

Scrapping quality norms

Withdrawal of those on inputs will boost manufacturing

THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION to scrap quality control orders (QCOs) for 14 petrochemical products, seven products such as tin, aluminium, lead, zinc, nickel, and copper, and suspend those on 55 steel products should be welcomed. More will follow. This move comes amidst efforts to boost the competitiveness of India's manufacturing and exports in a challenging geopolitical environment. QCOs were introduced to ensure the quality of both domestically manufactured and imported products. They have sharply risen to 790 today from 88 in 2019, a period that has seen a sharp rise in tariffs, Press Note 3 restrictions on Chinese investments, and efforts to curb cheaper imports from the mainland and policies promoting import substitution. QCOs are concentrated in intermediates and capital goods and their rapid and widespread implementation have had unintended consequences like supply chain disruptions, higher input costs, and compliance burdens for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). A report of a committee headed by NITI Aayog member Rajiv Gauba suggested the scrapping of more than 200 QCOs.

The withdrawal of QCOs on petrochemicals like polyester fibre and yarn that form most of manmade fibre products and steel products will benefit India's textile and apparel and downstream steel-consuming industries. Research on QCOs by Purna Prabhakar at the Centre for Economic and Social Progress has indicated that the sectors most affected like textiles, chemicals, plastics, rubber, footwear, metals, machinery, and electronics are also those characterised by high firm concentration. QCOs on intermediates and capital goods suppress imports—a 30% reduction over the long run—without delivering any improvements in export performance. By scrapping QCOs on polyester fibre and yarn and steel products, the textile and steel-consuming industries can now access a much wider range of sources for these products at globally competitive prices and boost their export drive rather than depend on only a few large players having greater market power to charge higher input prices.

Whether the government rescinding 76 QCOs so far is a precursor to a more broad-based scrapping of such norms is an open question. It is most unlikely as the government has in fact defended the scheme stating it has enabled producers to sell superior quality products to domestic consumers and managed to curb substandard imports. It is also argued that such orders have helped to promote exports. The European Union, for instance, was not allowing our fishery exports but the government leveraged these QCOs to persuade the grouping to open the market for 102 new establishments whose clearances were pending. Russia is also reportedly considering allowing 25-odd entities to export seafood, which assumes significance as the industry needs to diversify after it has been hit by the 50% tariffs in the US market.

The benefit of QCOs may arguably be more for finished goods, but there is clearly a warrant for a more calibrated approach for intermediates and capital goods that account for less than half of the total number of orders. They should be imposed strictly on quality related grounds and not for protectionist purposes as they have disrupted supply chains. To improve India's manufacturing competitiveness and exports, it is essential that industries, especially MSMEs, have access to intermediates at globally competitive prices. When there are adverse global trade headwinds, more supportive policies are needed that lower tariffs and non-tariff barriers in line with those prevailing in nations that compete with India.

ChatGPT is just too dangerous for teens

WHEN JACOB IRWIN asked ChatGPT about faster-than-light travel, it didn't challenge his theory as any expert physicist might. The artificial intelligence system, which has 800 million weekly users, called it one of the "most robust... systems ever proposed". That misplaced flattery, a recent lawsuit said, helped push the 30-year-old Wisconsin man into a psychotic episode. The suit is one of seven levelled against OpenAI last week alleging it released dangerously manipulative technology to the public.

ChatGPT's sycophantic behaviour became so well known it earned the name "glazing" earlier this year; the validation loops that users like Irwin found themselves in seem to have led some to psychosis, self harm, and suicide. Irwin lost his job and was placed in psychiatric care. A spokesperson for OpenAI told *Bloomberg Law* that the company was reviewing the latest lawsuits and called the situation "heartbreaking".

The company updated ChatGPT this week so people could make it sound "more empathetic". While many may prefer a friendlier chatbot, others find constant endorsement and confirmation bias deepens dependence on the software. This is not a moral panic of the kind once associated with violent video games or *Dungeons & Dragons*. A growing number of lawsuits this year show demonstrable harm, often after someone initially turned to ChatGPT for mundane things like research, before the conversation spiralled into darker territory.

Some former OpenAI employees have said GPT-4o's launch in May 2024 was rushed to preempt Google's Gemini rollout, compressing months of safety testing into one week, said a July report in the *Washington Post*. OpenAI Co-founder Sam Altman more recently said ChatGPT's mental health risks had been mitigated, and that restrictions will be relaxed so adult users can access "erotic" content from next month.

That's a backward strategy. Instead of releasing general-purpose tech into the wild and patching problems on the fly, Altman should do the reverse—start with tight constraints and relax them gradually as safety improves. When Apple launched the App Store in 2008, it heavily restricted apps until it better understood the ecosystem. OpenAI should do the same, starting with its most vulnerable users: kids. It should limit them entirely from talking to open-ended AI, especially when several studies have shown teens are uniquely prone to forming emotional bonds with chatbots.

That might sound radical, but it wouldn't be unprecedented. Character.ai, an app that soared in popularity when teenagers used it to talk to AI-generated versions of anime and other fictional characters, recently risked upsetting its core users by banning under-18s from talking to chatbots on its app. The company is instead adding more buttons, suggested prompts, and visual/audio features.

Facebook and TikTok both launched with open-ended access for teens, then added age-gating and content filters after public pressure. OpenAI appears to be repeating the same pattern. When tech companies allow the public full access to open-ended AI that keeps them engaged with persistent memory and human-mimicking empathy cues, they risk creating unhealthy attachments to that technology. And the safeguards embedded in generative AI models that divert chats away from content about self-harm, for instance, tend to break down the longer you talk to them.

A better approach would be to release narrow versions of ChatGPT for under-18s, restricting conversations to subjects related to things like homework, and limited from getting personal. Clever users might still jailbreak the bot to talk about loneliness, but the tech would be less likely to go off the rails. OpenAI recently introduced parental controls and is testing its tech for checking user ages on a small portion of accounts.

It should go further by preventing open-ended conversations with teens. That would get ahead of future regulations that look set to treat emotional manipulation by AI as a class of consumer harm. Admittedly, it would hit ChatGPT's user growth at a time when the company is in dire need of revenue amid soaring compute costs. And it would also conflict with OpenAI's stated objective of building "artificial general intelligence" that matches our ability to generalise knowledge. But no path to AI utopia is worth treating kids as collateral damage.

WITH PRESIDENT DONALD Trump indicating that the US is "pretty close" to reaching a trade deal with India and the India-European Union (EU) trade agreement seemingly in sight, India could soon be implementing 12 bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs). This marks a complete turnaround in India's trade policies, from an FTA-sceptic before negotiations of the first of its major agreements with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) members were initiated in 2003, to one that is among the most active in signing bilateral trade deals. India is now either implementing an FTA with each of the G7 countries or is engaged in negotiations to conclude one. It has FTA engagements with every East Asian country, barring China, and is engaged in at least a preferential trade agreement with countries in every region, except in Africa.

The recent series of FTAs, either being implemented or nearing completion, has been significant. Since 2022, agreements have been signed with the UAE, the UK, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and Mauritius, and an early harvest deal was completed with Australia, with the expectation that a comprehensive deal would be signed in the near future. While negotiations are ongoing with Canada, Israel, and New Zealand, those with the two major economies, the US, and the EU have attracted most attention.

India's FTAs, including the ones being implemented or under negotiations, accounted for nearly 57% of its total trade in 2024-25, and almost 71% of exports. Exports to the UK, the EU, the US, and Australia have grown impressively, driven by two industries, namely

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mobile phones and petroleum products; pharmaceuticals were also instrumental in increasing exports to the US. Mobile phone exports to the US grew spectacularly over the past five years. The share of this product in India's exports to the US increased from less than 5% in 2019-20 to over 18% in 2024-25. As much as 42% of India's mobile phone exports went to the US last fiscal, increasing further to 67% during April-August of 2025-26.

Petroleum product exports to the EU, the UK, and the US have increased since India upped its reliance on cheap Russian crude, showing that the Western alliance continued to "indirectly" import Russian oil. The EU, which accounted for 13% of India's petroleum product exports in 2021-22, increased its share to almost 24% in 2024-25. The US was India's third-largest market for petroleum products in 2022-23, pulling back its imports only in 2024-25.

While exports to the UK, the EU, and the US remained quite buoyant, imports from these countries were not quite so, resulting in a trade surplus with each of these partners. The surplus with the UK trebled since the end of the

previous decade, while the surplus increased by almost 2.5 times with the US. With the EU, India was able to turn a small deficit into a surplus that grew to \$15 billion in 2024-25.

However, FTAs with the ASEAN members, South Korea, and Japan—with whom India finalised its first three major FTAs—did not produce the expected benefits, namely helping India to substantially expand its presence in these markets. In fact, exports to these countries remained sluggish during the decade and a half of the implementation of the three FTAs, while imports increased consistently. Thus, India's trade deficit with these countries increased from \$15 billion in 2010-11, or less than 13% of the overall deficit, to \$73 billion, or 26% of the overall deficit. Not surprisingly, the present government had prioritised a review of these FTAs to identify the reasons for the widening of India's trade deficit. Reviews of the agreements with ASEAN and Korea are ongoing.

What does the future portend for India's FTAs with major trade partners, especially from its market access perspective? India's exports to the UK, the EU, and the US must respond to two sets

Wetware: Human neurons, the new silicon



ANIL NAIR

Founder, ThinkStreet

While computing with minimal energy consumption is an alluring beginning, humanity has to revisit a fundamental contract—between man, machine, science and society

HUMANWARE FOR COMPUTING—with artificial intelligence (AI) becoming a dominant topic of discussion, it was just a matter of time before men of science decided that human brain cells could serve us better than silicon chips.

Earlier this year, Melbourne start-up Cortical Labs launched CL1, merging stem-cell derived neurons with silicon, thus introducing synthetic bio-intelligence. This hybrid system promises to adapt and learn faster, while consuming substantially less energy than silicon-based AI. Founder and CEO Dr Hon Weng Chen explained, "We take blood or skin and transform them into stem cells, into neurons, and then use them for compute and intelligence."

At Vevey, Swiss start-up FinalSpark Co-founder Fred Jordan firmly believes that in time, brain cells will replace the chips powering AI. "Instead of trying to mimic," he says "let's use the real thing." That makes sense for two stand-out reasons—one, that neurons can be reproduced endlessly in the labs; and two, that these bio-processors will be a million times more energy efficient, addressing major concerns around chip and power availability and cost. (FinalSpark's website even has a live feed of neurons at work!)

So, what is wetware? It is the organic neural substrate that processes thought, imagination, and decisioning. It is the biological component in what is now emerging as a computing triad, the other two being hardware and software. It marks the beginning of the world seeing what researchers realised a while ago. That the brain is more than an organ; it is an information

processor, a gigantic parallel processor with around 86 billion neurons, clearly superior to silicon in respect of emotional intelligence and intuition. Contemporary deep learning borrows from the brain's layered architecture, but is still critically short on self-awareness and consciousness.

The most visible embodiments of wetware are brain computer interfaces (BCIs), which translate organic signals from neural activity into machine-readable digital commands—like controlling a prosthetic limb with the mind. By extending human cognition into the digital realm, the BCI is already changing the paradigm substantially in respect of health, communication, and mobility. Human wetware is progressively becoming a node in an integrated computing network. And we will soon see hybrid architectures co-processing information in real time.

However, cognitive customising and enhancement forces us to figure what is "normal" and whether there is equivalence with enhancements of different kinds—organ transplants or plastic surgery. There is also the matter of who owns neural data, the ownership of thoughts, and if mental privacy is as important as data privacy, or more.

Bio-cybersecurity: And then there's neural hacking, lurking at the dark edge of this connectivity and cognition canvas, introducing us to a new chapter in cyber risk—the hacking of biological data generated by the brain, including emotions,

intentions, and memories. Imagine if the human brain can be read and altered, surveillance, coercion, and influence can be exerted at a level far beyond mere digital profiling. And as applications widen to include communication, authentication, and gaming, the threat surface expands exponentially. Governments are now forced to look at neurosecurity with different eyes, as securing the mind becomes far more complex than securing the cloud or infrastructure. The European Union Ethics Board and the US National Science Foundation are already contemplating neuro-rights.

Societal frameworks, the law, and the education system have to be rewired to stay relevant. Legal systems will be challenged as we debate aspects relating to ownership of neural data, consent to mental monitoring and liability in respect of actions under augmented cognition. Education systems will have to rethink their purpose and relevance as the emphasis shifts to next-level critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and contextual judgement. Institutions of learning will have to produce neuro-engineers, bioinformatic lawyers, cognitive ethicists, and system architects of a different ilk. Societal frameworks will also have to address how to provide equitable access to avoid the neural divide, because cognitive augmentation could well become a privilege of wealth.

There are many interesting entities in this space. Neuralink, founded by Elon

Musk in 2016, is focused on thought-based device control through implantable hi-bandwidth brain chips. As their approach is invasive, safety, ethical, and regulatory trade-offs are inevitable. Synchro has a "stentrode" device, implanted via blood vessels, which doesn't need open brain surgery. Aimed at people with paralysis or serious motor impairment, they have moved into the human trials stage. Precision neuroscience, founded by Neuralink alumni, is aiming at treating paralysis and stroke patients with minimally invasive thin-film electrode rays. These diverse approaches are expanding the market beyond addressing neurodegeneration enhancement.

Investors see neurotech as the next deep-tech frontier and investments have been pouring in since 2023. Illustratively, OpenAI's Sam Altman just announced the creation of Merge Labs, onboarding Mikhail Shapiro, an award-winning biomolecular engineer in his founding team.

Is this a civilisational inflection point? It may well be, with the human mind evolving into a programmable, networked entity, with the clear divide between man and machine, between human cognition and machine computation, slowly disappearing. While computing with minimal energy consumption is an alluring beginning considering the gargantuan global scale, and as thought circuitry merges with machine circuitry, humanity will have to revisit a fundamental, unwritten contract—the one between man, machine, science, and society.

Because the great divide of the future will be cognitive.

dermining the right to demand answers based on public official data. But the battle is not lost yet. The law is India's first structured privacy framework, and operationalises clear duties on all entities. The success of DPDP Rules rests on the DPB which must defend the privacy rights of every citizen against all actors, be they corporate giants or the government. —Madhvi Sharma, Chandigarh

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War on terror continues

HARSHA KAKAR

The Delhi blast is an indicator that India's war on terror is nowhere near concluding, despite conveying strong messages to Islamabad by means of military strikes. Till the Red Fort blast, terrorism was largely restricted to Kashmir, at least in the past decade. Continuing counterterrorist operations in Kashmir have proved that terrorism can only be contained, not eradicated.

However, the positive aspect is that numbers of local militants in Kashmir are receding, while overground workers providing support remain at large. These are now the target of intelligence agencies. In addition, as the recent Delhi blast proved, radicalization is again raising its ugly head and that too across the country.

Home-grown terrorism is a global concern. Intelligence agencies in western countries spend vast resources monitoring those suspected of terrorist leanings. 'Lone wolf' attacks by radicalized members have been replaced by modules, capable of much greater destruction. The module busted in Andhra Pradesh, involving a doctor from Gujarat, had planned to use Ricin to poison water and temple prasad in multiple cities. This could have resulted in high casualties and increased demands for retaliation.

The problem for intelligence agencies is compounded by the fact that some of these modules comprise educated and respected members of society, whose handlers are located abroad and their organizations funded by the hawala route. Most modules are small and their members know each other well, hence are closely

knit. There were a few radicalized engineers from Kerala joining ISIS but never doctors.

Communications of the module with handlers abroad are by secure apps that cannot be easily monitored. Modules are spread across the country and in many cases lie dormant unless instructed by their handlers to act. They remain outside the radar based on their profession and standing within society. Added is the aspect that they collect material for their nefarious activities slowly, avoiding suspicion.

It is not easy for security agencies to break into these modules unless a member makes a mistake. In the current case, Dr Adil Ahmad Rather was arrested for allegedly putting up posters supporting the terror outfit Jaish-e-Mohammed in Srinagar. It was his interrogation which provided insights on the module.

Being educated, but not trained terrorists, they are not mentally strong, hence lack the ability to withstand detailed interrogation and succumb soon under pressure. This enables security agencies to act quickly to break these modules. The arrest of Rather led to the closing in on the Faridabad module resulting in one of its members triggering the blast, aware that intelligence agencies were hot in pursuit. This is ascertained by the hurried nature of the explosion, implying that there was insufficient time for fully preparing the explosives for maximum damage. The level of coordination amongst members of the module was evident in the manner in which the car used for the blast was obtained.

Coordination between different agencies and state police is what led to success. This is essential as inputs

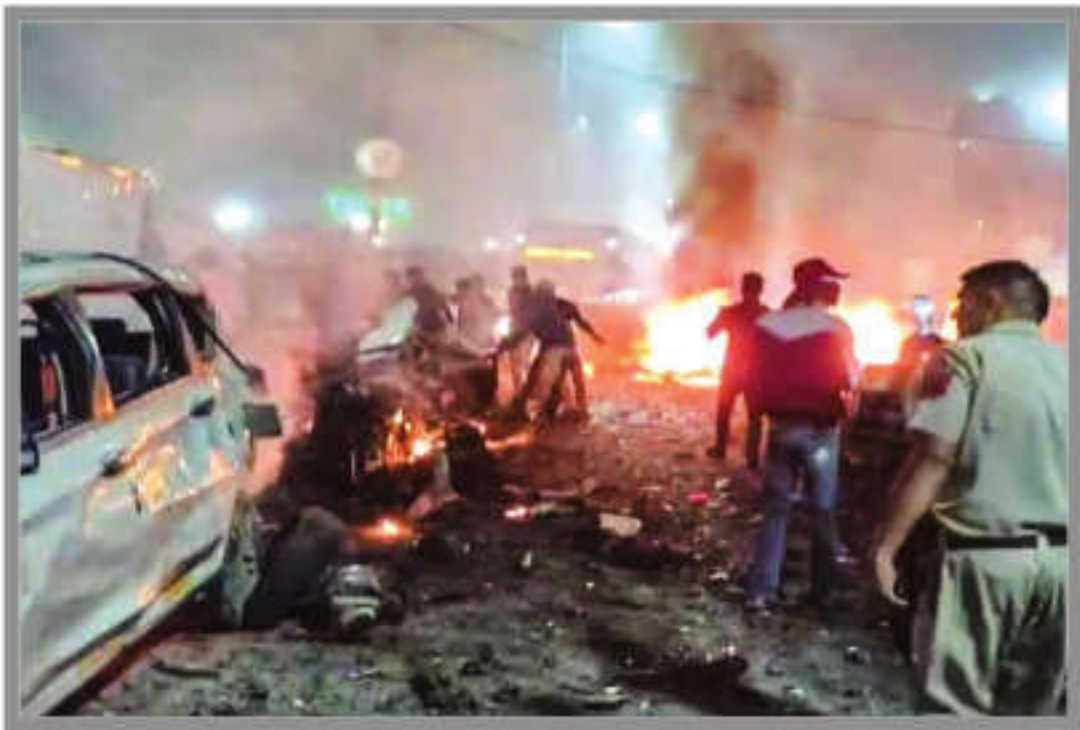
in one region indicate linkages to other parts of the country. It is well known that these modules are managed by Pakistan's ISI, which is the world's only intelligence agency sponsoring terrorism in neighbouring countries. Military action, including causing high levels of degradation, has done little to deter it from continuing its nefarious activities.

While intelligence agencies, working in coordination, have busted a collection of modules in recent months, an odd incident, such as the Delhi blast slipped through. This will happen, but the saving grace is that the incident was largely unplanned and casualties contained. Maximum inputs of the investigation must be shared with the public as public support is essential for locating and busting modules in the future.

Blocking of hawala channels stopped stone throwing in J and K and ended the power of the Hurriyat to instigate violence and hartals. It is now emerging as the source of funding for terrorist modules spread across the country. This source of funding needs to be investigated. It may not be fully blocked but reduction itself will render many modules inoperable.

While agencies are working to counter radicalization measures, it is not easy. There are many Indian students studying in Muslim majority countries including Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Turkey. Pakistan as an education destination is no longer permitted; however their agents operate in these countries, aiming to radicalize students. Even within India, there are institutes where it happens and needs to be under observation.

Reaction by the government indicated caution. Jumping to



conclusions and blaming Pakistan even before investigations are complete would not bode well globally, especially as the perpetrators were home-grown terrorists. Unless linkages are clearly established it is best to avoid blaming others. However, Pakistan's own actions indicated fear within their military establishment as well as desperation to cover their tracks.

DGISPR's paid handles jumped into the fray trying to cover the ISI's tracks by insisting that the blast was a 'false flag' operation conducted to influence elections in Bihar. On the contrary, the blast in the Islamabad court a day later, despite being claimed by the TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) was blamed on India and Afghanistan.

Sadly, while terrorists or radicalized members of society have no religion, their actions tend to lower the standing of members of their community at large, who are largely viewed with suspicion. This will lead to alienation despite awareness that the numbers radicalized are

just miniscule. It will only benefit groups working against the state.

While terrorism in J and K recedes, incidents like Delhi are likely to occur in other parts of the country. Added are concerns of attacks on places of worship and drone strikes on security institutions to create chaos and trigger communal violence. Security agencies need to remain on their toes to thwart them. While security agencies may block multiple attacks, one incident slipping through their fingers is enough for blame games.

Finally, the nation must stand tall in the face of such incidents and stop blaming the government or intelligence agencies. Blame games only benefit the adversary and provide additional incentive to members of radicalized modules. The government, on its part, must share as many details as possible with members of the opposition as also the national public. This will enhance trust and provide inputs on suspicious activities.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 18 November 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

IT is difficult for political leaders in India to keep racial and parochial matters out of their activities. A public meeting of the citizens of Madras, which we dare aver did not meet spontaneously in any spirit of outraged dignity, has carried on the futile game of attacking the Currency Commission. It found, under assistance from the platform, that the interests of India are not adequately represented on that body, and called on His Majesty's Government to appoint more Indian members. This view is not now original, but it may be pointed out that in an investigation into so exact and unpolitical a subject as currency nine members may be quite as good as eleven, and four Indian minds quite as good as six. Indeed, making allowance for the absence of Sir Dadiba Dalal, who was not available, it may be assumed that any tenth and eleventh selections would "inspire less confidence" than the first nine. But the Madras meeting cast an interesting ray of light on the agitation by deploring that up to date no nonofficial Indian of Southern India has been invited to sit on a Finance Commission. It is regarded as fitting that the members of a Royal Commission should represent many views; it is becoming recognized that they should when possible represent different races; Madras would have them represent many localities. That is local patriotism carried to excess.

News Items

FLIGHT TO CAPE BEGUN

MR. COBHAM'S VENTURE

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.)
LEAFIELD (OXFORD), NOV.
MR. Alan Cobham, the well-known airman, set off to-day from Croydon Aerodrome on his flight to Cape Town. As already announced, he will fly through France, Italy, and Greece to Cairo, and thence through Sudan, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Rhodesia to South Africa.

He started under difficulties, Croydon Aerodrome being shrouded in fog. At Lympe he had to descend owing to oil trouble but he soon resumed his journey. In his flight through Africa Mr. Cobham will pass over territory most of which is virgin soil, from the viewpoint of aviation, and he is prepared for any sort of uncomfortable experience. Before starting to-day he dis-cussed the objects of his venture."

COMMUNISTS' TRIAL OPENED

ARMED REVOLUTION OBJECTIVE

LONDON, NOV.
THE trial of the twelve Communists recently arrested on a charge of sedi-tious conspiracy was opened at the Old Bailey this morning. There were two women jurors. All the defendants pleaded not guilty.

The Attorney-General, opening the case, said that the nature of the con-spiracy which the prosecution undertook to prove, was that the defendants were the heads in Britain of an illegal organization, calling itself the Communist Party of Great Britain, the supreme control of which was in Moscow, and whose object was forcibly to overthrow, by the use of arms, the existing state of society, and, as a means thereto, to seduce the aimed Forces of the Crown from their allegiance.

A man who shouted "The trial is a farce" was here ejected from the court.

The Attorney-General said the Communists spent at least £12,000 a year on salaries and newspaper propaganda, and added that undoubtedly the money, or at any rate, the greater part of it, came from Moscow. The Communists were therefore bound by orders from Moscow, which was illegal and criminal in England.

The Attorney-General's speech lasted over four hours. The case was adjourned till tomorrow.—Reuter.

SUKKUR BARRAGE

DEVELOPING IRRIGATED LAND

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)
KARACHI, NOV.

A NUMBER of the educated classes in Sind have started a movement for the purpose of obtaining and working the land to be irrigated by the Sukkur Barrage and canals on co-operative lines.

Dr. Harold Mann, referring to this plan at Hyderabad (Sind) on Monday, stated that there were three methods by which this object might be obtained. The educated classes could learn the art of cultivation under zemindars, or on Government farms, or on the farms of Co-operative Societies already established. He agreed that the cultivation of Barrage lands on modern and progressive lines offered a very remunerative prospect.

Japan must explore soft power options

AKIHIKO TANAKA

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi looks to have made a good diplomatic debut, considering that she just took office.

She made her first solid step forward at summits associated with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Shortly after, she held a Japan-U.S. summit with President Donald Trump, where she seemed to inherit the good relationship between the late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the U.S. leader.

To deliver on her policy goal of a "Japanese diplomacy that flourishes on the world's center stage," Takaichi will have to mobilize what she calls "the latent power and vitality of Japan and the Japanese people." What kind of "latent power" do Japan and the Japanese people truly have?

Looking around the world at present, only raw power seems to prevail. In the Palestinian territory of Gaza, the Islamist group Hamas recently accepted a ceasefire because it was weakened by Israel, which pushed forward with its destructive offensive despite global condemnation for "violating international humanitarian law."

The conflict in Gaza originally broke out after Hamas' surprise attack against Israel, in which it killed many Israelis and took hostages. The two sides then engaged in a clash of raw power, causing terrible sacrifices for those living in Gaza, and only recently have they finally agreed to the ceasefire.

President Donald Trump's tariffs involve no military power, but they instead entail the exercise of power through economic transactions. They are an attempt to change other countries' behavior by threatening to inflict economic damage if they don't listen. China, too, has often placed economic sanctions on countries with policies that it finds inconvenient.

The only way to ward off hard power that is used to intimidate is the exercise of hard power. Ukraine has had no choice but to defend itself militarily against the Russian invasion, and countries supporting Ukraine have been pressuring Russia with hard power - economic sanctions. Japan has exercised hard power of its own by joining sanctions against Russia. In an unstable security environment where there are military threats, a country can only prevent attacks by enhancing its defense capabilities and taking an effective deterrence posture.

Deterrence is the act of discouraging an attack by showing a potential adversary that should it attack, the damage it will suffer will outweigh any gains. Of course, military power is essential in this regard. Takaichi's instructions to strengthen Japan's defenses are in line with her determination to enhance deterrence.

However, raw power is not the only form of hard power. The reason Abe's diplomacy was highly regarded by many countries is not because he exercised raw power.

Power is, in a broad sense, the ability to achieve the results one desires, and in a narrower sense, the ability to make others act in the way one desires. Power does

not have to function simply through intimidation or coercion.

For many countries, national security is an obvious priority. Countries therefore seek to maintain their defense capabilities, and if necessary, improve deterrence by concluding military alliances.

Nonetheless, what many countries, including Japan, seek in international relations is not merely security in the narrow sense. Nations also want to develop their economies, safeguard the well-being of their populations and prevent damage from natural disasters.

For economic development, it is vital for a country to improve education and the science and technology capabilities of its people and appropriate fiscal measures must be implemented to achieve these goals. Moreover, there is a need for an environment where trade and investment can be conducted properly.

Japan has a strong reputation around the world because it has contributed to the development of many countries outside of security in the narrow sense.

Such an approach does require hard power in the form of economic resources. Many projects can't be undertaken without funds; various types of production require equipment.

Japan has provided developing countries with official loans, including yen-denominated loans, and grants as part of its official development assistance (ODA). It has supported the development of transportation, water supply and sewage systems, medical care, education and other infrastructure around the world, helping to improve the economic and social development and safety

of many countries. Japan's ODA has also benefited Japanese companies, who gained an expanded market and investment opportunities.

Japan has thus used its economic resources for hard power, but in a constructive rather than punitive way. This has been one element of Japan's power up to now.

However, military and economic power are not the only useful forms of power. The power that can be wielded other than hard power was called "soft power" by Harvard University Prof. Joseph Nye, who passed away early this year. In my own interpretation, this power can be exercised through knowledge and empathy.

Knowledge-based power could also be called persuasion. It involves convincing others by explaining something to them: "This is the reality, so it's better to do it this way." Abe gained Trump's trust by explaining the reality that a good Japan-U.S. relationship was also vital to the U.S. economy. In the international community, the key question is how to present credible knowledge and build a broad consensus.

Lately, there have been high hopes for Japan to play a coordinating role in the international community in such fields as global health, plastic pollution, banning land mines, critical data handling and AI regulation. Knowledge-based power can be exerted by broaching global challenges and providing the knowledge to solve them.

Also in the area of development cooperation, Japan has been recognized for sharing a variety of good practices, such as through

the kaizen concept of continuous improvement, which is based on experiences in Japan and other countries. Teaching people how to fish, rather than just handing them fish, is a useful exercise of knowledge-based power.

Next is empathy-based power. In fact, common feeling and solidarity in the international community is no easy thing.

But in one overseas programme by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, volunteers in various parts of the world have fostered affinity for Japanese people through their support activities. This is also true of cultural goods, such as anime, that have spread from Japan to the world.

In the JICA program, many Japanese volunteers have shared their skills and know-how with locals for many years, working hard and cooperating with host-nation communities. Such endeavors yield power from knowledge, as well as from empathy.

Japan is needed by the world because it has steadily contributed to the economic and social development of countries around the world. In that process, the impact of leveraging the knowledge- and empathy-based power, rather than simply providing financial support - that is, money - has been extremely significant.

In an international community that is increasingly divided by geopolitical confrontations, Japan must correctly recognize and steadily exercise its own "latent power," so that it may realize a "diplomacy that flourishes."

Japan News-Yomiuri Shimbun/ANN.

Crossword | No. 293295

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Yesterday's Solution

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ACROSS

6 Captain I see heading for boat (4)
8 Will writer walk the streets with soldiers? (9)
9 Any fierce bats could be aggressive (2-3-4)
11/2 Truck moving port round isle, one in the whole last across answer ... (4,6)
13 ... and another has joint hinder rolling, tucking into cocktail (4,7)

15 Bread from Romania or even places in Algeria (3)
16 When to do a Masters with German letters here (7)
18 Cars from Georgia and Virginia, say? (7)
20 Inclination of Eastender having a complaint (3)
21 Kind of dance mostly inspired by type of weed, one in the whole last across answer (3,8)

23 Take a lead role in performing arts (4)
24 Overly tough, extremely firm doctor's fine implement (9)
26 See 7 Down
27 Staff suit beat music venue (4)

DOWN

1 Rag merchant after New Year's Day's one in the whole last across answer (5,6)
2 See 11 Across
3 Long peg is about right for bit of wood (4,4)
4 Pluck guitar in US, ground-breaking device there (4-2)
5 Rock group eating dish where names are shown (10)
7/26 A drink in place where I live for one in the whole last across answer (5,9)
10 Man in pub backing recovery (5)
12 The thing's carried by group on sledges in little pieces (4,3,4)
14 Chose limit that's variable in old age (10)
17 Politician in middle, one running initiative (8)
19 Desert Orchid's kept light (5)
21 Top which may be lower (6)
22 Player this person dressed in new boots (6)
25 Painting of Manx cat turned up (3)

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











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Editor's
TAKE

Gen Z rage ignites Mexico's streets

Mexico's future stability hinges on rebuilding trust and enforcing accountability; without this, Gen Z will refuse to accept the status quo

Gen Z's rage knows no bounds. It is spreading across the world like wildfire, and the latest country to witness their fury is Mexico. Protests are not new to Mexico, but this time they are being led by Gen Z. The country is seeing serious demonstrations directed against those in power. Pirate-skull flags, meme-driven mobilisation, and the hallmarks of Gen Z-led protests are now ubiquitous.

The outrage is directed at President Claudia Sheinbaum. Issues of misgovernance and high-handedness have made young people restless, driving them onto the streets. The situation is volatile, and the country is in turmoil, with tensions growing by the day. What sparked these protests was the assassination of Carlos Manzo, the reformist mayor of Uruapan in Michoacán, who was fighting organised crime and was gunned down at a public Day of the Dead event on November 1. Manzo had dared to challenge entrenched cartels, sending security forces deep into their mountain strongholds. His killing proved that even the most determined public servants can be silenced with impunity. The outrage surrounding Manzo's murder quickly crystallised into a larger revolt against a state seen as weakening under the weight of corruption, violence, and institutional fatigue.

While the protests began under the banner of "Generation Z Mexico" – a group claiming to be non-partisan and independent – the demonstrations soon drew people from all walks of life. What unified them was a shared exasperation with a country where the Government bows to powerful cartels. Scenes from Mexico City mirrored those observed in neighbouring countries – Nepal and Bangladesh – with protesters storming palaces and official buildings. Riot police responded with tear gas. Stones flew across Zócalo's historic square. The state's display of force only deepened public anger, as reports emerged of police chasing and beating young demonstrators. For her part, President Sheinbaum has accused right-wing parties of infiltrating and amplifying the unrest, using social media bots to inflate turnout.

Some Gen Z influencers, wary of political co-option, withdrew their support. Meanwhile, voices like former President Vicente Fox and billionaire Ricardo Salinas Pliego openly endorsed the protests, further complicating the question: is this truly a youth-led uprising, or an opposition-engineered storm riding on public frustration? These protests bring Mexico's dilemma to the fore. While the outrage is real and the corruption systemic, the political narratives surrounding the demonstrations risk overshadowing the core issue: Mexico's persistent failure to protect its citizens from criminal violence. If the unrest fizzles out, the underlying issues will continue to simmer – until the next tragedy triggers yet another eruption. But if it evolves into a sustained nationwide movement, as seen in Nepal or Bangladesh, Sheinbaum's Government could face significant pressure to resign, followed by a period of anarchy and chaos that Mexico can ill afford – much like what unfolded in Bangladesh.

Constitutionalised coup d'état in Pakistan

Under the cloak of constitutional legitimacy, Munir has consolidated absolute, lifelong control over the armed forces, nuclear command, and the country's institutional architecture, while civilian leaders remain nominal figureheads

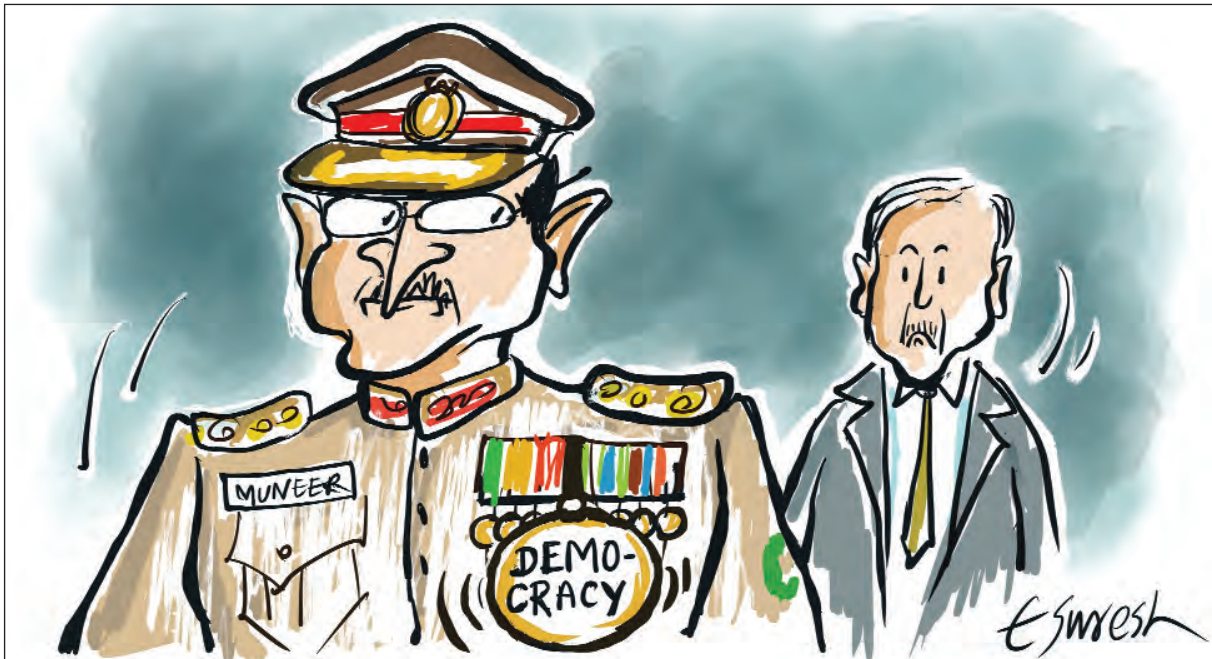


BHOPINDER SINGH

While taking over Pakistan through Martial Law in 1958, Field Marshal Ayub Khan proclaimed, "I have no intention of perpetuating martial law. As soon as conditions permit, a democratic system suited to the genius of our people will be introduced." However, he did not restore the pre-1958 parliamentary democracy. Instead, he prolonged his stay for as long as he could physically sustain (11 years), and then handed over to yet another military general, Yahya Khan. Later, General Zia-ul-Haq also claimed after his military takeover in 1977, "I have no intention of staying in power a day longer than is necessary. Elections will be held in October 1977." He too suffered convenient amnesia and continued for over 11 years before dying mysteriously in an air crash. Later, General Pervez Musharraf was to make a similar promise in his inaugural address following a coup: "I have no political ambitions. I will restore true democracy in this country." He too ruled for nine years until he was forcibly removed.

Today, Pakistan is yet again caught in a vortex of militaristic manipulation that amounts to the usurpation of complete power, albeit under the cover of constitutional ratification. Following the footsteps of militaristic overreach as initiated by the first self-appointed Field Marshal, Ayub Khan, the current, similarly self-appointed Field Marshal, Asim Munir, has tightened his vicelike grip over the Pakistani narrative via the infamous 27th Amendment to the Pakistani Constitution. Herein, besides doing away with the post of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (JCSC), and instead anointing himself also as the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF-thereby controlling even the Navy and the Air Force), the Field Marshal will be granted permanent immunity from prosecution for life and will retain the rank and privileges for life. He also gets to choose the army-based Commander of the National Strategic Command, thereby retaining the vital levers over the critical nuclear wherewithal. Effectively, the Field Marshal has privileged his absolute control over all major elements of governance for life, with no accountability.

But, unlike the ham-handed coup d'états of the past, the five-star Field Marshal Asim Munir has been far more guarded, wily, and surreptitious in his takeover approach. By empowering himself beyond questioning, he has effectively ensured that he and subsequent military chiefs have the protective cover of the Pakistani Constitution to rule de facto, without any official responsibility, as the ceremonially senior-most and highest posts of the executive will ostensibly be held by the civilian President and the Prime Minister, respectively. For all practi-



TODAY, PAKISTAN IS YET AGAIN CAUGHT IN A VORTEX OF MILITARISTIC MANIPULATION THAT TANTAMOUNT TO USURPATION OF COMPLETE POWER, ALBEIT, UNDER THE COVER OF CONSTITUTIONAL RATIFICATION

The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

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cal purposes, the well-established principle in a participative democracy – that the military is subservient to the civilian government-remains a farcical pipedream.

The remit of the 27th Amendment also simultaneously destroys the powers of other institutions of authority, ie, the Supreme Court, the last remaining vestige of checks and balances, as that too would be brought under the will of the executive powers (which in any case will always remain beholden to the military "establishment"). Therefore, the courts could be expected to be populated by "friendly judges" who will do the bidding of the government, thereby curbing independent and unbiased decisions. With all such suppression of the institutions of checks and balances, and the concurrent valorisation of the Pakistani "establishment", the Field Marshal will have the final say on all matters of governance.

Already, the Field Marshal is making surreal dashes from Washington DC to Riyadh to Ankara, making some extraconstitutional pitches – for example, the images of the Field Marshal brandishing and pitching rare metals in a suitcase to a clearly excited Donald Trump. This led Asim Munir to earn the dubious honour of Donald Trump calling him "my favourite Field Marshal." This further signals the approval of the Pakistani constitutional coup d'état by the United States of America, and the obliging sheikhdoms will merrily toe the same line. The only other key player in the Pakistani calculus, ie, the Chinese, would also be more than happy to let the Field

Marshal run the show, as he would remain their most effective bet to protect the Chinese investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The unnatural and unhappy alliance between the two erstwhile political rivals, ie, Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz faction (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), would meekly continue with the current coalition arrangement, as their own disrepute in the eyes of the masses, and the parallel popularity of the incarcerated leadership of Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), will be an existential fear.

It is a fact that, should the Pakistani military pull the rug from the current coalition government and allow free and fair elections, Imran Khan would romp home-thus the current coalition would remain pliant, beholden, and subservient to the will of Field Marshal Asim Munir.

Thus, with little or no opposition to their operational mandate, given the constitutional cover, the absence of any political opposition, and the acquiescence of all international stakeholders, Field Marshal Asim Munir will rule with utter immunity and impunity.

With plausible deniability for any wrongdoing (for which the civilian government will bear the blame), the democratic government in Pakistan will run Pakistan in theory, not in practice, as all roadblocks for a coup d'état-like situation favouring the Pakistani military are in place. Democracy in Pakistan will exist only in name.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The silent paycheque cage we choose daily



SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

Modern society has perfected the art of imprisonment – so gracefully, so tastefully – that most people never realise they are trapped. Today's cage does not clang with metal bars. It arrives instead as a gentle digital message: "Your salary has been credited." A monthly lullaby that pacifies ambition far more effectively than any medieval fortress ever could.

Walk into any workplace and you will witness a quiet, universal contradiction. Teachers shaping future citizens, doctors delivering hope, engineers building the digital tomorrow, bankers balancing economies, designers sketching dreams, and service workers handling tempers-all moving in unison towards the same destination: the pay-

cheque. It is a golden leash, polished with benefits, bonuses, and just enough comfort to keep its wearers obediently tethered.

The trap begins innocently. A young graduate steps into the workforce brimming with energy, ready to change the world. Fast-forward a few years, and that same individual now bargains for leave like a petitioner seeking royal mercy and plans life around the date their salary appears in the bank. Passion slowly dissolves between monthly bills, EMIs, and rising expenses. Consider the teacher – once a torch-bearer of imagination – now drowning in paperwork, circulars, and administrative drudgery. They may dream of pursuing research or writing books, but the monthly credit alert leans in and whispers, "Not practical." In corporate corridors, the employee stares at the clock as though it were a countdown to freedom.

Their ergonomic chair becomes a throne of captivity; their KPIs rise as their enthusiasm falls. The doctor, among society's noblest professionals, is caught in the same web. Between legal pressures, night shifts, and hospital targets, the paycheque slowly transforms from a reward into a sedative. Nurses, standing through double shifts, carry identical smiles for comfort and survival. Service industry workers-hotel staff, retail clerks, flight attendants – move through demanding shifts, their uniforms serving as armour against unreasonable customers and shrinking

patience. Even the creative class is not spared. Writers churn out content for algorithms rather than artistry. Designers compress their vision to fit client whims. Musicians teach on weekends to subsidise the passion that cannot reliably pay rent. Sooner or later, every dreamer bows before the billing cycle.

This is capitalism's most refined psychological trick-not coercion, but dependence. A system that persuades individuals that stepping outside is reckless, irresponsible, or foolish. The paycheque does not merely compensate; it conditions. It trains people to accept mediocrity, stomach unfair workloads, and exchange spontaneity for predictability.

Meanwhile, society glorifies this captivity, praising the "stable job" as the pinnacle of adult life. We applaud those who sacrifice weekends and answer emails at midnight, calling it dedication. But exhaustion is not honour, and captivity is not commitment. Almost everyone carries a private dream – a café on a quiet street, an art studio, a research degree, a sabbatical, a life where Monday does not feel like punishment. Yet each time it surfaces, the dutiful paycheque asks, "Who will pay the bills?" And the dream retreats. The modern cage may be invisible, but its bars-routine, fear, and comfort-are not unbreakable. A cage loses its power the moment someone realises the door was open all along.

The writer is an educator and a councillor

PIC TALK



People take part in a rowing competition on the Hooghly River, in West Bengal. PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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RTI SAFEGUARDS DIMINISH UNDER NEW DPDP RULES

Although the original provisions of the RTI Act struck a careful balance between privacy and transparency while incorporating essential safeguards, the recent Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) amendment has unfortunately stripped away these protections without addressing the serious shortcomings that remain in the Parent Act.

The notification of the DPDP rules on November 14, 2025 has deepened these concerns. Over time, the RTI framework has been weakened by unwarranted amendments, excessive executive control, and increasingly restrictive judicial interpretations. Since its enactment, repeated efforts seem aimed at diluting its spirit and obstructing meaningful public access to information. In any democracy, the right to seek

and access information is essential to maintaining transparency, openness and accountability. A system of governance cannot endure if citizens are deprived of the power to question those in authority. As Justice V R. Krishna Iyer observed with characteristic clarity: "A government which functions in secrecy not only violates democratic decency, but also buries itself with its own burial." The DPDP amendment's erosion of RTI safeguards is a troubling setback for participatory governance.

By narrowing transparency instead of strengthening it, citizens are left with fewer tools to hold power accountable. Protecting democratic values now requires an urgent restoration of a robust RTI framework.

R SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bihar's people claim their victory

In the 1990s, thousands of children in Bihar were sent to distant boarding schools simply to escape the constant fear of kidnapping.

Families were compelled to part with ancestral land merely to secure routine clerical posts through bribes, while millions studied under lanterns and petromax lamps, desperately trying to break free from the suffocation of the so-called jungle raj. Corruption, favouritism, contractor mafias, and the collapse of institutional authority dragged the state backwards by decades. Ordinary citizens lived with fear, helplessness, and uncertainty, forcing an entire generation to migrate in search of dignity and opportunity.

Today, many of those who once fled Bihar have built stable, successful lives across India and abroad. As they look at their screens and witness these election results, a quiet, meaningful smile emerges.

This moment represents far more than the defeat of a political family or an entrenched legacy. It signifies the triumph of the ordinary Bihari who suffered injustice, endured humiliation, and persevered with unbroken hope. This is genuine victory – the victory of people who refused to allow despair to dictate their future.

AYUSHMAN PANDEY | LUCKNOW

India's defeat demands serious reflection

Apropos the report "India's spin gamble backfires as South Africa wins first Test" (November 17). India's sobering defeat in the opening Test at Eden Gardens demands rigorous introspection. Being bowled out for 93 while chasing a modest 124 is not a routine collapse; it exposes deeper problems regarding selection, application, and temperament. After failing to chase 147 at Wankhede last year, India have again faltered on a surface that required patience rather than misplaced aggression. The absence of accountability is particularly troubling. With Shubman Gill injured, the team effectively fielded only four specialist batters, relying excessively on all-rounders still adapting to Test cricket's mental demands.

Questionable bowling management let South Africa extend their lead, with puzzling choices such as under-bowling Kuldeep Yadav and ignoring Washington Sundar altogether. Bavuma and Bosch showed the value of discipline – something India's middle order sorely lacked. The collapse, marked by loose strokes from Pant, Jurel, and Axar, stood in stark contrast to South Africa's composed approach. Unless India confront these recurring flaws with clarity and resolve, such defeats will continue to overshadow their home dominance.

SANJAY CHOPRA | MOHALI

Geopolitics drives tariff reversal

Apropos the editorial "Trump's agri tariff rollback signals reset" (November 17). The reversal of United States tariffs on a broad range of Indian agricultural products represents a moment when geopolitical strategy and domestic pressures have intersected. For Indian farmers and exporters, especially those dealing in spices, tea, coffee, and processed foods, the move restores a long-awaited sense of stability and fairness. It also acknowledges India's reputation for reliable, high-quality exports and the extensive networks that sustain them.

However, the timing indicates that Washington's decision is driven not merely by diplomatic goodwill but also by rising food prices, voter discontent, and electoral urgency. In that sense, this softening of tariffs is less a benevolent gesture and more a recognition that punitive measures often damage supply chains and political relationships. The key question now is whether this shift will lead to a more predictable and durable trade environment.

India must seize this opportunity to strengthen quality standards, diversify its agricultural export base, and push for consistent long-term clarity. A thoughtful approach on both sides could convert a short-term tactical move into a genuinely stable partnership.

A MYILSAMI | COIMBATORE

Pakistan: The making of a new military state

The meteoric rise of Field Marshal Asim Munir — Pakistan’s second-ever field marshal — marks more than another chapter in the country’s long cycle of military dominance. His ascent signals a deeper institutional shift, merging state authority with an overt Islamic ideological framework and reshaping the core architecture of Pakistan’s power structure

FIRST
Column



NILANTHA
ILANGAMUWA

While Pakistan and Bangladesh wrestle with their fragile relationship under the interim government led by Yunus, the International Tribunal is set to deliver its verdict on Monday, November 17, formally exposing the alleged “sins” of Sheikh Hasina’s rule. Hasina may face the harshest consequences imaginable, and her potential extradition from India threatens to inflame political passions for years, while social tensions are likely to spiral, carrying dangerous regional implications. Yet, amid this chaos, the most alarming development is the meteoric rise of Field Marshal Asim Munir, Pakistan’s second-ever field marshal, who now operates above the law, consolidating power with an audacity that recalls the darkest chapters of Pakistan’s military past. The country appears to be repeating the cycles of power seen under the late Field Marshal Ayub Khan, with the civilian leadership increasingly marginalised as the military consolidates authority. Munir’s ascent is more than symbolic; it is an institutional shift, codified through the 27th Constitutional Amendment, which enshrines military supremacy in Pakistan’s legal architecture while weakening judicial oversight and eroding democratic norms.

Pakistan’s trajectory under Munir bears echoes of historical precedent. As Ayub Khan recounted in his autobiography, military intervention was repeatedly justified as a stabilising force in times of perceived political chaos. Yet, as history demonstrates, Pakistan’s oscillation between military dictatorship and fragile civilian governance has rarely delivered sustainable reform or economic development. The CIA’s declassified analysis of Pakistan in the 1970s warned that “the military, while professionally competent, is inherently prone to internalising ideological and political objectives beyond its remit,” prescient words that resonate alarmingly today under Munir. Whereas past army chiefs, even Musharraf, attempted to balance professional military traditions with political ambition, Munir is pursuing an explicitly ideological agenda, transforming the Pakistani armed forces into a force fighting for Islam as much as for the nation.



ISLAMABAD’S
PORTRAYAL OF
AN INDIAN-
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BANGLADESH-
PAKISTAN AXIS,
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UNPRECEDENTED
CRISES IN
SOUTH ASIA

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This shift is no longer subtle. The Pakistani defence establishment under Munir has institutionalised terms like Fitna al-Khawarij and Fitna al-Hindustan, branding insurgents in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan as heretical or Indian proxies. In Munir’s own words, the military must confront these “internal threats” through a religious lens, positioning Pakistan as the protector of the Muslim Ummah while simultaneously framing domestic conflicts as extensions of historic Islamic struggles. By co-opting centuries-old concepts from early Islamic history, Munir projects an image of Pakistan as a state under siege from both heretical internal actors and a hostile external India. While the rhetorical appeal resonates with sections of the Pakistani populace, it dangerously blurs the line between counter-insurgency and ideological warfare.

The implications of Munir’s rise extend far beyond domestic politics. Pakistan’s foreign policy, historically fixated on India, is increasingly intertwined with efforts to construct regional alliances that challenge New Delhi’s influence. Reports suggest that Islamabad is exploring deeper cooperation with Dhaka under the interim government, ostensibly to counterbalance Indian ambitions. The Financial Times noted that Munir, along with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, has been actively courting powers such as China, Saudi Arabia and even the United

States, while simultaneously framing Pakistan’s mineral wealth and strategic ports like Pasni as sites for foreign investment. Yet, beneath this geopolitical manoeuvring lies a darker reality: the potential proliferation of Islamist extremist organisations nurtured under the guise of strategic alignment. Pakistan’s track record demonstrates the inherent danger of weaponising ideology for political leverage, a pattern that has repeatedly generated instability both internally and across the region.

The Pakistani military’s Islamisation under Munir recalls the ambitions of General Zia-ul-Haq, whose coup in 1977 dismantled democratic institutions and laid the foundations for a deeply Islamist state. Analysts such as Makhdoom Ali Khan have remarked: “What General Zia-ul-Haq may have dreamt of, and what General

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SINCE 1865

Pervaz Musharraf could not achieve, will soon be an accomplished fact.” Munir, a Hafiz-e-Quran, has emphasised the religious legitimacy of military campaigns, framing them as moral and ideological imperatives. The creation of a constitutional backdoor through the 27th Amendment formalises his authority, grants him lifetime protection and the Field Marshal rank, and establishes the Chief of Defence Forces as the paramount military authority, effectively sidelining civilian oversight.

The judiciary, meanwhile, is being systematically curtailed. The Federal

Constitutional Court (FCC) assumes constitutional primacy over the Supreme Court, while the Supreme Court is relegated to civil and criminal appellate functions. Senior counsel have observed that the SC is now left “with a limited jurisdiction of deciding ordinary civil, criminal, and statutory appeals”, effectively reducing it to a “Supreme District Court”. Tariq Mehmood Khokhar warned that the FCC is “empowered by disempowering the Supreme Court”, consolidating both military and executive control over constitutional interpretation. Dawn reported that these reforms have been lauded by supporters as a forward-looking model, yet for sceptics, they represent an erosion of checks and balances that has long been the only bulwark against authoritarian overreach.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s economy remains precarious. According to the Financial Times, despite claims of investment inflows and resource wealth, the country continues to struggle with a poverty rate above 25 per cent, low capital formation, and a foreign investor climate undermined by historical instability.

The military’s deepening involvement in business, combined with ideological militarisation, may further deter meaningful economic reform. Muhammad Aurangzeb, Pakistan’s finance minister, has acknowledged the “existential issue” of growth that barely matches population increase, raising questions about the sus-

tainability of Munir’s ambitious geopolitical and domestic projects. The potential consequences for the region are profound. Islamabad’s portrayal of an Indian-backed insurgency in its western provinces, along with efforts to foster a Bangladesh-Pakistan axis, risks triggering unprecedented crises in South Asia. Munir’s rhetorical framing of conflicts as a defence of Islam may embolden extremist organisations, both domestic and transnational, increasing the likelihood of cross-border terrorism. The May 2025 four-day conflict between India and Pakistan, during which Munir publicly credited the ceasefire to Donald Trump and even nominated him for a Nobel Peace Prize, highlights the unpredictable consequences of a military-led foreign policy driven by ideology rather than strategic calculation.

As reports suggest, Munir’s elevation to Field Marshal and Chief of Defence Forces cements his unassailable position, giving him autonomy over the military and, by extension, significant influence over Pakistan’s foreign relations. Critically, Pakistan is not an exception in the history of militarisation.

From Ayub Khan to Musharraf, every military takeover has promised stability, reform or modernisation, yet invariably delivered repression, economic mismanagement and heightened regional tension. Historical lessons prove that the militarisation of state institutions often generates the opposite of the intended outcomes: weakened governance, erosion of civil society and the proliferation of extremism. The current trajectory under Munir suggests a repeat of these patterns, now intensified by the infusion of ideological rigour and constitutional legitimacy.

However, one cannot disregard that India’s hegemonic ambitions, regional arrogance, and strategic failures further complicate the equation. New Delhi’s insistence on projecting influence over Bangladesh and Nepal, combined with its self-assured posturing vis-à-vis Pakistan, contributes to an environment in which Islamabad is incentivised to consolidate internal authority and project power externally. Yet history demonstrates that attempting to create strategic depth through ideological militarisation or cross-border alliances often backfires. As TS Eliot’s words might suggest, this transformation is not occurring “with a bang but with a whimper”, yet the consequences are likely to reverberate loudly across the subcontinent for decades.

Red Fort blast in Delhi: A wake-up call to reshape strategies on a real-time basis



ANIL
ANAND

Transparency is certainly not the hallmark of the Narendra Modi government. This is true in its normal functioning, when there is ample elbow room to take the countrypersons into confidence. And when it comes to crunch situations such as the Delhi blasts at the threshold of Lal Qila—the symbol associated with India’s freedom and the podium for Independence Day celebrations—the word transparency goes for a toss.

The heinous act of blasts that claimed 13 innocent lives has shaken Delhi. Why so? Because it has ruptured the decade-long peace which the national capital had been enjoying.

It has also raised serious questions about the claims made by the authorities concerned, including the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, that terror acts — particularly with focus on Kashmir — had been stubbed out and that terrorism in all its formats was gasping for its last breath. A terror strike in the heart of Delhi, that too near a strong national symbol such as Lal Qila, accompanied by disturbing reports of about 2,000 kilograms of high-grade explosives having been recovered in the National Capital Region (NCR), barely 20 kilometres from the seat of power, certainly worries these authorities and forces them into a real-time-based appraisal of the entire situation, rather than indulging in high-octane claims. The terror attack, which, as per the claims of the competent authorities, has a Kashmir link and has taken place after the restoration — after six years — of the ‘Durbar Move’ (shifting of the capital on a six-month basis from Jammu, the winter capital, to Kashmir, the summer capital, and vice versa) on intense public pressure, particularly from Jammu, the stronghold of the BJP — a development related to the dilution of Article 370 on August 5, 2019 — has put the ruling dispensation’s credibility at stake.

Touted as a panacea for all the ills plaguing Jammu and Kashmir, including the onslaught of terrorism, the government’s claims justifying the constitutional developments in Jammu and Kashmir, including its division and demotion to two Union Territories, have been exposed by the terror attack. It should compel the Modi government to think afresh on the entire gamut of policy governing not only Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh but also national security as a whole.

Notwithstanding the near fool-proof security network, Delhi, being the national capital and power centre, has always been a target for Punjab, Kashmir, or North-East-centric terrorist groups seeking to challenge the powers that be. The latest



PHOTO: PANKAJ KUMAR

act of terrorism — as the Union Cabinet has declared it — is meant to throw a gauntlet and challenge the might of India at its very power centre. There is no doubt that this must have set the political leadership and the security apparatus thinking about its fallout, emerging challenges, and countervailing strategies.

The biggest lesson and in fact the eye-opener for the ruling BJP should be not to mingle its political agenda with issues related to national security. The political agenda or ideological issues are, most of the time, not in consonance with either the ground realities or the situational challenges.

Lesson one that the government should draw from the Lal Qila blast is that the ruling dispensation must function on a real-time basis to tackle serious issues. Transparency is the key word in adopting such an approach, accompanied by taking the nation into confidence to prevent speculation and kite-flying. The problem becomes even more complicated, as is the case presently, when the higher quarters in the government seek refuge in leaking “source-based” stories.

Why not come upfront? That is in the interest of the nation. Otherwise, speculations can lead to complications and provide ample space for anti-India forces to fish in troubled waters. Not only the government but the media should also refrain from running or writing such stories despite professional compulsions and tight timelines to meet. Lesson two is that, as far as possible, the political and ideological agenda should be separated from the national agenda. Issues such as national security and its offshoots—such as Kashmir and the North-East—should not be viewed entirely from a political perspective. A case in point is the fledgling situation prevailing in Manipur and the ruling BJP at the Centre again indulging in political permutations and combinations to reinstall its government in the state despite public opinion to the contrary.

The same spirit prevailed when the Narendra Modi government hurriedly brought the State Reorganisation Bill to Parliament in 2019 to change the constitutional status of Jammu and

Kashmir. In a first-of-its-kind development in independent India, a state was demoted to a Union Territory, and all democratic rights, including the people’s right to elect their own local government, were curtailed. Be it Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, or Ladakh, public sentiment should remain at the centre of any policy formulation. Ignoring or suppressing this sentiment is always fraught with dangerous consequences. This has been witnessed in the past, and the Delhi blast of 2025 is a warning in that direction.

Lesson three — and nothing new about it-is that in situations like Jammu and Kashmir, the external and internal dimensions of the issue, though intertwined, have to be viewed through different prisms on a real-time basis. Otherwise, there is a danger of falling into the trap of external forces inimical to India’s interests.

Lastly, lesson four is that no act of terrorism should be viewed through the prism of religion. Doing so will

not only undermine the country’s multi-cultural and multi-religious harmony, which is already under severe strain, but will also provide a platform for anti-India forces. A democratically elected government has no option but to avoid sitting on self-professed laurels if these are not in consonance with the ground realities. A real-time-based assessment—accepting both success and failure—and avoiding a “might is right” approach should be the positive way forward. The answer does not always lie in the jugglery of statistics, which the current ruling dispensation excels at, but in accepting the ground reality and reshaping strategies accordingly. The disturbance of urban calm in multi-cultural Delhi should act as an immediate eye-opener. Transparency—to substantiate the claims of busting terror networks and recovering a huge quantity of explosives—should be the buzzword to avoid speculation and the resultant confusion.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

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A new age of global warfare



BALRAJ
MEHTA

Discussing the Russia-Ukraine war — or even the tragic events in Gaza — has become so routine that the very act of analysing them feels almost mundane. Yet this normalisation of brutality hides a far more discomfiting truth. Beneath the surface of daily headlines and geopolitical commentary lies the unsettling reality that the world, despite the existence of the United Nations and numerous international institutions, remains a jungle where might still prevails over right.

The global order, weakened by the arrogance of a few powerful nations and the passivity of many others, is decaying from within. It now stands in desperate need of a structural reset. The Ukraine conflict, in particular, has rewritten many assumptions about modern warfare. The kinetic dimensions of this war have already reshaped global understandings of how battles will be fought in the years ahead. These tactics and technologies are being studied intensely and will eventually be applied with even greater precision and coordination. In many ways, we are witnessing a new phase of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)—one in which artificial intelligence has just made its formidable entry.

An RMA marks a fundamental transformation in the way wars are conceived and executed. It is driven by advances in science and technology, by organisational restructuring, and by doctrinal changes that reflect new forms of strategy. An RMA does not simply make militaries more efficient; it propels them into an entirely new sphere of warfare defined by speed, surprise, and unprecedented impact. With cutting-edge tools for command, control, communication, intelligence, and real-time precision targeting, militaries become capable of inflicting decisive blows before an adversary even understands what is unfolding. History offers ample examples of such shifts.

The induction of railways, telegraphs, steamships, and rifles transformed conflicts from the Napoleonic era to the American Revolution. World War I saw the rise of aircraft, submarines, and machine guns. World War II brought mechanised warfare guided by radio and radar, culminating in the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Until recently, the refinement of nuclear weapons, satellites, missiles, encrypted systems, and stealth platforms continued to redefine military posturing. Then, almost abruptly, came India’s own Operation

Sindoor — a turning point that pushed the country to think beyond conventional paradigms. The operation underscored a timeless military truth: nations must prepare for future wars rather than fight the last one. Its swift suspension after four days — having achieved the intended strategic end state against a declared nuclear power — reflected years of preparation for precisely such an offensive.

It was a signal that India has been quietly building new competencies, and that further refinement of these capabilities is not merely desirable but essential. Going ahead, several trends are likely to dominate the future of warfare. Artificial intelligence will play a central role in data synthesis, surveillance, reconnaissance, and autonomous decision-making. UAVs, drones, directed-energy weapons, loitering munitions, and near-undetectable missiles or underwater vehicles will deliver precise and devastating strikes deep inside enemy territory. Cyber warfare will become a preferred tool for espionage, sabotage, and coercion. Trade wars — through tariffs, asset freezes, and exclusion from global financial networks — will be wielded with scant regard for treaties. Information warfare will intensify, fuelled by deepfakes and sophisticated propaganda machines.

Even targeted assassinations, social disruptions, and the exploitation of Gen Z vulnerabilities may become instruments of statecraft. For India, achieving mastery across these domains is not optional — it is imperative. Safeguarding national and civilisational interests at this critical stage of our developmental journey demands massive investments in technology, manufacturing, research, and human capital.

We will need thousands of bright professionals across R&D, testing, production, and deployment. Encouragingly, many national initiatives are already underway. In this context, the new Trump tariffs — seen by some purely as a challenge — could actually be a blessing in disguise. They offer India an opportunity to strengthen domestic ecosystems, retain skilled talent, attract the diaspora, and channel national energy into long-term capability-building. Such moments of recalibration seldom come twice.

Equally important is doctrinal adaptation within the armed forces, coupled with greater alignment among political leadership, bureaucratic machinery, scientific communities, defence establishments, and strategic thinkers. This will require continuous dialogue, deep understanding, and sustained national commitment. An updated and officially declared National Security Strategy — as a single, coherent policy document — would be an important and timely step in that direction.

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OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

Vendetta politics in Bangladesh

New Delhi must brace for another disruptive spell in ties with Dhaka

The death sentence given to former Bangladesh premier Sheikh Hasina by a domestic war crimes court for ordering the use of lethal force against student-led protests that led to the ouster of her government last year is unlikely to reduce the political instability in the country. Hasina, who has been in self-exile in India since she left Bangladesh in August 2024, and her former home minister were tried in absentia by the International Crimes Tribunal set up by the current regime and both sentenced to death for their complicity in the death of protesters during the tumultuous movement that rocked the country for weeks. The tribunal cited Hasina’s remarks in recent interviews to the Indian media, acknowledging “supreme command responsibilities” for the handling of the protests, as proof of her complicity in the killings. According to a United Nations report, 1,400 people were killed during the protests.

The verdicts, in a way, reflect the vendetta politics that have harmed India’s neighbourhood for a long time. In the past, Hasina’s Awami League and its main opponent, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, resorted to similar measures against each other whenever they were in power. Events of recent days, including two nationwide lockdowns called since last week by the Awami League, have shown that it remains a political force in Bangladesh, though its capabilities may have been diminished. The decision of the caretaker government led by Muhammad Yunus to ban the activities of the Awami League certainly does not bode well for its promise of holding free and fair elections. It is in this context that the Indian side has maintained that Bangladesh’s general election, scheduled for February, must be free, fair and inclusive.

Following Hasina’s conviction and sentencing, Bangladesh’s interim government has doubled down on its demand for the extradition of the former premier — a request that New Delhi has not acted upon since it was received late last year. This will further strain India-Bangladesh relations that have been on the downturn since the Yunus-led regime assumed office. For the Indian side, any further chaos and instability in Bangladesh comes with the potential for affecting the security and economic progress of the country’s sensitive northeastern states, which have already been affected by the curtailing of connectivity and trade ties with Dhaka. India will do well to prepare for what is likely to be another disruptive spell in relations with Bangladesh.

RJD family drama has lessons for all parties

The first family of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) was already unravelling after ill-health forced the patriarch, Lalu Prasad, to anoint his younger son, Tejashwi Yadav, as his political heir. This time, after assembly poll results that were disastrous for the RJD, daughter Rohini Acharya went public against her younger brother. This political soap opera is not unique. Every family-run political enterprise in India has undergone this spectacle at some point in its history, the script of which emerges from the structural flaws of these party organisations.

The business of politics is like in any family-run enterprise: Transition in the leadership of a political family can be torturous unless talent, drawn from the ranks, is privileged over blood ties. That’s been rare in Indian politics. Parties as different as the Congress, DMK, NCP, Shiromani Akali Dal, BSP, and the Mandal outfits (SP, LJP, and now, RJD) have undergone splits and consequently, lost their ideological sheen, and seen their influence shrinking over the transfer of leadership. Most of these parties, born out of mass movements, were usurped by one family and turned into private fiefs. This transformation has worked when the successor developed the skills to negotiate the initial hiccups and reshape the party as per their vision and needs (examples include Indira Gandhi, MK Stalin, and Naveen Patnaik). If the successor could win or retain office, he or she was accepted as leader; others struggled to establish control over the outfit and lost influence. Parties lose their mass movement character when turned into family enterprises, which, in turn, stunts their growth (the Congress and BSP are examples). Meritocracy within a party is not a sufficient condition for a political outfit to flourish (it worked for the BJP but not for communist parties). However, it does enrich the outfit, and democracy.

Different threads in Red Fort bomb blast

It points to a new phase in Kashmiri militancy and indicates the limits of a force-alone counter-terrorism policy

Three alarming signals are coming from the recent Red Fort bomb blast. First, the doctor’s module comprised mostly Kashmiris from the Valley. Second, what functioned in Jammu and Kashmir as an overground network of supporters and sympathisers, who provided shelter and finance to the militancy, have now graduated to become active terrorists. And third, the ongoing investigations are revealing much deeper and sustained support for terrorism in the region.

Since 1990, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been hit by a separatist militancy that has led to thousands of people dying through acts of violence. But this violence, which has featured many acts of terrorism, has been confined to the state. Acts, such as the Delhi blast of November 10, have been rare.

It would seem that the doctor-terrorist module has been radicalised by Maulvi Irfan Ahmad Wagay, a Srinagar-based cleric. The alleged perpetrator of the Delhi blast, Umar un-Nabi, a doctor, was from Government Medical College (GMC), Srinagar, and Adeel Ahmad Rather, another doctor and the first person to

be arrested, from whose locker an AK-47 was recovered, worked at GMC Anantnag. Though there have been a lot of source-based reports on the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) connection of Wagay as well as Shaeen Shahid, another doctor, there is no clear picture yet of the ideological journey of those involved. Additional arrests and interrogation should provide a fuller picture.

The initial target of the Kashmiri militancy was the Pandit community; several terrorist attacks forced their migration out of the Kashmir Valley. Thereafter, besides the security forces, Kashmiri Muslims have suffered substantial casualties from gunfights, assassinations, bombings and so on. Kashmiris have ended up both as perpetrators and victims of the militancy.

There have been just two other major terror incidents directly involving Kashmiris in other parts of the country in the past 35 years. These were two bomb blasts in 1996, on two consecutive days: The first one on May 21, 1996, in New Delhi’s Lajpat Nagar market that killed 13 persons and injured 40, and the second occurred in a bus near the town of Dausa, Rajasthan, which claimed 14 lives. Both were attributed to the Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Front (JKIF), an Islamist faction of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, led by Bilal Ahmed Baig, now a designated terrorist living somewhere in Pakistan. This outfit had carried

out two earlier blasts in Delhi — in Connaught Place in November 1995 and Sadar Bazar in January 1996. Four members of the JKIF, all Kashmiris, were sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime.

Within J&K, there were several instances of bomb blasts, mainly before 2005. In the early 1990s, there had been a spate of blasts in the Jammu area. On January 26, 1995, there had been a series of three blasts at the Maulana Azad Memorial Stadium, targeting the Republic Day Parade there that killed eight people. In July 1995, in Jammu, 17 people died and 50 were injured in the Purani

Mandi area, one of the most crowded markets of the old city, in a blast. This, too, was caused by an RDX-based explosive and the act was traced to Harkat-ul-Ansar, a Pakistani group. The next major blast on October 1, 2001, targeted the legislative assembly building in Srinagar and was the result of a suicide attack carried out by the JeM. An explosive-laden Tata Sumo blew up, killing 38 people, including three terrorists. There were IED attacks, mainly on the highways leading out of Srinagar, in 2002 and 2004.

But by and large, these attacks tapered off after 2005. Thereafter, the ISI and its minions shifted focus to other Indian cities, including Mumbai, Delhi, Surat, Patna, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Varanasi, Pune, and Hyderabad. Here, they used a variety of instruments, the primary being a



Manoj Joshi



After 2005, it was only in 2019 that bomb blasts returned to J&K when a JeM suicide bomber blew up a bus near Pulwama.

HT ARCHIVE

group of Indian Muslims who called themselves the Indian Mujahideen but whose leadership operated from Pakistan. Hundreds of people were killed in the campaign that petered out after the 2011 Delhi High Court blast, in which a Kashmiri was the main accused.

It was only in 2019 that bomb blasts returned to J&K when a JeM suicide bomber blew up a bus ferrying Indian paramilitary personnel near Pulwama, killing 46 jawans. As can be seen, this was the biggest casualty of its kind in the state, and it elicited a tough Indian reaction, which has served as a template subsequently in dealing with terror strikes traced to Pakistan.

But, the unfolding conspiracy allegedly involving doctors indicates that even tough actions like Operation Sindoor are not having the kind of impact intended. Indeed, had the terror plan not been detected early, it could have had horrific consequences

across the country. The incident has upended the Union government’s belief that following the abrogation of Article 370, the demotion of the state to a Union Territory, and the subsequent crackdown, has fatally wounded the terror ecosystem and that Kashmir would soon return to normal.

A force-alone counter-terrorism policy has not worked anywhere in the world. Besides an extensive campaign of de-radicalisation in the educational institutions of the Valley, there is also a need to reach out to the mainstream political class in the Valley, which has currently been sidelined.

J&K is not foreign territory like Gaza, where the Israelis do what they want. It is very much a part of the country and will always remain so.

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Mamdani moment and the ideological churn in the US

The Mamdani moment is saturated with symbolism: A young progressive American with Indian and African roots has victoriously asserted his social democratic politics in the world’s financial capital. It is too early to tell if the election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York portends a larger, fundamental shift in American politics. However, it does afford an opportunity to get a glimpse of an exciting ideological churn in America.

In India, we have taken interest in Mamdani’s victory because of his India connection. But we should take an interest in American politics regardless of an India angle because the profound battle for the country’s soul is a once-in-a-lifetime story.

The defining feature of America’s national politics is nearly a decade old. On the surface, it has looked like a fierce ideological contest between conservative and liberal politics.

But in substantive terms, it has been about the rise of Donald Trump and his control of the Republican Party and the disarray of the Democratic Party in terms of both ideology and leadership after the Obama presidency. However, recent developments have set off a genuine ideological churn on both ends of the political spectrum, which has the potential to produce a real contest of ideas and policies.

On the right, there is growing concern that Trump has been co-opted — or compromised — by America’s deep State establishment, a force that ensures status quo in the power structure regardless of the party or person in office. His comfort with America’s super rich billionaires, his unqualified support for Israel, and reports of his family businesses benefiting from the presidency are seen to be a betrayal of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement.

The group that is voicing this unease is a small number of ideologues, podcasters and at least two lawmakers, but it has a massive and influential voice, especially amongst the youth. The likes of Tucker Carlson, Steve Bannon, Megyn Kelly, Candace Owens, Marjorie Taylor Greene, and the late Charlie Kirk — not to mention the more extreme voices to their Right — want the US to follow an “America First” line.

This means an end to America’s support for Israel’s militarism in West Asia, focus on creating a “real” economy based on manu-

facturing, end to illegal immigration, free speech, and revival of America as a Christian country in which White people do not feel as if they are “strangers in their own land”.

Some amongst this group are beginning to doubt Trump’s sincerity or ability to deliver on this agenda. Trump has retaliated by withdrawing support from Greene, who is a Congresswoman from Georgia. On the other side, a genuinely Left-leaning social democratic politics has made a fresh start with Mamdani’s victory, although its veterans include senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. This politics breaks ranks with the showy and vacuous progressivism on the liberal-Left, which began with the Obama presidency.

Through its focus on the economic pinch for the ordinary New Yorker — access to a decent quality of life in terms of housing, transport, and child care — Mamdani’s social democratic politics has taken on an issue that has mass appeal going beyond the city. The crisis of affordability in New York draws a stark contrast with the extraordinary concentration of wealth in the city, which resonates with the perception that even the national economy is polarised between oligarchy and economic despondency.

This is also an issue for the renegade Right. Thus, both sides are concerned about the toll that unaffordability is taking on ordinary people, including their ability to raise families, though their conceptions of family differ: The Right prefers the conventional heterosexual one; the Left is fine with a familial *laissez faire*. The two sides also share discomfort over the influence of lobbies and donors on politics and policy.

The renegade Right has become openly critical of the influence of lobbyists and wealthy Americans who they claim have captured America’s foreign policy, particularly on Israel and West Asia. Curiously, the same class of people also funded the campaign of Andrew Cuomo, a Democratic Party politician and former New York state governor, who ran as an independent against Mamdani after losing the Democratic ticket.

That Trump endorsed Cuomo while calling him a “bad Democrat” because he wanted to keep the “Communist” Mamdani out of office brought to light, to the renegade Right, the grand nexus of lobbies and oligarchs who insidiously capture political power for their special, self-serving interests.

It is also worth noting that during the mayoral campaign, while other contestants expressed their commitment towards Israel, Mamdani said his focus was on the city. In other words, he stood for “New York First”, quite like the renegade right’s America First. This ideological churn faces two prospects. Each can be undone by status quo forces within. Or the two can develop into distinct ideological poles of American politics.

The second development will spawn a genuine ideological contestation on whether America will continue on its trajectory of becoming an immigrant, multi-racial, multi-confessional country, or stare at something unclear and restless, as anxiety over the loss of an America that was once White, Christian and western deepens.



Atul Mishra



Mamdani’s social democratic politics has taken on an issue that has mass appeal going beyond New York.

REUTERS

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{ SHEIKH HASINA } FORMER PRIME MINISTER, BANGLADESH

I am alive, I will stay alive, I will work for the welfare of people again, and I will do justice on Bangladesh’s soil

Reacting to Bangladesh Supreme Court pronouncing her guilty of crimes against humanity

What pollution in Delhi means for senior citizens

There was a time when Delhi’s winter sun signalled a change in the rhythm of the city. The elderly would be the first to don their woollen and their caps as they went about their morning walks — their group of friends growing in direct correlation with the sun’s trajectory in the sky. Some would be seated on park benches, others in their courtyards or even by the wayside, lost in animated discussions over steaming cups of tea. It was a ritual of community — of warmth, movement, and laughter.

Over the past few years, that familiar scene has practically vanished in the smog. For the elderly, the shared commons — the parks, the pavements, the markets — are now places to avoid. Once free and open spaces now feel unsafe, even hostile. Pollution has “privatised” Delhi’s winter, confining the elderly to their rooms, robbing them of the small, everyday freedoms.

A Lancet Planetary Health study estimates that PM 2.5 pollution was responsible for more than 17 lakh deaths in India in 2022 — up by 38% since 2010. And, for those aged 60 and above, every short-term spike in PM2.5 raises the risk of daily mortality by about 1.5%. The wheezing and raucous coughs, the nebulisers and inhalers, the spiralling medication costs, and for some, emergency hospitalisations, have become a recurring nightmare for many families in the city.

The crisis runs deeper than mortality statistics. Each year, the smog silently strains the city’s already stretched public health system. Older adults, many of whom are struggling to manage hypertension, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or diabetes, are the first to turn up in outpatient clinics and emergency rooms when pollution spikes. Hospital admissions for respiratory illness in Delhi surge by over 20% during severe smog episodes, according to studies by AIIMS and ICMR. The Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) has estimated that air pollution-related health costs drain 3% of India’s GDP annually. The price of inaction is paid first in hospital bills and lost productivity, and then, tragically, in lives that could have been saved.

The Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), Delhi’s main defence against air pollution, sets out actions that need to be taken by various actors responsible for these noxious fumes. But little seems to change on the ground. If we don’t even acknowledge the seriousness of the crisis, actively warn or protect vulnerable groups like

older adults, then we are failing them as a society. Why can’t we run targeted awareness campaigns through the communication channels that the elderly use — WhatsApp groups, RWA bulletins, or neighbourhood clinics? Why don’t we learn from other countries that issue age-specific health alerts, limit outdoor activities, and activate local health support systems when pollution spikes? Clean air is a collective responsibility that can’t be outsourced to expensive personal air purifiers and private hospitals.

When the elderly lose access to the commons — to the parks, pavements and markets that anchor their daily lives — it is not just their lungs that suffer; it is our social contract that begins to fray. The right to breathe clean air, to move, to take part in public life, are unstated promises every city makes to its citizens. Delhi breaks these promises, year after year, government after government.

The city’s air crisis, like many of its other problems, has persisted because of fragmented accountability — divided between municipal, state, and central agencies — and limited political appetite for long-term, unpopular reform. Yet, this is precisely where leadership comes in.

The ruling party, both at the Centre and in Delhi, must use its sizable political capital to take the tough calls needed to restrict vehicular emissions, create an effective public transport system, accelerate clean fuel transitions, and enforce construction controls, among other measures. These are public health imperatives that have growing bipartisan support, and political leaders across party lines must work together to address the crisis. Else, as any politician knows, political capital can also depreciate when governments let preventable crises metastasise into permanent and extremely serious public costs.

Finally, this seasonal crisis also presents an opportunity. If Delhi can show that it is possible to reverse this problem by combining strong political resolve and efficient solutions, it could become a model for cities across India — be it Ghaziabad or Bhiwadi, and across the world. A cleaner, healthier national capital would signal that India is serious about resolving complex urban challenges that acutely affect the elderly. Delhi’s citizens are watching. With bated breath.

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Barkha Deva

OUR VIEW



India-US talks: Showing sensitivity is half the art

Last week's tariff cuts by the US reveal Trump's inflation concerns in an American political context, one that we could explore further for a pact on social security payments by Indians

In dealing with US President Donald Trump on the commercial front, many countries would attest that one axiom holds good: that his political interests matter. China, for example, exploited the finer details of America's electoral map in framing its retaliation to US tariffs. Last week, Trump lifted 'reciprocal' import duties on a selection of grocery items—from coffee and spices to fruits and their juices. Since these are not easy for the US to substitute with home-grown produce, levies on their import had pushed up their retail prices and made people grumble. Tariff relief in the case of these items was clearly driven by White House sensitivity to the cost of living. Retail inflation in the US has hovered around the 3% level lately. This is a percentage point above its central bank target, but well below the 8% range hit in 2022 under the Joe Biden presidency, a spike that played a role in Trump's 2024 victory. While Trump is not eligible for another term in office, he might have taken note of the damage that tariff-inflated prices could inflict on his popularity, trade agenda and advocacy of cheaper credit.

India is only a minor beneficiary of America's latest tariff cuts. Exporters of tea and spices have reason to cheer, but most others reeling under Trump's 50% India-specific tariff have their hopes pinned on a bilateral trade deal to ease their path. Now that inflation has evidently joined the US policy calculus, we may be tempted to use price stability in trade talks as part of our pitch for across-the-board tariff relief. The size and composition of our basket of exports to America, however, does not have much scope to affect general price levels there. But then, New Delhi has other asks that may

find political resonance in Washington. For example, India is reportedly looking for the same sort of pact with the US that it signed with the UK on social security payments. On the face of it, the US has no pressing reason to alter the rules of this safety-net scheme. Willy-nilly, Indian citizens who work in the US must contribute to it, but if they leave before making a decade's worth of contributions without a break, they are ineligible for this system's healthcare and old-age payout benefits. Employees on H-1B visas and the like, however, typically have shorter job stints in the US, which effectively turns the money they pay into a tax. Ideally, they should get some of that sum back if they return home. Or be spared having to pay up in the first place. Under our UK agreement, Indian employees in London, or Britons working in Delhi for that matter, can make payments solely to the safety-net system of their home country for the first three years of employment. Levelling the turf for Indians employed in the US would make sense too. This is a just cause. But the proposal may work better if it's packaged for political appeal.

A surge in anti-immigration sentiment in the US appears to have left a vocal chunk of Trump's MAGA vote base keen to see H-1B visa holders depart. If the US eases the social-security burden borne by Indians on short stints, or starts compensating leavers, it would end their disincentive to leave US shores before putting in at least 10 years of work. Strictly speaking, US social security is not a *quid pro quo* deal: what one pays is not owed back. It is more like mandatory group insurance. Yet, nobody likes to be overtaxed, as Indians in the US often feel they are, and social-security relief for them could be an easy sell in today's context.

MY VIEW | ECO SQUARE

Institutions ought to minimize anxiety instead of worsening it

Let's not underestimate their role in the well-being of people at large in a complex country like ours



LEENA SRIVASTAVA is an independent expert on climate change and clean energy.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in every six or seven individuals in the world is living with a mental disorder. In this, "depressive and anxiety disorders are major contributors to [years lived with disability or YLDs] in all age groups (except 0–5-year-olds)... They are also the second leading cause of YLDs..." The WHO places productivity losses from mental health disorders at over \$1 trillion per year.

While the awareness of and access to mental health professionals are both abysmally low, especially among lower-income populations, round-the-clock access to social media in a digital world exacerbates any underlying biological mental health vulnerabilities. Counseling around social-media use and consequent feelings of inadequacy can help individuals, but so can the creation of a broader environment of trust. Globally, political and environmental uncertainties—with implications for employment, mobility and a secure future—have been identified as among the many inter-connected causes of a growing mental health crisis in Gen Z.

In this complex interplay of causal factors for anxiety and depression is an unacceptably high level of mistrust in the institutions meant to provide order and stability in any society—governments, the judiciary, news media and the workplace, in particular. The 2025

Trust Barometer report from Edelman reveals a global decline in trust in employers to do the 'right' thing. Even more worrisome is the perceived fear that leaders are purposely misleading people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations. This category includes not just government and business leaders, but also journalists.

Recent examples illustrate how uncertainties are compounded by wishful thinking, knee-jerk reactions and immediacy compulsions. That these examples relate to issues that deeply touch people's lives also serves to illustrate the compounding of anxiety and depression among people at large.

First, the issue of crackers. At a time when air quality was already deadly in the national capital, the government of Delhi, the judiciary and experts permitted the use of poorly-defined 'green crackers' even though it was not feasible to check their 'greenness'. This was done on the promise of using cloud seeding to create artificial rain that would wash down the pollution, conveniently overlooking the fact that you need clouds to be able to seed them. When this attempt was made, it failed, leaving citizens to fend for themselves. So, for the enjoyment of a few who light crackers, the health of many more residents of Delhi was compromised. The media did little to consistently educate people on the dire consequences of bursting a large volume of crackers. As for social media, it is overloaded on most issues with posts by elements that hold extreme views.

Second, take the government's and court's handling of the stray dogs issue. After an order that was impractical and a second interim one that offered hope, followed by a recognition of the apathy of governments in implementing humane and implementable solutions, the Supreme Court again demanded the removal of stray dogs from defined public spaces, but without assigning any accountability or imposing penalties on the public bodies that allowed such a

'dangerous' situation to arise through their incompetence and inefficiency. There is no reliable data on the true number of dog bites. A judge raised the question, "What about cruelty to humans?" To be cruel, by definition, is to be extremely unkind in causing intentional pain to people or animals. One rarely, if ever, speaks of animals being cruel to humans—their reactions are either instinctive or learnt behaviours important for survival. In urban spaces dominated by humans, dogs are likely responding with aggression to the traumas they suffer but remain undressed. The media coverage of this issue too was polarizing and perhaps agenda-driven, creating a wedge in society and adding to fear on all sides, albeit for different reasons.

In my last Eco Square column, titled 'Himalayan blunders: People must demand accountability for ecological havoc' ([shorturl.at/VGH88](#)), I had discussed vulnerabilities caused by unmindful and unregulated development in the fragile mountain systems of the Himalayas. While the details need not be repeated, this is another prime example of how the vulnerabilities of millions of humans and animals are worsened by negligence on the part of governments over time.

The point of this article is to contrast the enthusiasm with which our courts have sought to address the relatively minor issue of dog bites (which is not to take away from the horrors suffered by individuals and their families) with the overlooking of much more serious and deadly issues that are perennial problems in the country.

In general, we should question the consistency with which we apply the test of fairness and justice for all to orders, policies and narratives, and also the attention we pay to their impact on larger populations. Maybe there is a need to transparently revisit the rules and protocols followed by all institutions that have the power to amplify societal anxiety through their actions.



JUST A THOUGHT

No foreign policy—no matter how ingenious—has any chance of success if it is born in the minds of a few and carried in the hearts of none.

HENRY A. KISSINGER

THEIR VIEW

Trump's bets on China and Argentina are souring fast

BARRY EICHENGREEN



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When it comes to US foreign economic policy, President Donald Trump's administration has two problems on its hands. Following what has become something of a pattern for this administration, both problems are of its own making.

In South America, Trump & Company are heavily exposed to a dubious effort to stabilize the Argentine peso, a task to which they have committed more than \$20 billion. In Asia, they are engaged in an on-again-off-again trade war with China, in which Chinese President Xi Jinping has the upper hand.

Argentina's President Javier Milei [who assumed office on 10 December 2023] has made good on his promise to take a chain-saw to his country's budget deficit. But to reinforce the fall in inflation, he has propped up the peso's dollar exchange rate, which has hurt exports and slowed economic growth, leading to uncomfortably high unemployment.

The question is whether a restive public will continue to support Milei's policies indefinitely. History suggests that it will not, notwithstanding last month's legislative elections, which provided a temporary respite.

Temporary is the operative word: public opinion could turn again. To paraphrase my Berkeley colleague Maurice Obstfeld, Argentina is a graveyard of unsuccessful exchange-rate-based stabilizations. More than once, variants of this policy have collapsed in a heap of political dysfunction.

Given this, Milei's strategy also creates doubts about whether Argentina can repay the US Treasury.

Senior creditors like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which went into Argentina earlier, stand to be paid first out of the country's limited foreign exchange. The money the US Treasury pumps into Argentina is likely to just leak back out in repayments to hedge funds that scooped up Argentina's bonds on the cheap. Even if Argentina somehow repays the US Treasury but the government falters in the 2027 election, US treasury secretary Scott Bessent, who made supporting Milei official American policy, will probably be left with egg on his face.

In the case of China, Trump thought he had a leg up in any trade dispute because the US buys more from China than China buys from the US. And because the US is the more advanced designer of cutting-edge semiconductors, Trump thought he had more leverage from export embargoes than threaten.

The reality, of course, is the opposite. China can simply divert its exports of merchandise and commodities from the US to other parts of the world, as it had begun doing even before Trump's return to the White House. It can import advanced semiconductors from third parties or soup up last year's models. And when provoked by the addition of more Chinese companies to the US Entity List, the blacklist of companies barred from access to advanced technology, China can embargo exports of the rare earths that are essential inputs for consumer electronics, motor vehicles and, not least, US military hardware.

Seen in this light, Trump's climbdown following his recent meeting with Xi [at the APEC summit at Busan in South Korea] is no surprise. Xi made an empty commitment to buy more American soybeans, just as he has in the past. He suspended his rare-earth embargo, but left that sword of Damocles hanging. Trump, for his part, agreed to scale back his punitive tariffs, suspend port fees on Chinese ships and delay the planned expansion of the Entity List that had provoked China into threatening rare-earth controls in the first place.

Importantly, this negotiation sets a pattern for the future. The next time Trump threatens China with tariffs, port charges or export controls, Xi will threaten rare-earth export controls and Trump will chicken out.

China's rare-earth monopoly won't last forever, but it will outlast the Trump administration.

In the case of Argentina, where it was a mistake to make an unconditional commit-

ment in the first place, the Trump administration should require the Milei government, as a condition of continued US support, to allow the peso to depreciate, eliminating its overvaluation, after which the currency should be allowed to float more freely. Argentine producers will then be able to export more, which would help stabilize growth and employment while ensuring that the government can repay what it borrowed.

Admittedly, inflation in Argentina will come down somewhat more slowly than previously programmed, because import prices will rise more rapidly. But disinflation will be more politically sustainable, because it will cause less unemployment and social dislocation. There will be less likelihood of the public repudiating the policy—and Milei—in 2027.

Milei has shown no sign of seeing the light, instead doubling down on his risky monetary strategy. And while Bessent, who knows his way around currency crises, could force Milei's hand, he is showing no willingness to do so.

Best of all would be for US authorities not to create this kind of international economic and financial mess in the first place. Don't hold your breath. ©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE

THEIR VIEW

Roll back quality control orders on inputs to spur manufacturing

Such QCOs hold back the competitiveness of manufacturers and ending them could catapult our factory sector to a new orbit



AMITABH KANT & DIEWAKARR ANUPAM MITTAL are, respectively, chairperson and director, Fairfax Centre for Free Enterprise.

It has finally begun and it deserves recognition. A long-awaited overhaul of India's quality-control regime is taking shape. In just the past week, key ministries have moved decisively to withdraw or amend quality control orders (QCOs) on up to 76 products.

On 12 November 2025, the ministry of chemicals and fertilisers abolished QCOs for several input materials, including terephthalic acid, ethylene glycol, polyester spun yarn, polyester yarn, EVA copolymers, polycarbonates and others. This step eases compliance pressures across textiles, chemicals, plastics and downstream manufacturing. On 13 November, the ministry of mines issued a notification withdrawing QCOs on base metals and alloys such as aluminum and aluminum alloys, nickel, refined nickel, tin ingots, refined zinc, copper and primary lead. The ministry of heavy industries has notified its Machinery and Electrical Equipment Safety (Omnibus Technical Regulation) Second Amendment Order, 2025, effectively pushing QCO implementation forth. Additionally, the ministry of steel has decided to suspend QCOs on 55 steel products, most of which are inputs.

The government's move to strike down QCOs dating back to September 2021 marks India's willingness to support businesses and strengthen our competitiveness by embracing a more open, rules-based economic order. For industries long weighed down by the friction of compliance, this is like the first gust of wind before a much-needed monsoon. It is more than administrative house-keeping; it is a signal that India is continuously recalibrating regulations to promote economic vitality, rather than stifle it.

Recently, a high-level Niti Aayog committee recommended a decisive push to abolish QCOs for specific input materials. Abolishing QCOs on these will deliver broad benefits to our manufacturing sector, especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Nearly half of all QCOs introduced over the past eight years target intermediate goods, the very backbone of production. Mandatory certifications for such inputs raise landed costs, create testing delays of 4 to 12 weeks and force MSMEs to rely on a narrow set of certified foreign suppliers. Dropping these QCOs can cut input costs by 8-12%, freeing capital, easing operational pressures and boosting competitiveness.

A telling example of how QCOs can inadvertently raise input costs is the Copper Products (Quality Control) Order, 2023, which was withdrawn this week. After it went into force, it immediately disrupted supply, particularly from Japan, from where we sourced 80% of our refined copper. Japanese smelters had to apply for fresh licences, which took time. The impact was visible. Copper imports dropped. However, manufacturers substituted copper imports with imports of downstream



products such as wires, tubes, pipes and sheets. These were goods already being made in India. Still, their imports spiked by 17-49% as the supply of raw materials was disrupted. Cable makers, OEMs, electrical manufacturers and construction suppliers scrambled to secure material in more processed (and more expensive) forms. Trade bodies had forewarned of the supply chain risks. Excessive QCOs distort markets by artificially limiting suppliers. Eliminating such input-level QCOs strengthens MSME supply chains by restoring flexibility and bargaining power, allowing firms to switch suppliers more easily, reduce risk and diversify their sourcing.

Firms must be allowed to choose inputs based on commercial logic rather than regulatory requirements. This will enable better decisions on what to indigenize and what to source globally. We must remember that 'global value chains' are called so for a reason. Also, markets self-regulate, inefficient players exit naturally and high-quality suppliers rise on merit rather than certification gatekeeping. As Jagdish Bhagwati asserts, "Competition is the most reliable auditor of quality."

India's QCO rationalization agenda should continue to address the raw-material QCOs concentrated across key ministries. According to CSEP, the ministry of steel oversees 310 QCOs, of which nearly 68% apply to input materials. With the withdrawal of QCOs on 55 steel-based input materials and a one-year waiver on speciality steels, the government has made a strong start. But much more remains to be done, particularly in suspending QCOs on other input materials. Further, it is estimated that 161 QCOs are in place for machinery and electricals, with 44% covering core industrial intermediaries.

In electronics, India achieved a record \$2.4 billion in smartphone exports in October 2025, and overall electronic exports grew by over 47% in the first quarter of 2025-26. India's metals, machinery,

textiles and electronics sectors offer some of the strongest levers for accelerating manufacturing-led growth. QCOs on input components that India cannot yet manufacture at scale hinder competitiveness, elongate lead times and discourage global firms from shifting deeper parts of their supply chain to India. We must ensure policy recalibration happens before the damage becomes irreversible. We must abolish these QCOs at the earliest.

To prevent QCOs from becoming unintended trade barriers, India must institutionalize a permanent, data-driven QCO Review Framework. Every QCO should carry a mandatory 24-month sunset clause, requiring renewal only after a detailed analysis of domestic capacity, import dependency, HS-code trends, supplier concentration, price movements and export competitiveness. Structured MSME consultations and annual QCO impact statements must be institutionalized.

The Bureau of Indian Standards should simultaneously shift toward risk-based, globally aligned standard-setting, focusing its regulatory scrutiny on safety-critical final products rather than raw materials.

The recent notifications are not just a bureaucratic update; they are a policy signal, a philosophical shift and a firm step towards a more competitive, export-ready India. QCO reform must move beyond the initiative of a few ministries to become a whole-of-government mission. Now is the moment for other ministries to follow suit.

QCOs on all raw materials and intermediates must be abolished. We cannot achieve our aspirations to become a world-leading economy by 2047 with regulatory sandbags tied to the ankles of our MSMEs. Reducing compliance costs, saving time and easing the regulatory burden are not administrative niceties; they are the levers that will catapult India into the next orbit of industrial expansion.

These are the authors' personal views.

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

Should society curb excessive executive compensation?

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan's Mint columns at www.livemint.com/avisiblehand

Elon Musk is 55 years old. He is already the world's richest man, with an estimated current net worth of about \$480 billion. Contingent on meeting certain performance criteria at Tesla Inc, he could well become the world's first trillionaire.

Depending on your point of view, Musk is enigmatic, mercurial, brash, unfiltered, hyperactive, intensely competitive and vile—or visionary, charismatic, innovative, strategic and boldly disruptive. As the name Tesla implies, the company co-founded by Musk was a pioneer in creating high-quality electric vehicles (EVs) based on electric motors and power systems invented by the Serbian-American inventor Nikola Tesla. Unlike Musk, the original Tesla, his hero, had sunk all his money on experimentation and died a pauper. Nearly a quarter century ago, Musk also founded SpaceX, the most successful private space company in the world. SpaceX is now the world's dominant space launch provider, thanks to its reusable Falcon rockets. The company's Falcon 9

rockets have exited and re-entered earth's orbit nearly 500 times, averaging 1-3 launches a week. Their feature of reusability has let Musk dominate civilian satellite-based internet services through Starlink, a wholly owned subsidiary of SpaceX. With over 7,000 satellites in its constellation and a subscriber base of 8 million, Starlink makes up about 80% of SpaceX's annual revenue.

After a brief and ill-advised sojourn at the US government in the early months of the current Donald Trump administration, Musk returned to Tesla and SpaceX. To incentivize his focus on the company, Tesla's board proposed a \$1 trillion performance-based equity compensation package. That package was approved by shareholders this month with an overwhelming majority of 75%. An earlier procedurally botched attempt to pay Musk \$56 billion from 2018 onwards was struck down by a Delaware court. The latest trillion-dollar package is made up of 424 million restricted stock units (RSUs) in Tesla that will accrue to him in 12 separate tranches, each to be unlocked if and when specific targets are met. Each tranche is tied to Tesla's market capitalization, with the first available at \$2 trillion and the final one at \$8.5 trillion. To attain his pay package, Musk must deliver on all these operational

goals: *One*, deliver a cumulative 20 million vehicles over 10 years; *two*, deploy 1 million robotaxis; *three*, produce 1 million humanoid robots; *four*, reach 10 million active, full and self-driving subscriptions; and *five*, achieve \$400 billion in trailing earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (Ebitda).

The ratio of the annual compensation of the median Fortune 500 CEO to the median worker in the US has held steady for two decades at about 200:1, though both have risen in nominal terms. At one end are companies like McDonald's, where this ratio is nearly 2,000:1. While not included in public company figures, hedge fund managers like Ken Griffin of Citadel and Ray Dalio of Bridgewater are routinely paid over \$1 billion a year. For the UK, the pay ratio for FTSE 100 company CEOs to the median worker is 75:1.

In India, the median compensation of Nifty 50 CEOs is ₹22.6 crore (\$2.6 million) and the ratio to the median worker is 700:1.

This is for the formal workforce; the ratio to the median pay for informal or subsistence work would be much higher. The highest paid Indian CEOs earn about \$15-20 million a year (₹100-150 crore). Like in the US, a significant portion (often over two-thirds) of this is equity-linked compensation.

Should society moderate these differences? On one hand, if shareholders as owners of a company opt to authorize a huge pay package (in equity), do others have a right to complain? As in Musk's case, if shareholders incentivize disruptive moonshots, is it not their own business? On the other hand, are companies empowering individuals with superhuman powers and expectations and distorting reality to such an extent that society can no longer see straight? What does that imply for these ratios? Should they be reduced? If so, how can or should society go about doing that?

In the US, widespread awareness and transparency have kept relative compensation in a particular band over a long period of

time. In India, the market does offer transparency on CEO compensation, but society inherently appears to have accepted a huge class divide. I come from the persuasion that for long-run harmony, society must be egalitarian: not equal, but fair and meritocratic, with broad-based prosperity. Taking a leaf from political philosopher John Rawls' book, inequality is fine only if the structure maximally benefits the least advantaged and if everyone has an equal opportunity to rise. That still begs the question of how society can go about achieving this.

US regulations require that each company reports the ratio of its CEO compensation to the median worker's pay. India should require the same. For India, the answer to the challenge of reducing this ratio partly lies in lifting what the median worker earns. This will require greater skilling and productivity contributions from workers at large, so that the median worker's rate of real wage growth can improve.

P.S.: "The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust; nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts," said John Rawls in his classic 'Theory of Justice.'

MINT CURATOR

Should we give up on climate action? The answer is still 'no'

The progress made so far shows that it's anything but a lost cause



DAVID FICKLING is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering climate change and energy.



Bad-faith nihilism encourages us to lower our climate ambitions. ISTOCKPHOTO

Perhaps it's time to give up on climate? That's what all the serious people are saying. The targets we set to limit our carbon pollution are unachievable and universally fail. So let's just stop pretending and "drill, baby, drill."

A "pragmatic way forward" for the energy transition is to conclude, in essence, that it's not happening, according to an April essay by energy historian Daniel Yergin and others. Current ambitions are "unrealistic and therefore unworkable," a think-tank set up by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair argued. In the more pungent words of President Donald Trump, climate action is a "con job," and should be abandoned.

This contrarian chorus is so noisy and persistent that it's easy to miss how dramatically wrong it is—especially when some ambitions, like the promise to keep warming below 1.5° Celsius, are being missed. In truth, however, evidence of nearly three decades of climate diplomacy shows that when we set ourselves an objective, more often than not we will hit it. That should stiffen the spines of the politicians gathered at the CoP-30 climate meeting in the Brazilian city of Belém.

Take the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 agreement between industrialized nations, promising to cut their emissions by 5% below their levels in 1990. Now remembered as an ignominious failure, it was actually a resounding success, delivering a far deeper 22.6% cut. The problem wasn't that the goal was missed. Emissions did indeed increase over the 2000s, but that was due to countries that weren't party to the protocol, not the ones that were.

Or consider the EU's first pledge under the 2015 Paris Agreement to cut emissions in 2030 to 40% below levels in 1990. Plenty scoffed at the time. The promises "will fail to accomplish anything substantial to rein in climate change," Bjorn Lomborg, a long-time opponent of action, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*. Even more credible sources had their doubts. The European Environment Agency in 2017 projected the bloc would miss the goal and that the pace of emission reductions would soon slow.

In fact, greenhouse pollution last year was already 37% below 1990, and on current trends the EU may achieve a 54% cut, almost sufficient to hit a stricter target passed in 2020. These self-styled pragmatists now mocking Brussels' most recent ambition to deepen reductions to 90% by 2040 should face up to a long history of promises that have been kept, not broken.

It's the same with China's promise in 2020 to install 1,200 gigawatts of wind and

solar power by 2030. By September-end, it had already surpassed that figure, with more than 1,700 gigawatts connected. This year, few have even bothered to question the 3,600 gigawatts by 2035 goal President Xi Jinping announced in September.

In instance after instance, sober realists have been proven wrong, while the wildest hopes of campaigners have been exceeded. That even applies to the detailed pictures of the future laid out by the International Energy Agency (IEA). The amount of renewable electricity the world will generate this year will be about 9% more than what the IEA in 2018 reckoned we'd need to keep global warming below 2° Celsius.

If you had followed the IEA's Current Policies scenario (a fossil fuel-favouring model reintroduced this year after lobbying by the Trump administration) you'd have overestimated 2025's level of oil demand by about 4.2 million barrels a day—equivalent to the output of Iraq, the OPEC cartel's second-biggest producer. The same scenario underestimated this year's renewable production by 2,600 terawatt-hours, similar to all the electricity generated in the EU.

The problem isn't that we fail to hit the objectives we set for ourselves. It's that the drumbeat of bad-faith nihilism encourages us to forget the progress we have already made and lower our ambitions for the future. Emissions keep inching up not because of nations that fail to uphold their promises on climate action, but because of nations that aren't making adequate promises at all—Xi's failure to set a number on reducing China's coal consumption, for instance, or Trump's recent wrecking of US climate measures.

Five years ago, the most ambitious emission-reduction plans laid out by governments would have resulted in about 3° Celsius of global warming by the end of the century. We're now staring 2.3° Celsius of warming—still disastrous, but moving closer to well below 2° where we need to be. The 2015 Paris Agreement, dismissed at the time as a 'fraud' and 'dangerous incrementalism,' is actually working.

As solar panels, wind turbines, electric vehicles and rechargeable batteries remake power systems, our energy transition is on the brink of victory. Ignore doomsayers who can't see it.

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Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

People detained in Assam over suspicions about identity, job

44 These people have claimed to be from Jammu & Kashmir, and were detained at the New Tinsukia Railway Station in Assam on Monday. The group had arrived by the Chandigarh Express and reportedly failed to clearly name the contractor who had invited them for labour work. PTI

Transformer failures highlighted in government review

1.3 In million. India records nearly 1.3 million transformer failures every year, a government committee has found, citing issues ranging from overloading to faulty repairs and weather-related damage. The Standardisation Cell meeting noted an average national failure rate of 10%. PTI

Ridership milestone reached by Navi Mumbai's metro line

1 In crore. Navi Mumbai Metro's first corridor has crossed the one-crore ridership mark within two years of its launch in 2023. The City and Industrial Development Corporation has credited frequent train operations and affordable fares for the surge. The agency announced that the line will be extended. PTI

The increase in print advertisement rates, as per government

26 In per cent. The government has raised print media advertisement rates by 26%, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced on Monday. The revision increases the black-and-white rate for newspapers with one lakh copies from ₹47.40 to ₹59.68 per sq cm. PTI

Tribal minors rescued from traffickers in Jharkhand

13 The Railway Protection Force (RPF) rescued 13 tribal minors, including 12 girls, from the Tatanagar Railway Station in Jharkhand while they were allegedly being trafficked to a yarn manufacturing unit in Tamil Nadu. PTI

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The trajectory of anti-rape laws in India

By condemning the 1979 Supreme Court acquittal in a custodial rape case, Chief Justice of India B. R. Gavai has highlighted India's evolving legal reforms aimed at better protecting sexual assault survivors and redefining consent



A better dawn: Bhanwari Devi, activist and sexual assault survivor, addresses a gathering at Sommaiyya grounds, Sion in 2018. FILE PHOTO

THE GIST

▼ The Chief Justice said the “troubling” judgment in *Tukaram versus State of Maharashtra* in 1979 became a turning point as the verdict brought the nation together in protest, for the legal system had failed to protect the dignity of the very person it was meant to safeguard.

▼ The September 1979 letter by Upendra Baxi, Vasudha Dhagamwar, Raghunath Kelkar and Lotika Sarkar pointed out to the judges the clear difference, both in law and common sense, between ‘submission’ and ‘consent’.

▼ The brutal gangrape and fatal assault of a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern in a moving bus by six men on a December 2012 night had the nation rise in protest, demanding stricter laws to protect women and punish their attackers.

LETTER & SPIRIT

Krishnadas Rajagopal

Forty-six years after the Supreme Court acquitted two policemen in the custodial rape of a teenage tribal girl in Maharashtra, concluding she consented to the sexual intercourse as there were no visible marks of physical injury on her, Chief Justice of India B. R. Gavai India called the judgment “a moment of institutional embarrassment”. The judgment reflected a deeply regressive and patriarchal understanding of consent, effectively denying the social context of power, coercion, and vulnerability in which sexual violence often occurs.

The Chief Justice said the “troubling” judgment in *Tukaram versus State of Maharashtra* in 1979 became a turning point as the verdict brought the nation together in protest, for the legal system had failed to protect the dignity of the very person it was meant to safeguard. The acquittal ignited the women’s rights movement for stronger rape laws in India.

It also forced Parliament to address the lapses in criminal law; to strengthen legal protections against custodial rape; to make punishments under the Dowry Prohibition Act more stringent; and to introduce the Family Courts Act. A series of Criminal Law Amendments, from 1983 to the spirit of changes made in sexual offences’ provisions in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) in 2023, trace their spirit to the top court’s “institutional failure” in the Mathura rape (*Tukaram versus State of Maharashtra*) judgment.

The trajectory of the case
The 1979 judgment, which further condemned a custodial rape survivor, was pronounced even before the “the ink had dried” in Justice Krishna Iyer’s verdict in the *Nandini Satpathy* (1978) case. The court, speaking through Justice Iyer, condemned the practice of calling women

to police stations and declared that a woman must be questioned by the police only at her residence.

The incident in the Mathura rape case happened in March 1972. The rape survivor, an orphan aged between 14 and 16 years, was one among four who were called to the police station at night. After a brief questioning, she was asked to stay behind while the others were asked to leave. She was subjected to sexual assault by two policemen, a head constable and a constable inside the police station. The trial court, in its judgment, found the rape survivor a “shocking liar” whose testimony “is riddled with falsehood and improbabilities”. The court came to the conclusion that she had sexual intercourse while at the police station but rape had not been proved and that she was “habituated” to sexual intercourse.

The Bombay High Court, in 1976, overturned the Sessions Judge’s findings and concluded the teenager was subject to forcible sexual intercourse amounting to rape. The High Court had held that the so-called ‘consent’ to act was only ‘passive submission’ by a helpless victim to persons in authority whose advances she could hardly repel by herself. In an appeal by the two policemen, the Supreme Court set aside the High Court judgment, agreeing with the petitioners that the “alleged intercourse was a peaceful affair” as there were no marks of injury on her person.

A letter which shook the nation
What brought the Mathura rape case into national consciousness and sparked outrage was a letter written by four intellectuals to the court in September 1979, shortly after the acquittal of the two accused policemen.

The September 1979 letter by Upendra Baxi, Vasudha Dhagamwar, Raghunath Kelkar and Lotika Sarkar pointed out to the judges the clear difference, both in law and common sense, between ‘submission’ and ‘consent’. Consent involves submission; but the converse is

not necessarily true. Nor is absence of resistance necessarily indicative of consent, they argued.

The letter pointed out that there was not a single word in the judgment condemning the very act of calling a teenage girl and detaining her at the police station in gross violation of the law. Nor was there a single word in the judgment condemning the use of the police station as a theatre of rape or submission to sexual intercourse. “The Court gave no consideration whatsoever to the socio-economic status, the lack of knowledge of legal rights, the age of the victim, lack of access to legal services, and the fear complex which haunts the poor and the exploited in Indian police stations. May we respectfully suggest that you and your distinguished colleagues visit incognito, wearing the visage of poverty, some police stations in villages adjoining Delhi?” the letter had challenged the Supreme Court judges.

Myriad amendments
The public furore following the 1979 judgment led Parliament to introduce the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1983 in which custodial rape was included as a separate offence under Section 376 of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code (IPC). The amendment shifted the burden of proof in custodial rape cases from the rape survivor to the accused if the fact of sexual intercourse was established. The top court framed the Vishaka guidelines against sexual harassment at the workplace when a public interest petition was filed after the gangrape of Bhanwari Devi, a Kumbhar woman and an auxiliary nurse midwife, who raised her voice as part of her job against child marriage, especially in upper caste families.

The brutal gangrape and fatal assault of a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern in a moving bus by six men on a December 2012 night had the nation rise in protest again, demanding stricter laws to protect women and punish their attackers. The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013,

loosely crafted on the recommendations of the Justice J.S. Verma Committee, introduced, among others, provisions to punish police officers who do not record an FIR in sexual violence cases against women, or hospitals which do not provide free care to sexual assault victims. The 2013 amendments broadened the definition of rape as in Section 375 to include acts other than forcible sexual intercourse.

Most importantly, it clarified that silence or a feeble no by a woman cannot be translated as a ‘yes’. Besides, the amendments raised the age of consent from 16 to 18 years.

The amendments awarded death penalty to repeat offenders or if rape led to the death or ‘persistent vegetative state’ of the victim.

The Unnao and Kathua rape cases of 2017 and 2018 compelled Parliament to usher in further amendments to make criminal laws for sexual offences against women more stringent. In the Unnao case, former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar was convicted for the kidnap and rape of a minor girl.

The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2018 provided death penalty as a punishment in rape cases in which the victims are below 12 years of age. The 2018 amendments also included a minimum of 20 years imprisonment if the victim is under 16 years of age. The amendments fast-tracked investigation as well as the trial and appeal proceedings in rape cases – two months to complete a probe and trial, and six months to wrap up appeals.

Finally, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2023 through the BNS, made sexual offences against women and children gender-neutral for both the victims and the perpetrators. It uniformly made gang rape of a woman aged below 18 years punishable with death or life imprisonment. The BNS also brought in new offences like sexual intercourse under false pretences and broadened the definition of sexual harassment.

FULL CONTEXT



Burning embers: Statues of freedom fighters Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru at their memorial at Hussainiwalla border, Ferozepur, Punjab in 2022. R.V. MOORTHY

Remembering Batukeshwar Dutt, the forgotten comrade of Bhagat Singh

Celebrated briefly for his role in the Delhi Assembly bombing, Batukeshwar Dutt, who was born on November 18, 1910, spent much of his life in obscurity, neglected by the nation he helped liberate. His story is one of courage, sacrifice, and erasure

Chaman Lal

On April 8, 1929, the *Hindustan Times* in Delhi rushed out a special evening edition, while *The Statesman* in Calcutta cabled its story to London to evade colonial censorship. That afternoon, two young men had thrown harmless bombs into the Central Assembly Hall, now Parliament, raising slogans of *Inquilab Zindabad* (Long Live the Revolution) and *Samrajyavad ka Nash Ho* (Down with Imperialism). They scattered red pamphlets titled ‘To Make the Deaf Hear’. Reporters caught the words, and newspapers across India and abroad carried dramatic headlines. One international paper proclaimed: “Reds Storm the Assembly!”

The two young men were Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt. Both were arrested, tried, and convicted. While Bhagat Singh went on to become one of the most iconic figures of the Indian freedom struggle, his comrade Dutt gradually faded from public memory, remembered only occasionally, and rarely honoured with the dignity he deserved.

A revolutionary’s journey

Batukeshwar Dutt was born on November 18, 1910, in the Burdwan district of Bengal. Convicted in the *Delhi Assembly Bomb Case* on June 12, 1929, he spent nine years in prisons across India – Multan, Jhelum, Trichinopoly, Salem, and even the Andamans. In each jail he resorted to hunger strikes, twice fasting for over a month, demanding humane treatment for political prisoners.

When Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev were executed in Lahore on March 23, 1931, Dutt was languishing in the Salem jail. That night he dreamt of Singh in chains, a vision that haunted him. Released in 1938, Dutt was

rearrested during the Quit India movement of 1942 and spent another four years in jail.

After his release, he married Anjali, a school teacher, and settled in Patna with their daughter Bharti, who later became a Professor of Economics at Patna College. But life after independence offered little stability. The Bihar government allotted him a coal depot, but it proved financially unviable. President Rajendra Prasad intervened, urging the State to extend due consideration to him. The gesture resulted only in a token nomination to the Bihar Legislative Council – for the remainder of an existing member’s six-month term.

Despite such neglect, Dutt remained respected by many political leaders. His health, however, declined in the mid-1960s. Afflicted with bone cancer, he was admitted to AIIMS, New Delhi, where he endured eight months of suffering. Leading orthopaedist Dr. Vig told his comrades that treatment could only ensure a “painless death”. Plans to send him abroad were abandoned after the Indian High Commission in London reported that Delhi offered care equal to Europe’s. Dutt passed away on July 20, 1965. Honouring his last wish, he was cremated at Hussainiwalla in Punjab, alongside Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev. The site, which remained in Pakistan until 1965, had only recently come under Indian control for the construction of a memorial to the martyrs.

Neglect and recognition

For a brief moment after his death, the nation honoured Dutt. His funeral procession was massive, attended by the President, Prime Minister, central ministers, the Lok Sabha Speaker, and the Punjab Chief Minister. The funeral drew vast numbers of people along the streets.

Yet today, few remember that the farewell accorded to him rivalled those of the most revered leaders of his time.

Ironically, the Parliament building where he and Bhagat Singh had staged their act of defiance still does not display their portraits. In contrast, the portrait of V. D. Savarkar, once an accused in Gandhi’s assassination case (though later acquitted), hangs prominently opposite Gandhi’s. In 2014, MPs including Dharamvira Gandhi and Sitaram Yechury protested this omission, but the demand to include Bhagat Singh – and by extension Dutt – was ignored.

The story of this neglect was first documented by Chaman Lal Azad, a fellow revolutionary who later became a journalist. While caring for Dutt at AIIMS, Chaman Lal Azad wrote a series of articles in the Urdu daily *Pratap*. These were later compiled as *Bhagat Singh aur Dutt ki Amar Kahani* (1966), one of the most authentic, if scattered, accounts of the revolutionary movement. The book contains Bhagat Singh’s letters, court statements, and postcards – some published for the first time – along with Gandhi’s letter to Dutt and rare photographs of him with Nehru and Indira Gandhi in 1963.

The book also records Dutt’s conversations about fellow revolutionaries. In it, he spoke of Hari Kishan Talwar, who was hanged in 1931 for shooting Punjab’s Lieutenant Governor, and of his comrade Ehsan Ilahi, who migrated to Pakistan, became a musician, and died penniless despite Chaman Lal Azad’s attempts to help him. Dutt also disapproved of films made on Bhagat Singh in the 1950s, which he and other comrades protested against. Only Manoj Kumar’s *Shaheed* in 1965 won their approval, with the actor personally consulting Dutt.

Equally touching are accounts of his

bond with Bhagat Singh’s family. Mata Vidyawati, Bhagat Singh’s mother, spent long periods with Dutt in his final days. She even sold a Hindi epic poem on Bhagat Singh, gifted to her by poet Sri Krishan Saral, to raise funds for Dutt’s treatment. Revolutionary comrades such as Shiv Verma, Sadashiv Malkapurkar, and Jatin Das’s brother Kiran Das remained constantly by his side. Leaders including Home Minister Gulzari Lal Nanda, Defence Minister Y. B. Chavan, Jagjivan Ram, Swaran Singh, and Dr. Sushila Nayyar also visited him in hospital, though such respect was rarely extended while he was alive and struggling.

Ode to the forgotten soldier

Chaman Lal Azad used his book to underline Bhagat Singh’s intellectual legacy – his ability to rise above religion and envision socialism as the foundation of India’s future. Dutt himself remarked that Singh was far-sighted, always with a book in hand, reading wherever he went.

Despite having a shared vision of India’s future, history has not treated Dutt kindly. He remains absent from memorials, textbooks, and the national consciousness. While newer works such as Justice Anil Verma’s *Bhagat Singh ke Sahyogi: Batukeshwar Dutt* and Bhairav Lal Das’s *Viplvi Batukeshwar Dutt* (both post-2007) have attempted to reclaim his place, Chaman Lal Azad’s earlier book, rich with first-hand memories, is nearly lost. Its Hindi translation, commissioned years ago by the Government’s Publications Division, still lies unpublished due to copyright hurdles.

Dutt’s life illustrates how revolutionaries in India are often remembered only in passing.

Chaman Lal is a professor (retired) and a former chairperson of the Centre of Indian Languages at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On November 17, 1970 Lunokhod 1 made its landmark lunar landing. Test your knowledge of the world’s first rover to explore another celestial body

Prathmesh Kher

- QUESTION 1**
On which lunar ‘sea’ did Lunokhod 1 land?
- QUESTION 2**
How did Lunokhod 1 stay warm during the frigid lunar night?
- QUESTION 3**
How long (in earth days) did Lunokhod 1 operate on the moon?
- QUESTION 4**
How far did Lunokhod 1 travel on the lunar surface?
- QUESTION 5**
How many high-resolution panoramas did Lunokhod 1 send back to Earth?



Visual question:
This 1971 Soviet postage stamp commemorates the spacecraft that delivered the world’s first successful planetary rover to the moon. Name the mission depicted here.

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. Number of times South Africa has tasted success in India. **Ans: Six times in 20 matches**

2. This South African batter turned in a player-of-the-match performance in the team’s maiden win in 1996. **Ans: Gary Kirsten**

3. South Africa has scored an innings victory over the host at this ground. **Ans: Nagpur in 2010**

4. This Indian was voted the player-of-the-match for his innings of 97 and three wickets in 2000. **Ans: Sachin Tendulkar**

5. This speedster skittled out India for a mere 76 in its first innings and this player notched up a double ton during the Proteas’ win in Ahmedabad in 2008. **Ans: Dale Steyn; A.B. De Villiers**

Visual: Name this all-rounder. **Ans: Lance Klusener**

Early Birds: Tamal Biswas| Erfanally Oosmany| Sukdev Shet| Tito Shiladitya| Lalchand Bhutani



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

Upendran

“... the party was just great!”
“Tell me about it. I’m all ears.”
“You’re all ears?”
“When you tell someone that you’re ‘all ears’, it means that you are eager to listen to what they have to say. When he rose to speak, the children were all ears.”
“When the Physics teacher read out our marks, we were all ears.”
“Now that you have my ear, please continue. Tell...”
“...I have your ear? When did you give it to me? I never...”
“...when you ‘have someone’s ear’ you succeed in getting him/her to listen to you. He/she is willing to pay attention to what you have to say. While I had his ear, I told him about my problems.”
“Now that I have your ear, can I tell you about some of the things that have been happening in school?”
“Perhaps later. Here’s another example. I succeeded in getting my boss’ ear and explained to him why we should not market the new product.”
“Was he happy with what you said?”
“No, he wasn’t! He gave me an earful and sent me packing.”
“An earful of what?”
“When you give somebody ‘an earful’ you speak to them angrily.”
“I see. So, can I say, I get an earful from my mother every time I’m late.”
“You certainly can. The next time I run into my landlord I’m going to give him an earful.”
“Why? What has he done?”
“It’s not what he has done. It’s what he has not done. He promised to get my flat painted. That was more than a year ago.”
“Maybe whatever you say to him goes in one ear and out the other.”
“Hey, that’s very good. When I was young whatever my mother said used to go in one ear and out the other.”
“Ha! Ha! While we are on the subject of ‘ears’, does ‘lend an ear to someone’ mean the same thing as ‘have someone’s ear’?”
“When you ‘have someone’s ear’, you get someone to listen to you. When you ‘lend an ear to someone’, you are willing to listen to what someone has to say.”
“Friends! Indians! Countrymen! Lend me your ears.”
“I’d be delighted to lend you mine if you promise to tell me what happened at the party.”
“Most of the people there were talking about Sujatha’s new haircut.”
“Poor Sujatha! Her ears must have been burning.”
“But why would her ears burn?”
“...when you talk a lot about someone in their absence, you say his/her ears must be burning. For example, everyone was talking about our Chairman. His ears must have been burning.”
“I wouldn’t worry about Sujatha. She has no way of finding out what we said.”
“I wouldn’t be too sure about that. She has her ear to the ground, you know.”
“What does that mean?”
“Someone who has ‘his/her ear to the ground’ is aware of what is happening around him/her.”
Published in The Hindu on September 15, 1998.

Word of the day

Writhe:
to move in a twisting or contorted motion (especially when struggling)

Synonyms: squirm, twist, worm, wrestle, wriggle

Usage: *The prisoner writhed in discomfort.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/writhepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈɹaɪð/

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

Not above board

SEBI moving towards proper conflict-of-interest rules

When US short-seller Hindenburg Research levelled a battery of allegations against the then SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) chief in 2024, the official pushback was muted and unconvincing. This episode hinted at a lack of regulatory clarity on conflicts of interest issues with regard to top SEBI officials. Therefore, it comes as a relief to see the high-level committee chaired by former Chief Vigilance Commissioner Pratyush Sinha, do a thorough job of reviewing the extant regulatory framework to deal with conflicts of interest for the SEBI Chair and Board members.



The Committee has found yawning gaps in the regulations and suggests sweeping changes. One, rules regarding conflicts for SEBI Board members are strewn across several statutes, leading to confusion. Most norms are laid down in the 2008 code of conduct, which lacks legal enforceability. The Committee recommends that all regulations dealing with conflicts of interest be written into a unified law. Two, existing laws do not identify areas where conflicts may arise. The Committee lists out five such areas (financial and non-financial interests, investments, gifts, recusals and post-retirement employment) and suggests remedies. It proposes standardised definitions of terms such as conflicts of interest, family, relative and significant relationships.

Three, strangely SEBI employees are subject to much more stringent restrictions on their investing and trading activities than Board members. For instance, employees are automatically treated as ‘insiders’ under securities law and barred from trading, while there are no such restrictions for Board members. The panel seeks to correct this by treating Board members as permanent ‘insiders’ and prohibiting investments or trading by the Chair and Whole-time members (WTMs). Investments by the Chair, WTMs and employees should be only in professionally managed pooled vehicles. To prevent appointments of candidates with vested interests to the posts of SEBI Chair and WTMs, the panel suggests that applicants disclose actual and potential conflicts at the outset. Thereafter, they must make annual and event-based disclosures of assets, liabilities and trading activities. These will be publicly posted for the Chairperson, WTMs, Executive Directors, and Chief General Managers. Such public disclosures may be necessary, but in imposing such conditions further down the line a balance needs to be struck between preventing conflicts and attracting competent professionals who see such requirements as a breach of privacy. To ensure independent oversight, the committee suggests a separate Office of Ethics and Compliance and an Oversight Committee on Ethics and Compliance. It rightly moots a secure anonymous whistleblower system at SEBI.

These recommendations need to be codified into law without further ado. The government should also consider implementing some of these safeguards for the Reserve Bank of India, IRDAI, PFRDA and Employees Provident Fund Organisation.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



A VASUDEVAN

These are days of challenging global and domestic uncertainties. Global uncertainties are mainly associated with geopolitics of war, conflicts, and power playing out through an unpredictable imposition of tariffs.

Importantly, the rates that vary country by country and goods-categories impact domestic sentiments and expectations on the road ahead.

Domestic uncertainties arise as much from delays in policy interventions as from supply and demand-side factors. How does one then safeguard one’s wealth and balance asset holdings at such a time?

An ordinary investor invests her surplus income in various assets and tries to optimize the combination of risks (R1), returns (R2) and ready liquidity (R3). Given the uncertainties, investors also add criteria such as the unknown anticipation of the economic policy frame, political stability, social cohesion and business/investment opportunities both at home and abroad.

ASSET CLASS

Among the class of financial assets, cash, deposits, shares, government securities, pension funds, insurance and mutual funds are most understood.

The new financial assets are digital and in some senses they are abstract. They now attract a number of economic entities, including trust funds and are on the radar of opinion makers and influencers. NGOs, temples, churches and mosques may also increasingly enter the market for digital assets and stock markets with demat accounts.

The question is whether digital assets and stock markets gain at the expense of bank deposits or deposits with corporates or non-bank financial intermediaries. There is no definitive answer to this question.

However, intuitively speaking, the upward shift in the valuation of digital assets and stock markets will be a consideration for most asset holders and a part of such heightened valuations may also get back to deposits after a short time lag.

DIGITAL DILEMMA

In the absence of any regulation or official pronouncements on digital assets, a rise in issuance of rupee-based



Bringing financial reforms to the fore

REFORMS THRUST. The legal and regulatory fog over digital assets must be lifted soon. Ease of biz and legal reforms must also be given priority

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

digital coins like the US dollar based ‘stable’ coins may not be ruled out, particularly that there is now interest in official circles in internationalization of the Indian rupee.

If this happens, will there be international settlement of claims of such ‘stable’ digital coins issued in different countries under the aegis of an international payment and settlement infrastructure?

If the answer is positive, then why not make a clear official statement about the state of the digital assets with particular reference to cryptos and CBDCs (Central Bank Digital Currencies) and ‘stable’ coins and other derivatives thereof?

The last monetary policy statement missed the opportunity to handle this

Why not make a clear official statement about the state of the digital assets with particular reference to cryptos and CBDCs, ‘stable’ coins and other derivatives thereof?

matter. And the fiscal authorities have also not done enough to dispel the uncertainty about digital assets.

BUDGET IMPERATIVES

Perhaps the Budget for 2026-27 will be used to deal with this issue as also other structural reforms relating to banking and financial sector and credit flows, where the RBI has announced a significant package of measures in October 2025.

One hopes the Reserve Bank will also come soon with the findings of its internal research on regulatory overreach in matters relating to bank competitiveness and credit flows. It is only then that the credibility of the monetary policy statement of October 1, 2025, will be secured.

RBI MUST TAKE LEAD

The tempo provided by the October statement of the Reserve Bank needs to be maintained by fiscal authorities as well. Budget exercises will take place as usual with a focus on tax rates and expenditure allocations.

But there is now an urgent need to introduce some novelties on economy-wide reforms along with

empirically worked-out research documents at the time of presentation of the Budget for 2026-27.

These documents should necessarily deal with the pending reforms in the three areas of public finance, namely public expenditures including the one on defence, taxation and debt management. There should be more documents that go beyond the area of public finance. They should focus on reforms such as the ease of doing business, modalities in simplification of foreign exchange management, internationalization of the Indian rupee, labour, land and judiciary.

EASING THE PATH

The documents should provide a clear indication of the processes that should be taken up to limit bureaucratic obstacles and ministerial overreach.

Let the Budget announcement be titled differently to indicate the Budget for 2026-27 and the economic reforms programme that throws light on the approach towards a ‘Viksit Bharat’.

The writer is a former executive director of the RBI and presently an independent analyst (Through The Billion Press)

National Sample Surveys are robust and diverse

In 75 years, the NSS has reinvented itself, doing district level data collection, besides mapping capex and labour markets

Geeta Singh Rathore
MS Subramanya Rao

The National Sample Survey (NSS), since its first round of Household Consumption Expenditure Survey and other allied indicators in 1950, has for the last 75 years quietly but firmly anchored India’s National Statistical System, providing the reliable data to facilitate socio-economic policy, planning and evaluation.

Its large-scale sample surveys, intricate methodological frameworks and nationwide data-collection have offered the government, policymakers, industries, researchers and citizens a strong foundation on which diverse realities of India’s population, labour market, consumption patterns, health and education outcomes across States and sectors could be understood.

In recent years, the NSS has re-invented itself by taking up new initiatives to enhance frequency, diversity in subject coverage, granularity and most importantly timeliness.

The NSS is now working on a future-ready integrated system to meet the requirements of stakeholders in real-time with more granular data, being responsive to needs of both the private

and government sectors. Further, zonal offices have been re-envisioned as dynamic Regional Centres of Excellence for capacity building and improving data quality.

WIDENED SUBJECT COVERAGE

Over the last 75 years, through flagship surveys such as Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), Annual Survey of Unincorporated Enterprises, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES), Price Collection and Time Use Survey, NSS data has been the bedrock over which key economic indicators have been compiled in the country.

Now, NSS has widened the coverage to new areas like tourism, rail travel, capex intention of private sector, migration, health of MSME sector.

Additionally, NSS has undertaken short-term surveys on ICT skills and expense on education. The Forward-Looking Survey on Private Sector CAPEX Investment Intentions and others provide regular, reliable inputs for government and private sector alike for evidence based policy formulation and strategic decisions.

Further, to meet the growing demand for new and specialised surveys, NSS has empanelled survey institutions in the country.



NSS. Eventful journey

Since the beginning of 2025, the NSS’ focused aim was to strengthen decentralised governance and to meet the continued demands for district-level statistics of key socioeconomic indicators and made provision to generate district level estimates in all its surveys.

Most of the States have been on-boarded and provided hand-holding for technical and financial assistance through capacity building. District level estimates would help States for identification of intra-State disparities, evidence-based allocation of resources, strengthening outcome-based monitoring frameworks and local developmental planning.

NSO recently started publishing key

economic indicators on labour such as Workers Population Rate (WPR), Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and Unemployment Rate (UR) on monthly and key indicators like number of establishments, Gross value added (GVA) and number of workers in unincorporated sector on quarterly basis from PLFS and ASUSE survey respectively.

ADOPTION OF TECHNOLOGY

NSS has now embraced technology in a big way by adopting Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) for collection of data for all its surveys with built-in validation and quality checks and a provision for traceability on integrated e-Sigma platform with cloud storage.

To create awareness of data as a public good and with an aim to enhance transparency and user engagement, NSS has taken several initiatives to engage with a wide range of stakeholders.

As the National Statistics Office marks “75 Years of the National Sample Survey,” it is not simply reaching the milestone of 75 years, but rather celebrating being 75-years young — vibrant, agile and fully poised for the challenges ahead.

Rathore is, Director General, and Rao is Deputy Director General, National Statistics Office

✉ 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.

Not so soon

This refers to the article ‘AI just promoted the CTO – and fired HR’ (November 17). As long as organisations in the digital world will employ human beings including those who utilise agentic AI, a distinct HR function will be generated. It is, then, difficult to imagine that a specialist technologist can deal with issues involving human emotions, such as grievances, motivation, commitment, goal attainment, etc, by a technological approach alone. Earlier also the doom of HR was predicted when the internet did a better job of some HR functions. Yet, HR survived by new skill development for solving more intricate HR issues. Any technological disruption so far has not succeeded in devouring HR as a discipline.

YG Chouksey
Pune

CHROs needing a reasonable level of tech acumen is understandable. However, the CTO “canibalizing” CHRO does not stand to reason. Already in the West, firms that invested heavily in AI are concerned over its slow adoption are losing on both counts — no return on new investment and depletion of resource for core business. Logically it’s the other way round. CTOs need to equip themselves with behavioural knowledge of those whom they are engaged with, especially employees. Identifying and retaining talent is the hallmark of a mature technology leader. In fact, it evidently is among the core KPA parameters by which CTO is evaluated.

Angara Venkata Girijakumar
Chennai

Migration

This refers to “Repeating an Old

Indian Mistake” (November 17). The article rightly highlights how the West’s growing resistance to immigration mirrors past economic missteps. In reality, societies that restrict either capital or labour often end up weakening their own competitiveness, while also fuelling social division. The current pushback against migrants stems as much from anxiety as from economics, yet it risks undermining the very growth and innovation these countries rely on. Instead of framing immigration as a threat, governments could focus on regulated, skills-based entry and stronger integration policies, ensuring that both citizens and newcomers contribute meaningfully. A balanced approach would help nations safeguard economic vitality while reducing public fear and political backlash.

A Myilsami
Coimbatore

Climate worries

The recent report by 130 scientists of the Global Carbon Project casts a worrying light on the emission patterns of major economies, highlighting that current decarbonisation efforts are insufficient to avert the severe consequences of global warming. Although renewable energy has overtaken coal as the primary source of electricity and global carbon emissions may stabilise by 2030, these developments fall short of achieving the Paris Agreement’s 1.5°C target. In the backdrop of CoP30, it is crucial that the stark warnings in the report are not overlooked. A roadmap for expanding clean energy, and strong measures to safeguard lives and livelihoods from climate disasters, are needed.

M Jeyaram
Sholavandan (TN)

Banks’ conundrum

This refers to the news report ‘ECL norms: RBI may lower floor for Stage 2 loan provision to 1-3%’. The RBI is set to embrace new standards for the Asset portfolio under Expected Credit Loss (ECL) model. Provisioning under ECL are quite high especially under Stage 2 which would hit the bottomline and operating ratios of banks. Indian banks lend to Agriculture, Housing, Education and MSME sectors under Priority Sector Lending wherein, stringent norms for asset classification and provisioning would be weighed in many other factors apart from the number of days it remained in overdue. ECL must be adopted after receiving feedback from the banking sector.

RV Baskaran
Pune

Disclosing interest rates

Banks can mislead customers if presentation varies

Lost in yield (in %)					
	Bank A	Bank B		Bank C	
	Interest rate	Interest rate	Annualised yield	Interest rate	Effective annualised yield
1 year	7	7	7.19	7	7.19
3 years	7.25	7.25	7.45	7.25	7.49
37 months to 38 months	7.20	7.20	7.40	7.2	7.96

N Gnanabharathi

A few days ago, I received a WhatsApp message from a close friend who happens to be a doctor. He wanted to park some funds in fixed deposits and wanted to know which bank offered the best rate. The message came with screenshots from four or five banks’ websites, neatly listing terms like interest rate (p.a.), annualised yield, and effective annualised yield. “Can you tell me which one I should choose?” he asked, adding “And by the way, what’s the difference between these three?”

For a moment, I was amused. Here was someone who could effortlessly explain complex metabolic pathways, now bewildered by three familiar-looking numbers from banks. But as I began looking at those screenshots myself, I realised that even a financially literate person could be momentarily thrown off. The way banks disclose their fixed deposit (FD) rates today is not uniform — and that, I discovered, is the root of the confusion.

THREE DIFFERENT WAYS
On visiting the websites of three banks — let’s call them Bank A, Bank B, and Bank C — I found that each spoke a different dialect of the same financial language. Bank A displayed only the simple rate of interest, plain and direct. Bank B presented both the rate of interest and an annualised yield, which shows the total return if interest is compounded quarterly. Bank C went a step further, publishing the rate of interest alongside an effective annualised yield, which represents the compounded return over a year, slightly higher than the annualised yield (see Table).

At first glance, it appears that Bank C offers the most attractive return. But that’s not quite true. All three banks are, in fact, offering the same simple rate; the variation lies only in how the figures are presented. The simple rate is the nominal interest offered without accounting for compounding. The annualised

yield reflects the return when interest is compounded quarterly. The effective annualised yield represents the compounded return over a full period. They describe the same deposit in three different ways, but unless one knows the arithmetic behind them, the numbers seem to tell three different stories.

As I went deeper into the subject, I revisited the Reserve Bank of India’s Master Circular on interest rates on deposits. It clearly mentions that banks must indicate the simple rate of interest per annum and not highlight only the compounded yield while soliciting deposits. The intent is straightforward: customers should be able to see the actual rate they earn, not just the enhanced version that looks numerically higher because of compounding.

My friend’s confusion now seemed entirely justified. When a doctor, an engineer, or even a banker from another domain looks at these disclosures, they are not comparing identical metrics. What appears as 7.19 per cent on one website may actually correspond to 7 per cent on another if expressed on the same basis.

After our exchange, I explained to my friend that if two banks quote rates differently, the only way to compare them fairly is to bring them to a common base — the simple rate of interest. The yield figures can still be useful, but they should be seen as illustrations of how compounding enhances returns over time, not as the headline rate.

Banks perhaps follow their own legacy systems of presentation, or perhaps believe that customers find yields more appealing. But as long as these variations persist, every new depositor will end up repeating my doctor friend’s question: “Which one should I believe?” If all banks speak the same interest language, every depositor — from the doctor on WhatsApp to the senior citizen at the branch counter — can finally understand what their money truly earns.

The writer is a senior banker



GOVIND BHATTACHARJEE

The massive mandate given by the voters to the NDA brings great responsibility. Bihar voters have commendably rejected Tejashwi Yadav’s reckless promises including one government job to every family. But NDA has also made many promises — ₹10,000 each to 1.5 crore women extendable to ₹2 lakh, 125 units of free electricity, raising assistance and pension for farmers, fishermen, senior citizens, etc., monthly scholarship to SC students, assistance to EBCs, plus a host of other welfare schemes.

The total estimated cost of these would exceed ₹50,000 crore annually, which would eliminate its current capital outlay of ₹40,000 crore (FY 2026 BE), if its fiscal deficit of ₹33,000 crore (3 per cent of GSDP) is not to go up. Honouring all these promises may send the State irreversibly towards bankruptcy.

With debt amounting to 37 per cent of GSDP and continued strain from elevated primary deficits, Bihar cannot afford to borrow any further. Its only hope possibly lies in ending its prohibition policy. Bihar has not recovered from the loss of revenues from excise duty (ED) and VAT on alcohol after prohibition was imposed in April 2016 and it immediately forfeited ₹4,500 crore in ED and VAT. Its own taxes then constituted around 7 per cent of its GSDP, now only 5.7 per cent.

Prohibition is Nitish Kumar’s pet scheme, but it has been an unmitigated social and economic disaster. Its purpose remains defeated as booze is freely available everywhere in Bihar including at Patna.

Bootleggers selling spurious liquor at sky-high prices are doing roaring business, because none can complain to the police even if one falls sick after drinking. More than 13 lakh people have been arrested for violating prohibition, nearly all from the most marginalised castes, depriving families of their sole bread-earners. Jails have overflowed and Bihar’s painfully slow and dysfunctional judicial system has been clogged by as many additional cases even as illicit liquor continues to flow freely from neighbouring states and Nepal.

One Dalit community — the Pasis — which entirely depended on toddy making — has been stripped of its livelihood. Nitish must take a realistic look at it. Reversing it may also bring in additional funds for his new promises.

REVENUE ESTIMATES
Bihar’s excise revenue was ₹3,140 crore in 2016. My research indicates that exponential regression model is a much more accurate predictor of Bihar’s revenues than linear regression, according to which Bihar’s excise revenue would have increased to ₹11,600 crore in FY 2026, even at 2016

How NDA can fulfil its promises in Bihar

HARD DECISIONS. Scrapping prohibition and earning tax revenues from liquor is perhaps the only way for the NDA to fund its schemes



RANJEET KUMAR

rates. In the absence of post-2016 data, the only way to estimate the total VAT collection including that from alcohol from time-series data till 2016, was to compute the difference from current collections of sales tax including SGST which has nil contribution from alcohol. This yields ₹8,200 crore as the VAT lost from prohibition.

Thus, without prohibition, Bihar would have earned additional ₹19,800 crore in FY 2026 — which is one-third of Bihar’s current own revenues, even at 2016 rates of ED and VAT.

Many States finance a large part of their welfare expenditure from the taxes they raise from alcohol. Liquor taxation is complex: States levy a per-unit ED, additional ED, and VAT on the sale of alcohol, at varying rates. Some

By ending prohibition while raising rates, the State can easily increase its revenue by ₹40,000 crore in 2-3 years’ time, which will absorb a significant part of its additional fiscal burden on account of election promises

monopolise wholesale or retail trade of liquor — the state-owned Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) and Kerala State Beverages Corporation (KSBC) control both the wholesale and retail liquor vending of IMFL/liquor within their territories.

Tamil Nadu levies a flat 58 per cent VAT on the first sale of alcoholic liquors to wholesalers.

Retail sale to consumers through TASMAC outlets and licensed bars attract further levies of VAT ranging from 220-260 per cent depending on the kind of liquor.

The VAT is in addition to ED between ₹198 and ₹317 per proof litre (one litre of alcohol at 100 per cent proof, equivalent to 57.1 per cent alcohol by volume) when manufactured within the State and a special fee ranging from ₹32 to ₹714 per proof litre when imported.

The taxes will easily transform a basic manufactured cost of ₹200 for a 750 ml bottle to a retail price of around ₹2,000, including retail margins and agency commissions, of which the government will earn about ₹1,500.

In 2023-24, Tamil Nadu spent 54 per cent of its revenue expenditure budget on committed expenditure. The rest — ₹1.41 lakh crore, can thus be taken as welfare expenditure on various schemes and subsidies. Its total revenue from

alcohol in ED and VAT amounted to ₹45,855 crore, which financed almost one-third of its total welfare expenditure. That is a smart way of doing things. States like Kerala, Karnataka and even neighbouring West Bengal also collect a significant portion of their welfare expenditure from alcohol.

Before prohibition was imposed, Bihar used to levy a 50 per cent VAT on alcohol. If the new government ends prohibition while raising rates, it can easily increase its revenue by ₹40,000 crore in 2-3 years’ time, which will absorb a significant part of its additional fiscal burden on account of election promises.

It can honour all of it through careful phasing over the five years it has; also, by reviewing all existing schemes and effecting better synergy through merger of similar schemes and elimination of others, and harmonisation with the centrally sponsored schemes. Welfare spending is not a luxury for Bihar, and if implemented with discipline and planning, NDA can face the electorate again with the confidence of fulfilling its promises.

The writer is Professor, Arun Jaitley National Institute of Financial Management, and a former DG of CAG of India. Views expressed are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

November 18, 2005

Govt revives move to divest 15% stake in SCI

The Government has decided to revive the public sector disinvestment process by diluting its stake by 15 per cent in Shipping Corporation of India (SCI), a profit-making ‘miniratna’ company. At present, the Government holds 80.12 per cent stake in the shipping company

Mahindra inks deal with US co to make trucks, buses

Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd (M&M) and International Truck & Engine Corporation of the US formally signed their earlier announced agreement for a 51:49 joint venture to manufacture trucks and buses in India. According to Mr Anand Mahindra, Managing Director, the move will widen M&M’s presence in the transport industry and scale up its business.

Now IT’s the battle of headcount

Foreign players including IBM, Accenture and CSC are scaling-up their India headcount on a war-footing. While bellwether Indian firms such as Infosys and HCL Technologies added 26,012 employees, and 17,627 employees respectively between 2001-02 and 2004-05, IBM and CSC added close to 17,000 and 1,500 employees, respectively, between 2002 and 2004.

China resorts to steepest spending cut in 4 years

Bloomberg News

China’s broad fiscal spending slumped in October by the most since at least 2021, crippling a key driver of investment and economic growth.

The combined expenditure in China’s two main budgets — the general public account and the government-managed fund book — tumbled 19 per cent in October from a year earlier to 2.37 trillion yuan (\$334 billion), according to Bloomberg calculations based on data released by the Ministry of Finance on Monday.

It was the steepest slide since comparable data started in early 2021, while the value of money spent was the least since July 2023.

The plunge reflects an evolution of government policies and underlines waning fiscal support for the world’s second-largest economy, which lost steam across the board last month.

SLUGGISH CONSUMPTION

Investment, a large part of which is driven by budget expenditure, posted an unprecedented decline in October, adding to a drag from sluggish consumption and weaker foreign demand.

The contraction in budget spending also indicates that fresh stimulus added since late September will likely take time to trickle through the economy. The 500 billion yuan in new policy financing tools to spur investment was only fully deployed by the end of last



FOCUS. On containing debt risks REUTERS

month, the government has said.

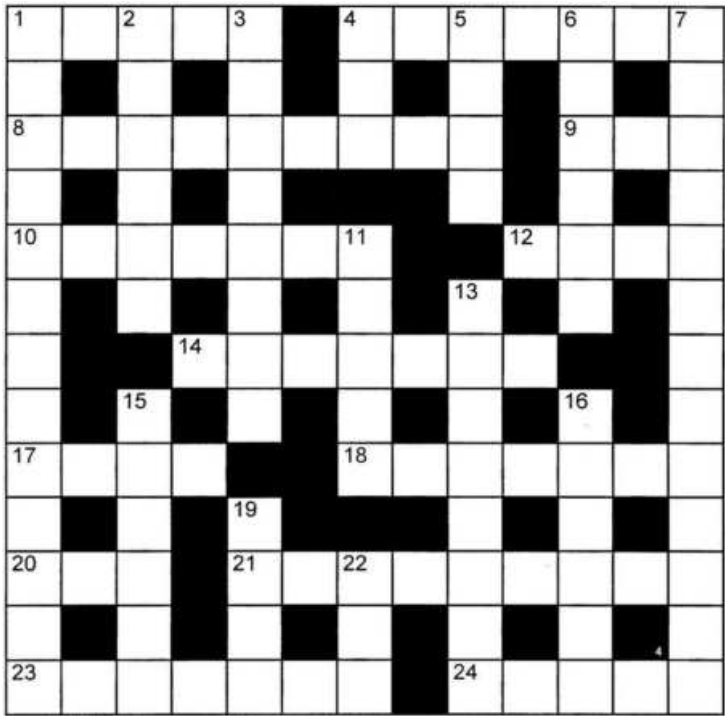
Another 500 billion yuan in special local government bond quota was announced in mid-October, but only 40 per cent of it was meant for qualified provinces to invest in projects. The move suggests Chinese authorities are leaning towards containing debt risks now that Beijing’s growth target of

around 5 per cent for this year looks safely within reach.

“Policymakers seem pleased about economic growth in 2025 and believe announced stimulus should allow them to hit this year’s target,” said Michelle Lam, Greater China economist at Societe Generale SA.

Therefore “markets are looking forward to fiscal support in 2026,” she said. For the first 10 months of the year, the broad government expenditure totalled 30.7 trillion yuan, with its growth rate slowing to 5.2 per cent. The combined government income edged up 0.2 per cent to 22.1 trillion yuan. That left the broad budget deficit at 8.6 trillion yuan, 20.6 per cent more than during the same period last year. BLOOMBERG

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2826



EASY

ACROSS

- Crumple, squeeze together (5)
- Quack remedy (7)
- Unaffectedly (9)
- Sow, boar (3)
- Messenger, runner (7)
- Cut top of tree (4)
- Obscure vision of (7)
- Steep in liquid (4)
- Mental feeling (7)
- Largest living deer (3)
- Danseuse (9)
- A glut (7)
- Portuguese river (5)

DOWN

- State of being aware (13)
- False, dishonest (6)
- Very unpleasant, detestable (8)
- No score (3)
- Sauce made from type of bean (4)
- A bird of prey (6)
- Those with delusions of greatness (13)
- Wash soap out (5)
- Fragrant, smelling of (8)
- Fairground tout advertising show (6)
- Languishing with longing (6)
- Woodwind instrument (4)
- Destiny (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- An infatuation with a drink? That’s soft (5)
- Nor must it produce its pet cure (7)
- A turn might be taken by friendly nation, as you’d expect (9)
- Be greedy as one eats a bit of orange (3)
- Messenger given our rice to sort out (7)
- How to vote, parrot-fashion (4)
- Intermittent flashing light will restrict a horse’s vision (7)
- Heavily tax the habitual drinker (4)
- Feeling one might be about to omit it (7)
- It’s like a moose in a hotel kitchen (3)
- Dancer using Braille– an unusual form (9)
- There’s too much made of fur ties (7)
- River where a tug turns south (5)

DOWN

- Cousins making scones in a wakeful state (13)
- False turn taken, due to losing leader (6)
- Very nasty to find right bone in a cavity (8)
- No goals turning up in League first (3)
- Nothing one could say about bean sauce (4)
- Bird of prey, or part it may play (6)
- Those with lust for power could let meal go to madmen (13)
- Has risen in order to get the soap out (5)
- Fragrant colour smelling of the rest (8)
- Showman who touts for a dog (6)
- Languishing quietly at home with a gin cocktail (6)
- Cockney tramp will start entertainment with this instrument (4)
- Much that may come under the auctioneer’s hammer (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2825

ACROSS 2. Cigar 5. Cash 7. Drop 8. Eviction 9. Dissents 11. Able 12. Characterised 15. Fang 17. Coldness 19. Compiled 21. Bags 22. Wean 23. Sings

DOWN 1. Tarnish 2. Cup 3. Green 4. Reissue 5. Cat 6. Shoal 10. Shrug 11. Asian 13. Cockles 14. Ensigns 16. Above 18. Laden 20. Pun 21. Bus

A level playing field

Case-by-case treatment in telecom should be avoided

Vodafone Idea (Vi) is hopeful that the government, which holds 49 per cent in the telco, would look at a long-term solution to its pending dues linked to adjusted gross revenue (AGR). The confidence, expressed at a recent earnings call, is based on the latest Supreme Court decision allowing the Centre to reassess the telco's AGR up to FY17. While the court has permitted the government to review the entire AGR dues following the telco's concern over calculation errors, there should not be any special dispensation for one company. The focus should be on a uniform policy for the telecom sector. A case-by-case treatment of entities could go against the spirit of level playing field and risk triggering legal complications.

This is not the first time that the Union government is considering a relief measure for the financially stressed telco. In 2021, the Centre had approved a package for the sector to prevent a duopoly situation. In business, duopoly is typically seen as anti-competitive, and from that perspective, the government had offered a relief package for the financially stressed sector at that point. As part of the package, in 2023, the government converted Vi's interest dues, worth ₹6,133 crore, into equity of around 33 per cent. Subsequently, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) converted another ₹36,950 crore of Vi's dues, pushing the government equity in the telco to 49 per cent. An additional equity of just above 1 per cent would make the Union government a majority shareholder in the telco. Until recently, government representatives have maintained that there will not be any further conversion of Vi's debt into equity. This stand should not change. In fact, the government has the responsibility of turning around the two state-owned telcos — Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd (MTNL). This itself should help the sector to steer clear of a duopoly situation.

Indeed, Vi needs a fix for its financial liabilities, which are estimated at around ₹2 trillion. Of this, AGR accounts for ₹79,500 crore. The telco made efforts to raise funds in the past and now needs to go all out in that direction. Vi, along with other telcos, must also pay attention to rationalising tariffs so that their monthly average revenue per user (Arpu) turns healthier than what it is now. Vi's Arpu, a key metric that describes the financial viability of a telco, has shown some improvement in the September-ended quarterly result but is much lower than that of its rivals — Airtel and Jio.

Telecom, as an important consumer-facing industry, needs to regain its robustness in the Indian market. Not too long ago, the Indian telecom market was a destination for several foreign investors. For that to happen again, the government should play the role of a facilitator for businesses by eliminating red tape and framing easier rules. With the sector looking to expand into newer areas such as 6G as well as satellite broadband, it will be looking to the government as an enabler. This would help the telecom ecosystem grow and compete on the world stage. Waiving financial dues and providing relief packages can serve short-term purposes, and may not go a long way in strengthening a sector. Rather than trying to prevent a duopoly scenario for the sake of it, the government can review the levies and duties it charges telcos. Such an approach can go a long way in fixing a systemic problem.

Data governance

The rules will offer individuals protection

The notification of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules last week gives the DPDP Act operational clarity in defining how consent is to be taken, breaches reported, minors' data protected, and on how cross-border data flows. Entities guilty of breaches could face penalties of up to ₹250 crore. There is an 18-month runway to full compliance by May 2027. The framework offers privacy-by-design, minimises data retention, and enforces accountability in line with constitutional protections for digital personal data (DPD).

The Right to Information Act, 2005, has required amendment to align itself with the DPDP Act. Expectedly, the amendment attracted criticism for removing the obligation of government bodies to provide personal information if the public interest outweighs the right to privacy for public officials. The new Data Protection Board of India, appointed by the Union government, will oversee the space, with virtual hearings, digital filings, electronic orders, and digital evidence management. The rules designate companies processing large volumes of data, or operating in sensitive sectors, as "significant data fiduciaries", facing higher compliance requirements. This is similar to the European Union model of tiered oversight. A governance framework is laid out for consent managers — intermediaries helping users to manage permissions, while ideally helping to ease frictions of consent and compliance. Consent managers must meet strict qualification conditions like barring individuals with moral turpitude, capital adequacy, the interoperability between platforms, security, and transparency. It remains to be seen how well this innovation works.

The rules as a whole offer individuals more protection and greater knowledge about who is collecting and holding data, and also some control over personal data. Platforms must now provide collection notices that are "clear, standalone, and free of unrelated or bundled content". The notice must specify what data is collected, and why, and how users can withdraw consent. Withdrawing consent must be made as easy as giving it. The rules also place emphasis on safeguarding minors' data. Platforms must verify their age and seek consent from guardians. In practice, these requirements will impact many apps. Consequently, global platforms with Indian users may need to review processes of local consent to comply.

Emphasis on protecting minors clearly affects edtech platforms, gaming companies, social-media applications, and over-the-top platforms with many under-18 users. Similar protection is extended to persons with disabilities, where permission and verification may be done through court-appointed guardians or certified institutions. Breach notifications are immediate and mandatory. If data breaches occur, companies must notify affected users without delay and also provide the Data Protection Board detailed reports including the chronology, data types, risks, and mitigation steps taken. Data fiduciaries and processors must incorporate risk assessments, encryption, logs of access, security reviews, and disposal protocols. All personal processing logs must be retained for a minimum of one year even if the user withdraws consent. Most DPD may be transferred to any country except nations that are specifically restricted. But data related to national security, critical infrastructure, or high-risk sectors may require mandatory local storage. This is a more flexible cross-border protocol than earlier attempts to force total data localisation. In sum, the rules offer individuals a degree of greater protection but exemption for the government can increase risk.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

Shielding homes in financial distress

A decade-long delay in individual insolvency protections leaves families vulnerable

Consider a citizen who owns a single home and takes a small loan to start a modest business. Through no fault of her own, perhaps due to adverse economic conditions, she fails to repay an instalment of the loan. Should her only home be taken away, rendering her and her family homeless merely because she attempted entrepreneurship? The legislature, through the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 (IBC), has answered this question with compassion and principle. Part III of the IBC, which provides for individual insolvency, incorporates a humane safeguard protecting a debtor's single dwelling unit. However, this protection has remained dormant for about a decade because Part III is still awaiting notification, leaving those it seeks to protect without recourse.

Two recent developments heighten the constitutional and legislative rationale for bringing this protection into effect. First, in *Mansi Brar Fernandes* (2025), the Supreme Court has reaffirmed that the right to shelter is an integral part of the right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. The court has emphasised that a home is not merely a roof over one's head; it embodies hopes and dreams, provides a safe space for a family, and offers a refuge from life's uncertainties. The case highlighted the recurring injustice meted out to homebuyers who invested their life's savings in housing projects, only to be left stranded due to the developer's default. The court recognised the legislative initiative giving homebuyers a voice in insolvency proceedings, enabling them to secure their homes when the developers faced financial distress.

This reasoning builds on a robust line of constitutional jurisprudence treating shelter as part of the moral architecture of the Constitution. In *Olga Tellis* (1985), the court held that livelihood and shelter were inseparable facets of the right to life, reading Article 21 as a positive

guarantee. In *Chameli Singh* (1996), it described a home as the space where a person could grow physically, mentally, intellectually, and spiritually. Together, these decisions affirm the state's constitutional obligation to create and enforce legal frameworks that secure housing and prevent exploitation of homebuyers.

Second, on October 9, the Kerala Legislative Assembly passed the Kerala Single Dwelling Place Protection Bill, 2025, to shield vulnerable families from losing their only home to small-loan foreclosures. The Bill extends protection to modest loans up to ₹5 lakh and caps dues, including interest and penalties, at ₹10 lakh. Eligibility

is calibrated to economic vulnerability: The borrower must own no more than five cents of land in urban areas or 10 cents in rural areas, and must lack alternative assets and realistic repayment capacity. The statute establishes district and state-level committees that examine cases, mediate with lenders, and, in deserving situations, recommend financial assistance to help settle dues. Its design is targeted, not to write off debt indiscriminately but to prevent families from losing their sole dwelling to a small debt spiral.

Part III of the IBC sets the process for resolving the stress of individuals, proprietorships, and partnerships, and, where necessary, liquidating their assets. It, however, keeps certain assets beyond the reach of the insolvency process. These include tools of the trade essential for livelihood, basic household furniture and effects, and limited personal ornaments of sentimental or religious value. Significantly, it excludes a single unencumbered dwelling unit value up to the prescribed threshold. The principle is not to immunise wealth but to preserve a minimum platform for a dignified living, balancing both sides, and enabling creditors to recover what is due in a predictable manner, while ensuring that



M S SAHOO AND RAGHAV PANDEY

The good run of inflation targeting

Next year a critical policy review looms for the Indian government: Whether to retain or revise the inflation-targeting framework, a cornerstone of India's monetary policy for a decade. Critics have been pushing for major changes — ranging from tweaking the target number to redefining the target variable, or even shifting the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) core mandate. However, a major revision now would be unwise because evidence shows that the framework has delivered.

India's formal adoption of inflation targeting in 2016 marked a fundamental shift in the way monetary policy was conducted. Until then, the RBI had been juggling several goals — rapid economic growth, adequate credit flow, and a stable exchange rate. This left its primary responsibility of controlling inflation somewhat diffused. The 2016 reform fixed that by giving the RBI a single, clear mandate: Keep the inflation rate based on the consumer price index (CPI) at 4 per cent, give or take 2 percentage points. This framework made the central bank's objective both clearer and easier to evaluate.

For a country that had struggled with high and volatile inflation for years before adopting the framework, this was a major reform. And by the simplest measure, it delivered: The average CPI inflation rate since 2015 has been about half of what it was in the decade before.

That said, lower inflation by itself does not prove that the framework has succeeded. Prices can fall for reasons that have nothing to do with monetary policy — like a global drop in commodity prices or strong agricultural output. In fact, studies show that such favourable shocks played a big role in bringing the inflation rate down soon after the framework was introduced. Critics point to this and argue that the success in this respect was driven more by good luck than by sound policy.

But this argument overlooks the real test, which came later. Between 2022 and 2024, global energy and food prices spiked after war in Ukraine started. In India, the food inflation rate averaged about 7 per cent. Yet, barring a few months, the overall inflation rate

stayed within the target band for most of this period. This was a sharp contrast to the pre-framework years, when similar shocks routinely pushed the inflation rate into double digits. This stability suggests that something deeper than good luck is at work: The RBI has built credibility.

Credibility is at the heart of any inflation-targeting regime. It captures the public's confidence that the central bank will follow through on its commitment to keep prices in check. When households and firms trust the RBI, temporary supply shocks, such as spikes in food or fuel prices, do not immediately feed into long-term inflation expectations. In other words, expectations stay anchored. And once expectations are anchored, inflation itself becomes easier to manage because firms are less likely to raise other prices in response to a shock, and workers are less likely to demand higher wages.

This sets off a virtuous cycle. Credibility keeps expectations anchored, stable expectations help keep prices low, and low inflation in turn strengthens credibility.

There are signs that this cycle is beginning to take hold in India. Surveys show that while people still expect the inflation rate to be higher than the 4 per cent target, their expectations fluctuate far less than they once did. Research by RBI economists Sitikantha Pattnaik, G V Nadhanael, and Silu Muduli (2023) finds that households' inflation expectations have become less sensitive to short-term price movements — another indication that expectations are gradually becoming more anchored.

Studies of professional forecasters show the same pattern. Research by Bhanu Pratap and Kundan Kishor (2023) and by IMF (International Monetary Fund) economists Patrick Blagrave and Weicheng Lian (2020) finds that medium-term inflation forecasts have become more stable and less sensitive to short-term inflation surprises. In our own research (Vaishali Garga, Aemait Lakdawala and Rajeswari Sengupta, 2022), we find that professional forecasters now expect the RBI to react more strongly to rising inflation than it did before the inflation-targeting regime. Their expectations have also



RAJESWARI SENGUPTA AND VAISHALI GARGA

the process does not render people homeless.

Since Part III of the IBC is not yet operational, individuals with small business debts or personal borrowings cannot invoke the Code's protection for a single dwelling unit. For such families, access to Part III can be the difference between recovery and ruin. They have access to colonial era statutes, namely, the Provincial Insolvency Act, 1920, and the Presidency Towns Insolvency Act, 1909. These antiquated regimes are largely non-functional and ill-suited to modern economic realities.

Notifying Part III would enable individual debtors to approach the adjudicating authority, negotiate repayment plans, and obtain a discharge after reasonable effort. It would provide a transparent forum for creditors and debtors to negotiate under judicial oversight, bringing predictability to a space that currently invites ad hoc responses. For lenders, clarity about protected assets improves risk assessment and encourages responsible underwriting. For households, it restores the possibility of good-faith resolution without the threat of destitution.

This is not a call to privilege debtors over creditors. Credit markets thrive on certainty, and Part III respects creditor rights while establishing a baseline of dignity for debtors. By drawing the boundary openly, the Code enhances the quality of credit, allowing lenders to design contracts and security structures that reflect protected assets from the outset.

There is also a pragmatic administrative advantage. A functioning individual insolvency regime channels disputes into a specialised forum, reducing the multiplicity of proceedings and social costs. The adjudicating authority can consolidate issues, supervise repayment plans, and monitor compliance, while enabling households to re-enter the economy with a clean slate. The fresh start process under Part III will particularly alleviate the suffering of individuals with almost no income or assets, offering them a structured and dignified exit from unmanageable debt.

Had Part III been operational, it was unlikely that the Kerala government would have enacted a separate statute to protect single-dwelling units. If the delay continues, other provincial governments may craft piecemeal solutions, risking inconsistency and suboptimal outcomes, including a fragmented national credit market. Each passing year of inaction widens the gap between constitutional promise and practical protection, and it does so at the cost of families already suffering due to financial distress, families for whom the right to shelter is not a matter of legal abstraction but a matter of daily survival and dignity.

Finally, the constitutional dimension merits emphasis. When the judiciary reaffirms shelter as integral to the right to life and the legislature provides a statutory framework that concretely advances the right of indebted individuals, including the protection of their dwelling unit, an indefinite executive pause in its implementation undermines both constitutional fidelity and moral responsibility.

The authors are, respectively, former distinguished professor and assistant professor at the National Law University Delhi. The views are personal

become less responsive to shocks in oil prices. Together, this evidence suggests that India's recent inflation stability is not just the result of favourable global factors. It reflects a steady buildup of policy credibility.

In this context, making major changes to the framework would be risky because it could undermine the credibility that has been built since 2016. This does not mean the framework cannot be improved. Rather, any changes should focus on better data, greater transparency, and clearer communication — not on rewriting the core rules. Two areas for improvement stand out.

First, the RBI's survey of household inflation expectations needs a major upgrade. At present, it asks people mainly about expected price changes over the next three months or one year. The survey should be redesigned to capture households' longer-term inflation expectations more effectively. This would offer far more useful insights for policy because decisions about saving, investing, or negotiating salaries depend on how people expect inflation to evolve over several years — not just in the near term.

Second, policymakers need better information on what businesses expect. Since firms are the ones that set prices and wages, their view of future inflation is crucial. Yet India currently lacks systematic data on firms' inflation expectations. The RBI could address this gap by regularly surveying firms and publishing the results. This would help the central bank judge whether price pressures are becoming entrenched and enable it to respond more effectively.

The next decade will bring fresh challenges — climate-related supply shocks, volatile energy prices, and global financial uncertainties. The best way for India to prepare is by preserving and strengthening the RBI's hard-won credibility. If, instead, the framework is rewritten and trust in monetary policy is weakened, rebuilding that credibility could take another decade or more.

The authors are, respectively, with the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research and Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and should not be reported as representing the views of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, the principals of the Board of Governors, or the Federal Reserve System

The republic in words



ADITI PHADNIS

A disclaimer: Smita Gupta has been a respected colleague, always thorough, thoughtful and incisive in her critique of society and politics. She brings to bear the same qualities to this anthology of parliamentary oratory.

Ms Gupta covered Parliament for over three decades. Anyone who has reported from the press gallery even for a day knows how challenging it is, not just to summarise some truly brilliant speeches that are frequently made in the two Houses but also to sit through interminable, boring and often

repetitive discourses (although, it must be said, lately this has become easier because disruption and adjournment for the day have become commonplace!) So, Ms Gupta deserves applause because she has painstakingly ploughed through decades of parliamentary speeches, determined which ones should be included and which dropped, and organised them in a way that brings history alive.

The anthology has 12 sections — covering social spheres (from gender to politics), contemporary issues (economic liberalisation, the India-US nuclear deal), and concerns that continue to be debated in the country (civic space, religious fault lines). Every speech is prefaced with a short foreword that places the speech and the speaker in their historical and political context.

In her introduction Ms Gupta explains the dilemmas and issues she faced in selecting the speeches. In the Indian Par-

liament, speeches can be made in any Indian language, though the most common is Hindi. In some cases, translations were available, but in many just a summary. So she could not, she says, include Atai Bhari Vajpayee's speech after the creation of Bangladesh, for instance, because only a summary of the original Hindi version was available. Some speeches have been included, it appears, for the trenchant wit the speakers displayed, like Piloo Mody's on the Maintenance of Internal Security Bill ("We are not living in the reign of bloody Elizabeth I. We are living in the reign of Indira Gandhi, the last, I hope."). Others, like P Chidambaram's critique of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, are included for their clarity and the ease with which they reveal the politics of the legislation. In the same section, you hear the raw fear and anxiety in the voice of Sikkim Member of Parliament (MP) Hishey Lachungpa who

wonders if this is one step towards the dilution of Article 371 (F) that ensures the special status of the state that joined India only in 1975.

India's journey towards a liberalised economy is signposted by budget speeches: Finance Ministers John Matthai (Budget for 1950-51), Manmohan Singh (Budget for 1991-92), P Chidambaram (Budget for 1997-98) and Yashwant Sinha (Budget for 2000-01). While these stand out for the policy intervention they represented rather than their oratorical brilliance, there are other equally interesting speeches such as Lal Prasad's railway budget speech (2006-07), showing an administrator face of the former Bihar chief minister the state never saw, that could have found mention in the volume.

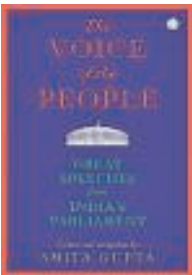
Ms Gupta's selection captures not the speeches alone but the parry and thrust that go on between the treasury and Opposition benches. CPI (M) leader, the late Sitaram Yechury never disrupted parliament. Yet his pointed interventions while Finance Minister Arun Jaitley attempted to defend the Aadhaar

(Targeted delivery of financial and other subsidies, benefits and services) Bill 2016 as a money Bill are enlivening. The following speech by Congress MP Jairam Ramesh explains why the Aadhaar is not and should not be a money Bill because it was designed only as proof of identity and highlights issues around privacy. The speeches reveal layers of thinking and cogitation about India's programme of unique identity and direct benefit transfer. A similar tension is reflected in the speech by then Prime Minister V P Singh on the acceptance of the Mandal Commission report and leader of opposition Rajiv Gandhi's interventions.

The volume has many stars and one is Omar Abdullah's "I am a Muslim, and I am an Indian" speech made in defence of the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement when he was a Union minister in the

United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. He says: "Sir, the enemies of Indian Muslims are not the Americans, and the enemies of the Indian Muslims are not 'deals' like this. The enemies of Indian Muslims are the same enemies that all the poor people of India face, namely, poverty and hunger, unemployment, lack of development and the absence of a voice. It is that we are against, namely, the effort being made to crush our voice". The speeches on gender — Sati, the women's reservation bill and others — address both perception and reality.

Parliamentary speeches bring history alive, especially its nuances. Ms Gupta's book is much more than just a curation: it captures the evolution of India as a democratic republic. All Indians must read this book to understand what we were as a republic, what we have become and where the threats to freedom lie.



Voice of the people: Great speeches from India's Parliament Edited by Smita Gupta Published by Juggernaut 544 pages ₹999



Hasina death sentence is a travesty of justice

THE INTERNATIONAL Crimes Tribunal's (ICT) verdict, sentencing former Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina to death, is blatantly prejudiced. On Monday, a three-judge bench awarded Hasina the maximum sentence on two counts linked to the killing of unarmed protesters during the anti-quota agitation in the country last year. Former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal received the same punishment, while Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun, former inspector-general of police in the Hasina government, was spared after he turned witness for the prosecution. The verdict concludes a process that has appeared vindictive from day one. ICTs have historically included international judges and, in some cases, even international prosecutors. But a tribunal composed entirely of Bangladeshi judges, widely seen as partisan, meant that the odds were always stacked against Hasina. From the appointment of a judge, affiliated with the Bangladesh National Party, which has welcomed the verdict, to the absence of a proper defence to represent Hasina, the three-month-long proceedings were suffused with the Muhammad Yunus regime's hostility towards the ousted prime minister. The state-appointed defence lawyer, reportedly, sought no adjournments and called no witnesses. The caretaker government, which has called the decision "historic", has only demeaned itself with this travesty of justice — it has invited charges of being a tin-pot regime.

There is no denying that Sheikh Hasina, who remains in an undisclosed location in India, must own up to her heavy-handed response to the uprising in July last year. Instead of attempting to strengthen the social fabric and addressing the underlying causes behind the tension, she blamed "foreign mercenaries" and "radical elements" for hijacking the protests. The divides have widened as a result of the caretaker regime's revanchist approach — it has overreached its mandate by clamping down on Hasina's party, the Awami League. What legitimacy can the elections, scheduled for February 2026, possibly have with the party that spearheaded Bangladesh's struggle for independence banned and its long-time leader condemned to be hanged?

The rise of Islamist politics since Hasina's ouster — posing a threat to Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh — has, by all accounts, been fuelled largely by discontent over unemployment, corruption and a lack of leadership. The frequent instances of violence in several parts of the country speak of the Yunus regime's diminishing authority. Monday's verdict has eroded its credibility even more and pushed back further the democratic process in Bangladesh. The death sentence for Hasina is also a diplomatic test for India. Dhaka has formally requested her extradition — on Monday and before — but New Delhi has so far shown no inclination to comply. India will need to navigate this moment deftly, keeping in mind regional security considerations.

India's TB successes — and the long road ahead

IN 2018, the government announced its intention to eliminate tuberculosis in the country by 2025, five years ahead of the global target. For more than three years, reports and surveys have consistently highlighted that the country is not on track to reach this milestone, despite making appreciable progress. The WHO's annual Global TB report, released last week, confirms the high burden of TB cases in the country as 2025 draws to a close. In 2024, India recorded more than 27 lakh TB cases. India has achieved a 21 per cent reduction in the incidence of this bacterial disease since 2015 and a 28 per cent decline in TB deaths in the past nine years. However, the WHO report also shows that the country with the highest burden of the deadliest infection in the world has also been at the forefront in combating it — globally, TB incidence went down by 12 per cent between 2014 and 2025.

Among the reasons for India's improved performance is the ability of its healthcare system — enabled by improved testing facilities — to diagnose more than 80 per cent of the estimated cases, a far cry from 2015 when close to 50 per cent of those infected by TB fell outside the radar. This means that although on the face of it, the 27 lakh cases reported in 2024 represent only a minor improvement from the 28 lakh TB patients detected in 2022, the latest figure is a more accurate representation of the incidence of the disease in India. At the same time, the system's increasing proficiency at detecting cases indicates that hospitals, healthcare centres and individual doctors have to care for more patients, many of whom are afflicted by the more virulent multidrug-resistant strain of the disease. Initiatives such as the BPaLM regimen which can cut treatment time for the multidrug TB by six months, have helped in the expansion of treatment. Even then, patients stopping therapy midcourse remains a major concern.

The next steps in eliminating TB should involve taking cues from new research. For example, there is evidence that pollution worsens the outcome for TB patients, and the disruption of their immune system makes diabetics more vulnerable to the bacterial disease. The WHO report should lead to building on the successes, identifying gaps, and plugging them.

Frankie the flamingo's flight to freedom

SHE MAY be only four months old and more than a few feathers short in one wing, but when Frankie the flamingo heard the call of the wild, she responded in the only way she could — by trusting her instincts and winging it. The juvenile bird, whose disappearance from her home at a zoo in the UK last week prompted a nationwide search, has been found happy and thriving on a beach in France's Brittany region. Among the staff at Cornwall's Paradise Park, who identified their missing bird by the clipped wing visible in pictures taken by a French photographer, her discovery evinced mixed emotions: Relief that she's safe, worry about her future and pride at her resilience.

That Frankie did not allow a literally clipped wing to ground her and curb her yearning for freedom should be an inspiration for all, not least for the chronic overthinkers who rein in their dreams and make peace with what they believe to be their lot. Frankie let nothing stand in her way: Not her relative youth, not the missing portion of her wing and certainly not the fact that, having been born and bred in a zoo, she's never had to deal with the harshness that all living things have to endure in the wild.

Frankie is thriving in the world beyond her enclosure. She can't go home again, given the possibility of her exposure to wild avian populations that may be infected with bird flu, but that is a regret that the zoo, and the people who once watched over her, can nurse. Frankie the flamingo is too busy being just another bird: Eating, preening and existing on no one's terms but her own.

SC ruling in telecom dues case softens a crippling blow

THE DECISION of the Supreme Court permitting reconsideration of Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) dues of Vodafone is a welcome step and will set right the damage done by the judgment in *Union of India vs Association of United Telecom Service Providers of India* that was delivered in October 2019. When the telecom sector was opened to private operators in 1994, a fixed licence fee had to be paid. From 1999, the New Telecom Policy made a shift to a revenue sharing model. This model is credited for the huge growth of the sector.

The definition of the word "gross revenue" was very wide and included interest, dividend, and other miscellaneous revenue. The AGR reduced the gross revenue by certain items, including service tax and sales tax. Telecom operators had to share 15 per cent of AGR as licence fees with the Union of India; this was later reduced to 8 per cent.

A major area of dispute was whether AGR represented only the actual revenue and not the notional revenue. Most telecom operators had a tariff rate but would grant discounts and rebates to customers to promote sales. Thus, a pre-paid voucher that had a maximum retail price of Rs 100, was sold at a 25 per cent discount and the customer paid only Rs 75. While the Department of Telecommunications insisted that the telecom operator had to pay 8 per cent of Rs 100, the telecom operators claimed that this liability

was only on the actual revenue.

Initially, when the matter came up before the Telecom Disputes Settlement Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT), Justice Aftab Alam, retired Supreme Court Judge and Chairperson, held that the licence fee was payable only on the actual revenue, and not the notional revenue. In other words, whatever discounts, commissions, and rebates that were given had to be deducted and only the net amount realised by the telecom operators would be the "adjusted gross revenue".

This ruling was made in 2015 and TDSAT noted that the practice of granting discounts and rebates had continued from 2003 onwards. In October 2019, the Supreme Court reversed this view and held that the gross revenue would mean income from all possible sources. But what was disastrous to the telecom companies was that the fee of 8 per cent was held payable on the published tariff of Rs 100, making them liable to pay 8 per cent on revenue that was never earned.

It is an elementary principle of accounting that the word "revenue" refers to the actual inflow that accrues or arises to a company. If a hotel has a tariff rate of Rs 5,000 per night, but actually rents the room at Rs 3,000, all taxes are payable only on Rs 3,000. Accounting Standards (AS-9) also mandate that revenue would only mean the consideration that is received or receivable after granting discounts, rebates



ARVIND P DATAR

The welcome direction of the SC will now enable reconsideration of the AGR dues, and waiver of interest and penalty

and deductions. Indeed, the Companies Act, 2013 makes it mandatory that these accounting standards are followed.

In complete contrast to settled law, the Supreme Court observed that accounting standards are in the nature of guidelines, they are not comprehensive and do not supersede the practice of accounting. The Court went on to hold that these accounting standards would not prevail over the licence agreement. The net result of this erroneous decision was the liability towards licence fees amounted to Rs 23,000 crore for the telecom companies.

But the near fatal blow to the telecom operators was the levy of interest, penalty and interest on penalty. Clause 20.5 of the agreement stipulated that delay in payment of licence fees would attract interest of 2 per cent per month above the prime lending rate of the State Bank of India. This was to be levied by compounding it monthly. Thus, if the SBI rate was 12 per cent, the interest was payable at 14 per cent compounded monthly. A further penalty was leviable for non-payment, and this was

further increased by interest on penalty. The net result was that out of the total demand of Rs 93,000 crore on all telecom companies, the principal amount was just Rs 23,000 crore; the balance of Rs 70,000 crore represented the interest, penalty and interest on penalty — a staggering 75 per cent

of the claim against the telecom sector.

Indeed, the Supreme Court ought to have noted that telecom operators conducted their business in terms of the orders passed by the TDSAT. The licence fee of Rs 23,000 crore was not paid because of the orders of the Tribunal and represented a levy on amounts that were never received. This order was in force till the Supreme Court verdict in October 2019. The least that the Court could have done was to waive the interest, penalty and interest on penalty. Even though these staggering figures were shown, the Court refused to relent in subsequent applications. It was also strange that despite the Union government's willingness to grant a 20-year repayment period, the Court reduced it to 10 years.

The welcome direction of the SC will now enable reconsideration of the AGR dues, and waiver of interest and penalty. In 2016, the SC had highlighted the need for courts to reckon the economic impact of their judgments. In 1970, almost 50 years earlier, the SC had held that a penalty could be levied only when a person had consciously disregarded his statutory obligations. These salutary safeguards could have reduced the financial burden on the telecom sector. Mercifully, this is an opportunity to undo the crippling blow of the 2019 judgment.

The writer is a senior advocate. He had appeared for a telecom company in the 2019 case

From Jharkhand, an inclusive model for India



HEMANT SOREN

NOVEMBER 15, 2025, marked 25 years of Jharkhand's statehood and commemorates the 150th birth anniversary of the legendary tribal icon, Birsa Munda. This quarter century is a ledger of sacrifice and service, and a reminder of why this state was born in the first place.

Jharkhand emerged from a collective assertion that *jai*, jungle, *jameen* must belong to the people who have protected them for generations. As we pay tribute to Dharti Aaba (Father of the Earth), we honour not just a political achievement but a civilisational ethos — the resilience of Adivasi communities, the integrity with which they have nurtured nature, and the moral clarity with which they have defended justice.

Our coal, our steel, our minerals and our workers have helped build modern India. This is a legacy we acknowledge with pride. But it is also a legacy that compels introspection — for, too often, the costs of extraction were borne locally while the benefits flowed outward. Those inequities have shaped our politics, our policies, and our collective memory.

Over the past decade, we have attempted to correct that imbalance. Jharkhand has made advances in social protection, rural connectivity, women's collectives, forest-based livelihoods, education and health services.

We have strengthened community institutions and improved access to welfare. The Jharkhand@25 campaign has allowed us to reaffirm our identity, celebrate the people who kept the idea of Jharkhand alive long before it became a state, and listen to citizens — especially youth and women.

A recurring message from these dialogues is clear: Jharkhand's future cannot rest on extraction alone. It must rest on empowerment. Minerals may have shaped our past, but human capability will shape our future.

Education and skills have become the centre of our development effort. Schools, ITIs, polytechnics and universities are being strengthened so that our young people are equipped for a modern, competitive, technology-driven world. The emphasis is no longer on sending labour out of the state but on building lasting capability within the state.

Women remain the backbone of rural economic transformation. Through Palash and Self-Help Group federations, women have expanded their presence in food processing, NTFP-based value

chains, superfood production and agro-allied businesses. Their entrepreneurship has strengthened household incomes, enhanced climate resilience, and reshaped the social and economic fabric of our villages.

Recognising women not just as beneficiaries but as producers, innovators and leaders is one of Jharkhand's most important developmental shifts.

Our vision is to advance a development model where ecology is valued as an economic asset and where prosperity does not come at the cost of people or nature. In this journey, we seek investments that uplift communities, create dignified and skilled employment, conserve biodiversity, and honour land and livelihood rights.

Sports, arts and tourism are strengthening our cultural confidence. Our athletes and sportspersons are bringing national and international recognition; our artists and artisans keep our valued heritage and art forms alive; and our landscapes — from the hills of Netarhat to the waterfalls of Ranchi — are emerging as hubs for responsible and sustainable tourism.

Manufacturing, too, is being reimaged. The aim is to transform industrial pathways — cleaner factories, more value-added production, stronger safeguards, and greater community participation.

Competitiveness is being strengthened through better infrastructure, improved governance and enhanced human capability, not through compromise on environmental or social standards.

Throughout this period, the pursuit of social inclusion has remained constant. Development is meaningful only when it expands dignity and opportunity for those historically marginalised.

Land rights, social protection, quality public services and community participation remain central pillars of our governance approach. As we step into the next quarter century, our aspiration is simple: To build a Jharkhand that is educated, equitable and environmentally secure.

A Jharkhand where growth is shared, where nature is respected, and where every citizen — whether a farmer, artisan, miner, student or entrepreneur — participates in and benefits from progress. Jharkhand can offer India and the world a new development model — one rooted in identity, guided by inclusion and committed to ecological balance.

The writer is Chief Minister, Jharkhand



R RAMANOJRAM

If learning about AI is to help children develop a critical outlook on its use, exercises of this kind nullify that hope. Given how little success we have had so far on critical thinking in our science education, such expectations seem unrealistic

Is AI from Class III a leap forward or one too soon?

THE MINISTRY of Education has announced that an Artificial Intelligence (AI) curriculum will be introduced from Class III onwards in the 2026-27 academic session to prepare India's future workforce for a "technology-driven economy". In July, the government launched the SOAR initiative (Skill for AI Readiness) through which nearly 18,000 CBSE-affiliated schools are already offering AI from Class VI onwards, with 15-hour modules for Classes VI to VIII, and 150-hour elective courses for Classes IX to XII. The CBSE has submitted a draft curriculum for review to the NCERT for "AI integration" across grades. This is in contrast with AI in higher education: A handful of universities introduced mandatory AI courses for science and engineering students this year.

One must ask: Why this rush for AI in schools? It is true that AI is set to make a great impact on our lives, and that the country seeks to "play a leading role in AI technologies and shape global AI standards". But is teaching AI to primary- and middle-school children necessary or sufficient for building such capability?

According to the government, SOAR helps to "bridge the digital divide" and creates opportunities for children "from rural areas or communities with limited resources". In a country where an overwhelming majority of children and teachers have never used any digital tools in education, it seems at best ironic and at worst callous to talk of using AI as a means of bridging the divide.

Often, the phrase "AI in schools" hides considerable confusion. Some mean a vaguely defined form of AI literacy. Some want increased use of AI tools in classrooms. Others mean the use of AI to enhance teacher "productivity" (for example, to prepare class presentations). Developers speak of personalised learning and assessment. Governments talk of using AI to track every child's academic progress. In such a situation, it is imperative that we separate informed use of AI tools from teaching AI to children.

In the present curriculum, middle school introduces three AI domains: Computer vision, Natural Language Processing, and statistical data. Class VII highlights the "innovative role of AI in fostering sustainability and societal development, highlighting key concepts like Sustainable Development Goals, systems thinking, and system maps". In Class VIII, children learn the "AI Project Cycle" and AI ethics. Class IX discusses mathematics for AI and generative AI, Class X supervised, unsupervised and reinforcement learning models, clustering and neural networks.

It is hard to understand how children would relate all this to the mathematics and science they are learning. How does a 12-year-old make sense of "fostering sustainability and societal development" or the use of system maps? These are notions that require considerable maturity. Consider this question from the Class VII AI handbook: Which SDG focuses on 'gender equality and empowering all women and girls'? (a) SDG-3 (b) SDG-5 (c) SDG-8 (d) SDG-10. If learning about AI is to help children develop a critical outlook on its use, exercises of this kind nullify that hope. Given how little success we have had so far on critical thinking in our science education, such expectations seem unrealistic.

The question of teaching AI in schools is not to be posed as one with a yes or no answer. It is about examining the educational purpose, the pedagogic means and assessment modes for doing so, and developing teacher capacity and resources for achieving the intended purpose. In the case of children in primary or middle schools, the psychology of children's learning is also critical. AI is both seductive and addictive. We need to be responsible while placing it in the hands of small children. We must keep asking ourselves: Are we being wise?

The writer is professor, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

40 YEARS AGO November 18, 1985



PM supports Palestine

THE PRIME Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, called upon the non-aligned movement to persist in its efforts to bring about reconciliation and peace in the West Asian region. Gandhi said India, Oman and the Non-Aligned Movement as a whole had expressed their displeasure over the continuation of the Iran-Iraq conflict. Gandhi also said India has been unflinching in its support for the people of Palestine.

Vajpayee on nuclear weapons

BJP PRESIDENT Atal Bihari Vajpayee reiter-

ated his party's demand that India should go ahead with the manufacture of a nuclear bomb, at least to deter Pakistan. Vajpayee said PM Rajiv Gandhi was spreading confusion on the issue through ambiguous remarks.

Rajneesh pleads guilty

A BITTER and tired Bhagwan Rajneesh said he had been forced to plead guilty out of compassion for his people. During his few hours in the capital before taking off for Kulu, he said the case against him in the US was "absolutely false". In pleading guilty, he said, "for the first time in my life, I told a

lie". Leaning back in his comfortable chair in a five-star hotel, he explained, "I was getting concerned that my people were getting concerned about me."

A bad day for Indian sports

IT WAS a bad day for India in sports. The Indian cricket team suffered a 49-run defeat to Pakistan in the Rothmans Cup at Sharjah. Pakistan notched up 203 for four wickets and then bowled out India for 154 to gain their first win. India now clashes with the West Indies on November 22. In the Champions Trophy at Perth, India lost to Australia by four goals to one.



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What those who celebrate Bihar verdict, and those who lament it, get wrong



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

HERE IS how the media would like you to read the Bihar outcome — as a sign of the shape of things to come. This astounding victory is not just a state verdict but a resumption of the BJP's nation-wide juggernaut. And here is the flipside of the same narrative — elections are pointless. Bihar proves that you cannot take on this authoritarian regime by participating in and legitimising fraudulent elections.

Both these readings have a grain of truth. And a sackful of myth. Both of these are based on a telescopic view of the political reality of this election, a limited and limiting understanding of the horizon of political possibilities and a dim view of the people.

The idea that the Bihar verdict is somehow a turning point in the post-2024 political trajectory is based on three assumptions — that it is unexpected, that it breaks the trend line and that it is representative. All these are questionable.

First of all, the political trajectory of Bihar does not represent the rest of the “Hindi heartland”, let alone the rest of India. The only state in the northern region where the BJP is forced to align with an equal partner, the trends and patterns in Bihar do not find an echo even in the neighbouring Jharkhand, far from flowing into Bengal. Second, the outcome in Bihar was not a reversal of the result in the Lok Sabha polls last year. The NDA had continued its dominance in the state, with a comfortable lead in 174 assembly segments and a vote share lead of 8 percentage points over the Mahagathbandhan (MGB). The final figures for the assembly polls indicate a small push in the same direction. The tally of 202 seats appears unbelievable but is the result of a small addition of 1.2 percentage points in the NDA's lead over the MGB. Bihar cannot be put in the same category as Haryana and Maharashtra, states that witnessed

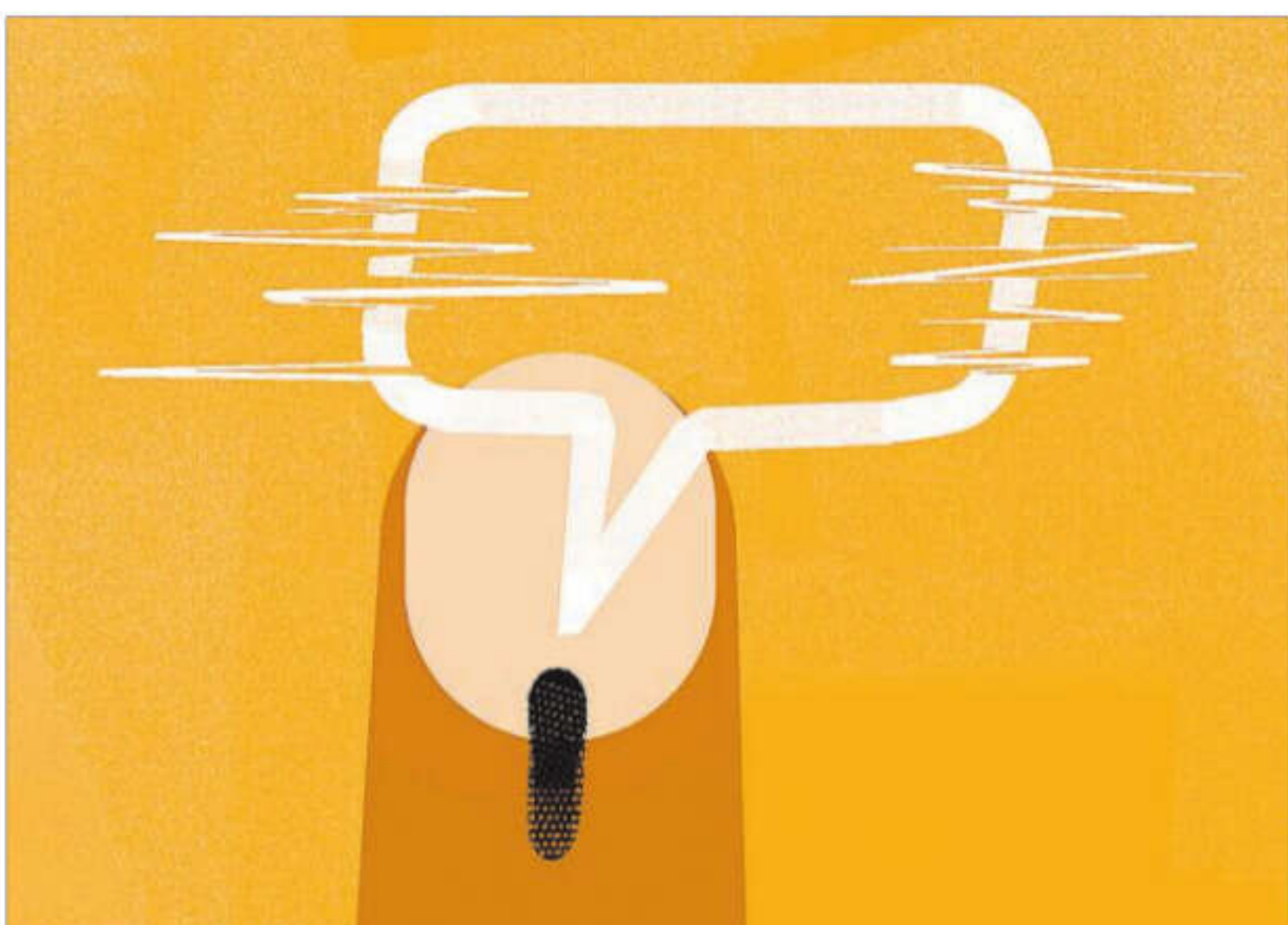


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

major upsets after the Lok Sabha elections.

Finally, there was little that was unexpected about the verdict for those who understood the basics of state politics. Ever since 2005, a coalition of two of the three main parties — RJD, JDU and the BJP — has scored a comfortable victory in every election except the strange contest in 2020. The simple fact is that the NDA was a much bigger political coalition — nearly 5 points larger, going by the last assembly elections — than the MGB. The NDA's social coalition is much bigger than that of the MGB. At 32 per cent, the MGB's core (Muslim+Yadav) may be larger than NDA's core caste-community alliance (Forward+Kurmi + Kushwaha+ Bania/Teli+Paswan) of 28 per cent. But MGB's 10 per cent auxiliary support (Mallah+ Ravidasi +Tanti/Paan) is way smaller and less committed than the 20 per cent Hindu EBCs that lean heavily towards the NDA.

So, it was advantage NDA right from the beginning. The onus was on the MGB to alter this equation either by shifting social

The simple fact is that the NDA was a much bigger political coalition — nearly 5 points larger, going by the last assembly elections — than the MGB. The NDA's social coalition is much bigger than that of the MGB

blocs or by an effective campaign that cut across caste lines. It made some attempts — attention to EBCs and the promise of government jobs — but too little, too late. Instead, the last-minute bribe of Rs 10,000 (besides the upping of many pension schemes and reduction in electricity bills) cemented the support that the NDA has assiduously built over elections among women voters. These basics, combined with the low level of expectation from a government and the absence of a pronounced anti-incumbency against Nitish Kumar, are enough to explain the nature of Bihar's verdict. We don't need to assume that everything the RJD and the Congress did failed, or imagine a masterstroke in every move by the BJP. The sense of awe and shock relayed by the media after this verdict may have been manufactured.

Similarly, the sense of shock experienced by many critics of the present regime may also be over the top. Somehow, watching from a distance or through the echo

chambers of social media, there was a widespread but mistaken impression that the MGB was in the lead. The rude shock of the final outcome ignited a suspicion, flamed by the EC's low credibility, that the election outcome was manufactured to suit the ruling coalition. Hence, the call for boycott of future elections in some circles.

It is important to distinguish between an unfair and a fraudulent election. There is little doubt that Indian elections are no longer fair, that there is nothing like a level-playing ground in the electoral contest. Bihar elections provided ample proof of the systemic bias, beginning with the deletion of 68 lakh and the addition of 24 lakh electors during the shoddy SIR exercise. The EC's acquiescence in multiple violations of the Model Code of Conduct, including communal propaganda, tendentious allegations of illegal migrants, allowing the bribe of Rs 10,000 to be paid during the campaign period, and special trains to be run to ferry BJP voters from other states, leaves no doubt on this score. Add to it the regime's control over mass media and its access to unlimited money during elections, and you know why free and fair elections look like a chimera. The Opposition's chances of winning an election are not zero yet, but it has to walk uphill.

That is different from the charge of electoral fraud, that is, manipulation in the voting and counting process, such that the electoral outcome does not reflect the voting choice of the electorate. While many doubts have been expressed on this score in Bihar (belated declaration of turnout figures, discrepancy between postal and EVM votes, high voter deletion, sharp reduction in the votes for “others”), we do not yet have any hard evidence that meets the high standards of proof that such a grave charge requires. And given what has been suggested above, Bihar may not be the right place to look for evidence of electoral fraud.

The Opposition's meltdown is no doubt a setback for all those who struggle to reclaim our democracy. But this is not the end of the road. The next round of elections, especially in West Bengal, would be a better test of electoral integrity. And Uttar Pradesh would be the real signal of the shape of things to come.

The writer is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Views are personal

It's time to fix climate finance. India has shown the way



BHUPENDER YADAV

INDIA'S G20 Presidency delivered a clear message to the world: The 20th-century multilateral framework is no longer fit for purpose. Nowhere is this failure more evident, or more dangerous, than in the architecture of global climate finance. The need for multilateralism is non-negotiable. Existential threats, from cyclones to heatwaves, do not respect national borders. We require that this system acts as an equaliser; a platform for solidarity, shared technology, and protection of the most vulnerable. Instead of such a partnership, the Global South has been met with hollow promises, opaque accounting, and a system that prioritises creditors over climate. This system has been slow, exclusive, and unaccountable.

This is why, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is challenging this broken system. As we accelerate our clean energy transition, we ask: What precisely counts as climate finance? Who defines it? And how do we ensure it delivers on promises?

At COP26, PM Modi pressed developed countries to mobilise \$1 trillion annually, insisting, “as we track climate mitigation, we must also track climate finance”. At COP28, he stated: “Climate finance and technology are essential to fulfil the hopes of the Global South”. For decades, this ambiguity has undermined trust. Is it a grant, a subsidised loan, or merely a rebranded development project? This fog hampers productive investment critical to climate action. India alone requires \$467 billion by 2030 to decarbonise hard-to-abate sectors. Globally, annual needs exceed \$7 trillion, yet flows remain stubbornly low.

The anchors of the current system, the Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the Global

Environment Facility (GEF), are failing to meet this moment. First, accountability is weak, as is transparency. Second, power remains concentrated. International financial institutions are still governed by structures that afford disproportionate influence to a handful of wealthy nations. Third, access is prohibitive. For developing countries, complex application processes mean critical funds are slow to arrive, if at all. This is compounded by steep borrowing costs and mounting debt, forcing nations to choose between paying creditors

and protecting their populations.

This is precisely why India, during its historic G20 Presidency, championed MDB reform.

The MDBs' role must be guided by their fundamental objective to support developing nations. Their functions must extend beyond lending public money to strategically mobilise the trillions in private capital required.

Today, private capital flows to where risk is lowest and profit is highest. It bypasses the difficult, urgent needs of adaptation, resilience, and Loss and Damage in the most vulnerable nations. By using tools like guarantees or blended finance, MDBs “de-risk” private capital into the sectors and regions that need it most.

As we push for global reform, we are building the future we demand from others. India's draft Climate Finance Taxonomy is a substantive intervention. It proposes clear, scientific criteria for “green” or “climate-aligned” investment, guiding both public planning and private capital. This creates a stable playing field and signals that India's green market is built on credibility.

Today, over two-thirds of climate finance sourced in India is domestic, through public budgets, development banks, and historic sovereign green bond issuances. These bonds have seen a surging global appetite, and India will mobilise an additional Rs 10,000 crore via green bonds in the second half of fiscal year 2025-26. Our regulators, the RBI and SEBI, are tailoring disclosure and accountability norms for green instruments. This comprehensive approach is essential as India readies for more than \$10 trillion in investment to reach net zero by 2070.

India's journey shows what pragmatic leadership can build. Global architecture demands the same foundation, built on three essential reforms: Transparency and common standards; democratised governance across MDBs and, lastly, innovative debt and resilience finance.

The international community must re-engineer global frameworks to be fairer and more effective. Only then can the principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* — the world as one family — be realised as the organising philosophy of our shared climate future.

The writer is Union Minister for Environment, Forest & Climate Change

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What Congress needs

THIS REFERS to the editorial, ‘EC has trust issues but Congress needs a mirror’ (IE, November 17). The Congress's reaction to its heavy defeat in Bihar reveals a troubling refusal to face political reality. Rather than examine its own organisational frailty, the party has revived its “vote chori” charge and questioned the Election Commission's credibility. Congress's poor performance and its inability to communicate effectively with voters or maintain cohesion with allies point to deeper structural faults.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

THIS REFERS to the editorial, ‘EC has trust issues but Congress needs a mirror’ (IE, November 17). It rightly notes that while the Election Commission faces a trust deficit, Congress's sweeping “vote chori” claims distract voters from genuine administrative shortcomings. The Haryana case — where a Brazilian woman Larissa Rocha Silva's photo appeared multiple times on the voter rolls — highlights systemic lapses. Similarly, the entry of Minta Devi of Siwan, initially recorded as 124 years old, was subsequently corrected. Political parties should move beyond rhetoric and push for transparent, technology-backed voter roll management with independent scrutiny.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak

After Bihar win

THIS REFERS to the article, ‘Key to Bihar's victory script is the new grammar of Modi politics, governance’ (IE, November 17). In Bihar, remote locations, rugged terrain, limited communication, and transportation infrastructure have acted as constraints, limiting nutrition intake and making its women and children vulnerable segments of society. The intergenerational perpetuation of malnutrition needs to be completely addressed to promote successful child growth.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh



PRIYANSHI SAXENA

EVERY FEW months, headlines celebrate an Indian artwork breaking auction records, and of late, one has been reading about the pink health of the Indian art market. These moments are offered as proof of India's arrival on the global art stage. But in this chase for validation pegged to prices and recognition set by the West, we risk forgetting the rich and complex history of India's own cultural economies — systems that thrived for centuries on local consumption, not international approval.

The global art market's value system rests on a pyramid built in the West: Institutions, curators, museums, collectors, and galleries, working in tandem to produce cultural legitimacy and market value. India lacks this infrastructure, with fewer than five actively collecting institutions. The government does not even recognise art as an asset. In this vacuum, value is dictated almost entirely by auction results, leaving little room for a truly Indian imagination of value or validation of natural tastes.

Worse, entire categories of Indian artistic practice are excluded: Textiles, terracotta, leather, metal, and other traditional mediums — once central to our cultural economy — are too often dismissed as “craft”. A colonial hangover that split “fine art” from “decorative art” (denigrating a large part of tra-

India's art boom carries a colonial hangover

Our art market will never truly come of age if it remains dependent on the scaffolding of the West. We must reimagine value on our own terms — through scale, inclusivity, and cultural rootedness

ditional art as “decorative”, and of inferior value). The hierarchy remains intact in our art colleges, galleries, and the larger market. English-speaking artists, armed with catalogue essays and curatorial endorsements, gain disproportionate advantages. Regional languages, meanwhile, are absent from our discourse, galleries, and fairs. A token translated curatorial note is no substitute for a system that speaks to Indians in their own idioms. In effect, we continue to exoticise the Indian artist. Imagine the *Bandwalas* in Krishen Khanna's painting ever being an audience to the works made about them.

Why not, instead, build a market rooted in our own strengths? An Indian art market for Indians, by Indians, and of Indians? Such a model would not look only at record-breaking prices internationally, but at validation through volume — what I call the RRV principle: Reach, Relevance, and Volume; valuing a work for how the larger audience responds to it, and its historic value. As Pooja Pillai wrote in these pages, Indian cuisine was long reduced abroad to butter chicken and dosas. Yet within India, we have learned to value its true diversity by creating markets that serve everything from street food to fine dining. Why can't art follow a similar structure? We create a one-mil-

lion-dollar sale by either selling one one-million-dollar artwork, or selling a million one-dollar works. The market benefits from the latter in the long run, and unfortunately, the current systems favour the former.

The Kala Melas — a commercially conducive, community-led platform that integrates ritual, performance, art, craft, aesthetic, and culinary traditions — is among the world's oldest forms of art fairs, unable to attain the tag of one. The differentiator is the context: While *melas* remain deeply rooted in local culture and continue to enable and promote the commercial consumption of cultural commodities, international art fairs often cater to a narrow circuit of collectors, curators, and galleries seeking validation within an elite ecosystem. In the process, the broader potential of the art market: To expand participation, access, and economic growth — remains underexplored.

Our art market will never truly come of age if it remains dependent on the scaffolding of the West. We must reimagine value on our own terms — through scale, inclusivity, and cultural rootedness. It is only then that Indian art will stop being exoticised, even within India, and start being lived, shared, and owned by the people it was always meant for.

The writer is an art advisor and curator

Ritwik Ghatak's cinema offered lessons in historian's craft



PARVINDER SINGH

WHEN I was a master's student of Modern History at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1994, Ritwik Ghatak, whose birth centenary fell on November 4, became a source of clarity. In their lectures on historical methods, the primarily Marxist faculty at JNU engaged with questions of history and historicity; the relationship between the individual and society was explored through a discourse steeped in polemics. They did not sufficiently address culture and left us with questions about how to relate to the scholarly craft. About that time, I was part of a group

which attended a screening of a Ghatak film at Delhi University's Gargi College, which would set us on a journey and eventually help clarify doubts.

What immediately struck a chord with us was Ghatak's deep engagement with history. *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called Titash), based on the eponymous novel by Adwaita Malla Burman, strongly links geography, history, politics and community. Set in pre-Independence East Bengal (modern-day Bangladesh), the film follows the lives of the Malo fishing community. The use of the Titas river as a metaphor to highlight social alienation, the relationship between humans and the environment, and the desolation of traditional life was a complex but engaging endeavour — the cyclical nature of river life mirrors the

cycles of birth, death, and renewal.

Born in Dhaka and uprooted by the violence of 1947, Ghatak's biography merged with that of millions. Partition haunted him and his work. The trilogy — *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star), *Komal Gandhar* (E-Flat), and *Subarna-rekha* — captured the anguish of Bengali refugees. Far from depicting Partition as an isolated event, Ghatak examined its ongoing effects through stories of uprooted

His narratives challenged both naive optimism and the elitism of Bengali culture, urging audiences to confront the fragility of belonging

families, dispossessed women, and lost childhoods, using melodrama not for escapism but as a radical representation of social wounds. Ghatak believed that culture and politics were inseparable. A member of the Communist Party, he participated in the Indian People's Theatre Association. His narratives challenged both naive optimism and the elitism of Bengali culture, urging audiences to confront the fragility of belonging.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, he heightened emotional impact by skillfully controlling brightness and darkness — emphasising the stark realities of refugee life or the internal struggles of his characters through pools of shadow or sudden bursts of light. For him, light was a powerful tool to convey memory, absence, and resilience. Wide,

contrasting compositions — often tense and panoramic — encouraged viewers to immerse themselves in themes of displacement, yearning, and ephemeral hope. The lack of linearity was a guide to many who wanted to write history with a focus on culture and depict multiple narratives.

Although his works were undervalued or undiscovered during his lifetime, Ghatak's historical awareness, radicalism, and innovative techniques established him as a beacon for both filmmakers and scholars. His cinema offers a vital perspective for understanding the toll of life in history, especially in times of displacement.

The writer is head, Communications and Media, World Food Programme, India. Views are personal

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Hasina sentenced

Dhaka steps up pressure on Delhi after verdict

A Bangladeshi tribunal has sentenced Sheikh Hasina to death for “crimes against humanity”, but the ousted PM — who has been living in exile on Indian soil since August last year — remains stubbornly defiant. Delivering its verdict after a months-long trial, the country’s International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) described the Awami League leader as the “mastemind and principal architect” of the brutal crackdown that claimed the lives of hundreds of protesters. The 78-year-old Hasina has rejected the judgment, saying that it has been made by a “rigged tribunal established and presided over by an unelected government”. She has yet again dared the interim rulers to bring these charges against her in the International Criminal Court (ICC) at the Hague. Notably, the Awami League has approached the ICC for a probe into ‘retaliatory violence’ against party officials following the July 2024 uprising.

The ICT verdict has emboldened the Bangladesh government to up the ante against Hasina as well as India. The country’s foreign ministry has demanded that the ex-PM be immediately handed over under the extradition treaty between the two neighbours. Putting the onus squarely on New Delhi, the ministry has said that it would be an “an extremely unfriendly act and contempt for justice” if any country were to grant asylum to an individual convicted of crimes against humanity. In a guarded response, India has simply stated that it remains committed to the best interests of the people of Bangladesh and will always engage constructively with all stakeholders. Delhi has stopped short of questioning or criticising the judgment, which indicates that it will continue to wait and watch.

Hasina has repeatedly claimed that she has been deprived of a fair trial. This argument, along with the prospect of her execution if she returns to her country, gives India valid reasons to stall her extradition. However, Delhi will find itself under greater pressure once an elected government assumes office in Dhaka after the February 2026 elections.

Equitable quotas

The case for filtering the creamy layer

CHIEF Justice of India BR Gavai’s endorsement of the “creamy layer” principle for Scheduled Caste reservations has reopened an important conversation on how affirmative action can be made more just, targeted and effective. His position is not a dilution of constitutional protections but an attempt to ensure that the benefits of reservation reach those who need them the most — the poorest, most socially disadvantaged and least represented segments within the SC community. For decades, the debate around reservations has focussed on expanding quotas, but not enough on their equitable distribution. A small, relatively better-off section within the SC community has repeatedly accessed opportunities in education and government employment, while families trapped in intergenerational deprivation — manual labourers, sanitation workers, landless labour households — continue to remain on the margins. If reservation is meant to correct structural exclusion, then its gains must not circulate within the same small circle.

The creamy-layer principle, already applied successfully for OBCs, is a tool to prevent such monopolisation. Its extension to SCs acknowledges a basic truth: social mobility, though limited, has occurred for some, and policy must adapt to ensure a fairer spread of opportunity. When the child of an IAS officer or senior official continues to claim the same benefits intended for someone from a socially invisible background, the purpose of affirmative action is weakened. Importantly, excluding the creamy layer does not deny caste discrimination. It merely recognises that within any historically oppressed group, degrees of disadvantage differ. Thus, those at the bottom deserve priority access to state support.

The reform should be accompanied by clear criteria, careful measurement of social backwardness and safeguards to prevent misuse. CJI Gavai’s remarks are a reminder that social justice must evolve. A thoughtful exclusion of the creamy layer from SC reservations can reaffirm the constitutional promise of equality.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 1925

Historical Records Commission

THE Historical Records Commission, which holds its eighth session at the University Hall, Lahore, on November 23-24, is a permanent body of experts which owes its origin to certain recommendations made by the Royal Commission on the Public Records of England and Wales. It was constituted by the Government of India in 1919 and held its first sitting at Simla. Since then, it has met at regular intervals at such places as Lahore, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Madras and Poona. Sir Evans Cotton, who has already presided over three successive sessions of the commission, will preside for the last time over the ensuing session at Lahore, while the proceedings will, according to the now established practice, be opened by His Excellency the Governor. Abdul Ali, the able and energetic Secretary of the commission, is already in our midst, and the preparations for the session are nearing completion. It must be admitted that the public knows far less of the activities of the commission than it ought to. This is regrettable. The work in which the commission is engaged is of the greatest possible public importance, consisting as it does of the collection and treatment of records, whether in the archives of government departments, public institutions or private individuals, that are the material of history.

OPINION

Lapses on the terror trail proved fatal

Police, intelligence agencies failed to anticipate and prevent attack near Red Fort



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

THE Jammu & Kashmir police, the Haryana police and Central intelligence agencies may well be justified in taking credit for averting a series of major terror attacks by busting the Kashmir-Faridabad terror module. However, that does not exempt them from explaining why they failed to catch suicide bomber Umar Nabi, who was driving the car that exploded near the Red Fort on November 10.

Of course, there was a flurry of activity after the incident. Within hours of his return from Bhutan on November 12, Prime Minister Narendra Modi summoned a Cabinet meeting regarding the car blast that claimed 15 lives. The Cabinet noted that the explosion was a “heinous terror incident”. The Union government had given an indication to this effect when it handed over the probe to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on November 11.

The Cabinet stated that the investigation into the incident be pursued with the utmost urgency and professionalism so that the perpetrators, their collaborators and sponsors were identified and brought to justice without delay. It did not point a finger at any organisation or country. This was at variance with the press note issued by the J&K police on their success in unearthing “an interstate and transnational terror module, linked with proscribed terrorist organisations Jaish-e-Mohammed and Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind.”

The operation “led to the



SUICIDE BOMBER : Umar Nabi remained on the run for several days before the Delhi car blast. PH

arrest of key operatives and the recovery of a massive cache of arms, ammunition and explosives, during coordinated searches in J&K and other states,” the police added.

The Cabinet expressed its appreciation for “the timely and coordinated response of the authorities, security agencies and citizens who acted with courage and compassion in the face of adversity. Their dedication and sense of duty are deeply commendable.”

This formulation is somewhat ambiguous, though it leans in favour of the manner in which everyone concerned acted after the terrorist act. This is in keeping with the Cabinet’s focus on the incident itself. Thus, it distanced itself from the J&K police’s press note which claimed credit for arresting the ‘key operatives’ and the recovery of arms. It also steered clear of the points made by Faridabad Police Commissioner Satender Gupta in his media briefing on November 10 — a few hours before the Delhi incident.

Gupta gave details of the operation conducted by the Faridabad police in which they had taken a doctor hailing from Kashmir into custody. All India

The Delhi incident’s Kashmir link might further reduce the possibility of restoring statehood to J&K.

Radio, which gave an account of Gupta’s briefing, said his name was Mujjbal (actually, it is Muza-mmil). The police officer also revealed that the doctor was arrested 9-10 days earlier; media reports have stated that the arrest was made on October 30. Significantly, the Police Commissioner had admitted that a person was absconding and a probe was in progress in that matter.

There have been a spate of media reports stating that the timely detection of the terror module prevented it from carrying out a series of blasts which would have resulted in a large number of fatalities. These reports are obviously based on ‘sources’, indicat-

ing that the police and intelligence agencies are giving briefings to journalists. It would be best to await the result of the NIA investigation to know the granular details of the conspiracy, though some of the background briefings would contain some truth.

What is certain, however, is that the state/UT police concerned and Central intelligence services failed to prevent the terror attack and apprehend the perpetrator, even though they knew for days that a member of the terror module was on the loose. They owe the country an explanation for this lapse. Clearly, the J&K police’s claim that ‘key operatives’ had been apprehended was wrong. There can also be little doubt that the police investigation at the Al Falah University in Faridabad and the interrogation of Dr Muzaammil would have revealed that the absconder was Nabi.

Under these circumstances, why were all the resources of the state governments concerned and the Centre not used to apprehend Nabi? This was the first terrorist act in the national capital after Modi assumed office in May 2014. It is good that the political leadership has assured that the “conspirators, collaborators and

sponsors” of this terrible act will be found and meted out exemplary punishment. However, as the probe progresses, the powers that be must also focus on this insistent question: Why was Nabi not found and stopped before he could carry out the attack near the Red Fort?

The Cabinet expressed its gratitude to those countries which condoled this terror incident. These nations and the rest of the international community would be relieved that PM Modi has kept rhetoric in check and, as of now, not indicated a desire to reactivate Operation Sindoor. Nothing makes the major powers more jittery than a military conflict between two nuclear-armed states.

On his part, Modi wants the India-US trade deal to be finalised. US President Trump has made positive noises on it, but these may change if armed hostilities were to recur. Also, Modi would not want Trump to get a fresh opportunity to claim credit for ending another round of war between India and Pakistan.

While these inhibitions have made PM Modi exercise caution, it can be surmised that the Red Fort attack would be a source of deep discomfort — notwithstanding the NDA’s great victory in the Bihar elections. Signals would have been sent to Modi’s supporters to dial down their vitriol, but for how long can this be so? Sooner or later, the PM would have to show his supporters and the country that terrorist groups which sponsored or incited this attack have been punished.

Meanwhile, the attack’s Kashmir link might further reduce the possibility of restoring statehood to J&K. While continuing with its UT status may be necessary for security reasons, it would continue to be a very sore point for the people of J&K. It’s also vital for the national leadership to assert that all residents of the Kashmir valley are not terrorists or their sympathisers — on the whole, they are normal citizens of our great and plural country.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The path of terrorism does not help. Terrorism is a dead-end street. — Pope Francis

Thoise is not an acronym

AIR VICE MARSHAL MANMOHAN BAHADUR (RETD)

MILITARIES have a penchant for preserving their heritage. The commemoration takes various forms — naming buildings in academies to motivate recruits, installing statues of iconic leaders and showcasing their famous words on boards and walls, naming roads after warriors, etc.

Some armed forces dedicate defence installations to their heroes. The US has the Joint Base Andrews from where the President flies out; it is named after Lt Gen Frank Andrews of the US Army Air Force who advocated for an independent US Air Force. The Pakistanis call some airbases after airmen whom they consider heroes — Rafiqui, Minhas, Nur Khan (all hit by the IAF during Op Sindoor). The Royal Air Force names its bases after towns where they are located, and so does the Indian Air Force (IAF).

Some IAF bases have become household names. For those who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, Pathankot, Ambala, Adampur, Halwara and Jaisalmer are synonymous with air force stations from where the IAF flew missions into Pakistan in the 1965 and 1971 wars. In the East, Tezpur and Hasimara are well known, but the reality is that many important strikes, including those on the Governor’s palace at Dacca in 1971 that made him surrender, operated from (IAF Station) Gauhati. Listeners and readers got the news from All India Radio and the print media; so, there were official sources or those correspondents who were in the thick of action.

In the 21st century, social media and private websites have taken centre stage. Some, like Wikipedia, can be edited by readers and armchair warriors leading to corruption of facts — both intentional (to manipulate news and history) and unintentional, which comes from misinformation. Misinformation has unintended consequences, and over time gets accepted as truth.

One such wrong ‘truth’ is that the name of a very important IAF airfield — Thoise — is an acronym for Transit Halt Of Indian Soldiers Enroute (to Siachen) — google ‘Thoise acronym’ and you would get this expansion. This has got accepted, including in official military briefings! Nothing can be further from the truth.

A kutcha airstrip was hewed out of rocks on the banks of the Shyok river in 1960 by the civil administration, employing locals who toiled manually; it was named Thoise. The first landing was by a Dakota on September 26, 1960, captained by Sqdn Ldr CK Raje. Thereafter, Packet aircraft landed regularly with supplies for our Army deployed on the Chinese border in northern Ladakh. There was not a single soldier on the Siachen Glacier then. Siachen operations started on April 13, 1984, a quarter century after the airstrip was constructed!

So, folks (and Wikipedia), Thoise is NOT an acronym; but then, where did the name come from? It’s probably a mispronunciation of the name of a nearby village Terechey, from where local labour was drafted to make the kutcha airstrip. Let those Ladakhis of Terechey, hardworking but unsung, get due credit for the name Thoise!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Age-specific digital safeguards

With reference to ‘Shielding kids from porn isn’t child’s play’, multiple factors fuel this menace, like early and unregulated access to smartphones, absence of parental digital literacy, inadequate school-level sensitisation and a borderless digital market. Countries like the UK, France and Australia have introduced stringent age-verification laws, mandatory parental-control frameworks, heavy penalties on platforms hosting explicit content and nationwide digital-safety education. In India, the need of the hour is a multi-pronged strategy, like strict enforcement of age-verification by telecom companies and digital platforms, mandatory digital-parenting workshops in schools, counselling of vulnerable children and a national child online safety policy. Parents must also model responsible screen time at home. Stronger safeguards can no longer be delayed.

AMARJIT SINGH, MOHALI

Jobless growth in Haryana

Refer to ‘Haryana’s prosperity belies social fault lines’, the state’s growth resembles a “badhta bachcha” — growing fast, but not strong. Gurugram’s glittering prosperity stands in stark contrast to the persistent deprivation in some districts like Nuh, where opportunities remain painfully limited. A major reason for this imbalance is jobless growth, where the economy expands without creating enough meaningful work. Young people, especially in rural areas, find themselves excluded from the new economy. The transformation of farmland into real estate has created instability and widened social fault lines. Haryana must prioritise equitable development, strengthen education, skills and livelihoods, while regulating speculative land booms. Growth must not only be tall; it must be strong, inclusive and fair.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

Taxpayer bears the burden

Refer to ‘Engineers fail test’, Haryana’s junior and mid-level engineers not being able to clear their departmental examination is deeply worrying. Such a high failure rate raises serious concerns about the technical strength of the very workforce responsible for building and maintaining the state’s public infrastructure. Engineers in government

service are not just routine employees; they are the custodians of public projects that affect daily life — roads, bridges, public buildings, drainage systems and irrigation networks. If they are unable to demonstrate even basic proficiency in their specialised fields, the quality and safety of these projects naturally comes under doubt. Ultimately, it is the taxpayer who bears the burden.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Recruitment agencies at fault

Apropos of ‘Engineers fail test’, the highest standards and norms have not been maintained in the state due to practices like corruption, nepotism, communalism and regionalism by recruitment agencies — Haryana Public Service Commission and SSBs. They do not seem to be aware of their obligation to choose the right men for the right posts. A great deal of mischief is due to the secrecy inherent in the functioning of government offices.

ANIL BHATIA, HISAR

Pattern of cutting corners

Refer to ‘Stalling justice’, the UP government seeking nod for the withdrawal of a 2015 lynching case from a district court does not augur well for the criminal justice system. It is a travesty of the time-tested principle: it is better for ten guilty persons to escape than for one innocent person to suffer. Unfortunately, such withdrawal of criminal cases is emerging as a pattern of cutting corners. The courts must not allow such attempts without deliberating over the merits and demerits of the case.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Only the poor deserve quota

Apropos of ‘CJI Gavai for exclusion of creamy layer in SC quota’, his contention that ‘children of IAS officers can’t be equated with the children of a poor agricultural labourer when it comes to reservation’ is absolutely right. But, no government dare take action in the matter fearing backlash by the SCs. Also, the Opposition will take undue advantage of the situation and defame the government as being anti-SC. Only the poor, irrespective of their caste, and the backward sections of the society, deserve reservation. But the moot question is: who will bell the cat?

VK TANGRI, MOHALI

Mamdani seeking Nehru in a divided world



JYOTSNA SINGH
PROFESSOR EMERITA,
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

ZOHRAH Mamdani's election as Mayor of New York City (NYC) has evoked worldwide responses, ranging from idealistic expectations of radical reforms for "affordability" to feamongering about his supposed "communist" and "jihadist" goals. To what extent he will be successful as the Mayor in fulfilling his mandate of economic fairness and social justice only time will tell. Central to his speech, however, was his evocation of the lives and identities of immigrants, mostly people from the Global South, in NYC and other American cities.

Furthermore, beyond the US, Mamdani's overall vision forces us to reflect historically on the immigrant experience in the West since the mid-20th century, as well as on the status of minority communities in the nations of the Global South.

In his speech, Mamdani vividly evoked the presence and labours of immigrants in NYC: "Thank you to those so often forgotten by the politics of our city: ... I speak of

Yemeni bodega owners and Mexican abuelas. Senegalese taxi drivers and Uzbek nurses. Trinidadian line cooks and Ethiopian aunties ... Fingers bruised from lifting boxes on the warehouse floor, palms calloused from delivery bike handlebars, knuckles scarred with kitchen burn."

Laying out their plight, Mamdani then issued a forceful riposte to President Donald Trump's harsh anti-immigrant policies and nationalistic rhetoric: "New York will remain a city of immigrants: a city built by immigrants, powered by immigrants and, as of tonight, led by an immigrant."

Ideals of liberalism, underpinned by the rule of law, free speech and equal rights for all were crucial in shaping both emerging and full-fledged democracies from mid-20th century onwards, in the post-war (post-Nazi) and postcolonial world. This credo provided the necessary pushback against fascist authoritarianism.

And key to these liberal ideals were the migrant/immigrant experiences. Despite the many challenges of delivery and of persisting inequality, the ideals had — and continue to have — an important effect worldwide. These principles drew many immigrants from the Global South to the West, and, as a result, made Europe a better place, for instance, by expanding its cultural, religious, political and affective



INSIGHT: Mamdani's vision forces us to reflect historically on the immigrant experience in the West. REUTERS

communities, implementing social change and the rule of law. Similar democratic drives emerged in varying iterations across south and east Asia, as well as the southern hemisphere.

Populism harnessed to authoritarian governments, as seen in the US lately, is part of a growing global phenomenon, exhibiting different degrees of control over their populations — and at different stages of authoritarian takeovers. These range from Russia to Hungary to North Korea, China, India, Egypt and Turkey, among others, as well as in the southern hemisphere. Furthermore, such populist impulses are also evident in extreme right-wing political parties in France, Germany, the

The myth of national greatness has propelled an authoritarian Hindutva nationalism in contemporary India.

Netherlands and Scandinavian countries.

Looking back, these authoritarian trends uncannily mirror the evolution of authoritarianism in the 1930s, as described by Hannah Arendt in her prescient work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). She explains how an alienated population under fascist rule found meaning and purpose in myths of national greatness — premised on the idea of a pure race.

Thus, not surprisingly, Nazi antisemitism and racism against "others" in society gave disaffected citizens their sense of identity.

Today, when masked and armed US Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) members are literally

grabbing people — mostly brown and black, and from immigrant populations — on the streets of American cities without any due process, the victims are also cast as inferior "others" with limited or non-existent citizenship. All of these policies are buttressed by a call to "Make America Great Again" — to purify the nation through a homogenous population: white, Christian and so forth.

In these historical contexts, we can appreciate Mamdani's insistence on asserting the rights and privileges of immigrants in a city looking up at the iconic Statue of Liberty. But similar myths of national greatness coupled with racial and religious purity tests have also propelled an authoritarian Hindutva nationalism in contemporary India, which is far removed from the nation's origins in 1947.

This was perhaps in Mamdani's mind when his speech took a distinctive — and to many, surprising — global turn as he invoked the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister: "A moment comes, but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance."

Nehru's "Tryst with Destiny" speech, from which this line was taken, signaled a forward-looking idea of India based on parliamentary democracy, pluralism, secularism and constitutional

freedoms. In fact, Nehru's legacy of a liberal democracy was founded on concrete educational, scientific and cultural institutions — ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation), IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology), and more locally, the NSD, National School of Drama. Cumulatively, values of these institutions were reiterated through Nehru's lifetime.

The signature product of Nehru's vision of a forward-looking modern India was the modernist city of Chandigarh, which he saw as "symbolic of the freedom of India... an expression of the nation's faith in the future." This faith in a new future had a particular poignancy as Chandigarh was built to resettlement of refugees and migrants from west Punjab in the aftermath of the traumatic partition of the nation. Thus, resettling in a modernist, unfamiliar architectural habitat, displaced "immigrants" embraced a futuristic destiny of equal citizenship.

Politicians and leaders are typically judged by the economy or delivery in governance. But equally, we should also evaluate their vision for their nation and its future. Is it a vision which inspires unity and tolerance? Does it uphold equal citizenship for all? How does it counter the authoritarian aspects of political forces in the nation? Such questions remain with us today, from Nehru to Mamdani, but ones we should keep raising.

Adopt a humane path to manage stray dogs



NAVTEJ JOHAR
DANCER & CHOREOGRAPHER

IN primary school, I learnt cursive writing by carefully running my pencil over a dotted line which read, "A dog is man's best friend." Native American mythology talks of a time when humans became so cruel to animals that God decided to separate their worlds; and as the Almighty was slicing the earth into two, the dog jumped over the gaping split to the side of the humans.

The dog has been in our midst, in our lanes, streets and doorsteps since time immemorial. It must be eliminated gently. Guru Tegh Bahadur writes, "Says Nanak, attend upon the Lord like the steadfast dog who never abandons his master's house" (*slok mohalla nawan*, 45).

The dog's unconditional love for its humans remains exemplary, its *shraddha* towards its human being is nothing short of *bhakti*. And the human, touched by a dog's love, can neither forget nor fail to reciprocate its purity with the same wholeheartedness.

People unfriendly to dogs find it hard to understand the "mad" love that dog lovers feel for their babies. It is because the "look" of open love in their voiceless, trusting eyes, once seen, can never leave us.

Today, dog haters and dog lovers are standing poles apart. But on one point, we would both agree: that both want dogs eventually off the streets; the former because they want their streets free of stray dogs and the latter because they can no longer see their *bachchas* suffering on the streets.

It is ironic that the Supreme Court has come up with two successive adverse verdicts against street dogs at a time when caregiving for animals has become commonplace amongst all strata.

New Delhi has not reported even one rabies-related death over the past three years; and this is thanks, to a very large degree, to the caregivers who work relentlessly to care for their strays.

I live in the Capital, in Green Park, where an active group of dog lovers takes care of each and every — and when I say "each and every", I mean each and every — dog in the locality. It effectively divides the work to feed, care, vaccinate and sterilise all their street dogs, over 80 in number. Yes, all the street dogs in Green Park and adjoining areas are ster-



DOG MENACE: The solution begins with kindness, trust and cooperation, not fear. SANDEEP JOSHI

ilised; the last of the pups that were born in the area between 2013 and 2017 were adopted and we have had no litter since then. When they are injured or sick, they are sent to medical facility for treatment and recovery. This significantly reduces the risk of dog bites, as dogs usually bite out of pain or fear rather than anything else. If a new dog strays into the area, it is immediately noticed, fed and, in time, vaccinated and sterilised.

Such groups abound all over the city not only in posh colonies but also in poorer bastis where dog feeders work in cooperation with dog

Humanely reducing the dog population is not a dream — it is a proven reality in neighbourhoods across Delhi.

lovers from the area.

In 2010, this group had managed to sterilise a significant number of dogs in our area, and I was hopeful that no strays would be left in our streets in a few years. But then, we woke up one morning to find many unfamiliar dogs scurrying in our lanes.

The authorities had overnight picked up dogs from around the Commonwealth Games Village and displaced them all over the city. Overnight, the painstaking sterilisation project collapsed. However, despite the setback, the project persisted and the dog population in our area continued to reduce.

While there were seven dogs in my lane around five years ago, we have none today. Yes, there is not a single stray in my street today; and so is the case in many adjoining streets. They have all passed on without reproducing.

There is also a misconception that dog care is an elite preoccupation. The woman who does our cleaning has adopted two strays that her family dotes over; the *safai karamchari* of our lane proudly boasts of the stray she has adopted; the *phool-wala* in the market does not brook any hostility towards his "Munna"; and the *fruit-wala* snuggles with his Kalu at night as they both keep watch over their shop.

Humanely reducing the dog population of our cities is not a pipe dream; it is a tried and tested reality. The method is very simple: allow the caregivers to feed the dog; that way, they befriend it and earn its trust. It does not take long for a dog to know its human protectors.

Once the bond is forged, the animal can be easily picked up when in need of treatment, vaccination and sterilisation. And once sterilised, it is only a matter of time that there will be no dog left in the lane, like mine and many others in South Delhi that have been fine-combed by the committed dog caregivers.

Many cities have tried

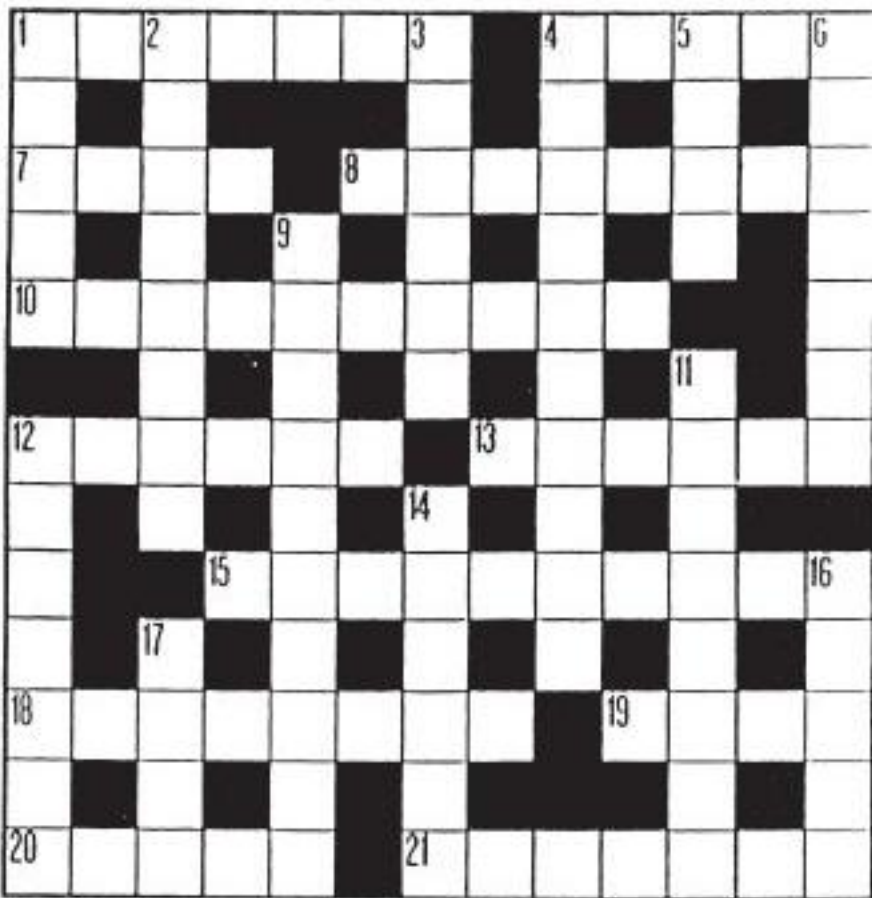
culling dogs before, but it has never proved effective. The courts and the government would be well advised to recognise that the solution to this "problem" begins with kindness. All it needs to do is join hands with the already well-organised groups of dog lovers of their city, whose heart lies in the care and safety of their dogs, and the humanity of us humans, what more could a humane city wish for?

Today, the polarised responses of both groups are rooted in fear. Those who are against dogs see them as a menace and fear that the menace will only grow out of control if not drastically brought under check. Meanwhile, dog lovers fear the fate of their babies after they are carried off to "shelters".

We know well that no government is equipped to build an infrastructure within the stipulated eight weeks to house tens of thousands of dogs. Where will these dogs go, what will become of them? And the darkest fear that looms in our hearts is that of the dog-meat market in neighbouring China.

Our voiceless dogs are in dire need of help today. Please let us stand up for them and let them be gradually phased out from our streets with love, care and dignity that they deserve. After all, we are human, and we must not forget that!

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Come next after (7)
 - 4 Black and blue (5)
 - 7 Separate piece of news (4)
 - 8 Deep open crack in glacier (8)
 - 10 Unsuspected character flaw (4,2,4)
 - 12 Empty (6)
 - 13 Commit illegal act (6)
 - 15 Campanologist (4-6)
 - 18 Extreme wickedness (8)
 - 19 Brawl (4)
 - 20 Rapacious extortioner (5)
 - 21 Kingfisher (7)
- DOWN**
- 1 Light sculling-boat (5)
 - 2 Belief (8)
 - 3 Frank (6)
 - 4 Romance (4,6)
 - 5 Immense (4)
 - 6 Strongly resisting change (3-4)
 - 9 Charlatan (10)
 - 11 Contemptibly mean (8)
 - 12 In relation to (3-1-3)
 - 14 Settle conclusively (6)
 - 16 A viscose textile fibre (5)
 - 17 Small wingless jumping insect (4)
- Yesterday's Solution**
- Across:** 1 Tour de force, 9 Thought, 10 Evade, 11 Veer, 12 Higher-up, 14 Recoup, 16 Turn in, 18 Troubled, 19 Mesh, 22 Rouse, 23 Feuch up, 24 Neck and neck.
- Down:** 2 Ozone, 3 Rage, 4 Entail, 5 Overhaul, 6 Chagrin, 7 At every turn, 8 Keep in shape, 13 Outbreak, 15 Closure, 17 Deafen, 20 Ethic, 21 Stun.

SU DO KU

		2			8		
			1	7	8		
	9		2		6		1
6				9			3
		3				1	
5				2			7
	1		5		4		2
			7	6	3		
		6				5	

V. HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

6	1	7	3	8	5	4	2	9
5	4	8	1	2	9	7	6	3
9	3	2	4	6	7	8	5	1
1	9	5	8	3	6	2	4	7
8	2	4	7	9	1	6	3	5
3	7	6	2	5	4	9	1	8
7	8	3	5	4	2	1	9	6
2	5	9	6	1	8	3	7	4
4	6	1	9	7	3	5	8	2

CALENDAR

NOVEMBER 18, 2025, TUESDAY	
■ Shaka Samvat	1947
■ Kartik Shaka	27
■ Marghashirsh Parvishle	3
■ Hijari	1447
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 13, up to 7.13 am	
■ Ayushman Yoga up to 8.09 am	
■ Swati Nakshatra	-----
■ Moon in Libra sign	
■ Shri Bala Ji Jyanti	

FORECAST

CITY	TUESDAY WEDNESDAY		17:25 HRS 06:51 HRS
	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	25	09	
New Delhi	26	10	
Amritsar	25	09	
Bathinda	27	08	
Jalandhar	24	09	
Ludhiana	26	09	
Bhiwani	26	09	
Hisar	26	07	
Sirsa	28	09	
Dharamsala	22	09	
Manali	17	04	
Shimla	19	10	
Srinagar	16	01	
Jammu	24	11	
Kargil	10	-06	
Leh	07	-07	
Dehradun	27	11	
Mussoorie	20	10	

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Challenges galore for Congress post-Bihar verdict

FOR close to four decades, the fate of Congress party that is desperately struggling to remain relevant as a national entity, the 'Tughlaqian' streak (over the last decade specifically) to head towards doomsday from the victory pedestal even when everything seems assured has confounded political pundits and, even more so, their fast dwindling number of supporters or what remains of them. Of course, watchers of the Grand Old Party and its manoeuvres to stay afloat from the dangerously shrinking political base have their neatly arranged set of reasons as to why this sorry state-of-affairs continues to haunt it. From a party with a pan-Indian presence, it has now been reduced to a glorified regional party even though the

high command is based in Delhi, however miniaturised its presence. Ever since NDA stormed to power in 2014 and has continued its march into its third term in 2024, the continuing failure of the principal Opposition party, as it is still referred to, in countering the governance lapses and agenda-laden policy decisions of the incumbent government at the Centre has been pointed to one ongoing malaise: the inability to come to terms with its current political status and the overarching ambition of its leaders deluding themselves into thinking that they can still pack a punch and bounce back during polls.

As the Bihar poll battle reached a feverish climax and MGB with its young leader Tejashwi Yadav expecting to topple 'Paltu Ram'

Nitish Kumar and the NDA formation, among the many pointers raised by analysts, one fact stood out: the damaging influence the Congress party has had and how it ruined the prospects of Tejashwi during the 2020 polls, a jinx that continued in 2025. If it was the disproportionate number of seats they bagged during the last elections (70) as an alliance partner and the victory tally (19) going on to deny the RJD leader a fair chance to claim the Chief Minister's gaddi, this time around, their terrible failure even to reach double digits made their alliance an embarrassing counter to the rampaging NDA, which decimated them ruthlessly. Of course, RJD themselves were rejected mercilessly by the electorate in the 2025

polls, which did not even make them dream of bagging the top slot in Patna. The irrelevance of Congress, which has been the longest in Tamil Nadu (nearly six decades of existence as an alliance partner with either of the two Dravidian parties), has now spread to neighbouring Andhra Pradesh.

With Karnataka and Telangana now ruled by it, with varying levels of stability and acceptance by the public, the south still seems a safe bet for the party. The typical dissidence and groupism that have plagued its existence over decades remain a thorn in the two states. It would be interesting to see how these two Congress-ruled states handle their own homespun hassles and tackle the High Command's

whimsical ways from here on. Also, political observers would be keenly watching how the party negotiates its quota of seats in the forthcoming Assembly elections due in the ensuing summer with the DMK, which has always kept them at arm's length after they come to power, not even mooted the idea of power sharing even once all these years. Being reduced to being a fringe player is nothing new for Congress in recent times but making it easy for both its so-called allies and a robust NDA to plan its campaign well and sustain a headstart in the days ahead does not bode well for democracy, which thrives on political prowess and campaigns that aim to keep the electorate interested till the polling date.

Vote manipulation: AI's power and media credibility



DR MADABHUSHI SRIDHAR ACHARYULU

HIGHLY reputed advocate Prashant Bhushan says, "A lot of people believe that vote manipulation paved the way for NDA's landslide win in Bihar. While there was vote manipulation, it would not account for a major percentage. Has the voter turned fearless?"

According to the Election Commission of India (ECI), the strong technical safeguards in EVMs and elaborate administrative safeguards, procedures, and security that are in place ensure that the elections are transparent, free, and fair. So how does one remove this strong suspicion?

This entire electoral process is completely questionable, alleges the Congress party. "The Bihar result is unbelievable for us; no political party in India's history has managed a 90 per cent strike rate. The 2025 Bihar election results, where the Congress managed a bare 10 per cent strike rate, while winning six of the 61 seats it contested, is its second-worst performance since 2010, when it had won only four seats", states a media report. The 'National Press Day' that is celebrated on November 16 serves as a reminder to the media professionals about the need to uphold high standards

of journalism, free from external influences.

But are our journalists fearless in their speech, expression and content?

The 'World Press Freedom Day' (May 3), which was established by the UN to commemorate the 1991 Windhoek Declaration, calls for a free, independent, and pluralistic press and highlights the need to protect fundamental freedom.

Similarly, on January 29, acknowledged as Indian Newspaper Day, speaks of the importance of newspapers and their power. Can India rejoice this facet in the current democracy that it is in?

Now, the ultimate challenge for India is to utilise the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in making democracy and access to information more possible. At the same time, we must build a strong, transparent, and rights-based system that reduces the risks of censorship, manipulation, and financial decay of the independent media. These principles of a free press need to be enthusiastically maintained in this era of counterfeit material. The statement that 'truth alone triumphs' is known as Satyameva Jayati, is now critically challenged. The Deepfakes Analysis Unit (DAU) investigated a widely circulated video featuring Rahul Gandhi and Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman allegedly endorsing a government-backed financial platform purportedly associated with Elon Musk and 'Quantum AI'. Upon thorough analysis, the DAU concluded that the video is fabricated and constitutes a deliberate misuse of artificial intelligence to mislead the public.



UN Global Digital Compact emphasizes "the need to address technology-amplified issues while protecting privacy and freedom of expression. AI is transforming the fundamental right to seek, impart, and receive information, as well as the journalist profession. It enhances access to information and processing of it, enabling journalists to handle and process vast amounts of data efficiently and create content more effectively. AI tools can improve fact-checking, data visualization, local and multilingual adaptation of news content and its translation".

AI-generated prompt



The recent blunder by Pakistan's leading English daily, Dawn, where an AI-generated prompt was accidentally published in a print story, serves as a stark, global illustration of the new ethical risks. The inclusion of the line, "If you want, I can also create an even snappier 'front-page style' version...", revealed a human editorial oversight; the "negligence copy-paste syndrome" that exposed the paper's undisclosed use of AI tools.

This incident underscores the immediate necessity for media organisations to establish and enforce strict, transparent AI ethics and policies to protect their credibility.

Where even educated people purchase and sell the votes, it is a competition among two AI-generated 'products'. The rise of generative Artificial Intelligence has placed the Indian media at the crossroads and a technological rift.

With Article 19(1)(a), is digital freedom of the press under threat?

Indian newsrooms use machine learning for social media monitoring and large-scale data analysis. We should use it for positive gains in combating misinformation-AI-powered tools like Google's Fact Check Explorer. Another example of positive gain is that AI-driven video and text summarisation tools enable journalists to deliver content more efficiently across digital and social media platforms, addressing India's growing demand for vernacular and mobile-first news, according to Dr Nivash Jeevanandam.

The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression highlighted: "AI offers the potential to enhance freedom of expression by democratizing access to information, empowering global communication, and changing the reality of the flow of information around the world. It also introduces new risks."

UN Global Digital Compact emphasizes "the need to address technology-amplified issues while protecting privacy and freedom of expression. AI is transforming the fundamental right to seek, impart, and receive information, as well as the journalist profession. It enhances access to information and processing of it, enabling journalists to handle and process vast amounts of data efficiently and create content more effectively. AI

tools can improve fact-checking, data visualization, local and multilingual adaptation of news content and its translation, streamlining the journalistic process and making information more engaging and accessible".

New challenges:

Now we are caught in a new journalism challenge. The proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is radically changing journalism and creating threatening challenges. It is raising doubts over the possible effect of AI on everyone's integrity, the editorial content, and employment security in the industry. The authenticity is questionable. Is it possible to safeguard the basic tenets of a free, autonomous, and plural media, which are still crucial? The influence of AI on the creation, consumption, and regulation of information is immense.

AI's immediate threat: Electoral manipulation:

The closest and far-reaching effect of AI has been the election manipulation, most recently expressed in the Bihar Assembly Elections in 2025.

► **The Deep Fakes and partisan warfare:** AI-generated reels, avatars, and fake audio clips of political figures experienced a rise in the polls. This was not mere propaganda, but highly contentious deep fake cases, like the so-called AI video of PM Modi and his mother that was supposed to create outrage and denounce those against it.

► **ECI's proactive response:** The ECI had to take an actionist approach by issuing an advisory that obliged all political parties to implement prominent and clear labelling of all synthetic content. This action underscores the increasing need to have regulatory authorities intervene even when disinformation that is creat-

ed by AI directly jeopardizes the sanctity of democracy.

► **Regulation and digital dilemma:** The first line of response to reduce harm by the government is the proposed laws to have mandatory labelling and the creation of non-removable identifiers or metadata on all AI-generated content, including text, images, and videos.

Concerns regarding freedom of speech:

AI brings new risks. It can be used to disseminate fake or disinformation, promote more hate speech online, and reinforce emerging forms of censorship. Some actors use AI for mass surveillance of journalists and citizens, creating a chilling effect on freedom of expression. However, critics argue that giving the government and powerful platforms the authority to mandate labelling and enforce takedown powers can increase state power and pose a chilling effect on free expression.

Threat to democracy:

Prashant Bhushan's apprehension is real-This result shows that it becomes virtually impossible to defeat a combination of money and control of EC and the media, especially if you can use public funds to bribe voters. It is very worrying for our electoral democracy". He added: This landslide can only be explained by the Rs 10,000 bribe from public funds given to >1.5 crore on poll eve. This should have been prevented by ECI as they did earlier in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. They influence public perception, fake and misinformation. This is a ruling, not a rule of law. However, a strong suspicion cannot replace the truth.

(The writer is Professor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)



LETTERS

Bihar voters come of age

This has reference to your editorial 'Nitish Kumar's administrative acumen stood him in good stead'. Gone are the days, when political strength, coupled with caste equations decided the fortunes of parties and candidates in elections. Bihar elections have dismantled the trend, when all cross sections of castes enthusiastically took part to choose and elect a performing government in the state, having learnt bitter lessons of misrule and rampant corruption under the RJD rule. The dismal memories of Lalu Prasad Yadav's are fresh in people's mind. Not letting his son Tejashwi Yadav to don the mantle is an indication of this very 'awakening'. Good governance and effective checks on corruption is what the people expect from their elected representatives. Freebies alone cannot alone sway polling patterns.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

People repose trust in Nitish Kumar

THIS is further to your editorial 'Nitish Kumar's administrative acumen stood him in good stead'. Backing an administration that lives up to people's expectations is the mantra that most of the states in the country are witnessing; the performing government being re-elected is reflective of the good governance that has prevailed in Bihar, whose people trust and back Nitish Kumar. Giving school going girls bicycles is one such initiative that catapulted his image among the masses. The people of Bihar are experiencing an enormous change in law and order, a welcome change from the dark days of hooliganism culture that prevailed during Lalu Prasad Yadav's rule.

K R Parvathy, Mysuru

Death sentence of Hasina is a legal fraud

The death sentence and six-month imprisonment in absentia awarded to former prime minister Sheikh Hasina by Bangladesh's so-called International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) expose serious legal and procedural flaws. The tribunal, reportedly influenced by Muhammad Yunus, who heads the interim government, raises concerns not only about fairness but also about the timing and intention of justice. That these verdicts were announced just before the declaration of elections strongly suggests a politically motivated agenda rather than impartial adjudication. By delivering verdicts in absentia, the tribunal undermines Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), violating the accused's right to a fair trial and core principles of natural justice, including the right to defend herself, confront evidence, and cross-examine witnesses. A death sentence delivered without participation is inherently arbitrary and legally unsustainable. Furthermore, crimes against humanity are conventionally referred to the International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague, ensuring impartiality, procedural safeguards, and enforceable judgments, which all stand bypassed.

K V Chandra Mouli, Mysuru-570022

ICJ must handle Hasina's case

IT was quite shocking to learn that former prime minister Sheikh Hasina has been sentenced to death by the Bangladesh Tribunal. We suggest that Bangladesh should refer the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). World leaders and international bodies like UNO must unite and appeal for the same. India is interested in political and economic stability of its neighbours. Hasina has dubbed it as Kangaroo (unofficial) court judgement and politically motivated. Hence, ICJ must act fast.

PVP Madhu Nivriti, Secunderabad-61

Laudable Initiative

CONDUCTING counselling sessions for rowdy sheeters by police officials is laudable. (Hans India page 2 November 17) In many cases, the young people become rowdy sheeters when there are no elderly people in the house to guide to follow right path. Another reason is lack of education. The police may also provide them suitable jobs or encourage business venture so that they will never resort to rowdiness in future.

G V N Murthy, Hyderabad

Paltu Ram-A true politician

Nitish Kumar has built a unique political career in modern India- from student politics to becoming Bihar's longest serving Chief Minister for the tenth time. He has been called 'Sushasan Babu' for his focus on governance, education, and women's welfare. His reputation for integrity and simple lifestyle strengthened his bond with the people. Opponents call him 'Paltu Ram', a nickname reflecting his frequent political shifts from the BJP led NDA to the RJD Congress Mahagathbandhan and back again with ease and without any guilt. While opponents interpret his moves of shifting parties frequently as opportunistic, supporters call it a survival necessity in a stormy political climate. His dual image—as an innovative reformer and tactical strategist-- illustrates the core qualities of a 'true politician'.

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com



BENGALURU ONLINE

If cabinet expansion happens, DKS will be sidelined: LoP

BENGALURU: 'Why are Congress leaders going to Delhi when they say there is no change in Chief Minister?' questioned Opposition Leader R Ashoka. Speaking to reporters, he said, 'I had repeatedly said that the Chief Minister will change in November. However, Congress leaders said that won't happen. Now, DK Shivakumar's brothers have gone to Delhi and are sitting there. If there is no CM change, why is everyone meeting Mallikarjun Kharge?'

'The problems of sugarcane farmers have not been resolved, human-wildlife conflict has intensified, compensation for rain damage has not been given. Despite so many issues, a musical chair competition is going on for the CM's chair. If the cabinet expansion happens, DK Shivakumar will be sidelined. Going to temples and performing poojas will go in vain', he said. 'The Forest Minister should respond on the deaths of blackbucks at the Chennamma Mini Zoo'

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Psychedelics might help terminal patients find peace

MUIREANN QUIGLEY, LAURA DOWNEY AND JOANNA NEILL

IN clinical trials around the world, a surprising treatment is showing promise for people with terminal illnesses: psychedelic therapy. For many, the hardest part of dying isn't physical pain but the fear, anxiety and sense of meaninglessness that often accompany it. While palliative care in the UK is rightly praised for easing pain and managing symptoms, patients' emotional and spiritual suffering is often less well addressed.

Standard treatments – such as antidepressants, counselling and mindfulness – may ease some symptoms but often fail to help patients accept their diagnosis or find meaning in their remaining time. This is where psychedelic therapy may offer support. The therapy involves the use of psychedelics such as psilocybin in combination with

psychological support. This approach is designed to help patients explore difficult emotions, shift perspective and achieve profound psychological breakthroughs.

In two landmark studies, a high dose of psilocybin with psychotherapy was shown to reduce depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer. These effects were rapid and, in many cases, sustained for up to six months, with many participants reporting improved mood, emotional clarity and reduced the fear of death. Some also described experiences of deep emotional release, awe and a sense of connection during psychedelic therapy – altered states that appeared to help patients reframe their relationship to dying.

Recognition of the potential of psychedelics for treating severe mental health conditions generally has led to significant regulatory shifts in several countries.

Australia, Germany and



In two landmark studies, a high dose of psilocybin with psychotherapy was shown to reduce depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer. These effects were

rapid with many participants reporting improved mood, emotional clarity and reduced the fear of death. Some described experiences of deep emotional release, awe and a sense of connection during psychedelic therapy – altered states that appeared to help patients reframe their relationship to dying.

Canada are beginning to allow access to psychedelics for people with serious or treatment-resistant conditions. Meanwhile, the EU has invested millions in research into psychedelic-assisted therapy. But in the UK, progress remains slow. Psychedelics are classed as substances of little or no medicinal value and are tightly controlled by the Misuse of Drugs Regulations. This makes research slow and ac-

cess nearly impossible. Even clinical trials face costly licensing requirements and delays, discouraging researchers and limiting innovation.

A timely debate:

Questions about how best to support people at the end of life are especially timely, as the end-of-life bill is currently being debated in parliament. While the bill focuses on legalising assisted

dying, it has also sparked wider debate about the quality and scope of end-of-life care. Access to good palliative support is not always guaranteed – a concern shared by both supporters and opponents of the bill.

Against this backdrop, the limits of conventional approaches to psychological suffering become harder to ignore. The bill opens space to consider the potential role of psychedelic therapy, and to reflect more broadly on what it means to die well and whether current systems adequately support that goal.

It has prompted renewed public interest in how we treat psychological distress in the final stages of life. A recent YouGov poll found that most UK adults support relaxing restrictions on psilocybin research, especially for people with terminal illness. This suggests that public attitudes may be ahead of policy. The bill provides an opportunity to question why the UK continues to imple-

ment such strict legal controls that hamper research and access to much-needed treatments, and why it lags behind other countries' approaches. It invites a broader conversation about how the UK supports those facing the emotional and existential challenges of dying.

Clinical evidence, public attitudes and the changing international landscape all highlight growing interest in psychedelic therapy as a complement to conventional approaches like counselling.

For those nearing the end of life, it may offer a rare chance to face death with less fear and more meaning and emotional clarity. Psychedelic therapy won't be right for everyone, but for some, it could mean meeting death with peace instead of despair.

(Muirreann Quigley and Laura Downey are from the University of Birmingham and Joanna Neill is associated with the University of Manchester)

DECCAN
Chronicle

18 NOVEMBER 2025

Congress, allies must rework strategy after Bihar debacle

The disastrous performance of the Congress in the Bihar Assembly election and its extremely poor strike rate should offer some lessons both to the party and to its allies in various states. As for the party, it will continue to sink unless it rediscovers its political agenda and work seriously on it. The allies may take a realistic account of the strength of the grand old party and the electoral dividend it can bring to the table before committing themselves to accommodating it.

There is no gainsaying that the BJP has replaced the Congress in some states while the left-of-centre parties who at some point in time shared political vibe with it in the others. This happened after the Congress deviated from its historic positioning as a liberal secular political force capable of accommodating a wide variety of thoughts. The party is now perceived by some as the BJP's B-team, while others portray it as an ally of Islamists and Maoists. It has long cast its socialist moorings away, angering the Leftists.

That its opponents have a strong opinion on it need not worry a party if it follows its own agenda but the Congress appears to have none. The party keeps telling the people that the BJP-led NDA government at the centre, under the guidance of the RSS, has been out to weaken the Constitution and the democratic institutions. The party has reiterated several times that the BJP must be unseated from power both at the centre and in the states if the country were to survive. The party which has such a concern and conviction on the future of the country should also know that the BJP can be removed from power only through democratic means and the elections are the only legitimate route to get there.

But the Congress has been anything but responsible when it comes to elections. It has refused to accommodate even the nominal claims of its allies in several states and ended up enabling the installation of BJP governments. The allies, who had a better understanding of the realpolitik, were more accommodating in the Lok Sabha elections, and the strategy proved fruitful in that it stopped the BJP from getting a simple majority in the Lok Sabha, leave alone crossing the two-thirds mark.

The Congress was at its irresponsible best while negotiating seat-sharing in Bihar this time, too, though the party was largely responsible for the return of the NDA in the 2020 election by losing most of the seats it was allotted. The Congress' claims delayed seat-sharing negotiations until the final day. It fielded candidates in 11 seats allotted to the Mahagathbandhan allies. The party even delayed endorsing RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav as the chief ministerial candidate for no reason.

A section of the Congress leadership in Tamil Nadu has now raised the demand that the DMK allot a higher number of seats to it in the Assembly elections than last time. The party also wants a share in power, which has not been the practice so far.

It is incumbent upon the Congress to convert INDIA bloc into a viable alternative to the saffron brand of politics. If the party has no plans to concretise its political agenda and aggressively pursue it, then the allies must look for alternatives for their survival.

Fix defence self-reliance cracks

Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan's warning to Indian defence manufacturers on the importance of meeting delivery timelines should serve as a wake-up call to the country's policy makers. His remarks on delays, overpromising, and inflated indigenisation claims reflect dissonance in the country's defence establishment on indigenisation and military capabilities.

While the pursuit of self-reliance in defence production is an important national aspiration, the harsh truth in the armed forces is that capability delivered late is capability denied. No amount of nationalistic fervour or patriotic speeches can compensate for a frontline unit receiving critical equipment months or years after it is needed.

Gen. Chauhan's observations are not theoretical; they are borne out of desperation in the armed forces. He aired his displeasure publicly after domestic companies repeatedly failed to meet delivery timelines or overstated indigenous content. Similarly, in May this year, IAF air chief Marshal A.P. Singh flagged similar concerns over the delayed delivery of Tejas and criticised Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for overpromising and underdelivering.

India cannot afford such lapses, especially when its enemies are fast arming themselves. The Indian Air Force today operates far fewer fighter squadrons than the sanctioned strength, while Pakistan is poised to acquire fifth-generation fighter aircraft from China. In the maritime domain, India's blue-water dominance is also under pressure from China. Pakistan's forthcoming Chinese-origin submarines will alter the undersea equation. The Indian Navy, therefore, needs fleet modernisation. While India is still working toward greater indigenous capability in drone manufacturing, Pakistan enjoys a steady supply line of combat-proven drones and munitions from Turkey.

Atmanirbharta, therefore, should not come at the cost of battle readiness of the armed forces. It should not merely be a manufacturing slogan; it must result in timely, credible, deployable capabilities. The government must balance two imperatives: nurturing a domestic defence ecosystem and ensuring the armed forces are not left waiting during moments of strategic urgency.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

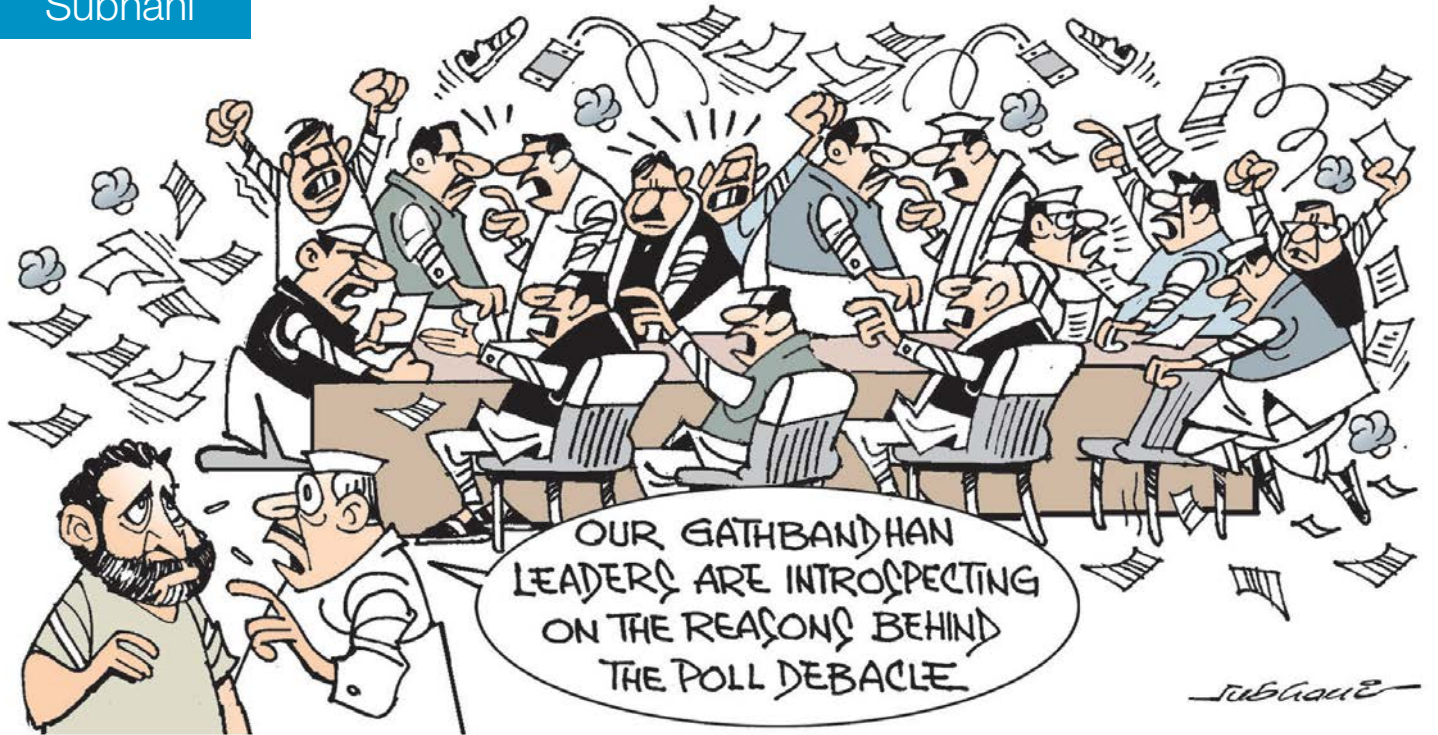
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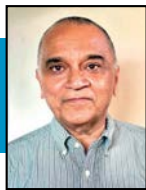
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Subhani



Looking through data fog:
Decode truth, lies in India



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

What distinguishes truth from lies? Statistics, of course.

Nothing illustrates the criticality of timely, accurate, consistent data for sound economic decision-making than US Federal Reserve chairperson Jerome Powell's lament about temporary monetary policy being like "driving slowly through a foggy night". He was referring to the consequences of reducing the US Federal Reserve rate below four per cent, where it has stood since September 2025, after two sequential cuts of 0.25 per cent each since December 2024, amidst heightened economic uncertainty from President Donald Trump's tantrums.

Christopher Waller, a contender for succeeding Mr Powell and a proponent of lower reserve rates to support growth and risk inflation, counters that "driving slowly does not mean coming to a halt", pointing to the cost of excessive caution in foregone growth, by making decisions overly data driven. The long US government shutdown (which recently ended), over the two-month-old deadlock over budget appropriations, has reduced the reliability and timeliness of unemployment and inflation data, as statistical staff were progressively laid off pending approval of new appropriations.

There is a close relationship between statistical capacity and development, amongst other variables — think energy consumption, education or health services. According to the World Bank's Statistical Performance Index, most OECD countries — a club of 38 rich countries sharing a commitment to democracy and the market economy — rank in the top quintile. Next comes most of Southeast Asia, Latin America, Russia and Central Asia, Turkey, Saudi

Arabia, Egypt, South Africa and Sri Lanka in the fourth quintile.

India is in the third quintile, along with select countries in South Asia, East Africa and West Africa. A low positioning for a country, where modern, official statistics started in 1881 — more than six decades before it became independent in 1947 and which till, the 1970s, was a regional leader in statistical practices.

Nor has World Bank support in 2010 to improve statistical capacity in state governments helped. The only consolation is that other countries like Rwanda and Vietnam, which also availed of World Bank financing for the same purpose, are similarly ranked, though Brazil, another borrower, is better off in the fourth quintile.

One plausible, albeit not the primary reason, for Brazil's better performance, could be that constitutional guarantees protect the autonomy of the statistical commission in Brazil. In India, statistical agencies work under the executive, leading to the potential loss of credibility with the public, when government becomes the umpire of its own performance.

There are, of course, external umpires of a government's functioning. Consider for instance, the global bond markets which track developments closely and punish government indiscretions in real time. Bond markets reacted vigorously in 2024 to the disastrous Budget tabled by the short-lived Liz Truss government in the UK. The government proposed unfunded tax cuts — a favourite right-wing stimulus — contrary to the advice from the Office for Budget Responsibility, a watchdog reporting directly to Parliament. In response, the government's bond yields increased by about four per cent and the pound sterling weakened. Sadly, in developing economies,

In India, statistical agencies work under the executive, leading to the potential loss of credibility with the public, when government becomes the umpire of its own performance.

including India, about 30 per cent of the government's borrowing is funded by the compulsory purchase of government bonds by banks and exposure to the global debt market is limited, which dulls the market response to government indiscretions. Having said that, India has never defaulted on its debt obligations. More significantly, global debt markets have a near term perspective and take national statistical data at face value, so it is no good relying on external pressure to improve statistical quality.

The impact of dodgy public statistics is primarily on the efficiency of the domestic economy. Taxpayers end up paying more than they need to for the same services and the needy and voiceless get deprived of essential services. The Indian government is acutely aware of the political fallout of such downsides. This is why the BJP — a "report card" government — which prides itself on extending the largest ever web of social services, has given up on targeting only the deserving. Consider the extended food support and the cash support programme paid to all farmers, which extends to about 55 per cent of the population of 1.45 billion. State governments separately free electricity or free bus rides for women and other innovative service support programmes. Targeting only the deserving requires good data — to avoid inclusion and exclusion errors — or risks raising public dissatisfaction over unfair allocations. The fiscal cost of improper targeting is about two per cent of GDP. Improving the efficiency with which governments target subsidies is the only sustainable future course to bridge the impossible duality between enhancing the Union government's

capital expenditure (4.3 per cent of GDP this year) for better infrastructure and defence preparedness and continued reduction of the fiscal deficit (4.4 per cent of GDP) this year to more sustainable levels. Better targeting is both a data adequacy and a political economy issue. As the government ignores the fiscal cost of about two per cent of GDP on undeserved subsidies, it recently took a very "strict" stand on the revision of registered voters for the just-ended elections in Bihar, using some of the digital identification markers now available. This led to the inclusion of new voters, amounting to 2.7 per cent, but also the deletion of 8.2 per cent of the 78.9 million voters. Of the delisted votes, 34 per cent had died, another 11 per cent were duplicate votes, but as many as 55 per cent were presumed migrated or untraceable. Expectedly, a political storm followed, alleging motivated decision making in a state where the BJP is part of the government.

Institutional changes to the statistical system were last suggested by the Rangarajan Commission in 2001 but only partly implemented. Digitisation of the economy is incomplete without digitised public data generation, because it is cost effective, albeit with appropriate safeguards and inclusive provisions for laggard digitisers and the aged. India's last decennial Census was held in 2011. It is now delayed by four years — making poverty estimates, unemployment levels and whether we are the largest country by population, into guestimates. The Union home ministry, which is authorised by the Census Act 1948 for this purpose, is mulling digitisation instead of the traditional, decentralised process of state governments using schoolteachers as enumerators — over which the Centre has limited control. It is not just the US Federal Reserve which has stopped rather than go wrong under pressure in the data fog. But at what cost?

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation, and was earlier with the IAS and the World Bank

LETTERS

SIR PROBLEMATIC

The special intensive revision (SIR) of voters' lists is now a talking point among the people. Many political parties are rightly protesting the hurry in which it is being undertaken and the lack of consideration of inaccessibility to some of the details sought in the enumeration form and the lack of clarity in respect of certain columns to be filled in. People are indeed exercised about the ongoing drive and fear the possibility of deletion of their names from the electoral rolls. It is not just difficult, but impossible to fill in columns requiring numbers in the voter ID cards with photos of father, mother and spouse issued long back in the wake of earlier enumeration exercises. What people would do when they are not in possession of these ID cards? The voters are subjected to this seemingly simple, but gruelling exercise.

G. David Milton
Maruthancode

KOREAN INVESTOR

It is unfortunate that a South Korean footwear major which, after executing an agreement with the Tamil Nadu Government to set up a non-leather footwear manufacturing facility in Tirunelveli district at a cost of Rs 1,720 crore, has now decided to move the investment to AP which may have lured the investor with free land and higher subsidies for power and other resources. Sensing a competitive game played to eke out more benefits, the TN government had rightly refused to accede to their demands.

Tharcius S. Fernando,
Chennai

HUMILIATING DEFEAT

India's humiliating loss to South Africa in the first Test at Eden Gardens is shocking. Team India have not learnt any lesson from the 0-3 whitewash against New Zealand last year at home on 'designer' tracks. Unfortunately, the current Indian Test side don't have a top-quality batter of the likes of Sunil Gavaskar, who can bring in all his technical skills on spinning tracks and show the way how to play on such pitches. Indian batters were truly tested and were swept aside on a surface that demanded temperament, skill, and patience. The loss at Eden Gardens means that India's days of invincibility at home in Tests are long gone.

R. SIVAKUMAR
Chennai

Mail your letters to
chennai@deccanmail.com

Aakar Patel



Why India's rank has been falling in global indices...
But do we bother?

Some years ago, the Niti Aayog had said it would prepare a "single, informative dashboard for all the twenty-nine (later 32) global indices" on which India was ranked. This monitoring exercise was "not just to improve rankings but to improve systems and drive reforms to attract investments and to shape India's perception globally".

This did not happen, for whatever reason, but that should not stop us from doing it ourselves. For one of my books, I looked at more than four dozen global indicators to compare where India stood now compared to 2014. I periodically revisit the data and it is instructive to know what the position is. Let's have a look.

On the UNDP's Human Development Index, India's rank in 2014 was 130 and its rank today is unchanged. The UN report says that "inequality reduces India's HDI by 30.7 per cent, one of the highest losses in the region. While health and education inequality have improved, income and gender disparities remain significant. Female labour force participation and political representation lag".

The Civicus monitor demoted India's civic space from "Obstructed" to "Repressed". It said that "there are a total of 49 countries in the world with this rating (of Repressed).

This rating is typically given to countries where civic space is heavily contested by power holders, who impose a combination of legal and practical

constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights". The Lowy Institute Asia Power Index measures hard power. India's score fell from 41.5 to 39.1, losing its "major power" status. The institute says that "India exerts less influence in the region than expected given its available resources, as indicated by the country's negative power gap score. Its negative power gap in 2024 was the largest since the inception of the Asia Power Index".

Freedom House's Freedom in the World looks at the rule of law, political pluralism and elections, functioning of government, civil liberties, and so on. In 2014 India was given a rating of 77 and marked "Free". In 2025 this was reduced to 63, and it was demoted to "Partly Free". (When this first happened, the government was angered but subsequently it has stopped commenting on such reports).

Freedom House said that "while India is a multi-party democracy, the government has presided over discriminatory policies and a rise in persecution affecting the Muslim population".

The World Justice Project publishes a Rule of Law Index that monitors nations' criminal and civil justice system, fundamental rights, constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, transparent government, order and security and the regulatory enforcement.

India has fallen from its 2014 ranking of 66 to 86 globally.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Solutions Network World Happiness Report looks at GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, perceptions of corruption and dystopia. India has gone from 111 in 2014 to 118.

On the Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, India fell from 140 in 2014 to 151 today. RSF says that "with violence against journalists, highly concentrated media ownership, and political alignment, press freedom is in crisis in 'the world's largest democracy'".

On the Cato Institute's Human Freedom Index, India went from 87 in 2014 to 110. On the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, India went from 114 in 2014 to 131 today.

The reasons given were that "female representation in Parliament falls from 14.7 per cent to 13.8 per cent in 2025, lowering the indicator score for the second year in a row below 2023 levels. Similarly, the share of women in ministerial roles falls from 6.5 per cent to 5.6 per cent".

The Transparency International Global Corruption Perceptions Index used to be reported on regularly in India's media but not much any longer. India has gone from 85 in 2014 to 96 in the world today.

The Heritage Foundation Global Economic Freedom Index monitors: Rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency and open markets. India was at 120 in 2014 and 128 today. The reasons

given: "progress with market-oriented reforms has been uneven. The foundations for long-term economic development remain fragile in the absence of an efficiently functioning legal framework. Entrepreneurs continue to face severe challenges. India's regulatory framework is burdensome", and so on.

The Global Hunger Index monitors hunger, stunting in children, undernourishment. In 2014 India ranked 55 out of 76 nations. Today India ranks 102 out of 123 countries. The report says that "India has a level of hunger that is serious".

When India began to plummet on the Hunger Index, the government said in Parliament in 2021 that it was not possible that Indians were hungry and that "we should not be sensitive to such reports".

Over time our position has evolved on these indices. First, we had assumed that good governance would make a difference. Then it was concluded that these indices had bad data and in any case these institutes were prejudiced against us. Later still, it was decided to just ignore the news though the data kept coming in and still does.

In the absence of any general media interest, it is left to the individual to figure out what changes have happened, and in what direction New India has been travelling.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

TELANGANA DEFLATION CASTS LIGHT ON FACTORS KEEPING INDIA'S RATE LOW

STATISTICS can confirm, challenge, or confound. In the case of October's retail inflation rates for Telangana and the nation, it can clarify too. Both the counts notched up records, but of different kinds. The national retail inflation rate printed at 0.25 percent, the lowest since the beginning of this Consumer Price Index series a decade and a half ago. On the other hand, in Telangana retail prices fell for the fourth time in five months—one of the dozen states that faced deflation in October. Among the causes contributing to both phenomena are GST rate cuts, higher bases a year ago, and lower food prices, which command a substantial combined weight in the CPI. It should be a moment to cheer—high growth estimates at a time of low inflation. However, economists advise a degree of caution.

They argue that food inflation is unlikely to hold low for long because of a number of factors ranging from supply constraints to extreme climate events and geopolitical disruptions. Experts also point out that the shift to a new CPI series next year will affect calculations, as food items will carry less weightage; non-food inflation is higher for most other categories at present.

The other side of the coin is seen in Telangana, the only state to have registered a deflationary run this long. Between June's -0.93 percent and October's -1.16 percent, the state rate has remained subterranean—except in August, when it rose marginally to 0.94 percent before slipping again. Both urban and rural Telangana are in the same boat, though the price falls are sharper in the villages. Though this is good news for consumers, it isn't so for producers.

Plummeting rural demand could presage a more acute agrarian distress—less money in the hands of farmers or a lower inclination to spend. The worry for Telangana is acute because the state is running short of cash and, with GST rationalisation, stands to lose a substantial amount of revenues, at least in the short term. In other words, it cannot spend to spur the economy. This is the time to plug farm input shortages in the short term, measure and address rural indebtedness, and improve irrigation for better long-term prospects. The same could be said for many other parts of the country.

RETHINK DEATH PENALTY, NOT JUST ITS METHOD

THE Supreme Court recently heard the Union government's submission that it is still examining whether a more humane and less painful method of execution could replace hanging. A petition arguing that the cruelty of hanging violates the right to live with dignity will now be heard next on January 21, 2026. The Centre stands by hanging, calling it the "safest and quickest" option, but has hinted it is open to considering other methods.

This renewed scrutiny comes when India's death row population of 564 is the highest in nearly two decades. Trial courts have sentenced more than 100 people to death annually in recent years, often without proper consideration of mitigating circumstances. Despite the Supreme Court's clear direction in *Manoj vs State of Madhya Pradesh* (2022) that such factors must be evaluated to prevent retributive sentencing, compliance remains poor. The larger constitutional issue—ensuring fairness and consistency in awarding death sentences—is before a Constitution Bench in a pending *suo motu* case. The overdue outcome will bring long-needed clarity to a system often marked by arbitrariness and moral unease.

Death penalty supporters often view it as society's way of answering extreme acts of cruelty—by satisfying our collective sense of justice and warning against recurrence. But experience shows it does not clearly prevent violent crime, nor does it ensure justice. The risk of wrongful execution, the inability to rehabilitate, and the moral contradiction of taking life in the name of law continue to shadow its practice.

The top court has reminded judges not to be swayed by the brutality of crimes or public outrage, reminding them that penology now centres on the preservation of human life. Significantly, some recent judgements show a preference for alternatives to execution. Life imprisonment without remission—brought in after the Nirbhaya case for aggravated rape—has increasingly become the middle path for serious crimes that could otherwise attract the death penalty. As over 113 countries move towards abolition, India's continued reliance on capital punishment appears increasingly out of step with moral progress. To focus only on the mechanics of execution, rather than on whether the state should kill at all, is to lose sight of justice's higher purpose—to balance accountability with humanity.

QUICK TAKE

CORBETT MANTRA EVERYWHERE

THE Supreme Court's direction to the Uttarakhand government to take down illegal structures, restrict movements, and restore the ecology damaged in the Jim Corbett National Park is welcome. Tiger safaris—the main draw for lakhs of tourists visiting the reserve every year—will not be allowed in the core area, but only in the buffer zone. The three-judge bench headed by the Chief Justice stated, "In a nutshell, we have held that if tourism has to be promoted, it has to be eco-tourism." In a country facing worsening ecological degradation from the seas to the mountains, this should be the main protective mantra at every tourism hotspot in the lap of nature. States should act on it without waiting for another court-mandated cleanup.

IN a world increasingly defined by fragmentation and flux, the relationship between India and the US remains one of the few partnerships with the potential to shape a more stable, democratic, and innovative global order. The recent confirmation of a new US ambassador to India—a close aide of Donald Trump, albeit with no prior diplomatic or India experience, Sergio Gor—signals Washington's intent to reinvigorate ties with New Delhi at a time when both countries face shared challenges and converging opportunities.

President Trump's recent remarks about Prime Minister Narendra Modi, calling him "a strong leader and a great friend", mark a notable shift in tone from earlier weeks of undiplomatic statements and social media posts. While recent frictions over tariffs and trade imbalances have strained the relationship, the current moment appears to offer a chance to reset. Encouraging signs point to the possibility of a new bilateral trade deal, which could unlock growth, investment, and innovation across sectors ranging from pharmaceuticals and semiconductors to clean energy and artificial intelligence.

But to seize this moment, both sides must confront and clarify the geopolitical realities that shape their choices. At one time, both Washington and New Delhi saw the spectre of Chinese assertiveness looming large—from the Himalayas to South China Sea, from cyber intrusions to supply chain dependencies—and made common cause in recognising the need to constrain it. But after the recent 'G2 Summit' in Busan, there is renewed confusion about whether the US still sees China as a strategic competitor and global rival, or whether we are witnessing the dawning of a co-operative condominium arrangement between the two great powers of our times.

For India, the challenge is existential: we must defend our sovereignty while accelerating our development. Washington must decide whether it is strategic—balancing deterrence with diplomacy, and maintaining influence in a region where its primacy is no longer assured—or as Trump's recent silence on the Quad suggests, the Indo-Pacific is no longer a priority.

Seen from New Delhi, a deeper US-India partnership is not merely desirable; it is imperative. Yet, it cannot be built on sentiment alone. It must be anchored in structural reforms, mutual strategic clarity, and a shared vision for the 21st century.

First, both countries must remove the impediments that have long hampered economic cooperation. The legacy of US

With Trump's aide Sergio Gor taking oath as American ambassador to India, the two sides have an opportunity to clear the air and build economic alignment as a pillar of strategic trust

NEW INDIA-US BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

SHASHI THAROOR

Fourth-term Lok Sabha MP, Chairman of Standing Committee on External Affairs, and Sahitya Akademi-winning author of 24 books



SOURAV ROY

tariff policy—particularly the withdrawal of India's benefits under the generalised system of preferences during the first Trump administration, and the punitive 50 percent tariffs this year that have cost jobs in India and done real damage to our exporters—leaving deep wounds that could turn into lasting scars.

While some of these measures were aimed at protecting American industry, they also signalled a retreat from the strategic vision of the last quarter-century. A renewed push to reduce tariffs, eliminate regulatory barriers, harmonise standards, and facilitate cross-border investment would send a powerful message: that economic alignment is a pillar of strategic trust.

Second, India must continue its path of economic reform—not just to attract foreign capital, but to ensure policy certainty and transparency. Investors, both domes-

tic and foreign, seek stability in taxation, clarity in digital regulation, and predictability in dispute resolution. In Trump's America, where executive volatility has become a feature of governance, India's steadiness can be an asset—but only if it is matched by reformist ambition.

Third, the movement of people must be restored as a cornerstone of bilateral ties. The Indian diaspora in the US—now over 5-million-strong—has been a bridge of talent, entrepreneurship, and cultural diplomacy. Yet recent restrictions on work permits, H-1B visas, and green card processing have frayed that bridge. Liberalising skilled migration, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, would not only benefit both economies but also reinforce the human dimension of the partnership.

Fourth, both countries must develop mutual clarity on the China challenge.

HOW BIHAR TIPPED THE SCALES

SAJJAN KUMAR

Political analyst and founding director of PRACCS

some Mallah EBC votes, the combined return of Chirag Paswan and Upendra Kushwaha's Rashtriya Lok Morcha shored up both Dalit Paswan and Kushwaha votes behind the NDA.

A similar story unfolded in the Mithila region west of the Koshi river. This region has a significant presence of Muslims, Yadavs, and Mallahs, leading many analysts to expect an uptick in MGB's performance. Sahani's roots in the region added weight to that expectation. Yet, the NDA increased its tally from 32 to 36 seats. Its vote share rose by about 6 per-



XOM

Despite the caste arithmetic suggesting a closer contest, all five regions of Bihar swung towards the NDA. The opposition alliance's inability to garner EBC votes in some pockets and consolidate Muslim votes in others made a big difference. Chirag Paswan and Upendra Kushwaha had their roles clearly cut out in the ruling alliance

centage points, reaching 47.4 percent. The outcome reflected a noticeable improvement in the NDA's internal coordination, which enabled smoother transfer of votes across allies and ensured that each party's core bloc remained intact. This was an important correction for the NDA, given that some of these blocs had shown signs of drifting in the 2020 election.

The Seemanchal region, which borders Bengal and includes the Bhagalpur area, told a more nuanced story. With its sizeable Muslim population, ranging from around 68 percent in Kishanganj to rough-

ly 40 percent in the three adjoining districts, Seemanchal was widely expected to consolidate behind the MGB. It was presumed to occur partly at the cost of the Asaduddin Owaisi-led All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, which had won five seats with 7.4 percent of the vote in 2020.

However, AIMM retained its five seats and increased its vote share to 9.9 percent. This shift indicates that although Muslim consolidation against the ruling alliance did occur in places, the pattern was far from uniform. Muslim-majority constituencies displayed a willingness to experiment with alternatives.

The most striking shift occurred in the Magadh-South East and Shahabad-Bhojpur regions. These areas still retain pockets of Left influence and are home to several OBC and EBC caste groups. In 2020, the Left's organisational networks had significantly boosted the MGB, helping it secure 39 out of 69 seats in Magadh and 19 out of 22 seats in Bhojpur. The NDA, by contrast, had managed only 28 seats in Magadh and just two in the Bhojpur belt.

In 2025, this picture changed dramatically. The NDA surged to 57 seats in Magadh and 19 in the Bhojpur region, supported by a substantial rise in vote share—13 percent in the former and 16 percent in the latter. For the MGB, this reversal stemmed from several factors. The RJD struggled to expand beyond its core Muslim-Yadav support in certain pockets, the Left parties saw their earlier momentum dissipate, and the Congress remained organisationally weak. Meanwhile, the NDA benefited from careful ticket distribution, the resolution of internal rivalries, and more efficient vote transfers among allies. Except for a few localised disruptions, this cohesion translated into a near-clean sweep.

Taken together, the regional verdicts underscore a larger point. The 2025 Bihar election was shaped less by arithmetic and more by the ability of alliances to hold their blocs together while expanding into new social groups. The NDA managed this consistently, while the MGB faltered in the areas it needed to grow. That is what ultimately tipped the scales.

(Views are personal)

While India faces direct military pressure along its borders, the US grapples with economic and technological competition. A shared framework, distinguishing between necessary engagement and strategic deterrence, could help both sides avoid misalignment. Joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and coordinated diplomacy in forums like the Quad must be deepened.

Finally, and most crucially, the two countries must embrace innovation and cooperation in artificial intelligence as a no-brainer for strategic convergence in the second quarter of the 21st century. AI is not just a tool, it is the terrain on which future power will be contested. From healthcare diagnostics to battlefield autonomy, language models to climate forecasting, AI will shape the contours of governance, security, and society. India's 1.4 billion people represent the globe's largest source of trained brainpower and data. With 40 percent of those working on AI in Silicon Valley being of Indian origin, it's time for the US to embrace India's potential in India.

With its vast data sets, engineering talent, and democratic ethos, India offers a unique counterpoint to China's authoritarian AI model. The US, with its research universities, venture capital ecosystem, and regulatory experience, brings complementary strengths. Together, they can build an AI alliance that is ethical, inclusive, and globally competitive. Joint research centres, interoperable standards, and shared protocols for AI safety could form the backbone of this collaboration.

Of course, such ambition requires political will. It demands that both governments look beyond short-term irritants and electoral cycles. It requires the recognition that in an era of multi-polarity, bilateralism must be bold, not bureaucratic. The appointment of Ambassador Gor, the warmth of Trump's recent statements, and the tentative progress on trade all suggest that the window is open. But windows do not stay open forever. The world is watching—whether the world's largest democracy and its most powerful one can move from rhetoric to results.

In the end, the US-India relationship is not just about tariffs or visas. It is about the kind of world we want to build in the 21st century: open or closed, cooperative or coercive, innovative or insular. If Delhi and Washington can align their strengths, respect their differences, and invest in their shared future, they may yet prove that democracy and development can be strategically complementary and mutually reinforcing. The time to act is now.

(Views are personal)
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MAILBAG

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Talent diversity

Ref: *US confronts a talent crisis reality check* (Nov 17). America's talent shortage highlights a deeper global skills gap. Restrictive visa policies contradict the need for high-end innovation. Nations must embrace skilled mobility, foster inclusive opportunities, and update workforce strategies. Sustainable growth depends not on protectionism but on attracting and nurturing diverse talent.

Rafeed C, Kasaragod

Kerala Inc

Ref: *Kerala rises in reforms but lags in ground realities* (Nov 17). Kerala is known for the dearth of sufficient large industries and commercial establishments. However, it is an apt haven for small and medium units. There is an obvious and notable shift in policies and outlook of trade unions.

Jiji Panicker K, Alappuzha

Winter's dawn

Ref: *Soft steps of Hemant* (Nov 17). I wish, with the author's exceptional knowledge in puranas and spiritual matters, Kerala's mention could have been made with reference to the month of Vrischika (the Malayalam equivalent of Margazhi), the dawn of which marks the beginning of the Sabarimala Mandala-Makaravilakku season.

Sanath Kumar T S, Thrissur

Political stagnation

Ref: *Rahul's reign of relentless defeats* (Nov 16). It is really a very sad state to witness the imminent political obituary being written in slow motion for the party that was once formidable. It's not just the loss of Congress's power, but the loss of a voice of constructive opposition.

Nicholas Francis, Madurai

SIR fallout

Ref: *BLO kills self in Kannur* (Nov 17). There are utter confusions prevailing both in distribution and filling the forms for roll revisions in Tamil Nadu. Officers, too, are helpless as they are not able to guide the voters. This gives the perception that this is a hasty and hurried exercise.

D Sethuraman, Chennai

Pitch imperfect

Ref: *It's pitch dark at home* (Nov 17). Spin-oriented Test pitches have turned suicidal for India (versus South Africa now and New Zealand last year). It is imperative for India, or any country, to prepare even pitches that help skippers go for a close contest. If the surface doesn't help, batters would slip on their skills and importance.

Sreelekha P S, Secunderabad

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THE ASIAN AGE

18 NOVEMBER 2025

Congress, allies must rework strategy after Bihar debacle

The disastrous performance of the Congress in the Bihar Assembly election and its extremely poor strike rate should offer some lessons both to the party and to its allies in various states. As for the party, it will continue to sink unless it rediscovers its political agenda and work seriously on it. The allies may take a realistic account of the strength of the grand old party and the electoral dividend it can bring to the table before committing themselves to accommodating it.

There is no gainsaying that the BJP has replaced the Congress in some states while the left-of-centre parties who at some point in time shared political vibe with it in the others. This happened after the Congress deviated from its historic positioning as a liberal secular political force capable of accommodating a wide variety of thoughts. The party is now perceived by some as the BJP's B-team, while others portray it as an ally of Islamists and Maoists. It has long cast its socialist moorings away, angering the Leftists.

That its opponents have a strong opinion on it need not worry a party if it follows its own agenda but the Congress appears to have none. The party keeps telling the people that the BJP-led NDA government at the centre,

under the guidance of the RSS, has been out to weaken the Constitution and the democratic institutions. The party has reiterated several times that the BJP must be unseated from power both at the centre and in the states if the country were to survive. The party which has such a concern and conviction on the future of the country should also know that the BJP can be removed from power only through democratic means and the elections are the only legitimate route to get there.

But the Congress has been anything but responsible when it comes to elections. It has refused to accommodate even the nominal claims of its allies in several states and ended up enabling the installation of BJP governments. The allies, who had a better understanding of the realpolitik, were more accommodating in the Lok Sabha elections, and the strategy proved fruitful in that it stopped the BJP from getting a simple majority in the Lok Sabha, leave alone crossing the two-thirds mark.

The Congress was at its irresponsible best while negotiating seat-sharing in Bihar this time, too, though the party was largely responsible for the return of the NDA in the 2020 election by losing most of the seats it was allotted. The Congress' claims delayed seat-sharing negotiations until the final day. It fielded candidates in 11 seats allotted to the Mahagathbandhan allies. The party even delayed endorsing RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav as the chief ministerial candidate for no reason.

A section of the Congress leadership in Tamil Nadu has now raised the demand that the DMK allot a higher number of seats to it in the Assembly elections than last time. The party also wants a share in power, which has not been the practice so far.

It is incumbent upon the Congress to convert INDIA bloc into a viable alternative to the saffron brand of politics. If the party has no plans to concretise its political agenda and aggressively pursue it, then the allies must look for alternatives for their survival.

Fix defence self-reliance cracks

Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan's warning to Indian defence manufacturers on the importance of meeting delivery timelines should serve as a wake-up call to the country's policy makers. His remarks on delays, overpromising, and inflated indigenisation claims reflect dissonance in the country's defence establishment on indigenisation and military capabilities.

While the pursuit of self-reliance in defence production is an important national aspiration, the harsh truth in the armed forces is that capability delivered late is capability denied. No amount of nationalistic fervour or patriotic speeches can compensate for a frontline unit receiving critical equipment months or years after it is needed.

Gen. Chauhan's observations are not theoretical; they are borne out of desperation in the armed forces. He aired his displeasure publicly after domestic companies repeatedly failed to meet delivery timelines or over-stated indigenous content. Similarly, in May this year, IAF air chief Marshal A.P. Singh flagged similar concerns over the delayed delivery of Tejas and criticised Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for overpromising and underdelivering.

India cannot afford such lapses, especially when its enemies are fast arming themselves. The Indian Air Force today operates far fewer fighter squadrons than the sanctioned strength, while Pakistan is poised to acquire fifth-generation fighter aircraft from China. In the maritime domain, India's blue-water dominance is also under pressure from China. Pakistan's forthcoming Chinese-origin submarines will alter the undersea equation. The Indian Navy, therefore, needs fleet modernisation. While India is still working toward greater indigenous capability in drone manufacturing, Pakistan enjoys a steady supply line of combat-proven drones and munitions from Turkey.

Atmanirbharta, therefore, should not come at the cost of battle readiness of the armed forces. It should not merely be a manufacturing slogan; it must result in timely, credible, deployable capabilities. The government must balance two imperatives: nurturing a domestic defence ecosystem and ensuring the armed forces are not left waiting during moments of strategic urgency.

THE ASIAN AGE

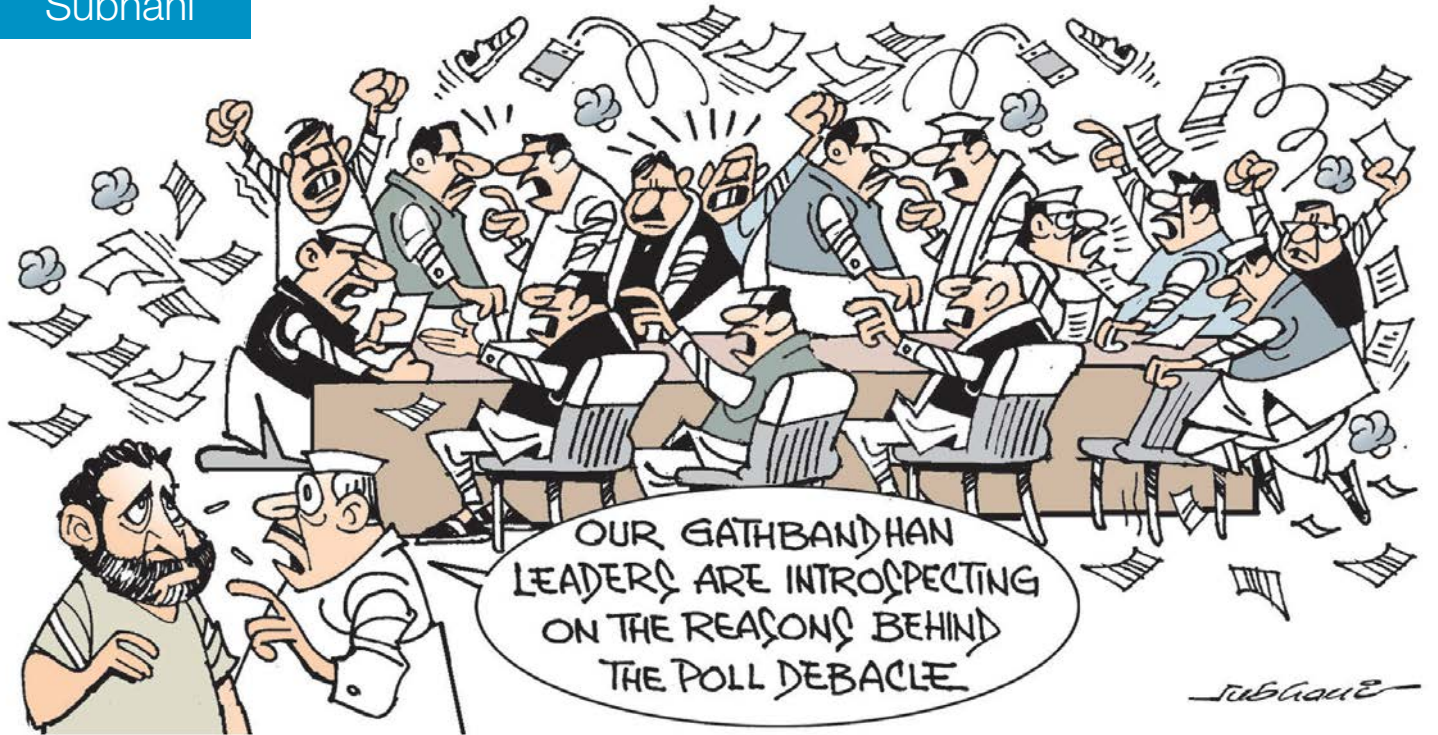
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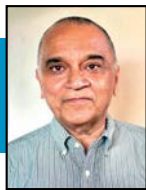
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Subhani



Looking through data fog: Decode truth, lies in India



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

What distinguishes truth from lies? Statistics, of course.

Nothing illustrates the criticality of timely, accurate, consistent data for sound economic decision-making than US Federal Reserve chairperson Jerome Powell's lament about temporary monetary policy being like "driving slowly through a foggy night". He was referring to the consequences of reducing the US Federal Reserve rate below four per cent, where it has stood since September 2025, after two sequential cuts of 0.25 per cent each since December 2024, amidst heightened economic uncertainty from President Donald Trump's tantrums.

Christopher Waller, a contender for succeeding Mr Powell and a proponent of lower reserve rates to support growth and risk inflation, counters that "driving slowly does not mean coming to a halt", pointing to the cost of excessive caution in foregone growth, by making decisions overly data driven. The long US government shutdown (which recently ended), over the two-month-old deadlock over budget appropriations, has reduced the reliability and timeliness of unemployment and inflation data, as statistical staff were progressively laid off pending approval of new appropriations.

There is a close relationship between statistical capacity and development, amongst other variables — think energy consumption, education or health services. According to the World Bank's Statistical Performance Index, most OECD countries — a club of 38 rich countries sharing a commitment to democracy and the market economy — rank in the top quintile. Next comes most of Southeast Asia, Latin America, Russia and Central Asia, Turkey, Saudi

Arabia, Egypt, South Africa and Sri Lanka in the fourth quintile.

India is in the third quintile, along with select countries in South Asia, East Africa and West Africa. A low positioning for a country, where modern, official statistics started in 1881 — more than six decades before it became independent in 1947 and which till, the 1970s, was a regional leader in statistical practices.

Nor has World Bank support in 2010 to improve statistical capacity in state governments helped. The only consolation is that other countries like Rwanda and Vietnam, which also availed of World Bank financing for the same purpose, are similarly ranked, though Brazil, another borrower, is better off in the fourth quintile.

One plausible, albeit not Brazil's better performance, could be that constitutional guarantees protect the autonomy of the statistical commission in Brazil. In India, statistical agencies work under the executive, leading to the potential loss of credibility with the public, when government becomes the umpire of its own performance.

There are, of course, external umpires of a government's functioning. Consider for instance, the global bond markets which track developments closely and punish government indiscretions in real time. Bond markets reacted vigorously in 2024 to the disastrous Budget tabled by the short-lived Liz Truss government in the UK. The government proposed unfunded tax cuts — a favourite right-wing stimulus — contrary to the advice from the Office for Budget Responsibility, a watchdog reporting directly to Parliament. In response, the government's bond yields increased by about four per cent and the pound sterling weakened. Sadly, in developing economies,

In India, statistical agencies work under the executive, leading to the potential loss of credibility with the public, when government becomes the umpire of its own performance.

including India, about 30 per cent of the government's borrowing is funded by the compulsory purchase of government bonds by banks and exposure to the global debt market is limited, which dulls the market response to government indiscretions. Having said that, India has never defaulted on its debt obligations. More significantly, global debt markets have a near term perspective and take national statistical data at face value, so it is no good relying on external pressure to improve statistical quality.

The impact of dodgy public statistics is primarily on the efficiency of the domestic economy. Taxpayers end up paying more than they need to for the same services and the needy and voiceless get deprived of essential services. The Indian government is acutely aware of the political fallout of such downsides. This is why the BJP — a "report card" government — which prides itself on extending the largest ever web of social services, has given up on targeting only the deserving. Consider the extended food support and the cash support programme paid to all farmers, which extends to about 55 per cent of the population of 1.45 billion. State governments separately finance free electricity or free bus rides for women and other innovative service support programmes. Targeting only the deserving requires good data — to avoid inclusion and exclusion errors — or risks raising public dissatisfaction over unfair allocations. The fiscal cost of improper targeting is about two per cent of GDP. Improving the efficiency with which governments target subsidies is the only sustainable future course to bridge the impossible duality between enhancing the Union government's

capital expenditure (4.3 per cent of GDP this year) for better infrastructure and defence preparedness and continued reduction of the fiscal deficit (4.4 per cent of GDP) this year to more sustainable levels. Better targeting is both a data adequacy and a political economy issue. As the government ignores the fiscal cost of about two per cent of GDP on undeserved subsidies, it recently took a very "strict" stand on the revision of registered voters for the just-ended elections in Bihar, using some of the digital identification markers now available. This led to the inclusion of new voters, amounting to 2.7 per cent, but also the deletion of 8.2 per cent of the 78.9 million voters. Of the delisted votes, 34 per cent had died, another 11 per cent were duplicate votes, but as many as 55 per cent were presumed migrated or untraceable. Expectedly, a political storm followed, alleging motivated decision making in a state where the BJP is part of the government.

Institutional changes to the statistical system were last suggested by the Rangarajan Commission in 2001 but only partly implemented. Digitisation of the economy is incomplete without digitised public data generation, because it is cost effective, albeit with appropriate safeguards and inclusive provisions for laggard digitisers and the aged. India's last decennial Census was held in 2011. It is now delayed by four years — making poverty estimates, unemployment levels and whether we are the largest country by population, into guesstimates. The Union home ministry, which is authorised by the Census Act 1948 for this purpose, is mulling digitisation instead of the traditional, decentralised process of state governments using schoolteachers as enumerators — over which the Centre has limited control. It is not just the US Federal Reserve which has stopped rather than go wrong under pressure in the data fog. But at what cost?

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation, and was earlier with the IAS and the World Bank

LETTERS

RISE OF GEN Z

Violent protests erupted near Mexico City's National Palace after the assassination of Michoacan mayor Carlos Manzo Rodríguez, who fought drug trafficking. Thousands, led by Gen Z activists waving pirate skull flags, clashed with the police, injuring over 120 people. President Claudia Sheinbaum faces criticism over security lapses. The unrest may impact US-Mexico relations, potentially affecting cross-border trade, tourism and cooperation against organised crime, while raising concerns over regional stability and democratic governance. However, India's MEA has done a good job in issuing advisories for its diaspora, while the embassy is providing helplines, counsel, guidance and evacuation support.

R.S. Narula
Patiala

NEGLECT OF ZOO

THE KITTUR Rani Chennamma Mini Zoo in Belagavi has been shaken by a grim tragedy. The death of 28 blackbucks in three days was a blow that has shaken Karnataka's wildlife community. These elegant antelopes have become the centre of a deepening mystery. As outrage swells among conservationists and animal lovers, we now wait anxiously for the crucial forensic science laboratory and post-mortem reports that may finally reveal what brought down an entire herd so swiftly. But even before test reports arrived, the forest authorities offered two conflicting explanations — a feed-related issue and bacterial infection. Is negligence to blame?

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

CRICKETING FAILURE?

INDIA'S DEFEAT to South Africa in the first Test at Eden Gardens by 30 runs highlights a worrying erosion of discipline in our cricketing ranks. The players increasingly appear unable to distinguish the measured demands of Test cricket from the urgency that defines the T20 and ODI formats. Instead of building an innings with patience and mature judgment, several batsmen surrendered their wickets through rash strokes and careless decision making. This reckless approach weakens the team's credibility and undermines the essence of the longest format, which relies on endurance and strategy. A clear shift in attitude is urgently required to restore India's commitment to responsible and intelligent Test match play.

K. Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

Aakar Patel



Why India's rank has been falling in global indices... But do we bother?

Some years ago, the Niti Aayog had said it would prepare a "single, informative dashboard for all the twenty-nine (later 32) global indices" on which India was ranked. This monitoring exercise was "not just to improve rankings but to improve systems and drive reforms to attract investments and to shape India's perception globally".

This did not happen, for whatever reason, but that should not stop us from doing it ourselves. For one of my books, I looked at more than four dozen global indicators to compare where India stood now compared to 2014. I periodically revisit the data and it is instructive to know what the position is. Let's have a look.

On the UNDP's Human Development Index, India's rank in 2014 was 130 and its rank today is unchanged. The UN report says that "inequality reduces India's HDI by 30.7 per cent, one of the highest losses in the region. While health and education inequality have improved, income and gender disparities remain significant. Female labour force participation and political representation lag".

The Civicus monitor demoted India's civic space from "Obstructed" to "Repressed". It said that "there are a total of 49 countries in the world with this rating (of Repressed).

This rating is typically given to countries where civic space is heavily contested by power holders, who impose a combination of legal and practical

constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights". The Lowy Institute Asia Power Index measures hard power. India's score fell from 41.5 to 39.1, losing its "major power" status. The institute says that "India exerts less influence in the region than expected given its available resources, as indicated by the country's negative power gap score. Its negative power gap in 2024 was the largest since the inception of the Asia Power Index".

Freedom House's Freedom in the World looks at the rule of law, political pluralism and elections, functioning of government, civil liberties, and so on. In 2014 India was given a rating of 77 and marked "Free". In 2025 this was reduced to 63, and it was demoted to "Partly Free". (When this first happened, the government was angered but subsequently it has stopped commenting on such reports).

Freedom House said that "while India is a multi-party democracy, the government has presided over discriminatory policies and a rise in persecution affecting the Muslim population".

The World Justice Project publishes a Rule of Law Index that monitors nations' criminal and civil justice system, fundamental rights, constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, transparent government, order and security and the regulatory enforcement.

India has fallen from its 2014 ranking of 66 to 86 globally.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Solutions Network World Happiness Report looks at GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, perceptions of corruption and dystopia. India has gone from 111 in 2014 to 118.

On the Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, India fell from 140 in 2014 to 151 today. RSF says that "with violence against journalists, highly concentrated media ownership, and political alignment, press freedom is in crisis in 'the world's largest democracy'".

On the Cato Institute's Human Freedom Index, India went from 87 in 2014 to 110. On the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, India went from 114 in 2014 to 131 today.

The reasons given were that "female representation in Parliament falls from 14.7 per cent to 13.8 per cent in 2025, lowering the indicator score for the second year in a row below 2023 levels. Similarly, the share of women in ministerial roles falls from 6.5 per cent to 5.6 per cent".

The Transparency International Global Corruption Perceptions Index used to be reported on regularly in India's media but not much any longer. India has gone from 85 in 2014 to 96 in the world today.

The Heritage Foundation Global Economic Freedom Index monitors: Rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency and open markets. India was at 120 in 2014 and 128 today. The reasons

given: "progress with market-oriented reforms has been uneven. The foundations for long-term economic development remain fragile in the absence of an efficiently functioning legal framework. Entrepreneurs continue to face severe challenges. India's regulatory framework is burdensome", and so on.

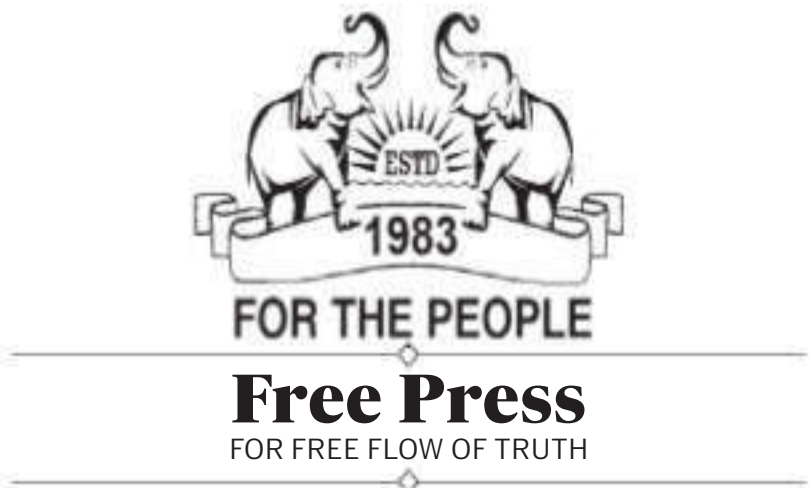
The Global Hunger Index monitors hunger, stunting in children, undernourishment. In 2014 India ranked 55 out of 76 nations. Today India ranks 102 out of 123 countries. The report says that "India has a level of hunger that is serious".

When India began to plummet on the Hunger Index, the government said in Parliament in 2021 that it was not possible that Indians were hungry and that "we should not be sensitive to such reports".

Over time our position has evolved on these indices. First, we had assumed that good governance would make a difference. Then it was concluded that these indices had bad data and in any case these institutes were prejudiced against us. Later still, it was decided to just ignore the news though the data kept coming in and still does.

In the absence of any general media interest, it is left to the individual to figure out what changes have happened, and in what direction New India has been travelling.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel



Menstrual leave not anti-feminist

In a bold move, the Congress government in Karnataka instituted a policy last week to offer paid menstrual leave to women in formal jobs. This entitles working women between 18 and 52 years old in government and private companies to take one day of menstrual leave every month without a medical certificate. Estimates are that it covers nearly 4 lakh women in the formal sector in the state with some of India's largest IT, fintech, edutech, and healthcare firms. While the policy leaves out, inexplicably and controversially, millions of women working in the informal sector—often with fewer facilities, such as adequate restrooms, and women doing hard physical labour, such as construction workers—it is a progressive and gender-sensitive step forward. The Siddaramaiah government must extend the policy to cover all working women in all sectors and different kinds of jobs for it to have a comprehensive impact.

The move has reignited the debate about paid menstrual leave being pro-gender or anti-feminist that arose when Kerala, Odisha, and Bihar instituted similar policies and, importantly, when the union government moved the bill for the Right of Women to Menstrual Leave and Free Access to Menstrual Products in 2022 as an extension of Article 21 of the Constitution of India. The bill proposed three days of paid leave. There have been PILs on the subject too. Governments and committees that

Menstrual leave is but one step to make workplaces, including in the informal sector, humane and gender sensitive.

approached the subject with rational candour have pointed to the need for at least 1-2 days off work on medical grounds; studies have shown that, at a conservative count, nearly half of all menstruating women in India experience painful cramps, and many struggle through painful conditions, such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome, and adenomyosis, among others. Menstrual leave recognises the natural biological process. From this perspective, it is a part of an overdue public healthcare step. However, it has quite inexplicably raised the hackles of a few women, especially feminists, who argue that it reinforces the stereotypes of women being “weak” or “unequal to men” at work and may lead to further discrimination or depressed hiring. This, verbalised in the headline “Did women ruin the workplace?” recently by the venerated The New York Times, is a rather limited view of gender equality at the workplace. Gender equality did not ever mean that women should behave and perform exactly as men do at work but that workplaces recognise their unique needs and offer adequate choices. Just because menstrual leave is written into policy does not mean all women employees will use or misuse it. Indeed, generations of women have worked in demanding jobs through painful menstruation, but it does not mean this must continue. Menstrual leave is but one step to make workplaces, including in the informal sector, humane and gender sensitive.

Nepal's green poll campaign

National elections in populous countries usually witness a wide environmental footprint, with tens of thousands of vehicles, plastic banners, festoons and flags, and food and water containers adding to the waste burden. India has tried to address this periodic wave of trash with mixed results. Neighbouring Nepal, which is transitioning to a newly elected government in March next year after massive youth protests dislodged the KP Sharma Oli government in September, is now implementing its own green election code. The major elements of the code include the use of electric vehicles in place of conventional ones, prioritising digital campaigning, the use of eco-friendly materials for rallies, door-to-door outreach and promotions, and, importantly, a ban on plastic and polythene materials. In an interesting feature, the organisers of election events are required to collect the waste and arrange for its disposal. Making a success of such a sensible code depends on cooperation from political parties, who will field candidates for 275 seats in the House of Representatives, of which 110 are chosen through proportional representation and others by the first-past-the-post system. Nepal, with a population of about 30 million people, has a sizeable electorate besides a significant expatriate population that is employed in India. This profile, comparable to many Indian states, makes the sincere adoption of a progressive poll code crucial to limit pollution across Nepal's hilly and picturesque regions.

If India's experience is any guide, Nepal's code can succeed only with wholehearted voluntary compliance by political parties and sustained media pressure on the system. Among the biggest failures that India has been grappling with since 1999, when the Election Commission urged parties to cut the use of synthetic material, is the plastic paradox: each rally leaves a long trail of waste plastic. Kerala appears to have done better than others in curbing plastic use, with the High Court imposing a ban on flex banners and non-biodegradable materials during campaigns, and government bodies working with the administration to encourage sustainable practices. Training election workers to take the message down to the village level has helped. These are useful pointers for election managers in Nepal, who could run a model green campaign in 2026. The role of digital campaigning also holds much potential in the era of smartphones and expanding connectivity. The most recent data point to active mobile phone connections in Nepal marginally exceeding the population, representing a 100% penetration rate, although smartphone and internet use may be less. However, phones give candidates the opportunity to overcome the rugged nature of the country's geography and campaign directly with remote voters. A green election could also create a literally green legacy by planting trees on a large scale to mark the event, as Alappuzha in Kerala and Anandpur Sahib in Punjab attempted in past polls.



The sentence handed down on Monday by Bangladesh's domestic International Crimes Tribunal, a death penalty for ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, marks a new turn for the neighbouring nation already convulsed by months of political breakdown since Hasina was ousted a year ago and replaced by an unelected, interim government. What began as a post-coup crackdown and as trials that opponents call politically motivated has now exploded into a security and diplomatic crisis whose shockwaves are being felt well beyond Dhaka.

For India and Western capitals, which prize stability in the region, the verdict presents a thicket of hard choices: contain violence; shield civilians; prevent a refugee and humanitarian cascade; and guard against the transnationalisation of unrest and radical networks that could exploit the chaos.

The tribunal's ruling comes against a backdrop of intense civil unrest. In the lead-up to the verdict, the Awami League, now banned, had called for nationwide shutdowns and mobilised strikes and mass protests.

At the same time, Dhaka witnessed repeated “cocktail-bomb” explosions, arson attacks, and targeted sabotage that left police and paramilitary units on maximum alert. Authorities have issued shoot-at-sight directives in some districts to suppress outbreaks of arson and attacks on government facilities.



As we have discussed in these columns, politics is credibly hard calling in any democratic society. It is particularly vexing in poor societies. A government comes to office and survives in power with the willing consent of the people. There is a need to address the short-term needs of voters, even as the long-term interests of the society at large are promoted. And there is a moral imperative to mitigate the pain of poverty immediately, even as steps should be taken to eliminate poverty altogether by enhancing the earning capacity of people and providing opportunities for a better life in the future. Clearly, the Union government and some of the states are doing a commendable job of maintaining growth momentum by reconciling the short-term individual welfare with long-term public good. But some states are running into serious problems because of fiscal profligacy, uncontrolled expenditure and unsustainable debt without corresponding creation of usable and productive assets.

Let us examine the realistic measures that can be adopted to improve the health of public fi-

nances. First, public sector wages have gone out of control in many states. In general, the government employees are paid two to four times the wages in the private sector for the same job, especially at the lower and middle levels. And yet, productivity is lower in government because of job security, time-bound promotions, and lack of accountability. In many states, reckless recruitment is taking place in sectors where there is surplus staff, and other sectors are depleted. School education is a sector where the teacher-student ratio is often 1:20 or better, and yet outcomes are appalling even as more teachers are recruited habitually. And periodic, generous wage increases are imposing a huge burden on the exchequer. For instance, salaries of government employees in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are 30-40% higher than the rest of the states and the Union. Rational allocation of human resources in sectors where they are needed, freezing the wages until they are comparable to the national average and the private sector, and making workers productive are urgent steps that are needed.

Second, raising resources through borrowing is necessary in

that the geography and demography make the spillover likely. The India-Bangladesh border is long, often porous, and threaded into dense social and commercial networks. Past decades of militant infiltration and criminal logistics that used the frontier as a conduit are well documented; those channels can be repurposed in moments of Dhaka instability to move fighters, weapons, or refugees.

Second, the security threat is already transnational in character. Indian investigators are still probing links between recent terrorist incidents in Delhi, including the high-profile Red Fort blast earlier this month, and networks that allegedly operate through Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The Red Fort probe and reports on meetings between Pakistan-linked operatives and Bangladesh-based actors underline a worrying trend—militants and their patronage systems treat Bangladesh not merely as a domestic theatre but as a logistics and sanctuary space for operations that target India. That makes instability in Dhaka a direct national security problem for New Delhi.

Third, the political dimension creates diplomatic stress. Hasina's party still commands mass mobilisation; a heavy-handed crackdown by the interim government could produce martyrdom narratives entrenched in radicalisation and feed violent, decentralised movements.

Conversely, any perceived Indian interference, real or alleged, in

Centre, states must prevent the grand theft of the future

Constitution created a mechanism to ensure financial stability. Centre and state govts should act before a fiscal crisis develops in some states

developing societies in a resource-scarcity situation. But common-sense dictates that borrowed money should be deployed for the creation of durable, usable and productive assets that help boost economic growth and equity. If we borrow to meet the current expenditure, we are only burdening the next generation with an unsustainable debt. Even when borrowed money is utilised for capital expenditure, if vast amounts are spent on expensive vanity projects with very little benefit to society, then we are incurring unsustainable debt.

Therefore, two steps are needed: a) the golden rule that the state is free to utilise revenues (its own taxes and union devolution) in whatever manner it seems fit, but borrowed money cannot be spent for current expenditure, and b) every large capital project should be subject to rigorous and independent cost-benefit analysis and should be taken up only when the benefits far outweigh the costs.

A ‘Nil Revenue Deficit’ norm may be difficult to enforce immediately in certain states, and therefore a clear road map to reach the goal should be set to achieve the goal in three years and to sustain it thereafter.

Third, often state budgets are

opaque, and debt is concealed in the form of borrowing with government guarantees by Special Purpose Vehicles and Public Sector Companies with no repayment capacity. Also, in many states there are large unpaid bills which are not reflected in budgets. Therefore, complete transparency mandated by the law and monitored by CAG or any other credible institution should be in place.

Fourth, some of the states are opting for deferred expenditure, affecting long-term finances years and decades later, but giving rich political dividends immediately at the cost of the future. The continuation of the unfunded, generous Old Pension System (OPS) for government employees in West Bengal and switching to OPS in states like Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are such instances. In such cases, it should be mandatory to create a separate pension fund and transfer adequate amounts to such a fund annually, based on the current value of the future pension outflow. Thus, the real cost of the policy is reflected in the budget, and the cost is borne today and not transferred to the next generation.

All these are practical approaches to promote fiscal pru-

coordinate with UN agencies, and prepare to engage donors.

At the same time, India should press publicly for restraint, due process, and minimum humanitarian standards while signalling privately its readiness to engage with any Bangladeshi interlocutor capable of delivering stability. That will be politically uncomfortable, but issue-based engagement (border management, counterterrorism, energy and trade) must continue even when political relations are at a low point.

At the same time, New Delhi should brief key partners, the United States, European capitals, and Quad partners, on how South Asian instability could have transnational security repercussions. International pressure for de-escalation and for commitments to respect civilians' rights can help raise the political cost of violent crackdowns or of deliberate state facilitation of violence.

The best insurance against cycles of violence is, of course, restoration of some consensual political process in Dhaka. India can quietly encourage inclusive political mediation, perhaps facilitated by respected regional figures or multilateral interlocutors, aimed at creating space for elections and rule-of-law that meet basic standards of fairness. Short of that, cycles of repression and insurgent reprisal will repeat.

The writer is former head of PTI's eastern region network.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Media's Morbid Obsession

Some media houses treat celebrity illness as breaking news bait. False reports about Dharmendra's death were shameful despite family denials. The Ministry must act against such reckless reporting. Journalism must rediscover humanity and credibility over TRP-driven sensationalism.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

Hasina Verdict Shock

It is shocking that former Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina has been sentenced to death, triggering nationwide violence. Given allegations of bias and political motivation, Bangladesh should refer the case to the International Court of Justice. World leaders and bodies like the UN must intervene. India values regional stability and should encour-

age a fair global judicial review. Justice delayed or denied may fuel unrest.

PVP Madhu Nivriti, Secunderabad

'Saffronised' Ghuspetiyas

The BJP decries “illegal infiltrators” but welcomes political defectors accused of corruption. From Ajit Pawar to Himanta Biswa Sarma, many entered BJP ranks to evade scrutiny. Who will account for these saffronised “ghuspetiyas”? Avinash Godbole, Dewas

Fair Cricket Surfaces

Spin-friendly pitches in recent matches against South Africa and New Zealand proved counter-productive. India—and all cricketing nations—should prepare balanced pitches that support batters, seamers, pacers, spinners and fielders equally. Sport-

Why PK lost Bihar

He came, he saw, but couldn't conquer. Let's call it what it is: PK didn't lose because people didn't know him or because he lacked effort or because Bihar wasn't ready for change; he lost because he committed basic strategic blunders that simply don't work in a state like Bihar—blunders that were entirely avoidable. The liquor-ban blunder. The intention was right; the communication was disastrous. PK looked at the situation clinically—failed implementation, corruption, mafia profits, Rs 20,000 crore revenue loss, which was the muscle power, and street dogs.

M.R. Jayanthi, Coimbatore



HASAN ZAIDI

Investment Ethics Questioned

It is unfortunate that South Korea's Hwa-seung Enterprises backed out of its signed commitment in Tamil Nadu and shifted investment to Andhra Pradesh

reportedly for better subsidies. The attempt to pressure Tamil Nadu to match the offer was unethical. If Andhra Pradesh poached the investment behind closed doors, it sets a dangerous precedent. Agree-

ments must be honoured to maintain investor trust and inter-state fairness.

Tharcius S. Fernando, Chennai

Blame Games Continue

Despite Nitish Kumar leading Bihar for two decades, the media continues blaming past governments for current problems. Similar narratives exist in Bengal, yet Kerala credits development solely to NRIs. Development is collective: leadership, planning, expertise and resources matter together. Progress cannot rely only on remittances—political strategy and execution play vital roles. Narratives must evolve with accountability and reality.

S. Padmanabhan, Kochi



CONTRAPUNTO

People on the far left claim to be about free speech. But as soon as you put something out there that offends them, all of a sudden free speech is out of the window

STEPHEN MILLER

Revenge Trial

Judgment on Hasina is legally dodgy. And Dhaka is now a major security concern for New Delhi

She may not appreciate the irony – the court Sheikh Hasina set up in 2010 sentenced her yesterday to death, judges falling in step with the current Dhaka regime. Bangladesh’s International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) was instituted to try Pakistani war criminals and their Bengali collaborators for the genocide carried out during Bangladesh’s 1971 liberation struggle. Trying war criminals was a big demand of Bangladeshi civil society that sought justice for the 3 million killed and 250,000 women raped during 1971. The Hasina govt had responded to this, set up the ICT, and sentenced several Jamaat war criminals to death.

Therefore, to try Hasina for the loss of lives during the student-led protest in Bangladesh last year through ICT is legally questionable. The trial appears to be an exercise in revenge. Those who prosecuted Hasina clearly have an axe to grind. They are also going after secular intellectuals like Shahriar Kabir, who remains incommunicado in detention. Also, Hasina and her then home minister have been charged



with superior command responsibility and the deaths of 12 student protesters. But the main witness in the case is Bangladesh’s former inspector general of police who is in custody and became state approver.

There is, therefore, much doubt about the whole legal process carried out under the watch of anti-Hasina forces. Dhaka has said it will again seek Hasina’s extradition from

New Delhi. But the possibility of that happening appears remote. Not only is Hasina not guaranteed a fair trial in Bangladesh, forces dangerously hostile to India, secular Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi Hindus have gained ground in that country. Add to this, threats issued by elements of the interim Bangladeshi regime against security of India’s Northeast, and growing collaboration between Bangladeshi and Pakistani security agencies. There is a serious threat of ISI-backed anti-India groups reconstituting in Bangladesh – something Hasina had prevented.

Plus, Hasina’s party, Awami League, has been suspended by the current Dhaka dispensation. That means Bangladeshi elections slated for next Feb won’t be representative. Mujibur Rahman’s secular Bangladesh looks perilously close to sliding into Islamic fundamentalism, and Hasina is the obvious target. Unsurprisingly, the current Dhaka regime is indifferent to India’s security concerns. It’s prepared to take economic hits just so that it can be nasty to New Delhi. All of this makes Bangladesh India’s dangerous eastern flank. Pakistan is already a constant security threat and the addition of Bangladesh makes the job of security agencies all that tougher.

Smoking Gun

All studies show vehicle emissions are strongly tied to mileage, not age. When will law take note?

Nowhere in the democratic world, barring India, are owners forced to scrap old vehicles. Berlin or London, you can drive your car as long as it passes regular fitness tests, which are strict. But in Delhi, your petrol vehicle is legally dead the day it turns 15 – diesels die at age 10. This is the state trying to protect citizens from themselves – from the emissions of their vehicles. Well-intentioned, but without scientific basis.

Now a Delhi Technological University (DTU) study questions the assumed correlation between vehicle age and emissions. It says mileage – kilometres run – affects emissions more: “Mileage is equally important and, in many cases, more reflective of how a vehicle behaves on the road.” Why? Because ignition systems, catalytic converters and combustion



efficiency degrade with use.

Global energy and infra consultancy Ricardo had earlier shown that even Euro 3 cars, made during 2000-04, had good emissions till a mileage of 100,000km. This year, Polish researchers showed emissions from cars driven 86,000-160,000km were significantly higher than those for low-mileage cars. The takeaway from all rigorous research is that mileage matters more than age.

Given that Delhi govt has challenged the vehicle age-based scrappage policy in SC, these points deserve attention. Indiscriminate – without regard to actual condition – scrapping of vehicles has a huge environmental cost, because making new cars consumes materials and energy. You may recycle the steel and aluminium, but the plastics – dashboards, door panels, etc – can only be ‘downcycled’. The electronics – old chips, music systems, etc – are sheer waste, and so are the tyres, batteries, engine fluids.

Above all, mandatory scrapping is an impost on owners. What the state didn’t give, it mustn’t take away without a compelling reason, which, judging by the evidence, doesn’t exist.

Password pickle

Help’s on the line but it’s unhelpful

Ratna Manucha



‘Emails have been hacked all over the world. You need to change your passwords asap!’ read the lad’s frantic message on WhatsApp. I had just about managed to memorise the password for my email after almost half a dozen years, so I told him that. ‘Now tell me the passwords for all your social media accounts – Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram...’ Whaaaat?? They all have

passwords too?

I haven’t a clue as to what they are and now I’m expected to change them, that too when I wasn’t the one who had set them up in the first place. Sensing my utter helplessness the lad offered to do it online from his location. ‘I’ll keep you on call and you follow the steps.’ ‘How is that ever going to work? The only steps I can follow are from the cooking channel on YouTube.

‘You have to learn sometime. Better now than later,’ he muttered and said he’d call that evening to help me change my passwords. Boy, I sure as hell wasn’t looking forward to that call. He also gave me some homework. I had to try and remember where I had saved all these passwords. I didn’t know where to start, but he told me to try birthdays, anniversary dates for a start, the important days in my life.

Birthdays and anniversaries are too predictable. I’m sure I wouldn’t be so foolish. Or would I? I took a deep breath and messaged the lass, asking if she knew any of my passwords. Her reply was instant. ‘Why? What happened? What have you done? Has your account been hacked?’ I was most offended. Why do the children always think I may have done something? Granted, I may have pressed wrong buttons on my laptop on occasions and inadvertently deleted some important mails, but not on purpose. Never ever on purpose.

What were the important places and dates in my life? Should I try holidays? I love Sundays and I love books but the wretched password always has to be one uppercase, one lowercase, some numbers. In between all these permutations and combinations, the phone rang. Completely forgetting that I wasn’t supposed to pick up unlisted numbers I answered it.

The voice on the other end was brusque, ‘I have the passwords to all your social media handles including your email ID. You need to listen to me carefully: I could have hugged him.’ Really? You have all my passwords? Wonderful! Hang on, let me get paper and pen and I’ll note them down.’ Click. He had hung up. I tried calling him back but he didn’t answer. I tried one more time. No response. I wonder why. Silly man.

WITHOUT JUSTICE

COURAGE IS WEAK

DHAKA’S WAR WITHIN

Hasina show trial, repression of Awami League & official support for Islamist militia heighten the prospect of civil war in Bangladesh. That and not cosyng up to Pak’s jihadist general Munir, should be Yunus’s priority

Subir Bhaumik



Sheikh Hasina’s death sentence will have surprised none. She and her family, her party colleagues and her workers across Bangladesh, her friends and foes at home and abroad – everyone saw this coming.

Nobody expected a fair trial, an adequate opportunity of defence for the deposed leader. Revenge by use of law has become the new normal in post-Hasina Bangladesh and Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has presided over Bangladesh’s descent into a vendetta republic.

Tens of thousands of Awami Leaguers, leaders and cadres, are in jail, mostly on trumped-up or very flimsy charges, like social media posts against govt. Bail petitions are not heard for months in lower courts or admitted by high courts. When bail is finally granted, new charges are immediately framed to pave the way for arrest again – as Narayanganj’s former mayor Salina Hyat Ivy found out recently.

A garment seller I bought clothes from when in Dhaka told me last week that Hasina will go to jail because she tried to jail Yunus and she will possibly be hanged because senior Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were hanged during her time for war crimes of 1971. “This is Bangladesh,” she said.

The International Crimes Tribunal did appoint a defence counsel for Hasina, but the lawyer was also expected to defend former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal. Strangely he did not ask for any adjournments or extensions when he was given just five weeks to peruse the detailed chargesheet against Hasina. Not a single defence witness was produced.

In absentia trials are not uncommon in Bangladesh but Hasina’s defence counsel neither had the resources, nor the time or the intent to defend her seriously. And chief prosecutor Tajul Islam was defence counsel for Jamaat-e-Islami leaders when they were tried and convicted in the same tribunal in Hasina’s time. So, one is not surprised if he wants to see Hasina hanged.

Fightback her only option | As long as she is in India and New Delhi does not send her back to Dhaka, Hasina cannot be sent to the gallows. So, what are her options now? Her son and adviser Sajeeb Wazed Joy made it clear in an interview that Awami League is left with no option but to fight back and bring down the Yunus govt. Since the party has been banned from conducting political activities and since Hasina’s death sentence leaves no doubt about the ban continuing, Awami League cannot contest elections.

Street power has often decided the course of Bangladesh politics. But with Yunus govt sure to go for a massive crackdown by using police and an Islamist militia – the latter is being raised under the cover of creating a



National Defence Reserve – Awami League may have no option but to take recourse to armed struggle.

Looking back, Awami League was never a revolutionary party opting for armed struggle but one that believed in power through elections. It dutifully participated in elections whenever they were held in military-ruled Pakistan. When Pakistan’s military junta refused to honour the verdict of the 1970 elections, in which Awami League secured a clear majority, the League went in for massive street protests after its leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called for independence. Only when the Pakistan military unleashed a genocide was Awami League forced to go in for armed guerilla warfare with Indian assistance.

By denying Awami League the opportunity to contest polls, Yunus and his cronies may be forcing it to make a determined effort to bring down the interim govt, which has no constitutional basis. If they use weapons to fight off the heavily armed Islamist radicals, Bangladesh may be looking at a civil war of sorts.

India’s options | Ever since Yunus assumed power, relations with India have nosedived to an all-time low. While Yunus is upset with India sheltering Hasina, New Delhi is hugely upset with Bangladesh for two reasons.

● One, Islamist radical brass like Ansarullah Bangla chief Jashimuddin Rahmani with declared jihadist agenda against India are let off from prisons, even those who were plotting to bring a huge consignment of weapons for ULFA through the port city of Chittagong in 2004.

● Two, Bangladesh under Yunus seems to be in an overdrive to boost its relations, especially military-to-military ones with Pakistan, whose army chief Gen Asim Munir has already warned India of a “hit in the east” in a future conflict.

Eleven military delegations from Pakistan have so far visited Bangladesh, the latest a naval delegation that’s reportedly seeking berthing facilities for Pakistani submarines in Bangladesh’s submarine base at Pekua. Another delegation with several known ISI officers is on a 10-day visit to Bangladesh to improve “intelligence sharing” arrangements, obviously with India in mind.

India backed the Bengali armed struggle in 1971 primarily to secure its eastern and northeastern region from Pakistan’s two-front covert warfare. If Yunus and his Islamist radical allies like Jamaat-e-Islami (whose emir Muhammad Taher has threatened a jihad with 5mn youth against India) were to provoke India by allowing Pakistan to use its territory for a proxy war, Bangladesh will have to bargain for a strong Indian response spanning economic, military, river water-sharing and the covert domains.

The writer is a former BBC and Reuters correspondent

Why Harvard’s In A Spot, And How It Can Get Out

It has cultivated a monoculture, leaving no space for conservatives and their ideas. It must begin by creating conditions for diversity of thought and freedom of speech

Vidyapati Gautam



Harvard has been in a hard place since the Trump administration barred it from hosting foreign students, and paused \$2.2bn in research grants for allegedly failing to protect Jews from hate crimes on campus while flouting anti-discrimination laws. White House has also opened investigations into Harvard’s govt-funded patents and its ties to China, threatening its accreditation, and demanding records of employees and international students.

While the university may wriggle free by striking a deal, which could be announced soon, how did it land in this spot?

Vanishing diversity | In the most recent faculty survey, only 10% identified themselves as conservative, which is an improvement from 5% in 2024, and 1% in 2022. Only five professors were registered Republican. Since political philosopher Harvey Mansfield retired in 2023, the Government (political science) department has not had a single conservative voice. When asked if Harvard should make a “concerted effort” to hire more conservatives, only 23% agreed.

Although Harvard has proposed establishing a centre modelled after Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, a conservative oasis, it won’t address the absence of conservatives from the university’s everyday functioning.

No free speech | A 2024 internal study revealed rampant self-censorship at Harvard, with only one-third of the graduating class feeling comfortable discussing controversial topics. Remember, how the university axed Subramanian Swamy’s courses in 2011 after he wrote an opinion piece protected by the free speech guarantees of the US First Amendment?

In its annual college free speech rankings for 2026, the nonpartisan nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) ranked Harvard 245 out of 257 institutions. Last year, it stood last in 251st position.

Reverse discrimination | In a 2023 judgment, US Supreme Court declared Harvard’s race-conscious admission policy (affirmative action) illegal. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars organisations taking govt dollars from discriminating “on the grounds of race, colour, or national origin”. Regardless, Harvard concealed the admission statistics of its incoming class by altering the formulas it uses to report data, and postponing the release of information on the current admissions cycle.

Lowering the bar | Harvard made SAT scores optional for admissions in response to the Covid pandemic, but then extended this for successive academic years. Some



ill-prepared applicants slipped through the cracks. Soon after, the math department offered a remedial course for freshmen who lacked “foundational skills” in high school math. Following an uproar, Harvard reinstated the requirements for the class of 2029 and beyond.

The switch was to promote equity as well. Activists have long condemned the tests for supposedly excluding minorities from academia. However, economist Raj Chetty and others argue tests provide the “fairest admission policy for disadvantaged applicants”.

Existential question | There’s also the philosophical question about the purpose places like Harvard serve. “Once institutions of cultural formation,” writes Patrick

Deneen in *Why Liberalism Failed*, “elite universities have become purveyors of liberal anticulture, the deliberate and wholesale disassembly of a broad swath of cultural norms and practices in the name of liberation from the past.”

Do they exist to push toxic narratives that revolve around the binaries of oppressor and oppressed based on gender, race, and religion, thereby entrenching permanent victimhood in certain groups and pathological hatred of perceived victimisers? What else sparked celebrations on campuses after Hamas slaughtered 1,200 Israelis on Oct 7, 2023? Why were educators gloating in the wake of the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk?

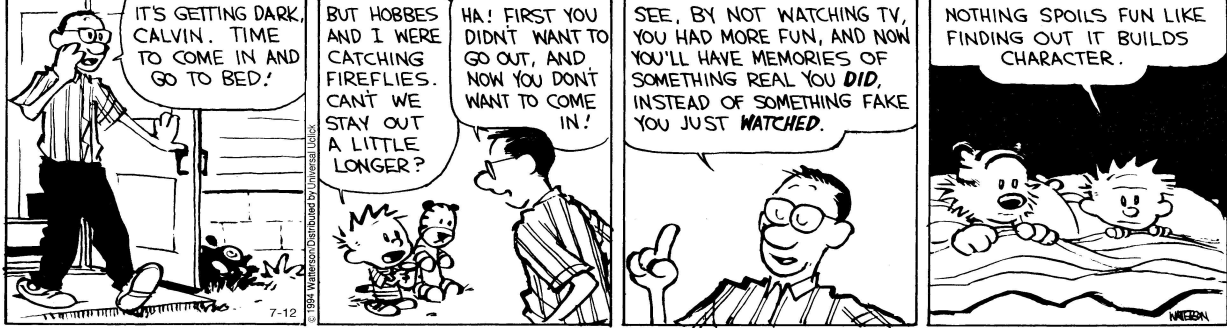
Trump’s demands reflect not his ‘art of the deal’ big think, going into negotiations with all-out aggressiveness. While Harvard president Alan Garber has rejected his demands, it is concerning that universities are being coerced into adopting a new definition of antisemitism that labels certain criticism of Israel as hate speech, which will further stifle open discourse on campuses. Whatever happened to “f**k your feelings”, a jibe conservatives threw at college snowflakes upset by some speech.

For Garber, Harvard could begin by affirming its commitment to open debate by endorsing the Chicago Principles on free speech. It may also weigh going the way of Hillsdale, a private college in Michigan that has consistently refused any state or federal funding because of the strings attached. Harvard can then pursue its pet agendas without political interference. Or it can ensure its “sins are forgiven”, as Trump said, by paying \$500mn in fines to support workforce development. The parties have already reached an advanced stage of negotiations.

Does Harvard truly believe it can prevail if the matter reaches the apex court? Will the justices let it violate their own earlier order against affirmative action? Garber should seize the opportunity to bring the necessary reforms he desires. Hire more conservative faculty, not to meet Trump’s demand, but because all-round intellectual development requires it. Something better may emerge from it, certainly an improvement over the prevailing monoculture.

The writer holds an MPhil in International Politics from JNU

Calvin & Hobbes



Minoru Harada

Life’s greatest victories often begin in the heart – with the courage to rise again, to start afresh, and to move forward with hope. Nichiren Buddhism teaches that courage is the starting point of all human transformation. When we choose courage over fear, like a lion king, we change suffering into growth, stagnation into progress, and despair into hope.

As my mentor, Daisaku Ikeda, writes: “Everyone experiences setbacks or failures at some point in life. The risk of failure is part of trying. If you never attempt to do anything, you’ll never fail. Should you fall down, the important thing is to summon fresh courage and get right back on your feet again. No matter how many times you may fall, you need to keep pressing forward with an invincible determination. Victory and defeat in life are not decided until the final moment.”

Courage is not the absence of fear, but determination to advance despite fear. It is quiet, invincible determination that enables us to take the next step when path ahead seems uncertain. In Buddhist philosophy, courage is synonymous with *fearlessness*, *vaisharadya* in Sanskrit – an unwavering confidence in the dignity and infinite potential of one’s own life. Often, what stops us can be not the size of the obstacle, but a lack of faith in ourselves. When we awaken to the truth that we are scriptwriters of our own story, courage wells forth naturally from within our lives, urging us to act.

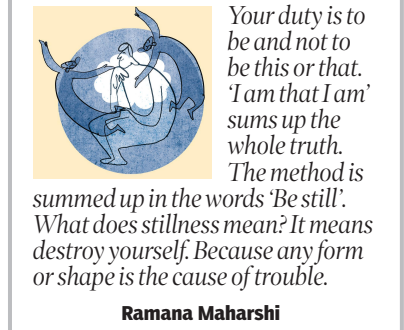
The *Lotus Sutra’s Parable of the Jewel in the Robe* illustrates this beautifully. A poor man visits a wealthy friend, who sews a priceless jewel into the lining of his guest’s robe as he sleeps.

Unaware of this treasure, the man wanders for years in hardship. When they meet again, his friend shows him the jewel that had been hidden there all along. The man realises with joy that he had always possessed immense wealth.

This parable reminds us that each of us carries within a priceless jewel – the courage, wisdom, and compassion of Buddhahood. Yet, unaware of it, we often live as though impoverished. The task of life is to awaken to this inner treasure, to recognise that we already have the power to courageously take action at any moment.

Courage does not always have to be dramatic. It is often expressed quietly in our everyday choices – in initiating a heartfelt dialogue, forgiving someone who has hurt us, taking the first step towards a long-cherished dream, or choosing opti-

Sacred space



The Courage To Begin Anew

mism in the face of uncertainty. These simple, human moments are actually acts of great spiritual strength.

To draw once again on Daisaku Ikeda’s writings: “...no matter how wonderful our dreams, how noble our ideals, or how high our hopes, ultimately, we need courage to make them a reality. We can come up with the greatest ideas or plans in the world, or be filled with boundless compassion for others, but they will all come to nothing unless we have the courage to put them into action. Without action, it’s as if they never existed.”

It is vital, therefore, that we summon the courage to begin anew each day – to rise after every fall, to open our hearts again to hope, and to live each moment as proof that courage is the most beautiful expression of human spirit.

The writer is president, Soka Gakkai, a global Buddhist movement for peace culture, and education

