

Russian oil roil

India can easily meet its needs from alternative sources, but the import bill will be a hefty one

INDIA HAS RIGHTLY pushed back against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) secretary general Mark Rutte’s warning this week that countries like India, China, and Brazil could face secondary sanctions if they continue doing business with Russia. Threatening a sovereign nation for prioritising its economic interests, especially when Western countries have historically done the same, reeks of hypocrisy. One cannot but agree with the government’s view that strategic autonomy in energy policy is non-negotiable, even amid shifting geopolitical equations. India has also done well to point out the “double standards”, in a possible reference to the fact that European Union members continue to procure oil, liquefied natural gas, and pipeline gas from Russia despite the sanctions, and are also major buyers of processed products that go through Indian refineries, including Nayara Energy in which Russia’s ROSNEFT has minority control.

Rutte’s crude threat is understandable as it comes amidst a large number of US senators, cutting across party lines, backing a new sanctions Bill proposing a 500% tariff on nations buying Russian goods. President Donald Trump, too, said this week that the US would impose 100% secondary tariffs targeting Russia’s trade partners if a peace deal with Ukraine did not happen in 50 days. One hopes this is yet another empty threat by the mercurial Trump. For, things will indeed be difficult for countries like India if he carries through with his threat. This is because secondary tariff will apply to the country and affect all merchandise exports, unlike in the case where only the entities doing business with sanctioned Russian entities are penalised. India’s trade with Russia has significantly increased, reaching a record \$68.7 billion in 2024-25, driven mainly by oil imports.

Oil minister Hardeep Singh Puri was at his optimistic best on Thursday when he said that India can easily meet its oil needs from alternative sources even if Russian supplies are hit by secondary sanctions. He noted there were many new suppliers coming into the market such as Guyana and supply from existing producers such as Brazil and Canada. The minister also said India has diversified the sources of supply from about 27 countries earlier to about 40 countries now. But the harsh reality is Indian refiners will have no other way than pivot towards its traditional West Asian suppliers to make up for lost Russian supplies. These new barrels will, however, come at a much higher cost—ranging between \$4 and \$5/barrel, pushing up the country’s import bill by a huge margin.

India, the world’s third-largest oil importer and consumer, received about 1.75 million barrels per day (bpd) of Russian oil in January-June this year, accounting for about 35% of the country’s overall supplies. In June, India’s Russian oil imports rose 17.4% to about 2 million bpd from the previous month. Indian refiners are likely to tank up on cheap Russian oil during the deadline period the way they had done during the Israel-Iran conflict while tying up alternative supplies. But that’s only a short-term solution. The US and NATO move is intended at choking Russia further as fossil fuels are a very big part of that country’s GDP. That’s why Trump has sought to checkmate Putin through secondary tariffs on his major oil buyers. The short point is that plugging the Russian pipeline is bound to drive up oil prices, creating further headache for oil import-dependent countries such as India. Besides, such sanctions could derail India-US talks for a trade deal.

Regulating stablecoins will take a real Genius Act

IF THIS SESSION of Congress is remembered for anything, it may be for its poorly named its legislation. First there was the One Big Beautiful Bill, which wasn’t. Now there is the Genius Act, which isn’t.

The Guiding and Establishing National Innovation for US Stablecoins Act, which Congress passed this week, would regulate stablecoins and effectively transform them from a security to a means of payment. While there is a need for some regulation, as some retailers are considering issuing their own stablecoins, mainstreaming the cryptocurrency is hardly a genius move. The bill would introduce a tremendous amount of risk to the financial system and to consumers. And for what purpose? The US already has a means of payment—it’s called the dollar—and it works pretty well.

For most of crypto’s history, its use case (other than paying for goods and services in the underground economy) has been unclear. Tokenisation does have the potential to make payments quicker and more efficient. The big problem has always been volatility: Cryptocurrencies are not a stable store of value, and therefore not a useful means of payment. Stablecoins solve this by striving to maintain a peg to the dollar. They can do this in several ways, the most common of which is to use low-risk assets such as Treasury bills as backing.

This will not produce a perfect peg to the dollar. The exchange rate between the dollar and Tether, the most popular coin backed mostly by Treasury bills, still fluctuates. It is more stable than an unhedged cryptocurrency, but not perfect.

Cryptocoin issuers are very similar to the banks of the 1830s, which also issued their own currencies and were regulated by the states. In a similar spirit, under the Genius Act, companies that issue less than \$10 billion worth of coins would also be regulated by the states, while the Federal Reserve would regulate bigger issuers.

The 1830s, from a financial standpoint, were very chaotic. Constant oversight was necessary, because any hint of currency devaluation created bank runs and failures. States had different standards, and several under-regulated their local banks—creating a lack of confidence in the system. Back then consumers had no choice, as no universal fiat currency was widely available. Today, Americans can just use dollars. Vendors don’t have to worry that their value will fluctuate, and holders don’t have to worry that it will collapse. And despite the occasional bout of inflation, the Fed has a great track record.

Mainstreaming stablecoins also poses risks to the financial system. Stablecoin issuers are already becoming a major source of demand for US Treasuries. Tether purchased over \$33 billion of them last year and now owns more than Germany. If the market takes off, some banks estimate stablecoin issuers could be a captive buyer for trillions of dollars in Treasuries.

The government might find this appealing, as it would help keep rates low. But it also introduces systemic risk. If there is ever a run on a large coin, all these Treasuries would need to be sold quickly—potentially causing a financial crisis or risking a bailout.

The Genius Act would make payments more efficient than the current system of using banks and credit and debit cards—which all charge non-trivial fees. But for the stablecoin issuers to turn a profit, they’d also have to charge fees.

Currently they earn most of their revenues from returns on their reserve assets. But to comply with effective regulation or just inspire confidence, these assets need to have a stable price (relative to the dollar) and be perfectly liquid. The only way to make money while also paying compliance costs would be to charge fees. Probably not much less than what credit-card companies or banks charge.

There are also concerns specific to the Genius Act itself: There is not enough regulatory scrutiny, so illicit use would still be possible. There are inadequate provisions for bankruptcy and for enforcement. And then there are concerns about conflicts of interest—particularly with the president, whose family issues its own coins.

But the biggest question is why the government wants to make it easier to use stablecoins as a means of payment. Not only does it create needless risk, but it also undermines the government’s own function as the issuer of dollar. The Bank of International Settlements has a better suggestion: To get the benefits of crypto while minimising its risks, and to better integrate tech into central banking, just tokenise the dollar.

● TECH IN TRADING

SEBI CAN TAKE STEPS TO NOT ONLY REGULATE BUT ALSO DESIGN A FRAMEWORK TO AID GROWTH, INNOVATION

Lens on AI in securities market

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing partner, Finsec Law Advisors



ness and bias, and data/cybersecurity.

Importantly, Sebi has proposed that third-party services would be deemed to be provided by the intermediary concerned, and thus, liable for any violation of securities laws. Further, it has extended the applicability of investor grievance mechanism in respect of AI/ML systems as well.

Sebi has proposed a “regulatory lite framework” seeking to segregate between AI/ML systems that have an impact on the clients, and those used for internal business operations. Further, even if the system is outsourced, intermediaries will be liable. The real challenge for intermediaries lies in building sophisticated internal teams, robust audit trails, and technical capacity to manage such systems. In this context, it is worth considering if Sebi should revisit this approach and borrow a leaf out of its own playbook.

In February, the regulator introduced a revised framework for safer participation of retail investors in algo trading. In view of several entities providing algo strategies to customers and the consequent risks, Sebi decided to introduce a new class of regulated entities, viz. algo providers. While they aren’t directly regulated by it, algo providers would have to become agents of stock brokers and be registered and empanelled with the

stock exchange(s).

A similar approach can be evaluated in respect of AI/ML systems, and a new class of persons—AI providers—introduced. While it is not necessary that Sebi directly regulates such persons, it could result in better oversight and understanding of the evolving nature of the AI industry and its nexus and impact on the securities market. Further, liability can be fixed on the person or entity

Sebi’s proposal of a principle-based regulatory lite framework reflects its intention to adapt to innovation in technology that would shape financial markets

actually responsible if an AI/ML system goes wrong, especially if the intermediary had no role in the violation. The alternative results in cascading litigation, as the investor would sue the intermediary which in turn would seek to recover losses from the third-party vendor (AI provider). While the investor grievance mechanism is proposed to be extended to AI/ML systems, introducing a new class of semi-regulated players in the securities market could have a better impact on fostering growth in a transparent, accountable manner with appropriate oversight.

Sebi’s proposal includes testing requirements at the time of commencement as well as on ongoing basis, to ensure the AI/ML systems are working as expected. Here, a key reform that could propel their growth is allowing players to access the regulatory sandbox frame-

JSW-BPSL saga: Let it be or let it go



BAHRAM N VAKIL

Founding partner, AZB & Partners

THE RECENT SUPREME Court judgment in the matter of JSW Steel’s acquisition of Bhushan Power and Steel Limited (BPSL) has delivered a significant setback to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). More than four years ago, JSW acquired BPSL through the IBC process by paying ₹19,700 crore to banks, employees, operational creditors, and statutory authorities. Yet, on appeal by the erstwhile promoters challenging the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal’s (NCLAT) order, the Supreme Court overturned JSW’s acquisition and directed the liquidation of BPSL. Notably, the court invoked its extraordinary powers under Article 142 of the Constitution, which empowers it to do “complete justice” between the parties.

The Supreme Court’s primary reasons appear to include delays by the Resolution Professional (RP) in completing the statutory time-bound process; alleged inadequacy of the RP’s examination of JSW’s eligibility under Section 29A of the IBC; failure to prosecute the erstwhile promoters for suspect transactions preceding insolvency; and the purportedly non-commercial manner in which lenders exercised their discretion. However, on a close examination of the public record, these grounds appear either legally insufficient, inaccurate, or irrelevant. Indeed, the Supreme Court’s order arguably violates several well-established principles of law.

A vital legal principle repeatedly affirmed by the Supreme Court is the primacy of the commercial wisdom of the Committee of Creditors (CoC) in the IBC process.

In the BPSL matter, the Enforcement Directorate had attached the company’s assets for violations allegedly committed by the erstwhile promoters. While JSW sought legal remedies to lift the attachment, the CoC, recognising the value-destructive effect of the attachment, exercised its discretion to extend the implementation timeline for the resolution plan. The Supreme Court’s order effectively nullified this commercial decision, relying on a technical reading that the CoC could not act as a body once the plan had received NCLT approval. However, the court appears to have overlooked that the NCLT-approved resolution plan itself expressly conferred such power on the lenders.

Furthermore, the invocation of Article 142 in this context was arguably unwarranted. The power to do “complete justice” is rarely exercised and is traditionally reserved for extraordinary circumstances—such as in environmental cases, politically sensitive disputes (e.g. the Ayodhya judgment), and mass torts (e.g. the Bhopal gas tragedy)—where legal gaps would otherwise produce manifestly unjust outcomes. In the BPSL case, Article 142 has been employed to send a viable, profitable company employing thousands into liquidation on what appear to be hyper-technical and factually debatable grounds. Paradoxically, even assuming some merit in the concerns raised, Article 142 should have been used to preserve, not destroy, the corporate debtor—to save it from corporate death, consistent with the IBC’s objective of revival over liquidation.

If the judiciary fails to protect the basic architecture of the IBC, there is a real risk of reverting to the pre-IBC regime of the Sick Industrial Companies Act

One of the fundamental tenets of our common law system is the principle of natural justice, which imposes a duty on courts to ensure no party is condemned unheard. A review of the orders of the lower tribunals reveals that several critical findings in the Supreme Court’s judgment—such as the alleged delays in the resolution process, the supposed inadequacy of diligence regarding JSW’s eligibility, and purported nondisclosures—were neither argued before the lower forums or pressed before the Supreme Court.

Neither the RP and the CoC nor JSW was given notice that the Supreme Court would adjudicate these matters, thereby depriving them of an opportunity to defend their conduct. It is disconcerting that the court arrived at factually contentious and arguably erroneous conclusions without hearing all affected parties. Beyond these legal infirmities, the apex court’s order raises broader systemic concerns. If the liquidation order is implemented, lenders—predominantly public sector banks—will likely have to return over ₹19,000 crore in recoveries, potentially reclassifying the company as a non-performing asset and reinstating over ₹47,000 crore in bad loans. JSW’s substantial investments in plant and machinery would need to be refunded, while thousands of employees, contractors, and counterparties could face job losses and commercial disruption.

The implications for the IBC ecosystem are grave. The finality and predictability of the resolution process will be severely undermined, discouraging prospective bidders who will price in this legal uncertainty with harder bargains and lower bids. Bank recoveries and employee claims may suffer as a result. Worse still, promoters may be emboldened to game the process through protracted litigation and procedural delays, undermining the very purpose of the IBC.

The IBC has been a notable success of the current government’s reform agenda. However, its effective functioning depends not only on legislative and executive action but also on judicial restraint and vigilance in upholding its core principles. In fairness, this is exactly what the Supreme Court has consistently done vis-à-vis the IBC, especially in its initial years. However, if the judiciary fails to protect the basic architecture of the IBC, there is a real risk of reverting to the pre-IBC regime of the Sick Industrial Companies Act, where corporate distress was endemic, recoveries were minimal, and resolution lay at the mercy of defaulting promoters.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Resist sanctions threat

Apropos of “India dismisses NATO threat” (FE, July 18), the threat of fresh sanctions over India’s continued trade with Russia, especially in the energy sector, is both disappointing and hypocritical. The West, led by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, continues to pressure India for decisions that are driven purely by national interest. India’s acquisition of the S-400 from Russia,

and its subsequent resistance to CAATSA (Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions set a clear precedent: strategic autonomy is not negotiable. The rhetoric over secondary sanctions is unjustified and counterproductive. Nations like India cannot be expected to compromise their energy security, especially when the same Western countries, including many in the European Union, continue to engage with Russia in less visible but

significant ways. India must firmly reject these coercive tactics and continue charting its own path. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

West targeting China

Despite sanctions imposed by the US and the European Union since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, these measures have not compelled Kremlin to reverse or alter its war strategy. India has benefitted from buying Russian oil at discounted rates

since the war. The West cannot penalise India for pursuing national interest and also expect cooperation in regional and global initiatives. It should engage with India as an equal partner. The threats against Russian oil buyers are a covert economic war against China’s ascent, thereby regulating the arms market to reassert the primacy of the West. —Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

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Editor's TAKE

A legacy of liberation and defiance

The Centre's bold push to reform litigation and judicial efficiency is a welcome step, though challenges remain

The Indian judiciary can be summed up in one phrase from Bollywood — tareekh pe tareekh. Whether you are a winner or a loser in court, the fact remains that the judicial process takes a heavy toll on litigants. Cases drag on for years, during which money drains and energy saps, making it excruciatingly painful to even fight the case. The irony is that the Government is one of the biggest litigants, putting an extra burden on the courts. However, some respite is in sight. In a landmark initiative that signals a major course correction in India's legal landscape, the Union Ministry of Law and Justice has rolled out a sweeping reform aimed at tackling one of the most chronic issues plaguing the Indian judiciary — delays caused by the Government's own overreach as the largest litigant in the country. Titled the Directive for the Efficient and Effective Management of Litigation by Government of India, the new standard operating procedure is more than an administrative adjustment. For years, India's judiciary has groaned under the burden of a staggering backlog, with over 4.7 crore cases pending across courts.

These legal disputes are often the result of avoidable service-related grievances, policy ambiguities, redundant appeals and poor interdepartmental coordination. The new directive acknowledges this reality and addresses it head-on by laying out a detailed, systemic roadmap for ministries to reform how they engage with the judicial process. A significant part of the directive's innovation lies in its call for classifying court cases by their urgency and impact. Legal matters will now be categorised as highly sensitive, sensitive or regular, ensuring that cases involving national security, major financial implications or public policy are flagged early and handled at the highest administrative levels.

At the same time, the directive discourages the filing of Special Leave Petitions in the Supreme Court — except in rare and exceptional cases. Central to this reform is the institutionalisation of legal expertise within every ministry. Each department must now establish a legal cell headed by a senior officer with legal training, supported by young professionals and subject experts hired on a contractual basis. This structure is designed to professionalise the Government's legal handling, replacing the current ad hoc and reactive approach with a more deliberate and informed process. The directive also seeks to curb the impulse to litigate by promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms such as mediation and arbitration. By including arbitration clauses in contracts and creating a centralised Arbitration Portal, the Government is taking concrete steps to resolve disputes more swiftly and efficiently.

The reform is heavily technology-driven. All legal matters must now be tracked through the Legal Information Management and Briefing System (LIMBS), a centralised digital platform that will help ministries monitor litigation, process payments to lawyers, track case histories, and detect emerging legal trends.

This system promises transparency and real-time accountability, giving the Government a clearer view of its legal landscape and enabling it to manage risks more proactively. If fully realised, it could help transform the Indian judicial system from a bottleneck into a beacon of timely justice and responsible governance.

Courts to shed delays, reduce vacations and embrace reform

With over 70 per cent of all court cases involving Government entities and millions of cases pending across the country, the Centre's recent move to reduce litigation is a welcome first step

The Central Government's intention to reduce the volume of court cases should be warmly welcomed. After all, 70 per cent of cases in the courts of the country involve the Governments, whether at the Centre or in the States. On the other hand, speeding up the hearing of cases and the passing of judgments also need to be expedited. The amount of time spent on each matter too needs to be recorded.



PRAFULL GORADIA

This is perhaps not being done, and if that is the case, it is certainly not published, as it may embarrass some of the judges as well as advocates. Adjournments are the main cause of delays, and delays are the bane of justice. They are often used as tactics to slow down or even snuff out the progress of the hearings. At times, they are sought because the leading advocate of one or the other side is busy in another case in another court — maybe even in another city.

For the ensuing waste of the court's time, a repeat court fee of, say, 50 per cent of the initial amount should be charged to the side that seeks the adjournment. When the client is debited for this fee, he would learn a lesson not to engage an advocate who is so busy as to be distracted by several other cases. The freedom to appeal upwards, again and again, should be reduced. Some matters which began in a small cases court in, say, Mumbai have reached the apex court. Normally, one appeal to each side may be permitted. In special circumstances, perhaps two could be considered.

Before a hearing begins in a matter, the judge should, in consultation with both the advocates, decide how much time each of them would be given. If either side exceeds their limit, they should have to pay extra fees — rather like in a journey by a taxi. Why should the court waste its time merely because an advocate is slow to think or express themselves, or keeps repeating themselves? As a layman, I am surprised that the litigant has to begin by submitting, usually, a lengthy affidavit.

On the night before the first hearing, the judge reads and digests all that has been stated in that affidavit. In the hearing, the advocate verbally explains to the judge and the opposing advocate what is written in the affi-



ADJOURNMENTS ARE THE MAIN CAUSE OF DELAYS AND DELAYS ARE THE BANE OF JUSTICE. THEY ARE OFTEN USED AS TACTICS TO SLOW DOWN OR EVEN SNUFF OUT THE PROGRESS OF THE HEARINGS

davit. Is this not a repetitive procedure? Surely, it can be cut down? Once, I happened to get a chance to read an opinion on a matter by a Kolkata advocate as well as a London lawyer. I was surprised to see that the UK draft was written in about 300 words while the Indian one was longer, at over a thousand words. For us Indians, writing in English has not been the soul of wit. Since a great deal of legal work is written, this becomes an important area of check. Incidentally, judgments or orders are not always brief or terse.

And what about the working hours of the courts themselves — or, more accurately, the duration of the court machinery? While one does not wish to be uncharitable, the Lordships across the country's courts taking off for vacations has begun becoming the topic of much talk.

In a country whose justice system is clogged with pending cases whose number runs into a few crores, such judicial holidays need a relook. It is important to bear in mind that these longish and regular vacations for judges and senior lawyers is a practice from the British days — a period when there was no air-conditioning. The summer of the

Indian plains was simply unbearable for most judges, and long vacations in the hill stations of Simla, Darjeeling, Ooty, or the cold valley of Kashmir was understandable — but not in today's age, when technology has made it possible to overcome many challenges of nature.

The present hours of work in the country's courtrooms too are not encouraging, as far as utilisation of both time and manpower are concerned. Most courts begin their proceedings at 10:30 or thereabouts and con-

clude at 16:30 — i.e., working for six hours, but effectively five, because there is an hour off for lunch. Saturdays and Sundays are not counted here.

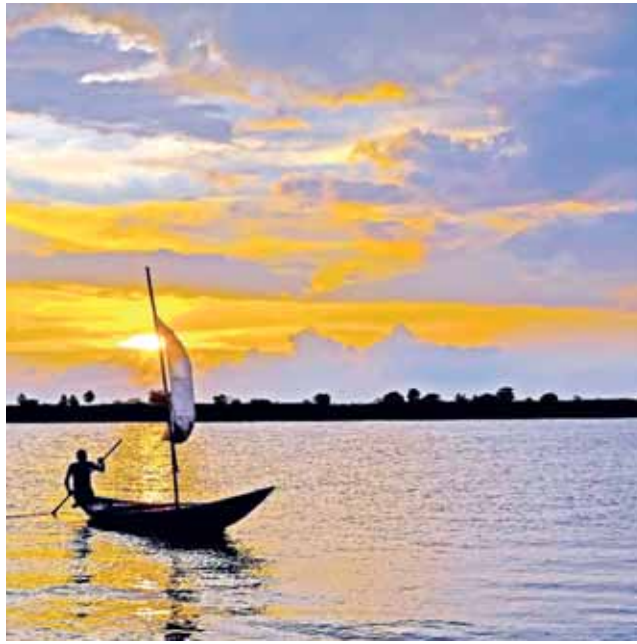
With overburdened judges and a mountain of cases piling up by the day, it is high time a shift system was introduced in the judiciary. There is no reason why courts cannot work in shifts, reducing the workload on the judges and advocates, plus ensuring more employment opportunities for many unemployed lawyers and other associated staff.

There are many advocates in the country who stand to gain by such a measure in the form of making the law and thereby, the country's legal system — accessible to the lower rungs of society.

The latter point is too obvious to bear iteration here. The then Chief Justice of India, Y K Sabharwal, had in 2006 not mooted the idea of courts needing to work in dual shifts in order to reduce the workload. The accessibility of justice to the common folk of the country has to become the topmost priority for judicial reforms in the country.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha)

PICTALK



A fisherman rows his boat across the Hooghly river on a cloudy evening, in Nadia. PTI

Stepping into “God’s own country”

SECOND Opinion

We were thrilled when my travel agent confirmed that everything was set for our trip to Kerala. With great excitement, we packed our suitcases and boarded our flight to Kochi.

Our driver warmly welcomed us at the airport, and so began our unforgettable journey through Kochi, Munnar, Thekkady and Alleppey.

I knew Kerala was located on the southwestern coast of India at an elevation of 3,000 feet. It's well known for exporting coffee, tea, spices, coconut, and rubber. Its long coastline supports a thriving seafood industry. Besides excellent commerce, Kerala also has the highest literacy rate and life expectancy in India.

However, what I did not realise was that Kerala's beauty could not be captured in statistics and photographs. No picture could have prepared me for the sheer splendour and wonder it had to offer.

The landscape and countryside were so pristine and mesmerising — something I came to understand only through firsthand experience.

Our drive to Munnar was absolutely breathtaking. The misty, undulating hills blanketed with lush green tea plantations looked like a picture postcard. We literally drove



SHARMILA VAIDYA

through clouds. The sound of cascading waterfalls filled the air, excited tourists were taking photographs, and vendors were selling fresh coconut water — far more refreshing than any “organic” variety sold in stores. To top it all, monkeys lounged casually by the roadside, as if they owned the hills, blending seamlessly into the serene landscape. We finally arrived at Munnar, a charming hill station.

We stayed at a place called Tall Trees, which had many different varieties of tall flowering cacti, trees, beautiful vines and wildflowers. The air was filled with a sweet fragrance, the sound of waterfalls, and the chirping of birds. It was so peaceful and tranquil — as if time had stood still. During our two-day stay, we watched the famous Kathakali dance performance.

The dancers' costumes, expressions, and graceful movements far exceeded my expectations. We also saw a traditional martial arts performance. I was wowed by their sheer energetic display of strength and skill. From the misty, lush green hills of Munnar, we headed to Thekkady and the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary.

A boat ride took us deep into the jungle. Although we didn't spot many animals, the experience of being surrounded by raw nature was outstanding. Our next stop was a spice plantation.

It was fascinating to learn how spices grow in such harmony. The bark, seeds, leaves, pods and roots were all used

as spices. Their aroma lingered in the air. Next, we travelled to the calm backwaters of Alleppey, often referred to as the “Venice of the East,” for its intricate network of canals and lagoons lined with coconut trees. One of the highlights of our trip was the houseboat ride through the backwaters.

As we floated gently past lush green paddy fields and swaying palm trees, we saw villagers fishing, some paddling small canoes, and children cheerfully waving from the banks. Onboard, we were served freshly caught seafood, cooked in special Kerala spices and served on banana leaves. Each meal was authentic and bursting with flavour.

Alleppey offered us not just scenic beauty but also a glimpse into the local way of life. Finally, we returned to Kochi, where I admired the Portuguese-influenced architecture.

The city's rich heritage was reflected in its exquisite temples, the historic St. Francis Church, and the ornate Jewish Synagogue. I returned home in awe of such a beautiful blend of culture, landscape, resources, and the warmth of simple, hospitable people.

As someone once said, “Some places leave you breathless not just for their beauty, but for the way they make you feel.” For me, that place was Kerala.

(The author is an educator based in the US and the author of children's books)

Letters to the Editor

Bold moves, missing plan B

President Trump remains no less enigmatic in his second term, even more vivid than the first, as he juggles many irons in the fire, with flourish.

Be it calling on Kim Jong-un with élan, brokering Abraham Accords in the Middle East or slapping tariffs on China, his Plan A was bold, attention-grabbing and deliberately disruptive by design. Not that Trump was not alive to the prognosis of such unprecedented first moves. Even as the rest of the world attempts to untangle the knots, he adds some more, to follow neither pattern nor predictability.

What is getting worryingly evident is that either his Plan B was too sketchy and tentative or, worse, there is none. His China trade policy, saw tariffs imposed swiftly. But for the vague and hesitant attempts at recalibration of supply chains, no definitive long-term objectives or measured follow-up has emerged. Absence of Plan B or the willingness to craft one renders US policy transactional and short-term. It has resulted in mounting uncertainty for allies, erratic signals to adversaries, and volatility across global markets and institutions.

Ab initio, disruption without direction may well have served as campaign slogans, but today it is creating a leadership vacuum which the world can neither conjure up in an alternate leadership nor an antidote Plan B of its own.

R NARAYANAN | NAVI MUMBAI

Yemen execution halted, questions remain

The execution of Nimisha Priya, a Keralite nurse who has been on death row in Yemen since 2020, was postponed a day before the scheduled date (July 16) owing to the efforts of Kanthapuram AP Aboobacker Musliyar, the General-Secretary of the All India Sunni Jamiiyyathul Ulama and the Chancellor of Jamia Markaz, and Yemeni Sufi Islamic scholar Sheikh Habib Umar bin Hafiz. Nimisha was convicted of murdering a Yemeni national, Talal Abdo Mahdi, in 2017.

He was her partner in setting up a clinic but soon allegedly began embezzling money and torturing her. He also seized her passport and other documents, not allowing her to return to India. Nimisha tried to sedate him in order to retrieve her documents, but he died of an overdose in the process. Indian citizens lured by overseas employment opportunities often face dire legal and humanitarian risks. While efforts continue to try to save Nimisha Priya, this episode demands urgent scrutiny of recruitment agencies and their unchecked operations.

Only God can save Nimisha Priya from being executed in Yemen. The fate of Nimisha Priya hangs by a thread, a stark reminder of the perils faced by those seeking opportunities abroad. This tragic case underscores the urgent need for robust safeguards and ethical recruitment practices to protect our citizens.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

Rice, reforms and a shaky coalition

Japan: Ahead of a parliamentary election on Sunday, the agriculture minister has released stockpiled rice in an effort to lower prices and woo voters. Indian political game is being copied by other countries. The ruling coalition needs to win 50 seats of the 125 up for grabs in order to retain its majority. While the vote will not directly determine whether Ishiba's Government falls, investors are nervous it will leave him beholden to opposition parties advocating fiscal largesse that could exacerbate mass selling of Japan's Government bonds.

In a worst-case scenario, some analysts say Ishiba may have to resign, unleashing political drama as Tokyo heads for an August 1 deadline to win reprieve from punishing import levies set by its largest trading partner, the United States.

If he had an overwhelming loss. Japan's shaky minority Government is poised for another setback in an upper house vote on Sunday, an outcome that could jolt investor confidence in the world's fourth largest economy and complicate tariff talks with the United States. Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has ruled for most of the post-war period, and its partner Komeito, are forecast to lose their majority in a repeat of last year's election for the more-powerful lower house.

JAYANTHY SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

UK LABOUR'S RACIAL CONTRADICTIONS

Seventy-two-year-old Diane Julie Abbott is a British independent politician who has served as the MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington since 1987.

The interview comes after Abbott was asked about a controversy in 2023, when she was suspended as a Labour Party MP for a year after making comments about racism in a letter to a newspaper.

I think the Labour Party's love for Jews has become so intense that it suspended its longest-serving member of the House of Commons just because she said that if anyone is the most victimised by racism in British society, it is people of Black African origin. She only compared it to Jews because she wanted to say that if you are of any religion or from any part of the world, if your skin colour is fair, then you will not face the discrimination that a dark-skinned person will face.

The Labour Party considered this comment anti-Semitic and, to show its strong relationship with Israel and to please the Netanyahu government, suspended Ms Abbott.

Ms Abbott also said in her clarification: “I have a little problem with those who try to label me as anti-Semitic because I have spent my whole life fighting all forms of racism, especially anti-Semitism, partly due to the nature of my constituency.”

I think the Labour Party should reconsider its decision. Ms Abbott's interview should be heard in full. Only then should any conclusion be reached. Being a Black woman herself, she knows very well how much sarcasm and abuse a Black person has to endure to survive in a white-dominated society.

JANG BAHADUR SINGH | JAMSHEDPUR

Biofuel or No Biofuel? India's Hamletian Energy Dilemma

India stands at an energy crossroads. With rising global instability and climate pressures, embracing biofuels like biodiesel and Sustainable Aviation Fuel offers a path to energy security, economic resilience and environmental leadership in a post-fossil fuel future

To be, or not to be," Shakespeare's Hamlet posed his existential question centuries ago, but in the 21st century, India faces a similar fateful choice: whether to persist with an oil economy chained to imported fossil fuels, or to boldly embrace biofuels — especially biodiesel and Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) — as the foundation of a more resilient, self-reliant future. The decision is not academic. It will shape the nation's economic security, public health, strategic autonomy, and it's standing in a world buffeted by both geopolitical conflict and climate crisis. The importance of alternatives to fossil fuel has been recognised the world over, and even the international bodies are making coordinated efforts to promote biofuel development and adoption. The Paris Agreement — a global treaty for limiting global warming — does emphasise transitioning to biofuels, substituting reliance on fossil fuels. Brazil's RenovaBio programme provides for an increase in biofuel production and consumption. Similarly, the UN Renewable Energy Agency encourages international cooperation in promoting biofuel production and trade.

India, being a signatory to the Paris Agreement, has been actively following the commitments to address the issue of global warming and defined five goals (*Panchamrit*) — announced by the Prime Minister at COP 26 in Glasgow. The larger goal is to achieve net zero emissions by 2070 through identified action points. It is heartening to know that we have already achieved one goal before the scheduled date (50 per cent energy requirement from renewable energy) of 2030. India has also integrated green energy with its developmental agenda. Initiatives such as the "PM Jivan" scheme and the promotion of "One Ped Ma Ke Naam" are unique and prove the country's commitments to a better and cleaner future for the new generation. Indian effort and strategy can serve as a model for other developing countries.

Petrodollar Chains: Old Risks, New Vulnerabilities

Recent Government data shows that our energy needs of more than 50 per cent are being met from non-fossil fuel resources. In this, solar-based power generation is emerging as a key player and contributor. Historically, India has long depended on imported crude, with over 85 per cent of its oil coming from abroad. This economic reality ties India's fate to the 'petrodollar' system: global oil transactions conducted in US dollars, a system that not only enriches oil-exporting countries but reinforces US financial hegemony. The consequences — India's economy remains hostage to supply disruptions, OPEC+ cartel manoeuvring, and the price



shocks as a result of geopolitical turmoil. The 2022-23 energy crunch triggered by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which sent oil prices and inflation soaring, is only the most recent reminder that dependence on mineral oil can inflict swift and severe pain. The US Government's new move to impose 100 per cent duties on countries that are importing oil from Russia reflects the vulnerability of countries like India who import a substantial quantity from Russia to meet their domestic demands. One has to wait and watch to understand the real implication of such a condition on our economy and geopolitical relationships.

But the true cost of fossil fuels goes far beyond the market price at the pump. Our continued reliance on oil exacts invisible but massive tolls — polluted air, oil spills, respiratory illnesses, and the staggering reach of climate change. Globally, the International Monetary Fund estimated fossil subsidies (including hidden health and environmental costs) at a staggering \$7 trillion in 2023. Such externalities are never reflected in the price of petrol, but the public pays for them all the same — in hospital wards, in lost crops, in balance-of-payments crises.

It is true that as compared to fossil fuels including coal, oil, and natural gas, biofuels are definitely superior alternatives to counter the emerging challenges of climate change and deal with the arm-twisting tactics by the fossil fuel lobby. In addition, there are other advantages offered by biofuels such as environmental friendliness, easy biodegradability, availability in abundance, renewable nature and sustainability, besides being price competitive.

Biofuels generally include solid biofuels (solid biomass, biochar), liquid biofuels (bioethanol, biodiesel), and gaseous biofuels (e.g. biogas, bihydrogen). Biofuels, such as ethanol, biodiesel, and biogas, are produced from renewable organic materials, including crops, algae, agricultural residues, and waste.

Countries across the globe are taking steps to promote the usage of biofuel. The European Union has proposed to achieve 14 per cent renewable energy in transport by the year 2030, with strict sustainability criteria for biofuels. Countries like Brazil and India are investing heavily in ethanol and biodiesel programmes to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. India announced a biofuel policy in 2018 which allows the production of ethanol from damaged wheat, sugarcane, rotten potatoes, corn etc. and provides incentives for biorefineries. Its focus is to promote biodiesel production from non-edible oil seeds, used cooking oil and short-duration crops. It has advanced the ethanol blending targets in petrol to 20 per cent by 2025-26.

Biofuel Pathway: Sovereignty, Security, and Circular Prosperity

This is where biodiesel and SAF offer a transformative alternative. Rather than importing crude, biofuels can be produced right here in India from waste and residues: used cooking oil, acid oil from vegetable oil processing, palm oil effluent, and a mountain of agricultural waste. Biofuels insulate India from global oil shocks while powering a new economy rooted in local jobs, clean technology, and rural prosperity. Waste to Wealth is the new slogan

— offering immense opportunities for new entrepreneurs and other stakeholders involved in last-mile collection and segregation. Circular economy — promotes India's vision of 'AtmaNirbhar Bharat' and "Gram Swara" — thereby fulfilling the aspirations of millions living in rural India by offering employment opportunities at the local level.

Consider the numbers: India discards more than 1.5 million tonnes of used cooking oil and acid oil each year, much of it dumped unchecked, clogging drains and polluting rivers — or worse, illegally recycled into food, threatening public health. Properly processed, that very waste becomes valuable fuel.

A single 1-million-tonne-per-year biodiesel plant can generate up to 7,000 direct and indirect jobs, primarily in rural and waste sectors — on top of cleaning up India's waterways and skies.

Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) is no less revolutionary. International aviation must decarbonise, and airlines are desperate for scalable alternatives to fossil-based jet fuel. SAF made from used oils and agricultural residues cuts CO2 emissions by up to 70 per cent over its lifecycle, while plugging India directly into the future of global green commerce.

Economic and Policy Winds Are Shifting

The resources and technology are available, and the winds of global investment are shifting too. While traditional fossil giants still draw state bank loans and sovereign fund investments, climate-conscious capital — green bonds, impact funds, and carbon credit markets — is flowing into biofuels.

FIRST Column



DINESH TYAGI

ESG (environment, social, governance) mandates and net-zero targets mean major corporations and Governments are seeking verified, traceable biofuels rather than risk the reputational hit of 'greenwashing'. Modern Indian biofuel plants, using advanced process automation, now deliver auditable supply chain data and emissions savings, opening doors to international finance. The Government's policies have begun to reflect this reality. From the Ethanol Blending Programme to the National Bio-Energy Mission and initiatives promoting waste-based SAF production, India is laying the foundations for a bio-fuel revolution — one aligned with global trends, national goals, and rural livelihoods.

Circular Economy: Turning Waste into Wealth

At the heart of the biofuel transition lies the idea of the circular economy. Instead of treating used oil or crop residue as waste, India can turn them into valuable fuel, closing the loop of extraction, use, and disposal. This reduces methane emissions from landfills, prevents toxic oil reuse in the food chain, and significantly relieves the municipal burden of waste management. By doing so, India can monetise what is currently a billion-dollar loss each year.

Answering Shakespeare's Question in Policy and Practice

India's energy dilemma is not merely technical but profoundly strategic: remain mired in import dependency with all its costs, or step confidently into a future of energy sovereignty and inclusive growth. The right policy mix — scaling advanced biodiesel and SAF, leveraging carbon markets and green credits (announced by the Government), building export-ready biofuel clusters, rewarding verified emissions reductions, and fostering global partnerships — will turn vision into reality.

"To be or not to be?" For India, the answer is clear: to be energy sovereign, to be clean, to be resilient — by embracing biofuels, especially biodiesel and SAF where the bulk of the requirements lie. It is the economic, environmental, and strategic choice of our times. Also, in an era where India is aspiring to be a global superpower — initiatives in reducing dependency on fossil fuel through strategic and time-bound action can definitely become an example for other countries to emulate and establish Indian leadership amongst the nations.

(Dinesh Kumar Tyagi is retired IAS officer; Suman Bose is President and Co Founder — GreenSource Energy Pte Ltd (Singapore) and Co Founder of GoFar Advisory & Investments Pte Ltd)

From Ancient Village Councils to Modern Panchayats

Ancient Roots of Local Self-Governance

India's legacy of local self-governance traces back to ancient times when village councils were like 'Sabhas' and 'Samitis', which played crucial roles in decision-making. The 'Panch Parameshwar', or council of five elders, administered justice and local Government by mutual consent. According to Kautilya's 'Arthashastra', the 'Gramika' (village head) is responsible for tax collection, land administration, and law enforcement.

The decentralised governance structure was built on community engagement, proximity-based decision-making, and a feeling of strong, joint responsibility.

However, with the emergence of centralised monarchs, particularly during British colonial rule, these self-sufficient institutions were replaced with tax-collecting centres, which deprived villages of their participatory governance essence.

Colonial emphasis on centralised authority undercut grassroots democracy, resulting in a governance vacuum that lasted long after independence. This historical context demonstrates that India previously prospered under decentralised governance, a model that modern Panchayati Raj aims to recreate.

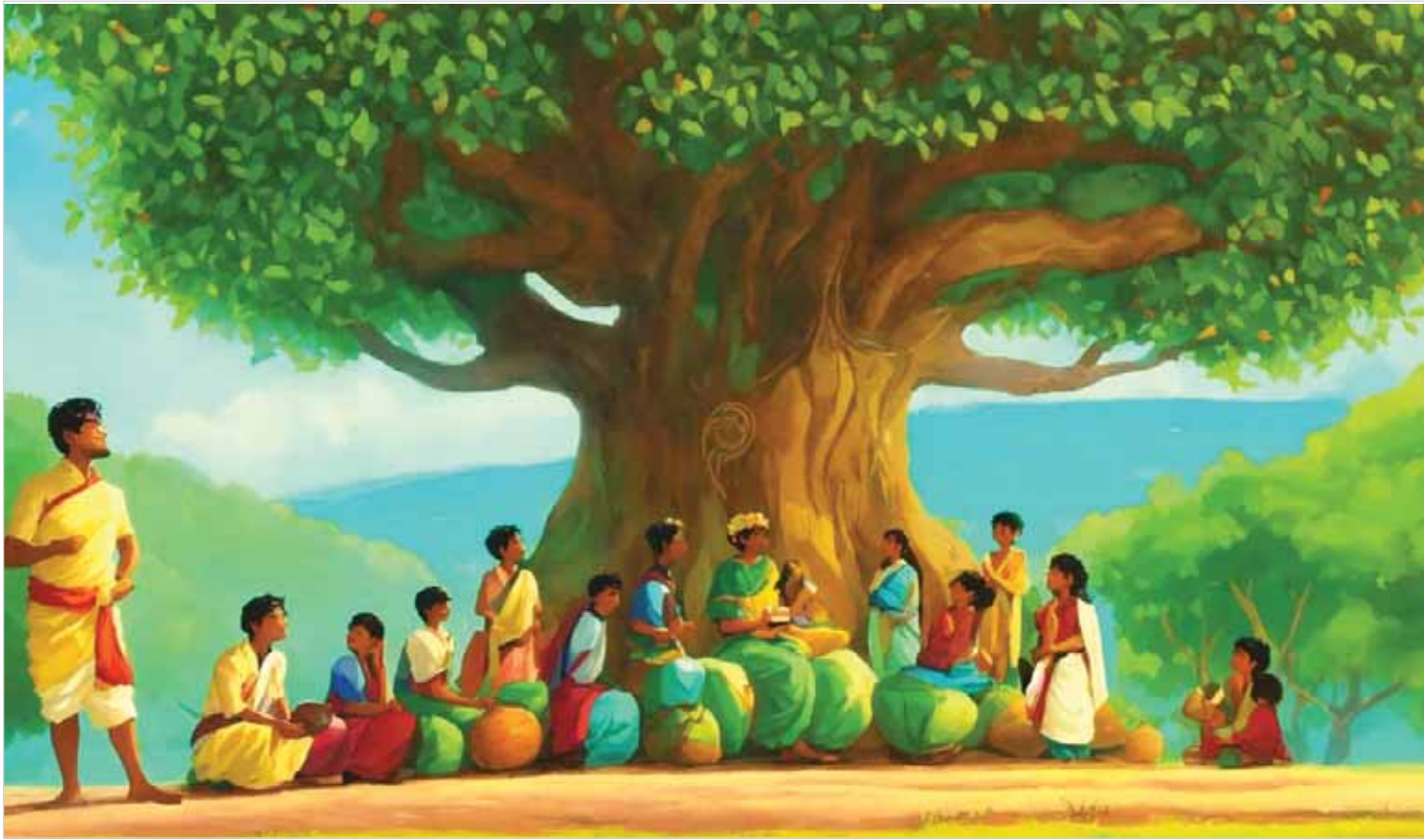
The Constitutional Revival of Panchayati Raj

Following independence, the imperative of restoring grassroots governance prompted the development of the Panchayati Raj system. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) proposed a three-tier Government structure, followed by the Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), which pushed for constitutional backing. This resulted in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992-93), which gave Panchayats and Municipalities constitutional standing. These developments introduced regular elections, special seats for women and underprivileged groups, State Finance Commissions, and decentralisation of power. Nonetheless, three decades after these changes, the full potential of decentralised democracy has yet to be achieved.

Elections are frequently postponed, financial devolution is limited, and bureaucratic interference erodes local autonomy. Although constitutionally sound, the Panchayat system is a work in progress, requiring continual political will and reforms to function as intended — a true type of democracy close to the people it seeks to serve.

Electoral Disruptions and the Erosion of Democratic Mandate

The integrity of India's Panchayati Raj system is increasingly compromised by persistent delays and manipulations in local elections, fundamentally eroding the democratic mandate. Panchayat elections were brutally postponed for almost two years



in Assam and Manipur, robbing the populace of their fundamental democratic right to representation and halting the flow of vital national money needed for local development.

Similar democratic vacuums occurred in Telangana, where disagreements over reservation policy resulted in the appointment of special officers to replace elected bodies, hence blocking ₹1,514 crore allocated for rural development under the 15th Finance Commission.

In Madhya Pradesh, Panchayat elections were outright cancelled by the State Election Commission due to conflicts surrounding caste-based reservation norms — a decision that starkly illustrates how legal and policy gridlocks can disenfranchise entire rural populations.

These incidents reveal not just administrative failures but a systemic undermining of grassroots democracy, where state Governments and electoral institutions fail to prioritise or preserve the core rights of local self-governance.

These delays, which disproportionately impact marginalised and rural people, are not merely procedural oversights but also deliberate roadblocks that impair local institutions' accountability and halt the pace of progress.

Corruption, Misgovernance, and Judicial Interventions

Financial corruption and governance apathy increase the Panchayati Raj system's defective

nature, with horrifying incidents of misappropriation and administrative negligence spreading throughout states. In the north-western part of India, a former 'sarpanch' plundered ₹79 lakh by fabricating records of infrastructure projects, including non-existent solar lamps and toilets. Similarly, in the tribal belt located in the eastern part of India, a 'Mukhiya' was suspended for corruptly moving public cash into a private account, a clear breach of fiduciary responsibility.

The effects of such financial malfeasance are evident in areas such as a hilly belt located in the northern part of India, where Panchayats refused to repair flood-damaged access roads, leaving villages isolated even during election seasons.

The dissolution of municipal councils in Nagpur, Maharashtra, led to "autopolit governance", where worsening roads and sanitary facilities reflected increased administrative tardiness.

In order to uphold constitutional obligations, courts have had to step in. For example, in Telangana, the judiciary questioned the State Election Commission's passivity, while in Rajasthan, the High Court denounced political interference in Panchayat delimitation and election scheduling.

These actions, while vital, highlight a sobering reality: without fundamental changes to protect local Government from political manipulation and corruption, Panchayati Raj institutions risk becoming mere facades of democracy rather than engines of grassroots empowerment.

The Way Forward: Strengthening Panchayati Raj

Several adjustments are required to revitalise the Panchayat system and achieve the goal of decentralised democracy. First, financial decentralisation must be prioritised, granting Panchayats access to untied funds that can be spent on local objectives. Second, mandatory social audits and regular public disclosures regarding financial spending can increase transparency.

Third, capacity-building initiatives for elected representatives and officials should be implemented to improve governance abilities. Fourth, 'Gram Sabhas' should have the ability to make decisions, approve initiatives, and track progress. Fifth, anti-corruption measures, such as local ombudsman offices and whistleblower protections, must be created to combat financial misuse. Finally, technological integration needs to be expanded to include support for digital infrastructure. These initiatives will ensure that Panchayats progress from symbolic entities to genuine drivers of development and democracy. Despite progressive policies, many states struggle with implementation.

Technology and Decentralised Governance

Technology has the potential to alter local governance. Initiatives such as the Suakati 'Gram Panchayat' in Odisha have shown how e-governance



SAKSHI CHAUDHARY

platforms may digitalise service delivery, making the Government more transparent and responsive. Geo-tagging of assets, mobile monitoring apps, and real-time dashboards are employed across states to track plan development and ensure that benefits reach their intended recipients. These technology solutions can improve transparency, prevent leaks, and provide citizens with information. However, the sustainability of digital governance is dependent on digital literacy, internet availability, and technical support, especially in remote and tribal regions. Simply adopting technology without addressing these issues risks worsening inequities. As a result, integrating technology into Panchayati Raj Institutions must be supported by initiatives to teach members, construct digital infrastructure, and educate citizens on their rights and entitlements.

Reclaiming the Spirit of Grassroots Democracy

The strength of India's democracy lies not just in its Parliament, but also in its villages, towns, and wards, where residents have firsthand experience with governance. Despite legislative initiatives such as the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSa), states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have poor implementation, particularly in tribal areas. The PESA Act (1996) is poorly enforced in Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, because 'Gram Sabhas' lack true authority. Additionally, women's reservations in Haryana frequently result in proxy rule by male relatives. These failures demonstrate a significant disconnect between policy frameworks and their real impact on grassroots empowerment and governance. Furthermore, under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the NFHS-5 (2019-21) stated that many toilets in areas such as Bihar and Rajasthan go unused due to a shortage of water and knowledge. Regardless of its flaws, the Panchayat system remains an important institution for democratic decentralisation. To be truly effective, there must be a genuine commitment to devolution, both financially and administratively. Villages and local Governments should be trusted to create, implement, and oversee development programmes. Only when Panchayats are granted actual power, autonomy, and support can they carry out their constitutional mandate.

Reviving the spirit of ancient local councils with contemporary, efficient, and accountable Panchayats is important for developing a dynamic, inclusive, and participatory democracy. The path forward is to increase decentralisation, embrace transparency, and encourage citizen participation at all levels of Government.

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Fiscal Rifts

At first glance, the proposal to rescind over \$9 billion in US federal spending appears to be a relatively modest budgetary adjustment. In reality, it is a litmus test ~ not just for fiscal discipline, but for the current state of the Republican Party’s cohesion and its evolving relationship with executive power. The Trump administration’s push for this rescissions bill is more about political posture than prudent governance, and it reveals a fault line that may widen as deeper cuts are pursued in future.

The core of the bill targets funding that, while often criticized by conservatives, serves tangible and sometimes life-saving purposes: foreign aid, public broadcasting, refugee programmes, and global health initiatives like PEPFAR. Though these expenditures constitute a small fraction of the federal budget, they represent disproportionately large benefits in global goodwill, public health, and rural infrastructure. Cutting them signals not just a shift in fiscal policy, but a retreat from bipartisan commitments forged over decades. The White House insists this is just the beginning, but symbolic victories often unravel when applied to complex systems. Governance demands more than gestures ~ it requires nuance, especially when lives and livelihoods are at stake. The administration’s method of circumventing the usual 60-vote threshold through the Impoundment Control Act is telling. It prioritises political expediency over deliberative governance. What is more revealing, however, is the reluctance of several Senate Republicans to fall in line. Lawmakers who have traditionally supported public broadcasting, global health aid, or bipartisan appropriations processes now find themselves caught between ideological loyalty and practical governance.

This internal Republican split underscores the limits of symbolic austerity. Legislating cuts to PBS or foreign electric bus projects may play well in certain political circles, but the real-world impact ~ especially on rural communities and global disease prevention ~ cannot be dismissed. Emergency radio broadcasts, refugee resettlement efforts, and epidemic control measures don’t lend themselves to partisan framing quite so easily when their absence begins to bite. Moreover, using rescissions as a tool to renegotiate past bipartisan deals threatens the trust and functionality of the appropriations process itself.

If one side believes the other will claw back agreed-upon funds through procedural shortcuts, the entire premise of compromise erodes. Future budget negotiations could stall, not over ideological disagreement, but over fear of bad faith. In effect, the rescissions bill may succeed in the short term, but it risks long-term institutional damage. More critically, it tests the boundaries of party loyalty and policy coherence within the GOP. Those Republicans who oppose the bill are not merely dissenting; they are trying to preserve a governing framework that prioritises continuity, deliberation, and shared responsibility. If today’s modest rescissions package becomes the precedent for tomorrow’s sweeping cuts, the divide within the party ~ and its governing challenges ~ will only deepen. At some point, symbolism must give way to substance. The Senate, even in a partisan age, must still reckon with that choice.

Turbaned Legacy

Fauja Singh did not just run marathons; he ran against time, against loss, and against the limitations that society ~ and biology ~ impose on age. His death in a tragic hit-and-run at 114 is not merely the passing of a man. It is the closing of a chapter that redefined human endurance and spiritual resilience. Singh’s life was remarkable not because he lived long, but because of how he chose to live in his final decades. In a culture where old age is often treated as a period of withdrawal and quiet decline, Singh took to running at 89 ~ not for medals or glory, but to heal, to remember, and eventually, to inspire.

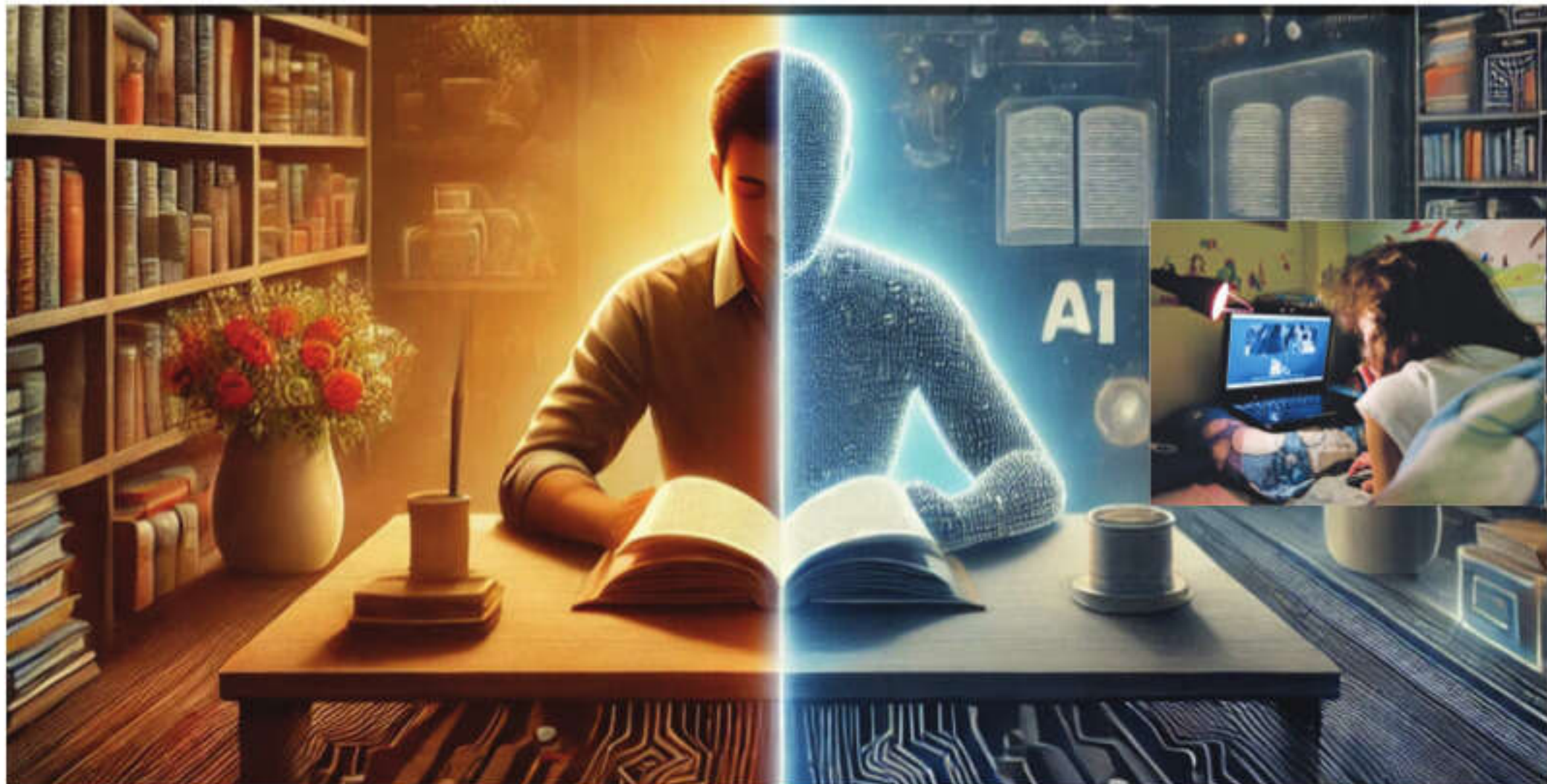
It is easy to romanticise such a journey, but it’s important to recognise the very real pain that drove him to the starting line: the deaths of his wife and younger son, the scars of partition, and the dislocation of migration. Running, for him, was not a sport. It was survival. And survive he did, clocking nine marathons between the ages of 89 and 101, becoming the face of campaigns, the bearer of Olympic torches, and a cultural ambassador who wore his turban not as an identity, but as a quiet assertion of dignity. That he was denied official recognition by record-keeping bodies due to a lack of birth documents is irrelevant to history. Communities don’t remember file numbers ~ they remember impact. Singh’s legacy is not just of broken records, but of barriers broken.

Even as global headlines celebrate athletic youth, Fauja Singh stood as a beacon for a forgotten demographic ~ elderly individuals still capable of growth, grit, and grace under pressure. At a time when India’s elders are often excluded from narratives of aspiration and action, Singh’s example is revolutionary. His life challenges the idea that youth alone defines energy or purpose. Here was a man who proved that the body can be trained, and the spirit rekindled, regardless of age. For the aging millions in India and abroad, he offered more than inspiration ~ he offered a roadmap: eat light, walk long, smile often, and stay rooted in something larger than yourself. We cannot help but feel the bitter irony in his final moments ~ a man who ran across continents laid low by reckless driving in the quiet village where he first learned to walk.

Yet even in death, Singh’s story compels us to rethink public safety, elderly care, and the value we place on our oldest citizens ~ not as burdens, but as torchbearers. Let his passing not be mourned in silence alone. Let it spark policies that make Indian roads safer for all pedestrians, regardless of age. Fauja Singh never wanted to be a hero. But in his quiet discipline, he became one. Not by outrunning others, but by outlasting despair, and turning personal grief into global hope. That is a finish line worth remembering.

New Dark Age?

Today, the age of reason is in danger of shifting backwards. The deluge of information is making us anything but smarter. It is ushering us into a new Dark Age of superficiality and narcissism. Universities are under attack. Our romance with books has faded. With so much stuff on the internet, we are destined to become a species of technological scavenging



At the end of the 20th century, celebrated Colombian writer Gabriel García Marquez made a seminal observation: “Expect nothing from the 21st century; it is the 21st century that expects everything from us.” Marquez was right. The new century promised glorious sunrise, major advances in human civilisation, innovations, and societal progress from the physical to the abstract, and from the digital to the tangible.

We are in the third decadal journey of the 21st century. With degeneration all around, one doesn’t have even a faint hope in what Victor Hugo believed: “even the darkest night will end, and the sun will rise.”

Today, science is slogging, technology is straying into the realm of the unknown and society is in retreat. Nobel laureate Venki Ramakrishnan believes that we are living in a profound-ly anti-science moment.

The age of theory is drawing to its end. We have entered a phase of “post-theory science.” How can science flourish when denial, distraction, accusation and lies are part of the new game in town? Doubt is essential for science.

We are in the belly of the beast. Technology is helping the believers of neo-science to perpetuate their myths. Thanks to the ‘smartphonification’ of life, we now have more memories in our pockets and less in our heads. We have entered a phase of unreason.

We may not have entered the age of anti-Enlightenment. But we see the core values of the Enlightenment fading. Critical thinking, empirical rigour and a spirit of debate and discussion are losing ground.

Today, secular values are ridiculed. The modern world, as Jurgen Habermas had said was “distinguished from the old by

the fact that it opened itself to the future.” With barbarians at the gate, modernity has become shambolic.

Democracy is on decline. In a large number of countries, there has been a merger of the nation with the state in which the citizen has become a glorified employee. We are moving towards a dystopian future. A tiny tech elite is operating the machinery of civilisation while the rest is becoming a mute spectator.

Internet has given us a wealth of information but the majority suffers from information poverty. Collapse of public debate is the result of digital distraction. As an analyst argues, instead of following Rene Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am”, we tend to adhere to “someone else thinks for me, therefore he/she is.”

Digitisation has transformed governance in India. We are now the third largest digitised country in the world behind US and China. But India’s problems lie elsewhere. Tagore’s rebuke remains relevant today. He said that the imposing “tower of misery” which rests in the “heart of India” has its sole foundation “in the absence of education.”

Humanity faces major challenges. Yuval Noah Harari talks of 21 lessons that we must wrestle with including nuclear war, climate challenge and technological-biological disruption. He also poses the question how we stay relevant in an AI-driven world.

Big data is threatening the foundations of liberty and privacy. Harari also foresees “digi-

tal dictatorships” where governments track and control people using AI, stopping dissent.

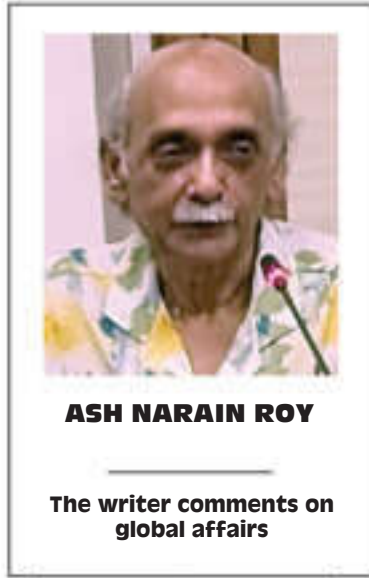
The Dark Age began with barbarians driving Roman civilisation from Europe. The label “Dark Ages” was more a figure of speech than a fair judgement, which showed a desire to distance from the medieval past and was repeated over time until it became part of public thinking.

Today, the age of reason is in danger of shifting backwards. The deluge of information is making us anything but smarter. It is ushering us into a new Dark Age of superficiality and narcissism. Universities are under attack. Our romance with books has faded. With so much stuff on the internet, we are destined to become a species of technological scavenging.

The 21st century is fast becoming a “New Dark Age.” Canadian author George Gae describes the new dark age as “the age of cacophonous technology, of information overload, of toxic clamour and attention-fuelled barbarism.”

We are losing trust in science but there is a growing trust in tech emperors. It is a new romanticism wonder! Big tech Czars have their own agendas. The new plutocrats of Silicon Valley are like predatory wolves. Innovation is not always progressive. It is often at the service of the plutocrats.

Another worry is the geopolitics of big tech. High tech has come to signify high politics, too. Today, digital and tech advancements are geopolitical issues of the highest order. As



ASH NARAIN ROY

The writer comments on global affairs

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A teacher's touch

Sir, Prof. Anshuman Kar’s article “Learning from AI” is an engaging read. When undergraduate or postgraduate students face difficulties with certain texts, concepts, assignments, tests, projects and many other academic issues, AI helps or guides them like a teacher. There is no doubt about its efficiency. I do agree there with Mr Sanjeev Sanyal. But it has, as Prof Kar observes, its own limitations. Machines cannot replace humans where the warmth of human relationships matter.

A student needs knowledge. The process of acquiring or constructing knowledge involves intellectual exercise. AI can stimulate a student’s intellect which



is a matter of the head or the brain. Intellect is the instrument of knowledge.

But there is another aspect to consider, i.e. his affective domain. The heart is the instrument of inspiration. When the head and the heart combine great things happen. It is the actual teacher alone who can reach out to his students through his heart. He understands their strengths and weaknesses better than AI. His voice of wisdom and warmth of heart strengthen their minds to overcome the challenges of their academic life.

Swami Vivekananda said, “We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s feet.”

This highest aim of education no machine alone can fulfil. For this, a physical classroom with the instrument of inspiration, i.e. an actual warm-hearted teacher is indispensable.

Had I not got Alok Biswas, a warm-hearted erudite teacher, as my friend, philosopher and gui-

de, it would not have been possible for me to embark on a teaching career with English as my subject giving up a lucrative Central government job at a crucial moment of my life.

However, in the age of science and technology, teachers must be techno-savvy to serve their students more efficiently.

Yours, etc., Subir Kr Saha
Nadia, 18 July.

ADRIFT

Sir, Apropos “Pressure by design” published today, six months into the Oval office, President Trump remains no less enigmatic. His second term is proving even more vivid than the first, as he juggles with too many irons in the fire, each with flourish and drama. Be it calling on Kim Jong-un, brokering the Abraham Accords in the Middle East or slapping tariffs on China, his Plan A was bold, attention-grabbing, and disruptive by design.

Not that Trump was sanguine on the prognosis of such unprecedented first moves. Even as the rest of the world attempts to untangle the knots, he adds some more, following neither pattern nor predictability.

GREAT EFFORT

Sir, When even the Indian Government has informed the Supreme Court that there was nothing more it could do to save the life of Nimisha Priya, who was to be hanged today in Yemen for killing her business partner, it has come as a great relief to all that her hanging has been postponed because of the efforts of the 94-year-old Kanthapuram A P Aboobakar Musliar, Grand Mufti of India who had pleaded with Muslim leaders in Yemen to stall Nimisha’s hanging.

Though what Aboobakar Musliar has achieved is great, particularly when even our government had given up hope, he has been very humble in saying that he did so giving priority to humanity and compassion towards others, the primary teachings of Islam.

This is only a temporary reprieve for Nimisha. Now the ball is back in India’s court to make it a permanent relief through its diplomatic channels.

Yours, etc., Tharcus S. Fernando,
Chennai, 16 July.

What is getting worryingly evident is that either his Plan B is too sketchy and tentative or worse, that there is none. His China trade policy saw tariffs imposed swiftly.

But for the vague and hesitant attempts at recalibration of supply chains, no definitive long term objectives or measured follow-up has emerged.

The absence of a Plan B or the willingness to craft one ren-

Hà Nội's green future is close, but it needs a bold plan

I remember vividly my childhood journeys on the back-seat of my parents’ bicycles, surrounded by dozens of bicycles riding together in the busy streets of Hà Nội. Motorcycles cost a fortune back then, and it was not until 2000 that we got our first motorbike, a Chinese-manufactured bike in the form of the Honda Dream, or as the Vietnamese would call them, ‘Dream Tàu’. Cars were even rarer and were perceived as a symbol of wealth; you could only see one or two parked in the streets during the 90s. My parents, on the other hand, have vivid memories of a public transport vehicle called ‘Tàu i n, which literally means ‘electric trains’, but is more accurately translated as ‘trams’.

The trams connected the city centre to the outer rings of the capital, all the way to places like B ch Mai and Hà ồng. As my dad was then living near B ch Mai, and my mom lived in the city centre, the tram line was the most effective mode of transportation when they were dating.

And then all of that rapidly changed as Viet Nam developed. As the economy progressed, trams were discontinued and replaced by buses. Motorcycles started popping up like crazy. By the time I was in high school, even some of my peers had their own mope-

Việt Nam News

ds. And with entry-level affordable cars available by 1998, owning an automobile was no longer a wild dream for most Vietnamese families. But there is one more memory from my childhood that many others brought up in the Hà Nội of the 90s will also recall: the blue skies on summer days.

As we progressed into the 2010s and the 2020s, these days became rarer, and grey and white became more dominant. After a mild pneumonia sent me into the hospital last June, my doctors recommended that I took up a light sport for lung recovery. I eventually chose cycling.

My most common cycling route is described by many as ‘bizarre’: I tend to travel in rush hour from the office in the city centre down Nguy n Trãi Road all the way to the outskirts of the city and then back again to the Old Quarter.

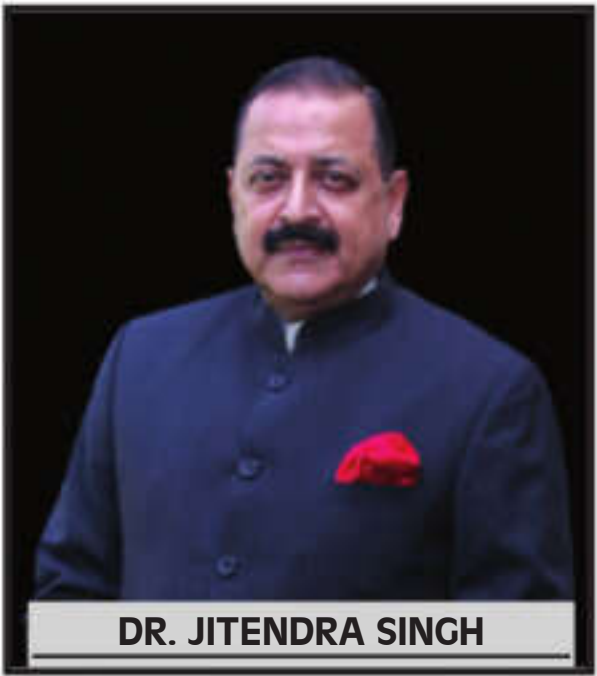
But through that route I was able to see the reality of air pollution and traffic congestion in Hà Noi. A chaotic traffic game of fill-in-the-blanks.

The smell of gasoline and sometimes a dash of black fumes from buses. All this as residents rush to get home as soon as possible ~ and it gets even worse on rainy days. A summer sunset on my cycling route is few and far between, but a sight to behold.

A study by the World Bank in 2020 suggested that 40 per cent of Hà Noi’s population is affected by a level of PM2.5 dust particles at 45 micrograms per cubic metre, five times higher than World Health Organization (WHO) standards.



A space journey to broaden a common man's horizons



It began with a crack - barely visible, tucked away in the weld joint of a pressure feedline on a Falcon-9 booster. A minor flaw, perhaps, in the grand machinery of spaceflight. But for India, it was a moment of reckoning. Our scientists at ISRO, vigilant and uncompromising, demanded answers. They insisted on repairs, not workarounds. And in doing so, they didn't just protect a mission - they safeguarded a dream.

That dream took flight on 25 June when Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla, an Indian Air Force officer and ISRO-trained astronaut, soared into orbit aboard the Axiom-4 mission.

Docking with the International Space Station (ISS) a day later, he became the face of India's next great leap - not just into space, but into the future of human-centric science, medicine, and technology.

This wasn't a ceremonial voyage. It was a scientific crusade. Shukla carried with him seven microgravity experiments, each meticulously designed by Indian researchers to answer questions that matter - not just to astronauts, but to farmers, doctors, engineers, and students across our nation.

Consider the sprouting of methi and moong seeds in space. It sounds simple, almost poetic. But its implications are profound. In the confined quarters of a spacecraft, where every gram of nutrition counts, understanding how Indian crops behave in microgravity could redefine crew diets for long-duration missions. More importantly, it could inspire innovations in vertical farming and hydroponics back on Earth, especially in regions battling soil degradation and water scarcity.

Then there's the study of Indian tardigrades - microscopic creatures known for their resilience. Revived from dormancy, these tiny organisms were observed for survival, reproduction, and genetic expression in space.

Their behavior could unlock secrets of biological endurance, informing everything from vaccine development to climate-resilient agriculture.

Shukla also conducted a myogenesis experiment, examining how human muscle cells respond to space conditions and nutritional supplements. The findings could revolutionize treatments for muscular degeneration, benefiting not just astronauts but elderly patients and those recovering from trauma.

Other ongoing experiments include the growth of cyanobacteria - organisms that could one day support life-support systems in space - and the passive exposure of Indian crop seeds like rice, cowpea, sesame, brinjal, and tomato to microgravity. These seeds will be cultivated across generations to study inherited changes, potentially leading to new crop varieties adapted to extreme environments.

Even human-machine interaction was put to the test. Shukla performed web-based assessments to understand how microgravity affects our ability to interact with electronic displays - a crucial insight for designing intuitive interfaces for future space stations and spacecraft.

These are not abstract pursuits. They are deeply rooted in the Indian

ethos of science for society. Every experiment aboard Axiom-4 carries the potential to touch lives on Earth - whether it's a tribal farmer in Odisha, a schoolchild in Shillong, or a front-line doctor in Ladakh.

The mission also showcased India's growing stature in global space diplomacy. Our insistence on safety protocols led SpaceX to identify and repair a potentially catastrophic flaw. Our collaboration with NASA, ESA, and Axiom Space reflects a new era of equal partnership, where India is not just participating but leading.

Throughout the mission, ISRO's flight surgeons monitored Shukla's health, ensuring his physical and psychological well-being. He remained in high spirits, interacting with students across India - from Lucknow to Trivandrum, Bangalore to Shillong - igniting young minds with the possibilities of science and space.

Shukla has since returned, and he brings back with him a rich wealth of data, samples, and insights that will fuel India's upcoming Gaganyaan mission and the Bharat Space Station.

This is not just about one astronaut. It's about a nation rising. It's about transforming space science into public service. It's about ensuring that the benefits of microgravity research reach every corner of India



- from satellite internet in remote villages to regenerative medicine in urban hospitals.

In the words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Gaganyaan is about placing an Indian in space by Indian means. Axiom-4 is the rehearsal, the proof of concept, the bridge between aspiration and achievement.

And as we look up at the stars, we do so not with awe alone, but with intent. Because for India, the sky is not the limit - it is the laboratory.

(The writer is Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science and Technology; Earth Sciences and Minister of State for PMO, Department of Atomic Energy, Department of Space, Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions.)

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'We will nurture excellence'

IIT-Ropar director Professor Rajeev Ahuja is one of the most highly cited researchers as well as one of the top materials scientists in Sweden and India. He is a Professor of Computational Materials Science primarily researching batteries, hydrogen storage and production, sensors, and high-pressure physics. He previously worked as Professor at Uppsala University in Sweden for more than 30 years. He also has more than 1,000 scientific publications in high-ranking international journals accumulating more than 41,000 citations.

Professor Ahuja talks about the growth trajectory of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), the societal pressure faced by engineering students as well as his interesting research projects in an interaction with Parvinder Sandhu of The Statesman.

Q. Since your appointment as Director in April 2021, what have been your key priorities in steering IIT Ropar's growth?

A: My focus has been on transforming the institute into a globally recognized center for excellence in education, research, and innovation. We have strengthened our research ecosystem with major initiatives like ANNAM.AI and the PAIR grant, expanded industry linkages through collaborations with defence bodies and regulatory agencies, and launched forward-looking programmes such as a universal AI minor and new undergraduate degrees in Digital Agriculture and IC Technology.

These efforts are backed by a strong commitment to inclusivity, global engagement, and societal impact - reflected in our rise in international rankings and our initiatives in sustainability, community outreach, and regional development. Our journey has been one of purposeful growth, with education and research at its heart, serving both national needs and global challenges.

Q. How do you envision IIT Ropar's role in India's evolving higher education landscape, especially among the newer IITs?

A: IIT Ropar sees itself as more than just an institute and we want

to become a transformative force in changing India's higher education scenario. Even though we are striving towards improving our infrastructure and rankings, we are equally committed to innovation, inclusivity, and bringing a meaningful social impact.

Based in Punjab, we have an edge to address regional challenges pertaining to agriculture, defence, and water management. Initiatives like ANNAM.AI reflect this mission. As a young IIT, we do not see or present ourselves as competitors. Instead, we focus on building bonds through collaboration with other institutions, industry, and society at large.

IIT Ropar intends to be a light-house institution that influences not just academic results but also national progress. This is being done through the creation of a model of interdisciplinary learning which empowers students from all backgrounds.

Q. Can you share insights into the interdisciplinary research areas that IIT Ropar is focusing on such as renewable energy and artificial intelligence?

A: Our vision focuses on using interdisciplinary research to tackle real-world problems, whether they are global issues or local challenges. We bring together engineering, science, and social relevance to drive innovation, emphasizing fields like artificial intelligence, clean energy, and rural development.

IIT Ropar has a dedicated School of AI and Data Engineering that advances research in areas like deep learning and interpretable AI. We also have the Indo-Taiwan Joint Research Centre to boost global collaboration. In clean energy, our teams are developing next-generation technologies such as hydrogen storage and battery innovation, supported by top-tier research in materials science.

Our work in agriculture and water connects closely with the region. We use AI and IoT to address stubble burning, evaluate water quality, and promote smart farming. In healthcare too, we collaborate with institutions like PGIMER and IIT Mandi to create affordable technologies that cater to country-specific needs.

We are also establishing a new Centre for Micro and Nano Fabrication to aid innovative research in sensors and devices. Our efforts are supported by our Central Research Facility, which gathers experts from various fields

Q. Could you elaborate on the significance of the DST Technology Innovation Hub at IIT Ropar and its impact on agriculture and water technologies?

A: The Department of Science and Technology-supported Technology Innovation Hub at IIT Ropar, AWaDH (Agriculture and Water Technology Development Hub), demonstrates our strong conviction that deep-tech innovation can transform lives, particularly in agriculture and water management, two areas that have a direct impact on millions of people around the globe.

Established under the National Mission on Interdisciplinary Cyber-Physical Systems, AWaDH brings modern tools like AI and IoT to farmers and rural communities, improving agriculture by making it more efficient, sustainable, and data-driven.

We have developed over 70 breakthrough technologies, from smart irrigation systems to nano-bubble oxygenation, and many have already been commercialized in various states. But AWaDH is more than a research hub. It has nurtured over 150 startups, offering incubation, mentorship, and funding. More than 3,000 professionals have been trained in cyber-physical systems, and the hub has contributed to over 8000 job opportunities. This showcases how innovation can truly empower people from the ground up.

Our work also covers water quality, stubble management, and soil health, key areas in the field of agriculture today. At IIT Ropar, we create solutions that have both environmental and social benefits. It has generated over 150 publications, 20+ patents, and 9 industrial designs, AWaDH has laid the groundwork for our new AI Centre of Excellence.

Q. In recent discussions, you have highlighted the societal pressures faced by students. What initia-

tives has IIT Ropar undertaken to support student mental health and well-being?

A: At IIT Ropar, student mental health and well-being are treated as foundational pillars of our academic ecosystem - not as an afterthought. Recognizing the societal pressures and emotional challenges students face, we have implemented a multi-layered support system that is proactive, compassionate, and inclusive.

Through the Snehlita Wellbeing Cell, students, faculty, and staff can access confidential counseling from trained psychologists, along with a peer buddy system. We emphasize early detection, with faculty and mentors watching for signs of distress. We are also developing digital platforms to ensure 24/7 access to help.

We hold regular workshops on emotional resilience and mental health awareness, aimed at students, faculty, and caretakers, to promote a campus culture built on empathy. We are working with organizations like NIMHANS and AIIMS to strengthen our approach with evidence-based practices.

Our initiatives are designed to assure students that IIT Ropar is not just an academic institution—it is a community that genuinely cares for their well-being, growth, and happiness.

Q. How does IIT Ropar integrate practical learning and industry exposure into its curriculum to prepare students for real-world challenges?

A: At IIT Ropar, practical learning and industry exposure are seamlessly woven into the academic fabric to ensure students are equipped for real-world challenges. Our curriculum is designed not just to impart theoretical knowledge, but to cultivate hands-on skills, entrepreneurial thinking, and professional readiness.

Hands-on learning is at the heart of our academic approach. Every programme integrates lab work, design projects, and capstone experiences that reflect real-world problem-solving and industry practices. We offer industry-certified courses with partners like NIELIT and TCS iON in areas such as AI and cybersecurity, ensuring students gain practical skills through live projects and mentorship.



Structured internships with organizations like DRDO, CSIR, and leading startups expose students to cutting-edge technologies and professional settings. Through our incubators—TBI and iHub-AWaDH—students tackle real-world issues in agriculture and sustainability, with many turning ideas into startups.

Q. What are your strategic goals for IIT Ropar in the next five years, particularly concerning research output and global rankings?

A: Over the next five years, our strategic goals are anchored in elevating research output, enhancing global rankings, and deepening our societal impact. These goals reflect our commitment to becoming a globally recognized institution that leads with innovation, inclusivity, and excellence.

We aim to double our annual research publications, with a strong emphasis on high-impact journals and interdisciplinary collaborations. Our focus will be on frontier areas such as quantum technologies, hydrogen energy, AI for social good, and sustainable agriculture.

Building on our recent ascent to the 12th position in the IIRF 2025 rankings, we plan to further improve our standing in global indices. Our five-year roadmap is not just about numbers - it's about nurturing a culture of excellence, curiosity, and impact. IIT Ropar will continue to be a lighthouse institution, illuminating pathways for transformative education and research.

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

A FEW more cases like those put up by the Bengal Iron Company and the iron merchants of Bombay, and the Government of India will have to consider the appointment of a Commission to report upon the question of restoring free trade. Protection is like a backfiring car—you never know when it is going to kick. The Tariff Board was piquantly reminded of this tendency on Friday by Mr. G. B. Trivedi, a Bombay iron merchant, who emphasized the backfire put up by the Indian consumers of protected steel. Protection increased the price by 30 or 40 per cent and the "stockists" proceeded, in the usual way of business, to pass on the extra burden to the consumer. Unfortunately for them the consumer either could not or would not pay the full protected price, and the merchants were therefore compelled to supply him for less than they had actually paid themselves. Calculations, as Mr. Trivedi put it, had been upset. So, one gathers, were the iron merchants.

NEWS ITEMS

PRESS ARTICLES

BAN ON BRITISH DOCTORS REMOVED

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)
LONDON, JULY 18.

The British Medical Association has decided to lift the ban that has hitherto forbidden doctors to contribute articles to the newspapers under their own names.

The British press describes this decision as a notable landmark in the progress of doctors, denoting their emancipation from the old-time exclusion and aloofness.

The Association requests those of its members who may write for the lay press to refrain from publishing their addresses or unnecessarily displaying their medical qualifications or appointments.

TEMPLE WORSHIP

PRIVY COUNCIL VERDICT FOR RESPONDENT

LONDON, JULY 17.
THE Privy Council to-day resumed the hearing of the appeal in the matter of a person, stated not to be a Parsee, worshipping in the Parsee fire temple at Rangoon.

Mr. Dunne, for the appellant, said that they objected to worshipping in the presence of persons of another race, and also objected to a person not a Parsee, being a Zoroastrian. They were of opinion that purity of blood was the first consideration.

Replying to Lord Blanesburgh, Counsel said that there could not be a genuine Zoroastrian who was not a Parsee. Not for 1,000 years, until the recent case of a wealthy French lady in Bombay, had such a question of conversion been raised. The appellants held that a man could not be a convert to their religion.

Lord Phillimore said that conversion to a religion must be a possibility, otherwise the initiation ceremonies would be meaningless. Mr. Dunne had quoted a Bombay judge in a similar action, who asserted that the Parsees were ready to overlook immorality and anything but alienage. They would not admit the purest and most blameless foreigner, but were willing to admit all the illegitimate children of Parsee parents. That was not religion, it was essentially irreligious, it was pure unadulterated, oriental caste.

At the conclusion of the appellant's case, Lord Phillimore said that Their Lordships accepted the findings of the court below that Bella's mother was a Parsee, and that any ceremonies necessary to make her a Zoroastrian had been carried out. Therefore, she could be taken to be a Zoroastrian.

All that the respondent's counsel had to do was to argue the remaining points. The case was adjourned.—Reuter.

"SERIOUS SITUATION"

RIFF PROPAGANDA BEHIND FRENCH LINES

("TIMES" SPECIAL SERVICE).
LONDON, JULY

The Times Paris correspondent says that, according to the latest news from Morocco the situation remains serious on account of the efforts which the Riffs are making to induce the tribes behind the French lines to revolt.

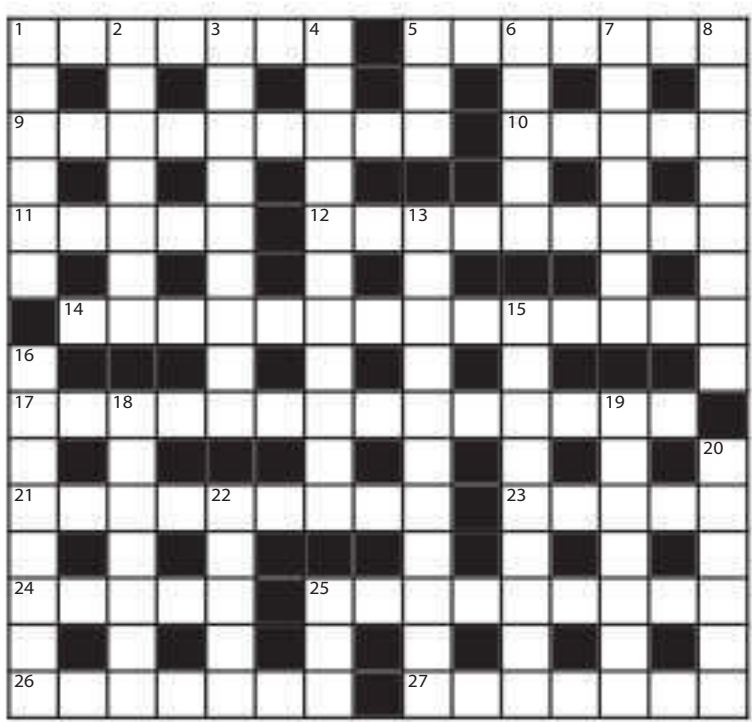
Small detachments continue their infiltrating and working on the tribes by means of threats and propaganda. Simultaneously bodies of the enemy are concentrating with the evident intention of trying out the road from Fez to Ainaicha by which important French posts are supplied and relieved.

The French are counter-patrolling the territory of the hesitating tribes and dispersing enemy concentrations by means of aeroplanes.

India was represented by Mrs. Sen, who gave a comprehensive history of the women's movement in India and also by Atya Begum, who asserted that the position of Eastern women was deliberately misunderstood by Westerners. She quoted instances of heroism and of the education of women dating back fifteen hundred years, and added that it was only within the past two hundred years, when Western civilization dominated Eastern, that the position was different.

CROSSWORD

NO-293198



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



ACROSS

- Whale to blow endlessly, about to rise? (7)
- Demand navy to attend old Italian port (7)
- A great many you once observed beside coastal feature (9)
- Players welcoming a very dab hand (5)
- Time to return, pursued by hot woman (5)
- Fellow arrives beside a large thicket of trees (9)

- Tackling corruption with his band, reversing poor showing in Government (7-7)
- Male in pursuit of fancy electric tools - something one has to have? (10,4)
- Small second soccer team around end of October regressed, becoming flabby (9)
- Swedish inventor's book appearing in festive season (5)
- Former Hollywood actor appearing in bizarre event (5)

- End of game sees friend following regular pattern (9)
- Mount finale of festival, blocking version of my opus (7)
- Attempt to secure outbuilding that's ditched by leather works (7)
- Down
1 Understand good parent avoids force (6)
2 A heavy arrow mostly is hard to stop (7)

- Quickly suggest reduced hydrogen in sample (4-5)
- Revolutionary counts least in revolution? (11)
- Something identifying sibling, primarily (3)
- Proposition from Frenchman, then married in the country (5)
- Othello's setback mostly provided by lago, principally (7)
- Studying wine, upset one over record year (8)

- A conifer ultimately carried aroma resembling a tree (11)
- Paper describing the leek? (9)
- No time at all to get wind of wild film idea (8)
- Clear criminal over US city crime (7)
- Accept support after not-so-brief space (7)
- Agent, having secured shelter, ready to go out? (6)
- Carefully observe confirmation of a palindrome? (3,2)
- Reduction in price for salad vegetable (3)

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



The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A SUPPLY SHOCK

Export restrictions imposed by China should lead to a rethink on fertiliser pricing

A GOOD MONSOON, with India overall receiving 8.4 per cent above average rain for the current season from June 1 till July 18, has led to brisk sowing of most *kharif* crops. The comfortable water situation — rainfall was a whopping 106.4 per cent surplus even in May due to the monsoon arriving eight days before schedule — has, however, had a flip side: Reports from the ground suggest shortages of both di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and urea fertilisers. This is also reflected in stocks of DAP, at 1.3 million tonnes (MT) as on June 30, being lower than the 1.9 MT for the same date in 2024. Urea stocks, too, at 6.1 MT, have been below the corresponding year-ago level of 10.3 MT. Lower stocks relative to higher demand from farmers, courtesy of the monsoon's early onset and good rains thereafter conducive to sowing, have created supply shortfalls and long queues at many distribution centres.

It's, however, not just the monsoon-induced demand. No less significant is the China factor. In 2023-24, China supplied 2.3 mt out of the total 5.6 mt DAP imported by India. It also accounted for 2.1 mt out of India's 8 mt of urea imports. But in the following financial year, imports of both DAP and urea fell to 4.6 mt and 6.9 mt, with those from China falling even more to 0.8 mt and 0.1 mt respectively. Simply put, China's unpredictable export restrictions have caused a global supply squeeze not only in rare earth elements and magnets used in electric vehicles and consumer electronic devices, but also nitrogenous and phosphatic fertilisers that are essential for crop growth and development. And these hurt India, which imports fertilisers in either finished form or as intermediates or raw materials for domestic manufacture: The country has hardly any mineable rock phosphate or potash reserves, while more than half of its natural gas, the main feedstock in urea, is imported.

If import dependence is a given, the policy response, too, must adjust to that reality. Unfortunately, that has not been the case with fertilisers, where political considerations have engendered the most perverse outcomes. The underpricing of urea and DAP — farmers are paying for the former almost the same as what they were some 12 years ago — has resulted in their over-application. Also, it has hindered the introduction of new products that allow the same nutrients to be better absorbed by the plants and converted into biomass (yield) or are customised to meet the specific requirements of a crop, soil type and local climate. Compare this with the increasing adoption of electric vehicles, solar pumps and rooftop panels: Would this have been possible had petrol and diesel remained super-subsidised? That lesson is as relevant for fertilisers. The China supply shock presents an opportunity to learn and reform.

UPSC'S HELPING HAND

Initiative to help those who can't make it to government services find jobs is welcome. Labour market needs more reforms

EVERY YEAR, LAKHS of people prepare for and sit the Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination. In 2024, for instance, 9.9 lakh had applied for the examination conducted on June 16. Of these, 5.8 lakh appeared for the examination. However, of all those who appeared, only 14,627 candidates qualified for the written (main) examination, of which just 1,009 were recommended by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) for appointment to the services. The lakhs who don't make the list each year either opt for another attempt — in the general category, candidates have six attempts — or start their professional life, often belatedly. There are several challenges posed by a late entry into the job market. Some of the candidates have competition from younger counterparts and the lack of work experience makes their predicament even more difficult. The spin-offs on lifetime earnings are not difficult to gauge, especially because many end up employed in occupations that are either not in line with their qualifications or possibly at junior levels. An initiative by the UPSC is now providing pathways to the unsuccessful candidates for securing gainful employment.

Under the Public Disclosure Scheme, called PRATIBHA Setu now, the Commission has started publicly disclosing information on the non-recommended, willing candidates of the exams it conducts. The UPSC conducts several exams every year — some of the examinations, other than the Civil Services Examination, included under this scheme are the Indian Forest Service Examination, the Indian Economic Service/Indian Statistical Service Examination, and the Combined Medical Services Examination. The non-recommended candidates are those "who qualify the written examinations but are not recommended after the interview". The portal provides information on these candidates. According to a report in this newspaper, it also provides subject- and discipline-wise search facilities to organisations, enabling them to pick out candidates who meet their requirements. By doing so, this facility is helping match candidates available in the labour market with prospective employers.

Initially, this scheme — it was launched in 2018 — had little success in placing candidates in government organisations and public sector entities, as per a report in this paper. Extending it now to the private sector helps cast a wider net, increasing the odds of the candidates being absorbed. Prospective employers now include PSUs, autonomous government organisations and private entities. This is indeed a welcome step. However, the problems in the labour markets in India require deeper and far-reaching policy changes.

FOR A SACK OF FLOUR

In the hungriest place on Earth, a writer offers his library in exchange for food

A SENTENCE IS not a loaf of bread, releasing steam as it is torn apart and dipped into fresh olive oil and zaatar. A beautiful metaphor offers little where the fragrance of a fresh meal is in danger of becoming a memory, and even the coldest can of beans does more for a hungry stomach than any word in any language can. And so, Omar Hamad — pharmacist, tailor, writer and eyewitness to the death and starvation in Gaza — shares an appeal on social media, offering his library in exchange for a sack of flour.

Because what place do books have in a land where access to food is now wielded like a weapon? "I once plucked roses from language," Hamad recalls in a short essay on LitHub. But even for a writer, books can qualify as a necessity only when the sharp edge of hunger is sheathed — not when there are mouths to feed, wounds to salve, bodies to count. Twenty-one months of conflict have made Gaza, as United Nations officials have reported, "the hungriest place on Earth". From rice to lentils to baby formula, even the most staple of foods have been made scarce by Israeli blockades and reports emerge every day of desperate, hungry people being crushed to death by others who are just as famished and just as desperate, begging for relief at aid hubs.

This is the double tragedy of Gaza where, for millennia, olive trees and poetry grew in equal profusion. Literature may be immortal, but for an entire population that faces starvation, books, too, have been reduced to mere possessions, emergency currency to be exchanged for food. The cultural devastation of Gaza since October 2023 is heartbreaking, with libraries, museums and ancient cultural sites destroyed by bombing. But as hunger stalks through the Strip, there will come a time when the world must reckon with a greater, incalculable loss.



SUJAN R CHINOY

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN India-China relations, including high-level meetings, suggest that ties are on the mend after prolonged estrangement caused by the bloodletting at Galwan in 2020. The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping at the 16th BRICS summit at Kazan on October 23, 2024, gave new direction to ties.

The resumption of patrolling and grazing activities in eastern Ladakh at the remaining friction points paved the way for disengagement. During recent visits to China for SCO meetings, both Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar have spoken of the need for early de-escalation in the border areas to facilitate normalisation of ties.

The resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra this year after a gap of five years has been well-received across India. Yet several key issues remain to be addressed, such as direct flights, stationing of journalists, business visas and the issue of upper riparian river waters data. Initial statements from China after the April 22 terrorist attack in Pahalgam had disappointed India. At the SCO defence ministers' forum in June, Rajnath Singh held firm in rejecting any document that failed to condemn cross-border terrorism. In a positive turnaround, the BRICS Joint Declaration issued following the summit meeting in Brazil, attended by PM Modi, specifically condemns the terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir. It censures terrorism, rejects safe havens and calls out the double standards in countering terrorism.

This is the first time that a BRICS statement has specifically condemned any terrorist attack in J&K. This vindicates Modi's proactive stance on combating terrorism as well as the dispatching of all-party delegations to sensitise key nations about Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and Operation Sindoor. It should be recalled that the horrendous 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack had failed to find a place in the then BRIC Countries' Leaders Joint Statement the following year. There was only a generic condemnation of "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations". It was in the BRICS Leaders Declaration of September 2017 that mention was made of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad for the first time.

This shows that India and China can reach

Perceptions drive India-China relations. Beijing must not breach Delhi's red lines if ties are to improve

Equality and mutual respect should form the bedrock of bilateral relations. Respect for core concerns cannot be one-sided. China frequently seeks reaffirmation by India of the One China principle with regard to Taiwan and Tibet. The presence of the Dalai Lama in India and the succession question are viewed by Beijing as sensitive issues. Yet, Beijing has failed to reciprocate on India's core interests, whether on Jammu & Kashmir or its nexus with Pakistan.

a consensus on terrorism as part of a broader multilateral context. It may instil confidence at the bilateral level. In the past, China has placed technical blocks on listing Pakistan-based terrorists at the UN. However, the forthcoming SCO summit declaration may not reflect the BRICS formula on terrorism, given Pakistan's membership of the grouping.

Going by the statements made by the Indian leadership in recent months, it is evident that peace and tranquillity on the border remain integral to the normalisation of ties. It took years to rebuild ties after the border war in 1962. Subsequent developments, unfortunately, belied early hopes of forging a mutually beneficial trade and economic partnership or maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas. Frequent tensions have only served to reinforce negative perceptions of one another.

In recent years, the adverse balance of trade with China and the lack of reciprocal market access have shaped public and political opinion in India. Fresh concerns have recently arisen over restrictions placed by China on the export of rare earth magnets for EVs to India, wind turbines and electronics, besides tunnel boring machines and certain high-value fertilisers.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Communist Party of China (CPC) had a jaundiced view of India. Jawaharlal Nehru was maligne as an "imperial lackey". China failed to appreciate India's civilisational ethos and the value attached to peace and non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi's pacifist teachings stood in sharp contrast to Mao Zedong's advocacy of class struggle and violent means to bring about change. The CPC's Marxist lens, unfortunately, disregarded the teachings of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, which were part of China's heritage. They provided a better civilisational connect with India.

Even today, Chinese assessments betray deep suspicion about India's ties with the US. Beijing views the Quad as an "exclusive clique" that seeks to contain China. Recently, China convened a trilateral meeting with Pakistan and Bangladesh during the China-South Asia Cooperation Forum in Kunming. China's expanding footprint in South Asia lacks trans-

parency and plays a role in widening the existing fault lines.

China's "all-weather friendship" with Pakistan has soured bilateral ties with India. The strategic cooperation with Pakistan, including in the defence and nuclear fields, is a case in point. As Operation Sindoor unfolded, Chinese analysts undertook misinformation campaigns to question India's military success and cast aspersions on its equipment and tactics.

India's non-participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Beijing's three Global Initiatives is for a valid reason. The CPEC, a flagship project of the BRI, traverses Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and violates India's sovereignty. Lack of consultation and transparency in regard to China's growing presence in the region, including the Indian Ocean, is cause enough for misgivings.

Equality and mutual respect should form the bedrock of bilateral relations. Respect for core concerns cannot be one-sided. China frequently seeks reaffirmation from India of the One China principle with regard to Taiwan and Tibet. The presence of the Dalai Lama in India and the succession question are viewed by Beijing as sensitive issues. Yet, Beijing has failed to reciprocate on India's core interests, whether on Jammu & Kashmir or its nexus with Pakistan.

On the question of equality, it is noteworthy that China considered itself an equal of the US in the 1950s and 1960s at a time when the Chinese economy was but a fraction of what it is today. The moot question is whether China is willing to follow the same logic today in dealing with others, regardless of asymmetries in power.

Perceptions matter. They play a major role in India-China relations. The positive signs in India-China relations are encouraging. The deep deficit of trust, however, calls for sustained efforts. The two sides must move forward with realistic expectations. The road ahead is arduous. Yet, forging a stable and co-operative relationship between the two Asian neighbours is a goal worth pursuing.

The writer is a former ambassador and director general of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Views are personal

AN INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL

In Balasore sexual harassment case, a failure of enforcement, empathy and ethics



PINKY ANAND

IT HAS HAPPENED again. This time, in the quiet district of Balasore, Odisha. A 19-year-old woman, a BED student, set herself on fire in the college hostel. She battled for almost three days with 90 per cent burns. She did not survive. Yet again, we are left with the smouldering remains of our conscience.

The student had allegedly been sexually harassed by a professor, also the head of the department she was affiliated to. A man in authority, trusted to lead and protect young women aspiring to educate others, instead allegedly abused his position of power. The survivor filed a complaint, her statement recorded on her hospital bed, but justice didn't come knocking. At least not fast enough. Not with the force it should have. As of now, the principal has been arrested and the college authorities have been suspended. But all this happened after she was gone.

Every time a woman speaks out against sexual harassment, she sets herself up for more than just legal battle. She exposes herself to ridicule, character assassination, silence from the institution, and a burden of proof that is rarely matched by sensitivity. The Internal Complaints Committee (ICC), mandated under the law to be a woman's first line of support in a college or workplace, is either inactive or complicit in many institutions. In this case, what was the ICC doing when the student first voiced her discomfort? Were there mechanisms to hear her out? Why were her complaints met with disbelief and inaction? These

are not procedural lapses, they are acts of institutional betrayal.

One must ask how alone, how abandoned, how desperate a young woman must feel to believe that the only way to be heard is by setting herself on fire.

We are told our homes are the safest. But women know that this is a myth. From schools to workplaces, hostels to offices, from families to institutions, women are asked to "adjust", "ignore", "stay quiet" for the sake of reputation, marks, jobs, and peace. When she dares to raise her voice, she is warned of "consequences". When she doesn't, she is blamed for tolerating it for too long.

How far have we truly come since the laws were amended after Nirbhaya? Section 9 of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, 2013, mandates that any woman, including students, can file a complaint within three months of the incident. Section 4 mandates every institution to set up an ICC to inquire into such complaints fairly and confidentially. But how many colleges treat these provisions as sacrosanct, rather than paperwork to be ticked off during inspections?

The failure in Balasore is not one of law, it is of enforcement, empathy, and ethics. It is a failure of the college, its administration, the ICC, the police machinery, and society at large. What stops institutions from ensuring their ICCs are trained, equipped, and functional? What stops them from supporting a complainant instead of shielding a predator?

Each case like this chips away at a parent's confidence. Every time a daughter leaves home for education, there's a silent prayer whispered behind her: That she will return safe. That her ambition won't be her undoing. And yet, we are forced to confront the reality: That the most unsafe place for a woman is often the very place meant to empower her.

As a woman and a lawyer, I say this with anguish: The law is not enough if it remains only on paper. Our judiciary, law enforcement, institutions — all must learn not just to hear, but to listen. Not just to act, but to act swiftly and justly. When complaints gather dust or are dismissed as exaggerations, the message we send is clear: "We don't believe you."

Sexual harassment is not a "misunderstanding". It is violence. And institutions that ignore and trivialise it become complicit. The principal of the Balasore college should face the strictest punishment under the law. So should those who allowed this culture of silence to fester, every authority figure who dismissed the woman, every mechanism that lay dormant until it was too late. A woman should not have to light herself on fire to make people pay attention. But she did. And now, we must carry the weight of her silence. We must ensure no other woman has to choose death over dignity, justice, delayed or denied, is not just a legal failure, it is a human tragedy.

The writer is senior advocate and former Additional Solicitor General of India

JULY 19, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

GUJARAT ACCORD

THE ANTI-RESERVATION agitation in Gujarat is likely to be withdrawn following an agreement between the government and anti-reservation leaders. The Amarsinh Chaudhary government has agreed not to implement the Solanki cabinet's decision to increase the reservation quota of non-Harijan and non-Adivasi backward-class students for admission in medical and technical institutions to 28 per cent.

PAK, CHINA & SIACHEN

PAKISTAN IS COORDINATING its military activities with China in a bid to capture the strategic

Siachen Glacier in Ladakh. Pakistani and Chinese air force jet fighters recently conducted joint reconnaissance missions over the glacier and the Indian Nubra Valley. Defence experts say Pakistan is trying to secure advantageous positions in the glacier to secure a common border with China to facilitate a closer military link-up in the event of a war with India.

‘SAFARNAMA’ DERAILED

SAFARNAMA, THE NEW TV serial presented at the initiative of the railway ministry, has been derailed. Doordarshan authorities have decided to suspend it on the ground that the third episode was "not only below standard but vul-

gar in dialogue at places". The move has caused surprise in Rail Bhavan, where officials point out that Doordarshan brought the alleged vulgarity to their attention only after the telecast.

CONGRESS VS CONGRESS

THE ONGOING TUSSLE between the Congress (I) and Congress (S) for office accommodation in Parliament House took a serious turn when the former made an unsuccessful bid to "capture" the adjoining Congress (S) office. After removing all sign boards of the Congress (S) office, Congress (I) men allegedly broke open the connecting door between the two party offices and took away some files and papers.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, JULY 19, 2025

9 THE IDEAS PAGE

A turnaround for banks

A decline in non-performing assets has meant that credit is more readily available for industry, especially MSMEs



SOUMYA KANTI GHOSH

THE CREDIT GROWTH of scheduled commercial banks, a bellwether of economic resilience, weakened to 9.5 per cent for the fortnight ended June 27 vis-à-vis last year's growth of 17.4 per cent. Credit growth has, however, been declining since May 2024, due to a confluence of myriad reasons.

One, the RBI's decision to increase risk weights on certain segments of consumer credit and bank lending to the NBFCs towards the end of 2023 saw loan growth in these two sectors fall sharply, ensuring a much-desired slowdown in unsecured loan growth. Unsecured credit, constituting 25 per cent of retail loans, has seen growth plummet to 7.9 per cent in March 2025 and 7.8 per cent in May 2025 from 28.3 per cent in March 2023.

Along similar lines, credit to NBFCs, making up roughly a third of services credit, declined to 5.7 per cent in March and (-) 0.3 per cent in May. The efficacy and rationale of the RBI's directives can be gauged from the fact that even after curtailing the exuberance for a year and a half, NPAs in unsecured retail loans jumped to 1.8 per cent in March this year from 1.5 per cent the year before.

Two, the relatively low share of floating loans by private sector banks in retail loans causes friction in the transmission of low interest rates to borrowers. Private banks' retail portfolio benchmarked to EBLR (external benchmark lending rate) is 54.7 per cent, while for public sector banks (PSBs) it is 59.8 per cent.

Three, there is a seemingly visible shift in balance from the private to public banks. PSBs showed stable growth of 12.2 per cent in 2024-25 compared to 13.6 per cent in 2023-24. However, the credit growth of private banks declined to 9.5 per cent — the lowest since 2020-21. Further, the share of PSBs in incremental credit has also increased to 56.9 per cent in FY25 from merely 20 per cent in FY18, reaping rich dividends from the government's strategy of recognition, resolution, recapitalisation and reforms.

Banks' gross NPA (GNPA) ratio has declined to a multi-decadal low of 2.3 per cent with the provision coverage ratio of 76.3 per cent in March 2025, as services and industry GNPA's declined significantly. The decline in industry NPAs, to 2.3 per cent in March 2025 from around 4 per cent in September 2023, is mainly due to the decline in MSME NPAs to 3.6 per cent in March 2025 from 10.8 per cent in March 2021. With a fall in NPA, credit to industry, led by MSME, has been growing steadily and its growth has outpaced those of other sectors during FY25. The share of industry credit in overall incremental credit growth has increased to 17 per cent in FY25 from 11 per cent in FY24. There is a turnaround story for MSME credit that needs to be told in detail. MSME credit, which grew by merely 5-7 per cent during 2011-2013, is now growing in double digits at around 18 per cent in May 2025.

Let us ponder over this shift.

There has been an increase in the supply of credit to existing borrowers in the MSME sector, because of an improvement in their



C R Sasikumar

balance sheet. Serious delinquencies — measured as 90 to 120 days past due (DPD) and reported as “substandard”, have dropped to a five-year low of 1.8 per cent. Additionally, the revised definition of MSME, with increased investment and turnover limits, will increase credit growth further.

The formalisation of MSMEs with the help of URN seeding is giving a necessary fillip to credit growth. The government has taken great initiative in providing enhanced guarantee cover to various categories of MSME borrowers, facilitating them in unblocking working capital by converting trade receivables into cash. Alongside, the turnover threshold for buyers' mandatory onboarding on the TReDS platform has been reduced from Rs 500 crore to Rs 250 crore. The MSME Samadhaan portal is also being reimaged for cash flow efficiency.

MSMEs could thus benefit from a plethora of overlapping factors, capacity expansion in a benign regime when public policies are getting increasingly reoriented for their welfare. MSMEs depend greatly on large corporates through backward integration (and at times, forward integration) and hence their activity level could be a latent gauge of corporate activities. Promoting technological excellence tailored according to their requirements at optimal costs, mitigating information asymmetry and ironing out supply-chain issues could prove to be the tipping point at the next stage.

We are also witnessing diversification and broadening of credit markets in India. Private credit markets are making rapid inroads with flexibly structured deals as

MSMEs depend greatly on large corporates through backward integration (and at times, forward integration) and hence their activity level could be a latent gauge of corporate activities. Promoting technological excellence tailored according to their requirements at optimal costs, mitigating information asymmetry and ironing out supply chain issues could prove to be the tipping point at the next stage.

global biggies join hands. Hence, the evolving trajectories of India's burgeoning credit markets would necessitate a pivot in regulatory attention sooner than later (In the US, lawmakers are asking for stress testing, as also questioning exuberant rating rationales.) Further, corporates are increasingly tapping off-bank channels such as commercial papers, ECBs and capital markets instruments to optimise their borrowing mix.

Lastly, India Inc has significantly leveraged its balance sheet, while increasing cash holdings. In the last two fiscals (FY24 and FY25), the cash and bank balance of corporates has jumped by around 18-19 per cent. Major sectors reporting increased cash holdings include IT, automobiles, refineries, power, and pharma. The cash and bank balances of India Inc, excluding BFSI, is estimated at around Rs 13.5 lakh crore in FY25, indicating cash accruals are a potential vector in funding capex plans.

So, what does the future hold? We believe that going forward, the sources of credit origination through bank deposits (primarily household savings in bank deposits) need to be keenly watched. The financialisation of household savings has gained significant momentum (the share of equities in household savings has increased from 2.5 percent in FY20 to 5.1 percent in FY24; China is at 9 percent) and this will have crucial implications for banking sector credit growth.

The writer is member, 16th Finance Commission and group chief economic advisor, State Bank of India. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Flattering Putin while mistreating the Ukrainian President has not succeeded in softening the Russian leader. There is no reason to think the threat of sanctions, whose scope remains unclear, will impress him any more.” — **LE MONDE, FRANCE**

How to spot a leader

RSS has given top roles to youngsters. But it continues to give weightage to experience and believes that dynamism is not a function of age

RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

RSS *sarsanghchalak* Mohan Bhagwat is a forward-looking leader. Heading a consistently growing organisation that is entering its centenary year, Bhagwat has time and again indicated his outlook on how the RSS can remain relevant for current and future generations. When he speaks his mind, it is essentially about how he wants the RSS to tread in future. However, given the high-profile position he enjoys in public life, whatever Bhagwat says is sought to be interpreted in different ways.

A recent comment by the RSS *sarsanghchalak* on the issue of retirement age led to several interpretations. The comment came at a function in Nagpur in which a book on the life and contributions of veteran RSS leader Moropant Pingle was released. Pingle was one of the organisation's senior functionaries and is widely regarded as the brain behind several mass campaigns the Sangh Parivar organisations undertook in the 1980s, like the Ekamata Yatra and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Pingle was also known for his wit and wisdom. At the function, Bhagwat recalled one such repartee: “Moropant Pingle once said that ‘if you are honoured with a shawl after turning 75, it means that you should stop now, you are old; step aside and let others come in’.”

The nature of the political discourse in the country today — which I am sure Bhagwat is not unaware of — is such that this anecdote was immediately interpreted as Bhagwat's advice to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Funnily, Opposition leaders, whose parties are run by octogenarians, thought it wise to take potshots at the Prime Minister. Since this debate over the retirement of leaders at 75 keeps surfacing time and again, it may be pertinent to put it in its proper context.

While Bhagwat's comment in Nagpur was anecdotal, his views on this matter seem to have been formed over the past three decades. It is known to insiders like us that as the *sarkaryavah* (general secretary) of the RSS from 2000 to 2009, and subsequently as the *sarsanghchalak*, Bhagwat made it his priority to change the organisation's age profile. The anecdote about Pingle, which must have been from the mid-1990s, seems to have influenced Bhagwat's thinking when he became the executive head at the relatively young age of 59 in 2000. This view was supported by his senior colleagues like H V Seshadri and M G Vaidya. Seshadri, who was widely regarded as the natural successor to the then chief, Rajendra Singh (Rajju Bhaiyya), decided to set an example by making way for KS Sudarshan, five years younger, for that high position. Vaidya, who functioned as the spokesperson before me,

also insisted on seniors taking a backseat and promoting youngsters, and set a personal example. Encouraged by the support of such elders, Bhagwat set in motion the process of assigning important organisational roles to youngsters. I was myself an example of that transformation when I became the public face of the organisation as its spokesperson at 36. Guarded by relatively older leaders in the past, the RSS has metamorphosed into a body led more and more by younger people in the past two decades. Many provincial organisers are under 50 today while several national-level functionaries are under 60.

That said, I must add that while there has been a concerted effort to rope in younger leaders at various levels in the organisation, there was never any “rule” to deny the job to any functionary in the name of an age limit. No *sarsanghchalak* or *sarkaryavah* was asked to leave at 75. Founder KB Hedgewar and his successor, MS Golwalkar, passed away prematurely due to ill-health when they were 51 and 68, respectively. The next three chiefs — Balasaheb Deoras, Rajju Bhaiyya and Sudarshan — opted to relinquish their position on health grounds at the age of 79, 78 and 79, respectively. Bhagwat will turn 75 later this year. He is in sound health, and the organisation certainly needs his stewardship for many more years.

In public life, the argument about age works both ways. Many global statesmen in the last century, like Mahatma Gandhi, Franklin D Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Lee Kuan Yew, Deng Xiaoping and Nelson Mandela, who transformed their countries, led an active political life well into the evening of their lives. On the other hand, younger leaders like John F Kennedy, Angela Merkel, Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi, too, made yeoman contributions in their respective countries in recent decades. It proves what Walt Disney once said: “Imagination has no age.”

Former US president Ronald Reagan was famous for his humour. In the presidential election in 1984, Reagan's age, 73, became an issue. During one presidential debate, when asked whether he was worried about his age becoming a stumbling block in leading the country, Reagan responded by saying, “Not at all. I also will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience.” In governance, what counts is the experience and maturity of a leader.

Bhagwat's comment may be understood in general as openness in allowing younger leaders to come forward. But to interpret it as directed toward a particular leader would amount to a misunderstanding of the nature of public life. In fact, our countrymen chose the current leadership despite “younger” options being available on the other side since they believed that age cannot be the sole criterion. Given their dynamism and vision, besides the respect that they command among the masses, both Modi and Bhagwat are expected to lead in their respective roles for many more years to come. In fact, they must. After all, “age doesn't matter, unless you are a cheese”.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal



RAHUL MUNJAL

IN 2008, CRICKET saw the birth of the Indian Premier League (IPL), a bold, fast-paced reinvention of the game that challenged tradition and captivated a new generation. Interestingly, that era was also marked by another audacious leap: India's early steps toward embracing clean energy. Both moves, in their own domains, signalled a shift toward innovation, risk-taking and long-term transformation.

Both ideas that challenged the tried and tested were greeted initially with scepticism. Traditionalists scoffed at the IPL's flashy format, fearing it would dilute the game's soul. Likewise, energy veterans questioned whether renewable power could ever rival the affordability and reliability of fossil-fuel power. Two decades later, the IPL and India's renewable energy sector have redefined their respective domains.

The IPL auction, for instance, is perhaps the clearest expression of how far things have come. Balancing budgets, betting on form and future, and placing bold bets on untested potential. It's remarkably similar to how we make investment decisions in clean energy: Weighing long-term returns, assessing risk, and blending proven technologies with next-generation innovations. The fact that the 2025 IPL auction went up to nearly Rs 640 crore, around four times the value from when it first started, is testimony to the sustained interest in the IPL. A similar bold ap-

The Energy Premier League

Rise of India's renewables sector mirrors that of the IPL. It is poised to leap

proach is reflected in how tariffs for renewable power have declined. Solar bids have decreased from above Rs 10 in 2015 to around Rs 2.4 currently.

The IPL has transformed into a multibillion-dollar franchise. Owners invest in academies, brand-building and talent pipelines, and look far beyond the boundary ropes. Revenue from IPL 2025 is projected to reach nearly Rs 20,000 crore, up 30 times from around Rs 650 crore in its launch year. This evolution mirrors our journey in renewables, from isolated pilot projects to a dominant source of new power capacity addition. From a mere 3 GW two decades ago, India now boasts around 180 GW of renewables capacity (excluding hydro), giving India the distinction of having the world's fourth-largest RE capacity.

The IPL-T20 format has been synonymous with relentless innovation in cricket, which has led to its continued success and popularity. Creative rule changes, such as “Impact Player”, have sustained interest. Similarly, continuous innovations in modules, batteries and wind turbines have ensured dramatic improvements in RE power cost and reliability, ensuring sustained growth of the sector. Innovation isn't optional for either; it's crucial to survive.

Their growth trajectories speak for themselves. According to Brandirectory, the IPL's brand value has surged from \$2.1 billion in

2008 to over \$12 billion in 2025. In comparison, according to the IEA World Energy Investment 2025 report, India's annual renewable investments have grown from under \$2 billion a decade ago to around \$33 billion in 2024. These numbers aren't just impressive, they reveal what's possible when execution meets vision.

Just as teams exploit field restrictions in cricket's powerplay overs to accelerate scoring, the renewable sector must seize its own powerplay windows — policy momentum, falling tech costs, and shifting global demand. With geopolitical tensions accelerating the global pivot to energy security, we are in the midst of our most crucial innings. Talent from all corners of the cricketing world coming together elevates the IPL to a higher level. India's renewable space now has a similar global magnetism. FDI has crossed \$3.5 billion, and international developers are lining up to participate in mega auctions. We've gone from domestic play to global destination.

Modern franchises are powered by data. Every delivery is dissected, every move backed by analytics. Renewable energy has followed suit. AI tools optimise wind turbine maintenance and energy dispatch. Weather models predict solar and wind output with over 95 per cent accuracy. Satellite imagery aids site selection. This is no longer a sector powered by sunshine and hope, it is driven

by AI and precision.

The employment impact is no less remarkable. During tournament months, the IPL supports over 40,000 direct jobs and countless indirect jobs, whereas India's renewable sector employs 1.1 million people today and is poised to create 3.4 million jobs by 2030. This is about more than gigawatts; it's about livelihoods and inclusive growth.

What separates serial winners from also-rans isn't just talent, it's culture. Long-term orientation, disciplined systems, and a relentless commitment to excellence. That's exactly what India's renewable energy mission demands. Our 2030 target of 500 GW is a national imperative. One that calls for patient capital, policy consistency, and unshakeable conviction.

The climate clock is ticking. The global spotlight is on. Economic competitiveness, energy security, and environmental responsibility now intersect. Like finishing a match with calculated aggression, the renewable sector must execute transition with boldness and urgency.

The IPL and India's clean energy sector have shown the world that India can innovate, lead, and inspire, driven by its ingenuity.

The match is on. And India is ready to lead.

The writer is chairman and managing director of Hero Future Energies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DOUBLE STANDARD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘The sanctions stick’ (IE, July 18). The West has always had these “double standards”. It accuses India of financing the Russia-Ukraine War, disregarding the fact that Europe imported LNG at record levels from Russia last year. India is pursuing its national interest, like Western nations, by purchasing Russian oil at discounted rates. India should pay no heed to the sanctions threat, instead diversifying its crude source slate. Energy security is key for development and India can't afford to cut out oil imports from Russia amid geopolitical tensions. India must walk its own path regardless of the threats from the West.

Indrajeet Shukla, Lucknow

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘The sanctions stick’ (IE, July 18). The NATO chief's comment on sanctions has raised hackles in New Delhi, which not only cautioned the West against applying “double standards” on the issue but also asserted its strategic autonomy by indicating its openness to reviving trilateral talks with Beijing and Moscow. Brushing aside criticism from the US and other countries, New Delhi clarified that it has never purchased sanctioned cargo and that Russian oil was not under global sanctions. India has diversified its supply sources and is therefore not concerned about any potential disruption in supply from Russia.

SS Paul, Nadia

FUELLING DIVISION

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Language issue is a distraction’ (IE, July 18). It rightly highlights how linguistic tensions are being needlessly inflamed while urgent civic issues go unaddressed. Language-based identity politics is not just cultural — it's strategic. It fuels vote-bank polarisation, distracts from economic distress, and deepens communal fault lines. We've seen attacks on migrant workers and discrimination against non-native speakers escalate. Instead of encouraging multilingualism, political discourse is turning language into a weapon of exclusion. Linguistic nationalism threatens the very idea of India.

Zainab Irshad, Patna

IMPROVING SCRUTINY

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘When every question counts’ (IE, July 18). Concerns about the devaluation of Parliament's authority and falling standards present a disturbing scenario. According to PRS Legislative Research, during the 16th Lok Sabha, only 77 per cent of the scheduled time in the Lok Sabha and 47 per cent in the Rajya Sabha was dedicated to questions. A mechanism to utilise Question Hour effectively is needed. International practices, such as holding Prime Minister's questions weekly, or the Opposition deciding the agenda for Parliament and forming a shadow cabinet to scrutinise and suggest alternative programmes, can also be adopted.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

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E. EXPLAINED

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, JULY 19, 2025



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Has China beaten US tariffs: Reading GDP growth data

Rishika Singh asked an analyst of the Chinese economy to unpack the official numbers, place them in context, and identify persisting areas of concern

EXPLAINED INTERVIEW



LIZZI C LEE

On July 15, China's National Bureau of Statistics released GDP growth numbers for the first half of the year, including new data for the April-June period. The growth rate in the first quarter (January-March) was 5.4% year-on-year, and 5.2% in the second quarter.

Has the Chinese economy weathered the worst of US tariffs?

Not quite, but it's proven more resilient than many expected. The 5.2% growth and robust trade figures reflect a combination of front-loaded exports (ensuring they were shipped out before the tariffs came into effect), adaptive supply chains, and targeted policy support — not yet a clean bill of health.

Much of the pain from tariffs is delayed thanks to stockpiling, supplier renegotiations, and the tariff truce that US and Chinese officials agreed to after talks in Geneva in May. A 90-day deadline was agreed to, which will end on August 12. The real test will come when inventories run out and the truce expires. So, it's more a temporary reprieve than a final victory.

What do these data say about Chinese domestic demand and consumption?

Domestic demand remains the Achilles' heel for the Chinese economy. The data confirms strong external demand but tepid internal momentum. It underscores caution among households amid deflationary pressures, that is, factors contributing to a fall in the general price level. Additionally, property value has declined following a housing crisis, and job insecurity remains a concern. These issues go back much further than the Covid-19 pandemic or the tariffs. They're the result of structural choices made decades ago.

For a long time, the economy focused on growth above all else, channelling a large share of national income into investment, say, on

building infrastructure. Wages and household incomes were kept relatively low, which helped sustain high savings and high investment.

That worked well when the investment was quite productive, but over time, capacity continued to grow faster than demand, and business margins thinned. Even before the pandemic, growth was slowing and the economy was showing signs of what economists call a growth recession — still expanding, but at a slower, less healthy pace, with weak prices and hesitant hiring.

At the same time, households were saving more due to uncertainty about the future and limited social safety nets. The pandemic and trade tensions worsened existing problems. Addressing them will require raising incomes, improving confidence, and shifting the growth model to rely more on domestic demand.

In an official release, Chinese policymakers have admitted that "effective demand is insufficient". Without stronger consumer confidence and income growth, the recovery risks being export-heavy, but fragile at home.

What is the incentive to move away from

the current economic model?

China's export-driven growth has been incredibly successful for decades, but it has also created some serious vulnerabilities.

With the US tariffs, it is clear that relying heavily on exports leaves the economy exposed to geopolitical risks. Internally, we're seeing what people in China now call "involution" — a cycle of extreme competition among Chinese firms, which has led to relentless price-cutting to appeal to consumers. That hurts firms' ability to invest, keeps wages low, and again holds back domestic demand.

Meanwhile, the European Union and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have become more important trading partners for China, and they do help cushion the blow from US tariffs. Exports to these regions have grown in double digits in some categories. However, the EU is increasingly wary of Chinese industrial overcapacity and unfair competition in the form of state subsidies, especially in green tech and Electric Vehicles. ASEAN is growing fast, but its demand is still uneven and more price-sensitive than the US market. Neither can fully replace the scale and

strategic weight of the US relationship.

There's also growing resistance from other countries to cheap Chinese exports flooding their markets. If China keeps doubling down on this model, it risks even more trade barriers and damage to its reputation and relationships overseas. There is now a push to produce higher-quality goods and compete more on innovation than just on low prices.

But making that shift is not easy or painless. Cutting excess capacity will slow growth in some industries and prices of certain goods will rise. Some firms with thin margins will have to exit the market, leading to job losses. Reforming the model is clearly necessary for the long term, but it comes with real short-term costs that are hard to ignore.

Could a massive stimulus be on the way?

China tends to approach stimulus very carefully, and usually waits to see clear signs of weakness before stepping in aggressively.

Given the current economic reality, intervention is weighed against the risk of piling up too much debt, fueling another housing bubble, or creating financial instability down

the road. That caution also allows them to keep some policy tools in reserve.

Right now, growth has actually been a little above the government's target, so they don't feel much urgency to roll out big, sweeping measures yet. What we've seen so far (modest fiscal spending, targeted subsidies, some selective credit easing) has helped keep the economy on track, but hasn't addressed the deeper problems.

Many see the stimulus extended so far as falling short. It has stabilised things on the surface but hasn't meaningfully boosted confidence among households or businesses. The government seems to be waiting for more decisive evidence before it commits to a more coordinated response.

It's also because putting together a comprehensive package of reforms is politically and institutionally complicated. We'll likely see stronger measures later in the year if the data shows growth starting to slip more clearly.

Lizzi C. Lee is a Fellow on Chinese Economy at the Center for China Analysis, Asia Society Policy Institute, Washington, DC

EXPLAINED HEALTH

TRUMP DIAGNOSED WITH CHRONIC VENOUS INSUFFICIENCY. WHAT IS IT?

THE WHITE HOUSE said on Thursday that US President Donald Trump had been diagnosed with chronic venous insufficiency (CVI). It is a fairly common condition in people older than 70. (Trump is 79.)

Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, told the media that the diagnosis was made while doctors were addressing swelling in Trump's legs and bruising on his hand in recent weeks.

Dr Sean P Barbabella, the physician to the President, said in a memo that Trump had noticed mild swelling in his lower legs and underwent a comprehensive evaluation which revealed the condition. He said that Trump had some bruising on his hand as well. This was due to irritation caused by repeated hand-shaking and to the use of aspirin, which the President takes as part of his heart health regimen.

Trump also had his blood work done and underwent an echocardiogram, Barbabella said. All of the results were within normal limits and revealed no cardiac, renal or systemic issues. "President Trump remains in excellent health," he wrote.

What is chronic venous insufficiency?

CVI is a condition that occurs when veins have trouble moving blood back to the heart. It occurs most often in the legs, and can cause swelling, as Trump experienced.

Other symptoms can include varicose veins, pain, discomfort and, in rare cases, venous ulcers, sores that take unusually long to heal, said Dr Prakash Krishnan, director of endovascular services at the Mount Sinai Fuster Heart Hospital in New York.

What can lead to chronic venous insufficiency?

According to Krishnan, smoking, obesity, and pregnancy can cause CVI. People who have to stand for long periods of time on the job are also at greater risk.

This is because veins, particularly in



Trump's swollen ankle during a meeting at the White House on Wednesday. *The NYT*

the legs, have to pump blood against gravity back up to the heart. They use one-way valves and muscles to help them do that, Krishnan said. But when too much blood pools, as can happen during prolonged standing, the pressure causes veins to dilate and the valves can stretch and become leaky, causing venous insufficiency.

How is the condition treated?

Doctors typically start with conservative treatments, such as compression stockings to squeeze the legs and help blood move back up to the heart.

They also often recommend that patients keep their legs elevated for at least 30 minutes three times a day, and sometimes advise patients to lose weight or perform resistance exercises to improve blood flow.

If those measures fail, doctors might try more intensive treatments, such as a procedure called sclerotherapy, which involves injecting a chemical solution into the affected veins to collapse them. They can also use heat to seal a vein, including with laser treatment. The body will then reroute the blood through other, healthier veins.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

AMRITA NAYAK DUTTA

NEW DELHI, JULY 18

THE INDIAN Navy on Friday commissioned INS *Nistar* at the Naval Dockyard in Visakhapatnam.

Indigenously designed and constructed by Hindustan Shipyard Limited, *Nistar* is the first of two diving support vessels (DSVs) that were ordered by the Navy in 2018. Its sister ship, *Nipun*, was launched in 2022, and is expected to be commissioned in the near future.

Meant to support deep-sea diving and submarine rescue operations, these DSVs will enhance India's operational preparedness in the underwater domain and reinforce the country's strategic maritime posture across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the Navy said.

Nistar & its capabilities

The original INS *Nistar* was a submarine rescue vessel acquired by the Indian Navy from the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1969, and commissioned in 1971. It remained in service till 1989, during which time it was the centrepiece of the Navy's diving and submarine rescue operations.

The new *Nistar* will carry forward this legacy. But unlike its predecessor, it comprises more than 80% indigenous content, with about 120 MSMEs having participated in its construction. This makes *Nistar* the first indigenously designed and constructed diving support and submarine rescue vessel in India.

"*Nistar* is testimony to the growing capability and maturity of our maritime industrial base, and another shining example of *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*," Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi said during the commissioning ceremony.

With a displacement of around 10,500 tonnes, length of almost 120 metres, beam of more than 20 metres, and an endurance of more than 60 days at sea, the new *Nistar* is also larger and more capable than its 800-tonne predecessor.

According to the Navy, *Nistar*'s specialised onboard diving complex has both air and saturation diving systems, which are complemented by underwater remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) and side scan SONARs. Moreover, *Nistar* will be the mothership of an advanced deep submergence rescue vehicle (DSRV). The Indian Navy acquired two DSRVs from the UK's M/s James Fisher & Sons in 2018 and 2019 — one each for *Nistar* and *Nipun*.

Nistar can also carry a 15-tonne subsea crane, and support helicopter operations. Aboard *Nistar* is an operation theatre, an in-

HOW DEEP-SEA RESCUE OPS WORK



IMAGINE THIS. A submarine malfunctions in the deep. Oxygen is fast running out. Hydrostatic pressure keeps the hatch closed, but even if it were to be opened, no human could survive at those depths. All that the trapped crew can do is wait for help.

INS NISTAR — 'salvation' in Sanskrit — is meant for exactly such a situation. It can undertake diving and salvage operations upto 300 m depth, with its DSRV capable of operating 1,000 m under the surface. Here's how deep sea rescues work.

■ The first task is to locate the submarine in distress, something easier said than done in the deep-sea gloom. *Nistar* will use ROVs, its advanced sonar system, and DSRV.

■ Once the submarine is located, rescuers in the mothership will decide the course of action. If the sub is simply trapped in some underwater debris, ROVs and

tensive care unit, and an eight-bedded hospital with hyperbaric medical facilities, all critical towards meeting the vessel's operational roles, the Navy said.

Why this matters

The induction of *Nistar* into the Navy after the successful integration of the two



(Clockwise from top) *Nistar* at Visakhapatnam port; DSRV being lowered; inside DSRV. *Indian Navy*

DSRV equipped with robotic arms and other equipment can try to free it.

■ But the rescue window is small, and the priority is to save personnel stuck underwater. This is where the DSRV comes in. It can attach to the disabled sub's hatch, allowing the crew to be evacuated. India's DSRVs can rescue 14 trapped personnel at a time.

■ *Nistar* is also a dive-support ship, with air diving capabilities for shallower depths, and more complex saturation diving capabilities for greater depths. *Nistar* can support prolonged saturation dives up to 100 metres.

DSRVs is a major milestone for India's deep-sea capabilities.

With the Navy continuing to expand its submarine arm, it has to reckon with increased operational risks of operating in the deep sea. These risks demand a technologically capable platform for submarine rescue operations — the primary mandate of the

Nistar-class vessels.

Officials told *The Indian Express* that *Nistar* is built to be both a diving support and a submarine rescue vessel, making it a strategic platform which strengthens India's position as a net maritime security provider within the IOR and beyond.

With the induction of the two DSRVs in 2018-19, India entered a group of only 12 nations with these dedicated capabilities, and one of the very few possessing DSRVs that can be requisitioned by another country and air-lifted for rapid international deployment during emergencies.

Until now, however, the Navy relied on commercially leased platforms for the deployment of DSRVs, limiting its instant-deployment capabilities and round-the-clock rescue readiness. *Nistar* (and *Nipun*) will change this.

The vessel's dynamic positioning and diving support features mean that the vessel can operate autonomously in the high seas. Officials said that its high transit speed ensures rapid deployment during emergencies, drastically reducing response time in scenarios where every minute counts.

Based in Visakhapatnam, *Nistar* will serve as the DSRV mothership in the Eastern Seaboard, and *Nipun*, based in Mumbai, will serve in the Western Seaboard, completing the Navy's dual-coast operational posture.

This arrangement guarantees simultaneous, high-readiness submarine rescue coverage across both maritime frontiers. This strategic capability would be particularly crucial in various maritime humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations carried out by the Navy.

For greater good

Through bilateral agreements and Memorandums of Understanding with other navies, India has committed to sharing its submarine rescue expertise, and providing actual rescue support during emergencies world wide.

"It positions India as a credible first responder in undersea contingencies and amplifies its soft power through the projection of maritime goodwill," an official told *The Indian Express*. The officer added that the development sends a signal that India's growing naval capabilities are aligned with the shared security interests of its partners and neighbours.

"In a world where underwater operations are becoming more complex and risks more unpredictable, INS *Nistar* ensures that India not only safeguards its own interests but is also ready and equipped to serve the greater good of global maritime safety," the official said.

Feeding strays: question of compassion & public order, the position in law

AMAAAL SHEIKH

NEW DELHI, JULY 18

THE SUPREME COURT observed this week that citizens who wished to feed stray dogs should consider doing so inside their own homes.

The Bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta were hearing an appeal filed by a Noida resident who had been allegedly harassed for feeding stray dogs in the common areas of her housing society.

The strongly polarising issue of feeding community dogs has frequently led to litigation over the years. Courts have weighed in on questions of constitutional protections, local governance, and claims over shared civic spaces.

Background of case

The president of the Residents' Welfare Association of the petitioner's society had allegedly broken some pots in which she had kept water for stray animals, harassed her, and killed 10 sterilised stray dogs. Local authorities had taken no action on her complaints, and had instead asked her to not place the pots again.

The woman had then approached Allahabad High Court, which had dismissed her petition in the interest of the "common man".

The court had said that the Animal Birth Control Rules, 2023 (ABC Rules) did warrant the protection of street dogs, but "the authorities will have to bear in mind the concern of common man, such that their movement on streets are not hampered by

attacks by these street dogs".

The ABC Rules, 2023, notified under The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, seek to control stray dog populations through sterilisation, and to curb the spread of rabies by vaccinating them. The Rules lay down protocols to ensure that the feeding of dogs respects both animal welfare and public safety.

'Stray' to 'community'

The ABC Rules, which replaced the Animal Birth Control (Dog) Rules, 2001, use the expression "community animals" instead of "stray dogs" — recognising that these dogs are not ownerless intruders but territorial beings that inhabit and belong to their local environments.

The Supreme Court has interpreted the constitutionally guaranteed right to life and liberty as extending to animals as well. In its verdict in the 2014 Jallikattu case, the top court held that animal life falls within the meaning of Article 21 of the Constitution (*Animal Welfare Board of India v A. Nagaraja*).

Also, Article 51A(g) places a fundamental duty on citizens "to have compassion for living creatures". All this means that the presence of dogs in residential areas cannot automatically be considered unlawful. Nor can those who feed them be considered offenders unless their actions violate specific behavioural and spatial guidelines set by the law.

EXPLAINED LAW

Rules for feeding dogs

Rule 20 of the ABC Rules, 2023 ("Feeding of Community Animals") states that "it shall be responsibility of the Resident Welfare Association or Apartment Owner Association or Local Body's representative... to make necessary arrangement for feeding of community animals" if someone living in that area "feeds or provides care to street animals as a compassionate gesture".

The Rule states that the feeding locations must be away from high-footfall areas like staircases, building entrances, and children's play areas. The designated spaces must be kept clean and litter-free, and community dogs should be fed at an appointed time.

The Rule also lays down a dispute resolution mechanism involving the chief veterinary officer, representatives of the po-

lice, the district Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, organisations conducting animal birth control, and the RWA.

The big picture is that dogs have a right to be fed, but this must be done in ways that minimise disruption to shared social spaces. The Rules try to strike a balance between compassion and public order.

Previous court order

In March 2023, the Bombay High Court in *Sharmila Sankar & Ors v. Union of India* ruled in favour of residents who had faced opposition from their housing societies for feeding dogs. The court said that RWAs and societies cannot restrict the feeding of community animals or threaten or penalise individuals who do so. The court affirmed that the ABC Rules have "the force of law".

Fuel for thought

Diverting FCI rice to ethanol is problematic

The sharp rebound in paddy output this year seems to have given India’s grain-based ethanol programme a new lease of life. Last week, the Centre more than doubled the quota of rice that the Food Corporation of India (FCI) can sell to ethanol distilleries to 5.2 million tonnes from the earlier cap of 2.4 million tonnes. This is a policy U-turn from two years ago when the government had to ban the diversion of FCI rice to ethanol after dwindling stocks risked a price spiral.

No doubt, the supply situation today is a far cry from what it was in July 2023. The Agriculture Ministry’s third advance estimates peg India’s rice production for 2024-25 at 149 million tonnes, up from 136-137 million tonnes in the previous two years. FCI carried rice stocks of about 37 million tonnes in its warehouses in June 2025 compared to 26 million tonnes in June 2023. Current FCI rice stocks are nearly three times buffer stock norms. However, comfortable supplies alone cannot be good enough reason to divert a widely consumed foodgrain for fuel.

The use of rice to meet India’s fuel blending targets is problematic on several counts. For one, grain-based ethanol distilleries are wholly reliant on subsidised FCI supplies to meet their output targets. FCI has been incurring an economic cost of ₹41.73 per kilogram towards procurement and storage of rice. It is supplying rice to ethanol plants at just ₹22.5 per kg. The Centre has, in fact, had to slash the sale price from ₹28 per kg in January 2025 after distillers complained of the price being unviable. Since FCI’s losses are directly funded by the government, the subsidy is effectively borne by taxpayers. Two, purchases of rice-based ethanol by Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) are not driven by commercial considerations either. To encourage the ethanol economy, OMCs are required to lift fixed quantities from distilleries at government-determined prices.

The current OMC purchase price is at ₹57.9 per litre for rice-based ethanol after many increases over the years. The argument that diversion of “excess” rice by FCI to ethanol doesn’t harm consumers or the poor is a bit thin too. State governments, co-operatives and community kitchens seeking to purchase rice for their public nutrition programmes compete with ethanol producers to buy rice under FCI’s OMSS (open market sale scheme). Though they get rice at the same subsidised rate, the quantities they can procure are limited by quotas which are more stringent than those for ethanol. While foodgrain unfit for human consumption can be diverted to other uses, it is unlikely that the bulk of the rice sold under the FCI’s OMSS fits this description. If India’s fuel blending programme is to be self-sustaining, ethanol units need predictable feedstock availability, with the ability to be commercially viable without subsidies. As things stand, second-generation ethanol projects which rely on crop residue and agricultural waste as feedstock rather than food crops, seem a better fit for India.

POCKET



GURBACHAN SINGH

After the change in the State government, several parts of Delhi have witnessed demolitions of slums. These demolitions may go on in Delhi and elsewhere but even if these come to a halt, we have a very serious problem nevertheless. Demolitions are painful but they are also a visible reminder of an ongoing, otherwise silent, and deep-rooted problem. Life in slums and even in many unauthorised constructions is, all said and done, difficult, unhygienic, unsafe and even inhuman.

The future of an entire generation that grows up there is often at stake, and there are many negative “externalities” for the city at large. It is not just Delhi. Nearly half the urban population in India lives in slums! And, possibly another 10-25 per cent people live in, what are, in one way or another, unauthorised constructions.

Why? Property prices are, by and large, very high in the big cities. So, a market for illegal or semi-legal real estate arrangements evolves at various levels. The price for such an arrangement is relatively low. This is a parallel housing “system” alongside legal housing. And, there is corruption and harassment. But there is also an understanding on the part of public authorities, many of whom are in a dilemma.

There are, broadly speaking, two views on this whole matter. First, because many real estate developments are illegal and cause negative “externalities”, these should be demolished. Second, the users are poor or not well-to-do, and so they should be allowed to stay. There is a dilemma. And, yet this whole way of thinking is actually missing the larger picture!

Effectively, the focus is usually, if not almost always, on the short term. It is time that we started thinking seriously about a long-term meaningful solution. It is true that such a solution can take 5-10 years and possibly even more. But we need to make a beginning at some stage, if we don’t want the problem to become bigger.

The heart of the problem is limited supply of housing, and this is basically for policy reasons. Now extending the existing big cities is very messy, and very costly. So, we need to think of a solution outside of the existing big cities. We need new cities, or extensions of existing small cities. We may treat these too as new cities.

SMART CITIES

An important mission of the Union government in 2014 was to build 100 new cities which would also be smart.



Slums — looking for a long-term solution

BUILDING AHEAD. We need new cities, or extensions of existing small cities

Soon enough, however, there was a shift to a mission under which 100 mostly existing cities would become smart. The idea of 100 new cities was, broadly speaking, shelved. The main reason seems to be that public money and state capacity are limited, and so this was a nearly impossible mission. But there is another route; this is mainly through an enabling public policy to build some new cities.

Consider economics. It is true that developing new cities has a very high opportunity cost. It is even debatable whether we should have new cities. Note, however, that this approach assumes that the resources are at present, more or less, fully utilised. But this is not true. We have, in India, underutilisation and inefficient allocation of the various factors of production — land, labour, capital and organisation.

Some people can shift to the new areas and get better occupations, close to full-time jobs, higher incomes, and cheaper, decent and legal housing

As an example, the top 10 cities occupy only about 0.2 per cent of the land mass! This is contrary to the common perception that there is a shortage of land for urbanisation. We have massive under-allocation for cities, which is where the value of (raw) land is very high. This is tantamount to serious underutilisation. It is true that the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 can come in the way of developing new cities.

However, if we make a very big change in policy, then it is not just about affordable housing, and decongestion in the existing cities. It is also about higher economic growth and greater employment. And, a big change in policy can itself pave the way, or at least make it less difficult, to amend the Land Acquisition Act, 2013.

This is not the space to get into the detailed economics of why it is actually less difficult to make an improvement in the utilisation and allocation of resources by developing new cities, instead of a substantial improvement in some other sector of the economy. But it will help to elaborate a little on the use of one of the factors of production here — labour in developing the new cities.

JOBS ANGLE

A new city can come up — with possible

hiccups — over what is now a rural area. The density of population in rural India is, understandably, low. This obviously means that when there is the development of an entire city over some (now) rural area, there is a need for hiring people from outside. Where can these people come from?

In the existing cities we have not only people who live in bad conditions in slums, and even unauthorised constructions, most of these people also have odd jobs, under-employment, and low incomes. There is scope then for a mutually beneficial and voluntary “trade”.

Some of these people can shift to the new areas and get better occupations, close to full-time jobs, higher incomes, and cheaper, decent and legal housing. And, the new cities are useful for absorbing other people in the future as well. Urbanisation in India is only at 34 per cent. Anyway, it helps to have new cities. In conclusion, the way out of the problem of slums, and unauthorised constructions lies mainly in the creation of new cities, which is possible. Sooner or later many people need to live and work there.

The writer is an independent economist. He has taught at Ashoka University, ISI (Delhi) and JNU

Trump’s curious quest for the Nobel Peace Prize

World leaders, wanting to curry favour with the US President, have rushed to nominate him

Atanu Biswas

Donald Trump has gained almost unprecedented control over both his country and the rest of the world during his second term. It’s, however, not a secret that Trump is fervently pursuing a Nobel Peace Prize. Consequently, it seems that the world has learned its newest tactic to sway Trump and win his favour. Simply commend his efforts to promote peace and nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize! And world leaders are working hard to implement that plan.

Well, Trump has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize since his first term – for his efforts in the Middle East, his outreach and summitry with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, his mediating role in the historic Abraham Accords, and his efforts to normalise relations between Kosovo and Serbia. But he may be more desperate now. Perhaps he thinks it will strengthen his legacy and align it with Obama’s.

In 2009, Obama’s nomination after just a few days in office created controversy; many argued that he had not accomplished enough to be worthy of the accolade. Trump even tweeted in 2013 that Obama’s award ought to be revoked.

The US President, who is his biggest political supporter and supplier of armaments, has now been put forward

by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a contender for the world’s top peace prize. A few days later, a group of African leaders took their turn with Trump. These leaders nominated Trump for the US assistance in mediating a recent agreement between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to achieve peace after decades of brutal conflict that has claimed millions of lives. And Pakistan Army chief Asim Munir recently pledged to nominate Trump for the award.

TRUMP, THE MEDIATOR

Trump, who has long coveted the honour, certainly views himself as a world mediator because of his successes with the Abraham Accords and in a number of crises ranging from Rwanda and the DRC to Israel and Iran. Although India vehemently denied Trump’s claim of mediating during the recent brief conflict between India and Pakistan, Trump continued to take credit for settling it. Trump’s followers also believe that his efforts to mediate the Russia-Ukraine conflict and a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas make him deserving of the prestigious honour.

Well, the Abraham Accords, which Trump mediated, resulted in the normalisation of ties between Israel and a number of Arab countries. However, the accords ignored the Palestinian problem, which has long been acknowledged as the root cause of



TRUMP. Nobel aspirations REUTERS

instability in the region. And Trump has yet to succeed in resolving the Russia-Ukraine or the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Trump can legitimately argue that his pressure on Iran and Israel resulted in a ceasefire in their 12-day war in June. However, some critics argued that Trump’s decision to terminate nuclear negotiations with Tehran in 2018 is only made worse by his bombing of Iran. Although a peace deal pertaining to the Rwanda-DRC conflict was signed in the Oval Office in June, some contend that Qatar had a major role that the Trump administration has downplayed.

Trump’s policies have caused divisiveness in the US and around the world, according to his detractors. Actually, not everything Trump has done fits the modern definition of “peace.” For example, Trump tried to annex Canada and seize Greenland and the

Panama Canal, just like the imperialists of the 19th century. His trade wars are a threat to the world. Trump’s pro-fossil-fuel views may not be the best for someone hoping to win the Nobel Peace Prize either.

Trump’s cuts to USAID are devastating. In 204 countries and regions, these programmes supported pro-democracy, health, and disaster relief efforts. One study estimates that by 2030, 14 million people — including 4.5 million children — will have died as a result of the Trump administration’s dissolution of USAID. Such a programme’s suspension is undoubtedly an act that contradicts the modern concept of peace in a more comprehensive sense. The same is true of the WHO and the second withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord too. Overall, through his various activities, Trump may be contrasting his efforts to promote peace with some damning actions.

“They will never give me a Nobel Peace Prize. It’s too bad. I deserve it, but they will never give it to me,” Trump said in February 2025. Or perhaps they will – who knows. However, Trump’s pursuit of the golden deer persists in his own style, involving numerous deals and also obtaining nominations from international leaders.

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

Unclaimed deposits

I am writing in response to your article “The phenomenal rise in unclaimed deposits” (July 18). The staggering increase from ₹2,795 crore in 2014 to ₹97,545 crore in 2025 raises serious concerns about financial awareness and public outreach. Despite RBI’s efforts through the DEA Fund, UDGM portal, and KYC campaigns, the unclaimed amounts continue to grow. This highlights a clear gap in execution and public engagement.

Stronger grassroots awareness, simpler claim processes, and transparent reporting by banks are the need of the hour. This issue involves the lifetime savings of citizens and must be addressed with urgency.

Chetan Malvi
Raipur (Chhattisgarh)

Apropos ‘The phenomenal rise in unclaimed deposits’, Indians are generally very secretive about their finances. Very often even the family members

are unaware of their bank accounts as they keep their pass books and other bank related documents outside their homes in places where they are employed. Not all colleagues are kind enough to inform the families. Another reason is that older parents fear; not without reason, that their own children may dupe them, fraudulently withdraw their money and leave them to the mercy of God. So, they keep them in the dark.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

Oil worries

Apropos, ‘India can secure oil from other sources if Russian imports are sanctioned’, (July 18). The threat by US President Donald Trump to impose secondary sanctions through exorbitant tariffs on countries importing oil from Russia, is deeply concerning. India, which sources around 35 per cent of its crude oil from Russia at prices lower than global benchmarks, stands to suffer significant economic consequences. Cutting off Russian oil imports would

strain India’s energy security, inflate costs, and disrupt its budgetary stability. Such coercive tactics undermine sovereign decision-making and disregard the economic realities of developing nations. Instead of punitive pressure, global diplomacy should focus on cooperation and mutual respect to address geopolitical tensions without harming nations striving for affordable energy.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru



All in one
Agriculture needs more public
spending, not just one umbrella scheme

The Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana (PMDDKY), a scheme approved by the Union Cabinet, is to be implemented through the convergence of 36 existing schemes across 11 Departments. According to Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the scheme seeks to address the “disparities in productivity” between States, and even among districts within a State. The Centre’s pet schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) and the PM Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) as well as relevant State schemes, to be identified by the District Dhan Dhaanya Samitis, will be subsumed in the PMDDKY. Local partnerships with the private sector will also be promoted under the proposed scheme, which will begin in October during the *rabi* crop season. The scheme is to get an annual outlay of ₹24,000 crore for six years. Modelled on NITI Aayog’s Aspirational Districts Programme, the Centre will identify 100 districts based on low productivity and cropping intensity and less credit disbursement. The hope is that the scheme will result in higher productivity, value addition in agriculture and allied sectors, local livelihood creation, leading to increased domestic production and self-reliance. This convergence of schemes must be viewed in the background of decreasing public spending on agriculture. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture, in the latest report on Demands for Grants, had observed a continuous decline, from 3.53% in 2021-22 to 3.14% (2022-23), 2.57% (2023-24), 2.54% (2024-25) and 2.51% (2025-26), of the allocations for agriculture as a percentage of total Central Plan outlay.

This aggregation of all schemes under one umbrella suggests that the Government wants uniformity in running the welfare, financial and technical schemes in the agriculture sector. It is keen to add States’ measures too in the new scheme. It remains to be seen how effective such uniformity will be on the ground as further decrease in public investment in agriculture could be disastrous. Private-public partnerships should be for the larger good of self-reliance, particularly in the production of foodgrains, edible oil and pulses. The progress of area coverage under *kharif* crops, released last week, points to a decrease in the sowing of oil seeds and popular pulses. Though it promotes national uniformity, it is welcome that the new scheme will function based on ‘District Plans’ that will be aligned to the national goals of crop diversification, conservation of water and soil health, self-sufficiency in agriculture and allied sectors. For the PMDDKY, the Centre will monitor 117 key indicators of progress on a monthly basis. But to make it more participatory, States, local self governments, primary agriculture cooperative societies, agriculture universities and organisations of farmers and traders must be involved in this process.

Taking responsibility
The Karnataka government must share
the blame for the stampede

For many cricket lovers in Bengaluru and Karnataka, the one lingering disappointment was the persisting failure of Royal Challengers Bengaluru to win the Indian Premier League (IPL) trophy. Virat Kohli may have been king across the world but in the IPL he was not, until a dramatic change of fortunes at the very end of his career. The cup win in 2025 was to be the crowning glory of Kohli, RCB, and, eventually, Bengaluru itself. But tragically enough, the stampede at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium during the victory celebrations on June 4 upended that glory. In its probe of the stampede that killed 11 and left 71 injured, the John Michael D’Cunha Commission has come down severely on the RCB management and the police. It has pinpointed the cause as “not regulating the entry into the gates and making reckless announcements with regard to the entry into the stadium”. It has named many and recommended legal action against them while discussing how such gatherings can be made safer and the medical backups that may be required. But its terms of inquiry were limited and missed the bigger picture. Blame must be apportioned to all stakeholders who just did not think of the consequences of calling for such a large gathering and going ahead with it without the permissions and arrangements. The police must be faulted for not beefing up the arrangements at the stadium’s entry and exit points. But it may not be fair to blame them for allowing the event – it had practically become a fait accompli as the administration was going along with the celebrations and the euphoria.

The stadium event was among the three planned that day. As if to kick off the celebrations, Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah felicitated the team in an open-air event outside the Vidhana Soudha in the morning. These celebrations set the tone for what unfolded that day. To their credit, the police did refuse to allow the planned victory parade on an open bus. And at the Vidhana Soudha, where only a few among the lakhs who had gathered got to see their favourite stars, an announcement was made that people could proceed to the stadium which has a seating capacity of just 32,000. In a broader sense though, the stampede was a reflection of the realities of urban life too, where massive flash crowds can generate from communities sharing a common passion and kindled by social media. Urban planners and managers have little clue on how to handle such mobilisations, which have resulted in stampedes at religious, social and cultural events, leading to the loss of hundreds of lives.

Inequality is an important concern for the political economy of a democracy. However, the Indian inequality debate is often characterised by the selective use of data to make exaggerated claims that fuel misperceptions rather than result in a better understanding. The sharp reactions to a recent World Bank report (“India Poverty and Equity Brief: April 2025”) are an illustrative case in point.

The World Bank report claims that India has almost eradicated extreme poverty. Further, it claims, the country has significantly reduced consumption inequality since 2011-12, in terms of consumption patterns of the population. In terms of the Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality, the report (without separating the consumption and income inequality-based estimates) has placed India among the top four least unequal countries. These findings have created quite a stir, as the media and the public are accustomed to reports claiming very high inequality in India. What has happened?

What it is based on
The World Bank’s claims about the Indian inequality are based on the official Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) data for 2022-2023. This data is collected using the modified mixed reference period (MMRP) method, which employs the state-of-the-art statistical technique. As the World Bank report correctly observes, “The MMRP is considered an improvement and alignment with international best practices...” The World Bank has adjusted the Indian data to account for some but not all government-provided free goods and services.

The World Bank finds that during 2011-12 and 2022-23, India registered a major decline in consumption inequality; in this period, the consumption-based Gini coefficient dropped from 28.8 to 25.5.

Critics of the report argue that the World Bank has underestimated the inequality, as the HCES data does not capture consumption by the rich. It is a valid critique, but India is not an exception. This limitation applies to all survey data in all countries and, in itself, does not question the broad ranking of countries. Even if we discount the precision of the World Bank’s inequality estimates, a significant improvement in India’s international ranking is a fact. Of course, we should not confuse consumption inequality with income inequality.

The decrease in India’s consumption inequality is substantial and indisputable. To address the data issue, let us assume that the problem of missing elite consumption is more pronounced in India – say, the HCES rounds do not capture consumption by the top 5% families at all. In that case, going by the consumption expenditure data, it is irrefutable that the consumption inequality has decreased between 2011-12 and 2022-23 for the remaining 95% of the



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Even if the precision of the World Bank’s inequality estimates is discounted, a significant improvement in India’s international ranking is a fact

population covered in HCES data.

The HCES data show that the country’s consumption basket is healthier today than ever. Between 2012 and 2023, the per capita availability of milk and eggs has increased by 45% and 63%, respectively. The availability of fruits, vegetables and protein products has increased. The share of cereals in the food bill, as well as calorie intake, has decreased, while that of healthier products has increased, for all strata. All this improves the diet for the 95%, rather than the richest groups, whose consumption already matches the best in the world.

The dietary intake improvements are most striking for the bottom 20% of households in rural and urban areas, even if we ignore the free food and cash transfers received by these groups. The share of rural households consuming fresh fruits (to a different frequency) has increased from 63.8% in 2011-12 to 90% in 2023.

The 2022-23 and 2023-24 rounds of consumption data irrefutably demonstrate that extreme poverty has been almost eradicated. Whether we use the Rangarajan, Tendulkar, or the multi-dimensional poverty index of NITI Aayog, poverty has declined significantly. Based on the International Poverty Line of \$3 between 2011 and 2023, India has pulled around 27 crore people out of extreme poverty.

Independently, the nightlight data show a significant increase in ownership rates of pucca homes and paved roads in rural areas over the last 10 years, owing to the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. Among the poorest 20% of households, more than 40% own a vehicle today, compared to just 6% in 2011-12. This enables rural workers to work part-time in nearby cities without having to migrate. If we factor in these and the other policies targeted at the bottom of the pyramid, such as Ayushman Bharat, the aggregates of welfare for the poor would look even better.

Examining income levels
True, it is important to examine income inequality separately from consumption inequality. There is no official income survey data yet. The mainstream media and commentators use the income shares of the top 1%, as estimated by the World Inequality Lab (WIL) to argue that the income inequality is very high in India, disregarding critical limitations of these estimates.

Given the lack of data on income distribution, the WIL uses the income tax data to estimate top income levels. They use the old consumption data and estimates of the income-consumption relationship to estimate income for low- and middle-income households. The latter estimates unrealistically assume that consumption expenditure exceeds income for 70%-80% of households. How can it be that all families,

except the top 20-30%, spend more than they earn, year after year?

As an inevitable consequence of using such an implausible assumption, the income of the bottom 80% gets underestimated. This reduces their estimated share of national income. Conversely, shares of top income groups are overestimated.

Even if we ignore these limitations, we do not find an increase in income inequality. Taking the WIL estimates as they stand, the national income shares of the bottom 50% have increased from 13.9% in 2017 to 15% in 2022. During the same period, the share of the top 10% has decreased from 58.8% to 57.7%.

The high national income shares of the top 1% are a matter of concern. However, since 2017, the income shares of the top 1% have increased by only 0.3 percentage points. Research by this writer indicates that a part of this increase is attributable to improved income reporting by affluent groups in response to the Centre’s anti-tax evasion measures since 2016-17. Better reporting should not be mistaken for increased inequality.

Furthermore, the WIL inequality estimates used by the media and commentators are based on pre-tax income levels. However, it is the post-tax and post-subsidy/transfer income that matters to people. Therefore, to be meaningful, income inequality estimates should be based on the post-tax rather than the pre-tax income. For instance, in the assessment year 2023-24, the top 1% of all taxpayers accounted for 72.77% of the total tax paid. Even in the individual category, the top 1% paid 42% of the total tax paid.

Arguably, wealthy individuals should pay more taxes, but the point is that even at the existing tax rates, the actual post-tax income of top-income taxpayers is only 65%-75% of the levels used in headline-grabbing estimates. For low-income groups, in contrast, the income levels used are smaller than the actual effective income, which is higher, due to the all-time high welfare transfers that account for more than 8% of GDP. On a post-subsidy, post-tax income basis, over the last decade, we will find a decrease in income inequality in recent years.

The other story about India
Admittedly, we must travel a long way before we can claim to be an egalitarian society. Inequality in accessing quality health and education is a serious concern. For a country of our size and diversity, inevitably, there are many lived realities. However, the story of India is not just about poverty and inequality any more; it is about progress and aspirations too. While being mindful of the current problems and challenges ahead, let us also celebrate the country’s successes.

The views expressed are personal

The mental health of pilots is the elephant in the room

Subsequent to the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau’s release of its preliminary report of the accident involving an Air India Boeing 787 flight at Ahmedabad on June 12, 2025, there has been a lot of debate on social media platforms and YouTube channels about pilot involvement. This has, in turn, led to further discussion on the sensitive topic of the mental health of pilots. While one should not indulge in speculation about the cause of the accident until the final report is published, there is no better time than now to examine this topic, which is, unfortunately, considered taboo.

Though there have been at least 19 documented cases of pilot suicides, where pilots used aircraft to end their own lives and those of others, it was the Germanwings disaster (flight 9525 in March 2015) which served as a wake-up call about pilot mental health. In this accident, the investigation revealed that the captain had left the cockpit and the copilot used this time to fly the Airbus A320 into a mountain killing all 150 passengers on board.

Factors in the life of a pilot
Pilots, by nature, are a group of people who will not accept any form of human weakness willingly and will instead opt to bear the rough ride and hide their pain. Added to this are the consequences of any voluntary disclosure, which could mean the end of the pilot’s career. In addition to the normal stressors that the general public are exposed to, there are other factors unique to the profession which place undue demands both on a pilot at the physiological level and the psychological level. In the course of their job, pilots are expected to “sleep to order” in unfamiliar locations that are spread across various time zones. However, this is next to impossible and, obviously, results in long periods of wakefulness and sleep debt. Frequent changes in the roster also disturb a pilot’s work-life balance, in turn affecting relationships with other members of the pilot’s family. In addition, escalating training costs and stagnant salaries impose financial pressures. With the widespread



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Airline managements and regulators need to adopt a very progressive attitude on this sensitive topic

use of social media, people in general are exposed to more depressing events. These affect all of us – pilots are also human beings and, therefore, not immune to it. The stress of modern living in cities also throws up its own set of challenges.

How airline managements can help crew
A study by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, U.S. (which included Joseph G. Allen, Associate Professor of Exposure Assessment Science), titled “Airplane pilot mental health and suicidal thoughts”, conducted a cross-sectional descriptive study using an anonymous web-based survey. Analysis of the study showed that 12.6% of the pilots who answered the survey crossed the threshold of criteria for having depression, and an astonishing 4.1% said they considered suicide within the preceding two weeks.

Airline operators can play a major role in alleviating the stress on aircrew. For example, there can be policies that allow pilots to proceed on paid leave when going through life-changing events such as divorce, the loss of a loved one, attending to a sick child or even taking care of a child who has learning difficulties. The majority of pilots have a high degree of resilience and it will only be a very small minority who may opt for leave citing such circumstances – this is not going to cause a dent in the finances of the company. A minor short-term issue can be prevented from escalating into a serious problem.

Though there is no evidence that the captain of the Malaysian Airlines flight, MH370 (March 2014), committed suicide, it was reported that he had marital problems and was living a lonely life. Airlines should have very active peer support programmes that are managed solely by pilot groups. The social stigma associated with this should be removed and steps should be taken to improve the trust between aviation medical specialists and the pilots. Another very pragmatic approach is to permit pilots diagnosed with certain conditions to continue flying as long as they receive treatment. It is better to know and

monitor than not knowing. A person could function very safely with aviation-approved medication and regular follow up. As the Federal Air Surgeon of the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said in 2022, “Early treatment is a win-win: the person gets help more quickly; typically, the symptoms are less severe and obtaining a special issuance is more likely to be successful.”

In the United States, the FAA has finally acknowledged that there is a problem and recently established a Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances Aviation Rulemaking Committee which is expected to make major changes.

Changes in the system
India’s regulator, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), should adopt a very progressive attitude towards finding a solution. Requiring pilots to undergo detailed mental health tests will only be counterproductive and impose more mental burdens on the pilots. There are severe limitations in objectively assessing mental health and if the test is subjective without specific criteria, it will only open up more issues. People with mental health conditions might go without being diagnosed and others could be misdiagnosed. The most pragmatic solution will be to educate pilots to recognise signs of depression in their colleagues. Flight instructors can be an important link in this as they get to see the difficulties experienced by trainees much before other peers.

The Union Ministry of Health should also enact legislation defining rules that require health-care providers to inform the appropriate authorities when a patient’s health is very likely to impact public safety, while, at the same time, protecting the patient’s personal/private data from unnecessary disclosure. While we may not be able to completely eliminate the risk, we can effectively manage the risks by a balanced approach and following best practices.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A musical bond
The article, “The musical bond”, which covered the conversation between mridangam maestro Umayalpuram Sivaraman and Marxist leader M.A. Baby, at *The Hindu* office (Friday Review, July 18)

took me back in time. Comrade A.S.R. Chari (Delhi), an eminent barrister, was so fond of Carnatic music that every year he would arrange for a programme of Chamber music in his sprawling bungalow in Defence

Colony. He was a close friend of Flute Mali. I attended a performance of Mali in his house where Mali played the Kapi Rag for four hours – it was the favourite Rag of Chari. **Indira Parthasarathy,** Chennai

Clean city
It is commendable that Indore has been recognised for sustained cleanliness

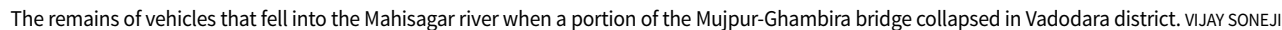
(Page 1, July 18). No programme can become a success without the wholehearted cooperation


Corrections & Clarifications
Bilaspur is a city in Chhattisgarh, and not in Madhya Pradesh, as given in a report, “Ahmedabad tops cleanliness chart for cities above 10 lakh population in India” (July 18, 2025).

of the people. Every city and municipal corporation must emulate Indore’s success story. **Kshirasagara Balaji Rao,** Hyderabad

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

Falling through the cracks





A thought for today
I can buy myself flowers
Write my name in the sand
Talk to myself for hours
MILEY CYRUS, song

Gene Studio

Tinkering to save lives is good, to satisfy whims bad

In news from UK, eight babies have three parents each – Papa, Mummy-I and Mummy-II. Mummy-II remains anonymous, and won't get a seat in baby's birthday photos, college convocation, wedding, etc. Baby doesn't look much like Mummy-II either because she only pitched in with 0.1% – that's 1 in 1,000 parts – of baby's DNA. But that jot of genetic material will be crucial for baby's survival. Which is the whole point of "mitochondrial replacement", as the breakthrough technique is called. It's not about making designer babies with blue eyes and blonde hair, but preventing mitochondrial disease that affects about 1 in 5,000 babies, and is incurable. So, don't lose sleep over it.

Besides, "designing" babies hardly requires cutting-edge technology. Sperm banks promise it with nothing more than self-attested declarations. In 2009, a Los Angeles fertility clinic caused a furore by letting parents' choose their children's skin, hair and eye colours through the IVF equivalent of a "brute force attack" – analysing embryos for desired traits before implantation. Chinese scientist He Jiankui used the admittedly very advanced method of gene editing to make designer babies in 2018, and spent three years in jail for it. But he's out now, and "warmly welcomed" by US investors, he told SCMP last month. He might, conceivably, succeed this time.

But prospective clients should consider how their designer babies might turn out to be like nouveau riche mansions – glass facade, Mughal dome and aeroplane-shaped water tank on the roof. Or as GB Shaw supposedly told a famous dancer, who wanted a baby with his intellect and her looks: "Yes, but supposing it had your brains and my beauty."

Get Your Story Out

Authorities must learn the art of good press briefing

AIB was upset enough over a report published on Thursday to issue a statement against alleged 'misreporting' of its preliminary probe report into last month's crash of a Dreamliner in Ahmedabad. AAIB said its preliminary report had addressed only the WHAT of the crash, and incorrect conclusions were being reported. Soon after AAIB's briefing, Indian pilots' association criticised AIIB report's 'tone'. More questions were raised than answered. The nub of communication is that audiences interpret the facts presented in the manner intended by the communicator. And it is that standard and quality of communication that Indian authorities often fail to deliver. What investigators believed they put out was not what the world heard.

This isn't the first time this has happened. In the recent conflict between India and Pakistan, the single powerful communication delivered on point was 'no escalation'. There were no mistaken takes on New Delhi's restraint. But authorities failed to address questions on fighter jets, allowing a flood of speculation. In a connected world, when high value news hits headlines, you can't control the narrative. Authorities couldn't avoid the question when some of India's military seniors spoke of the issue weeks later.

But when the issue at stake is civil aviation security, every word, every phrase, will be weighed and measured even more. Had communication on AAIB's prelim report been weighty and substantial, instead of providing 'trailers' and having media turn to 'sources', it would've killed the opportunity for possibly tendentious briefings. There's no point crying misreporting when the fault lies with the initial inadequate press briefing.

How To Live Long, Minus Disease

Fasting, personalised nutrition, regular exercise

Longevity is the new new holy grail. Naturally, therefore, the market offers magic diets, pills and exercises promising a sure-shot path to healthy nineties – and beyond. Thing is, the science of longevity is still largely a mystery. **Outlive: The Science & Art Of Longevity** by Peter Attia breaks it all down helpfully. Turns out we intuitively know some of the hows, but we don't quite get the whys.

The problem, Attia says, is with the approach of current medicine – described as Medicine 2.0 – that has become very adept at staving off death by months or years, but not prolonging lifespan or healthspan. This is because modern medicine intervenes too late – when disease has already taken root. What's needed, per the book, is Medicine 3.0, which identifies markers of disease based on a person's unique genetic and medical history, and intervenes way before actual disease sets in. This approach has the potential to change the last bits of most people's lives – 70s or 80s – into productive disease-free years or even bestow us with a bonus decade that could see us make it to healthy nineties.

What's needed though is a system-wide reorientation. Greater medical focus on prevention. And tweaking health insurance so that it covers preventive treatments. Sounds a lot. But the effort is well worth it, the book argues. It addresses the Four Horsemen of bad health – heart disease, cancer, neurodegenerative disease, and Type 2 diabetes and related metabolic dysfunction. Understanding how to keep them at bay is key.

The book offers plenty of scientific clues. For example, one possible longevity gene that has emerged in multiple studies of centenarians is FOXO3 and its variants. The gene

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



actually regulates other genes that maintain cellular health. And guess what! FOXO3 tends to be more active when we are slightly deprived of nutrients or when we are exercising.

Similarly, rapamycin, the miracle molecule that was discovered on remote Easter Island but is now a mainstay of transplant medicine, works on the intracellular protein complex called mTOR, which plays a key role in longevity at the cellular level. When food is plentiful, mTOR is active and cells go into growth mode. When food is scarce, mTOR is suppressed and cells go into recycling or cleaning mode, making them more resilient. This bit of science on cellular mechanisms supports the logic of fasting to promote health.

Exercise is the most powerful longevity drug, the book says. But it's not about strength training vs cardio. Instead, think about the 10 physical activities you want to be doing in your eighth or ninth decade and work back to determine how much fitness you should have now. To lift a 20kg suitcase overhead when you are older means being able to lift a 40kg suitcase now. Exercise can reverse both physical and cognitive decline. And almost any kind of exercise is better than none at all. High aerobic fitness and strength are linked to longer lifespan. The more aerobically fit you are, the more your body will be able to use oxygen to generate ATP – the chemical that powers our cells.

Attia warns against a dogmatic approach to diet and wants the term replaced with nutritional biochemistry. Each of us reacts to food molecules in a different way. So the same diet can produce different results. Hence, nutrition has to be highly personalised and pegged to our own unique health parameters. Decode yourself, eat right, do the brisk daily walk – live long.


NEVER BELIEVE

ALWAYS QUESTION

Ouch...To Be Young

In a major vibe shift, 50-somethings have begun to look at 20-somethings less with jealousy, more with pity. GenNext is falling behind on not just good jobs, but also marriage, migration and parties

Renuka.Bisht@timesofindia.com

 Forever young, I want to be forever young. These words of an Alphaville song have felt anthemic far, far beyond their origins in 1984, West Berlin. They capture the vibe of all of modernity everywhere – age envying youth's energy, idealism, rebellion, fearlessness. But with Gen Z, the digital natives, something is shifting profoundly.

Now 50-somethings look at 20-somethings less with jealousy, more with pity. Sure, they want the abs and acuity, skin and knees of younger persons. They are cracking the code to enjoy all this well past middle age. But younger persons themselves have never had it bleaker in living memory. Once, the future was something GenNext would shape. When their tomorrows look more endangered than our retirement, something's gone wrong.

Scroll the headlines country after country and what do you see? Young people are not finding good jobs, they're losing the desire to have children, they're losing desire itself, they're quiet quitting. India experienced the Great Resignation post Covid. The Japanese have *hikikomori*, withdrawing, often into a single room. The Chinese have *tang ping*, lying flat, plus *bai lan*, letting it rot – both fads rejecting the 996 ratrace.

What's also telling is how much Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* has touched the nerve across societies rich to poor. It's to do with smartphones, social media and now AI fundamentally rewiring childhood and causing an epidemic of mental illness. The 4,14 and 24 year olds deeply immersed in digital lives reject face-to-face interactions. They are out of practice for real intimacy.

Many Indians still dismiss such anxiety. They imagine loneliness as antonymic to crowdedness. Divine raps about being asked, *Pura sheher mere saath phir akela kyun?* How can you feel alone in a city packed with millions? These could be the same people who boast that our youth joblessness is lower than global levels. What even they can't deny is that India's 15-29 unemployment rate hovers three times higher than its elders.

Over in America, recent college graduates are looking at job prospects that have never been worse,

compared to the average worker. Such a poor start may depress their careers and family formation and even health for years. More shockingly, longevity economist Andrew Scott finds that the majority of job growth in rich countries – for a decade! – has been from workers over 50.

Chinese youth too are seeing both jobs and job quality fall. Tellingly, about 3.9mn signed up for the 2025 postgraduate entrance exam, compared to the sub 2mn average in 2010s. Just like their Indian peers, after long years of no play and all study, many



Chad Crowe (USA)

find the work they do sorely mismatched with the work to which they aspired. But one thing sets their condition apart: Chinese youth don't have siblings.

Economic insecurity hits harder when relationships are thinner. It's easier to feel stuck. There's pessimism about being able to break out of the condition one has inherited. The more pessimistic you're about changing your destiny the less motivation there is to even change your address.

Young people's world is of course being shrunk by anti-immigration politics. But internal migration is also trending down. In India, this is suggested by an EAC-PM paper based on railways, mobile roaming and banking data. US's decline in mobility is starker, with

THE GLORIOUS BOREDOM OF TEST CRICKET

The ongoing India-England series is a quiet resurrection of the classical form of the game

Partha Sinha



There was a time, not too long ago, when cricket started to resemble a badly dubbed action film. Overloaded with explosions, starved of script. The game got faster, louder, and somehow emptier.

In trying to make cricket more 'watchable', we quietly removed the cricket from cricket. T20 was the gateway drug. IPL was the overdose. What remained was a sport that dressed like cricket but talked like TikTok. Bollywood's mascara on baseball's pace. Everything became a number: Strike rates, economy rates, impact scores. If you couldn't clear the ropes every five balls, you were baggage. Bowlers were reduced to radar guns. And fielding? That became LinkedIn with turf burns. Dives done more for the CV than the scoreboard.

Administrators, armed with dashboards and delusions, thought they'd cracked the code for modern viewership. What they built, however, was a penalty shootout pretending to be a football match. Drama without context. Climax without narrative. Test cricket, in contrast, felt like a relic. Too long. Too subtle. Too reliant on cloud cover and tea breaks. Draws were mocked. Nuance was something you apologised for.

And yet, like the smell of old paperbacks in a Kindle world, Test cricket endured. Quietly. Proudly. Almost smugly.

And now, it's not just surviving. It's staging a comeback. Not with billboards and hashtags. But in the language of its own making.

This summer's India-England series, set in the soft menace of English grey, has been a slow-burn classic. Bazball's bravado met desi resilience. Muscle met mind. For once, nobody tried to win it in 15 overs. They tried to earn it across five days.

This revival hasn't been marketed. It's been earned. Earned by bowlers who coaxed swing out of damp air. By batters who rediscovered the ancient art of leaving. By captains who set fields like sculptors

shape marble. By curators who produced pitches with personality and patience.

And yes, by tailenders who turned blockathons into theatre. Who made 9 down feel like a prologue, not an epilogue. This last Test offered a full Shakespearean spread – from Siraj's forlorn stagger to Root's gentle shoulder pat, from Jadeja's bruised but unbowed stare to a bear hug from Ben Stokes that felt less like sportsmanship and more like shared authorship.

These are the moments. Not adrenaline. Moments. Ramachandra Guha once said cricket had been



reduced to a television soap. But Test cricket has always been a Victorian novel. Dense, layered, prone to digressions, but utterly rewarding if you stayed till the end.

Here, an 18 from 74 balls can weigh more than a 30-ball fifty. Silence in the crowd is not awkward. It is reverence. The match breathes. And so do we.

We're seeing it again. The things that don't make highlight reels. The soft hands that let a ball die. The bait set four overs earlier. The fielding tweak that pays off an hour later.

Even statisticians, those closet romantics with Excel sheets, have noticed. More matches are producing

the number of Americans who move every year at an all-time low.

What's also lonesome is that loss of confidence in the future is hitting young men and women differently. Politically, for example, they are leaning in opposite directions. This was mostly starkly seen in Germany's general election in Feb, where men aged 18-24 voted 27% for AfD while young women voted 35% for a far-left party.

Maybe the core divide is that young women feel freer than their mothers, while young men miss having their fathers' status. Plus, as new coinages like 'manosphere' to 'misogyny slop ecosystem' underline, social media technologies that have thinned out real, enduring connections have also pulled the sexes apart. Digital segregation means the haloed, youthful and poetic vision of "Ah, love, let us be true to one another...where ignorant armies clash by night" is getting shredded.

Perhaps worse, poetry writing itself is being outsourced to chatbots. Just like student essays. And romantic roleplay. This could turn out to be the surrender of humanity's superpower to the machine. An MIT study has found that ChatGPT use 'unintentionally' hinders authentic engagement with written material and knowledge retention. Simultaneously, AI is crushing the half-life of skills taught in college; it's alarmingly down to two years according to some hiring experts.

True, crystal ball gazing is a mug's game. There are young people who're training their algo thoughtfully. Instead of surrendering their brain to it, highly motivated learners are en-tooling AI like their parents did with computers and internet. Many are making a conscious effort to break the alone-meals doomloop. They're ditching Fortnite and Netflix and Pornhub to go to the movies, hang out. Fathers who embrace childcare lovingly, are making a world where women want to have more children.

Still, yeah, it's not a party in the USA. Over the last two decades, Americans have cut the time they spend at social events by 50%. Since 2020, 37% of all UK clubs have shut down. Many Indians would point to big fat Indian weddings etc and say our country has an altogether different energy. What's worrying is how many of our young people are, cognitively and geographically, living less adventuresome lives than their parents. The unsociable could yet become the prevailing social value. Youth really is in danger of losing its vibe.

results. Fewer are ending in truce by boredom. And in the stands, bucket-hatted teens with memes and match apps are discovering that not everything viral is valuable.

This England-India series has been a reminder: Test cricket doesn't reward volume. It rewards intelligence. It rewards memory.

David Frith once said, "Test cricket is the only sport where doing nothing – leaving the ball – is sometimes the most intelligent act." Only here can restraint be heroic. Only here is time not just a constraint, but a character:

As Ashis Nandy once noted, cricket allowed colonised nations to domesticate colonialism through leisure. And perhaps now, Test cricket lets us rebel against the tyranny of speed and scroll. It is the long read in a world of swipes.

It didn't evolve. It outlasted. So here we are. Back to sessions that feel like chapters. Back to long shadows, short tempers, and scoreboards that move like glacial novels. Back to a spell where the ball does just enough, and the batter knows it.

Test cricket didn't need a rebrand. It needed a re-remembering.

Let the others chase slo-mo sixes and memeable celebrations. We'll take the fifth evening at The Oval. The field drawn in. The cordon crouched. And something unsaid in the air – not just tension, but meaning.

Because in Test cricket, the poetry isn't in the punctuation. It's in the pause.

In the leave. In the silence. In the plan that unfolds like a sentence waiting for its verb.

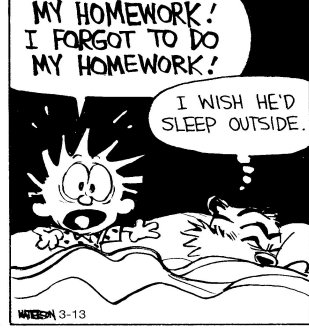
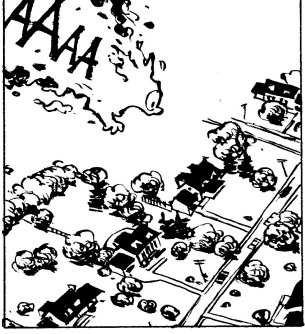
And when it all comes together – when a trap set on day one springs on day five – it doesn't explode. It blooms. Like a novel finding its final sentence.

For the content purists, this is not nostalgia. It is homecoming.

Test cricket isn't trending. It's transcending. It was never gone. We just scrolled past it.

The writer is a senior advisory professional

Calvin & Hobbes



True Leaders Work From Their Core Strength

Jaya Row

Some people are born leaders. Others are pushed into leadership by circumstances. But everyone has the potential to become a great leader. The qualities just need to be awakened through continuous learning, intentional self-effort and experience.

Throughout history, there have been outstanding leaders in every field – military generals, business moguls, political activists, and social reformers. Yet, the most impactful leaders have been spiritual masters, whose influence outlives their time. When you tap into the Spirit within, you rise above physical limitations, emotional baggage, and intellectual prejudices. You breathe an ethereal air.

Ancient India was led by *rajarishis*, royal sages, who held immense wealth and power; yet remained wise and

centred within. At the heart of great leadership lies a higher ideal. A leader sees beyond personal gain, beyond "I, me, mine."

The *Bhagwad Gita* guides us to work in the spirit of *yajna* – sacrifice and service for a noble cause. In this mindset, success and happiness follow naturally, and you begin to grow into your true potential. Constricted by selfishness, success eludes you. And happiness and growth remain distant dreams.

True leaders work from their core strength, inner calling. They are guided by the sane counsel of the intellect and not swayed by the whims and fancies of the mind. The mind, the seat of emotions, is fickle, irrational, and unreliable. The intellect is steady, rational and dependable. A leader loves his people, is ready to sacrifice for them, but the

intellect guides, supervises and controls emotions.

Leadership is hard work, but it never feels like drudgery when fuelled by inspiration. When you are uninspired, you experience boredom. The same work, driven by a powerful emotional motivation, becomes exciting. You break through physical barriers. You become enthusiastic, energetic and creative. Driven by an intellectual ideal, you smash through even emotional hang-ups and achieve the impossible. And when you take the mighty leap into the Spirit, all barriers break down.

One of the most powerful traits of a leader is their sense of oneness with others. Most people live in mental islands of separation. A true leader breaks through this illusion. If a leader is consumed by hatred and rivalry, how

can they uplift society? Great leaders see beyond divisions. They find common ground and build unity.

Look at others not as opponents but as partners. Focus on the values that unite us, not on the differences that divide us. Feel for people, work for them, and you will be amply rewarded. Shivaji, the great Maratha ruler, and his trusted lieutenant, Tanaji, were like brothers. This bond enabled Tanaji to win the battle against a larger, better-equipped Mughal army.

A leader must be objective and rise above partisan, prejudiced views. Take a step back and view the situation from an outsider's perspective. Act as if your life depends on it, knowing that it does not matter. As Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage, and all men and women mere players. They have their exits and their entrances." You have a role to play. Play it to the best of your ability. And exit when the time comes.

Sacredspace



How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, "This is better than we thought!"

The universe is much bigger than our prophets said... Instead, they say, "My god is a little god, and i want him to stay that way."

Carl Sagan

Big Tech ‘Acquihiring’ is an ugly but useful trend



PARMY OLSON

If you're a venture capitalist, you dream of backing the next billion-dollar startup to one day feast on the returns of a sale. The buyer? A gargantuan tech company, of course. But these days, Big Tech isn't buying so much as "acqui-hiring" the most promising artificial intelligence (AI) firms, specialised deals that scoop up the indus-

try's hottest talent while avoiding antitrust scrutiny, often by leaving behind business operations, aka the husk of a company. The phenomenon has been great for tech giants who can remove potential rivals more cheaply, but it's left venture capital investors in a rut with fewer returns than they would have expected from a traditional sale or even an initial public offering (IPO). How they react could set the whole industry on a different path and if we're lucky, a better one.

One reaction to the trend has been to grumble. "I dislike this phenomenon," says Ali Ojeh, chairman of Northgate Capital, a venture capital firm with \$5 billion of committed capital. Mr Ojeh was an early personal investor in Inflection AI, whose 70-strong team was acquired by Microsoft last year. Inflection promised its investors

would be made whole, and they were, but with modest returns. Much the same happened with Scale AI, when Meta Platforms bought a 49 per cent stake in the firm for \$14.3 billion and hired its chief executive officer, Alexandr Wang, to head Mark Zuckerberg's new Superintelligence Labs division. Acqui-hires are nothing new. For well over a decade, large tech firms like Alphabet Inc's Google, Microsoft and Meta typically paid a few million dollars to hire talented engineers and product teams from small, early-stage startups, leaving their investors with modest or no returns. But the generative AI arms race supercharged that strategy, beginning with Microsoft's Inflection deal in 2024, and it has deflated the blockbuster returns that venture investors count on to drive their portfolios. The venture capital industry's so-called

power-law model means payoffs for investors usually come from just one or two runaway successes like Inflection or Scale AI. But if a hot startup like Scale gets a \$14.3 billion investment instead of a \$29 billion sale in a traditional acquisition, the difference means a fund returns just two times its investors' money instead of four times. What if the acquiring trend becomes a permanent fixture? The mergers and acquisitions teams at tech giants are no doubt exploring all manner of hybrid deals that could help this new playbook keep working over the coming years, especially as antitrust regulators show no sign of softening. More acquihires would further entrench their dominance and be bad for the industry. But what if in the long term it led to a healthier market? Instead of pushing startups to get the

highest possible valuation for a sale, VCs in an acquiring market would prefer firms with a greater chance of running a long-term business and floating on the public markets. Strategic sales to Big Tech have always offered a premium over IPOs, but when such sales are less likely, going public becomes the more viable option. That could put venture investors on the hunt for startups with more sustainable businesses, not just those with a pitch deck promising hockey-stick growth and a total addressable market the size of Canada. That would be better than today's market dynamics. For all the money the power-law model has made for renowned firms like Sequoia Capital and Greylock Ventures, it has led to a cascade of negative outcomes for the public and wider market. VCs have pushed startups to move fast and break things, to blitzscale so they can dominate a market before competitors catch up. The costs have been high for both the market and public, from social media addic-

tion to poorly treated workers and vanishing competition, as the book *The World Eaters* by Catherine Bracy vividly lays out. Venture firms, in one way, have brought these latest frustrations on themselves by relying for so long on just a couple of big exits to drive their fund returns. That model has helped extend Big Tech's financial dominance, such that nearly half of the S&P 500's earnings growth in 2025 comes from a handful of tech giants. But sometimes actions lead to unintended consequences. In her quest to strengthen antitrust oversight of Big Tech, former Federal Trade Commission Chair Lina Khan may have inadvertently led tech companies to avoid scrutiny with just another flavour of anticompetitive behaviour. Yet, while their new acquihire trend may be an ugly one for the industry, it could also paradoxically spawn something better for everyone. Let's hope that's the case. war. Bloomberg

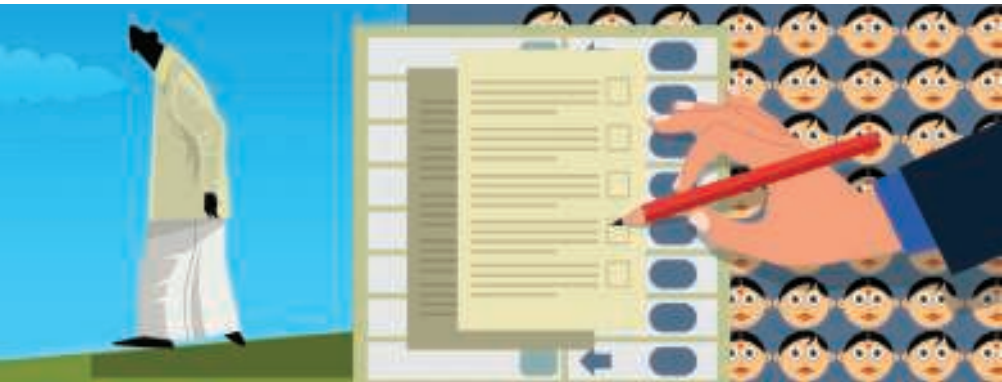


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

To SIR, with reservations



PLAIN POLITICS ADITI PHADNIS

When the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) last week approached the Election Commission of India (ECI) to register its reservations over the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, thus adding its voice to the Opposition, many said relations between the TDP and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had begun to unravel and it was just a matter of time before the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would come unstuck. The TDP's 16 members of Parliament are crucial for the NDA government, given that at 293 the alliance is just 21 seats more than the majority mark of 272.

While that could be a hasty deduction, this much is true. Over the role and powers of the ECI in revising electoral rolls, there is striking similarity between the arguments forwarded by the TDP and those of the Opposition. The TDP says it is not the ECI's job to decide citizenship and revision must be limited to electoral roll "re-correction and inclusion". Seeking proof of citizenship was not warranted, either, "unless specific and verifiable reasons are recorded". This is not the first time electoral-roll revision has become a political issue in Andhra Pradesh. In 2018-19, then Opposition leader Jagannathan Reddy of the YSR Congress charged that nearly six

million "fake" voters had been added to the electoral rolls by then ruling TDP, designed to skew the results in its favour. This resulted in a High Court direction to the ECI to audit the rolls, which happened subsequently. Mr Reddy won a landslide victory: Whether because of the charges he made or despite them we will never know. The loss led to internal course correction in the TDP. Andhra Pradesh has a 10 per cent Muslim population, which can significantly affect prospects in specific constituencies in Guntur, Krishna, Nellore districts, and Rayalaseema. The TDP had walked out of the NDA in 2018 on the issue of denial of special status to Andhra Pradesh. But when it returned to the alliance before the 2024 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections (held simultaneously), it was acutely conscious of the sensitivities of Muslim voters. In the course of the election campaign, Chandrababu Naidu sought to reassure the Muslims their interests would not be hurt by the alliance. He promised many new initiatives for the community if the coalition came to power, including a Haj subsidy, ₹5,000 every month for mosque maintenance, and the Dulhan scheme, which promised ₹1 lakh to Muslim brides. He also vowed retention of the 4 per cent reservation for the Muslims (carved out of the quota for Other Backward Classes, or OBCs). Not in Andhra Pradesh but in neighbouring Telangana, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a speech: "As long as Modi is alive, I will not let reservations of Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs be given to Muslims on the basis of religion." Now, with an alliance with the BJP that has yielded two Union ministries, the TDP is treading

softly but assertively. The possible disenfranchisement of voters is a live issue. Unlike Bihar or West Bengal, there are few illegal immigrants in Andhra Pradesh although bureaucrats concede the documentary evidence of citizenship like birth certificates is a "data nightmare". The BJP too is being careful. Despite its best efforts, its vote share in the state has never crossed 3 per cent. The appointment of PV N Madhav earlier this week as state BJP president, replacing D Purandeswari, was a strategic choice. Mr Purandeswari had done just two years as BJP state chief but many thought she was constricted by family and caste connections. Mr Madhav, by contrast, is an OBC of Akhila Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) stock and has been with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh throughout his political career. His task is to grow the party in the state without alienating the TDP so that the BJP has a respectable presence in the state by 2029. The BJP has demonstrated in a variety of ways that its alliance is still stable. Ashok Gajapathi Raju was named governor of Goa after the TDP met the ECI. Mr Raju has been a staunch and trusted TDP supporter who has held important portfolios in the state government between 1999 and 2004. The ₹15,000 crore allocation in 2025-26 Budget to develop Amaravati, with the promise of more to come, renders the debate over "special category state" politically irrelevant. The real test will be the upcoming monsoon session of Parliament and a discussion on SIR. Will the TDP say what it believes? And how will the BJP react to that? If a discussion ever happens, we will know the real state of relations between the allies.

Joys of Trumplomacy

Public, loud, upfront, filled with impropriety and high praise, sometimes laced with insults. This is what we call Trumplomacy. But the larger objective is the same: American supremacy

In the name of making America great again, Donald Trump is reviving anti-Americanism in far parts of the world where it had gone into dormancy. His playbook so far has been to publicly ridicule and humiliate allies and flirt with adversaries, theirs and his country's. For us, in India, his loudly and repeatedly claiming credit for stopping the war through intervention and mediation has reopened the old wounds of hyphenation. Those on the Left and in the larger anti-Modi ecosystem are smirking in quiet celebration: What did you expect when you supped with the devil? And who knows, if he does visit India to attend the Quad later this year, he may (more likely than not) make a stopover in Pakistan too. For him, old rules of diplomacy do not apply. If India is irritated by what it calls hyphenation, it is India's problem. Why should it make the rules for him?

In at least four statements, he has mentioned Narendra Modi and Field Marshal Asim Munir in the same sentence. The latest, on June 19, where he said the Pakistani general — very smart man — came for lunch to the White House, and India's Prime Minister Modi — fantastic man, a great friend of mine — etc etc etc.

Here we were slipping into neurosis because he was re-hyphenating us with Pakistan. Now he is hyphenating Modi with Munir. What a calamity. I would counsel a deep breath, some restraint, a rethink, and also a smile. If Trump is hyphenating Munir with Modi, who should be complaining most of all? Shouldn't it be poor Shehbaz Sharif, the prime minister who gave Munir his fifth star, field marshal's baton? At least on paper, if it is worth anything in that Constitution, the field marshal still reports to the prime minister. Even during the Op Sindoor facilitation (word I prefer to the more triggering mediation or intervention), Sharif only heard from Secretary of State Marco Rubio. His counterpart, to that extent, was S Jaishankar, the external affairs minister of India. Sharif should've been the guy crying about this hyphenation. He won't dare. No American leader has called out the Pakistani reality and hypocrisy as rudely and truthfully as Trump. Think this over calmly. For decades, India has maintained that Pakistani democracy is a farce and the real power resides in its army. In his apparent love fest with Pakistan, Trump is only endorsing that position. In a way he is



NATIONAL INTEREST SHEKHAR GUPTA

doing your job, endorsing your deeply held belief. Trump's predecessors were not foolish. They knew this reality and yet kept on batting to (or at least pretend to) restore and strengthen democracy in Pakistan across these decades. For Trump, those old-fashioned pretences are, to use his favourite word now on X/Truth-Social, especially when upbraiding his own loyal base, "bullshit." He talks straight. No bullshit. He will deal with whoever calls the shots in any country. That, in the course of time, should be India's approach too. If Trump runs his domestic politics through clumsily written, stream-of-consciousness social media posts, with grammar and spelling so bad he would crash out of our UPSC prelims, he sees no reason why diplomacy should get any privileged treatment. He's bored with the old diplomacy of subtle hints and persuasion, one thing in private, and another in public. The upshot is, you can't trust him to keep any confidences. See, for example, National Secretary General (and former Dutch prime minister) Mark Rutte's fawning note to Trump, which he immediately screenshot and made public. The Europeans were shocked. This is exactly what he wants: Shock and awe. The world must feel his, and America's power, and acknowledge it. Rutte only went to an extreme in his sycophancy by topping up his note by asking Nato leaders to see Trump as their "daddy." Any time you feel aggrieved, check out how he's treated all his closest allies. He invited Canada to become the US' state and get full security, including from "Russian and Chinese ships surrounding you", zero tariffs and low taxes. He called Justin Trudeau governor, and repeated the 51st state idea to new Prime Minister Mark Carney. Even when he said "never", Trump responded, "never say never." Can you imagine Trump sitting with Modi and saying, I think you should resolve that thousand-year war over Kashmir, each side keep what you have and be happy? He's said worse to Canada, his treaty-bound ally. Trump's is an insurgency against conventional diplomacy. When he wants Hamas to stop fighting, he says Gaza will be gifted to America and he will build a great river there. He posts AI-generated memes of chilling on that beachfront. He's negotiating with Iran, but when Israeli attacks are going well, wants

Lost for words

EYE CULTURE KUMAR ABISHEK

Languages die not with a bang but a whimper: Word by word, speaker by speaker, until there's no one left to pass them on. "Languages have no existence without people," wrote British linguist David Crystal in *Language Death*, capturing how spoken tongues fade. In India, over 250 languages have vanished in five decades, and nearly 400 more are facing extinction, according to the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI). Unesco lists 197 Indian languages as endangered. This is cultural deletion. Most language loss happens not by force but by choice. It begins when a parent drops Kurukh in favour of Hindi, believing it will help their child succeed. It continues when schools ignore Irula, Bhojpuri, or Kui — and punish students for using their native tongue. Today, children are more likely to recite "Twinkle Twinkle" than "*Machli Jal Ki Rani Hai*", let alone a rhyme in Bhili or Dogri. Language slips when bureaucracy prizes Sanskritised Hindi or English, and scoffs at Bagheli or Awadhi. The message is unmistakable: Your language lacks worth. And eventually, people internalise that belief. The market doesn't reward poetry in Kokborok. It rewards the language of commerce and governance — English, Hindi, or whichever language the power speaks. Then there's the digital gap: Over 90 per cent of web content exists in just 10 languages, mainly English. Indian languages barely feature. Saimar, once spoken in Tripura,

now has fewer than 10 speakers, not due to disaster but because it was never taught in schools, printed in books, or supported by tech. Kui, in Odisha, can't be typed on WhatsApp; it lacks Unicode support. You'll find more Khasi etched on gravestones than on YouTube. Languages vanish fast. Much of this decay feels inevitable — but much of it is by design. Take Hindi, not the informal Hindi of Delhi's streets, but the standardised, textbook version made the Union's official language in 1947. This Hindi, based on Khari Boli (a dialect once thought unrefined), was elevated by colonial officials and nationalists. Urdu, its sibling shaped by Persian influences, was labelled "foreign". In 1881, Hindi in Devanagari became Bihar's official language, replacing Urdu. That set a pattern: Alternative scripts were abandoned, "dialects" downgraded, and a sanitised "Raj Bhasha" took root. This streamlining erased diversity. Scripts like Kaithi, once widespread in Bihar and eastern UP, vanished from courts and classrooms. The Modi script of Maharashtra was replaced by Devanagari. Tirhuta, once used for Maithili, now survives mainly in stone inscriptions and nostalgia. When scripts die, cultural memory dies. Old records, legal documents — all become unreadable. A community loses access to its own past. Southern India isn't immune to glottophagy — a dominant language consuming smaller ones. Tamil Nadu is witnessing slow death of Toda, Kota, Irula, and Kurumba — tribal tongues older than formalised Tamil, spoken in the Nilgiris and Western Ghats — not due to

Hindi, but due to Tamil's institutional power. Schools don't teach them. Textbooks leave them out. In Karnataka, Kannada prospers while Tulu, Kodava, and Beary decline. In Kerala, Malayalam flourishes while tribal languages like Paniya and Eravallan fade. All this is more than cultural vandalism; it's intellectual loss. Dialects and tribal tongues hold ecological knowledge, traditional medicine, oral histories, philosophies — things mainstream languages can rarely replicate. When Manoj Tiwari sings the Bhojpuri sohar "*Hind Ke Sitara*" in *Panchayat*, no textbook Hindi can convey the emotional universe it evokes, rooted in parental dreams and local metaphor. When Irula elders map the forest through songs, they encode navigation, climate data and memory into words that risk vanishing. What can be done? First, stop pretending English is the only path to modernity. Countries like Norway, Japan, and South Korea have thriving local languages and strong scientific outputs. Studies show that children taught in their mother tongue alongside English do better in both. Second, invest in tech that supports local languages — Unicode, machine translation. Build a digital India that speaks in its native languages, not just about them. And finally, document. Tell stories. Record your grandmother's lullabies. Archive folk songs and idioms that never made it to the syllabus. "We are truly a linguistic democracy," says Ganesh Devy of PLSI, who identified 780 Indian languages (*bbc.com*). "To keep our democracy alive, we have to keep our languages alive." Perhaps it's time we put the tongue back in our mouth, not on someone else's leash.

Wimbledon: Real or reel?



YES, BUT... SANDEEP GOYAL

Wimbledon this summer became the No 1 destination for India's cricket glitterati. Virat Kohli was there. Sachin Tendulkar was there too — both in the Royal Box. Jasprit Bumrah, Suryakumar Yadav, Ajinkya Rahane, Ravi Shastri, Deepak Chahar and Rishabh Pant were also at Wimbledon 2025 — all of them graced SW19 and made every effort to proclaim their presence to the world, at least through their social media handles. The grass court tennis grand slam that ended last Sunday kept with its long-standing tradition and brought with it global stars from sport, music, fashion, and film, turning heads with elegant dresses, tailored suits, and plenty of style. Wimbledon is easily the most prestigious tournament in tennis, and comes in a signature blend of fame and omph. For a fortnight each London summer, the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club becomes more

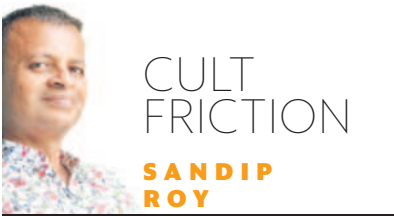
than just a battleground for Grand Slam glory; it transforms into a stage where fashion meets tradition and celebrity meets Centre Court. And this year, India cornered a disproportionate share of Wimbledon glamour — driven perhaps by the need of its celebrity class to be seen and liked by millions of their Insta followers. As always, the Royal Box delivered on spectacle. Guests turned heads with designer dresses, stylish neckties, and the ever-essential sunglasses. Queen Camilla, the wife of King Charles III, was at the Royal Box to watch a quarterfinal match. Britain's quintessential romantic hero, Hugh Grant, too, had a spot at Wimbledon. The legendary Billie Jean King also graced the Royal Box. Cate Blanchett attended with her mother. Olivia Rodrigo, fresh from headlining the Glastonbury music festival, too stopped by at Wimbledon. Dave Grohl — the Nirvana drummer attended with his wife, Jordyn Blum. The actress Jodie Foster, and Russell Crowe were there too. No dearth of celebrities. But for us *desi* folks, it was the Indian cricketers who stood out at tennis' Mecca this year. Sachin Tendulkar was pictured socialising with Bjorn Borg and Roger Federer. Virat Kohli and wife Anushka Sharma were there at the Royal Box to watch the legend Novak Djokovic play

— at one point the Serbian was 1-6 down in the first set, prompting Virat to call the Joker "the gladiator" after his gritty comeback. But somehow, both Virat and Anushka looked a bit pre-occupied and off-colour — social media of course connected it to the concurrent presence at the same venue of one scantily clad influencer called Avneet Kaur who wore a Tiger Mist outfit with stylish Hermes bag. No comments. "Boom Boom" Jasprit Bumrah and his wife Sanjana Ganesan couldn't make it to the Royal Box but still enjoyed the action on Centre Court. Suryakumar Yadav was accompanied by his wife Divyasha Shetty. Ravi Shastri came to cheer Carlos Alcaraz — "The Spanish Bull", as he called him. Rishabh Pant came alone. So did Rahane. But Chahar had his wife Jaya Bhardwaj in tow. And yes, cricketers Joe Root, James Anderson, and Brian Lara were there too. Cricketers apart, Ralph Lauren-clad Priyanka Chopra and her husband Nick Jonas were in attendance at the Grand Slam. An elegant Neena Gupta stood out in a well-draped saree, alongside her daughter Masaba — both in white. Lara Dutta Bhupathi too added to the glamour quotient. Urvasi Rautela became the first Indian celebrity to have four Labubus hanging on her Birkin at Wimbledon! Sonam Kapoor went one step

further — she wore vintage reworked Manolo Blahnik heels, which had tiny tennis balls tied to them! And there was javelin champion Neeraj Chopra too at Wimbledon — looking woefully out of place. Is the cricket rush at Wimbledon bigger this year because of the ongoing England Test series — a coincidental convenience of time and location? Or is it because more and more Indian celebrities are becoming increasingly stylish and savvy, learning to look cool and "with it" in global playgrounds of the rich and famous? Are their handlers working to make their personal brands more well-rounded and upmarket? Are these Wimbledon appearances driven by real admiration for the best of tennis, or by the need for an endless supply of Insta moments? To be fair, much like us ordinary folks, celebs too are entitled to enjoy some private escapes — where real life is allowed to eclipse their reel existence. The only quarrel is that these relaxed moments in the audience, or at the Larder or the Cavendish sipping a Pimm's No. 1 or a Sip-smith, or savouring strawberries & cream, or feasting on fish & chips, should not be marketed so heavily in the media or on social media. It tends to cheapen it all, somewhat. The author is chairman of Rediffusion

Civilisation is always in the eye of the beholder

In the former Danish outpost of Tranquebar, dining without cutlery offers a compelling perspective on the true meaning of being civilised



CULT
FRICTION
SANDIP
ROY

At lunch they forgot the cutlery. To be fair, my partner Bishan and I had arrived after normal lunch hours. But the gracious hotel, housed in a beautifully restored 17th century colonial building in Tharangambadi, a former Danish colony on the coast of Tamil Nadu, assured us that was not a problem. We sat on the veranda, next to trees laden with pink and white magnolias, while dragonflies swooped around us, waiting for our fish *kozhambu* (curry) and banana leaf biryani. The food arrived but without plates. When we pointed that out, a flustered waiter ran off to get plates. Later Bishan realised we had no cutlery either. By then the wait staff had vanished as well. “It’s okay,” I said. “We’ll just eat with our hands anyway.” I don’t know what the ghosts of dead Danes surrounding us in Tharangambadi, or Tranquebar as the Danes called it, would have made of our table manners. But eating with your fingers in the age of Zohran Mamdani felt like an assertion of post-colonial cultural pride. After a video surfaced of Mamdani, the man who wants to be New York’s next mayor, eating biryani with his fingers, Texan Congressman Brandon Gill said “civilised people in America don’t eat like this. If you refuse to adopt Western customs, go back to the Third World.” His Indian-origin wife Danielle D’Souza Gill insisted that even she never grew up eating rice with her hands. Civilisation was very much on my mind as we wandered around Tranquebar. This was where the Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau landed in July 1706, the first Protestant

missionaries in India. Their patron was Frederick IV, king of Denmark. Ziegenbalg brought not just Lutheranism but also a printing press. He printed the Bible in Tamil but at the house where he lived, it says the first book printed in Tamil was *Abominable Heathenism* in 1713. Missionary zeal was about the word of God but it also was always about civilising the abominable heathens. Ziegenbalg with his long curly golden hair, is all over the Danish quarter, his name as ubiquitous as Nehru’s. Ziegenbalg Printing Press. The Ziegenbalg Museum of Intercultural Dialogue. The Ziegenbalg Home for Boys. A big street sign proclaims him as a man of many firsts. The first Protestant missionary to India. The first to bring the printing press to India. The first to print the New Testament in Tamil. The first to introduce the free noon meal scheme and a school for girls. The list goes on for some 24 painstakingly compiled items. What it does not mention is why he made the arduous eight-month sea voyage to India despite ill health. It was because his mentor August Hermann Francke, professor of divinity at the University of Halle in Saxony, proposed he kindle the holy spark in “the heathen at Tranquebar”. At the Zion Church in Tranquebar, a sign on the wall commemorates his first five converts, baptised in 1707. In India, history books always open with the Indus Valley Civilisation. That’s roughly 3300-1300 BCE. Since then many other civilisations rose and fell up and down the Indian subcontinent. Yet missionaries still felt they needed to show Indians the light. Tranquebar feels haunted by the ghosts of that exercise in civilisation. It’s a picture-postcard village—golden beach, blue waters of the Bay of Bengal and the houses of the long-departed Danes blindingly white in the hot sun. Many of the houses are being carefully restored. They bear plaques from INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) and the foundations in Denmark. But they are mostly shuttered as if unsure of their purpose



Fort Dansborg, built by the Danish, in Tranquebar.

GETTY IMAGES

in the afterlife. The Commander’s House has become a Maritime museum but it’s half-hearted. One shelf in the display cabinet has a heap of old cameras. Another has “coat buttons from old period”. Yet another has a junk store’s worth of old-school typewriters. Someone put up a display shelf of empty bottles of alcohol—not Danish spirits but more mundane entries like Captain Morgan’s Spiced Rum and Johnnie Walker sitting next to little *murtis* of gods like Krishna. One room has more evidence of the “civilising” mission of colonialism—black and white photographs of the short-lived Danish attempt to colonise the Nicobar islands. The exercise went nowhere. Most of the colonists died from “Nicobar fever”, most likely malaria, and eventually the whole project was abandoned. The only vestige of civilisation left? In one photograph of the Shompen tribe, the men all

discreetly hide their genitals with their hands, so as not to offend the sensibilities of more civilised viewers. The museum sells tiny bottles filled with blue-and-white pieces of Danish pottery to tourists. For ₹300 you can take home the broken shards of civilisation. In his book *Gods, Guns and Missions: The Making of Modern Hindu Identity*, Lounge columnist Manu Pillai recounts many fascinating stories of this clash of civilisations as devout missionaries came upon this teeming country of heathens. Missionaries only had one way to access god, which was through the Bible, says Pillai. So anything that was not god had to be Satan. Pillai writes that it’s likely they turned a temple to the Devi in Calicut into the “Devil of Calicut” because as he says, “people come with their own cultural filters and apply that to an unfamiliar culture to make sense of that culture.” Even those who went native, like Rob-

ert de Nobili who called himself an Italian Brahmin and dressed like a *sanyasi* or Ziegenbalg who translated German hymns into Tamil, were convinced of their superior civilising power. They just felt dressing it up in Hindu clothes would help them sell it better to the Indian masses they wanted to convert. Over time that civilising mission entered deep into the Indian DNA as well. It’s easy to bristle at Brandon Gill. How dare the country that exported the KFC slogan “finger lickin’ good” now call eating with fingers uncivilised? Commentators rightly called out racism with some remembering how French filmmaker Francois Truffaut sneered he didn’t want to see “a movie of peasants eating with their hands” after watching Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali*, which opens with just such a scene. Former parliamentarian Jawahar Sircar pointed out in the *Indian Express* recently that forks were actually unknown to the

West till a Byzantine princess brought them to Venice in the medieval period. The Church at that time saw it as decadent, not in accordance with Christian values because it wasn’t essential to life, rather something brought by “a seductress of the East.” Yet many of the members of Kolkata’s plummy gentlemen’s clubs, civilised by a couple of centuries of exposure to colonial manners, would not be unsympathetic to Brandon Gill. The rules of many of the clubs remain starchy archaic. Civilisation becomes not so much about refinement as it is about aping the manners of the colonial masters. And there are plenty of brown *sahibs* around to ensure old rules live on. But in Tranquebar, the long-departed Danes seem to have left nothing behind other than empty buildings. The Danish fort, once the second largest in the world, is now just a place where Indians take selfies next to the cannons without much regard to its history. A vendor sells fried fish outside, to be eaten with fingers. Whatever civilisation the Danes intended feels like a whitewashed facade of an empty building. But then civilisation is always in the eye of the beholder. No one has a monopoly on it. On that same trip as we had a beer at a small dark bar in Trichy, the waiter kept bringing us little plates of munchies—chickpeas, chilli chicken, slices of boiled eggs, Fryums, *idli* chunks with *poddi*, wedges of watermelon. “So much food!” we cried in alarm. “But it’s complimentary,” the waiter protested. “You must have some *chakna* with your drink.” Used as we were too one measly bowl of salted peanuts with our drinks, whether in Kolkata or in New York, we stared at the veritable picnic spread before us in amazement. Even more surprisingly, I found out later, in Tamil slang *chakna* is called “touchings”, literally food to be eaten with your fingers. It all felt, dare I say it, so very civilised. *Cult Friction* is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr.

Indira's tryst with Emergency

In spite of its research and keen attention to detail, Srinath Raghavan's book fails to capture the voice of its protagonist

Swarna Rajagopalan

I am a child of the Indira Gandhi era. Through my formative years, she was Prime Minister. Until 1977, it never occurred to me that men could aspire to this position. Consider what an amazing reversal this is in a patriarchal, misogynistic society—that a little girl thought that only women could lead her country. Of course, this was always with the chorus of Indian male voices saying derisively, “That woman (this or that) ...” Even back then, I knew that tone was reserved for women—women drivers, women managers, women entrepreneurs and, of course, women Prime Ministers. No matter, as that little girl, I still wanted to be “that woman.” This book is not about “that woman.” The title, *Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India*, is misleading. What it is, is a history of India from 1966-84. The prologue sets the stage, moving between Indira Gandhi’s biography and a potted history of the first one-and-a-half decades after independence. In the first chapter, Srinath Raghavan traces the simultaneous decline of the Congress party’s dominance and Gandhi’s attempt to consolidate her position. It accounts for the economic crises of the mid-1960s and narrates the backstage machinations within the Congress, when Gandhi proved to be not such a “*gungi gudiya*” (or “dumb doll,” as the socialist leader, Ram Manohar Lohia, called her) after all. The fractured mandate of 1967, the split in the Congress party and the 1972 election move the story forward. The detailed reconstruction of all of the attendant intrigue and controversy is quite remarkable. The outstanding chapter in the book—no surprise, given that Raghavan is a military historian—is the one on the 1971 war. The chapter weaves together the emerging story from East Pakistan, the international context and Gandhi’s domestic challenges. If you had not read about this critical year in Indian history, these pages would be the place to start. It segues from the end of the war to the growing power of

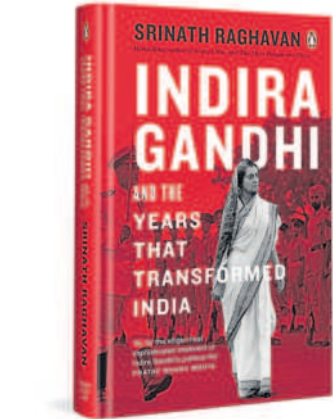
the Prime Minister and the way the argument began to build for the important constitutional amendment that was passed in 1977—the 42nd Amendment—and remains contentious. This Amendment added the words “Socialist” and “Secular” to the Preamble; added a part on Fundamental Duties of citizens; strengthened the Concurrent List at the expense of the State List; limited judicial review of laws; extended the duration of President’s Rule to one year and that of the Lok Sabha to six years. Some of this was rolled back in subsequent amendments. Raghavan pays a great deal of attention to economic policy in this period, including bank nationalisation and the constitutional debates on property rights. It is interesting that the only mention of India’s first nuclear tests in Pokhran in 1974 is this: “...the prime minister even burnished her Caesarist credentials by testing a nuclear device to rapturous applause.” Given the way in which Raghavan reconstructs policy debates and decision-making, it would have been interesting to read more but perhaps, he chose to leave this out because others, such as Itty Abraham, George Perkovich, Kanti Bajpai and Bharat Karnad, have written extensively on this. The next chapter is devoted to Jayaprakash Narayan’s movement that culminated in the Janata Party experiment. What came to be known as the JP movement was a mobilisation of student protests with the support of some opposition parties. They gained enough momentum to give the government pause and this became the pretext for the imposition of Emergency. Raghavan reserves his most colourful descriptions for this period—“The polar night of the emergency” and “The dark and gnarled stretches that led to this decision”—almost as if we might miss the point that these were bad times. To use Indian newspaper headline language, there is virtually no one that Raghavan does not “slam” in the Emergency chapter—from Indira Gandhi to Nani Palkhivala (“Such are the vagaries of the liberal conscience that Palkhivala not only agreed to appear for Indira Gandhi...”) to Justices Y.V. Chandrachud and P.N. Bhagwati. The chapter on the Emergency recounts in parallel the programmes that the government promoted vigorously, the manoeuvres of an imprisoned and underground but coalescing opposition and, also, what came to be called the “excesses” of Sanjay Gandhi’s Youth Congress. Raghavan writes about the one-and-a-half years of the Janata Party government



Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in November 1976.

GETTY IMAGES

under Morarji Desai and Charan Singh just as unsparingly, making note of every intransigence, foible and egotistical assertion. The final chapter takes us from Gandhi’s return to power in January 1980 to her assassination in October 1984. This is a period in which India was witness to growing unrest in three regions—Assam, over citizenship; Punjab, over the demand for a separate Sikh state; and Kashmir, where the push-pull of Centre-State relations was fomenting the conditions for the militancy that would come. Describing the world in which Gandhi came of age politically, the author writes, “...a wilfully cultivated aura of ruthlessness—as distinct from a highly developed instinct for power—was apparently her shield in an arena of politics shot through with gendered mores: one in which a woman prime minister could casually be



Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India: By Srinath Raghavan, Penguin Allen Lane, 384 pages, ₹899.

called a “*gungi gudiya*” ... or a “*chokri*” (derivative term for girl).” For all this gender sensitivity, in a nod to other writings on these years, he mentions five male authors but misses Nayantara Sahgal and Sagarika Ghose’s work. When one later reads sexist phrases (most likely inadvertently used) like “...she did succeed in molesting the constitution” and “More pregnant was her claim” (about the Congress mandate in 1971), it is hard to overlook them. That Raghavan is not a fan of Gandhi is made abundantly clear in the book, not just because the calculus of her political actions leads us to a critical appraisal but because his use of adjectives and adjectival clauses makes sure we know this. Writing about her first assumption of Prime Ministerial office, we are told about “her shallow puddle of experience” and then the word “Caesarist” appears over and over, sometimes as description and sometimes as explanation of other things. I would have enjoyed coming to a conclusion on my own based on the very detailed narrative he constructs, but then these were my formative years and perhaps unfamiliar readers need the signposts. Raghavan writes in his Prologue, “...this book was written in a time when a new political configuration was crystallizing in Indian democracy. It would be idle to suggest that my political views on this recent turn have not shaded this historical account... I have sought to write a history that ‘supplies the antidote to every generation’s illusion that its own problems are uniquely oppressive.’” He is also writing at a time when chunks of Indian history are literally being erased from our textbooks. This is a good book for those trying to fill

in the blanks about a period to which everyone now refers but ever-fewer people remember first-hand. What we hear on official channels is a version where successive Indira Gandhi governments accomplished nothing but the oppression of today’s rulers whose role in resisting the Emergency is lionised. Was Gandhi good or bad, the best or the worst? In our fact-free, nuance-free times, Raghavan’s book makes an important contribution by writing in detail about the decision-making process on a number of policies—from the first stirrings of an idea or a crisis to the various points of view as they emerged and crystallised to the implementation and consequences of that idea. This lets us see that nothing about government is easy, even for “Caesarist” Prime Ministers! On economic and foreign policy, and even on the question of constitutional amendment, despite his own disapproval, Raghavan lets us see someone who asks for opinions and considers them thoughtfully even though she ultimately follows her instinct. In fact, one of the strengths of the book is the dispassionate reconstruction of policy processes and outcomes. On bank nationalisation, for example, Raghavan says that while later writing has judged this as a politically expedient decision by Indira Gandhi, he also writes about its actual impact in giving the state access to more funds and taking the reach of the banking sector into rural India. Overall, I am not sure how accessible this book is for the general reader. Within the chapters, the narrative sometimes jumps around, almost requiring you to know this era to follow. The language is sometimes difficult and sometimes chatty. Reading about these years always feels personal to me. To encounter the years of one’s life in another person’s words is a strange experience because you want to jump in and say, “I don’t remember it like that” or “I also remember this”. Despite this personal connection, this book did not draw me in. What I missed was more quotations from Gandhi’s own letters and notes. In a book titled “Indira Gandhi,” I missed her voice. The writing has a personal quality because the author has such a strong opinion of the protagonist—who isn’t and yet, it is impersonal (not dispassionate) as a textbook would be. This may be to your reading taste or not. That diminishes neither the solid historical research nor the astounding detail in which historical events are described in the book. Swarna Rajagopalan is a political scientist and peace educator.

DECCAN Chronicle

19 JULY 2025

India’s priority should be early trade deal with US

The EU has acted in imposing sanctions on the oil refinery in Vadinar in Gujarat, which is part-owned by the Russian energy giant Rosneft while also lowering the oil price cap. That its member countries have been buying the output of diesel and petrol from this refinery does not seem to have counted when it came to penalising Russia for waging war against Ukraine. India’s cries of “double standards” may have been so much straw in the wind.

Trump’s eagerness to bring Russia to the table regarding the Ukraine war that began three years ago is understandable. But his calls for tariffs on Russia may have little meaning as there is so little trade. But it would be in everyone’s interest to see this long-running war end, most of all Russia whose economy too is showing signs of war-weariness.

Dealing with mercurial Donald Trump is a conundrum that is holding the rest of the world in thrall. Second guessing the US President has taken a very serious turn amid a smorgasbord of tariffs but while flattery seemed to score brownie points for a few nations, some were seen beating a retreat after nominating him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Trade deals to beat deadlines that seem to shift like desert sand in the wind are a priority for many scrambling to make sense of a new order that Trump is trying to create to shape the future of global trade after decades of virtually tariff-free exports into the world’s largest economy with an oversized appetite for the world’s goods.

Amid the wrangling over trade came the news that the US has named The Resistance Front, an arm of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, that India, with its security focus on sponsored terror, sees as a gigantic positive at a time when the prickly neighbour has used its ‘iron-clad’ friend China to stave off being named in the SCO forum with regard to the Pahalgam terror event.

And yet India will realise that Trump’s calls on various issues affecting the nation are, like the curate’s egg, good in parts. Waiting in the wings is Republican lawmaker Lindsey Graham’s Bill that seeks to impose 500 per cent duties on India for buying Russian oil while Trump himself is considering a secondary tariff of at least 100 per cent on those who continue to source Russian crude. India might find itself on a cleft stick in this regard, but it has smart options that it hopes to use when the time comes.

India is unlikely to be on the list of 150 countries to whom Trump will be dropping tariff letters and yet it must be able to present its case strongly enough in fresh rounds of negotiations on tariffs and market access that are on in the US now to make a deal that will not see its exports too badly hit. Trump has thrown hints that India might get a trade agreement like the one with Indonesia with a 19 percent tariff on US imports while getting some American products tariff-free access.

Signing an agreement with the US should be of utmost priority even if India should ideally look towards diversifying trade with other countries. Strong ties with the United States serve India’s strategic interest too. A deal with Washington would be a starting point for the future as the tariffs would define how much of a hit Indian export may have to take.

Cleanliness lesson for metros

Swachh Survekshan 2024-25, the national cleanliness survey started nine years ago, has sprung several surprises. While Indore continued to be the cleanest city among smaller cities, as it has been for the last few years, Ahmedabad, Bhopal and Lucknow have emerged as top performers among cities with more than 10 lakh population.

Hyderabad was adjudged the sixth cleanest city in the country, after Raipur and Jabalpur. The capital city of Telangana was the only one among the six major metros — which together contribute nearly 20 per cent of the country’s economy — to feature in the top 10 list.

All other metros fared poorly in the cleanliness survey, with Delhi ranked 31st, Greater Mumbai 33rd, Bengaluru 36th and Chennai 38th. Kolkata, which was once the national capital and industrial hub of the country, did not figure in the list of the top 40 clean cities.

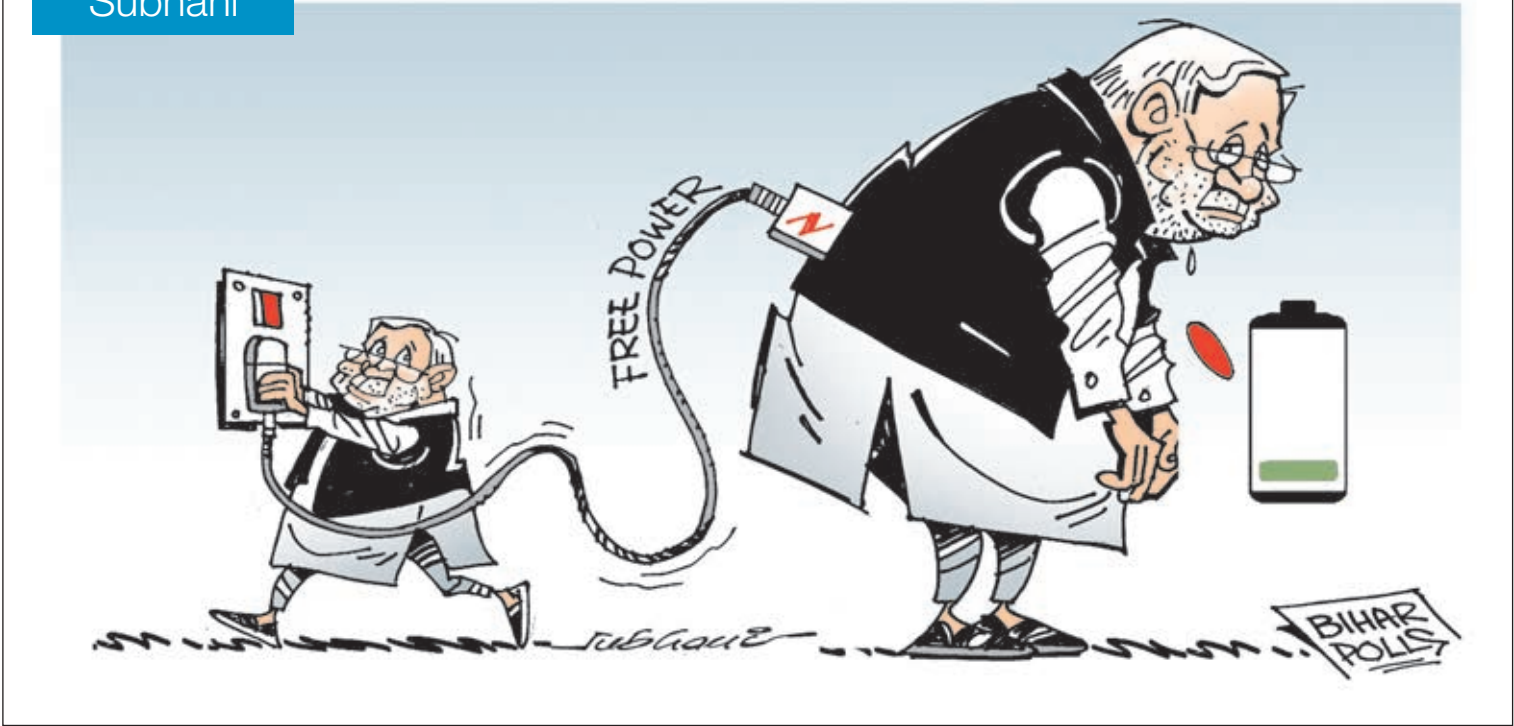
While the survey has undoubtedly highlighted the poor state of affairs in Indian metros, the Central government must be conscious of the fact that it cannot club cities like Raipur, Jabalpur, Gwalior, or even Visakhapatnam, with the six major metropolitan cities.

Only the six metros have populations of more than one crore — Delhi (3.38 crore), Mumbai (2.16 crore), Kolkata (1.55 crore), Bengaluru (1.4 crore), Chennai (1.2 crore) and Hyderabad (1.1 crore).

Given the size of their populations as well as their economic activity, the six metros face an incredible amount of strain — due to both their large resident and migrant populations — on civic infrastructure, which is far greater than in cities like Agra, Jabalpur or Raipur.

It is, therefore, not apt to compare the six metros with other cities, as they are in a separate league. If there were a separate category for these metros, Hyderabad would have topped it, followed by Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai and Kolkata. However, the survey findings should serve as a guiding light for these cities to improve their civic offerings to people.

Subhani



Radhika’s killing: ‘Honour’, control rules Digital India



Patralekha Chatterjee

Dev 360

The murder of tennis player-turned-coach Radhika Yadav reignites an uncomfortable question: How does contemporary India understand the word “honour”? Whose honour is society defending when a young woman is punished for choosing to live on her own terms — and when sections of the populace quietly sympathise with her killer, not always openly, but through nods, WhatsApp whispers, and the familiar logic of “had it coming”?

On July 10, 2025, in Shant Lok, an upscale neighbourhood in Gurgaon, one of India’s most globalised urban hubs, a young woman was murdered by her father. He shot her four times in the back as she cooked breakfast. Her name was Radhika Yadav. She was 25.

Deepak Yadav, Radhika’s father, was a real estate agent with rental income. By all accounts, the family was financially stable. After a shoulder injury, Radhika had taken to coaching tennis — booking courts, training aspirants, earning her own money, and promoting her personal brand on the social media. Her father felt humiliated. “When I used to go to Wazirabad village to get milk, people used to taunt me, saying that I live off my daughter’s earnings. This troubled me a lot. Some people even questioned my daughter’s character. I told my daughter to close her tennis academy, but she refused,” Deepak Yadav told the police. Instead of defending his daughter, he turned violent. This is the paradox of urban India: Women are encouraged to succeed — but only within boundaries. Step outside them, and the backlash is swift, sometimes fatal.

The Gurgaon police called Radhika’s murder an “open and shut” case and is reportedly working on a charge-sheet based on strong forensic and testimonial evidence.

A Gurgaon court has remanded Deepak Yadav, the killer-father, to 14 days’ judicial custody.

But this isn’t just another crime story. It is the story of a woman killed for trying to live up to her own aspirations. A close friend says Radhika faced strict control and social media surveillance at home.

Radhika’s father’s confession — that he felt shamed by villagers who mocked him for “living off her earnings”, and his alleged disapproval of her tennis coaching and social media posts — lays bare the broader socio-political context. The murder happened in Gurgaon, not a village backwater. It was a patriarchal execution carried out amid high-rise aspirations and gated denial.

This is not an isolated case. This is part of a continuum of “dishonour” killings in India. The savagery can’t be boxed into stereotypical narratives about the rural hinterland or poverty. A few years ago, another young woman pursuing a Bachelor of Computer Application degree in Delhi was murdered by her parents because she married a man from another caste.

“Despite constitutional guarantees of individual freedom and legal provisions under the Indian Penal Code (now Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita), honour killings continue to persist, often supported by informal social structures like caste panchayats,” points out Ajuni Bedi in LawChakra, a legal portal. Official data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recorded 25 cases of honour killings in both 2019 and 2020, rising to 33 in 2021. These figures are likely an underestimation, as many incidents go unreported or are disguised under other categories of crime, Ms Bedi adds.

The reaction of the political class to Radhika Yadav’s murder in a state where women sportspersons have

Such digital policing is, of course, not confined to Haryana. It exists across India. Not every case of patriarchal control ends in murder, but the psychological violence is real.

excelled in recent years is revealing. Very few major politicians, in the ruling party or the Opposition, have publicly commented on the subject. Wrestling coach and BJP leader Mahavir Singh Phogat is one of the rare ones who openly condemned the barbarity. One former chief minister, Manohar Lal Khattar, called the murder “a domestic matter” and remarked: “Back when there were bigger families, people had more morals and values. The elders impacted the younger generations in a positive way.”

But this isn’t just political failure; it’s also cultural rot. Haryana-based women’s rights activist and former volleyball champion Jagmati Sangwan, whom I have known for many years, put it bluntly: “Radhika Yadav was not only a successful tennis player but a young woman coming into her own, making conscious professional choices and having her own views about what she wanted to do with her own life. This is seen as an assertion. There is a backlash from the inherently patriarchal society. Women athletes are adored for their medals, their trophies. Families see awards won by daughters as part of family honour. The state government has also been offering many incentives — but the personal aspirations of women sportspersons are a different matter altogether. It signals agency, growing confidence in oneself. This is hugely resented.”

Ms Sangwan’s words point to the contradiction at the heart of this tragedy. Radhika was celebrated when she won. But she was condemned the moment she chose to be her own person in real life and on reel.

The khap panchayats (unelected village councils)

have been predictably muted. Yet it is no secret that many of these groups, spread across multiple states such as Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, have a long and troubling history of issuing extra-legal diktats that restrict women’s autonomy — especially around clothing, technology use and movement. Their ideology lives on in family WhatsApp groups, parental ultimatums and quiet approvals of punishment for defiance.

Digital India, with its promise of empowerment and nearly 900 million Internet users, has become a paradox. Platforms that offer voice and visibility also function as instruments of surveillance — especially for women. Careers, relationships, and identities are not just shared; they are scrutinised. Visibility is seen as provocation. Autonomy, especially when expressed online, becomes ground for punishment.

Such digital policing is, of course, not confined to Haryana. It exists across India. Not every case of patriarchal control ends in murder, but the psychological violence is real. The spotlight must remain fixed on this ecosystem of violence — the taunts, the scrutiny, the fragility that saw Radhika Yadav’s success as betrayal. The conflict between custom and modernity is not theoretical. It lives in India’s urban living rooms, as much as its village lanes. Countering this will require legal reform. Despite the Supreme Court’s repeated condemnation of honour killings as grave violations of fundamental rights, the country still lacks a law that specifically addresses such killings. It will also require many more public figures to defend a woman’s right to be seen and heard.

Digital India cannot celebrate visibility and simultaneously punish it. Radhika Yadav’s life was a testament to what it means to rise, to assert, to be seen. Her murder must not be reduced to just a footnote.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

LETTERS

DIVERGENT ALLIANCE

Success of a front in the election lies mainly on the cohesiveness of the alliance parties and their cadres’ hard work in the field. As of now, the Secular Democratic Front headed by DMK in Tamil Nadu appears to be more intact with good chemistry among the constituents, due to which it will have an edge over the opponents. In the NDA front there are visible divergent aims between ADMK and BJP. EPS strongly declared that there will not be a coalition government and that his party will form the government on its own with comfortable seats. But Amit Shah assertively stated several times that their front will form coalition government and his party will partake in the cabinet. This perceptible difference will create mistrust and confusion among their cadres.

M. Govindaraj Gudiatham

PM MODI @75

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has put Prime Minister Modi in a tight spot. His remark about public figures retiring at the age of 75 has reignited political chatter. His comment, while not naming anyone directly, has been widely interpreted as a subtle message for Prime Minister Modi, who turns 75 on September 17, 2025. In fact, the restrictive age for politicians was initiated by Mr. Modi himself. Whether that was done with genuine concern for the people’s sentiment or for his own political interest is debatable. More than Modi continuing in office beyond 75, the bigger question for the BJP is “after Modi, who?”. And the saffron party clearly has no answer for it.

R. SIVAKUMAR Chennai

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“Emptiness pursues when love has fled Leaving in mind and heart a void — I tell myself this is indulgence, avoid This nonsense — then I go to bed...”

From The Kallum Column, by Bachchoo

Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu bombed Iran and appealed to the Iranian population to change its regime. He said the Jewish nation (not then Israel) in historic times owed its continued existence to the Achaemenid emperors of Iran.

His historical contention should have, in all modesty, characterised the ancient Jewish nation of the sixth century BC as dependants of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, as the Old Testament books of Nehemiah and Ezra testify.

Nehemiah was the Emperor Cyrus’ cup-bearer and conveyed to Cyrus his distress at the enslavement of the Jewish people by the Babylonians in 586 BC. He told Cyrus that these vandals had destroyed the temple dedicated to the Jews’ monotheistic God. (The origins of whom follow — later in this column!)

Cyrus told him not to worry and that he would send some people — he meant an army — to free the Jews from slavery, see that they returned to what they regarded as their holy land and he would enable the restoration and rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

The book of Ezra testifies to the fact that Darius, Cyrus’ successor as Persia’s Zoroastrian emperor,

completed the work of rebuilding this Jewish temple.

Yes, Judaism owes that to the (ancient) Zoroastrians.

And perhaps, gentle reader, it owes much, much more. This contention is inspired by the fact that the proclamation of the prophet Zarathustra, that there is only one God, established the first known monotheistic world religion.

In the Persian empire’s province of Chaldea, the personage known as the founder of Judaism, Father Abraham, was born and grew up. It is not a great leap of faith — or as the Americans and their sheepish imitators say “it’s not rocket science” — to deduce that Father Abraham adopted and embraced the doctrines of monotheism from his surrounding environment of Zoroastrian belief and founded Judaism on it.

From that Christianity, and then Islam, flowed. (Apart from inventing God, I feel compelled to note that the Zoroastrians, though not the prophet himself, whose German portrait displays him in a white gown, invented trousers — but yes, that’s another story...)

As for a regime change in Iran? One sees and hears, by the hour, the atrocities, the genocide perpetrated by the Israeli Defence Forces under instructions from Mr Netanyahu’s maniacal government. They recently admitted to killing several Palestinian children queuing to fill vessels with drinking water.

One has not much more time for the ayatollahs’

regime of Iran which persecutes women and sells drones to Russia which the latter uses to mercilessly and randomly bomb Ukrainian civilians.

Does this kind of slaughter in our times bear thinking about? And why do international leaders of supposedly democratic countries turn a blind eye or even condone it? Come back God, and for God’s sake take f***ing charge — then all may be forgiven?

However much Iranian women and the population want regime change, the history of such alteration is not universally encouraging. The regime change brought about in Libya by Western forces using military means against Col. Muammar Gaddafi has ended in the disaster of present-day Libya. Before that there was the elimination, by George W. Bush and Tony Blair, of the cat that kept the rats at bay in Iraq. Yes, regime change at the cost of millions of lives — but is Iraq any better now than under Saddam Hussein?

Didn’t it breed the Islamic State, or ISIS? Afghanistan, where regime change was encouraged by the fantasy that the feudal country would instantly fall in with the shibboleths, however desirable to you and me, of liberal Western democracy? And *ki holo?*

We don’t yet know how replacing Bashar al-Assad in Syria will turn out, though we do know that it has led to murderous, vengeful assaults on some of the innocent Alawite population.

Of course, one hopes that regime change, if it comes about in Iran, will be initiated and executed

by liberal and liberating forces from within. But who would these be?

Years ago, on a 20-mile taxi drive from the suburbs of Toronto to its Bay Area one night, the taxi driver, chatty as they are in that continent, told me that he was from Persia. When I corrected him and called it “Iran”, he was not best pleased. Despite the fact that he was called Abdul or something, he insisted that he was, as I had identified myself as such when he asked, a Zoroastrian. He forcefully asserted that Persia was sick to death of the ayatollah’s rule and that most of Persia wanted to overthrow that regime and reconvert from Islam to the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Iran — sorry, Persia!

I said I wasn’t quite convinced, but he was insistent that that was how it was.

Though I know, gentle reader, that Ayatollah Khamenei’s son and his chief adviser are in line to succeed him when he goes, I would, of course, go along with my Canadian taxi driver’s unlikely prognostication and hope that a compassionate Zoroastrian regime would replace the repressive ayatollahs.

The obvious organisation to take charge of such would be the ZLF, the Zoroastrian Liberation Front, co-founded a few years ago, by Imoji Feromonereplacementwalla and Sinnerji Arthuroadjalala, of which I am a humble member and even the late Alexander Waugh was vice-president.

Gentle reader, the future awaits.

Water sharing dispute will remain despite the latest 'breakthrough'

SEEMINGLY, a sense of euphoria appears to have taken over the Telangana and Andhra Pradesh administrations, after Union Minister of Jal Shakti C R Patil's meeting with Chief Ministers of the two states to discuss and arrive at mutually agreed upon solutions to their long pending water-related issues. Bonhomie was on show during the meeting that not only featured Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy and his Andhra Pradesh counterpart N Chandrababu Naidu but also Water Resources ministers from both states. The meeting was convened by the ministry as part of its avowed bid to foster cooperation and facilitate sustainable water management practices so that people from both states could

benefit. Unlike similar exercises ending without any conclusive decisions earlier, the latest one raises a glimmer of hope with consensus emerging on some key issues, especially those pertaining to an equitable Krishna and Godavari water management. A good step has been the green signal given to the installation of telemetry devices for real time monitoring of water flows in the Krishna Basin. This will help in giving the exact extent of water usage by the two. That the two states have agreed to iron out issues as regards safeguarding the Srisailem dam and Andhra Pradesh giving its nod to repair the dam makes for a way forward move. One must recall that Telangana has been persistently airing its concerns, while alleging

that Andhra Pradesh was drawing more water than its allocated share from the Krishna River.

Meanwhile, in what can be deemed as a victory for both, they agreed to set up the GRMB office in Hyderabad and relocate the KRMB office to Amaravati. When taken pragmatically, these 'breakthroughs' call for a celebration but then there are many issues that remain unresolved and deadlocked, which is not quite surprising given that water sharing disputes between states have remained a bane in the country for decades together. Some have been fought so severely that there was a fear that the water wars may turn deadlier and adversely impact the country's social fabric. Many states continue to whip up frenzy by raising this

'crisis' involving one 'neighbour' or the other.

The thing to ponder is that merely agreeing to abide by CWC recommendations and expert suggestions with a plunge pool protection to safeguard Srisailem project, will not suffice. History shows that many suggestions of the CWC have been relegated to the backburner by successive governments when it comes to the critical issue of water sharing. An incumbent government takes delight in blaming the predecessor for all the ills begetting the state. Even this meeting was no exception. Telangana Minister N Utam Kumar Reddy slammed the K Chandrasekhar Rao-led BRS government for 'compromising' Telangana's water rights in favour

of Andhra Pradesh.

The challenges ahead are one too many. One does not know which way the high-level committee of senior officers and technical experts from both states will turn despite the panel being tasked to resolve all pending water-sharing issues between the two states. A bigger thorn would be in resolving the vexed Banakacharla project, against which Revanth Reddy has been quite vocal. One doubts if the new friendship can make headway when Reddy remains steadfast as regards Banakacharla project and puts it as the bone of contention to arrive at an amicable settlement vis-à-vis water sharing with Andhra Pradesh. It is not a win-win situation as is being projected.



LETTERS

Human touch inevitable in AI era

THIS has reference to the article 'Why drones and AI can't quickly find missing flood victims'. Over the decades all types of calamities are handled by human beings. As a result, there has been a repeat of the sequences and methods. During such calamities, the government and social service organizers do their best to bring such situations to normal. However, the mental agonies of people who lose their properties and kin continue as no one can heal it. When Artificial Intelligence (AI) and drones must work efficiently they shall be fed with a lot of information which is time-consuming. Human Intelligence had been in vogue for over centuries and suppressing human intelligence is unwise. Technical experts need to test and experiment the AI and drones that are used during calamities. Those found with a success rate that is above 70 per cent shall be certified for use. One should know that in Shankar's film 'Robot' all such practical problems are duly addressed. Let us welcome the efficient machinery for all pericyclic works.

Guidipati Anirudh, Secunderabad-11

Hyd's clean city ranking is a sham

I am not only amused but also shocked that Hyderabad has secured the sixth rank in the Swachh Survekshan 2025-25 cleanest city list as evolved by the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. The report card mentions 100 per cent in door-to-door collection of waste which is a totally bogus claim. Residents are paying anywhere between Rs 100 and 150 (in some places it may be Rs 50-75) to waste collectors but they are mostly irregular and sometimes absent for more than two days. After GHMC had done away with garbage bins at various points, the situation has worsened as residents have no idea where to put waste accumulated during their absence. On such days, street dogs have a field day and enter houses to look for leftover food. It is better to stop this bogus ranking system (Hyd sixth cleanest city among 40 with population of over 10 lakh) and officials who have gone to receive the award should introspect whether the city is clean.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

We need unity, not uniformity

THIS is in reference to the article 'Hindi & politics of Regionalism' (July 18), which rightly highlights the misuse of language identity for political gains. Politicization of Hindi imposition, especially during elections, distracts from real governance issues like education, health, and employment. India's strength lies in its diversity — linguistic, regional, and cultural. The idea of promoting Hindi should never mean suppressing other languages. Language must be a bridge, not a barrier. The need of the hour is not uniformity, but unity through mutual respect and equal promotion of all Indian languages.

Chetan Malvi, Raipur

A welcome eco-friendly KMF initiative

NANDINI Milk, Karnataka Milk Federation's (KMF) popular brand, is set to transform its milk packets into eco-friendly ones in the coming days. The new biodegradable milk packets are made from corn starch, sugarcane and other plant-based materials. Unlike conventional polythene packets that take over 500 years to decompose, these eco-friendly alternatives break down naturally within 90 days and can even be converted into organic fertiliser. All the cooperative dairy farms in other states should take cue from KMF to aid a sustainable environment.

Nagendra Kumar Vempalli, Bengaluru

Best ranking ever for Hyd

KUDOS to Hyderabad for securing the sixth rank in the National Swachh Survekshan 2024 survey, its highest-ever position among over 4,500 cities across India. The GHMC has rightly earned recognition as the 'most promising clean city' of Telangana. Through consistent efforts in door-to-door waste collection, cleanliness of residential and market areas, effective dump-site remediation, and maintaining hygiene around water bodies and public toilets, the city has demonstrated remarkable improvement in urban sanitation. Additionally, Hyderabad is set to join the elite '7-Star Garbage-Free' cities, apart from having earned the 'water plus' certification for the fourth consecutive time. These achievements are a tribute to the collective dedication of sanitation workers, civic officials, and citizen participation.

Dr Krishna Kumar Vepakamma, Hyderabad-45

thehansreader@gmail.com



BENGALURU ONLINE

Authorities to regulate traffic flow to Mullayanagiri to prevent landslides

CHIKKAMAGALURU: In a bid to manage weekend traffic congestion and mitigate environmental risks, the Chikkamagaluru district administration on Wednesday announced a new slot-based vehicular entry system to the hill station of Mullayanagiri, the highest peak in Karnataka. Deputy Commissioner C N Meena Nagaraj, addressing the media, said soon vehicles will be allowed uphill in two time slots daily—from 6 am to noon, and again from 1 pm to 6 pm—with a cap of 600 vehicles per slot. A one-hour buffer between slots will enable vehicles already at the summit to descend without added traffic pressure. To further streamline operations, parking will be provided at Seethalayyanagiri, and tourists will be encouraged to trek or use permitted departmental jeeps and Tata Tempos. According to the DC, an online pre-booking system for vehicles is being introduced.

However, during red alert, weather warnings or religious events such as temple fairs at Seethalayyanagiri and tourist bookings will be suspended. Local devotees will be granted free access during such periods. Over the past six months, approximately 2.5 lakh vehicles have used the narrow ghat road to reach the peak. The official cited a recent study by geologists warning of landslide risks due to high vehicular movement, particularly during long weekends when mini-buses and TT vehicles dominate the route.

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

Crash, cover-up and caste: India's rot runs deep



Will India's bureaucratic mind-set ever evolve? Will the so-called babus ever learn to say "Yes", as Prime Minister Narendra Modi once exhorted? Judging by the current state-of-affairs—particularly in the civil aviation sector—this hope still seems far-fetched. The Prime Minister's vision of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" continues to run into a brick wall of bureaucratic opacity and red tape. The most damning recent example is the handling of the June crash of Air India Flight 171 in Ahmedabad, which claimed over 260 lives.

The preliminary report by the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) raises more questions than it answers. Is the subtle attempt to blame the pilots an effort to protect Air India, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), or perhaps Boeing? Whose interests are being served here? Certainly not those of the passengers who lost their lives.

The report quietly insinuates pilot error—convenient, given that both pilots are dead and cannot defend themselves. Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu insists it's too early to jump to conclusions, but the very language of the report reads more like an exercise in blame-deflection than a search for truth. This column had earlier raised alarms about the DGCA's

lack of transparency. The current report only reinforces those fears.

One of the most disturbing aspects is that the AAIB panel reportedly did not include any experienced pilots. Worse, it skirts crucial technical possibilities like software or mechanical failures. According to aviation experts, the act of switching off both engines' fuel controls manually within 0.1 seconds—what the report attributes to pilot error—is virtually impossible. It would require superhuman synchronicity.

Adding to the dubious narrative, media reports hinted at possible suicidal tendencies in one of the pilots. That too collapses under scrutiny. Captain Sumet Sabharwal, 56, was a seasoned flyer with over 15,600 flight hours, more than 8,600 of them on Boeing 787s. He was nearing retirement and planning to care for his elderly father. First Officer Clive Kunder, 32, had over 3,400 hours of flying experience and was soon to be married. Neither showed any signs of emotional instability. These are not the profiles of men on the edge.

This is not how a credible investigation is conducted:

Worse still, the Wall Street Journal accessed and published the report a full 24 hours before its official release in India. Who leaked it? And why was the Indian public kept in the dark?

Shockingly, even after the Journal and other international media pushed a narrative of human error, the DGCA, Civil Aviation Ministry, and AAIB failed to issue a firm rebuttal. It

Red tape; deadly silence: Who killed AI 171?



India's bureaucratic inertia is once again under scrutiny following the tragic crash of Air India Flight 171, which claimed over 170 lives. The preliminary investigation reeks of evasion—shifting blame to pilots who can't defend themselves, ignoring critical technical red flags, and conveniently glossing over earlier global safety warnings. While the government remains tight-lipped, and regulators delay action, the real victims—Indian passengers—are left without answers. The Congress party too remains silent, except when it finds a chance to peddle identity politics, as seen in Rahul Gandhi's bizarre caste-based commentary on India's space mission. It's time to ask: will India's power circles ever choose truth, merit, and accountability over cover-ups, red tape, and hollow political grandstanding?

took five days for the Minister of State for Civil Aviation to make a bland statement urging the public not to speculate and wait for the final report. That's not leadership; that's abdication.

At the heart of the tragedy is a chilling fact: Both engines' fuel control switches were moved from 'run' to 'cutoff' within seconds of take-off. One pilot reportedly asked the other, "Why did you cut off the fuel switch?" The reply: "I didn't do it."

Yet the AAIB chose to paraphrase this cockpit conversation rather than

quote it verbatim. Why omit such a crucial detail? Is this ambiguity deliberate—intended to protect Air India and Boeing?

Former pilots insist it is nearly impossible for both switches to be accidentally moved in perfect synchronisation within 0.1 seconds. If true, the real culprit could be a systemic or software-related failure.

Equally damning is the DGCA's inaction despite a 2018 bulletin from the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) warning about the disengagement of fuel switch locks on Boeing

aircraft, including the 787—the same model involved in the Ahmedabad crash. India's regulator sat on this alert for seven years.

No fleet-wide inspections were conducted. No corrective directives were issued. Even after the crash and release of the AAIB's preliminary findings on July 11, the DGCA waited until July 14—after a conveniently timed long weekend—to order checks. Meanwhile, Etihad Airways and UK aviation authorities launched immediate inspections.

What explains India's delay? Gross negligence? This lethargy can cost lives. The Civil Aviation Ministry and DGCA owe the nation answers.

The report's silence on cockpit voice recordings is another red flag. Transparency in aviation safety is non-negotiable. But instead of facts, we get fog. Instead of accountability, we get spin. Even more appalling is the political silence.

The opposition, so quick to erupt on issues of caste and religion, has maintained an eerie silence. Where are their calls for justice and transparency? Rahul Gandhi, in particular, squandered an opportunity to raise serious questions. Instead, he continued his tiresome identity-politics circus, questioning why Shubhanshu Shukla was chosen for the Axiom space mission and lamenting the absence of a BC candidate. He made similar caste-based objections during the Agniveer recruitment drive and even the Miss India pageant. He continues to display his grandmother Indira Gandhi's Emergency

TG Human Rights Commission disposing cases on fast track: Justice Shameem Akhtar

SYED KHALED SHAHBAAZ

In a remarkable development that augurs well as regards delivery of justice, the Telangana Human Rights Commission (TGHRC) hit a new peak by disposing of more than 2,800 cases in less than two months, which translates to an average of clearing over 1,000 cases a month.

A credit for putting in place a workable and achievable speedy disposal system goes to Justice Dr. Shameem Akhtar, who achieved this distinction since taking over as the Commission's Chairman on April 17. Not surprisingly, he inherited a backlog of around 11,500 pending cases.

These included a wide range of human rights issues such as civil disputes, matrimonial conflicts, domestic violence, and criminal cases, among others, all falling under Section 21D of the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993.

In a chat with the writer, Justice Akhtar emphasized the Commission's commitment to treating every

A mindboggling 2,800 cases were cleared in less than two months



There are always two sides to a dispute, with allegations and counter-allegations. We cannot accept anything at face value. Our job is to detect the mischief and deliver justice. I am for alternative dispute resolutions: Justice Akhtar

complaint with equal seriousness. There would be no discrimination or prioritization, whatsoever.

"Every case is important. Irrespective of whether it is a dispute over one rupee or a crore, we will view and address them with the same lens of justice, which is what matters at the end of the day.

Judges must build a reputation that prevents external interference in order to ensure that the judicial process remains just and fair," is his governing yardstick, which sounds pragmatic and helps build public trust.

Incidentally his roots are equally illustrious. His father the late Jaan Moham-

med served as the superintendent of the Andhra Pradesh High Court, while mother Raheemunnisa is a literature enthusiast.

In a way, coming from a family of advocates, the legal spark in him was ignited while he was quite young.

"For nearly 100 years, there have been more than a handful of lawyers from my maternal side," he points out with a sense of professional pride.

Incidentally, Justice Akhtar had an affinity for social and political activism from an early age but chose law as his profession given that he was naturally drawn to it.

"I would wake up early and read law magazines and make notes," he recalls of his growing up years, a passion that has propelled his career to the zenith.

His career-graph shows a steady rise right from the time he enrolled himself in the Nalgonda Bar in 1986. He served with distinction as a district judge to eventually rise to the stature of

judge of the Telangana High Court. He served as the registrar of AP High Court for nearly five years.

Notably, Justice Akhtar led a one-man commission that was constituted by the Telangana state government on Scheduled Caste sub-classification.

With a legal career spanning over 16 years as an advocate and six years on the bench, Justice Akhtar is no stranger to rigorous workload.

An indication of the dexterity with which he handles cases is evidenced by the fact that he has delivered judgments in over 18,000 cases and an equal number of interim applications.

Justice Akhtar points out that while the Commission is prioritising older cases, new cases are being taken up simultaneously to maintain the momentum.

"Nearly 70 to 80 new complaints are registered with us every week. However, we are disposing of thrice that number to ensure that

we reduce the backlog efficiently," he points out, while stressing on striking a balance between pending and new cases.

The Commission's recent push is not merely a matter of numbers. According to the Chairman, the real challenge lies in carefully examining each case to unravel the truth.

"Like a coin, there are always two sides to a dispute, comprising allegations and counter-allegations. We cannot accept anything at face value. Our job is to detect the mischief and deliver justice," he maintains.

Justice Akhtar also stressed the importance of alternative dispute resolution.

"My advice to most people is to settle disputes amicably outside the court, whenever possible. It saves time, money, energy, and shields individuals from complex legal entanglements," he notes.

(The writer is a software engineer and journalist, best known for his book 'The Kohinoors: Distinguished Personalities of Hyderabad')

STARE BACK AT THE U.S. BULLY ON SECONDARY TARIFF

WHEN US President Donald Trump recently gave Russia 50 days to end the Ukraine war, while simultaneously threatening a 100 percent secondary tariff on big nations like India, China and Brazil for importing Moscow's cheaper crude, there was hardly a ripple in the global oil markets. For, bourses have learnt to live with Trump's eccentric pronouncements, perhaps because of his tendency to bark but not bite when push comes to shove. Trump is anyway averse to high crude prices, given its inflationary pressures. Analysts say such secondary tariffs could send crude prices flying from under \$70 now to \$130 a barrel, as it would suck out Russia's share—10 percent of the global oil output—from the market. Besides, working on a bilateral trade pact with the US, which Trump keeps trumpeting at every available opportunity, makes little sense under the shadow of a possible secondary levy. Yet, here we are, racing to arrive at an India-US pact before the August 1 deadline set by Trump.

Amid the trade turmoil came the welcome gesture of the US state department designating Lashkar-e-Taiba's offshoot, The Resistance Front (TRF), as a foreign terrorist organisation and a specially designated global terrorist outfit. The TRF had claimed responsibility for the Pahalgam terror attack, which set off the four-day India-Pakistan clash. Such is the mixed messaging on the intent of the Trump administration on a deal with India.

Nato chief Mark Rutte echoing his master's voice on secondary tariff was more of an irritant, as India cautioned him against double standards in global energy policies. Letting the European Union source gas from Russia while penalising other nations smacks of an appalling policy slant. India is one of the largest importers of Russian crude oil, sold at a price cap of \$60 a barrel, significantly below market rates. At present, it accounts for 42 percent of the country's total oil imports, or around 2.08 million barrels per day.

However, there can be no rational responses to quixotic exclamations like making others pay for US policy failure on ending the Ukraine war. India must continue with its strategic autonomy, stare back at the bully and face the situation as it presents itself. Reviving the Russia-India-China trilateral dialogue could be a diplomatic way forward.

TESLA ROLLS IN, BUT BUMPS STAY ON EV GROWTH PATH

AFTER years of lobbying for lower tariffs, Tesla has finally driven into India. More than anything else, the American electric carmaker's entry with two premium models has stumped everyone because of their superior price tags—more than in the US, China and Germany, thanks to high import duties. India imposes 100 percent duty if the car's cost, insurance and freight together exceeds \$40,000, and 70 percent on vehicles priced below. All eyes are on the proposed India-US trade deal and if it will entail lower duties on cars, much like the recent bilateral pact with the UK, where auto levies would reduce to 10 percent in phases. But even if the Indo-US deal includes lower auto levies, the question is whether they will apply to Tesla, whose American factories do not produce right-hand drive vehicles used in India and will have to import from China, which faces high tariffs.

The duty reduction in the India-UK deal focuses on non-electric vehicles and does not encompass any out-of-quota cuts for EVs. That said, India's EV policy announced last year does walk an extra mile, lowering import duties from 100 percent to 15 percent for cars priced over \$35,000, but with riders. To avail of these lower tariffs, companies must invest at least \$500 million in local production facilities over a three-year period, besides achieving 50 percent domestic value addition within five years. In other words, the government is keen on attracting global automakers, but wants to ensure job creation and development of the domestic manufacturing ecosystem in return—which does not enthruse companies like Tesla.

This is not surprising given the pace of EV adoption in India. In 2024, they accounted for 7.5 percent of India's total vehicle sales, but two-wheelers accounted for over 60 percent of all EV sales. Overall growth is also dismal compared to major markets like China, where about half the new cars sold last year were electric. One of the drags on growth is that there are too few charging stations—only one public charging station for every 235 EVs, according to one estimate. Then there is a lack of standardisation among charging stations and connectors. Above all, India imports over 90 percent of its lithium-ion batteries and needs local manufacturing to guard against supply chain disruptions. We need to pave the road before EVs can truly roam.

QUICK TAKE

RIGHT TO BE ANONYMOUS

A consequential fight is on between the Indian government and X at the Karnataka High Court. The social media platform is contesting the provisions of the IT Act the Centre can use to order takedown of accounts. At the latest hearing, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta revealed a verified account of the non-existent 'Supreme Court of Karnataka' his office had created just to show how easy it was to do so. Apart from freedom of expression, the case should provoke a broad debate on an early promise of the internet—anonymity, which has been a boon for many individuals, but has emerged as a bane for governments trying to Hoover up information in the name of ensuring public safety. It can hardly get more consequential.

INDIA-CHINA relations started with hope in the 1950s with the Panchsheel Agreement, stuttered later in that decade and deteriorated sharply in the wake of the 1962 war. Since then, it has fluctuated, with a sharp downturn over the last decade. Of late, it is again showing signs of revival.

The early 1950s are often referred to as the age of Nehru, during which he, along with a few other leaders, helped unite the Global South into a bloc of non-aligned nations as a counterbalance to the US and the USSR. While Nehru emerged as a prominent figure, his Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai was less visible internationally. Nevertheless, the two leaders forged a strong relationship. Zhou's visit to India in 1954 generated considerable excitement, and later that year, Nehru visited China.

The *New York Times* described the atmosphere during Nehru's visit, saying people crowded the six-mile route from the Beijing airport to the city, joyfully chanting the Chinese slogan that translates as "Long live peace" and the Hindi phrase "*Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*". Nehru and Mao Zedong's meeting lasted four-and-a-half-hours, during which Mao candidly acknowledged that China was less developed than India, a fact only revealed in the minutes of the meeting released in 2015.

The relationship began showing signs of strain after the 1955 Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian nations, co-hosted by Nehru and Indonesia's Sukarno. Zhou played a significant role at the conference, garnering support from many leaders. It was during this period that Pakistan and China began strengthening their ties.

Tensions escalated with the Lhasa uprising in March 1959, fueled by rumours that the Chinese authorities intended to arrest the 14th Dalai Lama. Despite India's clear support for Chinese rule over Tibet, uncertainty grew within the Chinese leadership over India's intentions. Chris Ogden, in his 2022 paper, '*The Double-Edged Sword: Reviewing India-China Relations*', observes, "Although India had recognised Chinese suzerainty over Tibet and classified it as an autonomous region, the Indian government's decision to harbour the Dalai Lama after his escape in 1959 heightened distrust and frustration in their diplomatic relations." Additionally, Chinese support for the Mizo and Naga uprisings in the Northeast exacerbated India's concerns.

During this time, low-intensity conflicts began in the Northeast, with China asserting claims over territories that India considered its own. Tensions escalated, reaching a peak in 1962 when Nehru and defence minister Krishna Menon significantly mis-

India and China have signalled that their strained relationship is on the mend. If the neighbours work together, they can write a new chapter in global diplomacy

CUE MUSIC FOR A HIMALAYAN PAS DE DEUX

K M CHANDRASEKHAR

Former Cabinet Secretary and author of *As Good as My Word: A Memoir*



SOURAV ROY

judged the capabilities of the Indian Army and ordered it to reclaim territories held by China along the Thagla Ridge. The result was a catastrophic defeat for India with the Chinese forces advancing down the Himalayas and reaching within kilometres of the Assam plains.

A chastened Nehru was forced to send an urgent request for assistance to US President John F Kennedy on November 19, stating, "With the Chinese advancing in massive strength, the entire Brahmaputra Valley is seriously threatened. Unless immediate action is taken, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and Nagaland could also fall to the Chinese." The Chinese, however, unilaterally declared a ceasefire and withdrew towards their stated boundary.

Since 1962, the India-China relationship has remained unsteady with Pakistan significantly contributing to the tensions be-

tween the two. In December 1988, Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China resulted in a joint communiqué emphasising the restoration of amicable relations based on the Panchsheel Agreement. Both countries committed to seeking a "fair and reasonable settlement" of their border dispute while fostering cooperation in various sectors beneficial to both sides. In January 1994, Beijing expressed interest in negotiating a resolution to the Kashmir issue and opposed any push for independence in the region.

During his first term, Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a series of cordial visits to China, and Xi Jinping too visited India on multiple occasions, reflecting the mutual goodwill. However, tensions rose following the incidents in Galwan and Doklam, further complicated by Pakistan's negative influence on the bilateral relations.

With global diplomacy taking a significant

THE OTHER CLASS STRUGGLE

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

REVERSE SWING

worried about what parliamentary backbenchers would say about his proposals.

But it must be acknowledged that in primary schools across India, backbenchers have often been stigmatised, and thus, the movie has triggered a healthy debate. One man's 'stakeholder' can sometimes be another's 'vested interest', leading to a 'class struggle' distinct from the Marxist variety.

We are into new-age pedagogy under which the Aam Aadmi Party even framed a 'happiness curriculum' to cheer kids in Delhi's government schools when it was in power. A classroom has historically been a



XCOM

A Malayalam movie has rekindled interest in how seating arrangements in classrooms can help learning. Examples from Tamil Nadu's state schools to Harvard University show seating along a curve can help peer learning, which can be more effective than pedagogic instruction

theatre of sorts, but not every teacher is a good performer. Nor is every student an eager audience. Some need the teacher to reach across, in which case the circular arrangement is a good thing.

I have childhood memories of being awestruck by a visit to my father's high school in rural Tamil Nadu. His school, built by a wealthy zamindar, had galleries that made the classroom a mini amphitheatre. By being perched above, the backbencher would look down on the teacher; perhaps sending a more-than-equal message, while the teach-

blow from the unpredictable and confrontational approach of US President Donald Trump, relations between India and China have once again entered a crossroads.

Modi met Xi on the sidelines of the BRICS meeting in Kazan, Russia last October. China's foreign ministry reported on its website that Xi said, "It is in the fundamental interest of our two countries and two peoples to keep to the trend of history and the right direction of bilateral relations." India's foreign ministry said that Modi welcomed the recent agreement on complete disengagement and resolution of issues that arose in 2020 in the border areas: "He underscored the importance of properly handling differences and disputes to maintain peace and tranquillity. The two leaders agreed that the special representatives on the boundary question will meet at an early date to manage peace and tranquillity in border areas while exploring a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable solution." Dialogues at the foreign ministers' level would also be used to "stabilise and rebuild bilateral relations". A positive outcome was agreeing to restore the border to pre-Galwan positions.

In a three-hour conversation with podcaster Lex Fridman in March 2025, Modi articulated his aspiration to enhance bilateral relations, highlighting the historical connections and the importance of preventing "differences from escalating into disputes". He talked about the time when India and China together accounted for over 50 percent of the global GDP, emphasising that their collaboration is crucial for international peace and prosperity.

The Chinese response was encouraging, with their spokesperson stating, "For over 2,000 years, the two countries have maintained friendly exchanges and learned from each other, contributing to civilisational achievements and human progress... The two nations should partner in each other's success, and a 'cooperative *pas de deux*', a ballet between the dragon and the elephant, is the only viable path forward."

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited Beijing earlier this month to attend a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and met Xi on the sidelines. During his meeting with the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, Jaishankar reportedly said, "India stands ready to work with China to speed up the resumption of cooperation mechanisms, enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges, facilitate personnel travels, and jointly safeguard peace and tranquillity in the border areas."

Perhaps we are on the brink of a new chapter in global diplomacy that could reshape our world.

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

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Inculcating morals

Ref: *Treat Balasore tragedy as a Nirbhaya moment to make education safer* (Jul 18). Apart from framing rules and policies, educational institutions must ensure that moral values are affirmed consciously and continuously. An effort to ensure that rules and policies are aligned with action, even in small ways.

Saria Achuthan, Palakkad

Assist Nimisha

Ref: *Explore all avenues to save Nimisha Priya* (Jul 18). A myriad of humanitarian gestures has won many hearts. I also urge the public to remain calm and refrain from provocative debates on social media. The Indian government must leverage all possible diplomatic channels to reach a peaceful resolution.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

Functional sanctuaries

Ref: *Manage the menageries* (Jul 17). Our zoos are turning into Bermuda Triangles for animals. Alipore Zoo's vanishing act of 321 creatures isn't just tragic—it's criminal. From miscounts to misdeeds, the law seems to be missing. Time to run real sanctuaries and not bureaucratic black holes.

Veda Chidanand, Bengaluru

Self-reliant consultancy

Ref: *Time to enable India's own Big 4 consultancies* (Jul 18). India's consulting sector is dominated by global 'Big 7' firms due to domestic policies that disadvantage local players. Stringent government contract requirements, protectionist measures and outdated branding rules hinder growth. This underlines the urgent need for regulatory reform to enable fair competition.

NR Jagannath, email

Expensive turkey

Ref: *F-35 woes no longer in stealth mode* (Jul 18). I have been flagging the F-35's sad history for over two decades as part of a thread called 'Turkey or Talisman?' on an open-source website. Reviewing various faults, the clear verdict is that it is the most expensive turkey in aviation history, a call for which I was eventually censured.

Philip, email

Geopolitical coercion

Ref: *India pushback against Nato's sanctions threat* (Jul 18). India's discounted oil import from Russia is one of the reasons that helped bring inflation down to 2.1 percent in June 2025—well below many G-7 nations. Ironically, Europe's own \$105-billion energy trade with Russia exposes massive double standards.

Sagarirtha Chakraborty, Guwahati

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

Chairman of the Board: Manoj Kumar Sonthalia Editor: Santwana Bhattacharya

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Terror tag

US move against LeT proxy raises India's hopes

INDIA has finally heaved a sigh of relief on the diplomatic front. The US has designated The Resistance Front (TRF), a proxy of the proscribed Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), as a global terrorist outfit, vindicating New Delhi's tougher-than-ever stand on cross-border terrorism. In a brief but telling statement, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has noted that the TRF had claimed responsibility not only for the April 22 Pahalgam attack but also for several attacks against Indian security forces in recent years. Though Rubio has stopped short of naming or alluding to Pakistan, where the LeT is based, he has echoed President Trump's "call for justice" in the Pahalgam case.

It's apparent that the US is trying to placate India, which has repeatedly asserted after Operation Sindoor that perpetrators and victims of terror should not be equated. Delhi was obviously not amused when Washington played host to the army and air force chiefs of Pakistan. Has America realised at long last that brazen duplicity on terrorism is a perilous course? India can draw that conclusion only if the US makes decisive moves that would put Pakistan in a spot.

The US needs to be reminded of the joint statement that was issued after a meeting between Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the White House in February. It mentioned that the two leaders called on Pakistan (yes, the P-word was used) to expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of the Mumbai and Pathankot attacks and ensure that its territory is not used to carry out cross-border terror strikes. This firm resolve has been conspicuous by its absence from Trump's statements and actions after the Pahalgam massacre. As per India's National Investigation Agency, the attackers were Pakistani nationals affiliated with the LeT. The terror tag given to TRF is a good first step; the acid test for the US is to consistently walk the talk on counter-terror cooperation with India.

Fuelling hypocrisy

India resists Western oil pressure

INDIA's firm rebuttal to NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte's threat over Russian oil imports once again exposes the West's duplicity on global energy security. During his visit to the US, Rutte warned India, China and Brazil to push Russia toward ending the Ukraine war or face punitive tariffs. His remarks coincided with growing US support for the Russian Sanctions Act, 2025 — a Bill backed by President Trump and 171 lawmakers — that proposes duties of up to 500 per cent on countries trading in Russian-origin oil, gas, uranium or petrochemicals. India, which imports nearly 88 per cent of its oil, has rightly cautioned against these "double standards." External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar conveyed New Delhi's concerns to Senator Lindsey Graham, emphasising India's legitimate energy needs and sovereign right to chart its own economic course. Even as Russian oil imports declined 14.5 per cent in February, Moscow remains India's top supplier, having offered discounted crude when others withdrew.

What irks New Delhi is the West's selective outrage. While Europe continues to import Russian crude through third countries and shadow fleets, it expects the Global South to uphold sanctions at its own economic cost. Russian oil refined in India or Turkey and re-exported to the EU reveals the hollowness of this posturing. India's sharp reminder, also directed at NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg during his visit to Delhi, highlights that national interest — not pressure — will guide its decisions. India's reference to reviving the Russia-India-China dialogue further signals a shifting strategic balance, one that challenges Western dominance.

If energy security is non-negotiable for Europe, it is equally vital for developing economies like India. Coercion and selective morality will only erode trust. A truly rules-based global order must apply to all, not just when convenient to the West.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JULY 19, 1925

Currency operations

THE report of the Controller of Currency on the operations of the department for 1924-25 explains the general features of the year, the nature of the foreign trade and various transactions of the government that helped to maintain a more or less satisfactory condition regarding Indian exchange and currency systems. The improved financial conditions in Europe and the satisfactory rainfall in the major part of India, followed by agricultural prosperity, led to the revival of large exports from India and the flow of money into the country. The finances of the government also improved considerably and a reduction was made in provincial contributions. The main feature of the foreign trade was increased exports and reduced imports. The total value of exports was Rs 385 crore, consisting of cotton and cotton manufactures of the value of Rs 103 crore, jute and jute manufactures of the value of Rs 81 crore and grains Rs 65 crore. The total value of imports was Rs 243 crore, the most important articles being cotton manufactures of the value of Rs 83 crore, sugar Rs 20 crore, iron and steel Rs 19 crore. The reduction in the value of imports, in spite of favourable exchange, was due to the high price of manufactured goods, which is reflected in the fact that India imported 1,820 million yards of cloth during the year against 3,200 million yards in 1923-24, though the price paid was more than double. The result of this was the large import of gold and silver into India during the year, which was helpful in easing the financial condition and steadying the exchange rate.

Morality, decency and free speech

If even the Supreme Court is asking us to self-censor our speech, where are we supposed to go for protection?



JUSTICE Sudhanshu Dhulia of the Hon'ble Supreme Court is a most interesting man. Not just because he is the elder brother of Hindi film director Tigmanshu Dhulia — think, *Gangs of Wasseypur*, *Paan Singh Tomar*, *Saheb, Biwi aur Gangster*, etc — but because you can see the righteous anger in him, that accompanies his judgments, in which bad people are punished or good is upheld, or, most importantly, the idea of freedom of choice that is fundamental to the Constitution is calmly reiterated.

At the risk of turning him into a hero, he has the makings of one. People like us applauded this April his confirmation of the Madras High Court's conviction of those awful parents who killed their own daughter and son-in-law ("a wicked and odious crime...is the ugly reality of our deeply entrenched caste structure"); also in April, Dhulia asked why there existed this prejudice against Urdu in a Maharashtra municipality ("the prejudice stems from the misconception that Urdu is alien to India...this opinion is incorrect"); and back in 2022, he delivered a — split — verdict against the Karnataka government's decision prohibiting female Muslim students from wearing hijab ("it should be a matter of choice...a matter of conscience, belief and expression").

Now there are others in the Supreme Court star cast of course — this week, Justice Surya Kant of Haryana, who will be Chief Justice soon, warmed the cockles of the nation's young heart when he scolded a gaggle of Haryana cops on the young Ashoka University professor Ali



POSER: Did Ali Mahmudabad's posts on Op Sindoor constitute free speech? PM

Mahmudabad's case — the cops had taken away all of Ali's devices and expanded the inquiry of his alleged crime (about two social media posts targeting the government for choosing a Muslim spokeswoman for Op Sindoor briefings) by asking for information of his foreign trips over the last 10 years. "You don't need him, you need a dictionary," Kant yelled at the policemen, albeit metaphorically. Young India applauded, then did a double-take. It was the same Justice Surya Kant who in March had called the comedian Ranveer Allahbadia all kinds of names ("disgusting", "filthy" and "insulting") when the latter had cracked a singularly inappropriate joke about mothers and fathers. At the time, Surya Kant had talked of drawing a line between free speech and vulgarity. In May, he stated that guidelines for social media use were needed.

Earlier this week, Justice Surya Kant finally came out with it. Article 21, which deals with the right to life and liberty, he said, should and would prevail over Article 19, which deals with freedom of speech and expression. "Article 19 can't overpower Article 21...Article 21 must prevail if any competition takes place," he said. The judge was finally examining the heart of the matter — the conflict between rights and duties. Clearly, he believed, some fundamental rights were more fundamental than others. Certainly, the founding fathers must have thought about this dilemma that was certain to surface across the ages. So they limited freedom of speech guarantees in Article 19(1) by immediately stating in Article 19(2) that free speech was not absolute, and reasonable restrictions must be placed on it in the interests of sovereignty and integrity of India, public order, decency or morality.

Certainly the last phrase can be problematic. The question, of course, is whether a Supreme Court judge's morality is more important than the decency of

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the public at large and who is to finally decide on either.

Often, social mores are way ahead of the statute books, but it takes a brave man to look outside the lakshman rekha. When Section 377 which began to criminalise homosexuality in 1862 was finally read down in 2018, it was the erstwhile BJP leader Arun Jaitley, also a notable lawyer, who persuaded his fellow party politicians that a revolution was not in the offing if a few people of the same sex had sex with each other.

Similarly, while the hon'ble judges well understood the value of free speech in real life, how was it to be treated on social media? Did Ali Mahmudabad's posts constitute free speech or was it a recipe for offending women, as a BJP leader believed it was?

Social media commentaries that are offensive to someone or other are far too many to recount. There is Kunal Kamra with his "gaddar" or "traitor" jibe allegedly against the Maharashtra deputy chief minister. There is Congress MP Imran Pratapgarhi reciting a poem that someone in Gujarat found inappropriate so an FIR was filed against him. As for Ranveer Allahbadia "mother-father" type jokes, a survey carried out by the hugely popular Selfie With Daughter campaign — promoted by none other than PM Modi

— called the "Gaali Band..." campaign, found that gender-based abuses about mothers and sisters were most rampant in Delhi (80%), followed by Punjab (78%), Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (84%) and Rajasthan (64%).

Perhaps the Hon'ble Supreme Court should take suo motu cognisance of how North Indian males speak, and not just on social media.

Perhaps, the heart of the matter is that we are like this only — although that is hardly a reason to go after people speaking their hearts out.

In May, when Ali's case first came to him, Justice Surya Kant made it clear that if students and professors "dare to do anything...if they try to join hands etc, we know how to deal with these people, they are within our jurisdiction."

You could accuse Justice Dhulia, our hero-in-the-making, also of an *Et tu Brute*. When Hemant Malviya, a cartoonist from Madhya Pradesh, sought anticipatory bail earlier this month from the Supreme Court because the MP High Court was okaying his arrest — over a 2021 cartoon on PM Modi deemed to be in poor taste — the judge exploded.

"Hadd hai! Log kisi ko bhi, kuch bhi keh dete hain (This is too much. These days, people write anything, say anything, without caring about their language)," Justice Dhulia said.

As the scales fall from our eyes and we look thunderstruck at our would-be hero, the thought surfaces, unbidden : If even the Supreme Court is asking us to self-censor our speech, our drawings, our poetry, our music, our movies, our thoughts, where are we supposed to go for protection?

This, then, is the great game dilemma this week. India's conservative and feudal society, which in the wake of the trauma of the Partition was allowed its great escape by the Nehru brigade towards egalitarian ideas like secularism and socialism, has happily fed into the hard right turn of the past decade. How now to reverse gear?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Free speech is my right to say what you don't want to hear. — George Orwell

How a humble hut became a shrine

LT GEN RAJ SUJLANA (RETD)

A career in the Army takes you to far-flung border areas where one is exposed to many a myth and superstition. Most of them have existed since long, usually based on local lore. There are 'Pir Baba' shrines revered for their supposedly spiritual or magical powers. Many are located on the roadside. Almost every vehicle passing by slows down or halts; drivers and passengers pay their respects before moving on.

Call it a compulsive adherence to superstition or something else, these shrines are regarded as tutelary deities who protect travellers. Sometimes, it's all about a coincidental happening or a prayer getting answered. One such myth which developed with time comes to memory.

Before the 1971 war, we were positioned on the heights of Shamshabari Range in Jammu and Kashmir. Deep down ahead of us lay Lipa valley in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Distance and thick forests restricted visibility. The enemy was seldom spotted, but often the distant beat of drums reached our ears. Possibly some local celebration, we thought.

We moved into this valley when the war began. Our attacks took us to the overlooking heights. As dawn broke, we spotted a nondescript hut in the valley. On a closer look, we realised that it covered the source of a spring. The sparkling water formed a small stream. A place nearby had the obvious name of Thanda Pani! The inside was dingy; except a Quran that was placed on a pedestal, there was nothing notable. Possibly, the holy book was placed there as thanksgiving for the spring by the locals. We paid obeisance and moved on.

Little did we realise that reverence for the place would increase manifold in the times to come. The war ended, and a few months later, we departed.

Years later, I got posted to the same area. As we reached the valley, there stood an elaborate structure with flags and buntings instead of the small hut. We were asked to pay obeisance at the shrine of the 'Pir Baba' to ensure a safe and successful stay. I was perplexed by this sea change.

Soon, I was posted out and left the area without visiting the place. I had barely reached home when orders came that my posting had been cancelled; I reported back promptly. Lo and behold, when I arrived there, my posting was reactivated! I was told that had I prayed to the 'Pir Baba' before leaving, all this inconvenience would not have happened. This time, before my departure, I bowed at the shrine, somewhat reluctantly, as that hut was still etched in my memory.

I again visited Thanda Pani to celebrate the golden jubilee of the war. The myth of the 'Pir Baba' had grown bigger. Visitors offered prayers and a *chaddar*, and so did we. Finally, as I crossed the Shamshabari, the sound of the distant drums came to mind. Possibly, these were sounded for a ruling local deity, and guess we too had fallen into the clutches of the superstition syndrome!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India-China-Russia troika

Apropos of 'India needs friends to turn the tide'; there are no permanent friends or foes in diplomacy. Alliances and friendships among nations are based on mutual interests and convenience. In some good news, China has expressed its support for Russia's initiative to revive the Russia-India-China (RIC) troika. It can positively influence India's border issues with China. Nonetheless, India should continue to upgrade its armed forces to the optimum, following the policy of self-reliance. As far as Pakistan is concerned, it will always remain hostile towards India as its very existence depends on the anti-India narrative.

ASHOK BAHL, KANGRA

Drone supremacy via collaboration

With reference to 'Drones to the fore'; future warfare demands tomorrow's technology, and waiting is not an option. To truly stay 'ahead of the curve', we must recognise that the core of next-generation UAVs lies in artificial intelligence and machine learning. The key to unlocking this potential is a robust collaborative framework. Public sector giants like DRDO and HAL must forge dynamic partnerships not only with private players but also with our premier academic hubs like IITs and the IISc. This synergy is crucial to foster cutting-edge innovation and provide meaningful opportunities to our bright minds. We must harness this talent for national security before a brain drain to foreign tech firms further widens the gap we are trying to fill.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

Frontrunners in modern conflict

Apropos of 'Drones to the fore'; the dawn of non-contact warfare means that missile-laden drones are now becoming frontrunners in a conventional conflict. Besides ramping up air offence capability, India should also focus on developing cheap and effective anti-drone systems. Several technologies are being tested, ranging from jammers which can confuse a drone's navigation system to lasers which can burn them up mid-flight. Commercialising them and mass-producing drones and anti-drone systems will need robust supply chains, for which private companies, particularly small and

medium enterprises should be made partners in India's national security.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Ill-treating our rivers

When Kali Bein was revived with the efforts of Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal, it raised hopes that the glory of the 'Buddha dariya' too would be restored. Now, even its name has been downgraded from a *dariya* to a *nullah*. Discharge of Ludhiana's industrial waste into the water body without effluent treatment and unwillingness of residents to take corrective measures have decimated chances of its revival. We, the citizens of this country, know very well how we ill-treat our rivers. Whether it is the Ganga, Yamuna or Buddha *dariya*, we don't treat our rivers with respect.

DEEPAK TAAK, PANCHKULA

A blot on democracy

The clash between BJP and NCP (Sharad Pawar) members inside the Maharashtra Assembly is a stark reminder of how far some elected leaders have strayed from the dignity their office demands. When those trusted to make laws engage in virtual street brawls, it doesn't just shame democracy, it weakens public trust and evokes disrespect for elected leaders. Leadership is not about position or power alone; it's about restraint, responsibility and moral conduct. If our lawmakers can't uphold decorum at their workplace, what example are they setting for the common man? It's high time our politicians showed real character.

ASAD DAMRUBAR, BY MAIL

Epitome of courage

Refer to 'PVC awardee IAF pilot Sekhon's Srinagar room now a museum'; it is a befitting tribute by the Army to Flying Officer Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon on his 80th birth anniversary (July 17). Sekhon was an epitome of courage who rammed his jet into enemy war planes and shot down two Pakistani jets in a dogfight. He showed the guts to fight hard when six enemy jets attacked Srinagar and the airbase there during the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

COL GURDEEP SINGH (RETD), SOLAN

Risk of vanishing votes in Bihar's revised roll



JAGDEEP S CHHOKAR
FOUNDER-MEMBER,
ASSOCIATION FOR
DEMOCRATIC REFORMS

THE Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral roll in Bihar initiated by the Election Commission of India (ECI) has been in the news ever since it was initiated on June 24.

It is a developing story with fresh developments happening every day by way of press notes issued by the ECI, newspaper advertisements issued by the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of Bihar and revealing reports in the media — mainstream and social.

This piece is an attempt to look ahead and try to build a scenario about what might or is likely to happen, IF the exercise goes ahead as envisaged by the ECI.

According to a full-page advertisement issued by the Bihar CEO on July 5, voters in Bihar could submit their Enumeration Forms (EFs) by July 25.

On July 6, the ECI issued a press note that said: "The electors can submit their

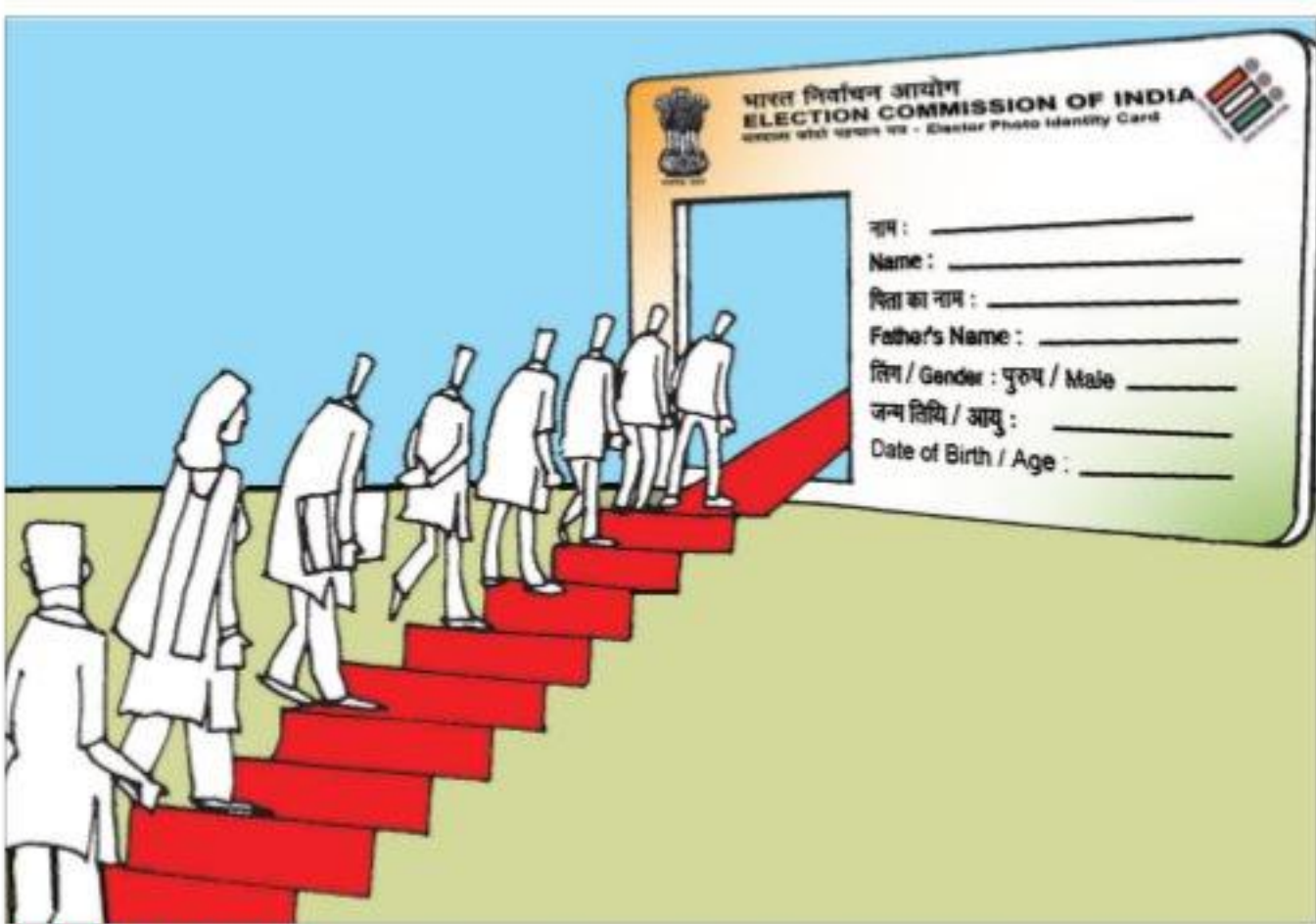
documents any time before July 25, 2025. After publication of draft electoral rolls, if any document is deficient, EROs can obtain such documents, from the electors whose name appears in the draft electoral rolls, during scrutiny in the Claims and Objection period."

The draft electoral roll is to be published on August 1 and the Claims and Objection period ends on September 1. From the press note of July 6, it is not clear if the last date of submission of documents is July 25 or September 1.

Notwithstanding the above, a scenario that is likely to emerge is visualised below.

On July 26 or earlier, the ECI will issue a press note claiming that 99.99 per cent or 7.9 crore documents have been collected. It will not clarify how many are complete or usable and how many are not.

The draft electoral roll will be published on August 1. It is likely that a large number of voters, particularly those who are working in various states as migrants and remote villages in Bihar (anywhere between 20 and 50 per cent) will not be able to check if their names actually appear on the draft electoral roll for a variety of reasons. One major reason for not being able to do so is that they are busy dealing



DEVELOPING STORY: The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral roll in Bihar was initiated by the Election Commission of India on June 24, 2025. SANDEEP JOSHI

with their bread and shelter issues, and do not have the luxury or wherewithal to check the draft electoral roll by going to cyber cafes.

Therefore, no 'Claims and Objections' will be filed either by them or on their behalf.

The final electoral roll will then be published on September 30. For the reasons described above, no objections will be filed against the final electoral roll.

Then will come the polling day. The day before the polling date, all the migrants who have been working in different parts

If a situation comes to pass when a large number of landless migrant workers find themselves deprived of the right to vote, their behaviour can be very unpredictable.

of the country will reach their villages either on their own or using the return rail tickets or chartered buses provided by various political parties.

Imagine a remote village which has 500 voters who have voted in all elections for the last 15 to 20 years, including the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. When all the 500 turn up at the polling booth on the polling day, let us assume that as a result of the process described above, about half of them, around 200-250 of the 500 find that their names are missing from the electoral roll.

What is likely to happen then? Here is a possible scenario.

People finding their names missing from the electoral roll is not impossible. In every election, in every polling booth, some people find their names missing. IF there are a few of them, may be 10 or 15, they feel very unhappy, even angry, but usually they swallow their anger, criticise the ECI or the 'system' and go back home feeling frustrated.

However, IF this happens with 200 out of 500 persons in a remote village in Bihar, the situation may turn out to be different. The six to eight ECI officials manning the polling booth and around the same number of police or paramilitary personnel guarding the booth may not be able to contain the anger of 200 persons and the situation may get out of control.

IF this happens in one or two, or even eight or 10 villages, the situation may be controlled or suppressed, as was done at Markarwadi in Maharashtra when the villagers wanted to conduct their own poll to check how the winning candidate in their constituency had got less votes in their village.

A large posse of police arrived in the village the night before and prevented the villagers from conducting their poll.

However, the situation

may be different in case this happens in a hundred or more villages.

I would be very relieved and happy, and sincerely hope so, if the above scenario does not come to pass, but the apprehension is that unless the ECI realises the possible consequences of its continuing on its path or the Supreme Court either stays the process or takes some other action to remedy the situation, the country may face a very difficult situation.

There is a saying often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi to the effect that one should be very careful of the man who has nothing to lose.

This may well apply to a large number of persons who migrate out of Bihar in search of livelihood. Whatever the economic and social condition may be, every person in India, including the most deprived, is acutely conscious of his/ her right to vote.

IF a situation comes to pass when a large number of landless migrant workers find themselves deprived of the only right they have, their behaviour can be very unpredictable.

It is hoped that the ECI will realise the possible consequences of its actions in time to prevent any catastrophe.

The Dalai Lama question will be a problem for China



JAYADEVA RANADE
PRESIDENT, CENTRE FOR
CHINA ANALYSIS & STRATEGY

ON the issue of the continuation of the institution of the Dalai Lama and the 14th Dalai Lama's reincarnation, both sides — the Dalai Lama and the Chinese — have drawn unambiguous lines in the sand. The 14th Dalai Lama has unequivocally declared that he will not be reborn under an authoritarian regime, thus ruling out the possibility of his being reincarnated inside the People's Republic of China. With this, it is certain that the Chinese, notwithstanding the irony of the situation, will contest the "genuineness" of the 14th Dalai Lama's reincarnation and announce a candidate of their own. This piquant situation will affect the approximately seven million Tibetans inside China and also the wider Tibetan diaspora.

The 14th Dalai Lama's 90th birthday on July 6 was an important event. That day, the 14th Dalai Lama made the long-awaited announcement confirming

that the institution of the Dalai Lama will continue. In fact, Samdong Rimpoche, former Kalon Tripa (or Prime Minister of the exiled Tibetan community) and one of the closest confidants of the 14th Dalai Lama, said that the institution would continue till the 15th, 16th and 17th Dalai Lamas!

It has also been clarified that the Gaden Phobrang, the 14th Dalai Lama's personal trust, has been entrusted with guiding and monitoring the process of finding the reincarnation. The details of where and when will obviously only become available after a while.

Despite various decades-long attempts by China's Communist regime, including negotiations with the Dalai Lama's representatives, to ensure that the 14th Dalai Lama either returns or is reincarnated inside China, it is now definite that the 14th Dalai Lama will be reincarnated outside China. This is a development that the Chinese leadership has tried hard to avoid.

In an unusual paper published in June 2013, obviously with high-level approval, Jin Wei, a senior faculty in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Central Party School, cautioned that in the "post-Dalai Lama phase, the exiled Tibetan government will probably join other extremist organisations to engage in extreme vio-



UNEQUIVOCAL: The 14th Dalai Lama has declared that he will not be reborn under an authoritarian regime, thus ruling out the possibility of his being reincarnated in China. REUTERS

lence." He said China must, therefore, make every possible effort to "avoid the embarrassment of a twin Dalai Lama" situation, like that of the Panchen Lama. Highlighting the status of the Dalai Lama among the Tibetan people, he tellingly observed that during his extensive travels in Tibet, ordinary people had told him: "In this life I depend on the Communist Party, in the next life I depend on the Dalai Lama."

The 14th Dalai Lama's reincarnation also has international ramifications. It is not only China's neighbours that will be impacted but also the numerous, largely Buddhist, nations in East and Southeast Asia as well as democracies in the West

In the post-14th Dalai Lama phase, Beijing can be expected to enhance pressure on India and try and promote division and discord within the exiled Tibetan community.

and the US.

Washington has, in fact, already stated its position in the Resolve Act passed by the US Congress in 2024. The Act asserts that China has no right to interfere in the Dalai Lama's reincarnation.

This is a crucial year for the Tibetans and is marked by a couple of anniversaries important for the Communist Chinese regime. It is the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and the 75th anniversary of the so-called 'peaceful liberation of Tibet'.

With occasional, but regular, protests mainly by monks or Tibetans motivated by the desire to preserve their language and

culture still occurring across Tibet and Tibetan areas, the Chinese authorities have taken steps to ensure that there are no protests. Heightened police and military presence has been reported in at least 12 Tibetan cities, prefectures and monasteries. These include Lhasa City and the reputed Kumbum and Labrang monasteries.

Meanwhile, Gyaltsen Norbu, the China-appointed Panchen Lama, who met Chinese President Xi Jinping and the two senior-most officials dealing with Tibet in Beijing on June 5, arrived in Tibet on June 27. Following Xi Jinping's instructions, he has been meeting Tibetan Buddhist monks in major monasteries and exhorting them to promote the 'sense of Chinese community', nationalism and patriotism and accelerate the pace of adapting Tibetan Buddhism to socialism with Chinese characteristics.

There are indications that plans are being finalised for celebrating the 60th anniversary of the so-called "peaceful liberation" of Tibet around mid-September. Reports indicate that Xi Jinping will probably visit Tibet to take part in these celebrations.

Xi Jinping's interest in Tibet has been visible ever since he was appointed Vice-President of China and even

earlier, if one recalls that his mother is a practising Buddhist. As Party Secretary of Zhejiang province, he successfully organised China's First World Buddhist Forum in 2001.

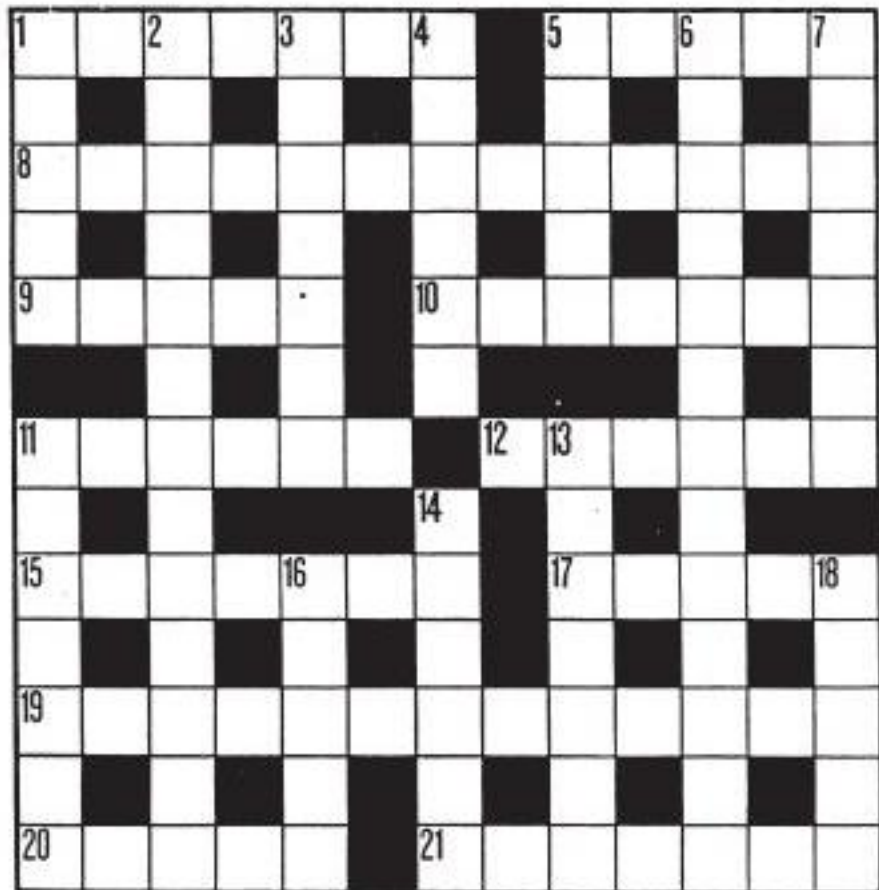
Xi Jinping's visit will reinforce the importance accorded to Tibet by the CCP leadership while simultaneously heightening the already restrictive security controls imposed across the TAR and on Tibetans.

In order to raise the China-appointed Panchen Lama's profile in preparation for his role in recognising the 14th Dalai Lama's reincarnation and later being his principal tutor, Gyaltsen Norbu is likely to accompany Xi Jinping during his visit to Tibet.

In the post-14th Dalai Lama phase, Beijing can be expected to enhance pressure on India and try and promote division and discord within the exiled Tibetan community. It will seek to describe the Central Tibetan Administration as a secessionist outfit and warn India not to support it or the reincarnate Dalai Lama.

India's stance over the years, however, in spite of Chinese pressure, especially since 1980, has not wavered and the government will in all probability recognise the reincarnation accepted by the Tibetan people. Prime Minister Modi's birthday greetings to the 14th Dalai Lama is a signal.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Daily record of events (7)
- 5 Value highly (5)
- 8 Take potentially fatal risks (4,4,5)
- 9 Push roughly (5)
- 10 Blissfully peaceful (7)
- 11 Delight in causing cruelty (6)
- 12 To an equal extent (2,4)
- 15 Loss of memory (7)
- 17 Subject of conversation (5)
- 19 Assortment of small items (4,3,6)
- 20 Over (5)
- 21 Winged horse of Greek myth (7)

DOWN


- 1 Betrayer of a friend (5)
- 2 Out of sync (13)
- 3 Novelty (7)
- 4 Baltic country (6)
- 5 Wetland for growing rice (5)
- 6 Fully (2,3,8)
- 7 Morally correct (7)
- 11 Walk with shuffling gait (7)
- 13 Immediate surroundings (7)
- 14 Strapped for cash (4,2)
- 16 Tolerate (5)
- 18 Legal expenses (5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Scrap, 8 Not least, 9 Belie, 10 Meltdown, 11 Motto, 12 Eye, 16 Geyser, 17 Look on, 18 Ram, 23 Steep, 24 Play ball, 25 Heady, 26 Cockeyed, 27 Blues.

Down: 2 Chew over, 3 Acid test, 4 Homely, 5 Flute, 6 Havoc, 7 At one, 12 Err, 13 Elm, 14 Soft sell, 15 Bone idle, 19 Allied, 20 Space, 21 Catch, 22 Ibsen.

SU DO KU



HARD

FORECAST

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JULY 19, 2025, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Aashadh Shaka 28
- Shravan Purnimots 4
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 2.43 pm
- Shoola Yoga up to 12.55 am
- Bhumi Nakshatra up to 12.38 am
- Moon in Aries sign

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	19:24 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	05:34 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	28
New Delhi	35	24
Amritsar	33	28
Bathinda	36	27
Jalandhar	33	28
Ludhiana	34	29
Bhiwani	34	26
Hisar	35	28
Sirsa	36	30
Dharamsala	28	19
Manali	26	17
Shimla	21	16
Srinagar	30	18
Jammu	35	25
Kargil	33	16
Leh	26	15
Dehradun	34	24
Mussoorie	24	17

TEMPERATURE IN °C