction costs almost nothing to process, yet its spillover benefits for a small merchant in a Tier-3 town can be transformative. Unlike a bridge that serves only those who cross it, digital infrastructure creates a foundation upon which infinite layers of private innovation can be built.

The data backing the DPI-led transformation is no longer just anecdotal; it is structural. According to World Bank estimates, India achieved in just nine years a level of financial inclusion that would have typically taken 47 years without its digital commons.

The scale and velocity of payments illustrate this shift. In FY 2024-25, UPI processed 186 billion transactions with a total value of ₹261 trillion, accounting for almost half of global real-time payments and sharply reducing the cost of commerce for MSMEs. By January 2026, UPI had reached a record ₹28.33 lakh crore in monthly transaction value, cementing its position as the world's largest real-time payments platform by volume (NPCI).

Welfare delivery has seen comparable gains: through the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism powered by the Aadhaar-linked 'JAM' trinity, the government has cumulative savings of around ₹3.5 trillion by eliminating leakages and "ghost" beneficiaries (Ministry of Finance, April 2025).

On the credit side, platforms such as the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) and Open Credit Enablement Network (OCEN) are currently reducing customer acquisition costs for small lenders by 30-40 per cent, allowing credit to flow to previously "unbankable" segments (RBI, iSPIRT).

Taken together, the multiplier effect is striking. Government spending on core 'India Stack' components was less than $2 billion over a decade, yet it has facilitated a digital economy now valued at over $350 billion (RBI, World Bank).

> **Government spending on core 'India Stack' components was less than $2 billion over a decade, yet it has facilitated a digital economy now valued at over $350 billion**

DPI versus physical infrastructure

Feature	National Highway Programme (physical)	India Stack / DPI (digital)
Primary goal	Physical connectivity	Economic inclusion and velocity
Capital intensity	Extremely high	Low (initial code and standards)
Marginal cost	Increases with wear and tear	Decreases towards zero
Maintenance	Physical repair and labour	Software updates and cybersecurity

Few public investments, physical or digital, exhibit this order of magnitude in return.

Given these outcomes, why does DPI barely register in Budget debates? First, fragmentation. DPI spending is scattered across ministries, regulators, and statutory bodies. Aadhaar sits with MeitY, UPI infrastructure flows through RBI and NPCI, account aggregators are embedded in financial regulation, and platforms like CoWIN were funded as one-off pandemic response spending. No single budget head captures DPI as national infrastructure.

Second, diffused returns. When UPI reduces costs for merchants or Aadhaar enables faster credit disbursal, the economic gains accrue across sectors; not to the sponsoring department. Traditional budget accounting does not recognise such spillovers.

Finally, timing asymmetry. DPI development costs are front-loaded into a few budget cycles, while savings from reduced leakages, lower transaction costs, and private innovation compound over decades. The result is a systematic undervaluation of DPI in fiscal decision-making.

'DIGITAL FIRST' FISCAL STRATEGY
While Budget 2026 signals intent, the next phase must focus on institutionalising DPI as infrastructure.

The first step is classification. DPI should be explicitly recognised as capital expenditure, not subsumed under routine IT or administrative heads. Create a dedicated 'Digital Infrastructure' head within the Capital Budget, consolidating all spending on identity, payments, data rails, and interoperable platforms.

Second, India needs a medium-term DPI investment framework spanning five to seven years, anchored in outcome metrics rather than inputs. Transaction volumes, cost reductions, inclusion indicators, private innovation signals, and cross-border adoption should be tracked with the same rigour applied to highways or airports. The Economic Survey 2025-26 made this case explicitly, emphasising India's DPI as the foundation for AI and cloud infrastructure, noting that "digital infrastructure is now strategic national infrastructure."

Third, sustainability must replace novelty. As DPI becomes mission-critical, underinvestment in resilience and cybersecurity becomes a macroeconomic risk. Budgeting must reflect the cost of maintaining national digital rails at scale.

Finally, Centre-State coordination can be better. Budget 2026 rightly emphasises cooperative federalism, but digital duplication remains common. Incentivising States to integrate with national rails rather than recreate them would deliver higher returns per rupee spent. None of this diminishes the importance of physical infrastructure. Digital rails cannot substitute for roads, power, or connectivity. But they dramatically raise the productivity of every rupee spent on them.

India will, and must, keep building physical infrastructure. But the next decade's productivity gains will increasingly come from reducing friction, not just adding assets. DPI is India's highest-leverage mechanism for doing that. Future Budgets should stop treating it as an accounting footnote and start recognising it for what it is: the country's most powerful capex multiplier, a bedrock of the Viksit Bharat ambition.

The writers are, respectively, Executive Director, and Senior Visiting Fellow, at Pahle India Foundation

Coconut sector gets a policy boost

From replanting to processing, the initiatives in the Budget will link farms, processing units and global markets

Dona Ghosh

The coconut sector is entering the new financial year with renewed confidence. Signals from Budget 2026-27 suggest that the industry is finally getting sustained policy attention. Coconut has been identified as a priority high-value agricultural crop. The objective is direct: (a) improve productivity; (b) raise farmer incomes; and (c) build a sustainable and competitive value chain.

A major announcement in the Budget is the Coconut Promotion Scheme, unveiled on February 1. The scheme focuses on replacing old and unproductive coconut trees with high-yielding varieties. In many coconut-growing regions, ageing palms have led to stagnant output and rising costs. Rejuvenation is therefore expected to deliver quick productivity gains over the medium term. Farmers can receive financial assistance of around ₹37,500 per hectare for cultivation improvements. Additional subsidies cover up to 50 per cent of costs for pest and nutrient management.

Production data highlight a strong regional concentration. Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala together account for more than 80 per cent of India's coconut output (see Figure). Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal are the other contributors. The green-shaded States (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal) record productivity

Coconut production status across States
Percentage of total production

State	Percentage
Karnataka	28.78
Tamil Nadu	28.50
Kerala	25.84
Andhra Pradesh	7.99
West Bengal	1.97
Odisha	1.87
Others	1.44
Maharashtra	1.23
Gujarat	1.15
Assam	0.83
Bihar	0.22
Tripura	0.09
Nagaland	0.05
Chhattisgarh	0.04
Mizoram	0.00
Telangana	0.00
Arunachal Pradesh	0.00
Manipur	0.00
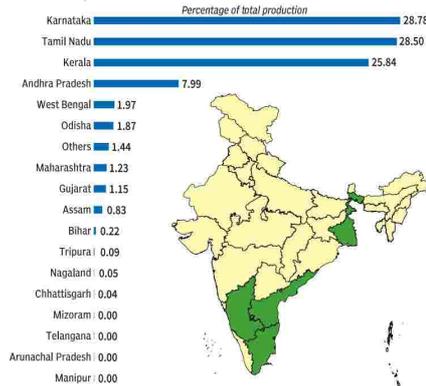
Note: Percentages are calculated by the author. Productivity of green shaded states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal) is more than country-level productivity.
Source: International Coconut Community (ICC) Statistical Yearbook 2021

levels higher than the national average. Higher productivity means faster income gains. It also strengthens India's position in global coconut markets. So, these four States can gain clear advantage in benefiting from the replanting and technology support announced in the Budget.

VALUE ADDITION
Beyond cultivation, the Budget places strong emphasis on processing and value addition. Subsidies of up to 33.3 per cent, capped at ₹50 lakh, are available for setting up units producing virgin coconut oil, desiccated coconut powder and tender coconut water.

Demand for these products continues to rise, driven by health awareness and export opportunities. The policy support is expected to attract new private investment into the sector.

In addition, the coir industry has received focused support through the Mahila Coir Yojana. Rural women artisans are eligible for a 75 per cent subsidy on motorised equipment, along with training assistance. New coir production and processing units will also receive infrastructure support. This is likely to improve scale, quality and market access.

OUTLOOK FOR FY27
Taken together, the Budget measures point to a clear shift in approach. Coconut is no longer seen only as a plantation crop. It is being positioned as a full agro-industrial ecosystem linking farms, processing units and global markets.

For farmers, processors and rural entrepreneurs, FY 2026-27 presents a strong growth opportunity. For the broader economy, the coconut sector could quietly emerge as a steady and resilient contributor in the year ahead.

The writer is Assistant Professor of Economics, Thiagarajar School of Management, and is empanelled with SEBI as a Security Market Trainer

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◉ **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.

Deposit mobilisation
This refers to 'Bank health check beyond CD ratio' (February 16). The credit-deposit (CD) ratio alone cannot be treated as a reliable health check of banks. While it reflects the proportion of deposits deployed as loans, it does not capture liquidity resilience and other vital parameters. Going forward, deposit mobilisation is set to become increasingly challenging as banks face stiff competition from mutual funds and the bond market. Since now risk-based deposit insurance premium norms are introduced by

RBI, banks with higher risk profiles may face increased insurance costs. Although these premiums are paid by banks and not directly charged to depositors, competitive pressures could influence pricing strategies and margins.
In this evolving landscape, it is time to seriously consider abolishing the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) as it locks up a portion of deposits without earning returns, thereby constraining banks' lending capacity and competitiveness.
Srinivasan Velamur
Chennai

Monitor riskier assets
Apropos 'InvIT with care' (February 16), the editorial rightly underlines the need to keep investor interest at the centre of reforms relating to REITs and InvITs. While easing norms may deepen the market and improve liquidity, the risks from higher leverage and exposure to greenfield projects cannot be ignored. Retail investors, in particular, may not fully appreciate these risks. Regulatory changes should therefore proceed gradually, with clear caps on borrowing and strict disclosure standards. Any expansion into riskier

assets must be matched by stronger monitoring and transparent reporting of cash flows.
SM Jeeva
Chennai

Domestic resilience
Apropos 'New global order and economics' (February 16), the article raises an important concern about how economics must respond to a fragmented and uncertain world. If the rules-based order is weakening, policy thinking cannot remain anchored in old assumptions of stability and free flows. Yet, a drift towards narrow national interest alone may deepen volatility. What is needed is a balanced approach. Policymakers should strengthen domestic resilience through diversified trade partnerships, robust supply chains and prudent fiscal management.
A Myilsami
Coimbatore

Corrigendum
The Pocket cartoon by Ravikanth published on February 14 was a repeat of the one that appeared on February 6. The error is regretted.

Don't ignore E-Voting

Retail investors must take dissenting votes seriously

Sowmya Subramaniam

Every year, thousands of shareholder meetings unfold across corporate India. The Resolutions are proposed, votes are cast in shareholder meetings and — in the vast majority of cases — management wins. But beneath this surface of routine approval lies a growing undercurrent of conflict: the rising dissent voice of the institutional investor.

Under Regulation 44 of the SEBI (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015, listed companies are mandated to provide an e-voting facility to all its shareholders to participate in the shareholders resolutions and to strengthen the corporate governance ecosystem. Retail shareholders routinely receive automated emails titled "E-Voting Intimation" or "Notice of Annual General Meeting."

However, these communications are often overlooked, leading to minimal participation by retail investors in corporate decision-making.

To protect the investor interests, SEBI has also mandated mutual fund houses to compulsorily exercise their voting rights on key resolutions, including matters related to corporate governance, changes in capital structure, stock option plans, executive compensation, appointment or removal of directors, and other issues that may impact shareholder interests.

INSTITUTIONAL INVESTORS'
This regulatory framework pushed institutional investors to play a more active role. Instead of remaining passive, they now closely monitor company decisions and increasingly vote against resolutions they believe will harm shareholders, such as excessive executive pay, questionable related-party transactions, or dilutive Employee Stock Option Plans (ESOPs).

Despite this regulatory push by SEBI a surprising trend persists. Take, for instance, the case of Cello World Limited.

In their AGM held in August 2025, the management proposed an ESOP scheme that was deemed non-compliant with SEBI norms by proxy advisors. Nearly 43 per cent of institutional investors voted against the resolution. It was a clear and loud signal of disapproval by the institutional investors, still the resolution was passed with ease as the promoters

hold the majority of the shares.

More surprisingly, the market didn't blink. In the days following this "governance failure", Cello World's stock price did not crash; it barely registered the conflict. In a dispersed ownership market like the US, such high dissent would often kill the proposal.

In India, thanks to dominant promoter holdings, the resolution passes with ease regardless of minority opposition.

This is precisely why retail investors should pay attention to how institutional investors vote. Recognising this imbalance, SEBI has introduced features to encourage the retail shareholder participation in the resolutions. Recently, it announced that proxy advisory firm recommendations will be made available on e-voting investor app to help shareholders make informed voting decisions and enhance corporate board accountability.

Proxy advisory firms are the intermediaries offering independent research-based recommendations on shareholders resolutions' to facilitate the investor to make more informed decisions while casting their vote. These firms evaluate the resolutions in the light of global best practices, regulatory framework and the keeping the view of long-term shareholder value.

For the retail investors: the next time look at the voting disclosures. If the institutional investors are voting 'No' and the company is ignoring them, your ride might be smooth now — but you should probably check what's in it for the longer term. It's also the time for you not to ignore that E-Voting mails.

Actively participate by casting your vote on the important shareholder resolutions and nudge the corporate boards toward responsible governance practices.

The writer is Associate Professor - Finance and Accounting Group at IIM Lucknow

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Tragedy of commons, and AI training

COPYRIGHT ISSUES. The nub of the matter is whether AI training on public knowledge be monetised without the author's consent

GETTY IMAGES

SUNDAR ATHREYA

Copyright Law was envisioned for the print world of 18th century with the motive to nourish the public with literature. The law also functioned as a tool to incentivise the Author to pen literary work which would in return deepen the public knowledge and increase the scope for further creation. The major stake holders of the law were the 'creator' and the 'public'.

The Author who created the work did not have the economic means to undertake the arduous task of disseminating their work among the public, as a result they began to exchange their right over the work to the publisher to print and disseminate the work for an upfront payment.

The publisher who 'owned' the creation fought for further protection and managed to increase the monopoly over the work for a tenure of Author's life plus 60 years.

This has resulted in the work being locked within the copyright law for a long time.

For the past two centuries, the law has been shaped to function as an 'investment protection' for its publisher. The major benefactors of the work were no longer the 'creator' who created it or the 'public' who consumed it, but the publisher who helped in the dissemination of the work.

CREATIVE COMMONS
Professor Lawrence Lessig founded creative commons (cc licences) in 2001 to provide a solution to the aforementioned problem, using the 20th century's greatest invention the 'internet'.

The Author can publish their work either as a printed copy or as an e-copy on the internet wherein the future reader need not 'pay' anything for consuming the work.

The future reader is only expected to follow the basic norms of copyright such as attributing the original Author's name whenever that work is used.

Further, if a junior author creates a work, utilising the previous work, they are expected to release their creation with a similar CC licence. The intention behind this is to prevent the junior author from monetising their creation which was created using the knowledge that was available free.

The prevalence of CC licensing can be observed in academic writing, where the creator publishes their work with the motivation of disseminating it to the larger public with the only reasonable expectation of being credited for the work. In fact, in the academic world the Author spends resources to make their work available for free of cost to secure citation.

The core principle of CC is to nurture public knowledge and help the consumer to have access to the work without the hassle of copyright licensing.

The core principle of creative commons is to nurture public knowledge and help the consumer to have access to the work without the hassle of copyright licensing

The movement garnered great appreciation and it can be observed with the rise of platforms like 'Wikipedia' whose main goal was to make information accessible for all, free of cost.

On the platform, the difference between the user and the creator is blurred as one can be both at the same time. It is pertinent to mention that Wikipedia earlier only sought donations from public for its service and did not charge any subscription price from its users.

The platform depends on community knowledge and enables users to provide for the bigger goal of knowledge contribution and distribution.

Recently, Wikipedia entered into a licensing agreement with a technology platform allowing them to train on its content for money which will be used for its maintenance.

While Wikipedia will continue to make its platform available for human users for their regular use, this raises questions regarding public-owned knowledge and AI training. Can AI training on public knowledge be monetised without the consent of the Author?

The agreement would enable AI platforms to train on all existing materials of Wikipedia. This includes not only the future information that would be added to the platform but also the materials that have been existing in the platform since its inception.

The terms of use agreement of the platform clearly states that Wikipedia is only a forum that hosts platform for users to contribute. The user contributes to the platform with an open and free licence that would enable other parties to use and edit.

However, the AI training would not come within the ambit of free use, and it is up to the discretion of the AI platform to either charge their consumers or be free of cost. Almost every Generative AI platform has a subscription-based model through which revenue is generated. This is against the principle of commons.

CONSENT ISSUES
Platforms like Wikipedia with a high volume of information are a treasure trove for any AI platform to train its model from. However, the question that remains unanswered is the consent of the users who contributed to Wikipedia, did they provide their free and informed consent to Wikipedia to use their contribution for AI training when they contributed?

It raises serious questions regarding the continued existence of 'commons.' It would also disincentivise a user to contribute further to the Wikipedia page without any economic incentive (at present there is no economic nourishment for the contributor/user).

Would public owned knowledge continue to remain in public or within the impenetrable locks of copyright law? The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade of India released a recent Working Paper that proposed a blanket licensing mechanism to secure the rights of copyright owner.

The complex solution proposed by the Ministry allows the AI platform to train on the materials from the internet and pay royalty to a government designated body which would distribute the royalty to the copyright societies.

The interesting question is even if Wikipedia intends to share royalty with its contributors, it would be almost impossible for them to locate them.

The writer is an Assistant Professor at KIIT Law School

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

February 17, 2006

Dr Reddy's buys German co Betapharm
Dr Reddy's Laboratories has acquired the fourth-largest German generic drug maker Betapharm Arzneimittel GmbH for euro 480 million (ap proximately Rs 2,550 crore). The Hyderabad-based company has signed a definitive agreement with 3i, the private equity house that controls Betapharm, on Thursday to acquire 100 per cent equity of the German drug major.

Govt's 49 pc stake in Balco valued at Rs 843 crore
The much-awaited valuation of the residual 49 per cent Government stake in Bharat Aluminium Company Ltd (Balco) has been finally completed by the SBI Capital Markets Ltd. According sources in SBI Capital Markets, the company in its report submitted to the Government has stated that the "fair business value of Balco is Rs 1,719.43 crore."

DoT favours ADC at 2.5 pc of operators' annual revenue
In a bid to pave the way for private telecom operators to lower domestic call rates further, the Department of Telecom (DoT) has asked the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) to consider pegging the Access Deficit Charge (ADC) between 2 per cent and 2.5 per cent of the operator's annual revenues.

As Trump shreds climate rules, China's emissions start to fall

Lili Pike
Zahra Hirji

This week's major climate news played out on a split screen with the world's two superpowers signalling different paths for the future.

In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency walked back its own authority to set regulations curbing greenhouse gases from major sources. Meanwhile, in China, initial analysis by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air for Carbon Brief showed that carbon emissions fell 0.3 per cent last year — the first dip to occur since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The decline in China's emissions, while small, may mark a turning point for the world's largest polluter. It was driven by factors including strong electric vehicle sales and clean power generation — the result of a decade of increasingly

stronger policies aimed at protecting the environment and developing green industries.

DISMANTLING REGULATIONS
By contrast, US emissions rose last year after a two-year decline, according to an estimate released last month by the research firm Rhodium Group.

This increase comes as the Trump administration is systematically and aggressively moving to dismantle not only many of former President Joe Biden's most impactful climate policies, including cutting key pieces of the Inflation Reduction Act, but also decades-old climate rules.

The campaign culminated on Thursday in the decision to rescind the so-called endangerment finding, a landmark 2009 scientific determination that greenhouse gases are harmful and which supports a swath of federal climate policy, as well as the repeal of Biden-era greenhouse

CLIMATE. Divergent paths

gas standards for cars and trucks.

China's climate record remains far from perfect. The country continues to build out its coal-fired power plant fleet to ensure energy security, a rising petrochemical industry threatens to undo climate gains and its pace of decarbonization trails what climate scientists say is required to prevent catastrophic impacts.

But overall, Chinese leaders envision a future in which clean energy dominates while the US is betting on a future powered by fossil fuels. The Trump administration isn't only throwing its full support behind increasing coal, gas and oil production, but it's also actively trying to halt the growth of solar and wind.

The juxtaposition is a significant reversal from a decade ago when the Obama administration was coaxing China into joining the Paris Agreement.

In recent weeks, as the White House celebrated the "largest deregulation in American history," China continued advancing its growing set of climate policies. Beijing took further steps to unify its power market to better integrate renewables, told industries including metals and aviation to prepare to enter its carbon market, and provided energy-storage companies with a new subsidy. BLOOMBERG

⊙ BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2618
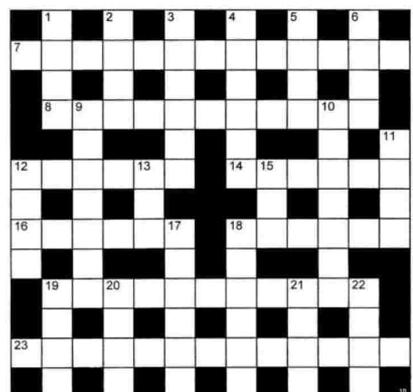
EASY

ACROSS
07. Answering to, agreeing with (13)
08. Wheels etc of an aircraft (7-4)
12. Great overflow of water (6)
14. Besmear, dirty, sully (6)
16. Touch lovingly (6)
18. To gather in and store (6)
19. Freed, exempted from (11)
23. Army rearrangement and strengthening (13)

DOWN
01. Puppet (4)
02. 37.5 gallons (herrings) (4)
03. Desire eagerly, aim at high things (6)
04. Makes counterfeit notes (6)
05. Cutting implement with arched blade (4)
06. To snarl or growl (4)
09. Balancing flap on aircraft wingtip (7)
10. To put in order (7)
11. Small lake, river fish (4)
12. Put into port (4)
13. Fuel (3)
15. Extinct bird (3)
17. Small portion to show quality (6)
18. Reduces to powder (6)
19. Religious picture (4)
20. A food preparation (4)
21. Greek letter; a jot (4)
22. Pronounce judgment on (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS
07. Is answering to one when writing letters (13)
08. Undercarriage used when bringing illicit drugs ashore (7-4)
12. Flood in which one dug eel out (6)
14. Sully one but make Sergeant-Major rich (6)
16. Minds the first sweetheart gets a loving gesture (6)
18. Gather and store and somehow arrange it after a loss (6)
19. Exempted from being fined, I mined it anyhow (11)
23. Programme of compulsory redundancies should make it firm (13)

DOWN
01. The model child may grow into an overdressed woman (4)
02. Quantity of herrings put right inside the tin (4)
03. Strive for high things - or one high thing (6)
04. Works in the smithy - on counterfeits? (6)
05. It cuts - and tots up, we are told (4)
06. Rang up to snarl at one (4)
09. Wing flap in a role it is adapted to (7)
10. Make plans to adapt if for a different instrument (7)
11. Fish tea for a Cockney (4)
12. Take it off one's pay to join spacecraft in orbit (4)
13. The main supply of idle conversation (3)
15. Some old bird gave Mother nothing to hold (3)
17. To try a little sulphur is more than enough (4)
18. Uses mill to provide the Navy with digs (6)
19. Something uncritically admired by one who is against it (4)
20. Of course, this may serve as an aerial (4)
21. Not to give one a letter from Greece (4)
22. Fate shows the state of one's emotions up (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2617

ACROSS 1. Candelabrum 7. Preview 9. Punt 11. Crimp 12. Kipper 14. Pyrotechnic 18. Tinder 20. Elver 22. Mark 23. Absolve 24. Westminster
DOWN 2. Amenity 3. Lawn 4. Usurp 5. Spicy 6. Storm 8. Improver 10. Richness 13. Few 15. Involve 16. Stamp 17. Creep 19. Nurse 21. Sari

OPINION

{ OUR TAKE }

Rooted in present, looking at future

India must continue to engage with problems rooted in legacy and current economic realities while aspiring to ace the future

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's interview to the Press Trust of India — excerpted in various newspapers, including *HT* — ahead of the India AI Summit ought to be seen as an important outreach by the highest level of the political leadership of the country. In hosting the AI Summit, India is making its pitch to be an important stakeholder in what is going to be the biggest technological disruption in the history of capitalism as we know it. Modi's comment about this Union Budget's focus on things such as data centres and the need for India to not "be content with digital adoption but also aspire for digital leadership", is a signal to stakeholders both within and without the country.

However, what is also important for a country like India to not lose track of is the fact that it must continue to engage with problems rooted in legacy and current economic realities while aspiring to ace the future. Modi's remarks about issues such as inclusive development, ongoing reforms, continuing focus on rejuvenating MSMEs, plugging India's physical infrastructure loopholes etc. are a welcome assurance of the government's realisation of this continuing challenge. It is on this front that political stability leading to policy consistency has helped India the most. Among the most important remarks by the PM — he had made similar statements on the floor of Parliament earlier — is the assertion that India is opening itself to greater trade liberalisation from a position of strength. This is clearly an attempt to allay fears that recent trade deals, especially the one with the US, will create costs that outweigh the benefits that will accrue from them.

These pages have argued that India's economic prowess can only be revived with a policy approach that prioritises reforms on both the domestic and the external front in a way that unleashes creative destruction in the domestic economy to boost India's external economic prowess and generate mass incomes at the same time. There has clearly been progress on this front under the current government's leadership, but as the PM rightly says in the interview, "public life demands a certain constructive restlessness, a constant urge to do more, to improve faster, to serve better". India's future can only be improved by cultivating a bipartisan consensus on this approach.

Pakistan cricket is stuck in the amateur era

The broadcasters of the ICC T20 World Cup have tried really hard to convince everyone that India vs Pakistan is the greatest rivalry in cricket. But right next to that tag, they flash India's 8-1 record against their neighbours in the tournament. Something that lopsided can't be rivalry, but it wasn't always like this. There was a time when Pakistan more than held their own against India. In the 1980s, the two countries clashed 31 times in ODIs, and Pakistan won 19 of them with three no-results. In the '90s, across 48 matches, Pakistan won 28 times. Their cricket was always defined by raw talent and skill. For every talented cricketer who made the cut, perhaps five didn't. But with India operating the same way, Pakistan had an edge.

Then John Wright took over as India's first foreign coach in November 2000 and ushered in an era of professionalism. Things started changing for the Men in Blue even as Pakistan remained stuck in the old, amateur ways (something even foreign coaches have not been able to change). The gap widened even more after the money brought in by the Indian Premier League, arguably the best T20 league in the world, was invested back into the system. India now has 81 grounds that have hosted a cricket match. Pakistan has just 18 grounds, and not all of them actively host matches. The Board of Control for Cricket in India is political, no doubt, but it has systems and processes in place, unlike the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB). Between September 2021 and now, PCB has seen five presidents — and each issued diktats that destroyed the trust that players and people had in the system. Truth be told, the game has changed, but Pakistan has remained the same and unless they realise that, the India vs Pakistan rivalry will remain a relic of the past.

{ GRAND STRATEGY }
Happymon Jacob

Exorcise ghosts of the past to reset ties with Dhaka

Not only must New Delhi ignore peripheral noises from both sides of the border, it must leverage the mutual need for stability and show openness to create a balanced and predictable bilateral framework

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)'s landslide victory, coupled with its diplomatic overtures towards India, gives New Delhi an important strategic opening to reset ties with Dhaka, shed the historical baggage of the previous decade, and recalibrate India's broader neighbourhood policy.

Unburdening our relationship with Dhaka from the ghosts of the past is a strategic must. While the Awami League regime under former Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina was clearly tilted in favour of India, that tilt came at a huge price — the alienation of Dhaka's opposition and a bilateral relationship tainted by association with deeply unpopular rule. Given that past, engaging the new BNP-led government that has signalled a desire for stable ties with India is an important opening for a structural reset. PM Narendra Modi's congratulatory message to Tarique Rahman has set the ball rolling. Dhaka invited PM Modi to attend the swearing in ceremony of Rahman, but in view of his prior appointments, Speaker OM Birla is representing India at the event. Here are six steps to reset relations with the new Bangladesh.

First, economic stability will be the new regime's priority. The 2024 uprising and the interim administration's suboptimal performance left the economy in a fragile state, marked by sluggish growth, high unemployment, and a troubled industrial sector. To restore investor confidence and stabilise fiscal health, Bangladesh will need to deepen its economic integration with India. New Delhi must leverage this mutual need for stability and show openness to create a balanced and predictable bilateral framework.

Two, New Delhi must ignore the peripheral noise from both sides of the border: Foreign policy cannot be held hostage to social media outrage. The political hot potato is already on the table — the BNP's renewed demand for the extradition of Sheikh Hasina following her death sentence *in absentia*. While Dhaka views this as the process of justice, for New Delhi, it is a complex legal and humanitarian dilemma. Navigating this will require quiet diplomacy and a solution that satisfies Dhaka's political optics without compromising New Delhi's principled stand.

New Delhi has already signalled its pragmatic pivot by recognising the BNP's democratic mandate. By congratulating Rahman on his "decisive victory", PM Modi has effectively de-linked India's Bangladesh policy from the Awami League's political fate. This outreach serves as a quiet but firm rebuttal to Sheikh Hasina's claims from exile that the 2026 polls were a "voterless farce". While India is unlikely to extradite Hasina to face a death sentence, the message is clear: New Delhi's bilateral ties will no longer be held hostage to her personal political preferences. The ball is now in Dhaka's court; the new regime must look past the "extradition card" and recognise that New Delhi is ready for a partnership based on current realities, not historical loyalties.

Three, stabilising relations with Dhaka is crucial for India's broader neighbourhood strategy. An antagonistic Bangladesh — as witnessed during the recent interim administration — creates a strategic opportunity for regional rivals such as China and Pakistan, and even extra-regional players such as Turkey. The real risk is a pincer dynamic where New Delhi's periphery becomes a theatre for coordinated geopolitical encroachment by its rivals.

While the rise of the Jamaat-e-Islami and its historical affinity for Islamabad is a cause for worry, the most consequential challenge India faces today is not the anti-India slogans on the streets of Bangladesh; it is the structural transformation of the region's geopolitics. Therefore, New Delhi must remain focused on the principal strategic equations in the region.

Four, once the new government settles down to get the economy back on track, it will have to deal with more consequential and substantive issues with India such as water, connectivity, border management and trade. These may be less emotional issues but not without their ability to flare up tensions if not handled carefully. To ensure the early momentum isn't squandered, both capitals must institutionalise sustained, high-level dialogues. Proactive diplomacy on the 2026 Ganga Water Treaty renewal and an arrangement regarding border management will be essential if this reset is to survive the initial euphoria.

Five, New Delhi must build a broader coalition of like-minded States to secure its interests in Dhaka. While India and the US share broader goals in the Indo-Pacific, their approaches to Bangladesh have often been at cross-purposes. To manage this friction and counter the challenge of an anti-India axis, India must court neutral development partners like Japan, South Korea, and the EU.

Finally, the radical changes in Bangladesh's politics from August 2024 to February 2026 offers a sobering lesson for Indian statecraft. Playing favourites in our neighbourhood, tying our national interests to the survival of specific regimes or dynasties in the region is counterproductive. When a friendly regime falls, India's strategic interests

Once the new government settles down to get the economy back on track, it will have to deal with more substantive issues with India. AFP

take a hit. The coldest dictum of international relations — there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests — must be the guide here. New Delhi's pragmatic outreach to the Taliban in Kabul in 2021 and the military junta in Naypyidaw demonstrates an evolving capacity for foreign policy pragmatism. While it took us some time to reconcile with a post-Hasina Dhaka, the precedent the government sets is clear: Bilateral engagement cannot be a prisoner of moral or ideological preferences. In a region undergoing profound geopolitical transformations, sentiment is a strategic liability.

Dealing with an increasingly contested and restive South Asia will be New Delhi's most important challenge going forward. While India remains the structural hegemon of the region, that hegemony must be exercised with far greater sophistication and subtlety. We must become a smart power that secures its interests through institutional depth, economic integration, and a clear-eyed realism that is able to look beyond the rise and fall of individual regimes.

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The views expressed are personal

The case for India to join Trump's Board of Peace

President Trump's formation of the Board of Peace (BoP) has set the cat among the pigeons. The first meeting is scheduled for February 19. Based on the US proposal, UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 2803 approved the setting up of a Board of Peace for overseeing the Gaza Peace Plan. The UNSCR 2803 gives the BoP sweeping powers, including the supervision and implementation of transitional governance administration of a "Palestinian technocratic, apolitical committee of competent Palestinians from the Strip"; undertake reconstruction of Gaza and establish a temporary International Stabilization Force (ISF) in Gaza, "acceptable to the BoP". In effect, the UN Security Council (UNSC) gave *carte blanche* to President Trump to set up the BoP as he deems fit. And history has shown us, especially in Israel-Egypt and Israel-Jordan peace treaties, that sustained US involvement, security and economic assistance and close monitoring, are crucial for the success of any plan in West Asia. That's what BoP aims to do.

But when Trump did set it up, many have accused him of exceeding the mandate given to him by UNSCR 2803. One clear transgression has been that he has extended the mandate of the BoP to cover all conflicts and not just the Gaza Peace Plan. Apart from this, as regards other provisions of keeping the ultimate veto for himself as Chair of the Board, choosing the countries invited and constituting the Executive Board, it is ingenious to argue that he was not authorised to do so when the UNSC gave him *carte blanche* to do what he wants with the BoP.

On the other hand, India has earlier taken an almost subdued line on the unfolding human and humanitarian tragedy in Gaza. I have consistently advocated a more vocal and proactive stand by India, given our stand against terror, our support for a two-State solution, our proximity to Israel, and our huge interests in West Asia. However, when India's relations with Trump 2.0 took a hit, along with that, our ability to engage with the US administration on the Gaza conflict also took a hit. In fact, India sent a minister of state to represent India in the Gaza Peace Summit in October 2025, jointly hosted by Egypt and the US.

While Trump's BoP may seek to cover all conflicts within its ambit, realistically, it will now contend only with the Gaza Peace Process first. Consequently, shorn of an emotional anti-Trump reaction, purely from a geopolitical and strategic standpoint, the invite to BoP gives India yet another opportunity to reach out to the US president on an issue of importance to him (and to us), especially after having declined earlier opportunities to engage at the highest level. The fact that India and the US may have reached a trade deal does not automatically reset the

relations to where they were a year ago. India-US relations need more reassurance in a fragmented world. And India joining the BoP is a big deal, and the US knows it. There needs to be a quid pro quo for our acceptance to be on the BoP, and the US may be willing to accommodate India a lot more to have us on board.

There is no doubt that a proactive role of India will help bring balance to the deliberations in BoP. If we do not join, India will be leaving the field open for countries like Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and others to drive the agenda. Not everyone has India's interests in mind. Do we need to hesitate because major European countries have declined? Not at all. Their concerns are different — breakdown of the transatlantic alliance, the US coveting Greenland, the weakening of NATO, growing synergy between the US and Russia.

But what if the BoP starts dealing with the India-Pakistan issue? First, it is better to be inside the room when this issue comes up, rather than staying outside. Moreover, India is too big a country to be bullied into accepting such meddling by the BoP. And finally, what Pakistan does or doesn't do in the BoP should be the last thing that should influence India vis-à-vis our participation. The world knows better than to pander to Pakistan's anti-India designs.

The other fear expressed is that the BoP may supplant the UN Security Council in dealing with conflicts. First, a non-representative body like the BoP cannot displace a universally representative organisation like the UN, which is the only body where more than 100 small States have a collective voice. At best, the BoP may eclipse UNSC for a short period on Gaza.

As it is, the UNSC is paralysed thanks to two differing world views of the five permanent members. However, the BoP can become the geopolitical counterpart of another non-representative if influential body, which is the G20, since the US, the current G20 president, wants the G20 to go back to its core focus on economic and financial issues.

The real shelf life of the BoP is probably three years (though UNSCR 2803 says it will need to be reviewed in December 2027). By which time, Trump 2.0 will be over, and India can opt out without having to pay $1 billion. Joining BoP is not like entering *Hotel California* of The Eagles.

India has just reached out to the Arab world, with which it has the best of relations now, by hosting the second India-Arab foreign ministers meeting in Delhi. All this is part of a careful orchestration where India is poised to play a more active role in Palestine and West Asia, and shrug off its image of not getting involved in world conflicts. These are very positive developments. Joining the BoP will only be a logical culmination of these steps and ensure that India plays the role it was always destined to do — a voice of reason and pragmatism in and for the Global South.

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TS Tirumurti

WHAT IF THE BOP STARTS DEALING WITH THE INDIA-PAKISTAN ISSUE? FIRST, IT IS BETTER TO BE INSIDE THE ROOM WHEN THIS ISSUE COMES UP, RATHER THAN STAYING OUTSIDE

Budget's welcome focus on improving India's brain health

Union Budget 2026 recognises brain health and human capital as a strategic asset and an important component of the mission to Viksit Bharat. The strengthening of mental health infrastructure, human resource expansion, and digital health and wellness initiatives reflects a welcome move towards a human capital-driven growth model. Economic Survey 2023-24 had first highlighted the significance of mental health in personal and national progress. The 2025-26 survey also focused on human capital in addition to flagging digital addiction as a major public health hazard as well as a risk for India's long-term productivity. Recent scientific literature also highlights digital addiction as a major hazard for India's demographic dividend and growth potential.

Brain health refers to the optimal functioning of cognitive, emotional, and psychological processes that enable individuals to learn, work, interact socially, and adapt to adversities. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises mental and brain health as fundamental to overall well-being and effective functioning of people and societies. Brain health directly influences learning abilities, creativity, and skill development. Thus, it is a key determinant of innovation, and economic growth. This approach reflects a shift towards treating mental wellness as foundational for economic growth. Mental disorders result in increased drop-out from schools, colleges and absenteeism from workplaces. They also add to health care costs and out-of-pocket expenses due to under-utilisation of public health care. Poor brain health disproportionately affects poor people, deepening inequity and undermining societal development.

The transition from a brain-negative to a brain-positive economy has been estimated by the McKinsey Health Institute as key to unlocking $26 trillion in global economic opportunities by improving labour force performance, igniting innovation, and sharply improving the quality of life. The economic loss due to mental health conditions in India between 2012-2030 is estimated at $1.03 trillion.

India has a relatively high but underestimated prevalence of mental disorders. The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) 2015-16 reported that 10.6% of Indian adults suffer from mental disorders with wide regional and gender differences. Mental health conditions are more prevalent in urban metro areas (13.5%) compared to rural areas (6.9%) and urban non-metro regions (4.3%). India has the dubious distinction of having the highest number of suicides in the world.

According to latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), more than 1,71,000 suicide cases were reported in 2023, up 23.2% from 2019. The age-adjusted suicide rate is about 21.1 per 100,000 people, reflecting serious psychosocial challenges — digital addiction and lifestyle changes are major risk factors among the youth, with nearly 38% of young people showing depressive symptoms. An NCERT survey highlighted that 11% of students feel anxious, 14% experience extreme emotions, and 43% face mood swings. These are preventable and these young productive lives can be positive economic assets.

Mental health expenditure in India has traditionally been characterised by low public funding and high out-of-pocket costs. Consequently, the average family with members suffering from mental conditions often spends nearly 18% of its income on treatment. India has 47 government-run mental hospitals including three central institutions, NIMHANS Bengaluru, CIP Ranchi, and LGB Tejpur. Additionally, the National Mental Health Programme mandates 10-bed in-patient services in district hospitals in all districts. There are also more than 170,000 *Ayushmaan Aarogya Mandirs*, providing primary mental health care. However, India faces a severe shortage of mental health professionals, with only 9,000 psychiatrists (0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 people), 3,500 neurologists and 3,500 registered clinical psychologists (0.07 per 100,000 people).

Addressing this pressing problem requires systemic reforms, strengthening of mental health facilities across all parts of the country as well as intersectoral synchronisation. This must be coupled with improving mental health literacy with a focus on reducing stigma associated with mental health and bolstering societal commitment to improving mental health. This will not only enhance the well-being of our population but also help in realising our economic growth potential. The commitment to establish a new central institute, NIMHANS 2, in North India and upgrading the two other central institutes in Ranchi and Tejpur are much-needed steps that will go a long way in providing quality brain health services across all parts of the country. Budget 2026 represents the commencement of a new era, in which brain health is placed at the centre of India's growth narrative with a vision to achieve healthy Viksit Bharat 2047.

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Rajinder K Dhamija

Consumer awareness

Front-of-pack labels can reshape food choices

The Supreme Court last week asked the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to "seriously" consider introducing front-of-pack warning labels on packaged foods high in sugar, saturated fats, trans fats, and sodium, observing that such labels could advance public-health goals. The Court has sought a response within four weeks, effectively nudging a regulator that has debated the issue for years without finalising norms. Obesity is rising at an alarming rate and is now a major public-health challenge. The National Family Health Survey (2019-21) has reported that 24 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men are overweight or obese. Excess weight among children under five increased from 2.1 per cent in 2015-16 to 3.4 per cent in 2019-21. The World Obesity Atlas 2024 estimates that more than 33 million Indian children were obese in 2020. This is projected to more than double to 83 million by 2035. Parallel to this, India has become one of the fastest-growing markets for ultra-processed foods (UPFs).

The Economic Survey 2025-26 has highlighted that sales of UPFs grew over 150 per cent from 2009 to 2023, which is a major contributor to obesity, diabetes, and other non-communicable diseases. Obesity has nearly doubled during the same period, and the correlation is difficult to ignore. A global body of evidence, including the *Lancet* series on UPFs, links high consumption of such foods to obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, respiratory ailments, and even disorders in mental health. The implications are worrying: Rising costs of health care, lost productivity, and a long-term strain on public finances. India's "National Multi-Sectoral Action Plan for Control of Non-Communicable Diseases" in 2017 had recommended front-of-pack labelling (FOPL) to reduce the consumption of high fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS). Yet, despite years of consultation, FOPL norms remain unsettled. The FSSAI has delayed finalising front-of-pack regulations amid industry pushback and debate over labelling models.

Part of the problem lies in regulatory ambiguity. The Central Consumer Protection Authority's guidelines against misleading advertisements and the Food Safety and Standards Act prohibit exaggerated health claims, but they lack clear nutrient-based thresholds to define what constitutes "misleading" in food marketing. An independent study by LabelBlind Solutions found that nearly one-third of labelling claims across packaged foods were either non-compliant or they lacked adequate regulatory substantiation. Warning labels offer a more direct corrective. Studies show that simple, interpretative warnings such as "High in Sugar" or "High in Salt" are more effective in discouraging unhealthy choices than rating-style systems like "Health Star Ratings". Countries such as Chile have combined warning labels with marketing restrictions, especially for children, creating an integrated public-health framework.

Labelling, however, cannot be a silver bullet. It should be part of a multipronged strategy: A stricter monitoring of misleading claims, possible nutrient-based taxation for HFSS products, and restrictions on children-targeted marketing across digital media. Government initiatives such as POSHAN Abhiyaan (PM Poshan Shakti Nirman), Eat Right India, and nationwide awareness campaigns provide a foundation. In a market flooded with ultra-processed food options and persuasive advertising, the state must at the very least ensure that consumers receive clear warnings about what they are eating.

Unreasonable priorities

US wants Europe to help turn back the clock

The transatlantic alliance between European democracies and the United States (US) served as the bedrock of the post-World War II international order. It allowed Europe to shelter under the US' military umbrella while it in turn ceded the mantle of global leadership and all the associated benefits to America. This was predicated, however, on one basic assumption: That the two espoused the same fundamental political and social values. That may no longer be true, as was evident at this year's Munich Security Conference. This conference, traditionally a celebration of the transatlantic partnership, has been, since President Donald Trump began his second term in office, more like a documentary of its demise. Last year, US Vice-President J D Vance used the opportunity to upbraid Europe for being, in his opinion, unfairly tolerant of far-right views. This year, the chief representative of the US administration was Secretary of State Marco Rubio. His speech had a less confrontational tone, and it made an effort to stress the things he believed that Europe and the US continued to have in common. He sought to reassure European leaders through this, and thus was granted a standing ovation by the assembled leaders of the continent.

Yet Mr Rubio's speech should instead have been viewed as being as dangerous as anything Mr Vance said last year. When he promised Europe that the US did "not seek to separate, but to revitalise an old friendship and renew the greatest civilisation in human history", what the Europeans heard was the first part; but Mr Rubio, like Mr Vance, intended to stress the second. From the perspective of their administration, it is not modern liberal political values that Europe and America share, but ethnicity and past glories. That Europe has sought to move beyond this, that it consented in decolonisation and now does not seek to reprise past ages of domination, is in their opinion the greatest crime that it has committed. This is an odd argument to make, even leaving its morality aside. The US' own founding myth revolves around throwing off colonial oppression. Meanwhile, the European countries that had colonial empires in other continents — France, the United Kingdom, and Spain — are those that are the least receptive to the Trump administration. It is the smaller nations of central and eastern Europe — the former Czechoslovakia, which was subjugated within an imperial system for centuries, or Hungary, which colonised its European neighbours — where "America first"-style politics is more potent. These are not parts of the continent that played any great role in the age of Western dominance that Mr Rubio eulogised.

Two things seem relevant when this speech is considered in context. First, that it is not the past that the Trump administration idolises so much as the notion of ethnic supremacy. It is not the world that it necessarily wants to remake as much as its own societies. That Europe is not working as hard to be cruel to its ethnic minorities is seen as a reproof by Washington, and that is the basis of its concern that values between the two are no longer shared. The second point is the broad silence of the post-colonial world to the spectacle of a high representative of the world's pre-eminent military power calling for a return to an age where national glory was measured by imperial possessions. India, once the most articulate spokesperson for the freed nations of the world, should be mindful of its implications.

Modernising our society

Access to quality education and skill development is crucial for social equity in India, and inter-caste marriages will be the proof

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Spending gap
Monthly consumption expenditure gap in comparison with all-India figure (in %)

	Rural				Urban		
ST	-19.7					-17.4	
SC	-7.5			-16.1			
OBC		1.9					-4.2
Others			15.9				13.2

Source: Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23, Business Standard calculations

Modernising our economy and modernising our society are connected but not proceeding at the same pace. While the economy has experienced robust growth for four decades, the persistence of caste-based discrimination and isolation, and poor employment opportunities for low-income citizens are slowing the modernisation of society. The deepest root of social inequality in India is the hierarchy of caste and even religion.

Our traditional society involved a hierarchy between castes; a social separation reflected in within-caste endogamy and a division of labour according to caste-based occupations. In a way it got formalised during British rule, with the inclusion of several thousand castes in the Census formulation and the judicial enforcement of within-caste marriage under Hindu law. Inter-caste marriage was possible only by renouncing Hinduism. What is most damaging is the placing of the Dalits and Adivasis, who constitute about 25 per cent of our population, at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

The rejection of untouchability, the worst part of social inequality, became a part of the freedom movement. Even the elimination of the age-old ban on inter-caste marriage under Hindu law was proposed by Vithalbhai Patel in a Bill placed in the Imperial Legislative Council. The Bill was not passed, though the Arya Samaj Bill for inter-caste marriages being permitted among their members was passed. In fact, the modernisation of marriage laws came fully only with the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955.

The social separation and within-caste endogamy continue. Most surveys over the decade beginning 2010 show that only 5-6 per cent of marriages are inter-caste. Hence the vast majority of marriages, and by implication families, remain within the inherited caste. The Dr Ambedkar Scheme for Social Integration through Inter-Caste Marriages to promote marriages between Scheduled and Non-Scheduled Castes has had a very limited impact. This continuing dominance

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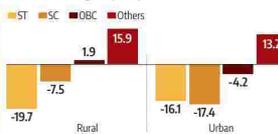
of within-caste marriages is an indication that social separation is still prevalent.

The inter-caste marriages that we see now are largely a product of social connectivity. They are mainly among non-Scheduled Castes, mainly, the top three castes. The basis for this social connectivity is the growing equality of economic status and activity among these upper castes. The integration of Scheduled Castes into the socially connected castes will depend on the economic status of the Scheduled Castes and even the Adivasis rising to that of the upper castes. That is why the principal instrument for social development is education and employment for Scheduled Castes and Adivasis, which would raise their work and economic status closer to the upper-caste level.

The occupation-based separation between castes has now been reduced but not eliminated. For instance, we continue to see a prevalence of Scheduled Castes for such work as manual scavenging, waste disposal, handling of dead bodies in crematoria. The Adivasis, by and large, remain isolated from the mainstream of the economy.

The key substantive challenge is to eliminate the adverse treatment of Dalits and Adivasis outside the caste hierarchy and considered the lowest of all. This is required by our constitutional provisions. However, at the social and political level, discrimination continues with the many reported attacks on Dalits and the isolation of Adivasis from mainstream politics.

The shortfall in the equalisation of Dalits and Adivasis with the middle and upper castes is manifest in the distribution of income and wealth across caste groups. The Household Consumption Expenditure Survey, 2022-23, shows that Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) monthly consumption is 7 per cent to 20 per cent lower than the national average. A study by Azim Premji University shows that the income earned by SC/ST relative to others is about 10 per cent lower for casual workers, 24 per cent lower for

regular workers, and 28 per cent lower for self-employed workers.

The distribution of employment among castes shows some key differences. In the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 23-24. The percentage of Adivasis with regular wages/salaries is 12.6 per cent, of Scheduled Castes 20.6 per cent, of Other Backward Classes 20.2 per cent, while that of the remaining higher classes is around 30.3 per cent. The PLFS data also includes those who are employed as helpers in household enterprises and this, possibly unpaid work, accounts for 29.7 per cent of employment of Adivasis.

The main goal of the modernisation of our society should be the elimination of persistent caste inequalities rooted in India's economic system, along with a truly vigorous implementation of the constitutional provisions we have on equality irrespective of caste or religion.

In my view, the most crucial need is for the equalisation of access to quality jobs and support for startups. The key lies in access to quality higher education, as lower-caste individuals and Adivasis with higher education show significantly lower disparity. Given the persistence of caste hierarchy in the minds of upper-caste individuals who still dominate senior bureaucratic and management jobs, a measure of caste-linked reservations may still be required for this purpose, for a defined length of time.

Caste discrimination in universities has been a major issue in recent years. The suicide of Rohith Vemula, a PhD student whose final words were — "my birth is my fatal accident" — and Payal Tadvi, a medical student, led to a plea by their mothers and the emergence of a recent University Grants Commission regulation on the implementation of strict anti-discrimination measures across Indian campuses.

A broader issue for social policy and development is the informal nature of employment in India. According to PLFS 23-24, only 21.7 per cent of workers have a regular wage/salary, while 19.8 per cent are casual labourers, and 19.4 per cent are helpers in household enterprises with little or no worker rights recognised. In fact, even among regular wage/salary employees, 58 per cent have no job contract, 47.3 per cent are not eligible for paid leave, and 53.4 per cent are not eligible for any special social security benefit. We have to correct this gross shortfall in worker's rights in the job creation that will come in our drive to become a developed economy by 2047.

Note also that better education, skill development and job creation are not just welfare measures. By including many more workers in formal employment and entrepreneurs in investment growth, this dimension of social development will also expedite growth. However, the main driver of moves to reduce and eliminate caste-based or religion-based prejudices must be the modernisation of our society. The primary approach must be a substantial improvement in access for the socially and economically underprivileged to higher-quality education, skill development, and support for startups. But the more complete modernisation of our society will come when these developments increase inter-caste marriages, which are the key to social equality in India.

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India-EU deal: From promise to reality

The announcement of a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the European Union (EU) is a major turning point — not so much for its immediate gains, but for what it signals about India's economic strategy. After several years of high tariffs and inward-looking policies, the deal reflects a clear recognition by the Indian government that exports must play a bigger role in driving growth. However, an FTA is only a framework. It creates opportunities, but it is not a cure-all. To fully benefit from this deal, India will still need significant domestic reforms.

The deal reflects the government's confidence that Indian firms are capable of competing more strongly in global markets. Where does this confidence come from? In part, from the sheer room India has to expand its global presence. Despite being the world's fourth-largest economy, India accounts for less than 2 per cent of global goods exports. Even a 2 percentage point rise in market share would effectively double exports.

Confidence also stems from global shifts. Supply chains are diversifying away from China, and European firms are seeking alternative production bases. With nearly 65 per cent of its population under 35 and significant untapped manufacturing potential, India is well placed to benefit.

Finally, the government's confidence also comes from the opportunity that FTAs create. The EU pact offers Indian exporters preferential access to 450 million consumers across 27 countries — one of the world's largest and richest markets. Alongside other proposed deals with the United States, Chile, Peru and the Eurasian Economic Union, it could help generate the millions of jobs India needs each year.

However, market access alone does not ensure higher exports or more jobs. To translate access into out-

MACRO PULSE
RAJESWARI SENGUPTA & ALICIA GARCÍA HERRERO

comes, India will need structural reforms that roll back protectionist barriers. Three such reforms will be key.

First, India's trade regime requires reform. Tariffs on intermediate goods must be reduced if exports are to become a genuine growth engine. Indian firms cannot compete globally if key inputs remain costly. They need reliable access to low-cost components, supported by streamlined Customs procedures and simpler regulations to minimise delays. Yet the recent Union Budget left most import duties unchanged, despite the need for rationalisation. India should also rethink its extensive use of quality control orders (QCOs), which function as de facto import barriers. Although a few have been withdrawn, more than 700 remain, disrupting supply chains and creating uncertainty for firms planning production and exports.

Second, while the EU FTA may expand market access, it will not by itself attract large-scale manufacturing investment. That requires a credible investment protection framework. In 2015, India unilaterally terminated around 77 bilateral investment treaties (BITs), leaving foreign investors with limited recourse in disputes with domestic firms or the government. A revised model BIT introduced in 2016 mandates that investors exhaust domestic legal remedies for five years before seeking international arbitration — terms few countries have accepted. As a result, India now has BITs with only a handful of relatively minor partners, while major global firms remain cautious about committing long-term capital.

The consequences are visible: Net foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows have fallen sharply, reaching just $0.4 billion in FY2025, the lowest on record. Without enforceable safeguards, European firms may opt to serve India through exports or modest assembly operations rather than establish large pro-

duction facilities. More broadly, modernising the BIT framework will be essential if India is to attract sustained manufacturing FDI.

Finally, India should seriously consider joining major regional trade groupings such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). These agreements go well beyond tariff cuts. They require members to strengthen domestic standards in labour laws, intellectual property, regulatory transparency and competition policy — areas where India needs reforms, but has found politically difficult to implement.

International commitments can help anchor domestic change. China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 shows how external discipline can accelerate internal reform. Joining high-standard regional agreements would similarly signal that India's policy direction is stable and long-term. That credibility, in turn, can boost investor confidence and attract greater investment.

India competes in a global trading system still shaped by China—a dominant exporter with deep manufacturing capabilities and highly integrated supply chains built over decades. In that context, the FTA with the EU is an important step forward. But it must mark the beginning of a larger transformation, not the end of reform. What India needs is a sustained commitment to trade openness. If it wants to become a global manufacturing hub and achieve its "Viksit Bharat 2047" goal, trade agreements must be backed by lower input tariffs, simpler regulations, stronger investment protection and deeper structural reforms. Global supply chains are being reorganised in real time. The question is not whether opportunities exist — it is whether India will move fast and decisively enough to seize them.

The authors are, respectively, associate professor of economics, IGIDR, Mumbai, and senior research fellow at Bruegel and chief economist for Asia-Pacific at Natixis. The views are personal

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India's shot at vaccine capabilities

BOOK REVIEW

NEHA BHATT

Vaccines have been central to India's public health outcomes — and indeed those of the world-saving millions of lives, reducing child mortality, and extending life expectancy. But when did it all begin? *Vaccine Nation* is a fascinating portrait of a journey that has so far remained largely untold and overlooked.

India's vaccine ecosystem came more starkly into public focus during the Covid-19 crisis. During the second wave of the pandemic, environmentalist, author and public policy professional Ameer Shahul turned his attention to how the industry developed in India and how the country became a global vac-

cine powerhouse. A little jab to protect us from some of the deadliest diseases has fascinating backstories — and Mr Shahul does an admirable job of uncovering compelling ones.

The result is a sprawling historical saga that travels back to colonial-era science, India's post-Independence ambitions and initiatives, and the complex, eventful transition to the global stage. When colonial-era patent laws were replaced by the 1970 Patents Act, it marked a turning point in India's pharma and vaccine industry. Indian companies could now reverse-engineer patented vaccines using different methods, making medicines and vaccines affordable and accessible. As a domestic pharma market rose, it enabled the large-scale production of low-cost generics by home-grown companies, pushing India towards its ambition of becoming the "pharmacy of the developing world." Its vaccine-building capability, too, multiplied manifold.

By the time India launched the

Expanded Programme on Immunisation in 1978, a vaccine strategy and institutional capacity were already taking shape. Mr Shahul notes that, unlike most developing countries at the time, India was less reliant on imports, with state-run production hubs in Coonoor, Kasauli and elsewhere ramping up manufacturing.

The 1980s were a period of "consolidation", when India doubled down on cold chain logistics, training for health workers, and disease surveillance. By the following decade, immunisation coverage was substantial but still uneven. Nevertheless, these efforts laid the foundation for India's immunisation programme.

Beyond institutions and infrastructure, the book tells the story of the individuals — scientists, doctors and entrepreneurs — who drove this transformation. *Vaccine Nation* is, in many ways, a tribute to their work. It also traces how Indian firms moved from being "backroom suppliers to frontline partners

in global health," eventually operating independently alongside multinational players and altering the economics of vaccines worldwide. The narrative comes full circle, from India's entry into the global patent regime in 2005 to the emergence of a mixed ecosystem of public and private organisations working on cutting-edge biotechnologies.

Mr Shahul successfully sets up these broader contexts while mining minute details, digging deep into historical events, shifts in science and medicine, and key policy changes across the book's five well-defined sections. For a weighty subject, the author keeps readers engaged with suspenseful anecdotes. Tighter editing could have made it crisper.

In Early Days (1875–1930), he begins with a fatal snakebite at businessman Cyrus Poonawalla's stud farm in Pune — a tragedy that turned into a groundbreaking business opportunity and gave rise to one of India's best-known vaccine manufacturing facilities, the Serum Institute of India.

The foundations, however, had been laid much earlier by French–Russian bacteriologist Waldemar Haffkine, who established the Haffkine Institute and

led pioneering cholera and plague vaccination campaigns in India, not without controversy, as vaccine politics began to take root in colonial India.

Other important figures such as Sahib Singh Sokhey — a medical officer involved in the development of antivenom to treat venomous snake bites at the Haffkine Institute — took India's vaccine story forward. More recently, there's Alka Dwivedi, a young scientist whose team is behind India's first cutting-edge, affordable CAR-T cancer therapy in recent years, yet who has largely missed the mainstream spotlight.

The book brings to light many such individuals who played key roles in shaping India's vaccine ecosystem. The author also examines India's major public health challenges, including smallpox, typhoid, tuberculosis, polio, measles, through the lens of vaccine innovation and the political, medical and economic contexts in which they unfolded.

VACCINE NATION

HOW IMMUNIZATION SHAPED INDIA

AMEER SHAHUL

Vaccine Nation: How Immunization Shaped India
by Ameer Shahul
Published by Pan Macmillan
485 pages ₹699

Importantly, it draws attention to the darker side of unethical clinical trials, often led by Western pharma companies, urging a rethink as India moves quickly up the global clinical trial ladder, surpassing the United States. The book reminds us of issues around consent, ethical oversight and accountability in our pursuit of vaccines.

The book leans heavily on a historical framing of vaccine development in India, with a lighter focus on contemporary geopolitical tensions, profit-driven vaccine markets, philanthropy in the Global South, vaccine nationalism and corporate lobbying that have played a big role. This epic account of exciting achievements and innovation has much to offer — and it is a story that is still unfolding.

The reviewer is an independent journalist and author who reports on global health, development and culture

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To avoid criticism, do nothing, say
nothing, and be nothing.
— Elbert Hubbard

The Editorial Page

10　　　　TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2026　　　　●

Rubio needs a reality check & a history lesson

IN ONE crucial sense, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio's speech at the Munich Security Conference got it right. Indeed, the year 1945 marked a rupture, the beginning of the end of European imperialism. What he did not say was, however, that it was also a moment of reckoning — of facing up to the horrors of the Holocaust and the nuclear devastation wrought at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and acknowledging the crisis, both moral and mortal, that the West had unleashed on the world. The global order that emerged in the aftermath of World War II, and later, with the fall of the Soviet Union, saw an unprecedented strengthening of American power and wealth. At the heart of this success, however, was not just its military might, but adaptability, openness, and the ability to make common cause with others. In practice, the US under Donald Trump — for all its bombast and bullying — appears to be agnostic in its deal-making. But in Rubio's framing, the Western, Christian "civilisation" is not one among others, flawed and imperfect — for him, it is the only one worth protecting and promoting.

Rubio's speech, a sequel of sorts to the one delivered by J D Vance on the same stage last year, may appeal to the MAGA base as a projection of American power. But for much of the world, it sounds like a superpower's anachronistic fantasy. Vance's speech was a blistering attack on Europe and the liberal values championed by many leaders and governments on the continent. Attacking migration policies and accusing governments of stifling free speech, he framed the "threat from within" as the greatest challenge for the West. Rubio's tone was different. He reached out to Europe, in order to paint an airbrushed and touched-up picture of the "Western" whole. By being apologetic for its "heritage" and the Christian faith that unites it, the West, he said, is sowing the seeds of its own demise. Trump, in this reading, is fighting a civilisational battle to protect White Christendom, from a range of its enemies, including migrants and former colonies.

Even from a purely "Western" lens, the mercantilist and colonial era was marked by war, conflict and uncertainty in Europe. There is no going back to the order that began to end in 1945: There will be no return to Apartheid in South Africa, no colonial ruler in India, mercifully. Rubio's speech is likely meant as much for a domestic political audience as it was for Munich. The message it sends out is that his administration's vision of the future is framed by both a past that never was, and one that will thankfully never be.

BJP shrinks House with its bid to silence LoP

THE FIRST half of the Budget session was not marked by rigorous debate or enlivened by sparkling parliamentary exchanges. It showcased, instead, a concerted — and disquieting — bid to silence the Leader of the Opposition. First, the Speaker and senior ministers prevented Rahul Gandhi from completing his reply to the motion of thanks on the President's address. Gandhi attempted to read out from the unpublished memoirs of a former Army chief, and the Speaker and Treasury benches insisted that the rulebook did not allow him to do so. The targeting of the LoP was unparliamentary. Then, late last week, BJP MP Nishikant Dubey introduced a "substantive motion" against LoP Gandhi, for being "hand in glove" with "anti-national forces", seeking the cancellation of his LS membership, and asking that he be debarred from contesting elections.

Dubey cannot be dismissed as that of an individual MP who has patented a provocative and polarising brand of politics. A substantive motion has been used in the past to suspend or disqualify MPs for criminal conduct, as in the aftermath of the "cash for votes" scandal in 2005. Rahul Gandhi's criticism of the interim India-US trade deal, on the other hand, is a legitimate questioning of the government. Dubey paints Gandhi's dissent as part of a conspiracy to "destabilise" India. This conflation of disagreement with being "anti-national", this equating of political opponents with enemies, is part of a disturbing trend that shrinks spaces for debate, both inside and outside the House.

The position — and voice — of the LoP is crucial in a parliamentary democracy. MP Dubey, and the Treasury benches, have every right to object to the tone and content of Gandhi's speeches in the House. Seeking his disqualification, however, reeks of intolerance. This is not the first such move — Rahul Gandhi was disqualified with unseemly alacrity in March 2023, following a conviction in a defamation case by a lower court; he was reinstated after the SC stayed the sentence in August 2023. Both then and now, the ruling party undermines itself, and diminishes the House, by being seen to use its considerable firepower to silence the LoP.

Obama hasn't seen aliens, but truth is out there

IN THE 1996 black comedy film *Mars Attacks!*, the aliens take advantage of humanity's naïveté. The Martian "ambassador" announces that he has come in peace and a cheering hippie releases a dove into the air, only for it to be vaporised by a Martian laser. The invasion follows. When the US President makes a stirring plea for peace, the Martian leader is seemingly moved, before killing him. The tactics of these bulbous-headed humanoids can serve as a warning of what was in store for Earth in reality — no, not an alien invasion, but an infestation of internet trolls and ragebaiters. If the Martians attack in 2026, they may find a more cynical world, and decide to approach with an offer not of peace but of "rare Mars" elements.

However, the fascination for extraterrestrial life remains as strong as ever. When former US President Barack Obama was asked on a podcast this weekend whether aliens were real, he replied, "They're real but I haven't seen them." He also said aliens weren't being kept in Area 51 — the classified facility at the centre of many UFO enthusiasts' theories. It sent the internet into a tizzy for a few hours, until Obama clarified that he was only speaking in terms of statistical probabilities.

Conspiracy theorists have never let a minor detail like lack of evidence stop them, and they're not about to start now. And Area 51 aside, the idea that life must be out there somewhere in this vast universe is fairly mainstream. The big question is, if the aliens don't come in peace, how can they be stopped? Music did the trick in *Mars Attacks!* and lack of immunity to earthly diseases proved fatal for the Martians in *The War of the Worlds*. Hopefully, they won't be able to survive the pollution in Delhi.

How Artificial Intelligence can become democracy's ally, not its adversary

S Y QURAISHI

AS INDIA prepares for its next general elections, AI has moved from a theoretical concern to an immediate reality. Deepfake videos of political leaders already circulate during state elections, while AI-powered tools enhance voter registration verification. With 970 million eligible voters, the world's largest democracy faces a challenge: Harness AI's transformative potential while guarding against its capacity for manipulation.

India's electoral rolls contain nearly a billion entries, with approximately 80 million additions, deletions, and corrections processed annually. Machine learning could transform this mammoth task. Traditional name-matching algorithms struggle with the linguistic diversity — where "Mohammad" appears in 15 spellings, or "Kumar" surfaces across millions. AI models trained on Indian name patterns can identify potential duplicates even when spellings vary wildly or transliterations differ between Hindi and English. During Bihar's 2024 Special Intensive Revision, manual verification took weeks; AI could reduce this to days while flagging anomalies like multiple registrations from single addresses.

Computer vision can detect when identical photographs appear in multiple voter ID applications under different names — a common fraud technique. AI can optimise booth management across the roughly 1,500 polling stations in each parliamentary constituency. AI analysis of historical turnout patterns, demographic clustering, and geographic accessibility could balance loads months in advance. Campaign finance transparency offers another frontier. AI can cross-reference declared expenses against market rates, flagging when candidates claim to have spent Rs 50,000 on rallies that clearly cost Rs 5 lakh. Computer vision analysing rally footage can estimate crowd sizes and infrastructure costs independently, catching discrepancies before campaigns end.

However, there is a flip side. Convincing deepfakes can be produced. Unlike broadcast media manipulation, AI-generated content can be hyper-personalised to inflame tensions. AI supercharges microtargeting beyond Cambridge Analytica's ambitions. Machine learning analyses social media behaviour, app usage patterns, and location data to identify psychological vulnerabilities. Instead of one misleading post, AI generates thousands of variants tailored to individual recipients.

Bot networks create artificial consensus, making fringe views appear mainstream. When 500 AI-generated accounts in a WhatsApp group all denounce a candidate, real members assume this reflects genuine community sentiment. Machine learning can even optimise traditional fraud — identifying which booths offer maximum impact with minimum risk, or calculating exactly which booth manipulations would be statistically unlikely to be caught in random VVPAT sampling.

Effective deepfake detection requires multi-modal analysis. AI-generated videos often show lighting inconsistencies or facial geometry irregularities invisible to human eyes but detectable algorithmically. Synthetic voices lack subtle breathing patterns present in authentic recordings. Metadata examination reveals manipulation traces.

Bot network detection examines social media activity patterns — accounts created in bulk with similar registration times, posting rhythms inconsistent with human behaviour, and suspicious content similarity. AI might flag 50,000 accounts revealing that 90 per cent were created within three days, all using AI-generated profile pictures, posting during hours when genuine users sleep.

Statistical anomaly detection in results can identify implausible patterns — booths where candi-

Unlike broadcast media manipulation, AI content can be hyper-personalised to inflame tensions. AI supercharges microtargeting beyond Cambridge Analytica's ambitions

dates receive exactly 100 per cent of votes, constituencies where turnout spikes in the final hours without corresponding queue observations. This directs investigators toward suspicious patterns worth examining.

India's election law predates social media, let alone AI. The Representation of the People Act, 1951 doesn't address liability for AI-generated defamation or prosecution of bot-network operators. When deepfakes originate from anonymous accounts and bot networks operate from overseas servers, attribution becomes nearly impossible.

Speed compounds the problem. During the critical 48 hours before polling, coordinated AI-driven disinformation can flood swing constituencies faster than fact-checkers can respond. AI systems often carry biases from their training data. Voter verification tools, for instance, might flag minority names as suspicious more frequently.

Immediate action requires establishing an AI Task Force within the Election Commission combining electoral expertise, data scientists, and cybersecurity specialists to monitor threats in real time and develop detection capabilities. Political parties should be required to cryptographically sign official communications, allowing voters to verify authenticity. Unsigned content claiming party origin should automatically be treated as unverified. Pilot programmes deploying deepfake detection and bot identification in select state elections could refine systems before nationwide deployment.

Medium-term reforms must update the Representation of the People Act to define AI-generated content, establish disclosure frameworks, create liability frameworks for deepfakes, and establish penalties for deploying AI tools for electoral manipulation. Long-term transformation requires redesigning electoral architecture, assuming that AI permeates all aspects — voter registration with built-in du-

plicate detection, campaign finance with continuous algorithmic oversight, and result verification incorporating statistical anomaly detection as standard protocol.

Beyond technical solutions lies a philosophical challenge: What does democratic participation mean when AI mediates between citizens and candidates? When every voter receives personalised messages designed by algorithms exploiting their psychological vulnerabilities, is informed consent possible? Yet, rejecting AI entirely is neither possible nor desirable. The efficiency gains are real. The ability to detect fraud at scale could strengthen electoral integrity. The opportunity to reach millions in their own languages represents democratic inclusion.

The challenge is developing an electoral ecosystem where AI serves democratic values rather than undermining them. This requires human-centred design where final decisions rest with humans accountable to democratic institutions. It demands transparency so citizens understand how AI shapes electoral processes.

India has navigated previous electoral transformations successfully. The AI challenge is more complex but not insurmountable. It requires the same combination of technical excellence, institutional integrity, and public engagement that has made Indian elections the world's largest democratic exercise.

The alternative — ignoring AI while others deploy it — would leave the Election Commission fighting sophisticated manipulation technology with inadequate tools. With appropriate safeguards, continuous vigilance, and commitment to democratic values, artificial intelligence can become democracy's ally rather than its adversary in India's ongoing electoral story.

The writer is former chief election commissioner of India and the author of An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian Election

At Mumbai climate week, time for questions and answers

AADITYA THACKERAY

THE BEAUTY of climate weeks, globally, is that they are bipartisan and honest — platforms where environmentalists, conservationists, enthusiasts, innovators, CSR advocates, and environmental causes come together with the executive and legislative branches of political forums. Even as Mumbai hosts a Climate Week, our city has been engulfed in some of the worst air quality over the past four years, with no significant action from the government.

In fact, every corner of Maharashtra today faces threats. From the mines that will now be opened up around Tadoba Tiger Reserve and Ghodazari Wildlife Sanctuary, to the illegal mining in the Western Ghats, the government endorses every action against nature. From the destruction of waterbodies to allowing builders to illegally cut trees in our cities, all is pardoned. From letting illegal coal washeries and fly ash destroy lives and livelihoods in Vidharbha and Marathwada, to letting trees be cut in Mumbai for hoardings and flyovers, everything is overlooked.

Let's see what the state's CM has to say about the narrowing and shallowing of the Mula-Mutha rivers; on the hacking of 7,500 trees on the riverbank; on the plan to flatten the Vetal Tekdi hill in Pune. Nashik faces the axe on the Tapovan forest and Nagpur on the Ajni Vann green belt. There is also the Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary where around 5 lakh trees are to be hacked to build the Gargai dam, even when desalination is an alternative.

The city's BEST buses have been made unaffordable and reduced in numbers. Builders have been given a free pass to finish off our open spaces — from gardens to the Aarey Colony and the Mahalaxmi Racecourse. There is no roadmap for river restoration and the ban on single-use disposable plastic has been eased. We want to hear our CM speak clearly on these issues.

MoUs, partnerships, announcements for ocean cleanups, and making industries and people adhere to green norms are one thing. But what about the government's negative

India can reap economic and demographic dividends provided we manage climate action better

impact on climate action? Announcements of electricity-guzzling Metro lines and tree plantations can't help in real climate management. The mystery of 13 crore trees planted a decade ago still remains unanswered. We need to know why the Mumbai Climate Action Plan and the commitment to net zero for 40 cities in Maharashtra were shelved by the government.

India can reap economic and demographic dividends provided we manage climate action better. The country's diversity, food systems, rural and urban life and livelihoods, and social harmony all depend on how we negotiate climate change.

At the national level, Paris Climate Pact commitments have been long forgotten for all practical purposes. Polluted states like Delhi are governed by those who blame the past for today's problems. The destruction of the Himalaya, the mindless plan to finish off the Great Nicobar region and, more importantly, the weakening of basic anti-pollution measures for thermal power plants are official government policy. Where do all these fit in the posturing of the Union government at a forum meant to bring like minds together for the planet?

A simple piece of advice from Gita Gopinath at the WEF Annual Summit 2026, to manage our pollution better, led to trolls calling her anti-national. I hope our platforms can be safe spaces for open speech despite an anti-environment regime.

The Climate Week is a welcome step to question our policymakers, make them accountable. It is also an opportunity for the government to learn from others. Let's hope that beyond the guest lists, receptions and media management, this is what matters to them. Only then will the Mumbai Climate Week shine as a landmark forum for honest and safe conversations globally. Let's pray that hope meets action and rhetoric meets reality here.

The writer is president, Yuva Sena, the youth wing of Shiv Sena (UBT)

New CPI index is less volatile, suggests long pause on rates

MADAN SABNAVIS

THE NEW CPI index with the updated basket of goods and services shows inflation at 2.8 per cent in January. While the number was expected to be in this region, the composition of the index merits attention. The weight of food items is now 36.8 per cent as against almost 46 per cent earlier. This sharp fall of almost 10 per cent is significant. But the share is still higher than that in other metrics. For instance, in the private final consumption expenditure data, the share of food and beverages is around 31 per cent in nominal terms and 28 per cent in real terms.

In the National Statistics Office's Household Consumption Expenditure Survey for 2023-24, the share of food is 47 per cent for rural households and 39.7 per cent for urban households. If values are assigned to the free food being provided by the government, the shares go up by 0.9-1.4 per cent. In comparison, in the new index, food and beverages have a weight of 42 per cent in rural and 30 per cent in urban areas.

It is interesting to see how the weightage of the food basket in consumer price indices varies in other countries. In the US, the share of food is around 13-14 per cent. It is at similar levels in Germany. In the UK, it is lower at 11-12 per cent, while in France, it is higher at around 16 per cent. In Italy, it is closer to 18 per cent. Japan probably has the highest share among developed countries at 26 per cent. Among these high-income countries, we find a higher weightage of around 8-15 per cent for education and recreation. As India continues on its development trajectory, it should also witness a similar trend. In these countries, as food has a lower share, monetary policy is more effective as several components of household consumption like housing and automobiles have considerable weight in the price index.

In emerging markets, while the share of food is slightly higher when compared to high-income countries, it is still well below that of India. In China, it ranges between 20 and 25 per cent. It is 20-26 per cent in Brazil and 17-18 per cent in South Africa. This indicates that none of these major economies has food constituting more than 30 per cent of the price index. However, in the case of East Asian economies, the situation is slightly different and closer to India. For instance, Vietnam is close at around 34-35 per cent. But this includes takeaway food as well. Malaysia is next with a share of almost 30 per cent, followed by Indonesia at 25 per cent.

For India, the decline in the share of food in the price index does suggest it will make headline inflation less volatile as food products normally witness wide price swings. This will have implications for monetary policy. Given that core inflation has been higher so far and has greater weight in the index, we can expect a prolonged pause by the Monetary Policy Committee this year.

The weight of food items is now 36.8 per cent as against almost 46 per cent earlier. This sharp fall of almost 10 per cent is significant

The writer is chief economist, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

40 YEARS AGO
February 17, 1986

Hegde returns as CM

THE 30-member Janata Party ministry headed by Ramakrishna Hegde swung back to power in Karnataka after five days of political turmoil unleashed by the Chief Minister's surprise resignation. Hegde and all of his ministry, which went out of office on February 13, were sworn in by the Governor, A N Banerji at a simple function at Raj Bhavan. This followed the unanimous re-election of Hegde as leader of the Janata legislature party.

Sarbat Khalsa's orders

A MASSIVE Sarbat Khalsa on Sunday annulled the decisions of a convention spon-

sored by the Damdami Taksal and the All India Sikh Students Federation at the Akal Takht on January 26. It ordered the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Akali Dal to end the "unlawful interference" by militants in the Golden Temple complex and restore the religious decorum "violated by them".

India-Pak on N-plants

INDIA AND Pakistan will soon sign an agreement for not attacking each other's nuclear installations, according to the Indian ambassador, S K Singh. The text of the agreement had already been finalised during the talks between the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi and the Pakistan President,

Zia-ul-Haq, when the latter visited New Delhi recently. Speaking at a reception hosted in his honour at the Karachi Press Club, Singh also disclosed that certain drafting exercises were going on in connection with the Indian proposal for a treaty of peace and friendship and the Pakistani proposal for a no-war pact.

PM on Indian Navy

PRIME MINISTER Rajiv Gandhi said that the responsibilities of the Indian Navy had increased greatly in view of the big power rivalry and "outside presence" in the Indian Ocean. He paid handsome tributes to the Navy's role in defending the country's sea frontiers.

● WHAT THE OTHERS SAY
Bondi's incompetence is the latest
insult for Epstein's victims.
— *The New York Times*

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

The Ideas Page

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2026

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11

To reclaim the republic, we need, first of all, a shared language and humility

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

DESH KAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

QUESTION THE world you must. Question its words if you must. But don't quarrel with the alphabet." Sitting at the feet of the Mahatma in Sevagram, I recalled this warning of my Marxist teacher to a group of young rebellious students. He was drawing our attention to a profound truth of communication: It is only by using a shared language, metaphors and symbols that we can hope to create new meanings and a new world.

I asked myself: Have we made the mistake that our teacher had warned us against? Are the liberal, progressive and secular Indians engaged in a futile quarrel with the alphabet of Indian society? We speak or think in English. We flinch at the mention of nationalism. Our alacrity in denouncing everything that our civilisation must be ashamed of is never matched by remembering things that we have reasons to be proud of. We are happy to name our adversary "Hindu nationalists". We participate in public spectacles to question the existence of God. We take pains to distance ourselves from anything religious, especially Hindu. And then we wonder why the people of this country do not listen to us.

Sitting in Sevagram Ashram, Gandhiji's home till the end, the message was unmistakable: Be the change you wish to see. If we want the state of affairs to change, we must begin by changing ourselves. We must radically change the way we think, communicate and act. This was my takeaway from a conversation among friends from diverse ideological traditions — Gandhian, Ambedkarite, socialist, Marxist, feminist and non-ideological — who gathered to reflect on how we can reclaim the republic in the face of the current onslaught.

The first lesson was surprisingly simple: Be positive. There is a stark difference between what people hear from the destroyers and from the defenders of the republic today. Those who are out to dismantle the republic speak in a deceptively positive language of new India, *aatmanirbharta*, integration, national unity and national resurgence. Sadly, those who seek to defend the idea of India speak a language of fear, shame, and doom. Our first challenge, thus, is to articulate and amplify the underlying hope in our vision of India.

There is so much to discover and celebrate in our civilisational heritage that we must not lose sight of in naming and shaming its rotten aspects. Civilisations are like rivers that bring stones, sand, and trash with fresh water. We filter it, but we do not refuse to drink its water. The same holds for our civilisation. Instead of focusing on all that is or has been wrong about our heritage, we must create new icons and be the carriers of historical memories and contemporary practices that infuse positivity.

The second lesson is that our constitutional values, the bedrock of the idea of India, need cultural anchors. We must enchant and re-enchant these values for each generation. This is something we have

failed to do for the last 75 years. Reading the Preamble or waving the little red book becomes a sacred ritual only if we connect the constitutional ideals with the moral language of an ordinary citizen. Liberty must be infused with the fervour of *azadi*. Secularism must recall the idea of *maitri*. Socialism can draw its strength from the concept of *karuna* and *raham*. Democracy can be traced back to the Vinaya Pitaka and the idea of *adal* or *maslah*. And federalism can be grounded in the idea of *deshachar*, *urf* and the acceptance of customary laws. The *svadharm* of our republic is an umbrella concept that offers cultural anchors to our constitutional values.

The third lesson is about reclaiming Indian nationalism. We must not carry the vicarious guilt of German nationalism and its siblings in the creed of driving that passes for nationalism in Europe. We are heirs to a positive creed, an ideology of belonging. Those who copy European nationalism carry out hate-mongering against our neighbours and search for enemies within.

Our nationalism must involve strengthening the bonds of belonging, defusing internal tensions, especially in the border regions with a history of alienation. Our national unity is not uniformity; it is articulated in and through our deep cultural diversities. Our nationalism must be expressed by addressing the concerns of those who fear exclusion, the linguistic concerns of non-Hindi speakers, by anticipating the regional imbalance that may result from the forthcoming delimitation and by an honest conversation about national security concerns from across the borders. Communal bigotry is antithetical to Indian nationalism; it must not be glorified by calling it "Hindu nationalism".

The fourth lesson is not turning our back to the multiple religious traditions that continue to shape ethical ideas and practices for an overwhelming proportion of Indian citizens. Secularism does not require citizens to give up their faith or set their religious beliefs aside in thinking about public affairs. We are particularly fortunate that India is home to multiple religions, multiple streams within each religion and multiple syncretic traditions. This vast ocean of ideas and practices offers us more than adequate resources to draw on all the ills associated with organised religions, institutional hierarchies, unjust social practices and bigotry. Religion is like a language — you can use it for love, poetry, or for vile abuses. This is how we must approach our religious traditions, including Hinduism. The idea that hatred against non-Hindus or oppression of non-savarnas is sanctified by Hinduism must be contested. Such practices must not be given respect by calling them "Hindutva".

These are not strategic lessons about communicative practices. These are ethical lessons in cognitive humility. Democracy is not just about respecting the voting choice of the people. It must also be about respecting their beliefs, their culture, their traditions. We can and are often called upon to disagree with their choices and opinions. But we must have the humility to speak to them in their language.

Was it the vicinity of Bapu Kutir that made this idea look self-evident?

Yadav, author most recently of Ganarajya ka Svadharm (Setu Prakashan, 2026), is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Views are personal

> Those who are out to dismantle the republic speak in a deceptively positive language. Sadly, those who seek to defend the idea of India speak a language of fear, shame and doom

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Summit places India firmly at centre of global discourse on AI

ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ

AS I arrive in Delhi to participate in the ambitious India AI Impact Summit, I feel an irrepressible sense of exhilaration — a feeling born of seeing a nation I have long admired thrive and forge a path to success for its peers. As one of the world's largest republics, encompassing myriad languages, religions, cultures and traditions, the country exemplifies a living, dynamic pluralism.

But what truly cemented my affection for India was my first exposure to its people during an earlier chapter of my life, when I worked in London in the 1990s. The lessons I absorbed then, far removed from the marbled halls of diplomacy and the clamour of politics, have helped shape both my character and my worldview. I arrived at work each morning before dawn and left only after 12 hours on my feet, often ending the day mopping the floor. It was hard, honest work, which served as an early apprenticeship in discipline and humility. The only people who worked even harder were the Indians I befriended — my manager, a Sikh gentleman from Punjab, and the Sagar family. The Sagars worked with an indefatigable sense of purpose. They were generous, spoke little of themselves, and yet taught me something profound about perseverance and dignity.

At a time when many Europeans around me were habituated to underestimating India and Indians, the quiet determination and industry of my colleagues and friends made me think otherwise. Those who dismiss India's long-term promise, I thought then, will one day be proved wrong.

I was reminded of this conviction at this year's World Economic Forum in Davos. Among the many voices in a discussion on AI was a perspective suggesting that India might occupy a "second tier" among global AI powers. I must respectfully disagree. India's approach to AI emphasises real-world deployment, ethical standards and inclusive innovation. As Ashwini Vaishnaw, India's minister for information technology, made clear at Davos, New Delhi focuses less on headline-grabbing models and more on effective application — from healthcare and agriculture to education and financial inclusion. This emphasis, hewing closely to the world's most pressing needs in the 21st century, underscores India's aspiration to be a trailblazer in applying technology for societal good.

The India AI Impact Summit places India firmly at the centre of the global discourse on AI. Its objective is to understand how AI can be deployed responsibly, inclusively and at scale to tackle real-world challenges. Animated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ambition to democratise access to the benefits of new technology, it seeks to ensure that AI is an engine of inclusive development and collective advancement.

As the leader of one of Europe's most promising economies, I am keenly aware of how much my compatriots — particularly the young — stand to gain from such an approach. Today, relations between Serbia and India are anchored in a history of cooperation, mutual regard and expanding economic ties. In 2018, to memorialise 70 years of diplomatic relations, our two countries jointly released stamps featuring Swami Vivekananda and Nikola Tesla — emblems of spiritual insight and scientific ingenuity whose legacies transcend borders. India has also been steadfast in supporting Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, including maintaining a principled stance on the issue of Kosovo.

While bilateral trade between Serbia and India — currently standing at around $400mn — has continued to grow, there remains vast untapped potential. Indian companies are active in Serbia across sectors ranging from IT to automotive components and manufacturing. These are encouraging indicators, but we can and must aim higher. Our shared ambition should be to broaden and intensify economic engagement through enhanced connectivity, simplifying and streamlining trade arrangements, and fostering sustained investment in innovation-driven partnerships, particularly in high-growth sectors such as information technology, pharmaceuticals and renewable energy.

There is immense scope, too, for cultural exchange. I would be delighted to see Indian films produced in Serbia, bringing to life our beatific landscapes and weaving together stories that resonate far beyond our frontiers. As I reflect on such possibilities, I return to the lesson I first learned decades ago on a London shop floor — grit, equanimity, and self-belief are often the strongest engines of progress. India has those qualities in abundance. I can also say that in Modi we have a partner who embodies them.

Those who still seek to dismiss India as a nation waiting its turn would do well to look again. India is not arriving at the future. It is helping to define it.

Aleksandar Vučić is the President of the Republic of Serbia

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AI's promise

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE is rapidly changing our lives, but the big question is whether it is a boon or a curse, and who truly benefits from this scenario. ('Artificial intelligence's larger promise — together, let's keep it', *IE*, Feb 16). It is certain that AI holds undeniable power in making things more efficient for us, but at the same time, its unchecked deployment can deepen inequalities. We need to ensure the ethical use of AI because technological progress without proper precautions and rules can be dangerous.

Anvi Jain, Jammu

AI summit

AS ARTIFICIAL intelligence increasingly shapes healthcare, education and public services, its development cannot remain concentrated in a few advanced economies ('Global South must seize its AI moment', *IE*, February 16). India's digital public infrastructure model demonstrates how innovation can be inclusive, multilingual and affordable. However, equitable AI growth must also address concerns of privacy, security and fairness. Governments must take the lead in fostering collaboration and research while having the interests of AI users, such as privacy, in mind. A more representative AI ecosystem is essential for balanced global progress.

Angel Gupta, Ambala

INDIA'S DPI offers a useful base, but stronger investment in research, local datasets and university-industry collaboration are essential. Skilling programmes must focus on regional languages and practical applications in health, agriculture and education. At the same time, clear rules on data protection and accountability will build public trust. The government should act as an enabler, encouraging start-ups and partnerships while safeguarding citizens' rights. Only then can AI truly serve inclusive development rather than deepen existing gaps.

S M Jeeva, Chennai

SC affirms women's choice, reproductive autonomy

SNEHA BANERJEE

THE SUPREME Court (SC), overturning a Bombay High Court judgment, has permitted a teenager to terminate her pregnancy at 30 weeks. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 2021 expanded the permissible gestational limits for women to seek an abortion up to 24 weeks under certain conditions. However, courts have had to decide on late-term abortions on numerous occasions and the outcome has been far from uniform. In this instance, the SC has not only permitted the abortion but also made some important observations on women's reproductive autonomy. It has emphatically stated that "the court cannot compel" completion of a pregnancy if a woman is "not intending to do so".

A prominent logic the Court has articulated pertains to issues of health. First, the Court acknowledges that a non-permissive, restrictive legal approach towards abortion does not necessarily prevent it. Rather, it compounds the risk of unsafe abortions. Therefore, access to MTP is crucial to reproductive autonomy. Second, given that there is no absolute "right" to abortion under the law in India, an important parameter for determining permissibility has been an assessment of "dangers" to health.

This, in turn, includes two questions — whose health and how health is understood. Courts often consider dangers to the health of the woman who is pregnant and/or that of the foetus. Globally, there are complex ethico-legal debates around the foetus's legal personhood, its competing claim to a "right to life" against the "choice" exercised by pregnant women. In fact, the now-overturned Bombay HC judgment held that termination of this pregnancy when the foetus was "healthy and viable" could not be permitted. In its ruling, the SC prioritises women's unwillingness over other factors. In so doing, it seeks to consider "mental trauma", and therefore mental health, on par with physical health. These very welcome moves foreground a health approach to reproductive autonomy, and move it away from the polarising pro-life-vs-pro-choice terms.

The case also puts the spotlight on the question of women and their autonomy in general. Notably, the SC rejected a similar petition by a 27-year-old married woman to terminate a 26-week pregnancy in 2023. How can this differential outcome be understood? The foremost issue here is who the woman approaching the court is.

According to reports, in the present case, the Court has referred to the pregnant teenager as a "child". She is reported to have turned 18 a few months ago but had become pregnant as a minor, and it is her mother who has petitioned to the Court on her behalf. The Court has set aside the question of whether the relationship through which she conceived was

consensual or not. However, given her unmarried status, that "this is an illegitimate child" is a significant observation for the Court. The arguable social illegitimacy of a minor's pregnancy outside marriage seems to have evoked the Court's empathetic stance. In its argument that minors cannot be compelled to see through a pregnancy, it sets a much-needed precedent.

The contrary outcome of the 2023 case follows from asking the counterfactual rhetorical questions — what if the pregnancy wasn't "illegitimate" and if the pregnant woman was not a minor? The petitioner in that case had, in fact, also submitted that her previous pregnancy had taken a toll on her mental health and that the pregnancy under review was "unwanted". It is amply clear that location, namely the institution of marriage, determines women's experience of what are otherwise fundamental rights. Indian women's sexual, reproductive, and general "autonomy" is overshadowed by their marital status. The "legitimacy" question ties the marital rape exception to the intertwining of marriage and motherhood. Therefore, the observation that "the mother's reproductive autonomy must be given emphasis", should become the guiding light in cases of this nature without exceptionalism around marriage.

The writer is assistant professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad. Views are personal

> The SC rejected a petition by a 27-year-old married woman to terminate a 26-week pregnancy in 2023. How can this differential outcome be understood? The foremost issue here is who the woman is

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What it will take for tech ambition to lift off the ground

SUSHANT KUMAR

INDIA'S TRADE deal with the United States marks a significant moment in its AI ambitions, expanding access to graphics processing units, deepening technology cooperation and encouraging massive foreign investment in data centres. Alongside this, the Union Budget's generous tax holidays for foreign hyperscalers signal that India is betting heavily on building its AI economy.

The short-term gains are undeniable. India lacks domestic GPU manufacturing capacity and remains heavily dependent on imports dominated by US firms. The trade framework helps ease these constraints by expanding access to high-end chips and helping India escape export-control restrictions that had capped imports of advanced GPUs. This is critical because AI innovation today is shaped largely by computing power. Although the current GPU capacity under the IndiaAI Mission stands at about 40,000, far below that of leading global companies, the government is betting that this number will rise to 100,000 by the end of the year.

India has also rolled out sweeping fiscal incentives to attract global cloud providers. Analysts estimate that the incentives in the Budget could catalyse tens of billions of dollars in data-centre expansion while lowering compute costs for start-ups and enterprises.

However, these policies deepen structural dependence on foreign technology providers. India is offering long-term fiscal concessions and market access without clear guarantees of technology transfer or domestic intellectual property creation. It has indicated that it intends to purchase around $500 billion worth of US goods over five years, including technology products and chips. At the same time, allocation for the IndiaAI Mission has been reduced from Rs 2,000 crore to Rs 1,000 crore. Experts have flagged the absence of sustained frontier research funding and long-term innovation incentives as a major vulnerability.

Rapid data-centre expansion raises environmental and democratic concerns. A hyperscale facility near Greater Noida is expected to consume about 160 megawatts of electricity, while global estimates suggest that even a one-megawatt data centre can use up to 25.5 million litres of water annually. In water-stressed regions, this creates competition between AI infrastructure and needs of communities, who often learn about projects only after construction begins.

To be fair, India's strategy reflects pragmatic sequencing. Building domestic compute ecosystems requires enormous capital and expertise. Leveraging foreign investment and global supply chains may be necessary to build early capacity. This year's Budget treats AI as foundational infrastructure. Yet, infrastructure alone does not guarantee technological sovereignty or equitable development. If foreign hyperscalers dominate India's data ecosystem while domestic research funding stagnates, India risks becoming only a hosting ground. If environmental costs and community displacement remain externalised, AI infrastructure could replicate earlier development models where economic gains were national but ecological and social burdens remained local.

The India-US deal is a strategic gamble. It delivers compute access and investment momentum, but without stronger domestic innovation investments, environmental safeguards and democratic participation, India may find that its AI ambitions are built on foundations that are economically productive but socially and ecologically fragile.

The writer, a former fellow of Harvard Kennedy School, teaches at Jindal School of Government and Public Policy

> If foreign hyperscalers dominate India's data ecosystem while domestic research funding stagnates, India risks becoming only a hosting ground

● EDUCATION

Bodhan AI: Centre's new bid to integrate AI tools in schools

Abhinaya Harigovind
New Delhi, February 16

EDUCATION MINISTER Dharmendra Pradhan last week said the Central government will integrate AI tools in teaching from the next academic session at all levels, from pre-primary to higher education.

The effort is propelled by the launch of the not-for-profit company, Bodhan AI, at the Centre of Excellence in AI for Education at IIT Madras. The centre was a part of the Budget announcement last year, with an allocation of Rs 500 crore.

What will Bodhan AI do?

The company will develop the Bharat EduAI Stack as Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) for education. DPI is a digital system that can provide access to services on a large scale, similar to UPI for payments.

The company will work to build AI capabilities for Indian languages and develop assets like automatic speech recognition. Applications will then be built and incorporated into schools through collaborations with state governments.

"These models have to be deployed on a sovereign infrastructure where you can just plug in these models into your existing EdTech solutions," IIT Madras Professor Mitesh Khapra said recently. "For example, the systems powering an existing EdTech solution for assessing reading fluency in English could be used to incorporate a speech diagnostics model in Hindi, he said.

He added, "We, as well as others (tech players), can build applications… The last mile delivery is where we would rely on government partners… many tech players [are] today building these solutions. But they are all plugging in models that are not Indian. They are relying on the ChatGPTs or the Geminis of the world."

What tools could be deployed?

Professor V Kamakoti, Director, IIT Madras, said that the focus will be on personalised learning, assistance for teachers and parents to make interventions, and for the administration to determine how schools are faring and take policy decisions.

"As a child, I need to understand… in my mother tongue… where I am going wrong, so that I can correct myself. We want AI to be able to do this," Kamakoti said.

For the student, this can mean voice-based exercises on a phone, tablet, or laptop, with feedback or reports provided to the teacher. The AI tool can then recommend exercises or personalised worksheets that the teacher can use.

Such services exist in digital learning, but AI is being seen as useful for creating a more foundational setup. Prof Kamakoti said it will "build the basic blocks". "If one of these EdTech companies wants to deploy a tool, we will have the basic infrastructure for them, and they can build on it," he said.

Funds will also come in through the startups and governments using the system. "The state governments will pay some maintenance costs. The start-ups will also give some equity in return for the services," Prof Kamakoti said.

However, several concerns need to be addressed. "We should be very careful about the data. Anything that the student puts in or writes is their personal data. We need to see that there is absolutely no data storage in a public forum," he said. As for the issue of high screen time among children, he pointed to voice-based tools as an alternative.

While Khapra said that "we will be grounded in the government policy framework of the National Education Policy of 2020", Karthik Mahadevan Mohanakrishnan, the COO of Bodhan AI, added that the research and tools will be based on NCERT and SCERT frameworks.

● APPLICATION IN SCHOOLS

● For the student, AI in teaching can translate into voice-based exercises on a phone or laptop, with feedback sent to the teacher.

● The AI tool can then recommend exercises or personalised worksheets that the teacher can use.

● AGRICULTURE

The cost of controls on the fertiliser industry

UP's ban on sale of non-subsidised fertilisers by urea manufacturers and suppliers could deter investor sentiment, industry experts say

HARISH DAMODARAN

THERE IS perhaps no industry in India as controlled as fertilisers.

The maximum retail price (MRP) of urea is fixed at Rs 266.5 per 45-kg bag, a rate practically unchanged since November 2012.

Di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) is technically decontrolled. Companies, on paper, can sell this fertiliser to farmers at market-determined prices, with the Centre merely paying a flat subsidy of Rs 1,490 per 50-kg bag. But the subsidy given to the companies is conditional upon their charging an MRP of only Rs 1,350 per bag, also frozen since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Even on the other "decontrolled" fertilisers — muriate of potash (MOP) and complexes containing nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), potassium (K) and sulphur (S) in different proportions — the companies have to ensure that the MRPs are "maintained in accordance with the subsidy rates as notified". The MRPs are to further be reported regularly to the Centre, i.e. Department of Fertilizers (DOF), with any "unreasonable" profit recoverable from the subsidy amounts paid.

And it's not just price controls

The movement, distribution and allocation of all subsidised fertilisers — urea, DAP, MOP and NPKS complexes — from the various plants and ports in the country is also controlled by the Centre.

The DOF prepares an "agreed supply plan" for each fertiliser, based on the requirement as assessed by the Union Agriculture Ministry in consultation with the respective state governments. The statewise, season-wise and month-wise plan is, then, shared with the fertiliser manufacturers and importers for them to make timely dispatches.

After the fertiliser is sent to a state as per the agreed plan for the particular month, the district-wise allocation, too, is decided by the government. In this case, it is usually a state-level joint director of agriculture who draws railway rake and road movement plans for individual companies — which district, when and how much material they would supply. Once a rake carrying around 2,600 tonnes reaches a designated rail head, the district agriculture officer concerned makes dealer-wise allocations. The companies are responsible for transport of the fertilisers up to the dealer or retail point on FOR (freight on road) delivery basis.

In short, fertiliser firms may be private, state-owned or cooperative entities. But the business they do — where, when and how much to sell and at what price — is entirely government-controlled.

The next level

The Uttar Pradesh government has recently come out with a directive that takes control to a new level.

The state agriculture directorate at Lucknow last month issued an order to all manufacturers and suppliers of urea in UP, banning them from selling "*gair-anudaanit* (non-subsidised)" fertilisers. The "*poornataya pratibandh* (complete prohibition)" order, effective from January 1, has been issued to about 15 fertiliser concerns.

These include the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative, Krishak Bharati Cooperative, Hindustan Urvarak & Rasayan Ltd, Indorama India Pvt. Ltd, Yara Fertilisers India Pvt. Ltd, Coromandel International Ltd, Chambal Fertilisers & Chemicals Ltd, Indian Potash Ltd, Matix Fertilisers & Chemicals, National Fertilizers, Rashtriya Chemicals & Fertilizers, Gujarat State Fertilizers & Chemicals, Gujarat Narmada Valley Fertilizers & Chemicals, Shriram Fertilisers & Chemicals, and Narmada Bio-Chem Ltd.

What are non-subsidised fertilisers?

Fertiliser firms sell both subsidised and non-subsidised nutrients.

Yara Fertilisers markets fully water-soluble calcium nitrate, sulphate of potash, mono-ammonium phosphate, mono-potassium phosphate, micronutrients and bio-stimulants. These are products designed for high-efficiency, targeted delivery of nutrients to the plant root zone through drip irrigation systems (fertigation) or foliar application (spraying in liquid form directly onto leaves for rapid absorption).

Chambal Fertilisers, likewise, sells bentonite sulphur, chelated zinc (containing 12% Zn), zinc sulphate monohydrate (33% Zn) and water-soluble NPK complexes (19:19:19, 0:52:34 and 0:0:50). Coromandel International, too, has a host of micro and secondary nutrient products from zinc oxide, chelated manganese and magnesium sulphate to boron powder and liquid.

All of these are premium fertilisers applied in low doses for high-value crops. Take calcium nitrate, which has 15.5% N (in both fast-acting nitrate and slow-release ammoniacal forms) and 19% calcium. Farmers typically use a single 25-kg bag per acre of it in sugarcane, vegetables, mangoes, bananas, apples, grapes, pomegranates and other fruits. This is as against three or more 45-kg bags urea per acre for paddy, wheat and other normal field crops.

Being non-subsidised, the MRPs of the above specialty fertilisers range from Rs 60/kg for calcium nitrate to Rs 70/kg for bentonite sulphur and Rs 90/kg for zinc sulphate monohydrate. Compare these with Rs 5.9/kg for urea, Rs 27/kg for DAP, Rs 29/kg for 20:20:0:13, Rs 36/kg for MOP and Rs 39-40/kg for other subsidised NPKS fertilisers.

The estimated all-India market for speciality nutrients is roughly 0.4 million tonnes (mt) per year. That is a fraction of the 67 mt for subsidised commodity fertilisers, with urea alone at 40 mt.

Logic of ban and implications

UP's ban on sale of non-subsidised fertilisers by urea manufacturers and suppliers comes despite these being notified products under the Centre's Fertiliser Control Order, 1985.

"How can they tell me not to sell an officially approved product? It also flies in the face of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for judicious application of fertilisers to protect soil health and promote innovative nutrient use-efficient products. Why will any company introduce such products hereon?," an industry source pointed out.

The UP government's move follows allegations of companies resorting to "tagging" — forcing farmers to buy non-subsidised fertilisers along with subsidised fertilisers. "We sell both through the same dealer channels, with urea and DAP bringing in volumes and the speciality nutrients generating margins. How can such cross-selling be called tagging? The ban will only open the doors for unorganised fly-by-night players pushing low-quality products with no proper farmer training and education," the source said.

Moreover, the market for non-subsidised fertilisers in UP is reckoned at hardly over Rs 1,300 crore, a tenth of the MRP value of Rs 13,000 crore for subsidised fertilisers.

There have been reports of urea retailing at Rs 400/bag levels. The industry, however, attributes that to falling domestic production amid the relentless increase in consumption of this highly underpriced nitrogenous fertiliser (see table).

● Rising urea consumption and imports

YEAR (APR-MAR)	PRODUCTION	IMPORTS	CONSUMPTION
2017-18	240.26	59.75	298.94
2018-19	238.99	74.81	314.18
2019-20	244.55	91.21	336.95
2020-21	246.03	98.26	350.43
2021-22	250.76	91.36	341.80
2022-23	284.95	75.82	357.25
2023-24	314.08	70.42	357.80
2024-25	306.41	56.47	387.74
Apr-Dec 2024	231.83	43.16	300.17
Apr-Dec 2025	224.43	79.97	311.56

ALL FIGURES IN LAKH TONNES; SOURCE: THE FERTILISER ASSOCIATION OF INDIA.

Urea being sprinkled in paddy fields at Bhanohar in Ludhiana district. RAAKHI JAGGA

Nature of regulation

Fertiliser firms may be private, state-owned or cooperative entities.

●

But the business they do — where, when and how much to sell and at what price — is entirely government-controlled.

● HISTORY

Reza Pahlavi calls for regime change: How his family ruled, lost Iran

Adrija Roychowdhury
New Delhi, February 16

IRAN'S FORMER royal Reza Pahlavi on Saturday again called for Western intervention to bring about regime change in the country he has been exiled from, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

Pahlavi, 65, is the son of Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah, and has lived in the United States since the 1979 revolution. Ever since the recent round of protests broke out in Iran, he has publicly urged Iranians to push for political change.

Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo told *The Indian Express* that for the last 47 years, the Pahlavi monarchy "has always been there as a strong alternative to the Islamic regime, especially in the minds of younger people".

A coup brought them to power

Before the Pahlavis came to power, Iran was ruled by the Qajar dynasty, which had governed the country since the late eighteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, Qajar authority had weakened considerably. Unlike its neighbour the Ottoman Empire, Iran had failed to modernise its military, leaving it vulnerable to foreign intervention.

Consequently, during World War I, despite having declared neutrality, Iran became a theatre of conflict among major Western powers. Eventually, Britain and Russia partitioned the country into spheres of influence. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Anglo-Russian understanding in Iran collapsed. With Russian officers withdrawing from the Persian Cossack Brigade, British officials encouraged its reorganisation under a reliable local commander to stem Bolshevik influence.

It was in this context that Reza Khan, a senior officer in the brigade, emerged as a key figure. In February 1921, he led a military coup in Tehran. Many historians believe the coup was encouraged by the British, and it eventually propelled him to power.

Little is known about Reza Pahlavi's early life before the coup. Historians attribute his rise to a combination of factors, ranging from his forceful personality to his imposing physical presence. Born into a low-ranking military family, he received limited formal education.

Once he was crowned Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi projected himself as the heir to Iran's ancient imperial past. At his coronation in 1926, the crown placed on his head was reportedly modelled on that of the fourth-century Sasanian king Shapur the Great.

He is best known, however, for his modernisation drive. Jahanbegloo said the Shah was deeply inspired by the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey. During his 16-year rule, the Shah created a centralised bureaucracy, a national army, railways, roads, and a secular legal and education system. He promoted Westernisation through dress reforms, curtailed clerical authority, and reshaped public life along European lines. The veil was forbidden.

At the same time, Reza Shah ruled through authoritarian means. Political parties were suppressed, the press silenced, and parliament weakened in the name of order and national unity. Dissent was met with punishment.

By the 1930s, Reza Shah had lost British support due to his pro-Nazi Germany leanings. In September 1941, Reza Shah was forced to abdicate and was replaced by his son, whom the Allies considered more pliable.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi differed sharply from his father in temperament and upbringing. Educated at an elite Swiss school, he spoke English and French and had a more Western orientation. As Shah, he was "terribly indecisive, and naïve". Jahanbegloo observed that these traits were largely responsible for the monarchy's collapse in 1979.

After World War II, Mohammad Reza increasingly aligned himself with the United States. He continued his father's modernisation project, though in a less overtly coercive manner. Repression persisted. The secret police force established under his rule, SAVAK, became notorious for torturing political prisoners. Secularisation policies further alienated the Islamic clergy.

And a revolution ousted them

Over time, opposition to the Shah coalesced across ideological lines. Leftist groups and the Islamic right converged in their rejection of the monarchy and Western influence in Iran. This alliance culminated in mass protests in 1978, paralysing the state and eroding the regime's authority.

In January 1979, the Shah and his family fled the country, ending more than five decades of Pahlavi rule. Three months later, Iran was declared an Islamic Republic, with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini assuming power as its first Supreme Leader.

Reza Pahlavi at a demonstration during the Munich Security Conference in Germany on Saturday. AP

Who is Reza Pahlavi?

● He is the son of Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah, and has lived in the US since 1979.

● His grandfather, Reza Pahlavi, led a coup against the ruling Qajar dynasty in 1921, which propelled him to power.

● SPORT

Badminton's proposal for a shorter format: 'The sport has gotten too physical'

EXPERT EXPLAINS
BY **PULLELA GOPICHAND**

RECENTLY, THE Badminton World Federation (BWF) dropped a bombshell: a sport, which has witnessed a fair number of classics in the 21x3 format (three sets of 21-point games), will now be shortened to 15x3 — a reduction of roughly a quarter of points contested.

Although the proposed scoring system will be put to vote at the BWF general meeting in April, a vote in favour is a foregone conclusion. **Pullela Gopichand**, national coach and former All England Open Championship winner, spoke to **Shivani Naik** about why he isn't opposed to the change, in part because it could've been far worse.

One would think you wouldn't be too fond of this scoring change.

No, I'm kind of OK with it. The sport has gotten too physical, and too many players are down with too many injuries, playing the 21 points. Somewhere, it needed to be shortened for their well-being.

Is it a cop-out to commercial considerations? Couldn't the BWF reduce the number of tournaments?

Yes, I would've preferred reducing the number of tournaments. But what will you take out of the calendar? They are trying to make the sport much bigger than it currently is (East and South Asia and pockets of Europe). Badminton needs tournaments in the US and Australia if it has to keep growing. And it needed a format that fits into this vision.

Badminton is far more challenging than tennis on that right. Tennis has the Slams… and singles is prioritised. Badminton can't dump doubles. Tennis can have long matches, because the players can rest and play on alternate days. The badminton calendar was getting too much in this format… Players were collapsing.

The assumption is that the 15-pointer will shorten match lengths. But won't players adapt? Isn't it possible that 15x3 also reaches the hour/mark?

Right now, it's reaching an hour and a half. 15x3 will keep it to 60 minutes, hopefully. Players will adapt and possibly stretch out 15x3 too… But I'm just happy they aren't getting the mad 11x5 experiment in. That would be a nightmare. I'd rather players play 60 minutes than 90.

Will 15x3 suit a certain style of play?

The game has already gotten aggressive. While top players will adapt, you have to be spot-on from the beginning. It will help those who can absorb pressure.

In a 21x3, players could open up and play or try four different strokes in a rally. Now you will see a safe sort of game. The level of skill won't be tested much, which is a huge drawback of 15x3. Players will stick to pet shots… Comeback drama won't be frequent.

Will it favour those close to retirement in prolonging careers?

It's a little easier for those closer to retirement or dealing with injuries. Senior Indians are anyway struggling, here they at least have a fighting chance at the 9th or 10th point.

What I'm worried about are doubles and mixed: I don't know where that'll end up. Earlier, you could keep lifting. Doubles gets tricky because serves become more crucial. Nobody will experiment.

Badminton swings from one player to the other depending on the court side, due to a draught in air-conditioned courts. How will that affect 15x3?

Usually, the first rounds are scratchy, with everyone trying to understand the court conditions. But in a 15x3, in drifty arenas, there's a risk of a game gone here and game gone there, and suddenly it's all over. If drift dictates wins, your real ability is not being tested.

In 21x3, there was time to cover ground. In 15x3, there's none, so you need to reduce the advantages from one side. So you need to standardise this change: perhaps equal practice courts available to everyone before the event.

Is there a chance the 15x3 might not get enough votes?

I think just the way BWF has gone about it, it will go through 100% this time. Last time, they were just a little casual, and many from the African continent weren't even clear about what the change being proposed was. This time, they will push it through.

FULL INTERVIEW ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED

Opinion

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2026

● **TRUST IN TECH**
Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

AI models, creators will have to take responsibility for making sure that the new technology is strengthening the trust rather than belittling it

A 'real' challenge

India's booming housing sector can't afford a regulator which appears to renege on promise

THE SUPREME COURT'S harsh words for the institution of real estate regulatory authorities (RERAs) should be taken as well-intentioned admonition. Chief Justice Surya Kant's oral remarks last week were scathing and carried the weight of unfulfilled promises for a quasi-judicial body set up nine years ago amidst a near breakdown of trust, transparency, and discipline in this vital sector. The CJI observed that RERA appeared to be doing little beyond "facilitating defaulting builders". Out of apparent exasperation, the apex court said it would not even mind if the institution were abolished. In September 2025 too, the SC had similarly critiqued RERAs' functioning, and observed that they had become "rehabilitation centres" for former bureaucrats, "who have frustrated the entire scheme of (the RERA Act, 2016)".

To be sure, although a legally empowered regulatory set-up for India's fast-growing real estate sector should have been in place much earlier, RERA was created in 2017 after legions of poignant stories about home-buyers being taken for a ride by unscrupulous builders and developers. The sector had come to be riddled with a huge information asymmetry and an absence of transparency that tipped the scales hugely in favour of the builders. Most projects were inordinately delayed, and possession timelines were missed by wide margins. In many instances, builders merrily diverted funds from one project to another, or even appropriated them through benami means. Things came to such a pass that the apex court had to take over some of the collapsed projects and direct state-owned companies to complete them, to offer a modicum of justice to the homebuyers.

The public outcry ensured quick establishment of RERAs. Projects above specified thresholds are required to be registered with the RERA and every prospective buyer now has got access to about 110 project-related parameters published on RERA websites. Builders are required to deposit 70% of the money collected from homebuyers in an escrow account. While the start was reassuring, many of these bodies have quickly relapsed into complacency and malfeasance. According to homebuyers' bodies, there is still no certainty that RERA-registered projects will be completed on time or that promises made to homebuyers will be fulfilled. These regulators have steadily relinquished the adjudicating authority they are supposed to wield. Instead of standing vigil and proactively enforcing justiciable orders, they often act as benign arbitrators brokering "settlements".

The importance of effectively regulating the sector cannot be overstated. Over 75% of household assets in India are held in real estate. In the 10 years to March 2025, outstanding individual home loans have risen four times to ₹37 lakh crore, and the home loans-to-GDP ratio has grown from 8% to 11%. After the Covid-induced lull, the housing sector has seen a sustained upcycle. Policy initiatives like the "Housing for All" mission and interest subventions have strengthened access to housing finance. Demand in tier-II and -III cities has surged, while it is forecast that 40% of the population will be living in urban centres by 2030. Of late, the housing market has shifted from volume- to value-driven growth, but the overall demand is seen to stay strong in the next decade. A higher degree of integrity and accountability among real estate regulators and greater standardisation of their functional parameters are essential for the orderly growth of the housing sector. The judiciary had to intervene as the political will doesn't appear to be strong enough.

● **BUDGET FY27**

IT HAS NOT ADDRESSED HOW TO PREPARE INDUSTRY TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF THE FTAs

Focus on fiscal stability

R GOPALAN
MC SINGHI
The authors are former civil servants

BUDGET 2026-27 FACED an external situation that is still challenging despite US President Donald Trump's decision to impose reciprocal tariffs of 18% and remove the Russian oil tariff. The Budget has been built on the advantages generated by rationalised goods and services tax (GST) and income tax rates. It focuses on fiscal stabilisation and *Viksit Bharat* 2047. The attempt at fiscal stabilisation seems reasonable, while more needs to be done on *Viksit Bharat.*

Keeping growth concerns in mind, expenditure compression is gradual in this Budget, with the fiscal deficit going down from 4.4% to 4.3%. However, we need to see the glide path of debt-to-GDP by FY31, as the government will be facing increased outflows in the next few years due to the implementation of the Pay Commission recommendations.

The Budget attempts to ensure that expenditure is restricted to its ability to raise revenues. Aspirations of revenue collections next year will be dependent on the nominal growth rate. Buoyancy assumed in collection seems to be in trend with the past, but nominal growth will play a critical role in determining buoyancy. Without 3-4% inflation, price, income, and growth assumptions may not materialise. The government must attempt to increase revenues to meet the requirements of expenditure through disinvestment and asset monetisation, bringing more people under the tax net with technology, applying GST to professions that are excluded, and taxing agricultural income above a threshold. The tax-to-GDP ratio combined with the states must be more than at least 20%.

The Budget has addressed the concerns of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). But a subset of MSME classification—unincorporated enterprises (UIEs)—has fallen off the radar. UIEs constitute 10% of GDP, employ 13 crore people, and have a 40% share in MSME exports. Their capital base was destroyed by demonetisation, GST, and Covid-19. We need a mechanism by which their capital requirements are taken care of without collateral and guaranteed by the government. Their vibrancy will enable an increase in income, contribution to savings, and the eventual investment in the economy. UIEs' rising incomes are an avenue for increasing savings in the economy as well besides being an incubator for entrepreneurship.

The Budget has not addressed how to prepare industry to make the most out of the free trade agreements (FTAs) that have been signed or are being negotiated. Our exporters will face many non-trade barriers. To help them to overcome these, we need to upgrade our standards as well as prepare our industry to face them abroad through education and the creation of additional testing infrastructure so that our industry is ready for the FTAs. A financing mechanism subsidised by the government should be established to enable industries to overcome the costs associated with the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). The operation of renewable energy certificates and emissions trading systems (ETS) must be overhauled for greater efficiency.

> Measures to enhance productivity such as parks, tax holidays, and corridors cover certain sectors only. A broader outlook for productivity development is desirable

The government should examine if the coal cess can be reformulated into a formal carbon tax or ETS-linked levy so that it can be used to offset CBAM charges.

The Budget has addressed advanced materials' manufacturing and labour-intensive industries with proposals to establish infrastructure, fiscal outlay, and taxation. A focus on hydrogen, chips, artificial intelligence, and biopharma prepares us to explore new horizons of industrialisation. However, a few problems persist. Spending on research and development (R&D) is still confined to the public sector. Despite the planned ₹1 crore expenditure for R&D, not much seems to have happened on the ground. Investments by industries seem to be only towards expanding existing capacities, except those in new-age industries like semiconductors and manufacturing (which the government had to encourage through huge subsidies). Tariff protection to industries does not help them in joining global value chains. As the Economic Survey points out, upstream industries seem to be getting more protection, possibly for a different reason. The monopolistic nature of our industries, especially in steel, cement, etc., needs to be addressed so that new entrants do not face a wall. Gross fixed capital formation in manufacturing has declined from 21% to 16%, and the aspiration of increasing the share of manufacturing in GDP to 25% remains somewhat difficult at this juncture. Revamping Skill Development Councils and the Skill Development Corporation for skilled personnel is required, as these have not delivered to their potential.

Vocational training and internship also need attention, as the outlay has not been utilised proportionately. A lot of thought has gone into having academic and vocational streams in schools. We must accelerate efforts to significantly improve the establishment of vocational streams. It will not only enable the demographic dividend to yield benefits but also reduce youth unemployment. Countries like Germany offered to help us in this regard. The vision of revamping industrial training institutes and putting the industry in charge seems difficult to actualise, and it must be realised.

The Budget is also a vehicle to indicate the government's intentions. Reforms are a part of it. Reforms in land acquisition fell prey to politics despite the best intentions, and so did agricultural reforms. States should be incentivised purposefully to take them forward. Surveys conducted with modern equipment to clearly delineate field areas and establish their ownership will go a long way in creating certainty for economic agents.

The Economic Survey has clearly indicated that even a potential growth of 7% is contingent on achieving a 7.6% growth in capital stock and a total factor productivity (TFP) growth of 1.9%. TFP growth during 2023-24, according to the capital, labour, energy, materials, and services (KLEMS) data, was only 0.6%, with manufacturing seeing negative growth. Measures to enhance productivity such as parks, tax holidays, and corridors cover certain sectors only. A broader outlook for productivity development is desirable.

Musk is beating China's 203,000 paper satellites

IF ORBITAL SPACE is the 21st century's high seas, China looks to be preparing an armada. Government plans submitted late last year to the United Nations' International Telecommunications Union, or ITU, promise a fleet of 203,000 satellites to be deployed by the mid-2030s. That would dwarf the ambitions of Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos: SpaceX's Starlink network has nearly 10,000 orbiters so far, while Amazon.com's Leo constellation will top out at just 3,232.

While there's undoubtedly a land grab underway 600 km above the ground, it's one that Musk is winning. China's plans are best understood not as a genuine expansion, but a bid to hobble the front-runner. The number of objects orbiting the earth is rising at breakneck speed. Two key innovations—reusable rockets like SpaceX's Falcon 9, and the development of reusable and lightweight components that enable smaller craft—have slashed launch costs. Since 2020, the number of orbiters has quadrupled to more than 16,000. SpaceX alone is adding more than 2,000 satellites a year.

Putting too many objects in orbit carries a host of potential problems. The most nightmarish is Kessler syndrome, the chain reaction that strands Sandra Bullock in the 2013 film *Gravity*. One disintegrating orbiter forms a cloud of debris, in turn smashing up other vehicles, until Earth is surrounded by an asteroid belt of scrap.

The more prosaic and pressing issue is that too many communication satellites might cause radio interference. The so-called megaconstellations being built by SpaceX and Leo float in Low Earth Orbit, closer than the far smaller number of GPS, weather, and communications craft in Medium Earth Orbit and geostationary space. In that position, they risk blocking the signals from more distant orbiters.

How near are we to that point? Closer than you think. There is about the same density of active satellites at the best altitude for megaconstellations as there are pieces of space debris, the European Space Agency said in October. There may only be enough room at these levels for just 148,000 objects, according to one study last year. If just four space programmes hit SpaceX's current launch cadence of more than 2,000 orbiters a year, we could reach that number by the late 2030s.

DAVID FICKLING
Bloomberg

That's the best context to assess China's 203,000-device plan. Many will be "paper satellites" designed to create a regulatory hurdle for Musk and other megaconstellation builders, Evan Grey, a contributor to website *SatNews*, argued last month. They don't have to enter orbit until the early 2030s, and the only penalty if they're never launched is that China will lose the "slots" it's reserving. But the ITU counts them as real, and has implications for the way rivals must mitigate radio interference.

"Western engineers are forced to design real hardware to dodge the 'ghost noise' of Chinese paper satellites," Grey wrote, "effectively throttling the power and performance of US networks before they even launch."

One 2023 study found governments had proposed launching a million orbiters in the previous few years. About 454,000 of that total was linked to serial entrepreneur Greg Wyler—a sometime associate of Musk as well as of Jeffrey Epstein, who advised Wyler on the creation of OneWeb. OneWeb, which Wyler left after a 2020 bankruptcy, is the most serious competitor to Starlink, with about 600 in space against its 9,646.

Until a rival can develop a reusable rocket to match the low cost and rapid launch cadence of SpaceX's Falcon 9, the only weapon they can deploy in this 21st century space race is delaying tactics at a UN agency in Geneva. China has nearly half a dozen firms, private and state-owned, racing to developing reusable rockets. But with every month that goes by, SpaceX creates hundreds more facts on (or, rather, off) the ground.

The touted $1.5 trillion upkeep mooted for SpaceX's listing this year might seem extravagant. But Musk, Bezos, and Wyler are all betting that the future of the internet and communications depends not on overloaded terrestrial systems, but mega-constellations in Low Earth Orbit. China seems to have made the same assessment. If that wager is right, Starlink's commanding lead in space might justify its valuation.

Desi AI: A blueprint for leadership

INDER GOPAL
D MANJUNATH
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The path to Desi AI is to emulate the Internet and the UPI, where the government builds the rails and the private sector runs the trains

ANTHROPIC'S RELEASE OF Claude Cowork and Claude Code triggered a sharp dip in Indian IT stocks, signalling a vastly changed technology ecosystem. India's manpower-intensive services companies are clearly under threat from artificial intelligence (AI), and a transition to an intellectual property-driven future leveraging AI is now an existential necessity. When confronted in Davos recently with the label "second-tier AI power", Union Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw gave a thoughtful riposte, laying out a layered AI taxonomy and arguing that leadership in many of the layers makes India decidedly not second tier. While this assertion is sound, the underlying anxiety is real—Indians aspire to a indigenous or desi AI that is an unequivocal global leader. The key question about realising this aspiration is not if the government should be involved, but how. We answer this through a careful examination of historical successes and failures in governance of technology development—from Tokyo to Washington, and from Centre For Development Of Telematics (C-DoT) to United Payments Interface (UPI).

Many well-intentioned government projects fail due to a misunderstanding of technological evolution. In the early 1980s, Japan's manufacturing engine, powered by the ministry of international trade and industry (MITI), was unstoppable. Buoyed by this success, MITI launched the ambitious Fifth Generation Computer Systems (FGCS) project with a massive 10-year budget. They mobilised universities and corporations to develop native hardware for AI. Initial momentum was high and fear of Japanese prowess caused tremors in the US as it contemplated losing its technological lead. However, FGCS ended in failure, set Japan's computer industry back, and contributed to its "lost decade".

What went wrong? FGCS was driven by planners and policymakers building for the present not for the future. Borrowing a football metaphor, MITI was "running to where the ball is and not where the ball will be". Their hubris and a docile community following their lead drove the project down a dead-end path. This provides a stark lesson—non-technologists cannot and should not micro-manage technology innovation.

The development of the internet in the US offers a contrasting blueprint for success. In the 1960s, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) sought a resilient communication system and funded a radical proposal for a "packet switched" network from Paul Baran, a technologist at the RAND Corporation. Amid scepticism from many, DARPA handed control to technologists such as David Clark from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who collectively established Internet's core principles. Clark's guiding mantra—rough consensus and working code—prioritising practical functionality and adaptability over rigid, bureaucratic specifications and standards, is still the principle of Internet evolution.

Taiwan followed a similar trajectory for its semiconductor industry. They recruited Maurice Chang, an Intel executive, to lead their investment in chip foundries. His insight to use bleeding-edge R&D to create a "pure-play foundry" paid off at Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Limited (TSMC), transforming global chip manufacturing in a way that no industry outsider could have. Clearly, government must appoint the right experts in decision-making roles. DARPA routinely hires external experts to manage programmes rather than generalist administrators. India must similarly ensure that experts are in charge, not merely advisers without power or risk of failure.

> Avoid the trap of administrative generalists running technical programmes. Recruit domain experts and empower them to make decisions and take risks

The government's role is best viewed as the first runner in a relay race. Provide a vision and assume initial risks that may be too high for commercial entities, possibly creating the first version of a solution. Then the baton must be passed to the private sector, unleashing their "animal spirits" to take innovations to the finish line. India Stack and the UPI are testaments to what is achieved when the government provides a vision and puts the right people in charge; here the government provided the infrastructure, policy, and regulatory support, but allowed the ecosystem to flourish.

The baton exchange to the private sector is where many projects fail. A prominent example is C-DoT. Tasked with modernising India's telecom infrastructure, C-DoT had early successes with microprocessor-based exchanges that worked in India's harsh conditions of heat, humidity, and dust. But when the "dog caught the car"—after the technology was shown to work—non-technologists stepped in to "manage" the process, licensing only a hardware specification and matching object code to manufacturers. This meant private companies competed on manufacturing efficiency and not on innovation. Animal spirits were unleashed, but the beast was on a leash.

Contrast this with China, where Huawei and ZTE started around the same time as C-DoT. They were encouraged to collaborate, co-develop, and eventually compete with multinationals. Internal competition was nurtured, regulatory help was provided, and today they are global giants. C-DoT lost momentum when control passed to non-technologists.

To ensure India's position as a top-tier AI power, the government must synthesise these and other lessons into a coherent strategy. We humbly suggest a tech-governance *panchshila*.

First, enable, don't direct. Provide broad objectives and let the best minds determine the trajectory. Micro-management causes stagnation, but broad vision leads to innovation.

Second, establish expert leadership. Avoid the trap of administrative generalists running technical programmes. Recruit domain experts and empower them to make decisions and take risks, like TSMC and DARPA did.

Third, provide strategic funding, not corporate charity. Fund innovation and risk-taking and resist the temptation to flood the ecosystem with capital. Funding start-ups just for the sake of it leads to mediocrity and a "dumbed down" start-up ecosystem.

Fourth, embrace open-source. Open-source is a "rising tide" raising all boats and must be preferred over closed, nationalist silos. Regional language large language models are valuable, but such projects alone cannot make India a global leader. We must contribute to, not just benefit from, global commons.

Finally, and most importantly, have patience. Recognise that good things take time. Copycat technologies are often several years too late and will most likely provide only short-term headlines.

The path to Desi AI is to emulate the Internet and the UPI, where the government builds the rails and the private sector runs the trains. Provide a vision, put experts in charge, fund genuine risk, and step back for private sector innovation. The relay race must be executed without tying the runner's legs.

Views are personal

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Labubu Test Will Not Be Child's Play

China may struggle to enforce IP protection

China is facing a new problem as it enters the Year of the Horse today. Accustomed to blithely violating intellectual property (IP) rights for decades, it now must try to stop copycats from stealing its ideas. Labubu, a 6-inch doll created by Chinese toymaker Pop Mart that has become quite the rage, is spawning an army of knockoffs. Officials are cracking down in typical Chinese fashion on fakes, but the larger question remains: will this latest outbreak of copying alter Beijing's attitude towards IPR protection? The short answer is no. China has too many factories chasing too few ideas. A winning product will find its way onto the shop floors of competitors. It doesn't matter who came up with the successful notion in the first place.

There are areas such as electric mobility and RE where China has made serious technological advances that need protection globally. It is, by some accounts, rapidly closing the gap with the US in the AI race. These are endeavours that need a robust IPR regime. China's research output has surged qualitatively and quantitatively, and one of the factors that help sustain the momentum is copyright protection. But the regime must be uniform. There can't be one set of rules for high-end manufacturing and another for toymakers. Policymakers will have to get a fix on the issue if they intend to pursue an investment-led growth strategy that creates excess manufacturing capacity.

The amount of technical innovation happening in China calls for a stronger global IPR framework. The easy option would be to harmonise the Chinese regime with that of other advanced economies before the former acquires technical superiority across a broad spectrum. But the Chinese economy is in transition and may find it difficult to adjust to a new order. Chances are China's leadership will protect strategically important technological advancements while ignoring the travails of toymakers.

Dhaka-Delhi, Enter The Pragmatic Phase

The arc of Bangladesh's recent political upheaval has come full circle. What began with 'India-friendly' Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024, has culminated in BNP leader Tarique Rahman, son of former PM Khaleda Zia, taking oath as PM today. BNP winning 212 of 297 seats marks not just a transfer of power, but a strategic inflection point in Dhaka-New Delhi relations. Rahman's reported insistence on reaching out to India's leadership despite alleged resistance from outgoing chief adviser of the caretaker government Muhammad Yunus is a sign of maturity, as is his avoidance of referring to India when questioned about frayed bilateral ties. India must reciprocate with equal nuance.

The other positive take has been the Jamaat-e-Islami-led alliance, punching above its weight during the interim phase, being limited to 68 seats. India must read the tea leaves and engage fruitfully with BNP and Rahman, who has, in the spirit of the times, articulated a 'Bangladesh First' policy premised on equidistance among regional powers. India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy speaks of equal partnership. This can be made more proactive now. The 2001-06 BNP government — when Jamaat was a coalition partner and Rahman seen as a 'parallel' power centre — marked the lowest ebb in bilateral ties. This time, both sides have much to gain by keeping an even keel.

A genuine reset of relationship will require substance: progress on trade and investment, movement on Teesta waters, credible minority protection, curbs on Islamic radicalism and anti-India rhetoric, and stronger border management. Durable stability will depend on both sides choosing sustained pragmatism over short-termism and playing to the gallery. Rahman's tenure as PM could bring about that pragmatism.

JUST IN JEST

It's remarkable how people fall for this dud propped up as a 'rivalry'

The Great India v. Pakistan Cricket Con

You can kid yourself as much as you want, but India's win over Pakistan in Sunday's game — the former's 8th victory vs the latter's 1 in T20 World Cup matches — really should slap you awake to the fact that India v. Pakistan cricket isn't just dead rubber, but dead rubber duckie. It's the brand equivalent of milk left out in May — curdled, sour, and yet still marketed as 'premium rivalry'. Once upon a time, sure, it was gladiatorial theatre. Now, it's a limp hand of a buried body still being sold as a high five.

It's a bit sad, really. Not the fact that every match is dressed up as Armageddon, while the vibe is closer to two uncles playing carrom at a wedding, but the fact that people also fall for the gag. Broadcasters still roll out sepia montages of Wasim Akram and Sachin Tendulkar, as if VHS tapes can resurrect adrenaline. To keep this zombie brand alive, custodians deploy increasingly desperate tricks: 'The clash of titans!' taglines and borrowing geopolitical narratives to scrape the pot. The true rivalry now is between marketing departments and reality. India v. Pakistan cricket isn't a rivalry any more, but nostalgic running between the wickets with a PR budget. And like all exhibits, it survives not on relevance but on the fact that dupes still gather to see the embalmed spectacle. What next? Prop up India v. China antakshari contests?

The US deal doesn't compromise national interest, but brings us big benefits of trade liberalisation

Freeing Ourselves to Trade

Arvind Panagariya

New York: With its focus on questions such as 'Did India lose its strategic autonomy by agreeing not to buy Russian oil?', 'Did it compromise the nation's interest by exchanging zero duty on imports for 18% duty on exports?', and 'Did it sacrifice interests of farmers by agreeing to liberalise agriculture?', Indian media has failed to perform its duty to satisfactorily inform the nation on what has been a historic breakthrough in trade negotiations with the US.

To understand what is at stake in these negotiations, let's begin with the geopolitics. India is surrounded by unfriendly, hostile and extremely hostile neighbours along its entire land border. One of these hostile neighbours is also one of only two superpowers. Under such circumstances, what best serves India's interest: making every effort to bring the relationship with the world's only other superpower back on track? Or grandstanding by refusing to negotiate except exclusively on its own terms?

India can take pride in how its leaders have navigated negotiations despite the ground constantly shifting beneath their feet. In a year when leaders of almost all major nations, except China and arguably Russia, suffered indignity or worse at the hands of Donald Trump, even as they granted nearly all the concessions the latter sought, Narendra Modi has patiently moved his pieces on the diplomatic chessboard without losing poise or pride. He has done so despite lacking the shield of rare-earth minerals that protected Xi Jinping.

Opens up all those bottlenecks

Over the past 25-odd yrs, India's relationship with the US has deepened and broadened to an extent that was unthinkable in the 1990s and earlier. US-India trade is only one aspect—although an important one—of that relationship. However, the on-again, off-again trade negotiations over the past year have cast a cloud over the entire relationship.

To rescue and advance the relationship, it was essential to first remo-

Unilateral trade liberalisation has a long and illustrious history. The advantage of liberalisation through trade agreements is they double the benefits by opening the partner country's market

ve this cloud. Both sides had a stake in it. But it mattered much more to India, given its vulnerabilities on the border, than to a superpower that sits many oceans away from its rival superpower. Any evaluation of what has been agreed must keep this background in view.

A trade agreement is a single undertaking with many gives-and-takes. Criticisms based on selectively picking the 'gives' without evaluating them against the 'takes' must be summarily rejected. Attacks that rely on imagined concessions regarding Russian oil purchases, or liberalisation of certain agricultural imports, without consideration of what India has gained from the deal as a whole, are problematic, even if true.

While full agreement is yet to be finalised, one data point we do have is that, with some exceptions, the US has agreed to reduce its tariffs from 50% to 18%, and India has agreed to either eliminate or substantially reduce tariffs on the imports of industrial products from their current average level of less than 20%.

Critics argue that exchange of 18% tariff on its goods entering the US for a zero tariff on US goods entering its market is a bad deal for India. Only ignoramuses fall prey to such criticism. The better-informed know that, setting aside FTAs, trade agreements are about exchanging market access on the margin: each country rolls back its trade barriers approximately equally from their initial levels rather than ending with equally open doors to imports. Under this conventional metric, the US has reduced its tariff from 50% to 18%, and India from an average of 20% to zero.

Even setting aside this nuance, should India have rejected the deal unless the US also lowered its tariffs to zero? Well, that offer has never been on the table for any country under the current US administration. Our rejection would have meant maintaining status quo of a 50% tariff on our goods entering the US, and jeopardising the entire US-India relationship. Would this have been a superior outcome?

Some critics reject the framework agreement on the grounds that the US cannot be trusted to honour its commitments. For all we know, it will raise its tariff from the agreed 18% level back up to extract additional concessions from India. However, this argument cuts both ways. Were India to choose the status

Both sides had a stake in removing the cloud over India-US relations. But it mattered much more to India, given its vulnerabilities on the border, than to a superpower that sits many oceans away from its rival superpower

quo over the framework agreement, what guarantee is there that the US will not raise its 50% tariff to 75-100%, eliminating nearly all Indian exports to the US? Between the two risks, which one gives you better future prospects?

Finally, a trade economist cannot overstate the benefits of one's own liberalisation. As in disarmament negotiations, each side presents its own liberalisation as a cost in trade negotiations to maximise access to the rival's market. However, while one's own arms reduction is rightly considered a cost because it adversely affects national security, one's own trade liberalisation is a benefit.

No nation in history has disarmed unilaterally. But unilateral trade liberalisation has a long and illustrious history, dating at least to Britain's repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s. The advantage of liberalisation through trade agreements is that they double the benefits by opening the partner country's market.

The writer is professor, Columbia University

Mark Surman & Raffi Krikorian

Open It Up and Reap Rewards

Berlin: The global AI industry is dominated by a handful of 'hyperscalers' offering proprietary models. Understandably, the value proposition is compelling. A single provider handles the model, hosting, guard rails and billing. For a developer or enterprise looking to ship quickly, the path of least resistance runs through these closed systems, which explains their dominance.

But this dominance stands in the way of economic growth and digital sovereignty. Closed models limit flexibility, and there are contextual nuances, languages, guard rails and customisations that proprietary systems will never accommodate. In a world that has grown more polarised and protectionist, and as technology platforms are increasingly enlisted as instruments of state policy, ceding digital sovereignty and building critical infrastructure on systems you don't own pose significant risks.

Open-source AI offers an alternative. A November 2025 paper, 'The Latent Role of Open Models in the AI Economy' by MIT's Frank Nagle and Georgia Institute of Technology's Daniel Yue, found that open-source models routinely achieve 90% or more of the performance of proprietary systems, while costing on average 6× less to run. Open models now catch up to the performance of closed models within 3-4 weeks of release, and that gap is shrinking. Nagle and Yue estimate $24.8 bn in unrealised savings if organisations switched to open AI models that already outperform many proprietary systems they are using. The study argues that businesses are overspending on closed AI platforms, even though high-performing open models could deliver similar or better results at a significantly lower cost.

The value proposition has led to a rapid expansion within the open-source AI ecosystem. While Chinese firms dominate the rankings with Kimi, DeepSeek and Qwen, the rest of the world is vying to compete in the same market. Google and OpenAI, long associated with closed systems, have begun releasing open weight models of their own, while Mistral and Meta continue to double down on their investments in open-source models.

Innovators and startups are beginning to build on top of the open-source AI stack as well, from federated learning infrastructure like Flower AI to smaller, smarter models like Adaption, to training infrastructure like Oumi and Transformer Lab, to production-ready machine learning tools like Probabl. This early momentum is encouraging for responsible open-source AI enterprises. India is no stranger to benefits of open-source technology, and has demonstrated what open standards can achieve. Its DPI, built on open, interoperable systems, has transformed financial inclusion and public service delivery at remarkable scale. UPI has become the world's 5th-largest payment network by volume. This was accomplished not by licensing proprietary systems from abroad but by building open infrastructure that Indian institutions control and can adapt to Indian needs.

The same logic applies to AI. If AI is to be deployed for public services, the systems must be auditable, customisable for local contexts, and resilient against external disruption. In a marketplace controlled by 7 big companies, at a moment of enormous global friction, India and the leaders gathered at this month's summit can commit to a different future: open-source AI as the fastest path to national economic growth and technical sovereignty.

But sovereignty does not mean solitude. The opportunity is not for each country to build its own walled garden, but for nations to collaborate around open standards and shared infrastructure. This is a third way that rejects the binary of platform dependency or isolation and, instead, enables countries to control their own AI futures while contributing to and benefiting from a global commons.

Surman is president, and Krikorian is CTO, Mozilla

Anjana Menon

Let's Flip the Skill Switch

India's software services sector may be at its Kodak moment. Anthropic's disclosure that its Claude Cowork automation platform could manage complex coding tasks with the same skill—and in a fraction of the time—as existing professionals triggered a $300 bn sell-off in IT stocks globally.

Indian IT companies have been left vulnerable after a decade of complacency and prioritising profits over innovation. The new stars of ITverse are likely to be solo entrepreneurs who use AI to deliver innovative solutions a hundred times more efficiently at a much lower cost. This inflection point has been building for years.

The dramatic development of ML was first showcased to the world in 2015 after Google's AI programme, AlphaGo, beat the human champ of the ancient Chinese board game Go, which has more permutations than atoms in the universe. During the game, AlphaGo demonstrated it had the ability to creatively outsmart humans and surprise them, something that was not possible by brute computational force alone.

More than a decade on, Indian IT majors are still grappling with the shift assuring investors they will retrain their workforce and find ways to serve global companies from India. The odds are stacked against this plan. India has always worked on labour cost arbitrage.

Up to 65% cheaper, it made business sense for global companies, based in the US or Europe, to readily outsource their application maintenance jobs to Indian firms. For dull, repetitive tasks, cost arbitrage is a big win. But what if a language model could do the same 100× faster with, say, 20% of the manpower needed? It would chip away the incentive to offshore the task. With this development, the narrative recasts AI as a replacement option, from a peripheral assistant.

Then comes the proposed plan of upskilling the workforce. To be fair, India's education system of rote learning has tended to produce steady minds, not breakthrough thinkers. Predictability of the outsourced tasks, along with our English language skills, gave us a seat at the table. If, however, a machine can do these tasks faster and better, working 7 days a week, you have the perfect employee, with a work ethic Narayana Murthy would applaud.

Except that leaves humans with much less to do. Rising nationalism and unemployment in the Western world will likely put pressure on companies to hire locally, anyway. Besides, big tech companies from Google to OpenAI have spent billions in developing language models and data centres — and to monetise this, they will have to get the large companies to buy their models. The likes of us dropping caricatures of ourselves isn't their revenue model.

This multiple whammy is a headache for Indian IT companies and GoI. They must find ways to demonstrate that the 5.6 mn people in white-collar IT jobs can add more value than machines. It is a talk task, given the acceleration in ML. Of course, a modest percentage of these coders will be humans in the loop who will work with 'AI agents'. But there is little doubt that we would need a new business model for Indian IT firms and their employees to thrive.

AI will eventually democratise coding, just like YouTube democratised broadcasting or Google did with information. Look at what it has done to legacy media. AI will become the new capital. This will open unprecedented opportunities for enterprising Indians to become solopreneurs who use AI tools to solve local problems. Whether we survive this shift and thrive will depend on how well we overhaul our education system and skills programmes by prioritising reasoning, creativity and project-based learning. Our best-case scenario is to develop an army of AI-driven solution providers.

India's creator economy has shown our youngsters know how to discover audiences and build personal brands. With better foundational learning and AI-driven execution, they could go on to conquer the ITverse.

The writer works with business leadership on narratives and conducts stakeholder audits

EYE ON AI

Suit up

THE SPEAKING TREE

SI Must Overrule AI

SWAMI ACHYUTANANDA

Intelligence is a function of mind that is illuminated by consciousness. However, ordinary mind is restless, fragmented, and often driven by desire, fear and conditioning. As a result, the intelligence that arises from such a mind is frequently erroneous and incomplete. How do we purify or rectify our intelligence?

The answer lies in settling mind through meditation and Self-inquiry. When mind becomes still and transparent, one begins to recognise the true Self. Only then does intelligence become pure — what we may call spiritual intelligence (SI). This intelligence is not merely analytical or problem-solving; it is rooted in awareness, clarity, compassion and truth.

Artificial intelligence (AI), by contrast, is a form of delicate but not pure intelligence. It can process vast amounts of data in seconds, drive vehicles with precision, write poetry, compose music and create images at remarkable speed. Yet, AI operates without first-person experience, without feelings, self-awareness or lived consciousness.

SI, on the other hand, brings a deep sensitivity to every action and its consequences. It arises from awareness rather than calculation. AI belongs to the outer, material world, whereas SI belongs to the inner, spiritual dimension. Over-dependence on AI may make us more machine-like and less human. Our emotional sensitivity, empathy and relational depth may gradually weaken.

True self-analysis, rooted in awareness, penetrates deeply within and reveals one's authentic nature. Therefore, while AI can assist us, it cannot replace inner wisdom. We should neither fear AI nor worship it. Instead, we must remain anchored in SI.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY
Paragraphs From Fiction

Things in Nature Merely Grow
Yiyun Li

There is no good way to say this — when the police arrive, they inevitably preface the bad news with that sentence, as though their presence had not been ominous enough. The first time I heard the line, I knew already what was about to be conveyed. Nevertheless, I paid attention to how the news was delivered: the detective insisted that I take a seat first.
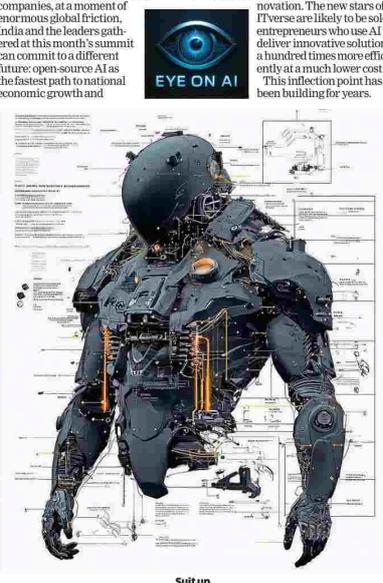
I sat down at the dinner table, and he moved another chair to the right distance and sat down himself. No doubt he was following protocol, and yet the sentence — there is no good way to say this — struck me as both accurate and effective. ...

...The second time, having guessed the news about to be delivered, I did not give the sentence a moment's thought. I did not wait for the detective to ask me to sit down, either. I indicated a chair where my husband should sit and took the other chair in the living room. My heart already began to feel that sensation for which there is no name. Call it aching, call it wrenching, call it shattering, but they are all wrong words, useless in their familiarity.

Chat Room

Demand If You Do, Damned If You Not

Apropos the news report, 'Fiscal Prudence, Infra Push Must as Demand Tilts South' (Feb 14), enhancement of capital expenditure creates not just capital assets but also employment, output and income on a sustained basis. India, a developing economy, has been fiscally prudent and focusing on capital expenditure for quite some time now. Good global trade ambience will give a fillip to all developing economies, including India, in terms of investment, which John Maynard Keynes described as 'an act of faith'. All the government has to do is to increase the components of aggregate demand — consumption, investment, state expenditure and net export. This will automatically ensure aggregate supply and economic growth.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

A thought for today

Reason and justice tell me there's more love for humanity in electricity and steam than in chastity and vegetarianism

ANTON CHEKHOV

Em**power**, Be **Chip**per

To be AI player, big investments are a must in both electricity & GPUs. India has to make a choice

Advanced AI chips, called GPUs, are quite expensive. Just one of these can cost over $30,000. Yet, as of last Oct, India had deployed more than 38,000. Last year, our data centres, where these chips are installed, sucked 1.4GW power from the grid, which is roughly a quarter of Delhi's peak demand. By 2030, these centres could be consuming as much as 8GW, exceeding the capital's load. This is a clear sign of India's growth in the AI universe. We have the human resource, and our "compute" is growing. But, is the pace adequate?

The answer depends on our AI aspirations. If we want to be counted among AI leaders, we will need to do better. US, the undisputed leader currently, had 62GW of data centre capacity last year, which will grow to 76GW this year, and 134GW in 2030. Its lead over India will increase from 60GW to 126GW in four years. US also controls world's supply of top-tier GPUs. That's how it has slowed China's rise in AI. Although Trump has allowed Nvidia to sell its second-best chip – H200 – to China, it must first ensure adequate US stocks.

And China has been slowed, not stalled. While we have 38,000 GPUs, Chinese firms have *pending* orders for 2mn H200s. Given that Nvidia has only 700,000 in stock, it's clear that GPU prices won't come down anytime soon. China saw this coming 10 years ago and has invested $150bn in chip-making. Huawei, Alibaba, Baidu already have AI chips, although not of the highest order, and ByteDance has now developed one. In two years, Huawei hopes to catch up with Nvidia. Meanwhile, in US, Amazon, Alphabet and Microsoft have also jumped into the advanced chip fray. Where will we be in 2028? Still making 28nm chips for consumer-grade products.

What are our options then? We can temper aspiration with reality. For example, our per person annual power consumption at 1,460 units is half of Mexico's, fifth of China's, and roughly ninth of America's. As Indians get richer, they'll want to use more electricity to run geysers and ACs. High power prices due to AI demand could hit their quality of life. So, should we scale down our compute plans? No. We need to think big now. Advance the chip-making plans, whatever it takes. Expand the energy infra, whatever it takes. Thinking small won't get us to the head of the pack.

Brave Baby Step But...

...For more people to follow the example of a Kerala couple, trust in state organ donation system is essential

Parents of Aalin Sherin Abraham showed courage and compassion in donating their brain-dead infant's body parts. The gesture has given life and vision to four children. Organ donation isn't easy – a complex of beliefs & values, rituals, science & logistics, and most importantly trust in the state framework, from recovery to transplantation. Kerala's little Aalin made history as a child donor.

Aalin was laid to rest in Kerala with state honours, a policy in TN where all organ donors' last rites are held with state honours. TN recognised "relatives...make the sacrifice at a time of grief". Such measures show respect and help expand the idea of organ donation. This came alongside TN govt expanding on infra for organ retrieval, transport and transplantation. State health insurance funds organ transplant and post-transplant medical requirements. A pain point across most of India is that while retrievals are in public hospitals, transplants are almost entirely (85%) in private ones, procedures costing a bomb. So, TN inspires public trust.

Indians are wary of organ donation, altruism rare in our society. In-family live donors, that too women, are more common while deceased organ retrieval remains a long shot. TN saw over 18k road deaths in 2024, second only to UP's 24k. Per an LS answer, in 2022 TN had 1,846 donors compared to UP's 232. As need for organs grows countrywide, state govts must step up to the task. Proactive govts can take a leaf out of govt initiatives for blood donation. Today, almost all blood required across India is replacement blood from relatives, and via altruistic donations.

Without govt initiatives, organ trade fills the gap between demand and supply to a brutal extent. Loan sharks trap people, force them to sell organs; jobless men were taken to Cambodia for a kidney to be removed; hospitals run organ rackets under the garb of 'medical tourism'. Meanwhile, TN is using an AI application that predicts kidney graft survival for up to 14 years with 80% accuracy. Families will take tough decisions, cross that emotional barrier when govts take the initiative.

Buffet list

Holidays are about breakfasting like a champion

Ratna Manucha

Holidays are a boon. Especially when one stays in places that offer complimentary buffet breakfasts. To me, that is the ultimate luxury. Imagine just rolling out of bed and walking across to a hall where the most tantalising spread is laid out. All mine for the asking. Effortless.

I'm no longer lonesome on my ownsome. In fact, I'm happy as a clam as I hop, skip and dance to the different counters displaying their delectable wares. I get to work right away, sampling all the various delights, some delicious, others not so much, and still others that make me gag.

If I start with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice (I discover it is from a tetra pack after I take a sip), I have no choice but to pick up another glass, this time of pineapple juice. Nah! Too sour. Both glasses are set aside without a backward glance as I traipse off to the counters displaying varieties of cakes and muffins. Pick up a muffin and plonk it on my plate. Some idli and sambar are added along with some sausages, a waffle topped with maple syrup, a croissant, upma too, some yoghurt, and for good measure a poori and some bhaji.

You are thinking of all that on one plate! But I have settled down at a table for four and distributed the food evenly across different plates. I take a bite of the croissant. Too cold. It is set aside. The muffin was too sweet, two bites were all I could manage. But the upma was quite alright so I polished it off. I asked for a cup of coffee but I'm used to good old masala tea so I ordered that too. No sooner did I take one sip of each than I noticed someone with a plate laden with freshly cut fruit. How did I miss that?

I jumped up, picked another plate and heaped it with fruit. A little while later, I walked off to order a fried egg, for what's a breakfast without an egg? When my egg arrived accompanied by a hot toast, I shoved all the other plates aside. Now this was just right! After two weeks of the complimentary breakfast buffet, I reached home to find the button of my jeans evading the buttonhole. I wonder why. I hardly ate anything.

Forget ChatGPT. Do FactoryGPT

Industrial AI can transform Indian tech sovereignty, like 1990s IT transformed services. But this revolution needs its own evangelist, someone to bridge policy and practice, and inspire trust

Vijay Govindarajan

**Prof of Management
Tuck School of Business
Dartmouth College**

In 2026, it's difficult to discuss AI without discussing geopolitics. Because the building blocks of AI – data, servers, computational power – are being seen as strategic assets. Trump's AI Action Plan makes it explicit that tech dominance is a matter of national security. France has said it will be replacing applications such as Teams and Zoom with European and French solutions. The message, for India, is clear. We cannot afford to build our future on technologies that might one day be withheld. Adoption alone is not sovereignty. We need to be able to build capabilities that are not hostage to foreign interests.

Lessons from the IT revolution | We've been here before. In the mid-1990s, India made a bold bet on IT services. That decision created millions of jobs and global giants like Infosys, Wipro, TCS. It was a moment of foresight that changed the trajectory of our economy.

Today, we stand at another inflection point. But this time, the upside is exponentially larger. Instead of chasing the next ChatGPT, India can define its own future by focusing on Industrial AI, or the artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics and the like built for the factories, supply chains, and industries that form the backbone of our economy.

Consumer AI is a winner-takes-all game. One large language model, say ChatGPT, can dominate the field, with a host of special-interest models providing ample support. Industrial AI is different. Each sector requires its own specialised model, trained on proprietary data.

An AI system that powers a Bajaj two-wheeler factory cannot simply be deployed in a Himalaya shampoo plant. This specificity is India's big advantage. With a vast and diverse manufacturing base, India is uniquely positioned to build sector-specific AI models that solve inefficiencies, streamline supply chains, and unlock productivity.

In my book *Fusion Strategy*, I wrote about self-driving company Waymo's vision of designing "the most experienced driving system", a digital artifact that learns continually. That illustrates a broader truth: Industrial AI is not about one universal model, but about deeply embedded intelligence that transforms how industries operate. Let's look at this potential in two vastly different industries where India is a global leader: two-wheelers and pharmaceuticals.

Advantage two-wheelers | India is the world's largest two-wheeler producer, accounting for 35% of global volume. The sector employs nearly 5mn people and continues to grow, driven by urbanisation, rising incomes, and the gig economy. Even as conventional scooters and motorcycles dominate, there is a very deliberate shift to electric two-wheelers, which are expected to contribute to 30% of sales by 2030.

The industry has already started using AI and machine learning to improve productivity. Predictive maintenance reduces downtime by nearly a third. Vision systems catch microdefects in real time, improving quality, and collaborative robots assist workers in repetitive tasks, making factories safer and more efficient.

These are not futuristic ideas; they are already being used on the factory floor. But a lot more needs to be done to allow AI to learn from existing processes and embed intelligence into every aspect of manufacturing.

Pharma 4.0 | This presents an even greater opportunity. India is a global leader in generics but is not well regarded when it comes to maintaining quality standards. Smart, interconnected manufacturing systems can overhaul this. AI-driven analytics can optimise production, robotic process automation can streamline workflows, and predictive maintenance can ensure uninterrupted supply. By merging scale with quality, Indian pharma can set global benchmarks and lead the next industrial revolution in healthcare manufacturing.

All Things AI

Again, it's not new. India's pharma giants have been moving to an AI-powered future. What is needed is a concerted political and regulatory push to ensure that the benefits of AI, robotics, and machine learning can be accessed by the entire industry and not just by the larger, richer firms.

Building consensus for Industrial AI | Seizing this moment cannot be left to techies and entrepreneurs. Aadhaar and UPI became transformative because they enjoyed political will, regulatory clarity, and broad public support. Similarly, Industrial AI requires a national consensus. It will not resonate with the average person as, say, ChatGPT does. But it is an important tool in the road to not just self-sufficiency but AI leadership.

We need a framework that brings govt, industry, and academia together, and a visible champion who can articulate the vision convincingly. Aadhaar had Nandan Nilekani, UPI had RBI and NPCI working in tandem. Industrial AI will need its own evangelist, someone who can bridge policy and practice, inspire trust across sectors, and ensure that this revolution is not fragmented but inclusive. Without such leadership, the opportunity risks being diluted. With such a trusted voice, India can create a unified movement that embeds AI into the very fabric of its industrial economy.

Compared to China's $47.5bn AI war chest, France's $117bn, and Saudi Arabia's $100bn, India's $1.25bn pledge may look modest. But India has a robust industrial base ready to adopt AI at scale, and this far outweighs govt investment. As a McKinsey report says, AI sovereignty is not about ambition alone; it is about execution. For India, it's about decisive investments in Industry Foundation Models, or AI systems tailored to specific sectors.

The IT revolution, and our bet on IT services, gave India a seat at the global table. Industrial AI can probably put us at the head of the table. The opportunity is vast, the timing is right, and the stakes are high. India's first IT moment transformed our services sector. The second can transform our sovereignty. The opportunity is ours for the taking.

Tarique Pe Tarique. But Which One?

BNP under its new leader can either go back to its anti-India politics or form a new pragmatic compact with New Delhi. The latter is its best bet to deliver on Bangladeshi aspirations

Harsh Vardhan Shringla

Ex-envoy to Dhaka

The recent elections in Bangladesh have opened a new chapter in South Asian politics, creating an opportunity for political renewal and a potential reset in India-Bangladesh relations. After a prolonged period marked by political uncertainty and a difficult interim phase, the emergence of an elected govt offers the prospect of restoring institutional stability and rebuilding regional confidence. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has secured a decisive mandate, winning over two-thirds of the seats in Jatiya Sangsad, a result shaped in part by the exclusion of Awami League from the electoral process.

Importantly, in the run-up to the elections, BNP leader Tarique Rahman's positive messaging on India and his emphasis on pragmatic cooperation have attracted attention, signalling an awareness that Bangladesh's future prosperity is closely linked with constructive regional engagement. At the same time, the historical memory of BNP's previous term from 2001-06 has not been reassuring. Under Tarique's mother Khaleda Zia, BNP engaged in anti-India rhetoric, allowed Indian insurgent groups to operate freely in its territory and maintained strategic proximity with Pakistan.

While it would be simplistic to assume that the past must automatically repeat itself, the current moment suggests that changing regional realities may provide space for a more forward-looking relationship grounded in mutual interests.

South Asia's economic and geopolitical landscape has shifted considerably since the early 2000s. India is today the predominant economic power in the region, deeply integrated into global supply chains and increasingly positioned as a key growth engine for its neighbours. Bangladesh itself faces economic pressures: mounting external debt exceeding $100bn, dwindling Forex reserves that have halved in the last four years (from $46bn in 2021-22 to $29bn in 2025-26), and a banking crisis where up to 36% of total loans are considered non-performing loans. This context makes regional cooperation not merely desirable but practically necessary.

Additionally, Bangladesh's long-term stability may depend on whether BNP can build a broad, pro-liberation (1971) coalition rather than rely solely on electoral gains. While it has secured a commanding majority, the Jamaat-led alliance has also recorded its strongest performance to date, winning 70 seats. National Citizen Party (NCP), often described as a 'protest party' emerging from the youth-driven unrest of July 2024, aligned itself with this coalition. Although NCP's electoral performance

fell short of expectations, the rise of a youth-oriented political force gravitating towards the extremist spectrum serves as an important warning signal for the future direction of political discourse in Bangladesh.

The coming months will, therefore, test whether BNP's electoral success can be translated into a governing philosophy that balances ideological pressures with economic necessity. One notable feature of the campaign was the relatively positive language employed by Rahman regarding India, which was carefully calibrated. These signals have been noted, though their durability will ultimately be judged by policy choices rather than campaign narratives.

For India, the evolution of BNP's stance will be assessed over time. Bangladesh's economic ambitions – restoring investor confidence, stabilising macroeconomic indicators, and addressing employment pressures – intersect directly with regional connectivity and trade. India's expanding economic footprint in South Asia offers opportunities that a pragmatic Bangladesh leadership may find expedient to be part of.

Enhanced energy cooperation, cross-border infra, and market access could provide the new govt with tools to meet public expectations. In this sense, bilateral cooperation with its closest neighbour may become a practical instrument for domestic political consolidation rather than merely a diplomatic objective.

For New Delhi, engagement with the new administration in Dhaka is likely to proceed through a cautious blend of strategic pragmatism and diplomatic restraint. India's approach to Bangladesh has historically been shaped less by short-term political shifts and more by an emphasis on stability along a deeply interconnected border, economic interdependence, and shared security concerns. As the relationship enters a new phase, continuity in cooperation on cross-border security, counter-radicalisation efforts, and regional connectivity will remain important.

Bangladesh should under no circumstances allow itself to be co-opted by Pakistan in its nefarious designs on India. Equally, the broader social fabric of Bangladesh, including the confidence and security of minority communities, will continue to influence perceptions of stability and trust within the bilateral relationship. If the new govt in Bangladesh were to prove serious in addressing India's security red lines, India must reciprocate in kind with generous support.

Ultimately, the significance of this election lies less in the scale of electoral victory than in the political choices that follow it. Bangladesh stands at a moment where governance decisions will determine whether political transition leads to renewed stability or renewed fragmentation. A leadership that combines economic pragmatism, inclusive politics, and responsible regional engagement could redefine the country's trajectory for the decade ahead.

The writer is Member of Parliament & former foreign secretary

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Calvin & Hobbes
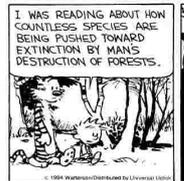
Overcome Exam Stress With Indic Wisdom

Nayaswami Nitai Deranja and Tyagi Shivendra

In India, the arrival of exam season often brings a palpable sense of tension that permeates households across the country. As millions of students prepare for competitive board examinations and entrance tests in 2026, the pressure to perform can become overwhelming. Yet battling exam stress is not merely a matter of working harder or having smarter study hacks. It requires a balanced, holistic approach – one that supports academic effort while also attending to students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

To manage stress in the moment, students must first attend to their physiological needs. A common misconception is that sacrificing sleep or skipping meals to put in extra study hours results in better outcomes. Physical exercise, a balanced diet, and adequate rest form the foundation of sustained concentration and memory. Regular physical activity – even a brief daily walk – improves mood and sharpens focus. Nutritious food fuels the brain, while sufficient sleep allows information to consolidate into long-term memory. Alongside these habits, effective time management and concentration techniques are essential. Breaking large course materials into smaller, achievable goals and using structured methods, such as alternating focused study sessions with planned breaks (as in the Pomodoro method), can help prevent students from feeling overwhelmed.

India's rich heritage offers 'time-honoured' solutions through yog. Simple breathing exercises, pranayam, can instantly lower cortisol levels during high-pressure moments. Learning to tense and relax muscles – a technique known as progressive muscle relaxation – helps release the physical manifestations of anxiety. Furthermore, meditating for even ten minutes a day fosters a sense of inner calm, allowing students to approach their tasks with a clear, steady mind rather than one clouded by panic.

Beyond individual practices, the academic environment itself plays a decisive role in shaping students' experience of exam pressure. Schools and teachers influence whether examinations are approached with confidence or fear. Classrooms that allow room for mistakes and emphasise conceptual understanding over rote memorisation tend to reduce anxiety and encourage deeper learning. On the other hand, constant ranking and public comparisons can heighten stress, particularly for students who progress at different paces.

When educators communicate balance and perspective – affirming that exams are important but not all-defining – they help place academic effort within a healthier frame.

This broader support system can become even more effective when reinforced at home. Parental attitudes towards success and failure often have the strongest emotional impact on students. When parents shift the focus from marks alone to overall well-being, they create a sense of safety and resilience. Helping students see exam results in the wider context of life – acknowledging effort, growth, and character – can ease pressure and restore perspective. While examinations are significant milestones, they do not define a young person's future or their inherent worth.

Ultimately, the battle against exam stress is won when students discover sources of self-worth beyond competition and marks on a sheet of paper. Creative expression, service, or physical activity reminds young people that they are multifaceted individuals. By treating examinations as tests of knowledge rather than measures of value, Indian students can navigate this demanding season with confidence, balance, and grace.

The writers are president, Education for Life International, and teacher, Ananda Delhi

THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Cricket mismatch
India-Pakistan rivalry is dying out

A one-horse race — that's what India-Pakistan cricket matches have sadly become in recent years. The Colombo encounter was no exception; there was an air of inevitability about India's big victory. The gulf between the two teams is widening with every match, setting the alarm bells ringing for the much-touted "greatest rivalry". Perhaps the only way Pakistan could have avoided defeat was to have boycotted the match — and that almost happened before the International Cricket Council made a desperate intervention and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif did a tactical U-turn. However, the anticlimax on the field is a stark reminder that this cash cow has virtually been milked dry. And that's bad news for cricket as well as commerce.

It's distressing to watch Pakistan, which was once a cricketing powerhouse, plumbing new depths. Stalwarts like Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis and Ramiz Raja, who were members of teams that won many matches against India in the 1980s and 1990s, have lashed out at the players and administrators. Their lament is that the current team is not even putting up a fight against the traditional rivals, and practically nothing is being done to avoid recurring embarrassment. The reluctance to involve former Pakistani players in the rebuilding process shows that self-serving politicians are calling the shots — without any accountability. For the record, Pakistan has won only two global titles — the 2009 T20 World Cup and the 2017 ODI Champions Trophy — since the dawn of this century.

The irony is not lost on anyone: ex-PM Imran Khan, arguably Pakistan's greatest cricketer, is languishing in jail. The Sharif government's focus is on political one-upmanship rather than on making sincere efforts to revitalise the nation's most popular sport. Ruthless introspection is a must to address the shortcomings. If things are allowed to drift, Pakistan might become a nonentity in world cricket sooner or later.

Sarma's speeches
SC restraint in a charged poll climate

THE Supreme Court's refusal to entertain petitions seeking an FIR and a Special Investigation Team probe against Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma comes at a politically sensitive moment. Assam is moving into an election season where rhetoric sharpens, identities harden and the stakes for those in power rise considerably. The petitions alleged that a series of public remarks by the CM amounted to hate speech against a minority community. The SC declined to intervene directly, advising petitioners to approach the high court. On the face of it, the decision reflects institutional discipline. The SC has repeatedly stressed that it cannot be converted into a court of first instance for politically charged disputes, particularly when high courts are empowered to examine facts, evidence and criminal liability.

But timing and context also matter. Sarma is not only a powerful regional leader; he belongs to the BJP, which governs at the Centre. He is a key strategist for the BJP in the North-East. In an election-bound atmosphere, allegations of hate speech by a CM from the ruling party inevitably raise questions about equal application of the law and the perception of accountability. Courts may insist on proper legal routes, but public confidence depends equally on visible impartiality in enforcement.

The court's refusal does not amount to an endorsement of the speeches under challenge. Nor does it exclude legal scrutiny. It merely shifts the battleground to the high court. Our constitutional framework allows robust political speech, but it also places a higher responsibility on those in public office. Election campaigns are not a licence to stretch the limits of legality. Judicial restraint must coexist with institutional vigilance, especially when the speaker is powerful and the moment electorally charged.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO
The Tribune.
THE TRIBUNE, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1926

Responsibility without power

THERE was one statement made by the Home Member in his otherwise temperate speech in the debate on the Bengal Regulation in the Assembly, which cannot be allowed to pass unchallenged. "I want to know," he said, "who is responsible for law and order, the Executive Government or this House? I want to know if this House has always been ready to support the Government in any way or shape measures necessary for the administration of this country. I say, No. I know this House is not prepared to help us in maintaining law and order. It seems to be a natural characteristic of Indians." If this means anything, it means that Indians, whatever other merit they may have, neither understand nor appreciate the necessity of maintaining law and order, and that it is for this reason that the Assembly has never been ready to support the Government in any form or shape in respect of measures necessary for the administration of the country. It is impossible to think of a statement which is either more serious or more incorrect and misleading, and this in spite of the qualifying clause, added probably as an afterthought, that the speaker did not say that the House was in sympathy with crime. Whether the House was or was not in sympathy with crime, if it could be truthfully said with regard to it that it was not prepared to help the Executive Government maintain law and order, and that because of the inherent incapacity of Indians to appreciate the necessity of doing so, it would be a conclusive proof both of its own unfitness to share the authority of the Government and of the unfitness of the country for a responsible or, for that matter, any other form of popular government.

Our anthem embodies the idea of India
Govt order giving precedence to *Vande Mataram* over *Jana Gana Mana* is unsettling

ZOYA HASAN
PROFESSOR EMERITA, CENTRE FOR POLITICAL STUDIES, JNU

PROTOCOL : As per a recent govt order, Vande Mataram should precede the National Anthem at official events. ANI

THE National Anthem's primacy is not a formality; it is the Republic's deliberate choice to assert unity without erasing diversity. The Union government's January 28 directive does not amend the anthem itself but changes its established placement in relation to the National Song, thereby unsettling a long-standing constitutional settlement.

The directive requires *Vande Mataram* to precede the anthem at official events. It further mandates that all six verses of the song be sung at attention before *Jana Gana Mana*, effectively overriding the Constituent Assembly's decision to adopt only its first two verses for official use.

This approach disregards Article 51A of the Constitution, which accords primacy to the National Anthem. Added later as part of the Fundamental Duties, Article 51A(a) obliges citizens "to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, the National Flag and the National Anthem," with no mention of the National Song.

The Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971, further extended statutory protection specifically to the anthem, prescribing penalties for acts of disrespect. Together, these constitutional and legislative choices embedded the anthem within the Republic's legal framework in a way *Vande Mataram* was not intended to occupy.

That hierarchy was never incidental or informal; it was deliberately established in 1950, reflecting the Constituent Assembly's conscious decision to define the order of national symbols and the anthem's place in the life of the new nation. At the time of Independence, the Constituent Assembly considered three stirring compositions — *Jana Gana Mana*, *Vande Mataram* and *Saare Jahan Se Achha* — before narrowing the choice to the first two.

Vande Mataram, originating in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1882 novel *Anandamath* and set to music by Rabindranath Tagore, had been a powerful song in praise of the freedom struggle. Yet, the Assembly, mindful of the Republic's constitutional commitment to secularism and equal citizenship, recognised a fundamental tension. While the opening stanzas evoke the motherland in broadly civic terms, the later verses present Bharat Mata as a Hindu goddess — an image that many felt was difficult to reconcile with a State pledged to equal belonging for citizens of every faith.

Accordingly, the Constituent Assembly made a distinction between the anthem and the song, assigning them different constitutional status. Significantly, this distinction had been made by none other than Rabindranath Tagore himself. In doing so, the Assembly honoured *Vande Mataram*'s emotive role in the freedom struggle while reserving primacy for

> The Constituent Assembly singled out the National Anthem for explicit priority.

the composition that most fully embodied the plural and inclusive imagination of the new Republic. This dual recognition acknowledged historical sentiment while assigning constitutional priority to the anthem deemed most compatible with the Republic's secular and federal character.

On January 24, 1950, the Constituent Assembly formally adopted Jana Gana Mana as the National Anthem. Its prescribed 52-second rendition has since served as a daily reminder of India's sovereignty, plurality and shared constitutional destiny. Composed in 1911 in Bengali as *Bharoto Bhagyo Bidhata* and first sung at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress, the anthem articulated unity not by suppressing differences but by affirming them.

In a single verse, India is invoked as Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravida, Utkala and Banga, affirming belonging without demanding homogeneity. The Indian subject is, therefore, plural by design, capable of inhabiting multiple identities while remaining part of a shared political whole rather than being dissolved into uniformity.

This pluralist vision did not emerge in abstraction. The Constituent Assembly deliberated in the shadow of the Partition and the trauma of communal violence, at a moment when debates over whether India should adopt a formally secular or majoritarian identity were neither marginal nor theoretical.

Against that backdrop, the choice of the anthem assumed heightened significance. The decision of the Constitution's framers was also philosophical. They chose civic nationalism over cultural majoritarianism, fully aware that national symbols can both unify and exclude. The distinction between the anthem and the song was substantive, not cosmetic. It reflected a constitutional framework premised on equal citizenship rather than majoritarian impulses or cultural homogeneity.

That constitutional choice is reflected not only in the anthem's status but also in its form. Compared with many other national anthems, India's choice remains distinctive. Numerous anthems foreground martial struggle or revolutionary violence, but *Jana Gana Mana* does not. Instead, it is structured as an invocation of unity across regions and linguistic communities. That structural character made it particularly suited to a federal democracy marked by deep and enduring diversity. The anthem's roll call of regions distils the Constitution's logic of unity without erasure, embodying an India that is diverse, inclusive and indivisible.

The present administrative reordering must be assessed against this constitutional background. The government guideline effects a substantive rearrangement of constitutional symbols, underscored by the sequence that places Vande Mataram first. Yet, the Constituent Assembly singled out the National Anthem for explicit priority. Administrative alteration of that order is, therefore, not a neutral exercise. It reopens the very concern that led the Assembly to limit the text of the National Song and fix the hierarchy of the two symbols in the first place.

The compromise of 1950 was born of debate, dissent and deliberation. It reflected a clear recognition that India's strength lies in its multiplicity. To unsettle that balance through an executive order is to subordinate a foundational constitutional settlement to the proclivities of a regime and the calculus of electoral politics.

When we stand for *Jana Gana Mana*, we do not stand for a melody alone. We stand for the constitutional idea of India that the Republic belongs equally to all who inhabit it. To diminish that idea, whether symbolically or substantively, is to constrict the expansive vision it embodies. It reopens debates that the framers of the Constitution resolved decisively in favour of pluralism.

Jaya he, Jaya he, Jaya he, Jaya Jaya Jaya, Jaya he.

AI craze should make parents introspect
ARCHIT WATTS

MY seven-year-old daughter asked Google Gemini on her grandmother's phone, "My dad is not playing with me. What should I do to convince him?"

Before I could say anything in my defence, she smiled and said, "*Lo sun lo, vo aapko kya keh rahi hai* (Listen to what she is telling you)." Gemini said, "Sometimes fathers are busy with work or feel tired, so they may not have time to play. You can politely ask him when he is free and tell him that you really want to spend some time with him. You can also choose a small game that does not take much time..."

The episode made me happy, uncomfortable and thoughtful. Happy, because a child trusted technology to express an emotion she perhaps felt I was too busy to sense. Uncomfortable, because that question was not really meant for an app, but for me. Thoughtful, because it showed the reality of our lives and our changing priorities.

Children today are growing up in a world where answers come instantly and devices respond right away. Parents are often busy: working, scrolling on their phones, worrying about responsibilities or telling themselves they will find time for kids later.

What struck me most was not that my daughter spoke to an AI "assistant", but why she did it. She didn't ask it a homework question or a spelling doubt. She asked for a strategy. The app responded kindly. But kindness is no substitute for a parent's presence.

This is not an argument against technology. In fact, technology has given wider access to knowledge. But it raises an uncomfortable question: are digital tools filling emotional gaps we didn't even realise we were creating?

Children of earlier generations made complaints to grandparents, siblings, neighbours — or to nobody. Today, a child can ask a machine how to get her father's attention.

Parenting has never been easy, and guilt has always been part of it. But modern parenting comes with a unique challenge. We want to give our children everything, yet we often struggle to give them the thing they want the most — time.

When a child says, "My dad is not playing with me," she is not asking for a toy or a game. She is asking for a chance to be heard.

The grandmother's gentle remark from the kitchen — "*sun le* (listen to her)" — was a reminder many of us need. Children speak in simple sentences, but their meanings are layered. If we don't listen carefully, they may stop telling us altogether or start telling someone else.

Perhaps the real lesson is not about AI mesmerising kids, but about adults drifting away from them. If children are turning to digital tools for advice on how to connect with parents, adults need to ask themselves why this is so.

That evening, I played with my daughter. Not out of guilt, but out of gratitude, and for the chance to listen before it was too late.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

R&D vital for Indian engines
Apropos of 'The long wait for indigenous engines'; India's continued reliance on other countries for engine technology in the defence sector needs attention. The delays in projects like the Kaveri engine underline the need for long-term vision, consistent funding and strong coordination among research institutions, industry and the armed forces. The government must encourage innovation, private sector participation and global collaboration to build domestic capability. Achieving technological independence in this critical area is essential for strengthening India's defence preparedness, and consequently national security.
ANGEL GUPTA, RAJPURA

Govt must be an AI enabler
Apropos of 'Small AI may matter more for jobs than Big AI'; the India AI Impact Summit 2026 in Delhi could help open the way to a richer and more inclusive AI ecosystem. It will be a laudable achievement if it can create more jobs, but for that our government must invest more in R&D. India's digital public infrastructure (DPI), like Aadhaar, UPI and DigiLocker, can be the cornerstone of welfare schemes, ranging from agriculture to subsidies for cooking gas to vaccine delivery, which underlines affordability. In India, like in many other developing countries, innovation including DPI has been managed by the government, which must become an enabler, not a controller.
SK PANESAR, BY MAIL

Generic medicines helpful
The directive of the Punjab Health Department to enforce generic drug prescriptions in government hospitals is a welcome step. It will address the high out-of-pocket costs for patients and curb the unethical nexus between doctors and pharma companies. Other related issues like inadequate coverage of Jan Aushadhi Kendras and lack of clear distinction between generic and branded medicines will have to be tackled first. There is uncertainty on how the government will ensure implementation, regular surveillance and prescription audits. What action will be taken if any doctor is found violating these orders?
VITULL K GUPTA, BATHINDA

Poor condition of Punjab roads
Refer to 'Deadly potholes'; there was a time when Punjab was considered one of the leading prosperous states, however, the ground reality feels very different. I travelled to Ludhiana from Mohali recently. The national highway was closed, I had to take the local roads. I struggled to find even a hundred-metre stretch without potholes. The roads were damaged beyond repair and unsafe, making travel uncomfortable and dangerous. I had witnessed such deplorable conditions in Bihar back in 2003, where conditions have improved significantly now. More than two decades later, Punjab has reverted to that state of affairs.
HARSHARANJIT SINGH, MOHALI

Financial burden on urban bodies
Refer to 'Urban challenge'; the structure of the Rs 1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) raises serious concerns. The Central government will bear only 25% of the project cost, while cities will have to mobilise 50% of the funds from the market and the remaining 25% must be covered by local bodies. For municipal bodies already struggling with revenue shortages, limited tax-collection capacity and rising debt burdens, the scheme does not appear practical. Calling it a reform-based model may sound promising, but at the ground level, it appears more like a transfer of responsibility. When cities are grappling with air pollution, water scarcity, poor roads and inadequate basic services, increasing financial pressure cannot be the solution. The government must ensure both accountability and adequate financial support.
HARSH OJHA, JAMMU

Himachal not a charity case
The Central government's decision to cut the Revenue Deficit Grant appears to treat Himachal as a 'charity case' rather than a 'national provider'. If the state chooses the allure of rapid industrialisation over environmental stewardship, the state coffers would be full. We do not seek a handout; we demand our due. The Centre must stop fiscal predation of our resources and recognise the hill state's worth.
VIBHAVRI DHAULTA, SHIMLA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

The moral force behind gurdwara reform

TARANJIT SANDHU
EX-AMBASSADOR TO US

TEJA Singh Samundri occupies a unique and revered place in Sikh and Indian national history for his leadership in the Gurdwara Reform Movement and his role in integrating Sikh mass politics with the broader Indian freedom struggle.

At a time when widespread resentment existed against sections of the Sikh elite — particularly those perceived as subservient to British authority — Samundri emerged as a moral and organisational force who redirected popular discontent into disciplined, principled and mass-based movements. The naming of Teja Singh Samundri Hall within the sacred complex of Harmandir Sahib stands testimony to his extraordinary ability, unassuming humility, ethical firmness and lifelong sacrifice.

Born in 1882 in Rai Ka Burj village in present-day Tarn Taran district, Teja Singh Samundri rose from modest rural beginnings to become a central figure of the Sikh Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1926). His leadership was marked not by rhetoric or self-display, but by the rare ability to transform moral conviction into disciplined collective action.

He provided strategic and ethical direction to a series of historic morchas including Rakab Ganj, Guru ka Bagh, the Keys (Chabian) agitation, Jaito and Nabha. Among these, the Guru ka Bagh Morcha became a watershed moment in India's freedom struggle.

Sikhs courted arrest and endured brutal beatings without retaliation, stunning colonial authorities and the wider Indian public. National leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Swami Shraddhanand and CF Andrews publicly acknowledged the moral force of this non-violent resistance.

Despite his stature, Samundri consistently refused formal authority, believing that movements decay when individuals overshadow institutions. Yet his counsel decisively shaped the birth of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Akali Dal, thereby democratising Sikh religious and political institutions.

What set Samundri apart was the coherence between his personal life and public leadership. According to Master Tara Singh, he was "a complete Gursikh." He believed credibility began with personal restraint and leadership with moral example. His commitment to equality was not rhetorical. In villages around Amritsar and Tarn Taran, he challenged caste barriers by inviting Dalits to draw water from common wells and serve him publicly — an act of quiet social revolution in early 20th-century Punjab. As early as 1917, he also advanced youth and women's empowerment by establishing educational institutions in Sarhali and Lyallpur.

His integrity extended to profound material sacrifice. When the SGPC faced a financial crisis and required Rs 1.5 lakh to pursue a legal appeal before the Privy Council, only half the amount could be raised. Samundri mortgaged two murabas (approximately 50 acres) of his own land to contribute the remaining Rs 75,000.

After his death, when the case was eventually won, his family refused reimbursement. In an era when public life is often shadowed by private gain, this episode stands in stark moral contrast.

The colonial state recognised the moral threat Samundri represented. They arrested him and his colleagues in 1923, imprisoned them in Lahore Fort & Central Jail — later associated with Bhagat Singh — to implicate them in a conspiracy case.

In 1926, Samundri led a group of eleven — including Master Tara Singh — in refusing to accept freedom under pressure. The jail became a site of principled resistance. He died in British custody in July 1926 in mysterious circumstances at the age of 43.

Public outrage forced the unconditional release of the remaining prisoners. In an attempt to fracture Sikh unity, the colonial administration announced immediate SGPC elections. Instead, a massive sympathy wave swept Punjab, and Samundri's group secured an overwhelming popular mandate — an affirmation that moral authority often outlasts coercive power.

Master Tara Singh later wrote in *Akali te Pardeshi* (Amritsar) that Samundri did not become a martyr in death — his entire life was one of martyrdom. He described a man marked by *sewa*, love, devotion, wisdom and fearlessness; one without enmity, who gave away what he possessed before keeping anything for himself. For him, sacrifice was not an event, but a lifelong condition.

By 1923, Samundri's stature was such that he was chosen as one of the Panj Piaras to initiate the *kar sewa* of the Golden Temple sarovar — the first such service since 1842.

After his martyrdom, the naming of Teja Singh Samundri Hall within the Darbar Sahib complex became a collective acknowledgment that some lives shape history without demanding remembrance.

Seen from a contemporary perspective, his life offers enduring lessons: Credibility flows from personal discipline; equality must be practised, not merely proclaimed; protest without moral restraint corrodes its own cause; institutions matter more than individuals and sacrifice need not be theatrical to be transformative.

In an age of performative politics and impatient leadership, Sardar Teja Singh Samundri reminds us that quiet courage, sustained integrity and institutional vision can leave a deeper imprint than public noise.

His was not a life of spectacle, but of conscience. And that is why it still speaks.

The author is Teja Singh Samundri's grandson

REVERED: The Samundri Hall in Sri Harmandir Sahib is named in the memory of Teja Singh Samundri who died a hundred years ago. TRIBUNE PHOTO/X

> Teja Singh Samundri mortgaged 50 acres of his own land when the SGPC faced a financial crisis.

A TRIPP across the South Caucasus

GADDAM DHARMENDRA
EX-AMBASSADOR TO IRAN

THE Caucasus doesn't usually get the attention it deserves from strategic analysts. Not surprisingly, two recent visits to Armenia this past fortnight have largely stayed below the radar.

The first was by Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Anil Chauhan, and the second by US Vice President JD Vance. General Chauhan's visit marks a distinct uptick in bilateral relations, it being the first by India's seniormost serving military official. Vice President Vance's is the highest-level visit from the US since Armenia's independence in 1991.

The scheduling of the two visits would appear to be coincidental. What is not, however, is their timing — both are taking place at a time of quiet competition and a consequent transformation in the South Caucasus. This region comprises Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Abutting them are three major powers, ie, Russia, Iran and Turkiye. This complex geography makes for a contentious strategic scenario, a Caucasian version of the "Great Game". This is evidenced by the renewal of their historic jostling by the three aforementioned powers to safeguard their regional influence. Adding to the mix is the role of extra-regional players like India, Israel and the US.

The visit to Yerevan of a high-level defence delegation led by India's CDS, General Anil Chauhan (Feb 1-4) cements growing bilateral ties. It widens the ambit of engagement and fits in with India's multi-alignment strategy. General Chauhan's official engagements included meetings with Armenian Defence Minister Suren Papikyan and Chief of the General Staff Edvard Asryan.

One significant outcome is the decision to expand defence cooperation to include military training, a sign of high mutual confidence. After its 2020 war with Azerbaijan, Armenia has increasingly turned to India to qualitatively upgrade its defence capabilities. Since 2022, India's defence supplies have grown significantly and are at present valued at $2.2 billion. These include Akash medium-range air-defence, Pinaka rocket launchers, 155-mm towed howitzers and other equipment.

General Chauhan also paid respects at the Armenian Genocide Memorial, a reminder of the genocide of around 1.5 million Armenians in 1914-15 under the Ottoman Empire. Turkiye's denial of that genocide continues to cloud Armenia-Turkiye ties.

Less well known is the triangular ethnic relationship between Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Iran is home to a substantial Azeri minority as also a small Armenian diaspora. In fact, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is of ethnic Azeri stock. Turkiye and Azerbaijan are linked by their shared Turkish ancestry but while Turkiye is majority Sunni, the Azeris profess the Shia faith.

The Iran-Azeri relationship is further complicated by Iran's traditionally close ties with Armenia, a Christian majority country. If that were not confusing enough, Israel has steadily deepened its ties with Azerbaijan, securing a valuable strategic foothold on Iran's northern border.

During the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Turkish military equipment was instrumental in Azerbaijan's success. At the time, Russia stayed neutral, despite its historical and religious ties with Armenia and their membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

Armenia has since distanced itself from the CSTO and, to an extent, even from Russia. Instead, it has broadened its range of partnerships — with India, Iran and the US, which hosts a large Armenian diaspora.

The latter fact contextualises the visit to Yerevan by Vance (February 9-10). He held talks with Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan and both sides announced cooperation in nuclear energy generation and of US military supplies to Armenia, essentially surveillance drones. From Armenia, Vance went to the neighbouring Azerbaijan.

But the actual intent of Vance's visit appears to be to follow up on the peace deal announced by President Trump between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington DC in August. The deal seeks to bring to a close the four-decade simmering conflict between the two Caucasian rivals.

At the end of their trilateral meeting in Washington, both leaders predictably endorsed Trump for the Nobel while Trump took characteristic credit for closing another peace deal. Subsequent developments, however, indicate that mutual distrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains undiminished while Trump has moved on to other issues.

However, the larger significance of last August's trilateral meeting was the announcement of the so-called "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" corridor or TRIPP. There is no formal mention of the TRIPP in the peace deal, but it forms part of a provision on "transit links". Notably, the agreement itself was merely "initialled" and requires completion of ratification processes by both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The TRIPP is ambitious in scope and has the potential to transform the region. It envisages redevelopment of Soviet-era transit rights linking Azerbaijan with its enclave of Nakhchivan. This corridor, presently referred to as the Zangezur corridor, is a 43-km route running across Armenian territory.
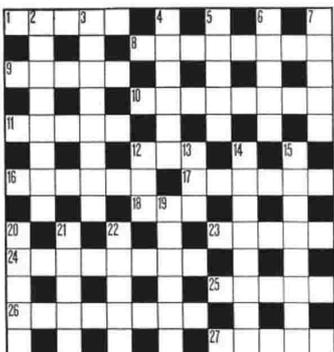
The TRIPP envisages a rail and road link cutting across the southern Caucasus. From Nakhchivan, the TRIPP will extend into Turkiye and then on towards Europe, as the so-called Middle Corridor being promoted by Turkiye.

Given the strained Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, Azerbaijan's only access is currently via Iranian territory. Once TRIPP becomes operational, its access to Nakhchivan will be from within Armenian territory, thereby bypassing Iran. Iran views the TRIPP with deep suspicion, as a strategic threat with the potential of stationing the US and Israel on its northern borders.

Iran has countered by reaching out to India, for a trilateral arrangement with Armenia. This is, however, lying in abeyance, given Iran's own distractions. Thus, embedded in the two visits are signals of strategic intent being sent by India and America. The US has offered to manage the TRIPP, floating the idea of a 100-year US lease for it.

India has shown that it is not averse to entering the South Caucasus game of thrones. It has signalled to Turkiye and Azerbaijan that their meddling in India's neighbourhood, support for Pakistan and, lately, Bangladesh, would come at a cost they would need to prepare for.

COOPERATION : Chief of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan's visit to Armenia cements growing bilateral ties. ANI

> Since 2022, India's defence supplies to Armenia have grown significantly and are at present valued at $2.2 bn.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 Sudden convulsive movement (5)
6 Freedom of access (4,4)
9 Have relevance (5)
10 Drive dangerously close behind (8)
11 Take it easy (5)
12 Wager (3)
16 Western US state (6)
17 By mouth (6)
18 Small quantity of spirits (3)
23 Impudently self-assertive (5)
24 Consist of (8)
25 An assumed name (5)
26 Bit of unexpected good luck (8)
27 Former capital of Japan (5)

DOWN
2 Pelted with missiles (8)
3 Put by (4,4)
4 Comprehension (6)
5 To slant (5)
6 A deep orange-pink (5)
7 Carrying a gun (5)
12 Prohibit (3)
13 Spinning toy (3)
14 Impartial treatment (4,4)
15 Example of outstanding quality (5,3)
19 A gross indignity (6)
20 Sullen bad-tempered look (5)
21 Included in (5)
22 Skill in practical arts (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Golden rule, 6 Spur, 10 Aloud, 11 Shameless, 12 Campaign, 13 Guest, 15 Lettuce, 17 Deadpan, 19 Current, 21 Awesome, 22 Glued, 24 Restrain, 27 Attention, 28 Guile, 29 Dart, 30 Green light.

Down: 1 Gnat, 2 Look after, 3 End up, 4 Restive, 5 Learned, 7 Piece, 8 Rose-tinted, 9 Belgrade, 14 Blackguard, 16 Unending, 18 Promising, 20 Terrier, 21 Absence, 23 Utter. 25 Regal, 26 Feat.

SU DO KU

			3	9	5			2
7								
	9	6		5				4
	5	3				8	7	
9	8	6					7	
			4		1			
1					2	9	3	
2	6				1	3		
4		5		7	6			
	5	2	6					

V. EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

9	8	1	3	4	7	6	2	5
7	4	2	8	6	5	9	1	3
5	3	6	2	9	1	7	8	4
2	6	4	1	7	9	3	5	8
3	9	5	6	4	8	2	7	1
1	7	8	6	3	5	4	9	2
6	5	3	9	1	8	2	4	7
8	2	9	7	6	4	5	3	1
4	1	7	5	2	3	8	6	9

CALENDAR
FEBRUARY 17, 2026, TUESDAY
- Shaka Samvat   1947
- Margshirsh Shaka   28
- Phalgun Parvishte   6
- Hijari   1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 15, up to 5:31 pm
- Parigha Yoga up to 12:29 am
- Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 9:16 pm
- Moon enters Aquarius sign 9:06 am
- Panchak start 9:06 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: TUESDAY 18:12 HRS
SUNRISE: WEDNESDAY 07:00 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	12
New Delhi	30	13
Amritsar	24	10
Bathinda	26	09
Jalandhar	24	10
Ludhiana	26	10
Bhiwani	27	13
Hisar	26	13
Sirsa	26	13
Dharamsala	23	07
Manali	17	02
Shimla	18	08
Srinagar	16	01
Jammu	25	11
Kargil	05	−08
Leh	04	−08
Dehradun	26	09
Mussoorie	18	08

TEMPERATURE IN °C

The Statesman

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

Uneasy Partners

The annual gathering of security officials in Munich has once again exposed a familiar truth about the Atlantic alliance: it survives less on romance than on necessity. The language of shared history and common civilisation still makes for good speeches, but the real story is one of recalibration in a harsher world. What emerged this year was not a break between the United States and Europe, nor a return to old certainties, but something more complicated - a relationship being renegotiated under pressure.

On the surface, the reassurances mattered. After months of anxious speculation about whether Washington might loosen its commitments, the message was clear enough: the partnership is not being abandoned. Yet reassurance came paired with a blunt inventory of grievances. Immigration, climate policy, trade orthodoxy, and defence spending were all held up as evidence that the alliance, as it has functioned, no longer fits American priorities. This was not a lover's quarrel; it was a reminder that power, not sentiment, now sets the terms.

Europe's response was equally revealing. There was visible relief at the promise of continued engagement, but also a growing acceptance that the continent can no longer outsource its security comfort to history. The repeated calls for greater defence investment, stronger "hard power," and even more integrated military thinking point to a shift in mindset. The old assumption - that the Atlantic partnership was an unchanging fixture of global politics - has been replaced by a quieter, more anxious realism.

That realism is driven by the wider strategic landscape. The war in Ukraine grinds on with no credible expectation that aggression will simply burn itself out. Russia remains a central, unresolved challenge.

Tensions are spreading northward into the Arctic, while instability in West Asia and uncertainty around nuclear ambitions elsewhere keep reminding policymakers that the post-Cold War lull is over. In this setting, institutions designed for a more orderly era look slow, constrained, and often irrelevant. The world of tidy multilateralism is giving way to something tougher and more transactional.

What Munich really highlighted, then, is not unity or division, but interdependence under strain. The United States wants allies who can carry more of the load and align more closely with its strategic priorities. Europe wants American engagement, but increasingly understands that this engagement comes with conditions and expectations that are not negotiable in the old way. Both sides are adjusting to a future in which shared values still matter, but shared vulnerabilities matter more.

This is not necessarily a tragedy. Alliances that never change tend to fossilise. A tougher, more clear-eyed partnership may be better suited to an age of open competition and recurring crises. But it does mean saying goodbye to comforting illusions. The Atlantic relationship is no longer a sentimental inheritance from the twentieth century. It is becoming a contract for the twenty-first, renewed not by nostalgia, but by the simple, uneasy recognition that neither side can manage the coming storms alone.

Rivalry Rewritten

The latest India-Pakistan clash in Colombo was supposed to be another chapter in cricket's most overburdened rivalry. Instead, it felt like a status update. On a pitch that asked for patience and precision, India displayed both, and Pakistan neither. The scoreboard told a blunt story, but the deeper message was more uncomfortable: this rivalry is drifting from combustible uncertainty toward predictable hierarchy.

Ishan Kishan's innings was the hinge on which the night turned. On a surface offering turn and uneven bounce, he batted as if conditions were a problem to be solved, not endured - moving quickly, choosing his moments, and forcing Pakistan's bowlers into reactive fields.

The total India assembled was not extravagant by modern T20 standards, yet it was perfectly calibrated to the ground and the pressure of the occasion. That calibration is the difference between a side that plays the format and one that understands it.

Pakistan's reply exposed a more persistent issue. Early wickets are not just setbacks in T20s; they are mood setters. When Hardik Pandya and Jasprit Bumrah struck in the opening overs, the chase was psychologically reframed from pursuit to survival.

From there, the innings never found a second gear. A single counter-punch, Usman Khan's resistance, could not compensate for the absence of partnerships or a coherent plan against spin. The collapse was not dramatic; it was procedural.

This is where the rivalry's romance runs into reality. For years, India-Pakistan matches have been sold as theatre: history, politics, and emotion compressed into 40 overs. That theatre still fills stands and headlines, but cricketing balance is what sustains suspense, and balance is exactly what is missing. India's depth across batting, pace, and spin now looks structural rather than circumstantial.

It is the product of a domestic pipeline, financial muscle, and a selection ecosystem that tolerates rotation without losing edge. Pakistan, by contrast, continues to live on bursts of brilliance, hoping that talent alone can outpace recurrence.

The political chill that surrounded this fixture only sharpened the contrast. The game went ahead, but without the rituals of warmth that once softened the rivalry's edges. That made the cricket itself carry more weight, and it delivered a verdict that was quietly damning. A rivalry cannot survive on symbolism if the contest keeps tilting one way.

For India, the win is more than a step toward another knockout berth. It is evidence of a team that can win without perfect conditions, without every star firing, and without theatrics. That is what champions look like in the modern game. For Pakistan, the path forward is less about finding the next prodigy and more about building an idea of T20 cricket that survives pressure, spin, and early setbacks.

If these two meet again later in the tournament, the marketing will promise fireworks. The cricket, unless something fundamental changes, is likely to promise something else: a lesson in what happens when preparation becomes culture, and culture becomes habit. In rivalries, habit is destiny.

Sparks near a powder keg

Collectively, however, a more troubling pattern emerges. The Arctic is militarizing. The Middle East negotiates under threat. The Taiwan Strait simmers. East Asia hardens its posture. South Asia remains brittle. This is how volatility accumulates ~ not through one dramatic event, but through layered tensions that narrow diplomatic space

The contemporary world does not feel stable. It feels tense, brittle, combustible. Across continents, great powers posture, threaten, and test boundaries. None of the current crises have tipped into full-scale war. Yet taken together, they form a pattern that is deeply unsettling. We are living in a moment when confrontation increasingly feels normal.

Even the Arctic ~ once imagined as a distant expanse of ice and scientific cooperation ~ is becoming militarized. Recent European coordination in support of Denmark's position on Greenland, along with expanded allied exercises in the region, signals that the High North is no longer peripheral to global power politics.

Military deployments framed as defensive are now routine. What was once a frozen buffer has become a theatre of strategic signalling. The logic is deterrence. The risk is miscalculation.
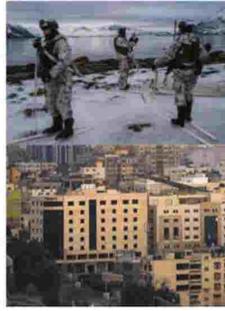
When troop movements, naval patrols, and air exercises become normalized, the line between reassurance and provocation blurs. The Arctic may not be ablaze, but it is no longer insulated from global rivalry.

In the Middle East, diplomacy and intimidation coexist uneasily. Washington and Tehran are reportedly engaged in talks exploring possible de-escalation. Yet President Trump has warned of "dire consequences" should Iran refuse a peace or nuclear agreement. The message is unmistakably coercive ~ diplomacy conducted under the shadow of force.

Such rhetoric may be intended as leverage. But leverage, when amplified publicly, can harden positions. Escalation in language often narrows room for retreat. The stakes extend beyond Washington and Tehran. Any direct armed conflict between the United States and Iran would almost certainly draw in regional actors.

Israel, which views Iran's nuclear ambitions as an existential threat, would be deeply implicated. Iranian retaliation could target not only American assets but Israeli ones, widening the theatre of conflict.

Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have sought to balance security partnerships with Washington against cautious engagement with Tehran. None of the current crises have tipped into full-scale war. Yet taken together, they form a pattern that is deeply unsettling. We are living in a moment when confrontation increasingly feels normal.

Even the Arctic ~ once imagined as a distant expanse of ice and scientific cooperation ~ is becoming militarized. In such a tightly interconnected region, even limited strikes risk spiralling outward through alliances and proxy networks.

Negotiations may continue. But the drumbeat of confrontation persists. One misread signal - one strike, one retaliatory move - could unravel fragile restraint.

In East Asia, tensions revolve around sovereignty claims with worldwide implications. China regards Taiwan as a breakaway province and has increased military pressure through air incursions, naval manoeuvres, and large-scale exercises around the island. Beijing frames these actions as warnings against separatism and foreign interference.

Taiwan has strengthened its defences and deepened informal ties with Western democracies. The United States continues to provide military support while maintaining strategic ambiguity about direct intervention.

The stakes are not merely regional. Taiwan sits at the centre of global semiconductor production, supplying advanced chips that power everything from consumer electronics to defence systems. A conflict in the Taiwan Strait would reverberate through global supply chains, financial markets, and strategic alliances. In an interconnected world, geography does not limit consequences.

War is not inevitable. But the frequency of military exercises and hardened rhetoric narrows the margin for error. Japan's new prime minister has adopted a firmer tone regarding Taiwan. While Tokyo formally upholds the "One China" policy, the rhetorical shift is unmistakable. Japan has linked Taiwan's security more explicitly to its own national interests, deepened defence coordination with the United States, and accelerated military preparedness.

Beijing sees such statements as provocative. Tokyo sees them as deterrence. Neither side appears to seek imminent war. Yet both are normalizing strategic confrontation. Chinese patrols around disputed islands in the East China Sea have grown more frequent. Japan's Self-Defence Forces respond in kind. Military exercises reinforce hardened narratives. The danger lies not in dramatic declaration but in the gradual erosion of guardrails.

Closer to home, South Asia remains burdened by unresolved tensions. India and Pakistan, both nuclear-armed states, continue to navigate a relationship marked by mistrust and periodic crises. Sustained dialogue remains limited. History demonstrates how quickly flare-ups can escalate before cooler heads prevail.

India's relationship with China remains strained by an unresolved border dispute along the Line of Actual Control.

Although disengagement efforts have reduced tensions in some sectors since the 2020 standoff, the boundary remains undefined and fragile. Beijing periodically reiterates its claim over Arunachal Pradesh ~ referring to it as "South Tibet" - a position India firmly rejects. Such assertions deepen mistrust and reinforce perceptions of encirclement in Indian strategic thinking.

Bangladesh has expanded economic and strategic engagement with China, including infrastructure cooperation and defence acquisitions, while also reopening diplomatic channels with Pakistan. There is no formal military bloc directed against India. Bangladesh's foreign policy remains pragmatic and economically driven. Yet evolving alignments are watched carefully in New Delhi.

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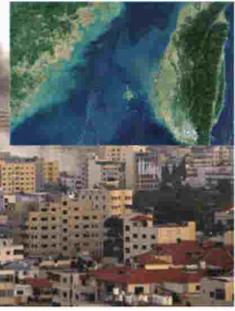
Indian defence planners have long contemplated the possibility of facing simultaneous pressure from China and Pakistan ~ often described as a "two-and-a-half front" scenario. While this remains a contingency rather than an active coalition, shifting regional dynamics inevitably shape India's security calculations.

Nuclear deterrence has prevented full-scale war in the subcontinent for decades. But deterrence depends on rational calculation, reliable communication, and political restraint ~ conditions that cannot be assumed indefinitely.

Individually, each flashpoint can be explained as rational state behaviour. Governments seek deterrence. Leaders signal resolve. Alliances reaffirm commitments. Rivals test limits.

Collectively, however, a more troubling pattern emerges. The Arctic is militarizing. The Middle East negotiates under threat. The Taiwan Strait simmers. East Asia hardens its posture. South Asia remains brittle.

This is how volatility accumulates - not through one dramatic event, but through layered tensions that narrow diplomatic space. The cumulative effect is psychological as well as strategic.

When leaders speak constantly of red lines and consequences, public opinion hardens. Compromise appears weak. Escalation gains momentum.

History rarely repeats itself neatly, but it does rhyme. The early twentieth century did not begin with a single global war. It began with alliances tightening, naval races accelerating, nationalist rhetoric intensifying, and crises being managed ~ until one was not.

We are not there. Not yet. But a powder keg does not explode because someone seeks destruction. It explodes because too many sparks are struck in close proximity. The question before us is simple: are today's leaders reducing sparks ~ or striking more of them?

Too hot to handle?

The latest word is that the Senate blue ribbon committee report on its investigation into anomalous flood control projects will be revised. No longer will the final draft recommend that charges be filed against some incumbent senators linked to the irregularities, only that they "undergo preliminary investigation."

A strategic retreat or a craven loss of nerve? The panel chair, Senate President Pro Tempore Panfilo "Ping" Lacson, is framing it as the former. "The version may change, but not the substance," he insisted. "The connotation, for example, in the draft that was initially routed, there was a word there: 'charged' ... To a layman, it sounds like the person is already in court. So we specified that instead of using the word ... it should say 'to undergo preliminary investigation,' 'to undergo fact-finding investigation,' or 'to undergo case buildup,'" he added.

Lacson had earlier confirmed the veracity of the leaked copy of the draft report. In that draft, the committee recommended the filing of plunder, malversation of public funds, and direct bribery against three senators ~ Jinggoy Estrada, Joel Villanueva, and Francis "Chiz" Escudero ~ as well as former Sen. Ramon "Bong" Revilla Jr., former Ako Bicol Rep. Elizaldy "Zaldy" Co, and former Caloocan Rep. Mary Mitzi "Mitch" Cajayon-Uy.

Lacson said the change in language was not to mollify his cosenators named in the report, or to shore up the leadership of Senate President Vicente "Tito" Sotto III, who had just survived an attempt to unseat him by the minority bloc that counts Estrada, Villanueva, and Escudero as members. In fact, it was the majority bloc, said Lacson, who "suggested that maybe the language could be softened without sacrificing the intent or changing the substance." Lacson may contort himself

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into knots trying to justify the changes in his committee report, but the toothpaste is out of its tube, so to speak.

Because of the leaked draft, the public already knows that, in an original moment of clarity ~ and perhaps moral courage? ~ the Senate committee had been prepared just days earlier to state that actual wrongdoing was committed by some senators, and call for charges to be pursued against them in court. Compare that now to the lame, noncommittal alternative of calling only for a "preliminary investigation" against them. That move effectively means the supposedly fearsome blue ribbon panel is abstaining from judgment on the very evidence it was able to gather across a number of hearings, and leaving it to other government agencies to formalize the findings of misconduct.

The accusations against Estrada, Villanueva, and Escudero stand on strong ground. They were directly implicated in sworn testimonies by former Department of Public Works and Highways Undersecretary Roberto Bernardo and former Bulacan district engineer Henry Alcantara.

The witnesses had dates, receipts, and numbers to back up their claims. Bernardo's testimony, in particular, has already led to the arrest and detention of a number of individuals, including Revilla, who faces charges of malversation of public funds through falsification of public documents at the Sandiganbayan. To hear now that the language of the committee report has been finessed to water down the findings of culpability by these senators is to suspect that the Senate's "old boys' club" system is once again at work. The lawmakers are circling the wagons and protecting their own kind from any serious threat of accountability, and any protestations of the report's intent still being "intact" only brings to high relief the horse-trading and accommodations likely done behind closed doors to defang the report.

Letters To The Editor ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Executive action

Sir, Please refer to today's report "SC rebukes Neeraj Pandey over 'Ghooskhor Pandat' title". In a welcome development, the Supreme Court on Thursday said that it wouldn't allow the release of the Hindi film unless the filmmakers file an affidavit mentioning a new title. However, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's direction to file a first information report (FIR) against the makers of the film, is a sign of how sections of the ruling establishment have come to treat speech that they dislike.

In a diverse society, people can plausibly say they are hurt by many things, which is why sentiments are not useful thresholds to trigger a criminal process. Speech is not always free of consequences but the state bears the burden to examine it with specificity. A more sensible response, when there is a credible claim of unlawfulness, is for the aggrieved party to seek judicial relief, record the reasons, and adopt the least restrictive measure. Taking executive action flies in the face of this constitutional process.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das,
Kolkata, 13 February.

Irresponsible

Sir, This refers to today's report,"Govt sold Bharat Mata, Gandhi alleges," in *The Statesman*. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi's charge that the Narendra Modi government has "sold Bharat Mata" by entering into an interim Indo-US trade deal is an irresponsible and inflammatory distortion of economic diplomacy.

Such rhetoric trivialises complex negotiations that shape market access, supply chains, technology cooperation and India's strategic leverage in a turbulent global economy.

Reducing a trade framework to a slogan of national betrayal may offer political theatre, but it corrodes serious public debate and weakens India's credibility abroad.

No evidence has been presented to show that sovereignty, strategic autonomy or core national interests have been compromised. Instead of demanding transparency through institutional channels and parliamentary scrutiny, Gandhi has chosen a provocative narrative designed to mobilise anger rather than understanding. Branding every engagement with a global partner as capitulation insults the intelligence of citizens and undermines the very democratic responsibility the Opposition claims to defend.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy,
Bengaluru, 12 February.

Terms of deal

Sir, Apropos "The Fine Print" (February 13), the editorial rightly highlights the ambiguities surrounding the India-US trade framework. While broad announcements create optimism, unclear commitments on energy, agriculture and tariff concessions can generate uncertainty at home. Trade agreements inevitably involve give and take, but their credibility depends on transparency and predictability. Farmers and small producers, in particular, need clear safeguards that go beyond general assurances.

The government would do well to place detailed terms in the public domain and subject them to wider parliamentary scrutiny. Impact assessments on sensitive sectors should be shared in advance, along with timelines for implementation. A consultative mechanism with industry bodies and farmer representatives can help address concerns early. At the same time, phased adjustments and targeted support schemes can cushion vulnerable groups. Diplomatic success should not rest on headline numbers alone. It must translate into stable rules that inspire confidence among investors and citizens alike. Clear communication and accountable follow-through will determine whether this framework delivers lasting gains.

Yours., etc., Avinashiappan Myilsami,
Coimbatore, 13 February.

Balancing ties with America and Russia

HARSHA KAKAR

Indo-Russia ties have been an enigma for the US. Russia has been a reliable ally for decades as compared to the US, which tilts depending on policies of the current administration. In 2000, India and Russia signed a declaration converting their relationship into a strategic partnership and in 2010 into a 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership.' Trade was low, largely based on military hardware. The scenario changed post the Ukraine war and imposition of sanctions on Russia.

India's oil procurements from Russia increased since the Ukraine war due to discounts, and reached US $64 billion in 2024-25. President Donald Trump then imposed 25 per cent additional tariffs on India for procuring Russian oil. Last week, in an interview with TV BRICS, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov mentioned, "US is trying to ban India and our other partners from buying cheap, affordable Russian energy resources." Earlier this month Trump said that India had agreed to stop procuring Russian oil, believing it "would help end the war in Ukraine." Lavrov countered, "No one other than Trump has claimed that India plans to stop buying Russian oil." India may have scaled down procurements, but there are no indicators that these have stopped.

Trump targeted India but not China for procuring Russian oil, because Beijing possesses leverage which India lacks, rare earth minerals, essential for the US. Washington is desperately attempting to break this stranglehold. Further, sanctioning China could impact supply chains, resulting in increased inflation in the US. Added is Trump's belief that President Xi Jinping holds greater sway over Russian President Vladimir Putin than Prime Minister Modi.

Trump could pressure India because the Indian economy remains dependent on Western markets, technology and funding. By inking the Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with the EU and other nations, thereby expanding its markets, India has been able to offset the tariffs imposed by the US.

The India-EU FTA caused panic within the Trump administration. The reason is that this deal covers about 25 per cent of global GDP and 30 per cent of the world's population. It would enable both India and Europe to reduce dependency on the US and China, a fact which worries Washington.

While a possible trade deal with the US has been announced, negotiations for concluding it would still take time. However, an agreement is no guarantee that Trump would adhere to it, as has been the case with South Korea, Canada, and Mexico, where Trump imposed additional tariffs for differing reasons. India therefore must keep alternate options up its sleeve.

In addition to tariffs, India has been threatened with CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) for procuring weapon systems from Russia. India refused to bend on the S-400 missile system and the previous US administration backed down. Presently, the same is again being threatened on possible procurement of SU 57 aircraft. CAATSA could also impact India's defence procurements from the US. It is already being applied in Algeria.

Simultaneously, the US is pushing Ukraine and Russia to ink a peace agreement to end their conflict. On one side, it seeks to partner Russia on peace, draw it away from China, while on the other it attempts to sanction allies of Russia. The target appears to be not just Russia but BRICS, of which India is the rotational President. The BRICS economy surpasses that of the G7 and is debating use of local currencies instead of the US Dollar in its trade dealings. Washington hopes that by drawing an influential India, it may be able to prevent BRICS from moving ahead on dumping the dollar.

India, on its part, has not confirmed Trump's statements on reducing Russian oil procurements. The MEA mentioned that oil procurements are 'are driven by national energy security and market conditions rather than geopolitical pressure.' Speaking at the Munich Security Conference last week, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar mentioned that 'oil companies in India, Europe and elsewhere make purchasing decisions based on market factors and what best serves their interests.' India has also not passed any instructions on Russian oil to its oil companies.

The US is also pushing India to enhance military purchases from it, which India is doing selectively. It does not seek to become dependent on the US for major military platforms, unless they are manufactured locally with a large domestic content. Dependence on the US could possibly open doors for diplomatic exploitation. Hence, Aatmanirbharta is essential.

India's military ties with Russia remain robust. Despite US pressure, India has turned down offers for F35 aircraft, while still considering domestic production of the Russian SU 57. However other defence deals with the US are ongoing.

Trump did attempt to pressure India to switch sides by imposing tariffs and sanctions and delaying supply of defence equipment. US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick even stated that the trade deal was delayed because PM Modi never spoke to Trump. Throughout the phase of diplomatic distancing, dialogue continued on defence cooperation. India also never negatively commented on Trump's claims of stopping Operation Sindoor or reducing oil procurements.

India's strategic silence, maturity in diplomacy and expanding FTAs with other nations pushed the US to realize that India would not bend. India, unlike European nations, neither accepted nor rejected Trump's Board of Peace. It only mentioned that it is 'carefully assessing' the invite. The US has understood that India can be wooed but not forced to adhere to its demands.

India has been walking the tight rope in its relations with both the US and Russia. It is aware that at some stage Moscow could gravitate towards Washington to gain benefits of US investments and technology by inking deals on minerals and unless India remains in the game it could be left out.

When compared to the US, which has begun exploiting its economic power as a tool for geopolitical coercion, Russia has been a steadfast partner and an equal. Thus, despite levels of pressure from the US, Indo-Russian ties have remained robust. India is unlikely to stop oil procurements from Russia, though it may reduce them, while continuing with its arms procurements, especially since Russia offers favourable terms for manufacture in India.

India also cannot ignore its ties with the US as Washington possesses levers to stall defence procurements, impacting vital capabilities, and curtail India's growth by limiting technology and finance. Those attempting to coerce the government into challenging Washington by accusing it of selling out do not have the nation's best interests in mind.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army.)

AI, deepfakes and money laundering

SMARAK SWAIN

For decades, policymakers and bankers have battled the paradox of fostering financial inclusion without compromising financial integrity. Policymakers want to bring the unbanked into the formal banking channels to foster growth, even while requiring banks to conduct sufficient Know Your Customer (KYC) checks to ensure that accounts are not misused by criminals and terrorists.

While elaborate KYC makes it difficult for launderers to use mule accounts to layer illicit proceeds, they also dissuade the common man from using formal banking. In recent years, digital identification technology seemed to have solved the paradox, allowing for seamless, paperless onboarding while maintaining the integrity of the system. But as we stand in early 2026, this technological solution is getting disrupted by a new one: Generative AI. Artificial Intelligence presents both problems and solutions in the ever-fight between bankers and criminals.

AI enables deepfakes, synthetic media that can convincingly mimic a person's appearance, voice, and even micro-expressions. Deepfakes can be used to impersonate real individuals, including during a KYC check. Criminals are now using these "digital masks" to bypass video-based KYC and biometric checks. A scammer no longer needs to find a real person willing to rent out their account to move money stolen from gullible victims. They can simply manufacture a synthetic persona, open a heap of accounts across various banks, and use them to move stolen funds before the system can even blink.

A Horizon Scan on Artificial Intelligence and Deepfakes, published by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in December 2025, observes: "The risks from deepfakes are escalating rapidly... Today, anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can generate convincing deepfakes within minutes." We have moved from times when forging an identity required a lab to a juncture when it requires a subscription to a basic AI app.

The proliferation of mule accounts is a global challenge. In India, data from the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C) suggests that approximately 4,000 mule accounts are reported daily. The challenge is going to become even more acute due to the democratisation of deepfakes. While mule accounts provide cybercriminals with the infrastructure to steal victims' money, they are also misused by organised crime groups, terrorists, and even hackers for laundering illicit funds.

However, it would be a mistake to view AI solely as a criminal's tool. If AI helps create deepfakes, it also provides banks with the markers to detect them. Banks must now transition from passive KYC to a more dynamic AI-driven due diligence. This involves, for example, deploying advanced algorithms called "liveness checks" that can detect the subtle unnaturalness in AI-generated skin textures, eye-blink patterns, and movements that a deepfake cannot yet replicate.

Moreover, AI allows banks to move beyond customer identity at the gate (i.e. when opening an account) to observing their behaviour in the hallway (i.e. when conducting transactions). By embedding AI into core banking functions, banks can identify anomalies in transaction patterns (such as a housewife suddenly receiving large funds, or an agri-business without GST registration making high-volume international transfers), marking them as suspected mules in real time.

The ease of digital banking cannot be sacrificed, yet the integrity of our financial borders is under siege by synthetic actors. The problem is created by AI, and the solution lies with AI. Banks that treat AI as a core operational layer, rather than a peripheral compliance tool, will be trusted and will thrive.

As global leaders gather at Bharat Mandapam for the India-AI Impact Summit 2026 this week, the focus is shifting toward institutionalizing these defenses. The summit is anchored on seven thematic "Chakras" or working groups, of which the third on 'Safe and Trusted AI' is dedicated to creating a global framework for transparency and accountability. For AI to foster 'Progress' (one of the summit's three Sutras), it must be 'Safe'. There is need for more dialogue on the regulated use of AI by banks for customer due diligence.

(The writer is co-chair of the FATF's working group on risks. Views are personal. AI has been used by the writer to conduct editorial review of this article.)

Front page of The Statesman
dated 17 February 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THERE are two reasons for hoping, in spite of the heat of the last few days, that the cold weather is not yet over in Bengal. The depression that entered India from Persia on Tuesday week may not have yet completely passed away, for it entered India on a broad front and the reporting stations in India are too few to keep track of any storm. The tendency of depressions from the north-west is to skirt the southern side of the Himalayas, and cover the higher peaks with snow. For some reason not yet understood, such falls of snow cause presently a change in the direction of the wind which then blows directly south bringing with it the fall in the temperature that means so much to dwellers in the Gangetic plains. Even if the first depression has disappeared there is still hope, for a second one entered India six days after the first. That is why we say there are two reasons for hoping that the cold weather in Bengal is not yet entirely over. And also there is always the chance of a local storm developing in the Chota Nagpur hills. These storms are generally of a cyclonic character but it is rarely that their radius is too short to touch Calcutta.

News Items

HOURS OF LABOUR

EFFORTS AT INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.)
RUGBY, FEB. 16.

THE conference of the Ministers of Labour of Great Britain, Belgium, France, Germany and Italy, which the British Government is convening, is expected to take place next month.

The object of the conference is to consider the possibility of securing an effective international agreement for the regulating of the hours of labour. The Prime Minister has already stated that if that agreement is reached the ratification of the Washington Agreement by the participating countries will then be possible and Great Britain will proceed to ratify. Italy has already ratified the Convention, conditionally on its ratification by Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland. A Bill authorising ratification by France when Germany has ratified has passed the French Chamber and is now before the Senate. A Bill for unconditional ratification has been approved by all sections of the Belgian Chamber.

The International Labour Office states that the combination of legislative and diplomatic action now in progress may presently produce decisive and valuable results.

WILD WEATHER

THRILLING RESCUES OFF DEVON & IRELAND

LONDON, FEB. 16.

WILD weather and fog on the sea during the week-end were responsible for shipping disasters on the Devon and Irish coasts. Thrilling rescues were made in perilous conditions.

The crew, numbering 27, of the Italian steamer Liberia, which ran ashore in the fog on the South Devon coast was saved by rocket apparatus. The crew of 34 of the Spanish steamer Cirilo-Amoros, which ran ashore on the rocks of Dungarvan in Waterford, were saved by being hauled up the cliffs in a cradle on a cable. The crews of two trawlers wrecked on the Galway course are missing in the fog.—Reuter's Special Service.

MLLE LENGLEN'S VICTORY

MISS WILLS FAILS IN RIVIERA MATCH

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)
LONDON, FEB. 16.

The much advertised tennis match in the Carlton Club tournament at Cannes between Mlle Lenglen and Miss Helen Wills, the young American champion, ended in a victory for the French player the scores being 6—3, 8—6. Although confidence had been expressed in some quarters, particularly America, in the ability of Miss Wills to defeat the world's champion the result came as no surprise both to genuine critics both in England and on the Continent. —Copyright.

Crossword | No. 293378

Yesterday's Solution

ACROSS

9 Make some kind of table decoration? Get away (2,1,6)
10 American attempt to accept one Hispanic friend (5)
11 Lady with kids least set to ditch car (3)
12 Crazed barber needs to dye head of woman, possibly (7,4)
13 Odd bits of ordeal forgotten with a kiss producing calm (5)
14 Loosely, it is a role for a recluse (9)
15 Mythological heroine chosen by artist (7)
17 Offer initially withdrawn after intervention by American customer (3-4)
19 How to give mate a treat at Christmas? (9)
21 Insect seen around November or similar? (5)
22 Burns character – panicked horseman that gets horse docked (3,8)
24 Somewhere to warm up tramp, nothing less (5)
26 Head of school and the writer accepting satisfactory fag (5)
27 Accounted for former priest backing rejection (9)

DOWN

1 Article on rising enthusiastic Scottish architect (4)
2 Rule may lead to kepi's redesign as specialist headgear (8)
3 Nookie identified in pursuit of suspicious behaviour in part of southern England (6)
4 OK – can the brasserie finally produce a joint? (4)
5 Lines confused with trick, becoming most uneven (10)
6 Dairy with cat sculpted to form supporting column (8)
7 Amusement park? First book on it turned up (6)
8 Contention for every one receiving right puzzle (10)
13 Sadly I must hear about male medical condition (10)
14 Embarrassed with fake source of Ethiopian coffee popping up (10)
16 Trophy remains held by you, once foremost in sport (3,5)
18 Special article from Mont Blanc, capturing climb in good weather (8)
20 He hunted revolutionary military force involved in murder (6)
21 Person of virtue accepting half of it (6)
23 Some security personnel use keys (4)
25 Early historian, qualified teacher, English (4)

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

DECCAN Chronicle

17 FEBRUARY 2026

T'gana CM cements grip on party, govt with wins

The unprecedented victory of the Congress in the urban local body elections in Telangana, with a strike rate of almost 90 per cent, has put Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy in the numero uno position in the party as well as the government. It has secured his Chief Ministership for the full term beyond any doubt.

However, to realise his dream of retaining power in the next Assembly elections, Revanth Reddy has to put his administration — both at the state government level and on the ground — on a constant delivery mode. The responsibility of serving the rural areas too lies with him, as the Congress made considerable electoral gains in the recently held gram panchayat elections also.

The next litmus test for Revanth Reddy will be capturing the Greater Hyderabad area, which is now trifurcated into Hyderabad, Cyberabad and Malkajgiri municipal corporations. Voters in this area, impressed with the development façade that then IT minister K.T. Rama Rao had projected, stood by the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) in the 2023 Assembly elections, denying the Congress victory in any of the 24 seats. Revanth Reddy, however, is keen on leaving his imprint on Hyderabad by winning all the three corporations, which will play a crucial role in the 2029 Assembly elections.

Revanth Reddy's Telangana Rising 2047 model, which envisages transforming Telangana into a $3-trillion economy by 2047, using Hyderabad and the surrounding area as the growth engine, got a fillip, with the Central government announcing big-ticket infra projects like the Regional Ring Road and a speed rail hub at Shamshabad. The Chief Minister was of the strong view that the core area of Hyderabad and the proposed development clusters between ORR and RRR will make India's fifth economic powerhouse a global city.

Despite severe financial constraints, the Revanth Reddy government managed to fulfil the majority of its poll promises such as the free bus facility to women, crop loan waiver, free power to the poor, and new ration cards, to name a few. Supply of fine variety of rice through the public distribution system, at a time when prices skyrocketed, earned the affection of the marginalised sections, and making recruitment in the government sector a continuous process helped in creating thousands of government jobs.

Employment creation in the private sector, though a bit sluggish due to distress in the realty sector, registered a marginal growth because of the flow of global investments in the IT sector. On the political front, the masterstroke is his unrelenting pursuit of social justice by resolving the decades-old Scheduled Castes classification, and following the *"jiina aabadi utna haq"* slogan of his party leader Rahul Gandhi, which, in other words, means increased reservation for the underprivileged classes.

Though legal impediments prevented him from legalising the enhanced reservation for people belonging to the Backward Classes, Revanth Reddy found a political solution — giving more tickets to candidates belonging to the community. This move not only endeared him to these sections, but also forced the opposition parties to toe the Congress' line. Today, in Telangana, 55.46 per cent of the elected councillor/corporator posts are held by persons from the Backward Classes, which is more than the mandated 28 per cent reservation and 35 per cent in municipalities and corporations respectively. Once the final results of the election for the chairpersons of the ULBs emerge, there will be more BCs in power because of the Chief Minister's decision to continue the tradition.

India-Pak contest is a damp squib

The frisson disappeared a long time ago as India-Pakistan cricket matches, considered the top marquee event, had lost much of their lustre over the years due to the increasingly one-sided nature of the contests. But this Pakistan team, dragged into the distressingly toxic geopolitics of the subcontinent, is to be pitied rather than censured as it went down heavily in Colombo.

There were more furrowed brows in the marketing rooms of the game and corporate boardrooms as the commercial value of the event, which draws more eyeballs in its 350 million-plus viewership than even the Super Bowl in the USA, could go down despite all the hyper-nationalistic and jingoistic hype that is whipped up.

Notwithstanding the flaming politics of the region, India-Pakistan cricket will go on because it keeps the cash registers ringing and the coffers filled with revenue from broadcasting and streaming rights. What is called for is a level of maturity among cricketing nations to keep the politics out of the sport and simply get on with promoting the game as an avenue for healthy entertainment.

The average fan on both sides of the border may still view the matches as virtual life-and-death events, but the administrators and governments can learn to keep the politics out of the game. It might even do the game a lot of good if the Indian and Pakistan captains were to shake hands at the toss and after the game if only to send the message that cricket is after all a game, purportedly played by gentlemen who have a duty to sustain its historical association with arts and graces.

As far as the match went, it was the innings of Ishan Kishan, once disciplined by the board for his attitude and his disdain for domestic cricket, that made all the difference on a pitch and in conditions not conducive to a free-flowing contest between bat and ball. Given the folly of the Pakistan batsmen who went hell for leather against the new ball, this was a non-contest hardly had the chase begun.

Considering Pakistan has beaten India only once in nine T20 World Cup outings, though only losing a tied match in a bowl-out, besides losing all three matches in the Asia Cup last year, this ran true to form. For the sake of the game, the true fan would wish for more of a fight, regardless of whether it is his national team that wins the match.

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Subhani

As democracy returns in B'desh... what next?

Shikha Mukerjee

It is for Tarique Rahman to figure out how enhancing presidential powers and a 100-member upper house fits into his vision of a democratic, unified Bangladesh.

A landslide victory of 212 seats out of a total of 300 elected seats in the Bangladesh parliamentary elections notwithstanding, the leader of the centre-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Tarique Rahman, the incoming Prime Minister, was oddly non-committal on how he would ensure that democracy, freedom and rights, including human rights, were firmly re-established in the country. The BNP's victory, as Mr Rahman said, is Bangladesh's victory. What exactly that meant he did not explain, probably because he is walking on eggshells in a fragile polity that has just reasserted its identity as a non-sectarian democracy.

The new government headed by Mr Rahman, who will take over from interim head Muhammad Yunus and is due to be sworn in on Tuesday, February 17, will probably lean towards building a narrative of inclusion and consensus with the principal political forces active in Bangladesh, including the new National Citizens' Party, which has links with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Mr Rahman, in his first press conference, spoke of the need for reconciliation and unity so that the "evil force", meaning Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, could not restore autocracy in the country and make Bangladesh a "subservient state". How that inclusion and consensus will be ensured with the Jamaat as the principal Opposition, which its leader Shafiqur Rahman said was building itself up to become the ruling party in the future, is not clear. Asif Nazrul, a law professor at Dhaka University, hit the nail on the head in an *Al-Jazeera* interview: "It is reasonable to expect they will play a responsible and constructive role in parliamentary politics."

What Mr Rahman did commit to was implementing the 31-point charter that was the BNP's manifesto and the dissent against the 31-point charter of Mr Yunus' interim administration that took over after Sheikh Hasina's ouster by a Gen Z-led mass uprising comprising youth elements like the Students Against D i s c r i m i n a t i o n , Bangladesh Chhatra League, Jubo League, support from the Jamaat and fringe political outfits with strong ideological Islamic fundamentalist roots. In what order the 31-point charter would be implemented, Mr Rahman left vague.

As much as he bypassed the issue of the 84-odd point referendum that saw an almost 60 per cent "yes" vote, so did the media, enabling him to make broad and general statements about democratic reconstruction, restoring institutions, steering the economy back to the growth path away from its capture by "oligarchs", ending corruption and restoring normalcy in law and order. Nobody is quite clear what the 84-point referendum, which has no constitutional validity under B a n g l a d e s h ' s Constitution, actually covers. It is reformist certainly, advocating "increasing women's political representation, imposing prime ministerial term limits, enhancing presidential powers, expanding fundamental rights, and protecting judicial independence and a bicameral national legislature with a 100-member upper house."

It is for Tarique Rahman to figure out how enhancing presidential powers and a 100-member upper house fits into his vision of a democratic, unified Bangladesh. The "yes" vote for reforms is a message to the new PM that he hasn't been given untrammelled power, despite his

huge victory. The spectacular result is not entirely a win for the BNP and his leadership; it's a vote for democracy and the BNP represents not only itself, but also voters who usually back the Awami League, but couldn't do so this time as it was banned from taking part in the election.

How Mr Rahman and the BNP repay their debt to the Awami League will be a politically sensitive issue for the new government. The election does imply that Sheikh Hasina's return to Bangladeshi politics is a near impossibility. There is uncertainty over how the Awami League can resurrect itself minus the Mujibur Rahman dynasty, since many of its top leaders have fled and Tarique Rahman is unlikely to want to negotiate for their return, busy as he will be in striking bargains with his Opposition and partners over the next steps to implementing his manifesto and accommodating the agenda laid out in the referendum charter.

Asserting that Bangladesh's foreign policy will be based on national interest and qualifying it by emphasising that under his leadership it will not be a "subservient state", Mr Rahman has laid down the broad contours of the diplomatic strategy he intends to pursue, vis-à-vis India, Pakistan, China and the United States. With the Jamaat as the principal Opposition, Mr Rahman's rhetoric and actions will have to communicate to his domestic audience that his government is not a "client" of New Delhi, a charge that was levelled against Sheikh Hasina and continues to be an emotive issue in Bangladesh.

The containment of the Islamic fundamentalist forces, of who the Jamaat is a moderate version, is

Bangladesh's unequivocal articulation of its identity as a religiously moderate, culturally conscious and inclusive nation. It contradicts the propaganda spread by India's ruling BJP and its affiliates that the country's eastern flank was in danger of becoming Islamist, hostile and a threat to national security and to a further decline in the Hindu population along the borders. The narrative of a Muslim invasion from Bangladesh will have to be either moderated or customised to fit the new reality of a BNP-ruled neighbour.

While it is true that the Jamaat won an unprecedented number of seats in the districts bordering India, the BJP's fear-mongering about a wave of infiltration into West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya is unlikely to get any traction among voters in the 2026 Assembly polls. On the contrary, the containment of aggressively communal and sectarian Islamist elements by the non-sectarian centrist BNP may push voters in West Bengal to re-think about the choices they have on offer for the 2026 Assembly elections, with the Trinamul Congress on the one hand and the BJP on the other.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's immediate welcome to the new political order that has taken over in Bangladesh is a clue to how the Indian government views the change; it wants to be friends.

If Mr Modi wants to improve the relationship, which is currently at an all-time low with Bangladesh, he has big problems on his hands; there is the shelter to Sheikh Hasina issue, which cannot go on forever, and there is the BJP's favourite narrative of the Rohingya and Muslim "invasion" from Bangladesh.

The new Bangladesh government will certainly demand changes on both issues and Mr Modi has to make up his mind on how to do it if he wants to protect Indian investment and trade across the border.

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist

Aakar Patel

Of India's national song and anthem... Ways to boost the nationalistic spirit

There is always a shortage of nationalism in our country, because there seems to be so much demand for it. In all of my decades I had not known of a demand for *Vande Mataram* to be tagged on to the national anthem, but now we are told this is to be the case.

There are six stanzas to the song which will have to be memorised for those of us who do not know them. The recitation will have to be three minutes and 10 seconds long, as the ministry of home affairs has ordered. It is unclear in the orders whether this singing is voluntary (like Aadhaar) or compulsory (also like Aadhaar).

This confusion arises from the wording. The ministry of home affairs tells us that "it is not possible to give an exhaustive list of occasions on which the singing — as opposed to the playing — of the official version of National Song can be permitted", but it helpfully adds that "there is no objection to the singing... as long as it is done with due respect". There are no guidelines on what constitutes due respect, but we will no doubt find out soon what constitutes violation. The more nationalistic among us will educate those who are less so.

Why I say it is unclear whether it is voluntary or not is because the order adds that "the National Song may be sung on occasions which, although not strictly ceremonial, are nevertheless invested

with significance because of the presence of ministers, etc" and further that "mass singing is desirable". What does the "etc" include or exclude? What is the true interpretation of "desirable"?

Again, we shall find out what happens when someone chooses to interpret the words "may" and "desirable" as being indicators of voluntary action. But all this is ultimately beside the point. The point, the main one, is that there is always a shortage of nationalism in our country and this is one way in which the shortage can be met. And it is also the case that this sort of thing works, as our history tells us.

Exactly 50 years ago, in 1976, the then government added "fundamental duties" to the Constitution. These duties are to "promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India, transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women". Who can deny that this has happened? India would not be the global example for brotherhood and the spirit of women if these instructions had not come to us.

There is also on the list "protect and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures" and, my favourite, "develop the sci-

entific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform".

These duties were added because nationalism was in high demand and short supply in 1976 and that is the case of the present as well.

Cynics and haters of the present dispensation will argue that there are other ways to show love of nation. That anthems and slogans are peripheral to national progress. That we would be better off as a nation if we were also to behave better in traffic, for instance, and we were to not litter. The national song talks about rivers and it would be difficult to name a country where the waters are filthier than the ones here.

We could show our patriotism through refusing to take or give bribes. Or through not attempting to cheat on taxes, something that comes so naturally to the most patriotic among us that it is a wonder tax evasion has not been included in fundamental duties.

There is a long list of things that can be added here, but, as our government and its defenders will likely say: these are things that the citizens of many nations can do. They are not special.

We need something unique and distinct to show our love. That is precisely what this new order has given us. "Whenever the official version of the National Song is sung or played", the ministry of

home affairs order cautions, "the audience shall stand to attention". Perhaps what this means is that once it has been determined by the venue that the song is to be played, the audience must comply and then participation is no longer voluntary. If that is the case, then what is the difference between the song and the anthem? One does not know, but our government in its wisdom surely does.

There is more: "In all schools, the day's work may begin with the community singing of the National Song." In my opinion, this is necessary to instil the same levels of patriotism in the next generation as are to be found in our generation, and the one before ours. There are other benefits as well.

The unemployed will utilise their spare time memorising the six stanzas. They will further be productive by policing the crowd to see who is unobservant and straying from "proper decorum". Reports of them doing so violently should start reaching us at any moment now. The lazy will stand an additional three minutes and 10 seconds and improve their fitness.

The nation progresses.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

AI TURNING POINT
16-20 FEBRUARY 2026

10,000+ police personnel, including 5,000 traffic staff, deployed across Delhi for AI Impact Summit security.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS as summit coincides with Central Board of Secondary Education board exams from February 17.

BLACKSTONE-BACKED funds to invest in Neysa, enabling a $1.2 billion capital raise to build India's AI infrastructure; plans to deploy **38,000+ GPUs**

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AI SUMMIT OPENS TO FULL HOUSES

Long queues and high enthusiasm mark opening day of AI summit, signalling strong interest in the event

DC CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, FEB. 16

The world's largest artificial intelligence summit opened to packed halls and long queues on Monday as tech moguls, industry leaders, policymakers, founders and technologists thronged the venue.

At the conference, India is set to push for widening access to AI and seek international agreement on global AI commons.

With huge billboards across the city welcoming delegates, speakers and guests to the AI Impact Summit, Bharat Mandapam saw long queues well before the conference opened at 9.30 am, signalling strong interest in both the subject and the event.

Enthusiasm remained high even though high-profile speakers — from Sundar Pichai of Alphabet Inc. to Sam Altman of OpenAI and Dario Amodei of Anthropic — have not yet arrived in the country. Their sessions begin on Wednesday.

The final two days of the summit — February 19 and 20 — will see more than 20 heads of state and government, including France's Emmanuel Macron and Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, along with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, discussing the future of AI alongside business leaders and investors.

Multiple parallel sessions are being held simultaneously, and all are packed to capacity. From February 16 to 20, the summit will feature over 3,250 speakers and more than 500 sessions. "Sessions are packed. There are long queues, and once the halls fill up, doors are closed, which creates some hassle for those still waiting outside," an enthusiastic participant said.

"You have to be there for a session well in advance. One cannot float around from session to session like at other conferences."

Another participant said an interesting line-up of speakers is drawing huge crowds. "There is a lot of buzz around AI."

Organisers said registrations exceeded expectations, reflecting accelerating interest in AI infrastructure and enterprise adoption.

1. National flags of various countries at Bharat Mandapam during the India AI Impact Summit 2026, in New Delhi on Monday. 2. Visitors look at a robotic surgical system on display at a stall during the India AI Impact Summit 2026 at Bharat Mandapam. 3&4. Visitors explore an AI-enabled automotive prototype on display at a stall. — PTI

NAGESWARAN: AI ADOPTION NEEDS PUSH, NOT DRIFT

New Delhi, Feb. 16: Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran on Monday said AI adoption cannot just happen by drift and requires a clear commitment to aligning technological adoption with mass employability.

In a virtual address to the AI Impact Summit 2026, Nageswaran said countries need to move decisively by strengthening foundation or education, high quality skills, expanding labour-intensive service sectors, and removing the regulatory bottlenecks.

Adopting AI requires a collaborative approach, he said, adding that it has to be a 'Team India' effort, including the private sector and academics, as well as policymakers.

"The window is open still, but it is not indefinite. We must act and act now," he said, adding that there is a need for urgency to adopt AI.

AMD BOOSTS INDIA STRATEGY WITH TCS AI PACT

New Delhi, Feb. 16: Chipmaker AMD is deepening its India push through an expanded partnership with India's largest IT services company Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), deploying its latest rack-scale AI data centre technology in the country as they prepare for competition from Nvidia Corporation in one of the world's fastest-growing AI markets.

TCS and Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) will co-develop a rack-scale AI infrastructure design based on AMD's 'Helios' platform in India, with an eye on large enterprises and sovereign AI demand, the company said.

The collaboration will see TCS, through its subsidiary HyperVault AI Data Center Limited, bring AMD's state-of-the-art AI architecture to India. The collaboration includes an AI-ready data centre blueprint that can scale up to 200 megawatts of capacity.

INDIAAI MISSION ROLLS OUT ₹10,372-CR PLAN

FROM PAGE 1

Structured around three thematic "chakras" — people, planet and progress — the expo is expected to draw large crowds, including international delegates.

Under the IndiaAI Mission, the government has allocated ₹10,372 crore to build a comprehensive AI ecosystem. More than 38,000 GPUs have been onboarded for shared compute access, 12 indigenous foundation models are under development, and over 30 India-specific AI applications have been approved. Talent development remains central, with thousands of undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD students supported through targeted initiatives.

Several senior government officials and industry leaders also addressed the summit, highlighting the need to bridge the AI adoption gap between the Global North and South, build trusted and sovereign technology stacks, promote ethical governance and ensure AI augments livelihoods rather than displaces them.

MeitY Secretary S. Krishnan said India's AI strategy is closely linked to the future of IT jobs, semiconductor ambitions and regulation of AI-generated content.

Modi, Macron to discuss bilateral ties in Mumbai

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 16

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will hold talks in Mumbai with French President Emmanuel Macron late on Tuesday afternoon, after which several pacts are expected to be signed between the two sides. The French President will land in Mumbai at about midnight and will later in the week travel to New Delhi to participate in the Artificial Intelligence Summit here.

Meanwhile, British deputy prime minister David Lammy will also participate in the AI Summit.

On the sidelines of the Summit, Modi will hold bilateral meetings with many of the attending heads of state/government on February 18, 19 and 20 at Hyderabad House. This will be the biggest single foreign policy engagement by India since the G-20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023.

Modi will host a dinner for the visiting foreign leaders on February 18, officials said. Almost all the visiting 24 world leaders will attend the dinner hosted by the PM, with the possible exception of Swiss President Guy Parmelin, who is likely to land in New Delhi early on Thursday morning.

The French President, accompanied by his wife Brigitte, will land in Mumbai to a warm welcome, as the two nations and strategic partners inch towards a deal for India to acquire another 114 French Rafale fighter aircraft, the bulk of which will reportedly be manufactured in India. India had earlier acquired 36 Rafale for its Air Force from France.

Modi also welcomed other world leaders who will arrive in New Delhi to participate in the AI Summit. The leaders who will be reaching New Delhi on Tuesday include Estonian President Alar Karis, Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Guyana's vice-president Bharrat Jagdeo and Bolivian vice-president Edmand Lara Montano.

ENTREPRENEUR TO INVEST ₹214 CRORE IN AI HYDROPONICS

An Indian entrepreneur who lost his entire crop to drought a decade ago is investing ₹214 crore in artificial intelligence-enabled hydroponic farming to grow high-value spices and medicinal plants in Karnataka.

Vivek Raj, founder and CEO of Mangalore-based Panama Hydro-X, said the company has developed four patented AI technologies after spending ₹146 crore on research and development over several years.

AI quietly rewriting grammar of cinema

New Delhi, Feb. 16: Artificial Intelligence is quietly rewriting the grammar of cinema - and for filmmakers chasing scale and spectacle, the future is already playing out before the first camera rolls.

AI now allows creators of big-impact films to almost watch their movies before a single frame is shot, actor Rana Daggubati said on Monday, underscoring how the technology is reshaping storytelling from the ground up.

What once lived only in imagination or rough storyboards can now be visualised in striking detail - scenes blocked, worlds built, action choreographed - long before production begins.

For large-scale cinema, that shift is transformative. It compresses uncertainty, sharpens creative decisions and gives filmmakers a near-finished window into their own vision.

But, as AI tools become more accessible, Daggubati drew a clear line between users and builders.

The next big divide in the industry, he suggested, will not be between those who adopt AI and those who resist it — but between those who build intellectual property on top of these tools and those who merely use them.

— PTI

India AI Impact Summit Highlights

UNITED KINGDOM TO CHAMPION AI-LED GROWTH, JOBS AND BETTER PUBLIC SERVICES AT THE AI IMPACT SUMMIT IN NEW DELHI.

NATIONAL PAYMENTS Corporation of India rolls out 'UPI One World' wallet for international visitors at the summit.

J. P. NADDA to launch SAHI (Strategy for AI in Healthcare for India) and BODH (Benchmarking Open Data Platform for Health AI) at Bharat Mandapam.

Goa eyes AI, deep-tech and semiconductor growth under the Centre's India AI Mission.

Govt plans e-books and AI resources for medical students; Phase 1 to cover 57 colleges in smaller towns.

Blue Machines AI COO says AI will augment human capability, calls it a force for good.

Stay calm, learn AI tools: Techies

New Delhi, Feb. 16: Amid growing concerns over artificial intelligence (AI) disrupting jobs, top technology industry leaders have a clear message for employees — "stay calm and upskill".

Life-long learning ability is required to swim with the AI tide, and as AI continues to evolve over the next 3-5 years, there will be a lot of workforce restructuring, they said at the AI Impact Summit 2026.

Speaking at a session on "The Future of Employability in the Age of AI", industry leaders felt that while some existing jobs might become redundant, artificial intelligence will create new job opportunities and employees must be on the lookout to find which skillsets they need to upgrade.

Sanjeev Bikhchandani, Founder, Info Edge (which owns Naukri.com) cited the example of the time when computers were brought in to handle functions at the bank. "Nobody lost their job and instead productivity went up," he said.

Responding to a query on whether AI adoption is going to cost jobs, Bikhchandani's message to youngsters was "don't worry about policy. Just think what should you do so that AI does not make you lose your job and instead help you get a job". He recommended that youngsters should learn useful AI tools.

"AI is happening, it is relentless, if you don't do AI, AI will be done to you... Set a personal target of learning how to use three AI platforms within the next three months. The more you do that the more your job is safe," he said.

ACCOUNTABILITY RISKS FLAGGED AMID AI GAINS

New Delhi, Feb. 16: Artificial Intelligence (AI) is boosting efficiency and reshaping the way work is done, but gaps in the education system and the risk of weakening human accountability pose serious challenges, leading voices from global financial institutions cautioned on Monday.

Speaking at a panel discussion at the AI Impact Summit 2026, Srijay Ghosh, a senior executive at Temasek, said that AI will enable employees to use their time more productively and add 2030 per cent more value in their work.

"This is a potential for us to move up the value chain in everything we do... I can move up 20-30 per cent value chain of humanity because I can use my time productively," he said.

However, he cautioned against weakening human oversight as machine-led decision-making becomes more prevalent.

"What I'm worried about is dilution of human accountability because there will be a lot of decisions which will be taken by agents, machines, but human accountability has to stay", Ghosh said. — PTI

WE HAVE maximum AI skill penetration, we have gone ahead with the policy of ensuring not to over-regulate so that innovation thrives, we are ensuring that GPU access has been available as far as possible at the cheapest cost."
—JITIN PRASADA
Union minister

AI HAS the potential to reduce the burden on the healthcare workforce while strengthening, not replacing the physician-patient relationship. India's health system has evolved into a nationally interoperable digital ecosystem over the past decade."
—PUNYA SALILA SRIVASTAVA
Union health secretary

AI HAS generated more productivity to businesses, he said, adding that ultimately there has to be a human being to take accountability of the jobs getting done. "So the jobs are not going anywhere, nature of jobs will change."
—SATEESH SEETHARAMAIAH
CEO EdgeVerve

AI-led innovation redefining content creation, distribution and audience engagement

51 start-ups to spotlight next-gen media tech

SHASHI BHUSHAN | DC
NEW DELHI, FEB. 16

In a major boost to India's emerging Media and Entertainment innovation ecosystem, 51 promising start-ups from the sector will showcase their products and technologies at the WAVES Creators Corner during the five-day India AI Impact Expo 2026, which commenced on Monday.

The international expo is being held at Bharat Mandapam in the national capital and is set to witness participation from 20 heads of state, besides top tycoons from tech giants.

The WAVES Creators Corner will spotlight India's next-generation media tech innovators in the AVGC-XR (Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, Comics and Extended Reality) and Media Tech sectors.

The WAVES Creators' Corner, powered by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, is serving as a dynamic platform for startups to demonstrate AI-powered solutions, immersive storytelling formats, gaming innovations, virtual production tools, and next-generation content technologies to industry leaders, investors, policymakers and global stakeholders.

The curated cohort represents a diverse cross-section of India's rapidly growing AVGC-XR landscape. From AI-enabled animation pipelines and real-time rendering engines to immersive XR experiences and gamified learning platforms, the exhibiting start-ups reflect the transformative potential of Artificial Intelligence in redefining content creation, distribution and audience engagement. At the India AI Impact Summit, the "WAVES Creators Corner" is set to showcase a futuristic lineup of "Ideas for India AI" that blend media innovation with immersive visitor engagement.

Start-ups and tech developers are presenting the "Zero-Touch Autonomous Newsroom," a groundbreaking system that converts live event feeds into multilingual "Breaking News" bulletins in Hindi, English and Tamil without human intervention.

The corner also features "The Bhasha-Wall," a massive video grid demonstrating real-time, lip-synced dubbing across eight Indian languages alongside an AI sign language avatar.

For interactive experiences, visitors can step into "Samvad Setu" to converse with historical legends, use "The Director's Chair" to alter movie scenes via voice commands, or use "Swar Sangam" to compose broadcast-quality anthems in seconds.

Visitors during the India AI Impact Summit 2026 at Bharat Mandapam, in New Delhi on Monday. — PTI

FRAUD SURGE

The Supreme Court has issued an unambiguous warning by flagging the siphoning off of more than Rs 52,000 crore through digital fraud between April 2021 and November 2025. It has asked the Reserve Bank of India and the Union ministry of home affairs to take steps to effectively address such crimes within a month. Data reveal the magnitude of the threat. Over 39,000 cases of digital arrest fraud and related cybercrimes were reported in 2022. In 2024, that figure crossed 1.23 lakh, with losses of nearly Rs 1,936 crore reported in that year alone. These estimates are conservative as many victims do not report fraud due to fear or embarrassment. The reasons for the surge are easily identifiable. India's digital payments ecosystem has expanded rapidly. However, monitoring mechanisms have not kept pace. Fraudsters thus get away by impersonating police officers, court officials, or regulatory authorities and invoking fabricated charges. Limited digital literacy, particularly among senior citizens, and an ingrained fear of official authority make such tactics effective. At the institutional level, coordination among banks, telecom service providers and local cybercrime units is patchy. Cross-border scam operations further complicate enforcement.

India has a statutory framework to combat such offences. The Information Technology Act, 2000, provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, and rules framed under telecom and banking regulations provide legal tools. The RBI has also issued a standard operating procedure when suspicious transactions are detected; it has also proposed to compensate victims of small-value fraud up to Rs 25,000. Yet significant loopholes remain. For instance, as the apex court pointed out, the definition of "suspicious transaction" is not sufficiently dynamic or customer-specific. Banks are not uniformly mandated to deploy advanced Artificial Intelligence capable of flagging deviations from established spending patterns. Inter-agency data sharing remains fragmented. Compensation schemes exclude larger losses, leaving many victims without relief. Awareness campaigns are intermittent and lack targeted communication in regional languages. The RBI must move beyond advisories and impose binding, technology-based standards for real-time fraud detection tailored to individual account behaviour. The home ministry must establish a single, national coordination grid integrating banks, telecom operators and cybercrime units. Public education is equally essential. Digital literacy initiatives should include practical demonstrations of common scam techniques. The Supreme Court has articulated the urgency. Regulatory oversight, technological enforcement and sustained public awareness must now follow.

LUNAR SURFACE

India's roads would put the surface of the moon to shame. Latest data presented in Parliament show that pothole-related fatalities across India increased from 1,555 in 2020 to 2,385 in 2024, reflecting a surge of more than 53% over five years. Between 2020 and 2024, 9,438 lives were lost owing to potholes, while total injuries during the period stood at 19,956, including 9,670 grievous ones. The state-wise distribution is as revealing. Uttar Pradesh accounted for 5,127 deaths over five years and 1,369 deaths in 2024 alone, constituting more than half the national toll. In 2024, the chief minister of the state ordered that all potholes should be filled by October of that year. Yet, as of September 2025, only 21.67% of that work has been completed. The top five states — Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Punjab are among them — together contributed over 80% of all pothole-related fatalities, indicating deep regional disparities in maintenance standards and enforcement. These deaths are the outcome of systemic neglect. Potholes form due to inadequate drainage, poor construction practices, inferior materials, and delayed maintenance. The larger policy imbalance lies in public expenditure priorities. India's road sector has witnessed record capital expenditure on new highway construction. In contrast, dedicated allocations for ordinary road safety and maintenance remain modest. For 2025-26, safety expenditure stood at a few hundred crore against over Rs 2.7 lakh crore earmarked for highway development. This gap reflects an approach that privileges expansion over preservation. Roads are constructed at scale; yet their upkeep lacks comparable institutional focus and financial discipline.

Global experience demonstrates that such outcomes are avoidable. Germany mandates regular inspections and holds authorities accountable for preventable hazards. India requires a comparable framework. State legislatures must impose explicit statutory obligations on road-owning agencies, whether municipal bodies, public works departments, or national authorities. Contracts should incorporate multi-year performance guarantees with financial penalties for premature failure. Independent audits of construction and maintenance quality, too, should be mandatory and publicly accessible. Public awareness, on improved civic infrastructure being a right, must improve.

SCRIPSI

'Life will break you.'

LOUISE ERDRICH

The importance of Mamata Banerjee

National imprint

SANJAYA BARU

In recent years, the return to office of no other incumbent chief minister would have been regarded as more consequential for national politics than the potential return of Mamata Banerjee as chief minister of West Bengal. There was a moment during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections when state-level political leaders like Nitish Kumar in Bihar and N. Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh may have entertained hopes of playing a larger role in national politics. Despite his loss of majority in the Lok Sabha, Prime Minister Narendra Modi not only managed to retain power but also ensured the marginalisation of such regional aspirants with national ambitions.

Ms Banerjee is different. As the only woman to presently head both a political party and a government, Ms Banerjee stands apart from all the current generation of leaders of national and regional political parties. She is a totally self-made, first-generation leader who has her feet firmly on the ground. She can communicate in three languages — something that cannot be said of most North Indian politicians.

Living in a small apartment in an unglamorous neighbourhood, sporting a white cotton *saree* and *hawai chappals*, Ms Banerjee has branded her popular image as a no-nonsense person of the people, the country's most rooted and most important woman political leader. Her recent appearance in the Supreme Court underlined, once again, the self-confidence that has always defined her persona.

While there have been many political leaders who led simple lives and commanded popular support and respect — such as a Karpoori Thakur in Bihar and an E.K. Nayanar in Kerala — more recently, one can think of very few. By the time a politician rises to become a chief minister or a Union minister, he or she has acquired adequate personal wealth and, once in office, their wealth rapidly multiplies. In this regard, Ms Banerjee remains an exception.

More importantly, Ms Banerjee has crafted her political career almost entirely on her own, setting up her own party, leading it into office, and securing a wholesome endorsement the third time round. This, too, is an exception when one compares her to chief ministers across party lines around the country.

Given the uniqueness of Ms Banerjee, it is surprising that she has taken a long time to acquire a national persona befitting her political career and achievements. Perhaps it speaks to Bengal's long-term marginalisation in national politics and business. Time has come for Bengal to leave its imprint, once again, on the country.

Bengal has long nursed the grievance that despite its role and importance in the nation's political, social and cultural awakening, no Bengali has been able to become the prime minister of India. Several Bengalis have been national leaders across many professions: from Swami Vivekananda to Rabindranath Tagore, from Subhas Chandra Bose to Jyoti Basu, from Satyajit Ray to Amartya Sen and from J.C. Bose to P.C. Mahalanobis. Yet, few Bengali politicians have left their mark on national politics and governance.

At least two Bengali politicians have nursed a grievance that their respective political parties denied them the opportunity to become prime minister. The late Jyoti Basu articulated his grievance publicly, while the late Pranab Mukherjee rarely spoke about it. Both deserved a chance. After all, *Jyotibabu* may have well been a better manager of a coalition in the mid-1990s than H.D. Deve Gowda or I.K. Gujral.

Mr Mukherjee was the only Bengali to become president of the republic but the prime minister's post eluded him. Of course, he was not a popular political leader in Bengal in the manner in which *Jyotibabu* was or Ms Banerjee now is. But then, neither P.V. Narasimha Rao nor Manmohan Singh was a popular political leader and, yet, the politics of New Delhi enabled them to occupy the high office of prime minister.

So Bengal has a legitimate grievance that national politics has not so far favoured its leaders. Remember it was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose who gave the slogan, "Dilli *chalo*", to his rank and file. Supporters of Ms Banerjee would not be off the mark if they believe that it is time for another Bengali to echo Netaji's call — 'Dilli *chalo*'!

Three years back, when the INDIA platform was formed, I took the view that Ms Banerjee ought to have been made its chairperson. Repeating the Sonia Gandhi-Manmohan Singh model with Rahul Gandhi-Mallikarjun Kharge has not helped.

A fiery Mamata bolstered by nationwide political support through INDIA would have helped the parties battling the Bharatiya Janata Party to acquire coherence and popular appeal.

Even now, if INDIA facilitates Ms Banerjee's electoral victory, it would be in a better position to take on the BJP. I have long argued that the Congress Party would have immensely benefited by inviting her to return to the fold and made her the party president.

Considering the fact that the BJP is a male-dominated party, an Opposition alliance led by a woman political leader, that too one who symbolises independent womanhood, can make a dent into the BJP's more recently acquired women's vote base. It has been suggested that in Bihar, the BJP owed its return to power to a swing in its favour of women voters. If it is indeed the case that women, especially younger women, are seeking a voice in governance, then they cannot find a better mascot than Ms Banerjee.

Ms Banerjee's only deficit is that her governance record at the state level has not been very impressive. But then, there are few chief ministers who can legitimately claim a creditable record of governance. Consider the case of Nitish Kumar who has repeatedly returned to office without much to show for it. Ms Banerjee has a reasonably good record of governance, especially the turnaround in Calcutta's urban development.

Governments in states like erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are credited with good work, but politicians in these states have become millionaires in office, pointing to high levels of corruption. Perhaps efficient corruption delivers development but not good governance. Maharashtra has had a run of bad governance for two decades. So the charge that Ms Banerjee cannot be credited with good governance gets diluted by the comparative record of her peers across the country.

In any case, it is a long time since we have had a woman prime minister. Given the excessive male domination of national and regional politics at a time when women have come to play a larger role across all professions, it is time the country had a second woman prime minister and no one fits the bill better than Ms Banerjee.

Sanjaya Baru was Editor, Business Standard. His most recent book is Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India

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Too rushed

■ Sir — The reported reduction of over 68 lakh voters from West Bengal's electoral roll is significant. The draft revision had already excluded over 58 lakh names. Further deletions are expected before the final list on February 28. Such a large change between two elections requires detailed public explanation. Citizens deserve clear information about why names were removed and how verification was conducted. Transparency will help prevent confusion and protect confidence in the electoral process.

A. Bandyopadhyay,
Calcutta

■ Sir — West Bengal's chief electoral officer, Manoj Kumar Agarwal, has stated that 4.9 lakh voters did not attend hearings for the Special Intensive Revision of the electoral rolls despite receiving notices. Many people may have been unaware of the implications of missing these hearings. Migrant workers, elderly residents and those without stable housing often face communication gaps. Administrative processes must consider such realities. Removal from the voter list should follow thorough outreach and reasonable opportunity to respond, ensuring that genuine voters are not excluded unfairly.

A.K. Sen,
Nadia

■ Sir — It is concerning that more than 94 lakh individuals from West Bengal were summoned by the Election Commission of India for logical discrepancies. Errors in parental names or age details can arise from clerical mistakes in older records. Many families rely on documents created decades ago. Such inconsistencies should not automatically place voters at risk of deletion. The EC must ensure that correction procedures are simple and accessible so that ordinary citizens can resolve minor documentation issues without difficulty.

Aayman Anwar Ali,
Calcutta

Bad hair day

■ Sir — What is the cost of a bad-hair day? Aashna Roy, a model from Mumbai, thinks it is worth over Rs 2 crore. A visit to the salon in April 2018 led to years of litigation after Roy said that her hair was cut far shorter than instructed. She claimed mental trauma and loss of modelling assignments. The National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission awarded her Rs 2 crore as compensation. The Supreme Court has now reduced this sum to Rs 25 lakh. There is something faintly comic about the journey from shampoo chair to an apex court bench. A stylist misjudges a few inches; years later, judges analyse documentary proof. All the while, hair keeps growing quietly in the background.

Sunanda Patil,
Mumbai

Bitter fruit

■ Sir — The recent reductions in import duties on apples from the United States of America, the European Union and New Zealand have unsettled apple growers in Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. India produces around 2 to 2.1 million tonnes of apple annually, leaving a modest gap met through imports. Lower duties may narrow the price difference between domestic and imported fruit. Clear details on quotas, enforcement of the minimum import price and biosecurity checks should be shared to reassure farmers.

M. Pradyu,
Chennai

■ Sir — The Union commerce and industry minister, Piyush Goyal, has stated that safeguards such as a minimum import price of Rs 80 per kilogramme will protect Indian farmers. Political reactions in Jammu and Kashmir highlight the sensitivity of the issue. Constructive dialogue between the Union government and Union territory is essential. Balanced trade policy should protect farmer welfare while meeting consumer demand.

Monidipa Mitra,
Calcutta

of verification would help citizens understand how decisions are being made at each stage.

Ishika Mukherjee,
Calcutta

This mechanism needs strict enforcement at ports and wholesale markets. Under-invoicing remains a genuine risk when duties are reduced. Transparent customs data and regular inspections would help maintain credibility. Farmers require predictable policy, especially when input costs are rising and yields remain vulnerable to erratic weather.

Md. Alam,
Mumbai

■ Sir — The apple economy supports nearly seven lakh families in Kashmir alone, according to industry representatives. Jammu and Kashmir accounts for roughly 80% of national production. Even modest price pressure can affect livelihoods across the Valley. Policymakers should consider targeted support, including better storage, grading facilities and transport infrastructure. Reducing post-harvest losses would strengthen domestic competitiveness more effectively than relying solely on tariff protection.

Unfruitful deal

ELITE POOL

The Rhodes Scholarship is one of the world's most prestigious academic fellowships. Conceived by Cecil Rhodes as a vehicle for social transformation, it was meant to identify talent across social strata and to cultivate leadership grounded in character and public service by enabling individuals of exceptional promise to study at the University of Oxford. However, the scholarship's contemporary operation in India appears increasingly detached from this redistributive vision. Instead of widening access and democratising opportunity, it has become concentrated within a small circle of elite institutions, raising uncomfortable questions about whether it now rewards merit or merely perpetuates inherited privilege.

In today's Indian context, the award has become a credential circulating within a narrow circuit of elite institutions. Analysis of recent cohorts shows a recurrent concentration of awardees from a select group of colleges: the Indian Institutes of Technology, St Stephen's College, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, National Law School of India University, National Law University Delhi, among a handful of elite universities. This institutional clustering is not incidental but symptomatic of deeper systemic biases.

The selection criteria themselves reflect this skew. A pronounced emphasis on international exposure, visibly institutionalised leadership roles, and fluency in the discursive norms of elite academic English inherently privilege candidates from well-resourced campuses. Contrary to this, excellence demonstrated under conditions of financial precarity, institutional neglect, or social marginalisation is often undervalued.

Furthermore, the operative definition of leadership within the Rhodes India framework appears unduly narrow. It frequently prioritises managerial, institutionally-sanctioned, and ideologically non-disruptive forms of initiative. Grassroots organising, advocacy, community mobilisation, and resistance-based leadership rarely receive equivalent recognition. This preference systematically advantages candidates whose leadership trajectories are forged within privileged enclaves over those shaped in adversarial or marginal spaces.

The interview stage often compounds these disparities. Traits such as confident articulation, familiarity with Oxbridge-style discourse, and specific social poise —attributes cultivated through elite schooling and cultural proximity to Western academic norms — carry significant weight. For first-generation learners or candidates from vernacular or rural backgrounds, this process can act less as a fair assessment and more as a gate-keeping mechanism.

While public commitments to diversity and inclusion are made, the absence of meaningful structural correctives is striking. There is little evidence of systematic outreach to state universities or regional colleges. The evaluation process lacks a robust framework for contextualising achievement relative to socio-economic adversity.

This critique is not a reflection on the individual merits of selected scholars. Rather, it is an interrogation of a system that repeatedly locates 'excellence' within the same privileged habitats. What was envisioned as a scholarship to broaden horizons and democratise access to world-class education has, in India, come to resemble a mechanism for elite reproduction. For the Rhodes Scholarship to realign with its original purpose in the Indian context, it must undertake a fundamental redefinition of merit — one that accounts for context, adversity, and the profoundly unequal landscape of institutional resources.

MICROSCOPE

Venus volcano

■ Scientists analysing decades-old data from Nasa's Magellan mission say they have identified what appears to be a vast underground tunnel carved by volcanic activity on Venus. The finding, by researchers at the University of Trento in Italy, contributes to a growing body of evidence challenging the long-held view of Venus as a geologically dead world.

Sea silk

COURTESY: POSTECH

■ A legendary golden fabric once worn only by emperors has made an astonishing comeback. Scientists at the Pohang University of Science and Technology in South Korea have recreated ancient sea silk — a rare, shimmering fibre prized since the Roman times — using a clam found aplenty in the country's coastal waters. The fabric is woven from the fibres the clams use to attach themselves to rocks and, in ancient times, was harvested from the Mediterranean Sea. It was also revealed why this fabric never fades: its glow comes not from dyes but from microscopic structures that bend light itself.

Penguin loss

ISTOCK.COM/GUENTERGUNI

■ Conservation efforts have paid off in Patagonia, with a significant rise in the puma population. When pumas disappeared from the landscape, penguins started nesting on the mainland instead of on islands off the coast. Now that the apex predator is back, it is making a beeline for penguin colonies. Scientists at the University of Oxford, UK, estimate that more than 7,000 adult penguins were killed in just four years.

AGENCIES
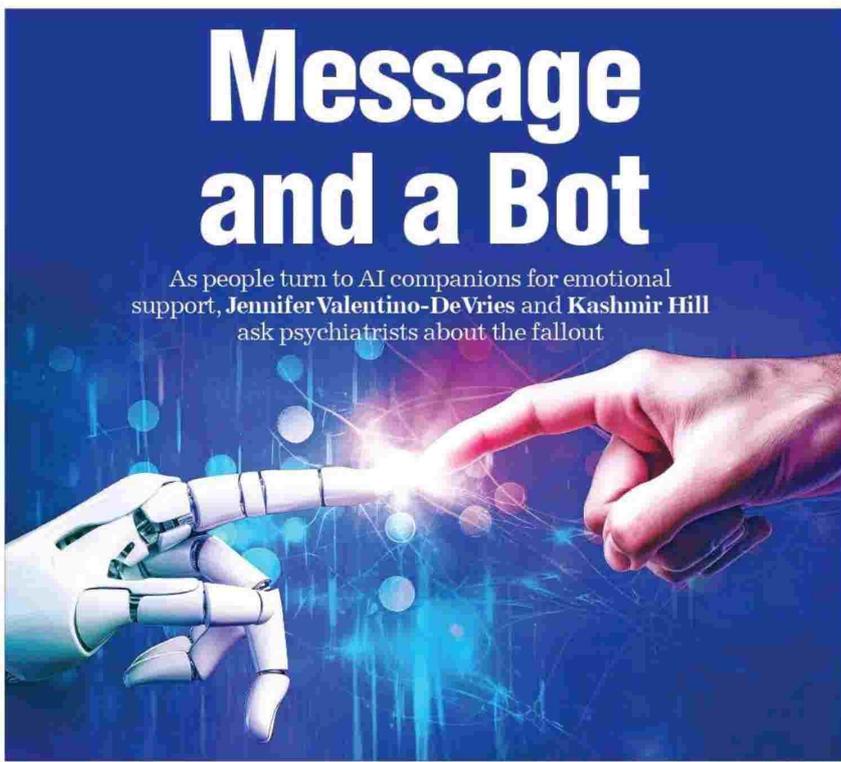
Message and a Bot

As people turn to AI companions for emotional support, **Jennifer Valentino-DeVries** and **Kashmir Hill** ask psychiatrists about the fallout

ISTOCK.COM/ADRIAN VIDAL

Julia Sheffield, a psychologist who specialises in treating people with delusions, is difficult to rattle. But she was quite unnerved last summer when patients began telling her about their conversations with AI chatbots.

One woman, who had no history of mental illness whatsoever, asked ChatGPT for advice on a major purchase she had been fretting about. After days of the bot validating her worries, she became totally convinced that businesses were colluding to have her investigated by the government.

Another patient came to believe that a romantic crush was sending her secret spiritual messages. Yet another thought that he had stumbled onto a world-changing invention.

By the end of the year, Sheffield had seen seven such patients at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee, US. Although she is accustomed to treating people with mental instability, Sheffield was disturbed that this new technology seemed to tip people from simply having eccentric thoughts into full-on delusions.

"It was like the AI was partnering with them in expanding or reinforcing their strange or unusual beliefs," Sheffield said.

Mental health workers across the US are navigating how to treat problems caused or exacerbated by AI chatbots, according to more than 100 therapists and psychiatrists who were interviewed by *The New York Times* about their experiences.

While many mentioned positive effects of the bots — like helping patients understand their diagnoses — they also said the conversations deepened their patients' feelings of isolation or anxiety. More than 30 described cases resulting in dangerous emergencies like psychosis or suicidal thoughts. One California psychiatrist who often evaluates people in the legal system said she had seen two cases of violent crimes influenced by AI.

Reporters from *The Times* have documented more than 50 cases of psychological crises linked to chatbot conversations since last year. The maker of ChatGPT, OpenAI, is facing at least 11 personal injury or wrongful death lawsuits claiming that the chatbot caused psychological harm.

The companies behind the bots say these situations are exceedingly rare. "For a very small percentage of users in mentally fragile states there can be serious problems," Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, said last October. The company has estimated that 0.15 per cent of ChatGPT users discussed suicidal intentions over the course of a month, and 0.07 per cent showed signs of psychosis or mania.

For a product with 800 million users, that translates to 1.2 million people with possible suicidal intent and 5,60,000 with potential psychosis or mania.

The Times has sued OpenAI, accusing it of violating copyright laws when training its models. The company has contested the lawsuit.

Many experts said that the number of people susceptible to psychological harm, even psychosis, is far higher than the general public understands. The bots, they said, frequently pull people away from human relationships, condition them to expect agreeable responses and reinforce harmful impulses.

"AI could really, on a mass scale, change how many people are impacted," said Haley Wang, a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, US, who assesses people showing symptoms of psychosis.

Psychosis, which causes a break from reality, is most associated with schizophrenia. But as much as 3 per cent of people will develop a diagnosable psychotic disorder in their lifetime, and far more than that are prone to delusional thinking.

Dr Joseph Pierre, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, US, said he had seen about five patients with delusional experiences involving AI. While most had a diagnosis related to psychosis, he said, "sometimes these are very highly functioning people".

For him, the idea that all chatbot-fuelled delusions were going to happen anyway "just doesn't hold water".

He recently wrote in a scientific journal about a medical professional who began conversing with ChatGPT during a sleepless night. She took medication for ADHD and had a history of depression. After two nights of asking the chatbot questions about her dead brother, she became convinced that he had been communicating with her through a trail of digital footprints.

Dr Pierre and other experts said that a wide range of factors can combine to tip people into psychosis. These include not only genetic predisposition but also depression, lack of sleep, a history of trauma and exposure to stimulants or cannabis.

"I am quite convinced that this is a real thing and that we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg," said Dr Soren Dinesen Ostergaard, a psychiatry researcher at Aarhus University Hospital in Denmark. In November, he published a report finding 11 cases of chatbot-associated delusions in psychiatric records from one region of the country.

It's not unusual for new technologies to inspire delusions. But clinicians who have seen patients in the thrall of AI said it is an especially powerful influence because of its personal, interactive nature and authoritative tone.

Sometimes, the psychotic episodes spurred by chatbots can lead to violence. Dr Adam Alghalith of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, US, recalled a young man with depression who repeatedly shared negative thoughts with a chatbot. At first, the bot told him how to seek help. But he "just kept asking, kept pushing", Dr Alghalith said.

Safety guardrails that stop chatbots from encouraging suicide can break down when people engage the bots in extended conversations over days or weeks. Eventually, Dr Alghalith said, the bot told the patient his thoughts of suicide were reasonable. Fortunately, he had a support system and entered treatment.

NYTNS

Thrill of climbing from the comfort of your couch

GAME: Cairn by The Game Bakers
GENRE: Indie, simulation, adventure, action, sports
PLATFORMS: PC, PlayStation 5, GeForce Now

The creative director of Cairn wants players to feel all the tension of climbing while their character clings to a granite-grey mountain face. Toes clench over a slither of rock as hands clasp a protruding crag. Each limb trembles. Listen closely and you can hear the quickening of the mountaineer's breath.

If a path is beyond the capabilities of Aava, the game's protagonist, she will tumble down a sheer cliff, battered and bruised as her body hangs from the safety rope. But with each handhold, players can feel the exultations of real-life climbers — white-knuckle anxiety giving way to what the creative director Emeric Thoa calls "huge satisfaction".

Development of Cairn started in 2020 when few games were dedicated to climbing, which has surged in popularity during the past decade. Now this genre boasts a string of hits: the first-person climbing game Peak blew up last year, selling more than 10 million copies; the Death Stranding franchise sees players scaling massive mountains (and rappelling down them); Jusant offers an achingly poetic take on alpinism; and indie games such as Lorn's Lure and White Knuckle deliver darker, more experimental angles.

For gamers, there is appeal in pitting oneself against a towering mass of stone. "The mountain offers a literal learning curve, a clear goal and a visual way to track your progress," said Paolo Pedercini, a professor who teaches game design at Carnegie Mellon University, US.

The challenge is an essential component for this climbing cohort, bucking the safe and predictable scrambling seen in many blockbuster action games. In those titles, players tend to follow a prescribed path highlighted with conspicuous yellow markings.

Not so in Cairn. An avalanche of mathematical calculations feeds the game's free-form movement system, which is constantly evaluating Aava's physiological stress and which limb she is likely to move next. The gigantic, fictional Mount Kami was laboriously constructed by level designers and artists who hand-sculpted and hand-placed every rock and ridge.

The lineage of these climbing games is varied. Death Stranding and Baby Steps add greater interactive depth to the walking simulator genre of the late 2000s and early 2010s (pejoratively named because walking is the primary activity). In Jusant, little leaps of faith to reach distant handholds evoke the unforgettable jumps across the backs of steppe-scraping titans in the 2005 classic Shadow of the Colossus.

For the makers of Peak, which can be played cooperatively online, a major inspiration was the groundbreaking open-world adventure The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Petter Henriksson, a Stockholm-based designer, said he and his colleagues were influenced by Link's ability to climb anywhere. The blond hero simply approaches any vertical surface to start climbing, limited only by a slowly decreasing stamina bar and rain that causes him to slide down slippery rocks.

Rain does not halt your progress in Peak but merely slows the ascent. Peak's multiple summits are not handcrafted; they are procedurally generated, the product of a carefully programmed algorithm. Chief among Henriksson's considerations for that approach was ensuring that the mountain routes delivered sufficient challenges.

While Cairn evokes the clean nobility of winter mountaineering, Peak evokes four friends going on a breezy afternoon hike, during which a poorly judged leap across a towering ravine can lead to your death.

It is this juxtaposition — between goofing around with friends and what Pedercini describes as the "godless, unforgiving" environments — that elevates the climbing experience in Peak. "You can get lost. You can follow what looks like a trail and end up at a dead end," he said. "It's just you and your friends against chaos."

The sheer hugeness of Mount Kami in Cairn evokes the world's largest peaks like K2. Even bigger, stranger and more expressive is the world in Lorn's Lure, where the climbing takes place within a vast subterranean megastructure. The space is unfathomably deep, though Toronto-based designer Radu Nicolae prefers not to reveal its precise dimensions. He merely confirms that it plunges downward for miles and miles, and then keeps going for many more.

Like other climbing games, Lorn's Lure, released in 2024, delivers the thrill of travelling somewhere rarefied and out of reach while also subverting it; the vistas here are dark and gloomy, more likely to inspire dread than wanderlust.

You do not need to have exceedingly strong fingers or a stomach for heights to enjoy these games. Regardless of setting or style, they suggest that everyone is a climber, seeking to convert the environment before them into a symbolic system of self-expression.

Lewis Gordon/NYTNS

Ticking Closer Towards Apocalypse

Wars, climate change, rise of autocracy prompt scientists to set the Doomsday Clock at 85 seconds to midnight, says **John Yoon**

The Doomsday Clock, a metaphorical timepiece showing how close humanity is to destruction, is now 85 seconds from midnight. It is the grimmest outlook yet on our future from the clock's creators, a nonprofit organisation and publication called the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

Tensions between nuclear powers, failures in climate action, disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence and the rise of autocracy are among the reasons that the *Bulletin's* experts in global security, climate and nuclear science cited for advancing it four seconds from last year.

"Catastrophic risks are on the rise, cooperation is on the decline and we are running out of time," said Alexandra Bell, president and CEO of the *Bulletin*. "Change is both necessary and possible, but the global community must demand swift action."

Anti-nuclear activists were paying attention to the Doomsday Clock — especially those working with survivors of the atomic bombings in Japan at the end of World War II.

"This is a warning that we need to take urgent action to avoid a global catastrophe," Hideo Asano, coordinator of the Japan Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons in Tokyo, said in an interview. "We should know that the risk of nuclear war is the highest since the end of the Cold War."

The nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union was the primary concern when the clock was invented in 1947. At the time, the people involved with the *Bulletin* included Albert Einstein and some of the scientists who made the first nuclear weapons, including J. Robert Oppenheimer.

The clock was first set at seven minutes to midnight and has fluctuated throughout its nearly 80-year history.

Critics have dismissed the clock as a stunt based on subjective assessments. Others have said that its repeated warnings of total annihilation could become the public policy equivalent of the boy who cried wolf.

When the Cold War's tensions rose, the clock's hand moved forward. Intermittently, it was wound back — including when the two nuclear-armed superpowers showed signs of cooperation in the 1960s and when they signed a major arms-control treaty in 1991, a few months before the Soviet Union collapsed.

That year the clock showed the greatest distance to midnight, 17 minutes. It has ticked steadily closer since, aside from a reversal in 2010. More nuclear tests happened, including in Pakistan and North Korea. Countries failed to live up to their climate pledges.

Events from 2025 that the scientists said had informed this year's Doomsday Clock setting include the Russia-Ukraine war, the conflict between India and Pakistan, a global average temperature that was the third warmest on record, deadly weather events like extreme heat in Europe that killed tens of thousands, and the Trump administration's dismantling of pollution and climate regulations, and public health infrastructure.

The *Bulletin* also cited the rise of "nationalistic autocracy" in countries around the world. It said that the leaders of the US, Russia and China varied in their autocratic leanings but all favoured competition over cooperation.

"The rise of autocracies is not in itself an existential threat but an us-versus-them, zero-sum approach increases the risk of a global catastrophe," the group said.

Asano, the anti-nuclear activist, echoed the sentiment.

"We are also concerned by the fact that nationalism and unilateralism are growing," he said. "We believe that unilateralism is not the solution to the existential global risks."

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When you argue, guard against anger, for anger destroys your argument and gives your opponent mastery over you.
Abdullah bin Al-Muqaffa
(Eighth-century Persian translator, philosopher, author and thinker)

ARAB NEWS Monday, February 16, 2026

9

Opinion

Democracy at risk in an age of fabrication

DALIA AL-AQIDI

Public trust in truth is declining at an alarming pace. Across continents, societies are experiencing a dangerous shift: Citizens are no longer certain about what is real. Facts are questioned as though they are opinions. Accurate reporting is often brushed off as biased, depending on the reader's views. Fabricated claims spread faster than carefully documented evidence.

Democracy depends on shared facts. Without them, disagreement becomes hostility, and debate turns into confusion.

Not long ago, before the massive expansion of social media connected billions of people from places of comfort to zones of conflict, journalism operated under clearer standards. News organizations did not publish serious accusations without confirming them through multiple independent sources. Editors demanded documentation. Accuracy was not optional; it was foundational. Mistakes occurred, but credibility mattered.

Today, information spreads very quickly. News, photos, and videos move around the world in seconds, often without context or fact-checking. A rumor shared in one country can anger people in another within minutes. The editors who once separated fact from fiction have been replaced by algorithms that push whatever is fastest and most emotional.

Subsequently, there was a rapid development of artificial intelligence. AI carries enormous promise. It assists doctors in detecting disease, supports engineers in designing safer infrastructure, and helps educators reach students more effectively. Yet alongside these benefits lies a darker reality. AI tools can now generate realistic images, videos, and voices that blur the line between authentic and fabricated. A convincing speech can be created without a speaker ever uttering those words. A document can be altered seamlessly. A public figure may appear to have said something they never said.

Dalia Al-Aqidi is executive director at the American Center for Counter Extremism.

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Once misinformation starts spreading, it becomes hard to stop. Millions of people may form opinions before checking the facts, if they ever do, and those first impressions often stick. Later corrections reach fewer people, move much more slowly than dramatic claims, and rarely change minds that were already made up.

This phenomenon is not limited to the US. It is global. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X have transformed how we consume information. They have also become sources of income for millions of content creators. The more dramatic the claim, the higher the engagement. The more controversial the accusation, the greater the visibility. In this environment, verification often takes a back seat to virality.

Younger generations are particularly vulnerable. Many teenagers and even children rely primarily on short videos and posts for news. Complex geopolitical conflicts are reduced to one-minute summaries. Historical events are explained without context. Over time, this would reshape how citizens understand politics, culture, and global affairs.

The challenge before us is profound. Technology will continue to advance, and information will move even faster. The boundary between authentic and artificial may become harder to discern. Yet the principle remains simple: democracy depends on trust, and trust depends on truth.

If societies lose their shared understanding of facts, they lose the ability to deliberate wisely. When verification disappears, manipulation thrives, and when manipulation thrives, freedom weakens.

Trust in truth is essential for a free society. Restoring it requires the efforts of journalists, technology companies, educators, leaders, and citizens.

The task is difficult and may indeed be the defining challenge of our era. But if we fail to restore verification and protect shared facts, we risk leaving future generations not merely confused, but divided and disconnected from the very principles that sustain democracy.

> **Rebuilding trust is difficult but necessary**

COURTESY: AMJAD RASMI/ASHARQ AL-AWSAT

> **Africa must now decide whether to pursue health sovereignty or continue relying on Western capitals**

Africa must achieve health sovereignty before next pandemic

JOHN NKENGASONG

The first reports of an unknown respiratory infection spreading in Wuhan, China, came during the quiet days between Christmas and New Year's Eve in 2019. At the time, I was director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control, the African Union's public health agency, and was trying to recharge after months spent fighting a deadly Ebola outbreak in Congo. But, recognizing the severity and urgency of this new virus, I summoned the Africa CDC team back to headquarters in Addis Ababa.

The Africa CDC had never confronted a crisis of this scale. Early worst-case projections from the UN Economic Commission for Africa suggested that up to 1.2 billion Africans could be infected and over 3 million could die from the disease now known as COVID-19. Coordinating a response for 55 African Union member states, with a population of more than 1 billion people, required using all the expertise and skills at our disposal.

At first, we trained medical staff in the African countries with direct flights to China and created working groups led by African experts on laboratory medicine, public health, data science and genomics. As COVID-19 spread, young epidemiologists who had been fighting Ebola in Congo deployed to West Africa.

It soon became clear that the world was reverting to old patterns. The World Health Organization offered us only about 2 million COVID-19 tests and wealthy countries stockpiled vaccine doses. To be sure, the motive was national self-preservation, not malice. But it demonstrated that Africa needed a different strategy, based on our own resources and institutions. We were determined not to repeat the experience of the AIDS pandemic, which left 12 million Africans dead in the decade it took for effective antiretroviral drugs to reach the continent after becoming available in the West.

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A partnership with the Mastercard Foundation (where I now work) made a new strategy possible. Reeta Roy, then the foundation's president and CEO, approached us to ask whether $1 billion would enable a meaningful pandemic response and, if so, what that response would look like. After explaining that these funds would allow us to purchase and distribute vaccines, strengthen our institutional capacity and support local vaccine manufacturing, the foundation committed $1.5 billion to "Saving Lives and Livelihoods," a three-year partnership with the Africa CDC that finished in December 2025.

That investment dramatically shifted how the world saw the Africa CDC. Raising money suddenly became easier. The World Bank, which had previously offered $10 million as part of a regional grant before the pandemic, committed $100 million to bolster public health preparedness on the continent. The UK followed with £20 million ($27 million) in funding. By the time I left the Africa CDC in May 2022, the organization had mobilized about $1.8 billion.

The Saving Lives and Livelihoods program was based on trust in African leadership and institutions, which made it particularly effective. Empowered to make decisions and act quickly, the Africa CDC delivered more than 32 million vaccine doses to member states, supported the training and deployment of 37,000 health workers and created nearly 23,000 jobs across 25 African countries.

Africa can no longer rely on Western aid budgets that rise and fall with electoral cycles. But achieving health sovereignty requires political will. African governments must treat health infrastructure as a top strategic priority and commit to long-term investment in it. When the next pandemic arrives, the continent must be prepared to lead its own response or else risk being left behind in the recovery.

Opinion

Climate progress requires realism, not hysteria

ARNAB NEIL SENGUPTA

More than a year into US President Donald Trump's second term, one of the most noticeable shifts in political discourse is the disappearance of the words "climate change" from the news cycle. Just a few years ago, headlines were dominated by dire climate predictions and calls to immediate action.

Today's changed media environment does not mean that the Earth's atmosphere is suddenly healthier or that greenhouse gases have mysteriously diminished. The physical reality of our planet — its biochemical composition and position in the solar system — has not changed with the international political calendar. Scientists still agree that greenhouse gas concentrations, such as carbon dioxide, have risen substantially since pre-industrial times.

Global levels of CO2, measured in parts per million, have crossed the 422-424 ppm mark, up from about 280 ppm before the Industrial Revolution. Studies indicate that these concentrations are rising by roughly 2-3 ppm per year and are at levels not seen for hundreds of thousands of years. In other words, climate change has not suddenly ceased to be a challenge.

What has changed is the belated realization that progress must be achieved with a sense of proportion, one that does not set back broader human development or exaggerate the chances of climate catastrophe.

Until recently, the "endangered planet" narrative had drowned out constructive conversation on the subject of climate challenge. In the US and Europe, much of the public discourse became so tightly linked to ideology, anxiety, and even identity that it seemed at times that hard evidence and rational policy discussion no longer mattered.

This combination of discourse politicization and media alarmism, in turn, generated pressure on developing nations to devote precious financial resources toward imported "green technologies," often at prohibitive costs. For countries weighed down by poverty, food insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of fiscal transparency, such diversion was both economically harmful and politically destabilizing.

A more pragmatic strategy to tackle climate change would have recognized that development and clean energy goals need not be in conflict. In fact, greater wealth enables societies to invest more in cleaner technologies, better environmental regulation, and innovation that ultimately benefits both people and the planet.

The good news is that real progress is being made, quietly. For example, electric vehicle adoption is expanding rapidly worldwide, driven by a combination of cost reductions, improved range and consumer demand. Transportation accounts for about 16 percent of global greenhouse-gas emissions and roughly one-quarter of energy-related CO2 emissions, so electrification makes a difference, both economically and environmentally.

Adoption of renewable energy sources — namely, wind, solar, and hydroelectric — continues to grow faster than conventional fuels in many regions, especially when supported by market forces as opposed to top-down mandates.

In many industrial countries, UN demographic projections show population growth slowing or stabilizing, which is likely to lower future energy demand and carbon emissions.

These trends show that reductions in emissions are perhaps better achieved through innovation, incentives, and evolving consumer preferences.

Among those advocating for this type of "climate realism" is Danish statistician and policy analyst Bjorn Lomborg, who has long argued that while global warming is real, man made, and an important problem, it is not the "end of the world." He insists that "we need to evaluate climate policy in the same way that we evaluate every other policy: in terms of costs and benefits."

Lomborg's emphasis on cost-benefit analysis and prioritizing policies with the highest humanitarian and environmental returns strike a chord with policymakers who believe that fear-based messaging from left-liberal Western politicians, think tanks, and media commentators has proved counterproductive.

Again, this is not a call to ignore climate science. The evidence that human emissions contribute to warming is far too well established to dispute at this stage. The scientific consensus, including reports by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, confirms that human activity, particularly fossil fuel burning, has raised global temperatures and influenced extreme weather patterns. But recognizing the significance of the threat does not mean abandoning common sense.

The world never needed alarmism to motivate climate action. Depoliticization of public discourse coupled with realism might be the most effective way to tackle climate change and support global development.

> **Headlines were dominated by dire predictions**

> **Policy ought to be founded on pragmatic solutions**

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Why West Bank annexation is a direct threat to Jordan

OSAMA AL-SHARIF

When Israel's security Cabinet voted last week to extend Israeli control over areas under Palestinian administration, Amman heard more than a policy announcement — it heard an existential threat. For Jordan's King Abdullah, the move crossed what he has called his "red lines": no displacement of Palestinians, no alternative homeland, no liquidation of the Palestinian cause. All three are now in jeopardy, and with them, Jordan's stability.

Jordan was quick to condemn the decision, describing the measures as "illegal" and "aimed at entrenching settlements and imposing Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank." The Palestinian Authority, Arab and Muslim countries, as well as the EU and UN, joined in the condemnation.

In a lukewarm reaction, US President Donald Trump reiterated his objection to Israel's annexation of the West Bank, but stopped short of denouncing the measures or calling on Israel to rescind them. To underscore the unambiguous meaning of the measures, Israel's Energy Minister Eli Cohen told Israeli radio that the steps amounted to implementing "de facto sovereignty," adding that they "actually establish a fact on the ground that there will not be a Palestinian state."

"We will continue to kill the idea of a Palestinian state," Defense Minister Israel Katz said in a joint statement with Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich.

But aside from the terminal blow that the PA has received, effectively annulling the Oslo Accords and all the agreements that followed with Israel, the Israeli decision reverberated in Amman, raising fears that King Abdullah's "red lines" concerning the Palestinian issue have been crossed.

As recently as February last year, the Jordanian monarch repeated what has been dubbed the three royal nonnegotiable nos. The three red lines are interconnected.

While the current Israeli far-right government has been implementing measures to speed up the colonization of West Bank territory, this latest decision is now seen as the most critical Israeli claim to the West Bank since the 1967 war.

Among the most serious steps that Israel has taken is to make land records in the West Bank public and to allow non-Arab individuals to directly buy land from Palestinian owners. The measures include widening the Israeli civil administration's mandate to extend to areas directly under the sole control of the PA, especially the so-called Area A — the urban Palestinian centers that were supposed to remain under full Palestinian civil and security control under the Oslo Accords.

These measures are viewed in Jordan as accelerating the elimination of any Palestinian state by sealing the fate of the Oslo Accords, bringing down the PA, and extending Israeli law to the occupied West Bank — that is, sovereignty through annexation.

By doing so, Israel appears to have achieved a major geopolitical goal: to have legal control over the land, from its point of view. Its measures delink the territory, which is slated for the establishment of a future Palestinian state, from the people. That leaves the demographic issue: the fate of 3 million stateless Palestinians who will soon be living on Israeli land.

Jordan is home to the largest number of Palestinian refugees outside the occupied territories, and it has campaigned to keep the UN agency alive and funded. The possible collapse of UNRWA represents another step in Israel's effort to erase the Palestinian national identity and force host countries to resettle Palestinian refugees.

There have been some outrageous Israeli suggestions regarding the fate of West Bank Palestinians. Katz has historically supported the idea that Jordan is the appropriate national home for Palestinians, a view often termed the "Jordanian option" in Israeli right-wing discourse, aiming to relieve Israel of responsibility for the Palestinian population.

Another interim proposal suggests that Jordan reclaims its administrative role over Palestinian population centers in the West Bank until a more permanent solution is found. Such a role suggests that Jordan would replace a defunct PA.

King Abdullah and the Jordanians are united in rejecting such proposals. The king's red lines should be taken seriously by Israel. Unlike in any other country, the annexation of the West Bank poses a major national security threat to Jordan — one that King Abdullah is prepared to escalate tensions to prevent.

The stakes could not be higher. If Israel proceeds with full annexation, Jordan may find itself, at a future stage, forced to choose between accepting millions of displaced Palestinians or suspending its peace treaty with Israel — a move that would fundamentally reshape the regional order. For now, Amman is watching, waiting, and warning that its patience has limits.

> **Israeli army raids have crippled the Palestinian economy**

> **Israel appears to have achieved a major geopolitical goal**

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Drawn to comparison

Zhao Xu finds out how the horse is depicted across cultures.

Galloping horses painted by Xu Beihong during the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45) stand for resilience and moral resolve. COURTESY OF THE PALACE MUSEUM IN BEIJING

Across civilizations, few animals have carried as much symbolic weight as the horse. In both Western and Chinese history, horses shaped warfare, enabled empires, and stirred the imagination of artists.

Yet, the meanings attached to them — and the ways they were depicted — reveal profound differences in how power, heroism and the individual were understood on either side of Eurasia.

In the Western tradition, the horse is most often inseparable from the individual hero or ruler. From antiquity onward, equestrian imagery served as a visual shorthand for sovereignty.

The bronze equestrian statue of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180) in Rome, one of the few ancient monuments to survive the Middle Ages, established a durable model: the calm ruler elevated above the masses, mastery of the horse equated with mastery of the world.

This tradition resurfaced forcefully in early modern Europe. In equestrian portraits by Rubens, Van Dyck, and Velazquez — all masters of the Baroque period between the late 16th and the mid-18th centuries — kings and princes appear astride powerful steeds, their authority dramatized through controlled movement and disciplined force.

This logic reaches its theatrical height in Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), who in reality crossed the Alps on a mule, is transformed into a heroic conqueror on a rearing horse, reins clenched, his name inscribed alongside conquerors like Hannibal and Charlemagne.

In Western art, the horse amplifies the will of the individual, projecting ambition, destiny and personal glory. The animal becomes an extension of human command.

Chinese horse imagery follows a markedly different path. While horses were no less essential to warfare and the state — particularly from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) onward — their representation rarely centers on the self-aggrandizement of a single ruler.

Instead, Chinese art tends to emphasize the moral quality, vitality and spirit of the horse itself. From Han tomb reliefs to Tang (618-907) sculptures and Song (960-1279) paintings, horses appear not as props of power, but as living beings endowed with character.

This distinction is especially evident in the Tang Dynasty, often regarded as the golden age of Chinese horse imagery. The Tang court prized horses from Central Asia, emblems of the dynasty's openness and cosmopolitan reach. Yet works, such as the celebrated Stone Reliefs of the Six Steeds, installed at the mausoleum of the second Tang emperor Li Shimin, commemorate not imperial vanity, but shared hardship.

The horses are shown without the emperor astride them; instead, they stand alone, or, in one striking scene, accompanied by a man — one of the emperor's generals — pulling an arrow from a wounded steed. The gesture is met not with resistance, but with trust, underscoring a bond forged in battle, rather than a display of sovereign power.

So where, then, were the emperors and generals, if not depicted on horseback? "In the gardens," replies Maxwell Hearn, a leading curator of Chinese painting in the United States and head of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of Asian Art.

"You don't see paintings from that period of a conquering general planting a flag on a beach. Instead, the Chinese elite preferred to be shown in their own gardens," he says.

"Above all, they wished to be remembered not as bureaucrats or rulers of the state, but as gentlemen versed in the refined arts of painting, calligraphy, music and chess."

This preference helps explain the near absence of mounted rulers in Chinese art, as well as the quieter treatment of horses themselves. Chinese painters from the Song Dynasty onward — the likes of Li Gonglin, Zhao Mengfu, Ren Renfa — often portrayed horses in moments of stillness: grazing, bathing or resting.

"They are what we call literati painters — artists of classical cultivation who dominated much of Chinese art history and often held official posts," says Ma Shunping from the Palace Museum in Beijing, curator of an upcoming exhibition on ancient China's equine art and culture, drawn in part from the museum's own collection.

"Their images invite contemplation, serving as vehicles for reflection on unrecognized talent, constrained strength, or virtue awaiting its moment."

Standing in sharp contrast are the Western battle scenes, such as the Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii or *The Battle of San Romano* by Florentine painter Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) where horses are locked in violent motion, carrying history forward through conquest.

Even when horses are used as mirrors of thoughts and emotions, Western art diverges sharply from the Chinese tradition.

The work of Theodore Gericault (1791-1824), a pioneer of Romanticism in French painting and arguably the most influential artist in redefining the horse in modern art, offers a telling example.

Far removed from the composed steeds of Baroque equestrian portraiture, his horses emerge as forces of nature, expressive and unstable, their unsettled bodies echoing the psychological and political upheavals of post-Revolutionary Europe.

Rooted in early Romanticism, Gericault's approach was informed by an obsessive study of equine anatomy — a pursuit that had largely eluded his Chinese counterparts, who placed greater emphasis on conveying spirit than on physical likeness.

Chinese art underwent its own transformation, particularly after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. Yet, the horse endured as a charged cultural image, nowhere more powerfully than in the works of Xu Beihong (1895-1953), the most renowned painter of horses in modern China.

Swept forward in broad ink lines and taut compositions, his horses are rarely still: they surge, rear and strain ahead, their energy barely contained. Trained in Western anatomical study, yet grounded in Chinese brush tradition, Xu gave his subjects both physical weight and expressive force.

During the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45), Xu's horses came to stand for resilience, moral resolve and the aspiration of a society struggling toward renewal.

Yet, this symbolic power did not emerge in isolation. Across history, in both Chinese and Western societies, horses were far more than instruments of transport or war. They facilitated movement itself — of people, goods, ideas, technology and beliefs.
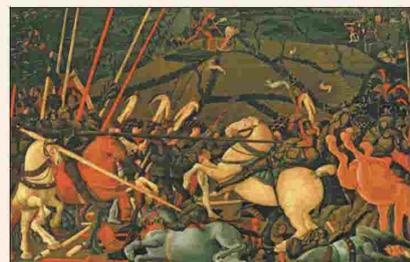
In China, the opening of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty relied not only on camel caravans, but also on horses capable of guarding routes, carrying officials and sustaining control over vast frontiers.

Demand for strong warhorses from Central Asia fostered sustained contact between China and the nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppe, creating a horse-powered network of diplomacy and trade through which silk, jade, metalwork and ideas traveled east and west.

In later periods, especially during the Song Dynasty between the 10th and 13th centuries, China institutionalized horse acquisition through systems such as the Tea-Horse Trade, exchanging tea for warhorses from frontier regions in the west and southwest.

These routes declined under the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), as the Mongol rulers' direct control of the Eurasian steppe reduced the need for such exchanges.

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the question of horse supply resurfaced. Warhorses were obtained through several parallel channels: Joseon Korea (1392-1897), particularly Jeju Island, provided horses through tribute and limited trade, though these remained supplementary, while frontier horse markets along the northern border enabled regulated exchanges with Mongol groups for steppe-bred mounts.

The Tea-Horse Trade was also revived, reflecting the Ming state's persistent effort to secure reliable cavalry resources, as well as the animal's crucial role in facilitating exchanges.

In the Western world, horses also played a connective role. From the Persian Empire to Rome, mounted couriers, cavalry and traders depended on them to bind together territories spanning thousands of kilometers.

During the medieval period, between the 8th and 13th centuries, equestrian cultures in West and Central Asia further refined breeding, veterinary knowledge and riding techniques, which later spread to Europe through trade and contact.

Technology associated with horses traveled in both directions as well.

According to Li Yongping, a researcher from the Gansu Provincial Museum in Lanzhou city, Northwest China's Gansu province, archaeological and historical evidence suggests that chariot technology reached China from the Western Eurasian steppe and was adopted during the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC).

Many centuries later, the innovation of the single-metal stirrup — widely believed to have originated in East Asia around the third or fourth century — spread westward through the steppe, eventually transforming warfare and mobility in Byzantine and medieval Europe.

"Across these networks of exchange, the horse consistently occupied the boundary between cultures — a living agent that crossed borders and rendered them permeable. Even today, it recalls a world in which distance was measured in days of riding rather than hours of flight, and in which movement depended on endurance, trust and mutual reliance," says Li.

From this shared history of movement and encounter emerged a deeper, more enduring role. Across both worlds, the horse came to serve as a mirror of human aspiration.

Whether rearing beneath an emperor or standing quietly in a scholar's painting, it carries the same lingering question: how should strength be borne, and to what end?

Contact the writer at zhaoxu@chinadaily.com.cn

The horses of French painter Theodore Gericault (1791-1824) are shaped by an obsessive study of equine anatomy. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Top: A rider and a horse by Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) master Zhao Mengfu, a representative figure of China's literati painting tradition. COURTESY OF THE PALACE MUSEUM IN BEIJING **Center:** *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by French painter Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY **Above:** Grazing horses depicted by Zhao Yong, the son of Zhao Mengfu. COURTESY OF THE PALACE MUSEUM IN TAIPEI

In *The Battle of San Romano* by Florentine painter Paolo Uccello (1397-1475), horses are locked in violent combat. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

EDITORIALS

Endorsements in Illinois House Districts 35, 40, 42, 52, 76, 84, 89

Today, the Tribune Editorial Board is continuing our endorsements in contested primary elections for Illinois House races. We're endorsing statewide. This is the second of our three installments.

35th District

The district, traditionally the home of many first responders and filled with moderates who value common sense and old-school community service, includes such Southwest Side neighborhoods as Beverly and Mount Greenwood as well as all or part of Alsip, Orland Park, Worth and Palos Heights, among other suburbs. Mary Gill, a moderate Democrat, currently holds the seat.

In the Republican primary, Chuck Lay, a self-employed resident of Beverly with a background in the technology field, vies against David Dewar, 59, the owner of his own company, Tax-Free Retirement Solutions. Dewar's search engine-friendly materials leave no doubt as to where this resident of Mount Greenwood Heights stands, declaring Lay is "running as a TRUMP KIRK MAGA RED INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT (his capitalization) within the Republican Party." More specifically, Dewar told us he advocates for an end to Illinois' "sanctuary state status," the repeal of the no cash bail provisions of the SAFE-T Act and other MAGA-friendly positions. Republican leadership surely is well aware that he has little chance of unseating Gill.

Given the reality of the extreme-MAGA opposition, Charles "Chuck" Lay, of Morgan Park, is by far the shrewder choice for Republican voters in the district, even if he was not responsive to us. Lay, who was raised in a Pennsylvania steel town, Aliquippa, is a more traditional Republican, at least as far as we can tell, focused on "reining in spending," supporting "pro-active" policing and increasing parental voices in education.

Chuck Lay is endorsed.

40th District

The 40th District, which includes lively Chicago neighborhoods like Irving Park and Avondale, has been represented by Democrat Jaime Andrade Jr., 53, since 2013. He has had very few serious challengers over the years but he has one this time in Miguel Alvelo-Rivera, an organizer who boasts endorsements from such progressive names as U.S. Rep. Delia Ramirez and Ald. Rossana Rodríguez Sánchez, as well as from the Chicago Teachers Union.

Alvelo-Rivera wants to increase the state's minimum wage to $30 in relatively short order and advocates for holding "Illinois State Police to account for assisting ICE at Broadview." We were glad our state police were there to try to ensure safety in the face of the unacceptable actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U.S. Border Patrol.

We've endorsed Andrade, who is deeply entrenched in this district and is also an IATSE (union) stagehand, several times before, noting his hard work on issues like affordable housing, protecting employees from AI-related job losses and finding ways to curb property tax increases, especially for seniors. He is plenty progressive enough for the voters in this district, but far more likely to support practical, commonsense future solutions for the state's many problems.

Jaime Andrade Jr. is endorsed.

42nd District

The 42nd District, which includes all or part of such suburbs as Downers Grove, Glen Ellyn, Lisle, Lombard and Wheaton, is represented by Margaret DeLaRosa; DeLaRosa, 63, who was school board president for Glenbard Township High School District 87 from 2022-25, was appointed to the seat last October to fill out the term of Terra Costa Howard, who became a judge. DeLaRosa, whom we've heard tell is a notably kind person, has been endorsed by U.S. Rep. Sean Casten, among others.

Her challenger in the primary race is Lynn LaPlante, a DuPage County Board member and professional musician with many union endorsements. She's championed a project for redeveloping the current fairgrounds into an arts complex. LaPlante, 53, told us she supports a new Illinois tax on the "ultra-wealthy," with which we disagree, but many of her positions struck us as reasoned and thoughtful, including her view on the SAFE-T Act. We did not discern a huge difference on the issues between these two candidates, although LaPlante is running slightly to the left of the moderate DeLaRosa and strikes us likely as more of a fighter.

DeLaRosa, though, has deep roots in this district and a stellar local reputation among the party faithful in her district. **Margaret DeLaRosa** is endorsed.

52nd District

Erin Chan Ding, a freelance journalist and progressive, who has written for this newspaper among other outlets, is running against Maria Peterson in the Democratic primary for the 52nd District.
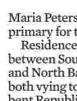
Peterson

Residence-wise, it's a battle between South Barrington (Ding) and North Barrington (Peterson), both vying to unseat incumbent Republican Rep. Martin McLaughlin of Barrington Hills in the fall. It's all Barrington, all the time, though the leafy district also includes Algonquin, Fox River Grove, Inverness, Island Lake, Volo, Wauconda, and western portions of Libertyville and Mundelein.

Ding, 44, sits on the Barrington Community Unit School District 220 Board of Education and touts that experience. She wants to see more "progressive revenue solutions," wants to "fix" the Tier 2 state pensions (without dealing much with the cost) and supports a progressive state income tax. She's also opposed to Illinois participating in the federal tax-credit scholarship program. We were impressed with her detailed answers to our questions but her views put her very much on the left of her party.

Peterson, 63, is a former attorney and a small business owner and talks a more moderate game, notwithstanding some progressive positions.

"Nothing matters more than keeping people healthy and alive," she told us. "As the federal government continues to pull back funding for health care, vaccines, and essential public health services, Illinois must act as a safeguard. I support policies that protect and expand access to affordable health care, preserve vaccination programs, strengthen community health centers, and defend reproductive health care access. No one in our district should delay care, ration medication, or risk their health because of cost or politics."

Amen to that.

Peterson and Ding share many policy positions and we admire Ding's energy and smarts, but we feel Peterson, whose parents came to the U.S. from Mexico, will do best when it comes to paying attention to the state's finances and economic environment and working with Republicans: "I approach policy through a practical lens rooted in basic needs," she told us. "If a proposal does not meaningfully improve stability, safety, or opportunity, and if it is not funded and enforceable from the start, I will not vote for it, even if that puts me at odds with party leadership."

Good. Savvy Democrats also should conclude that Peterson has the best chance of prevailing in the fall. **Maria Peterson** is endorsed.

76th District

The Republican side of the 76th District, which is centered on DeKalb, home to Northern Illinois University, and includes surrounding communities, features a battle between Liz Bishop, a 65-year-old retired bank examiner, and Crystal Loughran, 63, a teacher and tutor who has challenged Bishop before, always from the right.

Bishop

We endorsed Bishop in 2024 and see no reason to change our minds this time around.

Bishop is a moderate who is much admired by a Republican leadership that hopes to win this seat, held by first-term Democrat Amy Briel, who defeated Bishop in 2024 by less than 600 votes. Some moderate Democrats may well find Bishop's positions helpful to the state's future: "By lowering the overall tax burden," she told us, "we can attract new job creators, expand the tax base, and collect more taxes from a larger group of taxpayers. Most importantly, this would create more opportunities for our children once they enter the workforce, instead of driving them away to other states with more to offer."

She also has some strongly held and centrist views on health care. "I would support legislation," she told us, "to address the issues with health care disparities in Illinois, and I would fight to ensure each family can rely on nearby quality care for emergency services, routine care, and everything in between."

Springfield Republicans sorely need such a candidate who can work across the aisle and we believe Bishop is the right choice for Republicans who'd like to see more members of their party in a position to curb Democratic excesses. In other words, by getting elected.

Liz Bishop is endorsed.

84th District

The west suburban 84th District features a primary battle between Democrats Jared Ploger and Saba Haider, vying to succeed Rep. Stephanie Kifowit, who is running for Illinois comptroller.

Ploger, a Valley View School District middle school teacher, comes wrapped with an endorsement from the Chicago Teachers Union and told us of many progressive positions, including the state not participating in the Educational Choice for Children Act, presumably a prerequisite for the CTU endorsement.

A DuPage County Board member who has a business providing wellness services, Haider is an immigrant from India. Her campaign foregrounds her interest in the economic development of the district, her background in the provision of mental health services and notes her environmental bona fides and her master's degree in wildlife science, which would be an interesting addition to the Springfield Democrats.

Saba Haider has our endorsement.

89th District

Rep. Tony McCombie is serving her fifth term representing Northwest Illinois (albeit in several different districts) and her second term as House Republican leader. McCombie, who was the first woman elected House Minority leader in Illinois, is the former mayor of Savanna, a Mississippi River town. She has been outspoken when it comes to the culture of corruption in Illinois, advocating for meaningful restrictions on lobbying and other elements of ethics reform. And she has firm ideas on the future of the state.

McCombie

"A key policy priority," she told us, "is restoring Illinois' competitiveness by lowering the cost of living and doing business, cutting wasteful spending to deliver tax relief, reducing unnecessary regulations, investing in affordable energy, and prioritizing public safety so communities can thrive." We most certainly agree.

Running against McCombie from the right is 49-year-old retired police officer Victoria Onorato of Byron, who was not responsive to us and uses McCombie's willingness to cross the aisle in Springfield as a cudgel.

We endorse **Tony McCombie**.

EDITORIAL CARTOON

SHENEMAN TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

"HOW'D YOU BOYS LIKE TO BE IN CHARGE OF THE MIDTERMS?"

DREW SHENEMAN

OPINION

Holding his hat high, President Dwight Eisenhower starts a trip from Glenview to Evanston to give a speech before a crowd of thousands in Deering Meadow at Northwestern University in August 1954. **CHICAGO TRIBUNE HISTORICAL PHOTO**

President Eisenhower deserves our gratitude, not indifference

By Michael Peregrine

The Interstate Highway System is named after him. The nation's newest memorial honors him. And the fastest path (sometimes) from downtown heading west is an expressway bearing his name. Dwight D. Eisenhower was one of the most consequential American leaders of the 20th century, and yet on this Presidents Day, we barely remember who he was and what he did.

And that's a terrible shame, for Eisenhower's record of service to the nation is simply unparalleled: D-Day commander, supreme commander of NATO, Army chief of staff, president of Columbia University and two-term president of the United States. A highly respected figure to politicians of both parties and a venerated world leader. A lifelong soldier who abhorred armed conflict. A leader of uncommon discretion, decency and grace, who is unfairly recalled — if at all — as an old man who liked to fish and play golf. And that's a travesty of American history, as even the briefest review of his record will attest.

Eisenhower first came on the national scene as a fast-rising young general in the early days of World War II. He made the hugely difficult recommendation not to reinforce the besieged American forces in the Philippines. He commanded both the invasion of North Africa and the subsequent invasion of Sicily. He then served as supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe, the war's most important military role. Eisenhower led the Allied armies across Europe, from the D-Day invasion to Germany's surrender, while exercising the political skills necessary to preserve the United States' challenging partnership with Britain, France, Russia and other allies.

After the war, Eisenhower served as Army chief of staff and then led Columbia University before being called back into service by President Harry Truman as the first supreme commander of the newly formed NATO. In that role, Eisenhower promoted the foundational goals of the now-historic alliance and developed its first command structure.

Eisenhower won elections in 1952 and 1956 in a landslide; he led the country to an extraordinary period of domestic tranquility, bipartisan grace and economic prosperity. Among the major accomplishments of his presidency were the resolution of the Korean War, the establishment of NASA as a civilian agency and his unwillingness to intervene in Vietnam in support of French forces.

As a soldier-statesman, Eisenhower focused on keeping the peace. He urged countries to resolve differences, "not with arms but with intellect and purpose." He characterized the cost of powerful weapons as "in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. ... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense." He famously warned the nation of the dangers to arise from "the military industrial complex."

In retirement, Eisenhower was widely sought for his wisdom and judgment. President John F. Kennedy sought his advice following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. President Lyndon B. Johnson regularly consulted him on matters ranging from presidential succession in the wake of Kennedy's assassination to the conduct of the Vietnam War.

Upon Eisenhower's 1969 death, President Richard M. Nixon observed of Eisenhower's last years: "Some men are considered great because they lead great armies, or they lead powerful nations. For eight years now, Dwight Eisenhower has neither commanded an army nor led a nation. And yet he remained through his final days the world's most admired and respected man, truly the first citizen of the world."

None of this is to say that Eisenhower's career was without fault. He failed to aggressively confront U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy's political terrorism. His support for the Civil Rights Movement was generally passive. He was slow to react to the rise of Soviet space technology. And for years, Eisenhower failed to earn historians' appreciation, who misinterpreted his measured tone, lack of flair and willingness to work out of the limelight as the traits of a "do-nothing" president. If that is so, perhaps we need more "do-nothing" political leaders.

Eisenhower was possibly the most extraordinary public servant of the 20th century: soldier, commander, diplomat, educator, president and, in retirement, the ultimate symbol of public dignity and national rectitude. All this is particularly noteworthy in today's era, where such leadership virtues are seemingly in decline, if not disappearing.

So, on this Presidents Day, do yourself a favor and pull up the video of Eisenhower's farewell address as president. It's a little long, but it's worth the investment of time. You'll hear a formality of tone that is respectful of the office. You'll hear his encouragement for "an alert and knowledgeable citizenry" to serve as the bulwark against misplaced power. You'll hear his call to use America's power only in the interests of world peace and human betterment.

Chances are you won't just be impressed; you'll be shocked. And you'll wonder if America can continue to produce public servants like Eisenhower.

Michael Peregrine is a retired Chicago lawyer.

On Presidents Day, we should consider our civic legacy

By Erin Carlson Mast and Shawn Healy

In 1838, at age 28, Abraham Lincoln delivered a public speech responding to a rise in mob violence and warning that it could erode trust in public institutions. He asserted that the greatest risk to our nation's preservation wasn't an attack from a foreign power but rather destruction from within.

His solution to fortifying our republic was to empower all citizens with the knowledge of and commitment to our Constitution, laws and democratic processes. He called this our shared "political religion." Today, we might describe this as civic education and civic practice.

Presidents Day invites us not only to reflect on past generations of political leadership but also to consider what kind of civic inheritance we are preparing for the next generation.

On George Washington's birthday in 1861, Lincoln raised the American flag at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Addressing the crowd, he declared, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."

He made the statement just days before his inauguration, at a moment when several states had already seceded from the Union and concern about the nation's future was mounting. Lincoln recognized that while the Founders had the shared experience and excitement of creating a new nation, his own generation had no such galvanizing moment and faced the less glorious task of maintaining (and improving upon) what the Founders created.

As the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's call to action feels newly relevant. Consider that the children entering kindergarten this year will graduate in the 250th anniversary year of the Constitution. Whether they will inherit and be prepared to maintain a functioning constitutional democracy cannot be left to chance.

The question is not simply how we teach young people about civics, but the role we all play in supporting civic learning and modeling the principles and practices in everyday life that make constitutional democracy not just survive but thrive.

The good news is that we know what works in both formal and informal civic education, and meaningful progress is already underway. The challenge now is scale, shared commitment and the will to treat civic education as essential civic infrastructure rather than a peripheral concern.

Students who experience high-quality civic education are more likely to complete college and develop employable skills, vote, discuss current issues, speak in public with confidence, contact public officials and volunteer in their communities to address issues of common concern.

Across the country, educators, cultural institutions and civic organizations are proving that high-quality civic education engages young people, strengthens democratic skills and builds durable civic habits. For example, the Lincoln Presidential Foundation has produced award-winning short documentaries that can be used by students, educators and lifelong learners, plus companion resources for use in the classroom.

We're also making progress in passing legislation and policy state by state that are designed to bring civics back into the center of the curriculum. The CivxNow Coalition, a project of iCivics, convenes a national coalition of 415 member organizations united behind the goal of ensuring universal access to a high-quality civic education for all K-12 students.

But we have a long way to go in ensuring Lincoln's vision. State policies must foster students' civic development throughout their K-12 trajectories. For most students, Illinois' included, civics constitutes a single stand-alone, one-semester class in high school. We can and must do better, extending this semester-long course in high school to a full year, and ensuring a dedicated middle school course, too (Illinois does require instruction in civics in grades six to eight thanks to a 2019 law), and dedicated instructional time for civics in elementary school. Illinois has not tested students in social studies since 2005, and in the current era, what's tested is what's taught. Illinois policymakers should consider project-based assessments in civics, where students study an issue of public concern in their communities and construct a plan to solve it through policy innovations and civic engagement.

Finally, Illinois should join 12 other states in recognizing students for excellence in civics with seals on their graduation diplomas.

As we celebrate Presidents Day in the Land of Lincoln during this year of American turning 250, let's double down on the civic development of the rising generation of Americans. In them, we seek to preserve and strengthen this grand experiment in self-government our Founders established and Lincoln made more perfect.

Erin Carlson Mast is president and CEO of the Lincoln Presidential Foundation. Shawn Healy is the chief policy and advocacy officer at iCivics.org.

OPINION

Why aren't we talking about the harm AI is doing to students?

By Liz Shulman and William Liang

"I think, therefore I am," philosopher René Descartes famously said in 1637. To think means to be alive. Learning how to think is why students go to to school.

As a high school student and high school teacher in different parts of the country, we believe education can still serve that purpose — but we're worried.

Thinking was still a core value in 2023 when American education took the potential dangers of artificial intelligence seriously. Educational institutions signed contracts with AI detection companies such as GPTZero, ZeroGPT and Turnitin to deter students from cheating and adopted AI policies. They were concerned about academic integrity and critical thinking.

They knew the very thing that schools stand for — the place where young people learn to think, to become fully human — was under threat.

Two years later, under enormous pressure, schools have sold out to AI companies, and students and teachers are bearing the cost. The same systems that politicians hope to steer toward their own ends — consider President Donald Trump's executive order pressuring schools to integrate AI "into all subject areas" — are being forced into schools as if they carry no risks.

The two of us have experienced firsthand how schools are being pressured to rely on machinery rather than human judgment, to trust these tools precisely where trust matters most — at our educational institutions.

Despite the evidence saying AI is killing students' critical thinking skills, schools have signed contracts with Big Tech companies, allowing the technology to alter the educational landscape and shape what schools expect from students and educators, who have little say on the matter. The Center for Democracy & Technology estimates the percentage of schools with policies permitting the use of AI for schoolwork nearly doubled from the 2022-23 to 2023-24 school years, even though only 28% of teachers report strong guidance on what to do when they suspect prohibited AI use.

Big Tech's multibillion-dollar pledges to bring AI into classrooms and communities hail AI's ability to "democratize access" and "reimagine pedagogy." Students are told to use these tools "responsibly," even as no one can explain what this responsibility looks like.

The question is no longer whether AI belongs in education, but how efficiently schools can accommodate it without disrupting daily operations.

Even the country's largest teacher unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Educators Association, have sold out to Microsoft, OpenAI and Anthropic. The AFT signed a $23 million deal providing AI training to educators. One of that partnership's first efforts is a "National Academy for AI Instruction," where teachers learn how to use AI for generating lesson plans. The program plans to reach 10% of U.S. teachers over the next five years.

The justification is to put "teachers in the driver's seat," according to AFT President Randi Weingarten.

Teachers should have been in the driver's seat from the start, but some schools have removed the teacher from the classroom completely. In Texas, Arizona, and California, students sit in front of screens for two hours a day while AI "teaches" them at a supposed accelerated and individually tailored pace, reducing teachers to classroom monitors.

We doubt these students are learning how to think for themselves when they're sitting with chatbots that mimic thought rather than discovering their own original thoughts.

Some AI proponents even claim, such as political analyst Van Jones, that AI is revolutionary for equity and inclusion. Jones called AI "the closest thing to reparations (Black Americans) will ever get."

We wish AI could close the equity gap, but if AI equalizes anything, it's access to cheating and the outsourcing of critical thinking. Every day, we see students use it to cheat, whether it's to write a science lab report, generate an essay draft or do algebra problems.

Fifty percent of students admit AI is hurting their relationships with their teachers, and over 70% of teachers worry AI is diminishing students' critical thinking skills.

No matter how much money is spent to integrate AI into schools "ethically" and "responsibly," students have learned the easiest way to complete any assignment is to outsource their thinking by cheating.

"I use it for inspiration," many students say when teachers talk with them about forming their own original thoughts. "It helps me organize."

Many students ignore the barriers teachers put on assignments. Some educators use images of red traffic lights (no AI) and green lights (yes AI) at the top of worksheets. Students laugh at these paltry attempts to prevent cheating. We don't blame them, of course, for becoming dependent on products marketed to them.

Other AI programs are less subtle. The "undetectable" AI assistant Cluely encourages users to "cheat on everything," including tests and presentations. Perplexity incentivizes students to promote its products on college campuses by giving them money for each student who downloads Comet, its AI browser, and runs ads showcasing how its tool helps students cheat on assignments and exams.

Even more worrisome than cheating on homework is the decline in students' ability to think for themselves.

Why aren't schools talking more about these dangers? Since the technology is here to stay, schools need better policies on its use. Students' work needs to be monitored better, and teachers need to be supported in a return to paper and pencils and more work being done in class. If students cheat, at least they're copying something that was human generated.

Schools need to better address these dangers before the consequences outweigh the positives. Big Tech may have the money that schools need, but schools shouldn't sell their souls for the funding they deserve. Besides, public schools remain massively underfunded despite their contracts with tech companies.

The two of us value what school is supposed to be, and we think everyone should, too: It's the place where you learn how to think and how to be.

Liz Shulman teaches English at Evanston Township High School and in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. She is working on a book of stories from the classroom. William Liang is a high school junior living in the San Francisco Bay Area and a columnist at The Hill.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Archer Avenue's bike lanes

For 10 consecutive weeks, both the supporters and opponents of concrete protected bike lanes on Archer Avenue have gathered at a busy intersection in Brighton Park to express their opinions, but you wouldn't know that by reading Yunus Emre Tozal's recent op-ed ("Why concrete barriers alone cannot fix Chicago's Archer Avenue," Feb. 9).

Tozal characterizes the neighborhood response to the redesign of Archer as universally negative, but there have been many weeks when supporters have outnumbered opponents during the protests. Not only that, but also, we've heard messages of support from neighbors walking home, residents getting off the No. 62 Archer bus and even drivers who've shared words of encouragement.

Of course, there are opponents of the project, but they do not represent the entirety of the neighborhood. Talk to our neighbors (in person or on social media), and you'll find a range of opinion — including outright opposition, enthusiastic support, skepticism that the project will achieve its goal of reducing crashes and a wait-and-see attitude that reserves judgment until construction wraps up later this spring.

For the supporters who have braved the cold since early December, safety on Archer is not an abstract issue. Most of us have shared stories of being hit by cars, and too many of us know people who have been seriously injured or even killed. We're hopeful that this project will make it safer to get around the neighborhoods we call home: Brighton Park and the surrounding communities of Gage Park, McKinley Park, Archer Heights and Little Village.

Many local supporters have adopted the slogan "Archer is for everybody," because we believe this major thoroughfare needs to accommodate residents no matter how they get around: drivers, yes, but also pedestrians, cyclists, young people on scooters, parents pushing strollers, and neighbors who are elderly and have disabilities.

A safer and more inviting Archer would encourage more trips by bike or on foot — especially short trips within the neighborhood. This would ease traffic congestion, increase foot traffic for local businesses and provide more opportunities for neighbors to see each other face to face and not just from behind a windshield.

Tozal understands the benefits of this project and states, "For years, Archer Avenue has been a game of Russian roulette. The physical separators are simple geometric solutions that will save lives."

Many Southwest Siders agree.

— Dixon Galvez-Searle, transit advocacy steward, Southwest Collective

Automobile dependence

Yunus Emre Tozal made a fine contribution to the discussion of how city development must balance the needs of its residents. There are more than safety concerns at stake, we are reminded.

Chicago was once truly a city of neighborhoods, where residents typically worked, shopped, worshipped and played where they lived. This was not entirely by choice: Strict racial segregation, for instance, locked Black residents into the Black Belt. Yet that experience shaped the map of the city that we know today.

As streetcars gave way to private automobiles, the government built interstates and white flight swelled the suburbs, our city infrastructure was refashioned to favor cars. One consequence was to drain neighborhoods of their amenities and vitality. Major shopping districts (Commercial Avenue, Madison-Pulaski, 63d and Halsted) went into decline. Neighborhood theaters and clubs disappeared.

Today, those advocating for more protected lanes are incrementally pushing us back from our automobile dependence and may presage a rekindling of neighborhoods. This requires adjustment and thoughtful planning, but in the long run, this may benefit local businesses much more than the immediate loss of street parking will hurt.

— Paul W. Mollica, Chicago

Neighborhoods and safety

With respect to Yunus Emre Tozal, I agree that we must engage with communities sincerely as we design infrastructure projects. However, I also ask the same of the community residents who attend those meetings.

As a safe streets activist, I have attended many, and rarely do I find residents eager to engage in sincere conversation. What I see instead are grandstanding and bad-faith arguments presenting an individual's preference as a community good. It is without question that safer streets bring gentrification — but this is a demonstration of the unmet need that safe, walkable neighborhoods deliver.

We must bring so much beauty and safety to our neighborhoods that we swamp demand and the presence of bike lanes isn't enough to raise property values.

— Carl Beien, Chicago

Empowering true leaders

President Abraham Lincoln's birthday was last week, and it got me thinking about what Illinois has looked like at its best: a place and a people that meet moral crisis with courage.

As a state legislator, Lincoln stood against slave catchers backed by the federal government who defiled our state's laws and terrorized our most vulnerable. As president, he broke the back of Southern slave power forever and inaugurated a "new birth of freedom" in America.

We should remind ourselves of that tradition in these trying times, as our communities are stalked by masked federal agents at the behest of an administration unconcerned with the niceties of civil liberties, even those of American citizens. These spiritual successors of the slave catchers must be confronted, and we should look to Lincoln's example about how to do it.

As Illinois heads to the polls next month in what is shaping up to be a historically important election, I pray we empower leaders who will use every lawful tool at their disposal to protect our neighbors, demand transparency and hold officials accountable for their abuses of power.

— John Engle, Chicago

A principled stand wins

In endorsing state Sen. Laura Fine for Illinois' 9th Congressional District ("Laura Fine for Democratic nomination in 9th Congressional District," Feb. 3), the Tribune Editorial Board says in closing, "she was made to feel uncomfortable for her belief in Israel's right to defend itself or even to exist. A principled position for a principled Democrat, to our minds."

Then, in its endorsement for Melissa Bean for the 8th Congressional District ("In 8th Congressional District, Melissa Bean is endorsed for Democrats and Jennifer Davis for the GOP," Feb. 9), the board says that her main opponent, Junaid Ahmed, "supports banning all U.S. military support to Israel, a position that we believe wouldn't serve U.S. national security interests."

I wonder who will be endorsed for my home district of the 7th Congressional District. Can't wait to find out!

Why is unconditional support of Israel, or any foreign country for that matter, part of the editorial board's criteria for endorsement? Particularly when that country's government and military commit war crimes that kill tens of thousands.

As is being seen across the country, most recently with Zohran Mamdani in New York and Analilia Mejia in New Jersey, taking a principled stand on foreign policy while remaining focused on the needs of your constituents is the true path to victory.

Regardless of who the editorial board endorses.

— Mohiuddin Ahmed, River Forest

For online exclusive letters go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Send letters by email to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your name, address and phone number.

People demonstrate in favor of reduced traffic lanes for automobiles along a stretch of Archer Avenue near Rockwell Street in Chicago on Jan. 12. A bike lane has been installed on the street with concrete islands in what used to be a lane for automobiles. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/TRIBUNE**

The FT View

FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

The great software stock meltdown

Sell-off may be overdone, but companies need to move faster to respond to AI

The rapid advances in artificial intelligence since the launch of ChatGPT have taken place deep inside the leading AI labs, out of sight to most people. By contrast, the stock market lurches that come as investors wake up to the disruptive potential of all this new technology can be all too visible.

The devastation of software stocks over the past month is a case in point. AI agents — software tools that can take actions on behalf of a user — have long been talked about in the AI world. The market ructions are a sign that they may finally be at hand.

The main source of investor angst has been a move by Anthropic and OpenAI to repurpose their code-generating tools as general-purpose agents, capable of carrying out a wide range of actions for non-technical workers. Need to clean up your email inbox and organise your expenses receipts, or handle more specialised jobs like producing marketing copy or analysing a legal contract? You may soon be able to ask an all-purpose agent to do all this and more, without having to open all the different apps currently used to accomplish these tasks.

This presents a severe risk that established software companies will be usurped. Rather than replacing existing software, automated agents could become a new layer on top, a primary computing interface for many workers and a chokepoint for AI firms to claim a bigger slice of corporate IT budgets.

Wall Street has woken up to this as a threat in particular to software-as-a-service, or SaaS, companies, which use software to provide corporations with a wide range of services, from human relations management to handling customers. However, many companies outside the tech industry also rely on software to shape the services they sell, potentially putting them in the line of fire as well. Business-to-business data providers and wealth management companies have been among those caught up in the recent stock market carnage, but they will not be the last.

Investors did not stop to ask too many questions before concluding that this was a threat to much of the SaaS industry. In reality, the picture is more mixed. Most exposed are companies whose software is used for non-essential work processes that can easily be replicated by others. There are no moats to protect businesses like these as AI agents become ever more capable.

Software companies that act as systems of record, holding important corporate data, are more deeply entrenched. Such companies also embed core business processes that are seldom changed. Even if they look elsewhere for new AI capabilities, customers are unlikely to rip out these essential systems. But there is still a risk that these software businesses will fade into the background, relegated to the role of essential but largely ignored utilities that miss out on the growth from AI.

Investors did not stop to ask too many questions before concluding that this was a threat to much of the industry

That does not mean some of these companies won't succeed in reinventing themselves around AI. It takes time to build enterprise-grade systems, to persuade customers to test and use them, and to retrain workers. The AI insurgents will find this out for themselves when they seek to turn their new agents from eye-catching demos into revenue-generating products. High among customer concerns will be how to defend against the heightened risk of prompt injection attacks, where the new agents are misused to reveal sensitive data or take unauthorised actions.

The message from the financial markets, however, is that SaaS companies need to move much faster. Incumbents in other industries who think time is on their side as they figure out a response to the AI threat should also take note. The stock market's AI reckoning, when it comes, can be swift and brutal.

ft.com/opinion

Yes to preserving western culture, but not like this

Ben Hickey

Jemima Kelly

It's been a big week for indefatigable defenders of western culture everywhere. On the hallowed stones of the "digital town square", X, Elon Musk once again bemoaned the sad demise of Grand Britannia by sharing an AI-generated image of a lion — the kind that makes you less worried about the imminent takeover of AI — wrapped in a union jack with a little blonde girl crying over it saying "Please wake up!"

In Paris, Britain's very own, newly God-fearing Stephen Yaxley-Lennon — aka multiple criminally convicted far-right activist Tommy Robinson — went around the French capital saying things like "you what bruv?", being shocked by the presence of "large groups of Algerian men" selling cigarettes, and wondering why "none of them speak English". His conclusion? "I noticed the city of love is long gone".

Are we going to take our cultural cues from a man whose idea of good design is the Cybertruck?

Well you can't argue with that.

And in Atlanta, a 55-year-old man in denim cut-offs and shoes with no socks (his name is Kid Rock; Donald Trump thinks he's "amazing") rapped "for the hookers all trickin' out in Hollywood and for my hoods of the world misunderstood", while a young woman sang her hit song "I Hope", with the positively hymn-like refrain "I hope she cheats like you did on me" at an event dedicated to "faith, family and freedom". This was the "all-American halftime show" put on by Turning Point USA, a rightwing non-profit founded by the late conservative activist Charlie Kirk, which presented itself as an alternative to the main Super Bowl halftime show headed up by Puerto Rican superstar Bad Bunny. "He's said he's having a dance party . . . and singing in Spanish?" Kid Rock said in a statement announcing the event. "Cool. We plan to play great songs for folks who love America."

You might have thought that Trump — who called the main show an "affront to the Greatness of America" that "doesn't represent our standards of Success, Creativity, or Excellence" — would have watched the Kid Rock version, but footage from inside his annual party near Mar-a-Lago suggests otherwise. I attended Trump's Super Bowl party myself two years ago and was not particularly struck by the success, creativity or excellence on display there. The decorations were gaudy; there were vast quantities of the kind of "toxic" junk food that Trump's health secretary wants to ban; and each table was decorated with mini American footballs whose underside read "MADE IN CHINA".

And yet this is the man who tells us at Davos that "we have to defend [American-European] culture" and "rediscover the spirit that lifted the west from the depths of the dark ages". These kinds of highfalutin proclamations have become a defining motif of the Trump 2.0 era. "For a country to survive, there has to be a common culture . . . Nobody dies to defend a 'multicultural economic zone'! American culture, with its English-Scotts-Irish origin, is great and worth fighting for," a prominent South African-born tech CEO with Canadian roots and a penchant for posting bad AI posted on X.

I too believe there are large parts of western culture worth preserving and celebrating, and we are often too shy about saying that. One of my favourite things about the cities I grew up in — London and Paris — has been their diversity, but I am sympathetic to Thomas Sowell's critique of multiculturalism: "you can praise any culture in the world except western culture, and you cannot blame any culture in the world except western culture."

But very often the kinds of grand claims that are made about saving the culture are nothing more than thinly veiled racism and xenophobia. Trump's Davos comments came amid more negative remarks about Somalis. Musk's framing of the basis for American culture being English-Scots-Irish, as if the contributions of other groups didn't count, is both offensive and deeply ignorant. Sowell himself, a forerunner to Musk's arguments whom he has often praised, happens to come from one of them.

What is the western culture that all these people think they are preserving? Do they understand that culture evolves? Do they know where pop music came from? Are we really going to take our cultural cues from a man who has been listening to the same songs and wearing the same suits since the 1980s and a man whose idea of good design is the Cybertruck?

Musk likes to cloak himself in literary authority by quoting George Orwell, but it's hard to believe he's actually read his books — he might then realise the love is unlikely to have been mutual. We should all seek to preserve and develop the best bits of western culture. The idea that we must rely on the likes of Yaxley-Lennon, Trump and Kid Rock to do this for us is at best laughable; at worst dangerous.

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Letters

Human fertility's chicken-and-egg conundrum

Martin Wolf's column on demographics and delayed childbirth highlights important economic and social trends ("Why are fertility rates collapsing?", Opinion, February 11). But one dimension deserves far greater attention: maternal and child health as a form of long-term economic infrastructure.

As women have children later, biological risks for both mother and newborn increase. At the same time, declining birth rates mean that each child carries greater future economic weight.

Yet healthcare innovation and investment remain overwhelmingly focused on diseases of later life, while early life health is still treated as a niche concern.

From a demographic economics perspective, later childbirth without parallel investment in maternal and neonatal health may become a hidden productivity constraint. Preventable complications in pregnancy and early infancy do not only affect families; they shape future workforce participation, healthcare costs and long-term growth.

There is also a commercial dimension that is often overlooked. Maternal and neonatal care are frequently described as small markets, yet the willingness to spend is extremely high because complications are extraordinarily costly. This suggests a misalignment between capital allocation and long-term economic value.

If demographic change is to be taken seriously, investment in prevention, early diagnosis and innovation in maternal and child health should be viewed as a strategic priority rather than a marginal field of study.

Povl Verder
Founder and CEO, SIME Diagnostics, London W1, UK

Hypocrisy: the handmaiden of liberal democracy

There have been multiple references to "hypocrisy" as one of the weaknesses of our western societies in the plethora of "smell the coffee" pieces such as Martin Sandbu's column "Middle powers may miss the global order more than they think" (Opinion, January 26).

May I venture that hypocrisy tends to go hand-in-hand with our rule of law and the system of checks and balances?

After all, why did this system evolve if not to act as a foil to human weaknesses such as the propensity to commit crime, to deceive, to lie, to accumulate and exercise too much power? Liberal democracy merely recognises that these are a fact of life and part of human behaviour. Our system is slow-moving, truth-seeking, ponderous, even bureaucratic and always suffers when directly pitted in elections against those promising quick and popular solutions. For heaven's sake, let us not call out hypocrisy as a sin on a par with outright lying — not to mention the violent perversion of those who dissent from the path of lies.

Andrew Seton
Emeritus Fellow, Pembroke College University of Oxford, UK

An odd NHS policy, in this age of vaccine hesitancy

I read Anjana Ahuja's article regarding the shingles vaccination programme with some irritation — not with the article but with the NHS programme for delivering the vaccine ("The shingles vaccine may have a dementia upside", Opinion, February 11).

When I turned 70 I duly received the shingles vaccination and my wife, who is a few years younger than me, expected to wait until she too turned 70 for her vaccination. However shortly after this it was announced that the age at which you become eligible for the vaccine had been reduced to 65, so she contacted her GP expecting to be able to receive the vaccine. Alas, she was told that the new policy only applied to those people turning 65, from the date of implementation, thus those already over 65 on that date must wait until they turn 70.

Enquiries with the GP indicates there's no shortage of vaccine. So in this age of vaccine hesitancy why is an effective treatment being denied to a willing cohort? This seems to be especially the case in this situation as not only are those in this cohort potentially suffering a painful illness unnecessarily, but they could also potentially be missing out on the wider benefits regarding dementia outlined in the article, the treatment of which must vastly exceed the cost of the vaccination.

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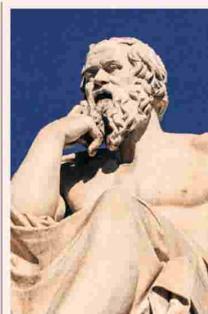
Socrates worried that writing would kill memory. And maybe it did

How the Attlee government ran such big fiscal surpluses

Sharon Graham, the Unite union leader, asks in the FT: "Would we ever have had an NHS if the 1945 Labour government had adopted this worship of fiscal rules?" I believe the correct answer is "very much so" (Opinion, February 13).

Clement Attlee's 1945-51 Labour government created the NHS while delivering several spending control. In fact they ran the biggest fiscal surpluses of any government in the 20th century, comfortably meeting the current fiscal rules. Any political party that understands that to govern is to choose has nothing to fear from sensible fiscal rules.

Tim Leunig
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What would Socrates make of our world?

Guru Madhavan has struck a rich chord with his column "The beauty of friction that lets us feel the world" (Opinion, February 5). What if dealing with friction is what makes us intelligent? The Peter Thiel-inspired "friction removals teams" have put a lot of focus on a field even more central to human existence: interaction. Many people find talking to strangers very burdensome. Uber, Airbnb, Tinder have made it possible to go through life without ever talking to a stranger. This may have increased our efficiency. But what has it done to our ability to navigate the social environment, to identify and solve bigger problems?

Nothing new under the sun. Socrates worried that writing would kill memory. And maybe it did. Welcome to the post-intelligent world.

Lukas von Rantzau
Berlin, Germany

The risks in Nestlé's strategic overhaul

Your report on Nestlé's strategic overhaul (Report, February 4) highlights a critical question: will consumer health sit at the centre of value creation or remain just one pillar?

The opportunity cost of delay and inaction is rising. Obesity alone could drain around $4tn annually from the global economy by 2035, while demand for healthier products grows and regulatory, legal and reputational pressures intensify.

Nestlé remains materially exposed: only around a third of its sales qualify as healthier. A reorganisation without clear, time-bound commitments to improve the health profile of its portfolio will not reassure investors that the company is adapting at the pace required.

For a business of Nestlé's scale, nutrition is a strategic test. A credible global target to improve the health profile of sales — backed by executive accountability — would signal intent to capture future growth rather than defend the status quo.

Investors are looking for evidence of resilient, long-term positioning. This promised strategic overhaul gives Nestlé the chance to provide it.

Catherine Howarth
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Come the next crisis, don't say you weren't warned

I wish to highlight an implication in Robert Armstong's insightful discussion of the effect of US Treasuries' holdings and transactions on bank solvency risk ("Privatising the Fed's balance sheet", Opinion, Unhedged, February 6).

Bank regulations treat Treasuries as riskless, subject only to the lower bound of the supplementary leverage ratio (SLR), which has recently been relaxed by US bank regulators.

However, even if we posit that Treasuries have no repayment risk (a contentious concession given the frequent Congressional brinkmanship over the debt limit), they are not riskless. Holding Treasuries carries interest rate risk, which caused the insolvency of Silicon Valley Bank in 2023. Treasury repos and derivatives, even when margined, carry the risk of counterparty default.

Therefore, the regulatory treatment of Treasuries on bank balance sheets is a fiction, and the relaxation of the SLR lower bound raises the solvency risk that banks are allowed to assume. If the next financial crisis is linked to how much exposure banks have to Treasuries, it cannot then be claimed that it came as a surprise.

Daniel J Aronoff
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European steel will need a new production model

Michael Flacks' proposed acquisition of British Steel (Report, FT.com, February 2) supports a long-held view: steel is a key industry of the future, including in Europe, and the "smart money" knows this. However, a new owner and fresh capital will not be enough on their own to bring this great industry into the 21st century.

The challenges facing the British and European steel industries are well known: high energy costs, old legacy assets, and global rivals with plants built recently and cheaper production. Therefore, if new capital is to be injected into Europe's steel industry, it must come with a new mindset and production model which prioritises competitiveness, avoids the pernicious reliance on subsidies, and is genuinely sustainable for the long term.

"Business as usual" will not work, but Britain and Europe do have an opportunity to take the lead in the green steel industry by leveraging world-class domestic scrap and imported low carbon iron feedstock, embracing electric arc furnace technology and state-of-the-art downstream facilities, and building strategic partnerships internationally. This approach will allow the industry to avoid the high energy costs upstream where enormous emissions plague it today, while protecting thousands of high-skilled, high-value downstream jobs.

However, this opportunity is time limited, and if the industry hesitates then it will be overtaken by international competitors and Britain and Europe will have lost their steel industries and a core component of their national industrial security. The solutions are here, the time for Britain and Europe to show confidence and build a steel industry fit for the future is now.

Sebastian Langendorf
CEO, Meranti Green Steel, Singapore

Return-to-office mandates show management's angst

The move by big business, particularly banks, to bring staff back to the office is counterintuitive at first glance ("Why bank bosses are pushing strict return-to-office mandates", Work & Careers, February 9).

Surely staff working from home should be a lower-cost proposition than having them in the office? At home, staff are paying for their own heating, electricity, broadband etc. Businesses need to lease less office space and have less office-related costs if staff are at home. In theory, productivity should be higher, as staff have no commute and no in-person distractions from colleagues.

So why are management so anxious to have them all back in the office? Is it because they cannot manage staff effectively if they cannot see them in person? Do they fear that staff at home are spending too much time on domestic concerns and becoming culturally and emotionally detached from the business? Surely modern technology and effective performance management can provide the means to monitor staff activity effectively?

Regular in-person meetings can maintain the sense of belonging to a team and business. The argument about sunk investment in office space does not hold up. Offices can be sold or sublet.

This is starting to look like a gap in management's skillset or a generational issue rather than a problem with employees.

Joe Lenihan
Dublin, Ireland

Opinion

Student loans show that hard policy choices will only get harder

ECONOMICS
Martin Wolf

Like many other countries, the UK confronts insoluble long-term challenges: it has inescapable obligations that impose painful trade-offs. Given its ageing population and a slow-growing economy, all this can only get harder.

For a taste of such challenges, look at the vexed debate over student loans. The Institute for Fiscal Studies captures it as follows: "On average, students now leave university with just over £50,000 in student loan debt. Repayments are income-contingent: many graduates will repay little or nothing, while others repay 9 per cent of their income above a threshold for decades, often watching the outstanding balance rise. That design has led some to argue the system is unfair and to argue that students were mis-sold loans whose terms have shifted over time."

This controversial outcome is the result of an imperfect effort to solve an extraordinarily difficult set of problems, namely, how to finance the expansion of tertiary education in the UK in a fair and fiscally manageable way, while preserving the institutional independence and academic excellence that had made it highly regarded.

In a speech delivered in 2022, Nick Hillman of the Higher Education Policy Institute noted that "there were just 85,000 full-time students in the UK at the start of the 1950s — compared to 2.2mn today." Thus, the UK has widened educational opportunity enormously, especially for women, who have outcompeted men. Moreover, according to Times Higher Education, the UK now has six of the world's 50 top universities, with Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial in the top 10. France, for example, only has one and Germany has three in the top 50. Thus, the UK has sustained its relative excellence. Its university sector is also a huge export industry, with 686,000 foreign students in 2024/25. In all, this is a triumph.

The change in the nature of both economies and individual aspirations made a huge expansion in tertiary education inevitable. When I went to university only 5 per cent of my generation did so. This was, quite rightly, judged wasteful. But the huge expansion also created big dilemmas. How was it to be

> How should the huge increase in costs be shared between the students and society?

financed? How should the huge increase in costs be shared between the students and society? How well could standards of teaching and research be sustained? How far, too, could the treasured independence of academic institutions be protected?

I was involved in the debates of the early 2000s on how the sector was to be financed. I argued in line with the emerging policy of the Blair government for higher fees and income-contingent loans, which were enacted in the controversial Higher Education Act of 2004.

I remain convinced that this was the best strategy. It was politically impossible to obtain the needed resources from the general taxpayer alone. It was also wrong to do so, since, on balance, graduates were better off as a result of their university education. Moreover, I argued, universities would be more independent if they could charge fees directly. Finally, a system of income-contingent repayment would provide both resources and needed insurance for those who turned out to be less economically successful.

All this remains, in my view, correct. But, as always, the devil is in the (evolution of the) details. At first, fees (and loans) were capped at £3,000 a year, which was too low. Under the coalition government, fees jumped to a ceiling of £9,000, while the government's direct support for university teaching was eliminated. One justification for this was the absurd accounting convention (subsequently changed) that the certainty of future loan writedowns would not be recognised. This allowed the government to record a huge notional saving on public spending by shifting from direct spending to loans.

Subsequent tweaks have included lengthening the period before loans are written off, higher interest rates and, more recently, freezing of nominal values of thresholds for loan payments. Debtors rightly complain that it is unfair for government to increase the costs of their debts, at will. Meanwhile, fee income lags behind costs of teaching home students, which means that universities cross-subsidise expensive courses (such as science and medicine) from fees on lower-cost courses (such as humanities).

Here then is a successful sector that depends on government. But the latter attempts to evade the costs by shifting burdens from taxes. This creates unpredictability and inescapable unfairness. Is this the best we can do? In most ways yes. But the state must provide more direct support for teaching.

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Bad Bunny and the real America

SOCIETY
Rana Foroohar

Those longing for an aspirational vision of America should look no further than Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny's halftime performance at the Super Bowl earlier this month. It was joyful, multicultural and international, and provided an infectiously danceable soundtrack for the growing anti-ICE sentiment in the US. I would go even further and say that it provided a decent political roadmap for what a post-Maga America should aspire to embrace: pro-growth humanism inside and outside our own borders.

Whether or not Maga anger finds a new figurehead when Donald Trump leaves the White House, the Super Bowl show provided another signal that we are turning some kind of corner on the topic of race in America. The country's highest-profile entertainment programming of the year was performed almost entirely in Spanish. That's a big deal. What's more, it happened at a time when ICE raids on immigrants in Democrat-run cities are being rejected by liberals and conservatives alike, and as several high-profile Republicans loudly denounced Trump's posting of an appalling video depicting Barack and Michelle Obama as primates.

The business community is subtly pushing back against this administration, too. Even the US Chamber of Commerce has stressed the need to remain "fearless" in defence of free markets and "open to the world". While the impetus may be more commercial than moral, who cares? Companies, which spend more on Super Bowl advertising than on any other single event per year in the US, know that the market for white supremacy and Christian rock is smaller than that for Bad Bunny, J Lo and Shakira, as evidenced by recent NFL halftime show odds.

There is a larger point here. Neither America, nor American companies, can go it alone. Global markets are where the growth opportunities reside, which is why NFL commissioner Roger Goodell emphasised during Super Bowl week that the league would be increasing the number of games held outside the US, in places that include Madrid, Munich, Mexico City, Melbourne and Rio de Janeiro. As Goodell put it last autumn during a match in Dublin: "Our job is to share our game with the world."

Trump has made it harder for business to do most things internationally. That, along with the broader American public's increasing rejection of the most extreme Maga politics, presents an opportunity for Democrats as well as thoughtful Republicans. While the old order is gone — China does present economic and political challenges for the world, Europe does need to take care of its own security, the deepening divide between capital and labour should be addressed — America has yet to articulate its own non-nationalistic version of the new one.

The Biden administration tried but couldn't quite get there. Here, I come back to Bad Bunny. His set design included mock sugar cane fields, a reference to the long history of slavery in the Caribbean, with dancers dressed as electrical workers, a nod to the failing power grid in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria.

This put me in mind of the "postcolonial" trade and foreign policy strategy that was starting to be articulated by the Biden administration before inflation and the former president's age tanked his campaign (and Kamala Harris failed to provide a new and convincing alternative to Trump's tariff strategy).

Biden may have been the wrong leader for this particular job, but there's

> An aspirational US would foster racial unity across class lines, within and outside its own borders

still a big opportunity here for a new Congress, and for the next administration, to work with allies to set a floor under labour and environmental standards across borders. This would go a long way towards addressing globalisation's discontents. Trumpian nationalism isn't the way forward, but the Bretton Woods system must still be reformed.

On that score, I was struck by a recent Harvard Business School debate in which Biden's former US trade representative, Katherine Tai, and conservative Oren Cass, bested free traders Lawrence Summers and Robert Lawrence. Tai articulated the key point that still needs resolution: "The productivity of American workers has gone up, but their wages have not kept pace. In the context of [the North American Free Trade Agreement], we see that even more with Mexican workers."

This gets to the heart of the matter. An aspirational America is one that would foster racial unity across class lines, both within and outside its own borders. The problems of wage inequality, AI-based job disruption and global warming pose a challenge for the US and the world as a whole. An insular, xenophobic America, closed to immigrant labour and growth markets, will quickly collapse in on itself.

There is low-hanging fruit here for liberals, and I see signs that some are starting to grasp it. Witness Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's decision to attend the Munich Security Conference, a surprising move for a young progressive lawmaker who isn't a foreign policy official or a head of state.

Still, it makes sense that she is thinking beyond New York, and not just because she is considering a Senate or presidential run. Someone like Ocasio-Cortez arguably has more in common with, say, a German Green party member or a Mexican democratic socialist than with a Maga supporter in the US. Immigrants in her mould, as well as those who built half of the Fortune 500, are the real America. Thanks to Bad Bunny for reminding us of that.

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The AI productivity take-off is finally visible

Erik Brynjolfsson

For over a decade, economists have grappled with a modern iteration of the Solow Paradox: we have seen artificial intelligence everywhere except in the productivity statistics. Sceptics argue that the reason for this is that modern innovation in machine learning systems and now generative AI pale in comparison to the great inventions of the past. However, the latest benchmark revisions from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest the statistical fog may finally be lifting.

Data released last week offers a striking corrective to the narrative that AI has yet to have an impact on the US economy as a whole. While initial reports suggested a year of steady labour expansion in the US, the new figures reveal that total payroll growth was revised downward by approximately 403,000 jobs. Crucially, this downward revision occurred while real GDP remained robust, including a 3.7 per cent growth rate in the fourth quarter. This decoupling — maintaining high output with significantly lower labour input — is the hallmark of productivity growth.

My own updated analysis suggests a US productivity increase of roughly 2.7 per cent for 2025. This is a near doubling from the sluggish 1.4 per cent annual average that characterised the past decade.

This shift aligns with the productivity "J-curve" that my colleagues and I have explored in earlier research. General-purpose technologies, from the steam engine to the computer, do not deliver immediate gains. Instead, they require a

> New data suggests the US is transitioning to a phase of measurable gains from the technology

period of massive, often unmeasured investment in intangible capital — reorganising business processes, retraining the workforce and developing new business models. During this phase, measured productivity is suppressed as resources are diverted to investments. The updated 2025 US data suggests we are now transitioning out of this investment phase into a harvest phase where those earlier efforts begin to manifest as measurable output.

Micro-level evidence further supports this structural shift. In our work on the employment effects of AI last year, Bharat Chandar, Ruyu Chen and I identified a cooling in entry-level hiring within AI-exposed sectors, where recruitment for junior roles declined by roughly 16 per cent while those who used AI to augment skills saw growing employment. This suggests companies are beginning to use AI for some codified, entry-level tasks.

While the trends are suggestive, a degree of caution is warranted. Productivity metrics are famously volatile, and it will take several more periods of sustained growth to confirm a new long-term trend. Furthermore, powerful macroeconomic headwinds, ranging from geopolitical trade wars to fiscal or monetary mismanagement, could counteract these efficiency gains.

But there is cause for further optimism when we distinguish between potential and realised gains. Many businesses are using generative AI for only a small fraction of tasks. Some merely employ AI for translation or summarisation — what might be called "glorified dictionary" use.

Conversely, my company found a small cohort of power users are leveraging interactive conversations with AI agents to automate end-to-end workstreams, such as generating complete marketing plans, compressing weeks of effort into hours. The challenge for businesses is not simply acquiring the technology but using it to level up the average employee. That will boost not only their own profits but productivity gains across the economy.

We are transitioning from an era of AI experimentation to one of structural utility. We must now focus on understanding its precise mechanics. The productivity revival is not just an indicator of the power of AI. It is a wake-up call to focus on the coming economic transformation.

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The writer is director of Stanford University's Digital Economy Lab and co-founder of Workhelix

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How China could win the geopolitical game by default

Eswar Prasad

Is China winning the geopolitical game? The US appears isolated as President Donald Trump attacks not just rivals but long-standing allies. Trump's boorish behaviour towards other countries allows Chinese leaders to act as the responsible adults in the room. China clearly wants to assume the mantle of being the defender of multilateralism and free trade, and the linchpin of a stable world order.

The reality is more complex. The rest of the world is wary of China's embrace. Beijing benefited from the rules underpinning the multilateral system, turning that system to its advantage. For instance, even as it gained access to worldwide markets for its exports, China kept its own markets mostly closed.

In two important respects, though, China is winning the geopolitical game. First, Trump is steering America away from the ideals and principles it once championed. Second, with China, at least other countries know exactly where they stand, in contrast to the whiplash from unpredictable shifts in the whims of the US president.

Trade and territory matter in geopolitics, but the current competition between the two superpowers is about something more fundamental: conflicting visions of the world and how best to organise a country's institutions and its economic, political and legal systems. The US paradigm of a market-oriented liberal democracy with an independent judiciary once stood in stark contrast to China's model of a command economy, with the Communist Party directly controlling all arms of government and the legal system.

However, Trump is now taking America closer to Beijing's vision of the world. He has directly intervened in markets, giving preference to companies and industries that curry favour with him and his family, and has even tried to micromanage financial decisions such as credit card interest rates. He has attacked official data as flawed rather than acknowledging the economic reality they portray. He has made clear his desire to control the central bank's interest rate decisions, like the Communist Party does in China. He has fired officials who don't show fealty to him and his policies. And he has used the legal system to take down political rivals.

Moreover, his administration has shown contempt for a broader vision of the rule of law, one in which even the government is subservient to the laws it creates. So far it has attacked judges who hand down unfavourable rulings as nakedly partisan, but not overridden their rulings. Still, some members of his administration would dearly love to ignore the courts altogether. This is akin to how the Chinese Communist Party stands above China's judicial system, which adjudicates property and contractual rights but does not challenge government actions and policies.

Trump's vision of a free press is of one that salutes his accomplishments and tones down criticism. Under assault from his administration, the press's role as an instrument for holding public officials accountable is eroding, as Trump seeks something akin to China's official press (which is all there is) that limits itself to extolling the leader's virtues.

In short, Trump is gutting the very institutions that separate Washington from Beijing.

Mercurial shifts in US foreign policy have left leaders of other countries baffled. Trump has undermined Nato and threatened to make Canada the 51st state. These countries have stood by America for decades, although Trump certainly has a point that the rest of Nato

> Mercurial shifts in US foreign policy under Trump have left leaders of other countries baffled

needs to shoulder a bigger portion of the alliance's defence budget. Close allies such as the UK and South Korea have not been spared from Trump's tariff bludgeon. It is not just strong-arm US policy but unpredictable shifts in policy — including attacking allies who share its values as much as rivals who don't — that are pushing countries away from America. China, for its part, is tough on its rivals, but its allies can usually count on its reliable support.

For all this tumult, though, it is an overstatement to claim that countries are going willingly into China's embrace as an alternative to the US — for China is still seen as a rapacious and untrustworthy partner. But China might triumph by default. Even if Beijing is not winning the hearts of other countries, its vision of a world order is gaining ground because America, rather than providing a principled and attractive alternative, is beginning to look more like China.

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