



Editor's TAKE

Trump and the art of making friends into foes

Trump's fixation on Greenland has pushed the US into an open confrontation with the European Union, undermining the NATO alliance itself

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the world's largest and most potent military alliance, is at a crossroads. Born after World War II it rose in scope and prominence, and its strength grew from 12 members to 32. However, in present times it is facing one of the biggest challenges to its existence, not from outside but from within – The US. President Donald Trump's pitch to acquire Greenland at any cost has rendered Article 5 meaningless. The article states that an attack on one of its members would be deemed an attack on all. But what if the attack is by its own member, in the present scenario, the US on Denmark. The whole premise of NATO falls flat.

It remained cohesive and strong during the Russian aggression in Ukraine or on the US unilateral action in Iran, but the fissures are coming out in the open as European nations are consolidating against the US like never before. Europe sees the US move as coercive overreach. No doubt Greenland, an autonomous territory under the control of Denmark, occupies a strategically vital position in the Arctic. Its location, natural resources, and proximity to emerging polar shipping routes have made it increasingly important. There is also stiff competition with Russia and China. Trump's argument that US control of Greenland is essential for American national security is absurd, as Denmark happens to be a NATO member and by default Greenland a partner to it, and the US and NATO can always use it as a military base to thwart any challenge. Yet pressure tactics are being employed by Washington – punitive tariffs against several European nations unless Denmark agrees to negotiate Greenland's transfer. For Europe, this is an intimidation guise as a security concern of the US. If the US can do it with Denmark, it can do it with other territories as well, shattering the notion of sovereignty of small European nations. The European Union is in no mood to comply; its response has been unusually unified. Denmark has categorically rejected the idea of selling Greenland, while Greenland's local government has stressed that its future is not for foreign powers to decide. European leaders have categorically warned that coercion against any NATO ally undermines the very foundation of the alliance. If economic threats become an acceptable tool within alliances, the moral authority of NATO weakens. The US move could also have wider geopolitical implications. Any visible schism between the US and Europe is closely watched by Moscow and Beijing.

A divided NATO emboldens adversaries and weakens deterrence at a time when global security is already under strain. Ironically, a move justified in the name of American security could end up diminishing it by hollowing out the alliance system that underpins Western power. Interestingly enough, within the United States, concerns are growing across party lines. Lawmakers and policy experts have warned that treating allied territory as a negotiable asset damages America's credibility and leadership. Ultimately, Greenland is a test of whether alliances are partnerships or mere power arrangements. If NATO falls apart, it would disbalance the world geopolitics in a big way.

Wikipedia@25: Knowledge at the crossroads

Wikipedia—the world's most radical experiment in democratic knowledge—faces its greatest challenge yet. At 25, the platform that once reshaped how humanity learns must now redefine its relevance in a world increasingly mediated by AI and machines



SANTHOSH
MATHEW

Just as human history is often divided into the eras B.C. and A.D., it is no longer unreasonable to imagine the Internet's story split between B.AI and A.AI. — Before Artificial Intelligence and After Artificial Intelligence. In this dramatic transition, one quiet but revolutionary institution stands at a crossroads: Wikipedia, which turned 25 this January. Born in the age of dial-up modems and nurtured in the optimism of early cyberspace, Wikipedia now finds itself navigating the shadows—and possibilities—cast by AI.

When Wikipedia went online on January 15, 2001, it was the brainchild of two men who represented two contrasting intellectual temperaments of the digital age. Jimmy Wales, an internet entrepreneur with libertarian instincts, believed deeply in radical openness and crowd wisdom. Larry Sanger, a trained philosopher and Wikipedia's first editor-in-chief, worried that unfiltered openness could undermine neutrality and epistemic rigor. Their collaboration lasted barely a year, but the tension between openness and authority, participation and expertise, democracy and discipline continues to define Wikipedia even at 25. Yet, against all skepticism, Wikipedia survived—and triumphed. At a time when knowledge was either locked behind academic paywalls or curated by elite institutions, Wikipedia demolished the idea that information must have gatekeepers. It declared, boldly and unapologetically, that knowledge has no monopoly. Anyone could write. Anyone could edit. Anyone could correct. In doing so, Wikipedia became the most radical experiment in the democratisation of information in human history.

Today, Wikipedia exists in more than 300 languages, hosts over 60 million articles, and is among the most visited websites in the world. For students in rural India, activists in Africa, journalists in Latin America, and citizens everywhere, Wikipedia became the first port of call on the information superhighway. It flattened hierarchies of knowledge dissemination and transformed passive consumers into active participants. The traditional flow of information—from elite producers to mass audiences—was disrupted forever. But Wikipedia's silver jubilee arrives at a moment of profound uncertainty. Artificial Intelligence, particularly generative AI, threatens to redraw the architecture of knowledge itself. Tools powered by large language models no longer merely retrieve information; they synthesize, paraphrase, predict, and even "create" it. The question is no longer how humans access information, but whether humans will remain central to its production. Ironically, AI systems owe a significant debt to Wikipedia. Its freely licensed content has served as a foundational dataset for



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training AI models. In a sense, Wikipedia is both the parent and the prey of AI—nurturing the systems that may eventually overshadow it. Search engines already answer questions without directing users to Wikipedia pages. Chatbots summarize topics in seconds, eroding the incentive to consult original sources. The risk is not extinction, but invisibility.

This marks a shift from the age of information retrieval to the age of information mediation. Wikipedia was built for the former—a transparent, editable repository where users could see sources, debates, revisions, and disputes. AI, by contrast, often operates as a black box. It delivers confident answers without citations, context, or accountability. In doing so, it risks reversing one of Wikipedia's greatest achievements: making the process of knowledge creation visible. At stake is not just Wikipedia's relevance, but the very idea of democratic knowledge. Wikipedia's model assumes that truth emerges through collective scrutiny, disagreement, and correction. AI models, however, optimize for coherence rather than truth, fluency rather than fairness. They reflect existing biases embedded in training data and amplify dominant narratives—often from the Global North, in English, and from digitally privileged communities.

This is where Wikipedia's continued relevance becomes critical. In an AI-saturated ecosystem, Wikipedia remains one of the last large-scale, non-profit, human-curated knowledge platforms. It does not chase clicks, sell ads, or optimize for outrage. Its neutrality policy, though imperfect, is enforced through transparent rules and community deliberation. Errors are not hidden; they are corrected in public view. This ethos stands in sharp contrast to algorithmic opacity.

For countries like India, the stakes are even higher. Wikipedia has played a crucial role in vernacular knowledge dissemination, allowing histories, cultures, and perspectives outside Western academia to find space online. AI systems trained predominantly on English-language and Western-centric data threaten to marginalize these voices further. If Wikipedia weakens, so does the digital presence of the Global South. AI can assist editors by detecting vandalism, translating articles across languages, summarising sources, and identifying gaps in coverage.

Wikipedia's 25-year journey also offers a lesson for the broader politics of knowledge. In an era of misinformation, deepfakes, and epistemic chaos, trust has become the most valuable currency. Wikipedia earned trust not through authority, but through process—openness, verifiability, and collective responsibility.

AI systems, if they are to be trusted, must learn from this model rather than undermine it.

There is also a deeper philosophical question at play. Wikipedia represents the Enlightenment ideal that knowledge progresses through reasoned debate and shared inquiry. At risks ushering in a post-Enlightenment moment, where answers are consumed without understanding and certainty replaces skepticism. In such a world, the danger is not ignorance, but uncritical acceptance.

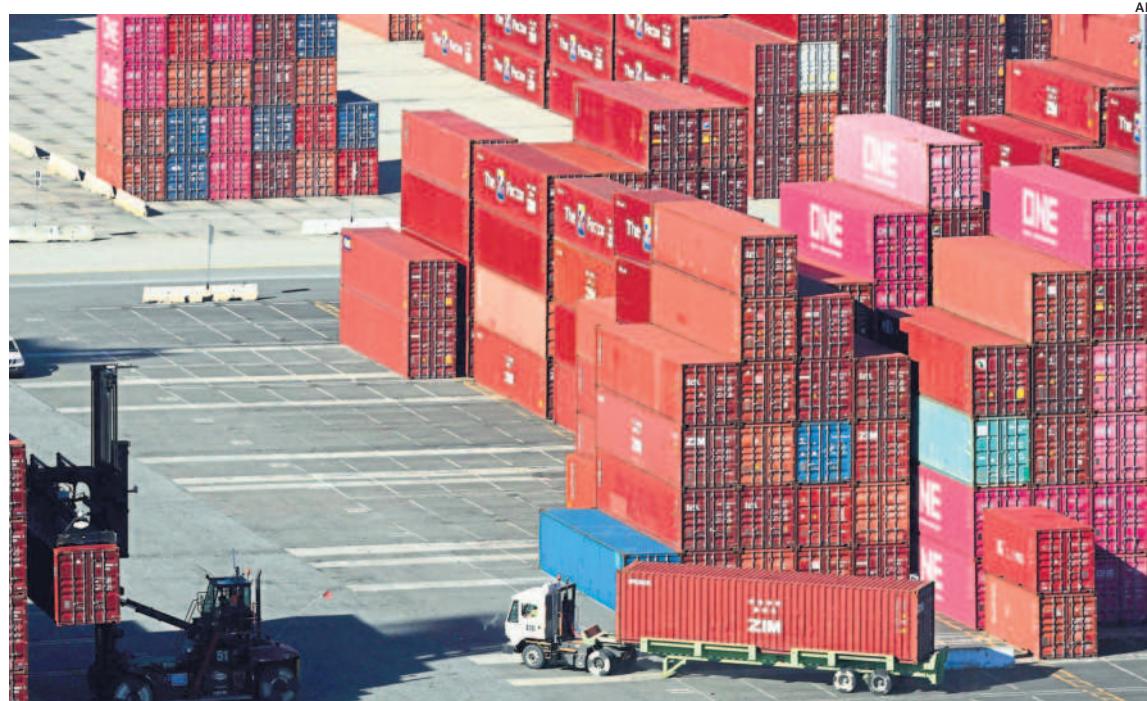
As Wikipedia steps into its second quarter-century, it must reassess its founding vision with renewed urgency.

The Internet may now be divided into B.AI and A.AI, but Wikipedia must ensure that the human remains at the center of knowledge.

Its challenge is not technological obsolescence, but moral relevance. Twenty-five years ago, Wikipedia proved that knowledge does not belong to institutions, corporations, or experts alone. It belongs to humanity. In the shadow of Artificial Intelligence, that idea is more radical—and more necessary—than ever.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

OUR VIEW



The export readiness of states is too local a lens

Niti Aayog's new report on Indian preparedness for global trade has some useful cues but misses the big picture in its state and district level analysis. Success demands a wider view

One characteristic of this era of social media, globally, has been an erosion in the credibility of expertise. Niti Aayog's *Export Preparedness Index 2024*, a laborious attempt to measure how ready India's different states are to generate exports, is not designed to counter that trend. Released last week, it delves into the export readiness of states classified as 'large,' comprising 17 of them, and the rest—based on four pillars with 13 sub-pillars and as many as 70 parameters. Evidently, a lot of work has gone into it. Unfortunately, though, a missing macroeconomic perspective on export success dims the glow of its little gems of fact and insight.

The notion that individual states and districts within states can boost exports just on the strength of their initiative and drive is dubious. Take the 50% import duty that the US has levied on non-services, non-pharma exports from India. Garment exports from India have been hit, regardless of how prepared our garment-exporting states have been to support shipments. The exchange rate is a crucial variable that determines how much a country can export and that is beyond the control of any state government. Access to foreign markets is majorly influenced by trade deals and partnerships, apart from the ability to figure in global supply chains. Neither is a state-specific capability. The forging of supply network links is a function of nation-level industrial policy, supported with funds for design, R&D and infrastructure. The cost of capital, similarly, is under control of the central bank's monetary policy committee. Import duties on inputs are critical determinants of how viable particular exports are, regardless of where production is located.

Sometimes, non-tariff barriers, such as stiff quality norms, are as significant a factor shaping input costs as tariffs. States could lobby to have these duties altered, but these are for the Centre to determine. High import duties on synthetic yarn and fibre have constrained India's garment industry, for example, because most of the clothes bought by the world are made of synthetic fabrics or blends. At times, one state's export success could be constrained by another state. Take the case of a town whose nearest port lies in another state where roads are in such disrepair that they hinder access to docks and slow shipments. Measuring the export preparedness of the town in question and the state in which it is located falls short of a realistic assessment of their potential. Also, some states specialize in exporting skilled labour, which generates high remittance income for the entire nation. The report's parameters overlook this. While it does acknowledge the value of service exports, tourism included, its indices fail to reflect their importance.

Should we then conclude that the entire report represents wasted effort? That is not the case. It does serve to alert states to their shortcomings, particularly in relation to other states, in various areas that matter for broader economic efficiency. State administrations should look into these and close the gaps that hold them back. Merchandise export success, however, calls for a lot more; for the coming age of AI, we may even need a whole new approach. AI, in combination with advanced robotics, looks set to turn many labour-intensive sectors into capital-intensive ones. At the same time, many new opportunities are likely to open up. Studying such aspects of the future would be more useful than such a report.

THEIR VIEW

The Tiger Global ruling: A blow to foreign investment in India?

The Supreme Court's ruling creates tax uncertainty that may hit the confidence of foreign investors



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after running short of foreign exchange and New Delhi liberalized rules for foreign investment inflows. Around the same time, Mauritius passed the Mauritius Offshore Business Activities Act, which brought into effect the tax treaty with India that gave tax exemption on the sale of shares by companies resident there. It was obviously designed to attract foreign investment to India via Mauritius. However, a Tax Residency Certificate (TRC) regime arose that allowed treaty benefits to be claimed by obtaining a TRC in Mauritius.

As Circular No. 682 of the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDC) dated 30 March 1994 states: "Any resident of Mauritius deriving income from alienation of shares of Indian companies will be liable to capital gains tax only in Mauritius as per Mauritius tax law and will not have any capital gains tax liability in India." In August 2016, Sections 3A) and 3B) were inserted in Article 13 of the treaty: "3A) Gains from the alienation of shares acquired on or after April 1, 2017 in a company which is resident of a Contracting State may be taxed in that State; 3B) However, the tax rate on the gains referred to in Paragraph 3A of this Article and arising during the period beginning on April 1, 2017 and ending on March 31, 2019 shall not exceed 50% of the tax rate applicable on such gains in the State of residence of the company whose shares are being alienated."

The holding structure was complex. It was Tiger Global Mauritius (TGM) that held equity in Flipkart Singapore, which in turn had a stake in Flipkart India, and what was sold to Walmart in 2018 was TGM's stake in Flipkart Singapore. As such, this was not a sale of a company in India. This offers a parallel with the Vodafone case: in 2007, Hong Kong-based Hutchison Group had sold its stake in overseas holding firms (including one in Mauritius) that controlled Hutchison Essar in India to UK-based Vodafone. In TGM's case, though, the sale was by a Mauritius company of shares in a Singapore firm.

Since 1992, Article 13 of an India-Mauritius tax treaty had offered a capital gains exemption till it was amended with effect from 1 April 2017. Consider the historical background. In 1991, India had to reform its economic policies

purpose of the treaty was to lure foreign investment. But unfortunately, endless doublespeak over three decades has acted as a dampener for investors.

One would assume the Supreme Court was acquainted with that context. Yet, it ruled against Tiger Global and its use of tax grandfathering—notably, the transactions under scrutiny involved shares acquired before before 1 April 2017. The tax department had still pressed for a capital-gains levy and the top court focused on substance over form and the fact that underlying business was in India to uphold the tax claim. Here are some larger issues:

First, the government's keenness to attract foreign investment was clear in its use of the Mauritius treaty and CBDC circulars to convey its intent to honour the tax exemption. Yet, strangely, the government chose to press for the levy.

Second, what are the signals this sends to foreign investors? Especially in today's context, as we face geopolitical headwinds and uneven capital inflows.

All of this raises a question. Should the Supreme Court not have considered the larger picture, including the CBDC circulars and intent to allow the grandfathering of shares acquired pre-April 2017? This judgement against Tiger Global's exemption claim has cast a long and dark shadow on the certainty of law, sanctity of tax treaties and the credibility of government promises (even if only implied). Overall, it has sent negative signals to foreign investors, particularly private equity players. While there may be few other cases of its kind, the ruling raises the risk of deals long-concluded being reopened. It also casts into uncertainty cases covered by other treaties with a similar provision, such as one with Singapore, as well as cases under the India-Dutch treaty, which has its own form of exemption.

One can only hope that some kind of resolution will emerge and positive signals will be sent by the Centre to mitigate the impact of this judgement.

Sneha Mahnot contributed to the article

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Let us come together and think of ways India does not have to import but we export to the world.

NARENDRA MODI

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

In *Scenes from a Situationship*, an urban Indian film that has released on YouTube, a young couple drifts closer, losing their annoyances in companionship, liking, talking, bickering, making plans, making love, abusing, making up, taking it for granted that they are adored and still dissatisfied, as though they know what it is to be satisfied. They may think they are the first of their kind, but while generations before them have had the same conversations and same lives; just that we may not have seen it in an Indian film. They love sex, though maybe not equally. She can make him bathe by promising sex; but he doesn't have that sort of power. She, in fact, blames him for his mediocre technique; he blames the mysteries of girls. They have a lot of time, a lot; like many young people, they are billionaires of time. These two don't have to send money to parents, or worry about them. They are the type of young people whose problems are themselves. They have friends like them, who are couples and who say that to be in

love is to be bored with each other. They are proud of this observation, which they suspect is deeply philosophical.

It is such a rare, real and delightful Indian film, one of the best written in my recent memory. I do not have the heart to call it independent or 'art cinema', though it is, because Indian fringe cinema is generally dreary or at least dour and fake, intended for the lottery of foreign acclaim on the festival circuit and made by urban people who do not belong to the world they claim to portray. *Scenes from a Situationship*, directed by Vaibhav Munjal, who has also co-written the film with Vaishnav Vyas, one of the two remarkable lead actors, Shreya Sandilya being the other, is the work of people who belong exactly in the world they depict.

The achievement of *Scenes...* is that it is art that is entertaining, which is the only part of art that requires talent more than narcissism. Its other achievement is that it feels real. Realism in cinema is not reality, but a fantasy of reality. And this film's realism comes from the most difficult aspect of life to capture in art: conversations. How modern Indians speak is a part of Indian life we never get to see in any form of cinema—neither in 'good' movies, because they are charlatan, nor in mainstream cinema, because they are farces.

The film is brilliant because it is independent in a way that most independent films are not. Usually, films made on a shoestring budget have only one market: the international acclaim market, which has some unspoken requirements. An Indian film, for example, is expected to show exotic forms of misery. *Scenes...* is doomed in that market. Not only is it entertaining (and for some reason the high priests of art are allergic to entertainment), it is also about conversations that one can picture any young couple having in a Western city. Yet, it was made.

The film does not try to hide the fact that it has been made with very little money. In any case, it is not something that can be hidden. Its austerity, though, enhances its grimy realism. The film's creator, Vaibhav Munjal, told me that he had funded the film himself with some friends and by giving equity to key people who worked for free or almost nothing. But how much exactly did the film cost? He refused to divulge the fig-

ure, fearing that it would diminish the ambition of the film.

Usually, a film like this is made this way: someone writes it, then someone who knows someone in a studio or a platform suggests changes; then someone in the studio suggests more changes in return for

funding the film; then actors, if they are reasonably well known, gives notes. In not seeking studio or platform money, or not having the chance to seek it in the first place, Munjal could make the film he wanted. But the process after that usually is to 'send' the film to international festivals to gather acclaim and attention.

Munjal, who is 31, was very clear he wanted to stay clear of "validation," which is a young person's word for acclaim. He says it is a trap. Once you allow yourself to fall into its lure, you will spend your whole life making things you don't believe in but will get you compliments.

Munjal completed the film, packed it and "gave a narrow window for the OTTs," but

figured that selling to them would be a long and difficult process. In any case, Munjal knew the YouTube medium. He is the co-creator of Chalchitra Talks, a hugely successful channel on YouTube that recommends films and books. He has also released short films on the platform, which is a great medium, he says, if you are not serious about recouping the money.

Money is the hardest problem to solve in filmmaking. Even some of the most famous filmmakers in the world struggle to find funds. Then there is a greater struggle to recoup that money.

This is odd because most of the world is in the trance of cinema, which is now called by many names. People spend hours everyday looking for themselves in drama. And they almost never find that in mainstream or art cinema.

In an ideal world, an entertaining art film should have a chance to make money. In an ideal world, it should be streamed on YouTube and people would pay a ticket price to watch it. Half a million people, which is a small niche for cinema, paying ₹300 could create a whole new enjoyable genre. People tell me there's no chance of it; that it cannot happen. I think that is the future of honest entertaining art cinema.



Opinion

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2026

Investors need stability

Policy intervention could be constructive in deepening the bond market

WITH THE UNION Budget just around the corner, the government finds itself in a delicate position. On the one hand, secondary markets have struggled, but the causes are largely external—most notably US tariff actions—rather than a verdict on India's underlying growth story. If trade tensions ease, some normalisation is likely. On the other hand, the sustained flight of foreign portfolio capital is a more immediate concern. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have pulled out ₹1.65 lakh crore in 2025, a scale of selling that cannot be brushed aside. In 2026, the selling spree—at ₹18,000 crore—has continued till date. While several brokerages expect the Sensex and Nifty to be meaningfully higher by December 2026, the opening weeks of the year have done little to inspire confidence in those projections. Coming on the heels of a tepid 2025, secondary market investors have little to celebrate. Benchmark indices returned around 10%, but the broader market fared worse. Mid- and small-cap stocks were flat to negative, vindicating earlier warnings by fund managers such as ICICI Prudential's Sankaran Naren about valuation excesses in these segments.

The primary market, however, told a very different story. More than 100 initial public offerings (IPOs) raised a record ₹1.8 lakh crore in 2025. While listing gains became harder to come by, marquee names such as LG Electronics and Meesho—delivering first-day gains of about 50% and 45%—were enough to keep retail interest alive. That momentum is unlikely to fade soon. With large listings such as Jio and NSE expected in 2026, the IPO pipeline looks even stronger. Unless valuations become egregious or markets suffer a sharp correction, investor appetite for quality paper should remain intact. Against this backdrop, the most sensible course for the government may be to do very little for equity investors. At the same time, the current tax rates of 12.5% and 20% on long-term and short-term capital gains seem to be tough enough.

Stability, rather than stimulus, is what markets need. There may be a limited case for fine-tuning certain provisions to improve India's appeal to FPIs. As *Financial Express* reported recently, discussions are underway on extending pass-through tax treatment to pension and endowment funds that are tax-exempt in their home jurisdictions. The perennial demand to cut the securities transaction tax and commodities transaction tax has also resurfaced, a move that would please exchanges and market participants alike. Yet, given the revenue implications—and after sweeping changes to income tax slabs and the rollout of goods and services tax 2.0 that lowered rates across segments—it is unlikely the government will be eager to give up more fiscal room.

Where policy intervention could be more constructive is in deepening the bond market. Both the Securities and Exchange Board of India and the Reserve Bank of India have taken steps to widen retail access to bonds, supported by the growth of online bond platforms. The government could reinforce these efforts by reviving Section 194LD, which lapsed in mid-2023 and allowed FPIs and qualified institutional investors a concessional 5% tax deducted at source on certain debt investments. Other demands—such as equalising tax treatment between debt and equity funds or offering tax holidays to FPIs—remain largely aspirational wish lists. For equity markets, however, the case for restraint is strong. Maintaining the status quo would send the right signal. In uncertain global conditions, nothing reassures investors more than a stable and predictable tax regime. As they say, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Why Supreme Court must side with SEC fraudster

NO ONE WANTS to come down on the side of people who commit fraud. But last week, the US Supreme Court agreed to consider whether the Securities and Exchange Commission might have gone too far in punishing one. And in this unusually fraught political moment, we would do well to ponder the possibility that the fraudster should prevail.

The case in question is *Sripathi v. the SEC*, which, on its face, raises only the technical question of under what circumstances a person who commits securities fraud can be made to disgorge the profits from the fraud. As a matter of practical ethics, "always" might seem the obvious answer. In general, I'd agree. But read on.

The SEC has long and successfully asserted the authority to seek disgorgement of ill-gotten gains as part of its authority to obtain equitable remedies for securities fraud. In 2020, the Supreme Court placed the breadth of that authority in doubt. A year later, Congress adopted an amendment that expressly permits disgorgement as a remedy. Unfortunately, and somewhat amusingly, that amendment failed to define what disgorgement means, who it benefits, or when it is apt.

That's where the problem arises. Disgorgement is part of the common law of restitution and, traditionally, was used to compel the fraudster to transfer the profits of the fraud to the victims. The question is who counts as a victim. *Sripathi* argues that under the securities laws, investors qualify as victims only if they've suffered a pecuniary loss from the fraud. Absent those losses, he contends, disgorgement is inappropriate because there are no victims to whom the money should be returned.

In a separate case decided in 2023, the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit endorsed this position, ruling that the SEC can force the fraudster to surrender profits only if "the defrauded investors suffered pecuniary harm". In *Sripathi*, however, the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit rejected this argument. The Supreme Court will now resolve this split among the circuits.

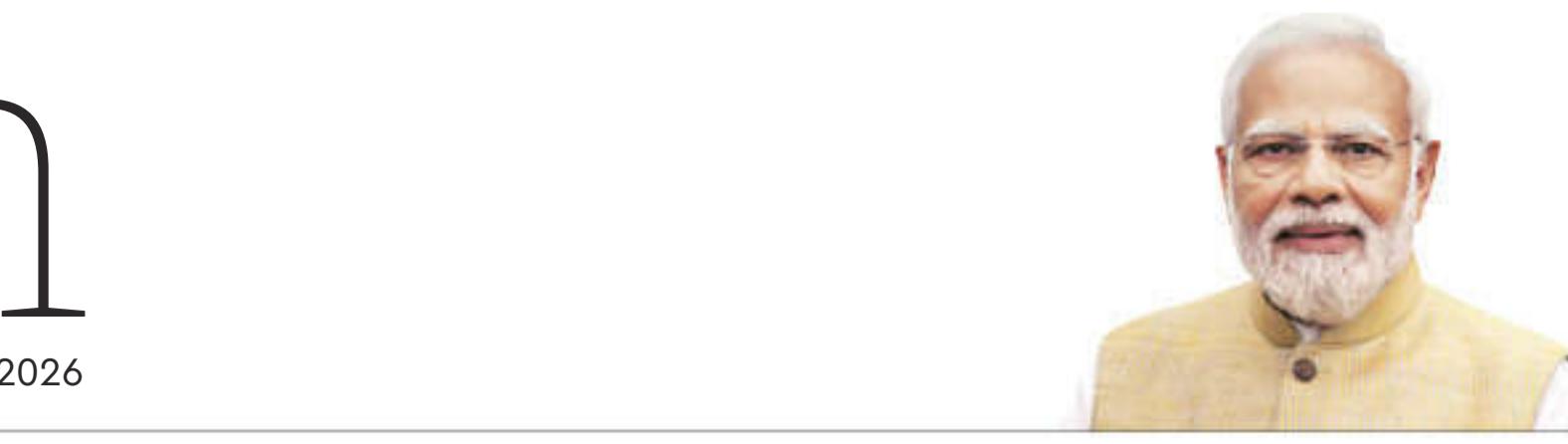
I've taught the subject of restitution, and I can state confidently that the common law provides support for either view. But therein lies the problem. Here, a federal agency insists on its right to define who is or isn't a victim, without any clear instruction from Congress. There's a reasonable argument to be made that, for the sake of protecting our rights, agency powers in general should be narrowly construed. Especially these days.

At the Supreme Court, the Trump administration is supporting the SEC in its claim of a broad equitable power to seek disgorgement even when no victims have suffered pecuniary harm. True, the SEC has been somewhat defanged of late, with disgorgements, in particular, falling in 2025 to the lowest level in at least a decade and a half (after hitting a record high in 2024). But at stake in the case is a larger issue than how much fraudsters must pay. The *Sripathi* case, in the end, touches upon a fundamental question about, to paraphrase Oliver Wendell Holmes, which square corners must the government turn before being permitted to punish?

The Supreme Court's controversial 2024 decision in *SEC v. Jarkesy* is looking better and better. There, the justices ruled by the familiar 6-3 majority that when the SEC seeks civil damages for civil fraud, it must do so before a jury in the regular federal courts, not before its own administrative law judges, who are by statute—get this—subject to presidential removal for cause. The dissent in that case warned of the majority's "power grab." In retrospect, however, one might reasonably conclude that the greater risk is a power grab in the opposite direction. Does one really want, in the current climate, to leave presidential appointees free to decide on their own whom to fine and how much?

We can agree that fraud is wicked and that victims should be compensated. But *Sripathi* presents a much broader question about government authority. If we're serious about cabining executive discretion, forcing Congress to be clear about which remedies agencies may seek might be a good place to start.

STEPHEN L CARTER
Bloomberg



EAST IN FOCUS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

All central projects will accelerate the development of West Bengal. The central government is working to meet the goal of a developed eastern India

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

IF THE GOVT IS REALLY ON 'REFORM EXPRESS' MODE, IT NEEDS TO REFORM AT LEAST TWO ITEMS IN THE BUDGET

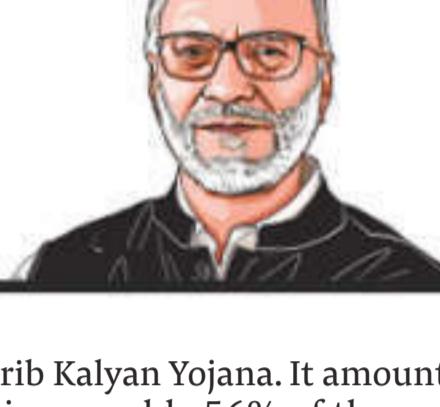
Streamline agri-food policies

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi says that his government is in "Reform Express" mode, having carried out several reforms ranging from income tax, goods and services tax, and the Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) to free trade agreements and so on. All of this is commendable. One could thank President Donald Trump for giving India a tariff shock, which stirred the Modi government to initiate reforms, many of which were overdue. The results so far have been better than expected. The first advance estimates project the Indian economy to be growing at 7.4% in FY26. Consumer inflation is also down to 1.3% in December 2025. But will this performance repeat itself in FY27, even if the trade deal with the US remains uncertain? The answer is not very clear, but a lot will depend upon how much more domestic reforms the Modi government can undertake. Here are a few areas in the agri-food space that are crying for reform for a long time.

Let us begin by noting that the agri-GDP growth is likely to be only 3.1% in FY26, which is quite a drop from 4.6% in FY25. What is less known is that the primary reason why consumer price inflation is so low is a collapse in some food prices. Onion prices are down by 48% in December compared to last year's level; potato prices are down by 35%, and all major pulses are selling at 10-30% below their respective minimum support prices (MSPs). Where is the emergency support coming from the government? Under such a depressed price scenario, it is not feasible for the government to achieve its objective of *atmanirbharata* (self-sufficiency) in pulses, irrespective of its mission on pulses and oilseeds. We need crop-neutral incentive struc-

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tures, which currently are heavily skewed in favour of water- and fertiliser-intensive crops like rice, sugarcane, and wheat. It is because of massive subsidies doled out by the states and the Centre in the form of free or highly subsidised power and fertilisers, especially urea. And this gets compounded by open-ended procurement of these crops in some states at least.

If the Modi government is really on "Reform Express" mode, it needs to reform at least two items in the Union Budget. The food subsidy is likely to touch ₹2.25 lakh crore, and fertiliser subsidy may go up to ₹2 lakh crore. Both are operating at a sub-optimal level to say the least.

Food subsidy is the difference between the economic cost of procuring, stocking, and distributing rice and wheat by the Food Corporation of India (FCI), and the price received from the beneficiaries of the public distribution system (PDS). In case of rice, the economic cost is hovering around ₹42/kg, and in case of wheat around ₹30/kg to FCI. It gives free 5 kg of rice or wheat to about 813 million people under the

PM's Garib Kalyan Yojana. It amounts to covering roughly 56% of the current population of around 1.45 billion. The introduction of point of sale (POS) machines in more than 5 lakh fair price shops (FPS) was a significant reform by the Modi government, which helped it to reduce massive leakages in PDS. But how rational is giving free food to 56% of the population, when according to World Bank's definition of extreme poverty (\$3 per capita/day) in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms at 2021 prices, India's poverty has come down to just 5.3% in 2022?

Even with a higher poverty line of \$4.2 per capita/day, poverty in India was about 24%. One can argue that the extremely poor (antyodaya) need to be given free food. From that standpoint, only about 5% of the population deserve free food, while others should pay at least half of the MSP. If not, then this policy is nothing but the biggest political *revali* (dole) that the government is giving to consumers for their votes. It gives free rice even to rice growers! This is the height of irrationality as these growers first give all their paddy to the government and then get back free rice with an enhanced economic cost and subsidy.

How can one reform this system? Coverage must be scaled down gradually from the current levels to 40% of the population, then to 25%, and finally to about 15%. If it does not have the political courage to do so, then the Centre should at least directly transfer cash to rice and wheat producers. Further, at least 20% of FPS should be converted to nutrition hubs having pulses, oilseeds, milk, eggs, fruits, vegetables, etc., which are more nutritious than just wheat and rice. Beneficiaries at these FPS can be given food coupons to buy this more diversified food for better nutrition.

Now, let us turn to fertiliser subsidy. It is the second largest subsidy (about ₹2 lakh crore) in the Union Budget, bigger than the entire budget of the ministry of agriculture and farmers' welfare (MoAFW) (₹1.37 lakh crore). It is well known that excessive subsidy on urea is nothing short of subsidising poison. Urea is not being used in a balanced manner with phosphatic and potassic fertilisers, leading to contamination of groundwater and swelling greenhouse gas emissions. A sizeable part (20-25%) is also leaking away. The solution is to transfer cash directly to farmers' accounts, and loosen control on fertiliser pricing. If the government can't do that, then it should at least bring urea under the Nutrient Based Subsidy and give the same subsidy as for diammonium phosphate and muriate of potash. Also, fertiliser subsidy must be shifted from the department of fertilisers to the MoAFW, which is dealing with farmers directly.

And if both food and fertiliser subsidies can be merged with an augmented PM-Kisan, then the Modi government is truly on a "Reform Express" mode.

Views are personal

Xinnian kuaile (Happy New Year)



JAMAL MECKLAI

CEO, Mecklai Financial
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I'VE JUST RETURNED from a wonderful holiday in Thailand over the new year, and, my God, what a fabulous country. We hadn't been there in over 10 years and it's so much better than I remember—of course, I used to drink a lot, so that may have something to do with my memory.

The best thing, of course, is the people—sweet, smiling, friendly, helpful. Then there's the food—one of the best chefs in Bombay had told me that Bangkok is the culinary capital of the world today, and he was right in spades, and at every price point. And, of course, there's the infrastructure—not quite Chinese, but leaves us way behind. And, finally, and best of all, clean air and water—I saw a skyful of stars after what felt like decades.

A hotelier friend of mine from Goa had told me that tourism in India will never take off—Thailand provides much higher quality, and it's cheaper to boot. No wonder they get 30-plus million international tourists a year (more than 40% of their population), while we struggle with 10 million. True, we have a huge number of domestic tourists, but wouldn't it be great if we could provide them real value not just in terms of price but also quality of experience? Our approach

needs to be more holistic—I'm not sure our tourism department even recognises the value of clean air and water in terms of achieving its mandate. I love Goa and will never stop going there but I know I'll be going to Thailand much more than ever before.

Another very interesting learning

from my trip was the fact that the Thais are very happy with China; the two countries have a long history, first with Thais providing support to the then-much-poorer Chinese and, more recently, with China supporting Thailand across the board. And despite running a huge deficit on trade with China, the Thai baht is quite strong, as a result of which prices are well contained. A Grab driver who collected us in a fantastic BYD vehicle told us that the car cost him just under 1 million baht (that's less than INR 30 lakh), which is far less than a far inferior Toyota Camry in India!

Judging from conversations with some Thai friends, all of Southeast

Asia seems to be happy with China, which appears to have an intrinsic sense of how to build meaningful bridges with its neighbours

seems to be happy with China, which appears to have an intrinsic sense of how to build meaningful bridges with its neighbours, despite being a *very* big brother—again, something that we need to learn, particularly right now, when we appear to have poor relations with virtually every neighbouring country.

Indeed, over the past few months, I have been thinking more and more about how we need to completely change our attitude and approach to China. Perhaps this was triggered by a debate I attended some months ago, titled, "Should India and China be friends?" To me, the subject was nuts—of course, you should be friends with everybody, more so with a large and extremely powerful neighbour. This is even more important since there has been so much negative rhetoric about the Chinese—I don't dispute the border problems over the years and the ongoing problems with Chinese dumping, but unless we are able to

build a sound relationship with China, we will be forever hampered in our dreams to enable the poorest Indians to have a better life.

My wife has an old Thai friend who has been a peripatetic "fixer" of sorts, travelling all over Asia for decades. We had dinner with him and he had a very interesting take. He told us, "I go to China a lot and every time I go there, I see Buddha—an Indian man—everywhere; I see (and feel) the presence of Indian culture constantly in daily life. But when I come to India, China is nowhere to be found, other than a few Chinese restaurants. India needs to learn about China, starting with the language and culture. You need to be less arrogant about who you are. You do have a wonderful ancient culture that all of Asia—indeed, the world—respects, but respect is a two-way street. Your young people need to start learning Mandarin; you need to acknowledge that over 50 years the Chinese have lifted their GDP per capita to USD 13,500—nearly five times yours; you need to see their technology to believe it. And, you need to make friends. If India and China could get together, the world would be a much more amazing place."

Amen.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Clarity on offshore investment structures

Apropos of "Substance over shelter" (FE, January 17), the Supreme Court's January 15 ruling in the Tiger Global case brings much-needed clarity to the treatment of offshore investment structures. Though some market voices express concern over its timing amid efforts to attract foreign capital, the judgment does not alter existing law or reopen past transactions. It simply reaffirms that treaty benefits require genuine economic substance, not just a tax

residency certificate or conduit entities. This is a practical reminder for private equity and venture capital players: structures should reflect real commercial purpose, with meaningful decision-making, governance, and presence in the chosen jurisdiction. Such discipline will help minimise disputes and litigation over time.

Overall, the ruling strikes a fair balance. India continues to welcome foreign investment, while firmly discouraging treaty abuse. Greater predictability in tax outcomes should, in the long run, strengthen investor confidence

rather than deter it.

—A Mylsami, Coimbatore

Sustaining investor confidence

Apropos of "Substance over shelter" (FE, January 17), the Supreme Court's ruling in the Tiger Global case usefully settles a debate that had lingered for years. The emphasis on commercial substance over formal treaty shelter is sensible, but it also raises concerns about how predictably this test will be applied. Investors value certainty as much as tax efficiency, and uneven

interpretation could revive disputes. The way forward lies in clearer administrative guidance, well-defined substance benchmarks, and consistent application by tax authorities. Advance rulings should be time-bound and transparent, reducing room for discretion. If policy intent is communicated early and enforced evenly, India can deter tax avoidance without unsettling genuine long-term capital. That balance will matter for sustaining investor confidence.

—SM Jeeva, Chennai

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

Stolen Childhoods

India's juvenile justice system was conceived as a moral contract with its children: even when they stumble, the state will not abandon them. In practice, that promise is fraying. Across districts, the machinery meant to protect and reform young offenders is uneven, understaffed and often invisible. The consequence is not merely delay or inconvenience; it is the quiet erosion of childhood itself.

When boards fail to sit, when age checks are skipped, when oversight visits never happen, children slide into adult processes by default. They are handcuffed to procedures designed for hardened criminals and warehoused in spaces that treat survival, not responsibility.

The law imagines a continuum of care - police sensitisation, legal aid, observation homes, counselling, education, skill building. What many children experience instead is a vacuum where no one owns the outcome. This vacuum is filled by violence, hierarchy, and fear.

Overcrowded institutions reproduce street power structures, and the youngest learn quickly whom to appease. Idleness replaces schooling; television replaces therapy. In such conditions, reform is a slogan, not a pathway. The system's failure becomes the child's identity.

Part of the problem is bureaucratic neglect. Data is scattered, benches are incomplete, inspections are cursory. But an equally corrosive issue is attitude. A resigned belief that some children are "beyond help" seeps into policing, prosecution and even defence. Once that belief takes root, process replaces purpose. Files move, hearings happen, but the child is no longer seen.

India's social realities make this indifference especially dangerous. Many children in conflict with the law come from homes fractured by addiction, poverty, migration, and abuse. They are shaped by scarcity and exposed early to violence. To treat their actions without addressing their context is to guarantee repetition. Accountability and empathy are not opposites; in juvenile justice, they are partners.

The good news is that alternatives exist and they work. Where institutions invest in counselling, behavioural programmes, education and vocational training, outcomes change. When young people are taught to understand their actions, manage impulses and imagine a future, they choose differently. These are not miracles; they are the predictable result of sustained care.

Reform, then, is less about rewriting laws and more about making the existing ones real. It requires fully staffed boards, mandatory timelines, transparent data, and independent inspections with teeth. It requires training police to identify minors correctly and lawyers to argue for care, not convenience. It requires budgets that value counsellors and teachers as much as walls and locks.

Above all, it requires political will. Children do not vote, and young offenders are easy to ignore. But every year a child is misclassified, mis-housed or forgotten, society compounds a small crime into a lifelong disadvantage. The price is paid later in broken livelihoods and repeat offences.

India must choose a system that heals, not hardens, because every child reclaimed today saves families, communities, and the future from preventable harm and needless suffering.

Engineered Peace

Phase Two of the Gaza peace plan arrives wrapped in the language of reconstruction and technocracy, but it is built on political fault lines that have defeated far simpler initiatives. The promise is seductive: a ceasefire gives way to demilitarisation, a neutral administration takes charge, and cranes replace drones. For a war-weary region, the vision offers a clean break from cycles of siege and retaliation.

Yet the plan's core assumption is that governance can be engineered before legitimacy is earned. Installing a technocratic committee may streamline aid, restore services, and reassure donors, but it cannot substitute for consent.

Gaza is not an empty spreadsheet waiting for rational management; it is a traumatised society with factions, memories, and claims that resist being tidied away. A government without a political horizon risks becoming a caretaker for other people's priorities.

The demand for full disarmament is the most brittle pillar. Armed groups have long tied their weapons to unresolved questions of statehood and security. To ask for surrender of arms without a credible pathway to sovereignty is to ask one side to abandon leverage while the other retains control. History suggests that such asymmetry breeds spoilers, not stability. Even if leaders sign on, enforcement on the ground will be messy and contested.

Equally uncertain is the expectation of complete withdrawal. Partial pullbacks and security buffers can coexist with declarations of peace, but they also blur accountability. Who governs who secures, and who answers when something goes wrong? Ambiguity is a recipe for mutual recrimination, and that is how ceasefires die.

The architecture of oversight raises its own questions. When decisions are perceived to be made elsewhere, even competent administrations struggle to command loyalty. Reconstruction that feels imposed will be protected by force, not embraced by communities. Support from regional mediators and cautious assent from rival Palestinian factions are encouraging, but they read more like tactical pauses than strategic conversions. No party has abandoned its red lines; they have merely stepped around them. That may be enough to start rebuilding schools and clinics, but it is not enough to settle borders, rights, or recognition.

None of this is an argument for paralysis. Gaza needs homes, water, power, and jobs now. A technocratic phase can stabilise daily life and reduce suffering. But it should be treated as a bridge, not a destination. Without a parallel political track that addresses sovereignty, security guarantees, and mutual recognition, reconstruction risks becoming a revolving door: build, break, rebuild.

Peace is not assembled the way infrastructure is. It grows from bargains that both sides can defend to their own people. Phase Two will be judged not by how quickly the rubble is cleared, but by whether it clears space for a durable political settlement. If it does, the technocrats will have done their quiet work well. If it does not, Gaza will remain governed by plans rather than by peace.

Prescription for Politics

Political parties - the crucial link between citizens and government - have so far prioritised winnability alone, for reasons obvious in a democracy, while giving scant regard to what is equally obvious - if not more vital - political credibility. Since the quality of the legislature is crucial to a healthy political culture, the larger question is whether parties will have the courage to deny tickets to unscrupulous candidates, however electable they may appear, and instead field those who embody integrity and bring fresh perspectives to public life.

In an age when political discourse permeates nearly every aspect of daily life, genuine political leadership has become one of the scarcest resources across much of the world. Yet a stubborn myth persists - that the mere assumption of power automatically bestows the right, wisdom, or capacity to lead. This fallacy continues to shape our nation, often at the expense of substance, service, and vision.

In Enlightened Leadership, chronicling Bhutan's inspiring transition from monarchy to democracy, the country's current Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, recalls a defining moment from the 2008 coronation address of the fifth and present King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. Laying down the ethical foundations of his reign, the King declared:

"Throughout my reign I will never rule you as a King. I will protect you as a parent, care for you as a brother and serve you as a son. I shall give you everything and keep nothing; I shall live such a life as a good human being that you may find it worthy to serve as an example for your children. I have no personal goals other than to fulfil your hopes and aspirations. I shall always serve you, day and night, in the spirit of kindness, justice and equality."

The King's words, most would agree, offer a succinct - almost poetical - summation of how leadership ought to serve the people.

As one navigates the Indian political landscape, the question inevitably arises: how many political leaders truly subscribe to such ideals? In principle, most readily profess allegiance to these values; in inner conviction and lived practice, far fewer do. Nothing silences a debate of this nature more swiftly than the reflexive act of slapping an ideological label on those who merely articulate inconvenient truths.

But the brutal reality is this: sketching a grand vision is easy; translating it into action is far harder. Given the nature, scale, and urgency of the grave challenges confronting our country, we are in need of leadership that is committed to a culture of collaboration,



openness, empowerment, and care.

It may be argued that invoking the King's principled stance as a reference point for a country as vast and diverse as ours is deeply flawed - or, at best, a theoretical abstraction. Yet the fact remains: the ethos of good governance knows no geographical boundaries. If the highest leadership of a small, landlocked nation with limited resources could believe in, and strive towards, such ideals, why should our country fall short of visionary leadership, especially when it is far larger and endowed with greater capacities, opportunities, and strategic advantages? For precisely this reason, our nation requires transformative political leadership capable of harnessing these distinctive strengths to their fullest potential.

At a time when political trust is plummeting and truth is harder to find, the period from 2026 to 2029 will see a series of Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and several other states, culminating in the much-anticipated General Elections of 2029.

These forthcoming elections offer a rare opportunity to transform the country's political discourse. Political parties - the crucial link between citizens and government - have so far prioritised winnability alone, for reasons obvious in a democracy, while giving scant regard to what is equally obvious - if not more vital - political credibility. Since the quality of the legislature is crucial to a healthy political culture, the larger question is whether parties will have the courage to deny tickets to unscrupulous candidates, however electable they may appear, and instead field those who embody integrity and bring fresh perspectives to public life. As for the electorate - including even staunch party loyalists - it is time to move beyond settling for the "least bad" option. With the alternative of 'None of the Above' (NOTA) having failed to make any meaningful impact on electoral outcomes, a crucial reflection comes to the fore: are we, as common citizens, too complicit in an ailing electoral politics, jealously guarded by political parties?

Designing and adopting an electoral system is an inherently political exercise - complex, contentious, and politically risky. The key question, therefore, beyond mere moments of sound and fury, is whether parties of all hues can come together, mustering enough political will to bring about necessary and effective changes to correct systemic flaws and restore accountability. Yet skepticism is warranted, for our political leadership - knowingly or otherwise - appears to subscribe to what Hammergren

once observed. He described political will as "the slipperiest concept in the policy lexicon," calling it "the sine qua non of policy success which is never defined except by its absence." The unambiguous trend thus far has been this: in every election, political parties win, but the people lose. They lose to enduring afflictions - deep-rooted corruption, the many shades of the criminalisation of politics, and entrenched socio-economic inequalities. Since election manifestos are not legally enforceable, parties find it easy to make lofty promises - declaring policies and programmes to address critical issues and recycling oft-repeated pledges, from probity and inclusive development to good governance. Yet once the ballots are counted and an elected government assumes office, the old pathologies swiftly reassert themselves: abuse of power, mediocrity, cronyism, and appeasement, often repackaged in newer forms, designs, and stratagems. A telling irony is that the same political party, when in power, proclaims democracy triumphant; when in opposition, declares it imperiled. All in all, the country's political landscape is characterised by five distinct legacies.

Posturing: The politics of spectacle is showy, unserious, emotive, and bereft of ideas or higher purpose. We have been conditioned to accept this performative dimension of politics as normal - indeed, even inevitable. Politicians, by and large, are consummate performers: quick to read the room, adept at playing the part, and ever ready to switch scripts to suit the audience before them.

After all, they cannot get elected unless they present themselves in ways voters find acceptable and convincing - so much so that the line between moral and immoral becomes increasingly blurred.

Populism: There is little denying that populism rests on a remarkably thin ideological foundation, cutting across political lines. The real question, therefore, is not whether populism exists - it plainly does - but how its growing dominance shapes a country, for better or for worse. When populism becomes narrowly vote-box-centric, pursued at the expense of long-term development and fiscal sustainability, it ceases to act as a democratic corrective and turns distinctly corrosive. The unchecked proliferation of electoral freebies - short-sighted by design and ill-suited to sustained, broad-based

development - has thus emerged as a favoured instrument across political stripes, aimed less at responsible governance than at harvesting immediate electoral dividends.

Polarisation: Polarisation, a time-tested political tool, pushes people towards ideological extremes, steadily cultivating distrust and dislike of the "other side." We have reached a point where it feels almost unimaginable to disagree politically with our neighbours and still trust them enough to turn to them for help. When political division corrodes social trust, democracy is weakened at its very roots.

Personalism: Over the years, individual-centric political leadership has gained prominence, driven by charismatic figures whose personal whims and preferences often override the principles of intraparty democracy. No party is entirely immune to this syndrome - from regional outfits to national parties - and the danger intensifies when charisma is mistaken for unquestioned loyalty.

Phantom: Two typical symptoms of phantom politics, leading toateful consequences, are opaque systems of political funding and phantom campaigns. Parties carry out both shorn of any pretence of due process. The influence of money in elections - though no longer unknown - is often rooted in murky financial architectures and clandestine political nexuses. Equally concerning is a gullible electorate, frequently deceived by politicians through half-truths, emotional appeals, and false promises. Leaders advancing a phantom campaign also inject a sense of nonexistent 'threat.' Once these fictitious dangers are implanted in the public mind, parties exploit them to attack opponents - attributing these threats to their rivals, with social media serving as the great facilitator and amplifier.

As members of the world's largest democracy, we carry a responsibility ~ to uphold and advance democratic values. Yet all too often, we have fallen short, outsourcing the task of democratic renewal to governments, political parties, or the system itself. It is far easier to cast ourselves as victims of political culture than to confront our own role in sustaining ~ or transforming ~ it.

It is time we ask ourselves ~ now, not later ~ "Politics, yes; not Pretension." This calls for leadership that is genuinely organic ~ rooted in a deep cultural and ethical spine, shaping not merely governance but the very practice of responsible citizenship ~ while firmly rejecting those who thrive on style, spectacle, or empty gestures devoid of principle.

That said, despite significant progress in service delivery and development programmes, the country's democracy - though marked by a growing loss of confidence that borders on despair - retains deep resilience and innumerable strengths, and can yet regain its footing. The future can still be shaped, and the common good secured.

In an era where misinformation and disinformation can distort reality at alarming speed, a strong political culture is not merely desirable; it is essential. Amid troubling signs of democratic backsliding, yet also moments of heartening pro-democratic momentum, it is too much to expect this of the world's largest democracy ~ and a major global economic and political player?



DEBASISH BHATTACHARYYA

The writer is an author, columnist and former Dy General Manager, India International Centre

President Xi Jinping just eight days before those held with Takaichi. The president reportedly told Xi that ties with Japan matter as much to South Korea as those with China. During his summit with

Takaichi, he said that South Korea, China and Japan should seek common ground and build communication and cooperation. Lee's decision not to directly mention Taiwan was a wise one. In clashes between Beijing and Tokyo, taking either side entails considerable risk and requires caution.

His call for trilateral cooperation signals Seoul's intent to position itself as an intermediary in Beijing-Tokyo tensions. On the other hand, Takaichi emphasized South Korea-US-Japan cooperation, but made no mention of South Korea-China-Japan communication. Mediation for dialogue has value, but its prospects remain uncertain. Even so, close Seoul-Tokyo ties must be

maintained to balance a powerful China in East Asia and safeguard democracy and regional peace. The two leaders agreed to pursue closer cooperation across a broad agenda, including North Korea's denuclearization, economic and security cooperation, supply chains, and joint efforts to combat international crime. In effect, they underscored the need to look ahead and expand cooperation, instead of remaining bound by past conflicts.

The momentum must now be carried forward through sustained working-level talks. The agreement on humanitarian cooperation to recover remains from the Chosei undersea coal mine in Japan represents meaningful progress in addressing historical issues. In 1942, during Japan's colonial rule of Korea, the mine in Yamaguchi prefecture was flooded by a water leak, claiming 183 lives, including 136 Korean forced laborers.

rightly highlights critical concerns about our collective priorities as we stand at what the author terms the "event horizon" of our species.

As AI begins to displace a significant portion of the workforce and reshape societal structures, it is imperative to evaluate whether these advancements truly serve humanity's long-term interests.

The pandemic demonstrated the enduring value of human innovation, compassion, and resilience - qualities no algorithm can substitute. I applaud the article's call to shift focus from nurturing corporate behemoths toward cultivating human potential and ecological stewardship. It is indeed time to reconsider what we value most as a society.

Yours, etc., Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, New Delhi, 13 January.

Summit momentum

Summit between President Lee Jae Myung and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in Nara, Japan, was their second since her inauguration in October. Their first summit took place on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang Province, in late October.

It is notable that South Korea and Japan have held two summits within three months through reciprocal leader-level visits under what they call "shuttle diplomacy." For South Korea, relations with Japan carry greater weight than those with any other country, given their shared geopolitical neighborhood.

In security terms, Japan stands with South Korea and the United States against North Korea, China and Russia, while also remaining an essential partner in economic cooperation. However, historical issues have repeatedly emerged as a stumbling

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block in bilateral relations. They have at times turned frosty over issues stemming from Japan's colonial rule of Korea, including visits to Yasukuni Shrine and Japan's sovereignty claims over the Dokdo islets. But amid mounting global uncertainty, both countries would be wise to pursue a forward-looking course focused on future development. In this sense, it is encouraging to see Lee actively engage in summit diplomacy with South Korea's two neighbors - China and Japan - through visits spaced a week apart. The latest summit unfolded at a moment of rising Sino-Japanese tension, highlighted by Beijing's tightened controls on rare-earth exports to Japan following Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks on a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan.

Lee held summit talks with Chinese

President Xi Jinping just eight days before those held with Takaichi. The president reportedly told Xi that ties with Japan matter as much to South Korea as those with China. During his summit with

Takaichi, he said that South Korea, China and Japan should seek common ground and build communication and cooperation. Lee's decision not to directly mention Taiwan was a wise one. In clashes between Beijing and Tokyo, taking either side entails considerable risk and requires caution.

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Mother India be the only god to be worshipped by the Indians". In essence, Vivekananda provided the 'soul' or spiritual backbone for India's freedom struggle .

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

Contradiction

Sir, Compliments to *The Statesman* for having published Biswajit Bhattacharyya's excellent article, "Swamiji and India's independence movement" (Perspective, 13 January) that throws a flood of light on Swami Vivekananda's contribution to India's freedom movement.

Swami Vivekananda was not only a great spiritual leader but also a great patriot and revolutionary who played a very significant role in India's freedom struggle. His contribution to the noble cause was primarily ideological and spiritual, fostering national pride, cultural revival, and self-confidence among Indians. He was a great source of inspiration to the National Freedom movement. In 1897 Swamiji said, "For the next fifty years, let

inequality. The land revenue laws in UP are thumbing their nose at central inheritance laws.

That is why only unmarried daughters are being allowed to share in the father's agricultural land and property. The married daughters are being deprived of inheritance rights.

Yours, etc., Shyamal Thakur, Rammagar, 14 January.

Our priorities

Sir, I am writing in response to the article titled "Whither Survival Instinct?" published today on *The Statesman* editorial page. I found the article thought-provoking and timely in its examination of the paradoxical direction of human progress. The piece



THEIR VIEW

Global imbalances: They're back in focus but mustn't be misread

The West sees China's trade surpluses as a major problem but rebalancing solutions lie within the realm of domestic policies



BARRY EICHENGREEN

is professor of economics and political science at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of the forthcoming 'Money Beyond Borders: Global Currencies From Croesus to Crypto'

On 1 January, France assumed the presidency of the G-7, the hoary club of advanced economies. Under its presidency, the focus of the group's agenda will be global imbalances—the current-account surpluses and deficits of China, the US and other countries. Shades of 2006, when global imbalances were last a major concern.

This agenda makes sense politically. If US President Donald Trump and European leaders agree on anything anymore, it may be that China's trade surpluses are a problem. The focus on global imbalances also deflects attention from France's fiscal problems and allows President Emmanuel Macron to project leadership on the global stage.

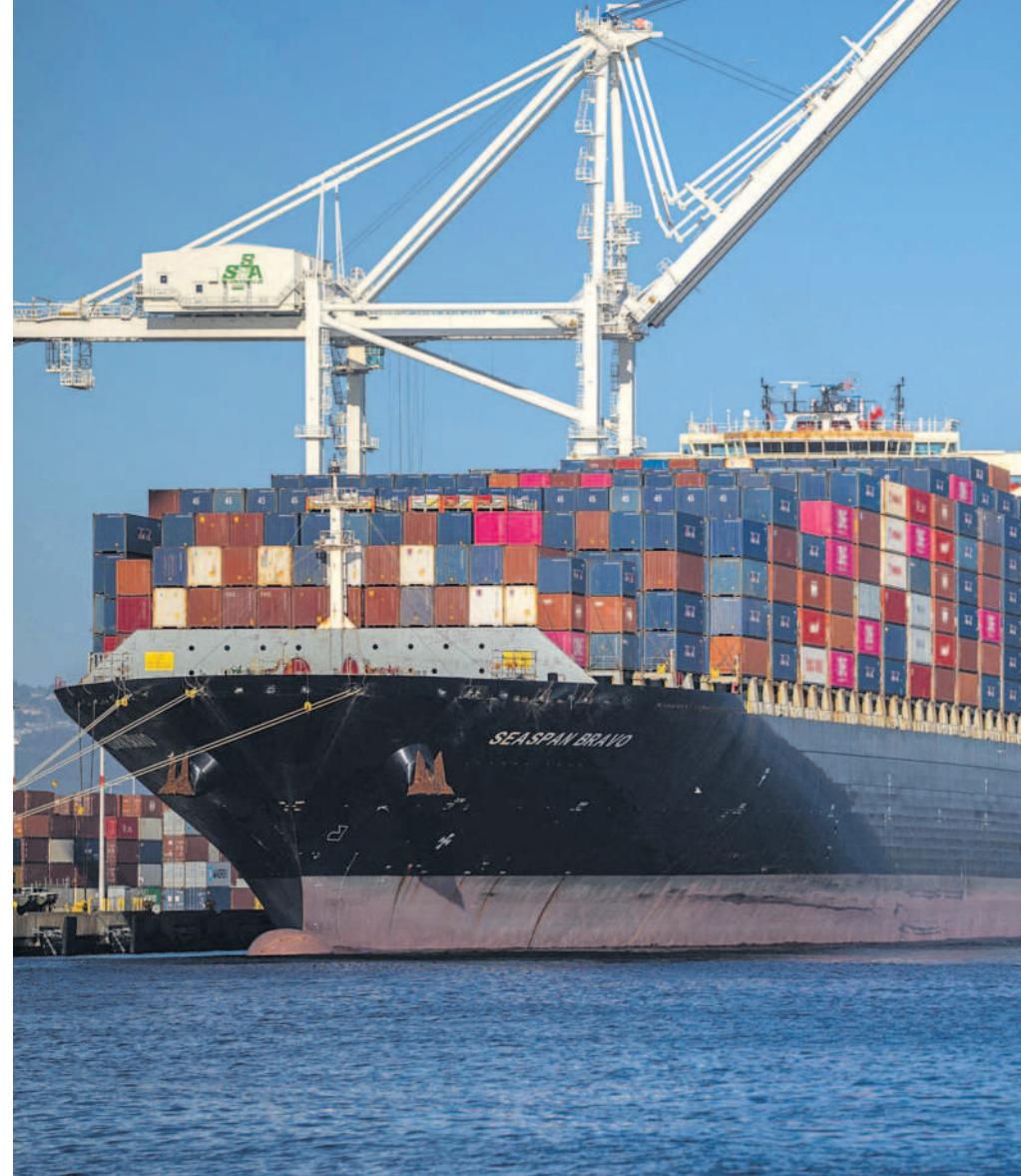
Economically, the case remains to be made. To be sure, US and Chinese imbalances are large. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) puts America's current-account deficit for 2025 at around 4.6% of GDP, down slightly from its 2006 peak of 6.2%. China's surplus is down to 3.3% of GDP from 10% in 2006. But China's share of global GDP has tripled since then (at current prices, which are what matter for internationally traded goods). Multiply China's surplus by three, as is appropriate for gauging its impact on the world economy, and you get the 2006 surplus ratio.

So, if we focus on the two economies that together account for 40% of global economic output, imbalances are nearly as large as they were in 2006, when they anticipated the global financial crisis two years later.

But reckless risk-taking, inadequate transparency and lax financial regulation, not global imbalances, lay at the root of that crisis. Today, risks to financial stability abound once again—in private credit, crypto, circular financial flows related to data-centre and semiconductor investments, and looser bank supervision in the US.

And yet these risks are neither causes nor consequences of global imbalances. In private credit, the problem is again a lack of transparency. In crypto, it is inadequate regulation. In bank supervision, it is ideology and the power of the banking lobby.

Only when it comes to investment in data centres and chips can one draw a link between global imbalances and risks to economic and financial stability. Such investment was responsible for fully 80% of the increase in US final private domestic demand in the first half of 2025. The US current-account deficit is the excess of investment over saving. So, if investment were less, the US current-account deficit would be less, other things being equal. Of course, US growth would also be less, which would not be positive for either America or the rest of the world. Be careful what you wish for.



This situation is also a reminder of the Lawson Doctrine, named after Nigel Lawson, the second chancellor of the exchequer under British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Lawson held that current-account deficits are benign if they reflect high investment rather than low saving. We learnt subsequently that investment-driven deficits are benign only if investments are productive.

Fast-forward to today's doubts about the returns on investments in AI, specifically in energy-hungry data centres using chips that burn out or become obsolete after two or three years. Seeing technology companies use special-purpose vehicles of finance to borrow, slice and dice the resulting obligations, and sell them to institutional investors will trouble those whose memories stretch back 20 years.

In China's case, the problem is not that investment is too low, but quite the contrary—that savings are too high. Chinese officials acknowledge the need to boost consumption and have been acknowledging for 15 years since they made it a major national goal in Beijing's 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-15). But then, acknowledgement and action are different matters.

Excessive corporate savings devoted to low-return investments and household savings ploughed mindlessly into real estate tend to create financial problems, as close observers of China's local government financial vehicles and property companies will attest. But China has the financial

wherewithal to address these issues. And China remains sufficiently insular financially that any such problems are unlikely to spill over to the rest of the world.

So why worry about China's trade surplus? Start with its uneven incidence across countries and regions, as we learnt from the first 'China Shock,' the country's export surge preceding the global financial crisis. As we also learnt, such concentrated effects threaten a populist backlash against globalization and multilateralism.

The problem is apt to be even more pernicious now than it was a generation ago. Because the US market is increasingly closed to China, other regions, starting with Europe, will feel the brunt of China's exports. And there are already other threats to multilateralism, notably US-China geostrategic rivalry and US-European tensions, on which the resulting backlash will now be superimposed.

The solutions lie at home. The US can address public-sector dissaving by raising taxes and closing tax loopholes. It can tighten financial regulations that encourage tech companies to throw good money after bad. On its part, China can stimulate consumption by strengthening its social safety net, which would free up precautionary savings.

The IMF has sent these messages. The question is whether they will be received. As Shakespeare put it, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

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VIVAN SHARAN & SAMIRA ABRAHAM



are public policy experts at Koan Advisory, New Delhi.

India is in the midst of a heated debate over quick commerce. Substantively, this is about what the quick-delivery model supposedly represents: the exploitation of gig workers, unsafe streets and a reckless disregard for human dignity in the pursuit of convenience. Recently, India's labour ministry stepped in, urging quick-commerce firms to tone down their '10-minute delivery' pitch. Opposition parties and unions, sensing fertile political ground, have denounced the model itself. What was once a niche discussion among venture capitalists and urban consumers has entered mainstream political discourse. This, in itself, is welcome. But the debate, as it stands, suffers from a fundamental confusion. It collapses the distinction between what markets are responsible for and what the state is obliged to do.

The great conflation: One part of the criticism relates to road safety. The argument goes something like this: faster deliveries mean more rushed riders, which means more accidents, which means quick com-

merce is unsafe and should be restrained. This logic is fragile. India has had one of the worst road-safety records in the world for decades. India accounted for 1% of the world's vehicles in 2021, but 11% of its road accidents. This is not because groceries arrive quickly in Bengaluru, Mumbai or Delhi. It is because of a lethal combination of poorly designed roads, corruption in transport departments, weak driver education, abysmal signage, potholes that appear overnight and traffic enforcement that is either absent or selectively present. Union minister Nitin Gadkari has also acknowledged the role of a combination of these factors as the main reason for road accidents in India.

If the mere association with a hurried pace is enough to indict a business model, India should be rethinking fast retail payments—enabled by the much revered Unified Payments Interface—because of the transaction scams that such speed enables. Movement from point A to point B, efficiently and at scale, whether on physical or digital roads, is not a market failure. It is the definition of economic activity. Speed is not the enemy, lack of commensurate safeguards are.

Even under a minimal Hobbesian conception of the state, focused on preventing physical harm and disorder, ensuring safety in

shared public spaces such as roads plausibly falls within its core functions. Outsourcing this function to private platforms because they are visible, successful and politically convenient is intellectual laziness.

Conversely, if this line of reasoning holds, why stop at road safety? Consider environmental regulation. India has an extended producer responsibility regime that makes manufacturers accountable for plastic waste. Fair enough. But waste segregation and collection—the boring, unglamorous basics—are still absent in most urban neighbourhoods, the national capital included. Should FMCG companies be blamed for the state's inability to provide municipal services? This pattern repeats endlessly. When enforcement fails, it's tempting to preach to markets rather than fix institutions.

Businesses cannot be the state: This confusion extends to the proliferation of gig-worker cesses being introduced by various states, ostensibly for funding worker wel-

fare. The idea sounds noble. But it's instructive to look at how District Mineral Funds or Construction Workers' Welfare Funds have been used. Most well-intentioned funds are plagued by weak accountability and opaque deployment. Adding new levies while increasing friction for businesses is not reform. India already asks businesses to navigate bureaucratic inertia, slow dispute resolution and regulatory uncertainty.

Similarly, consider the case of lack of enforcement of minimum wages in traditional areas. Sectors like agriculture, construction, and manufacturing, which employ far more Indians than gig platforms ever will, are rife with violations. Yet, there is no minimum wage movement in these spaces because compliance can be gamed. Gig platforms, which are legally not equivalent to employers, are easier to beat with the proverbial stick.

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This should prompt an uncomfortable question: Are these unions truly representative of young Indians trying to make ends meet in a country where 800 million rely on food subsidies yet aspire upward mobility in a brutally competitive smartphone-driven economy? Symbolic gestures may generate headlines, but they are no substitute for understanding how people survive.

At the end of the day, markets must be legally compliant. Businesses cannot be allowed to take consumers, vendors, employees or partners for granted, and if this means stricter standards for grievance redressal, so be it. But the state must do its job: enforce traffic laws, design safe roads, uphold labour standards and administer welfare funds transparently. What we cannot do is take the easiest route: grabbing the fastest-growing and most visible businesses by the collar and asking them to fill in for institutional failure. If we continue down this path, we will eventually hollow out both the state and the market. And then, we really will have no one left to blame.

Disclosure: The authors advise ecommerce, payments and other digital businesses.

MINT CURATOR

Could California actually elect a Republican Party governor?

Democrats must get their act together or face an unthinkable fate



ERIKA D. SMITH

is a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion.



Newsom's 2028 bid for the White House may leave a vacuum in his state.

such, represents the California Democratic Party's latest dashed hope—behind Harris and Padilla—of easily consolidating the crowded field of Democratic candidates around a frontrunner.

"My place is here on the front lines, in the trenches, serving as a bulwark," Bonta told the *Los Angeles Times* over the weekend. He has built himself a national profile by leading other Democratic attorneys general in more than 50 lawsuits against the Trump administration. He said he plans to run for re-election.

But this is the second time Bonta has decided not to run for governor in the past few months. He reconsidered his initial demurral after allies in labour and business worked to recruit him.

"I think I could have been a game changer, and I think I would have consolidated a lot of support," Bonta told the *Los Angeles Times*. "I don't know what's going to happen."

Unless something changes, what could happen is that Bianco and Hilton become the two candidates on the ballot in November in a state where Democrats have had a trifecta lock on every lever of state government for decades.

The last time California elected a Republican governor was in 2006. That was Arnold Schwarzenegger, an actor and a relative moderate. Back then, Republicans made up a much higher percentage of the state's electorate—34.5% compared to 25.2% today. And it was long before President Donald Trump brought a new level of polarization to US politics.

Trump is so unpopular in California that his approval rating is just 29% among likely voters, according to the non-partisan Public Policy Institute of California. Nevertheless, Bianco, in particular, has been unabashed about his support for MAGA and the American president, seemingly not worried about turning off the majority of voters in the state who don't agree. Hilton is more reserved, but still backs policies that are well to the right of most voters in California.

If the Democratic Party doesn't do more to consolidate the race for governor—if not by recruiting more high-profile candidates, then by getting lower-profile candidates to drop out—it may face an unthinkable fate in November.

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THEIR VIEW

Fast deliveries, slow thinking: Spare the Q-com model

VIVAN SHARAN & SAMIRA ABRAHAM



are public policy experts at Koan Advisory, New Delhi.

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Maha conquest

BJP recasts Maharashtra's political map in civic polls

The results of Maharashtra's civic body elections mark a decisive shift in the State's politics. The Bharatiya Janata Party has emerged clearly on top, wresting control of the cash-rich Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation from the Thackerays after decades and, along with allies, securing majorities in 23 of the 29 municipal corporations.

The BJP has consolidated its position, winning roughly 1,400 of the 2,833 seats declared, more than three times the tally of the Indian National Congress, which managed 324 seats and held on to Bhiwandi-Nizampur, Latur and Parbhani. Beyond arithmetic, the elections deliver a sharp political message: the steady dismantling of Maharashtra's once-dominant regional dynasties. The Pawars and the Thackerays, long seen as immovable pillars of State politics, no longer command the same electoral gravity. The Shiv Sena's nativist 'Marathi Manoos' pitch has been blunted, if not broken. The Pawars have floundered badly, winning just 36 seats in all municipal corporations. The verdict crowns Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis as the undisputed winner, strengthening his standing as a future national leader for the BJP alongside Yogi Adityanath and Himanta Biswa Sarma. Notably, this was achieved without star campaigning by the Prime Minister or Amit Shah, a tactical choice to avoid lending oxygen to Uddhav Thackeray's narrative of "Gujaratis capturing Mumbai".

The BJP has cemented its dominance by undermining its political partners. While it will still need support from Eknath Shinde to run the BMC, Shinde's decision to sequester his MLAs in a hotel underlines an acute fear of poaching by a far stronger BJP. Ajit Pawar has fared worse. His inability to win Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporation, even after aligning with Sharad Pawar's faction of NCP, signals voter fatigue with cynical realignments. The BJP won both these corporations. Despite holding the Deputy Chief Minister's post, Ajit Pawar now will be a diminished force.

For the opposition, the results underline the cost of fragmentation. A broader understanding between the Congress, Uddhav Thackeray's Sena and the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi led by Prakash Ambedkar could have altered outcomes. Instead, the BJP and Fadnavis demonstrated that they not only hold the upper hand over their allies, but also control the levers that matter most in local elections: money, organisational muscle and administrative reach. The Election Commission of India, meanwhile, did not cover itself in glory. Allegations over indelible ink, including complaints that it faded quickly or was inconsistently applied, did cast an avoidable shadow over the process. The new civic regimes face a stern governance test. Mumbai's residents continue to endure crumbling roads, erratic water supply, sewage failures and monsoon flooding. The BMC, with a budget larger than several States, cannot plead constraints. Having redrawn Maharashtra's political map, the BJP will be watched for whether it can deliver on urban governance.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Trumpism's brutal tactics don't end with migrants

In Minnesota, armed and masked agents are ripping families apart. They are seizing parents while they wait with their child at a bus stop, going door to door seeking undocumented migrants and breaking car windows to drag people out. Last Wednesday an officer shot dead Renee Nicole Good, a 37-year-old American citizen. Her killing is a tragedy for all who loved her, and most of all for the three children left motherless. It also marks her country's crossing of a Rubicon. Where Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) once preferred to keep a low profile, it now seeks publicity and confrontation — pumped up on billions of dollars in funding, the aggression and brazenness of the administration and the licensing of bigotry. Most Americans think Mr Trump's deportation drive is excessive. (LONDON, JANUARY 16)

CHINADAILY

Bid to annex Greenland exposes US iniquity

The US is making renewed attempts to exert control over Greenland, which have once again laid bare Washington's ingrained mindset, marked by greed, a double standard and blatant hypocrisy. Cloaked in the rhetoric of "security" and "strategic interests", the US ambition not only tramples on international law and Denmark's sovereignty, but also risks demolishing the postwar international order painstakingly built on respect for borders and sovereignty. No wonder Denmark's Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen told the media there is a "fundamental disagreement" with the US over Greenland after talks at the White House, adding that the US leader was insisting on "conquering" Greenland, which was "totally unacceptable". (BEIJING, JANUARY 16)

LINE & LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Tomorrow Donald Trump will complete a year in office of his second term as president of the US. The main problem the world has to grapple with now is if his second year will be as disruptive as his first.

Trump has had to choose between the two old faiths of power, money and muscle. He has chosen muscle. China has been using money for a long time.

Muscle is like an antibiotic and works quickly. Money is like ayurveda. If it works, it takes a long time to achieve its results. The cultural orientation of these two societies is revealed by their preference in this regard: impatience vs patience.

But here's the problem: America has muscle, but not money. China has money, but not muscle. India, like all other countries, has neither. This is the essence of G2.

Thus it has become a 3-player game, the worst possible thing imaginable. There's an inherent instability in this that has been studied by economists and others.

The most comprehensible description, however, can be found in George Orwell's dystopian and dismaying prescient book, '1984'. It was published long ago in 1949.

In the novel the world has been divided into groups: Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. Oceania is the white world. Eurasia is Russia plus some parts of Asia. And Eastasia is the world east of India. Two of these three are always in alliances and war against the third over resources.

They are all run by totalitarian regimes where the state is continually watching and attempting to get citizens to 'behave'. Technology is central to it all. Seems familiar?

ICE CREAMS AND HORSES

There are other depictions, too, of the three player phenomenon and its implications. The number 3, by the way, has always fascinated mathematicians, philosophers and physicists.

One of the best insights was by an American mathematician-cum-statistician-economist called Harold Hotelling. He taught in the first half of the 20th century, including Milton Friedman.

A famous one is the 'ice cream vendors on a beach' problem. As long as there were two, he said, there would be stability as they divided the beach into equal halves as their market. But if a



A future fraught with uncertainties

The 3-player — US, China and the rest — phenomenon will be inherently unstable, making rational decision-making more complex

with John Nash. His formulation is called Selten's Horse because the graphic depiction looks like a horse's head.

It's a very complex analysis whose bottom line is that people, and I daresay countries, too, usually make sequential decisions of what is rational at that moment.

But this leaves them vulnerable because the opponents are also doing the same thing. The problem is especially tough to resolve when there are three players.

A family with three children, for example, is more fraught than one with two, four or more. The problem is balance.

THE BOTTOM LINE
So where does all this leave us *vis-a-vis* the future? I think there are more certainties than uncertainties.

One absolute certainty is that there will be a scramble for resources in order to keep both capital and labour happy. The three players will be the US, China and the rest.

The second certainty is that the rest will try to have their own economic and security arrangements. This is possible but the third certainty below will limit its effectiveness.

That third certainty is the dollar that will continue to be the reserve and trading currency for the world for the foreseeable future. China is trying to displace it but it can succeed only up to a limited extent.

The fourth certainty, despite Chinese propaganda to the contrary, is the technological dominance of the US, which has effectively stopped Chinese technology in its tracks by stopping technology theft. By itself China doesn't have the intellectual wherewithal.

The fifth certainty is political: a squeezing of liberal values in all countries. That era is over because it was, on a long view, an aberration. This will mean, overall, a contraction of global trade and economies.

And the uncertainties? By definition these cannot be predicted. But for what it's worth I would say these might lie in the hidden clauses in bilateral FTAs.

Davos goes far beyond just signing MoUs

It has evolved into a forum for ideation, to understand how the next generation of business, industry, and tech will converge

Nara Lokesh

Last year, a quiet conversation in the Swiss Alps set off a chain of events that would culminate in what is now India's largest-ever foreign direct investment: the \$15-billion Google AI-hub at Vizag. No ribbon-cutting. No press release. Just a meeting of minds at Davos that gradually gathered conviction, partners, and scale. That is how Davos truly works — and why it continues to matter.

We live in a time defined by uncertainty. Geopolitical tensions are reshaping alliances, supply chains are being re-drawn, technologies are advancing faster than regulation can keep pace, and climate realities are forcing hard transitions. In such moments, platforms for thoughtful, global dialogue become more valuable. Davos remains an oasis where political leaders, CEOs, technologists, financiers, and civil society actors step away from daily firefighting and engage in deeper ideation about the future.

Over the decades, Davos itself has evolved. In the early 1990s, as India began opening up its economy, my father, Chandrababu Naidu, emerged as one of India's earliest and most effective global evangelists. Labelled the original "Davos man", he used the platform to talk about a confident, reforming India ready to partner with the world. Those conversations helped position India as a

credible investment destination at a time when scepticism was widespread, eventually leading to landmark investments such as Microsoft's development centre in Hyderabad. Davos, then, was largely about telling India's story to global investors and reiterating that we meant business.

Today, the purpose of Davos has broadened. It is no longer just a marketplace for capital seeking opportunity. Governments and policymakers now come as much to listen as to pitch. Artificial intelligence is redefining productivity and employment. The energy sector is transitioning from fossil fuels to renewables, storage, and green molecules. Manufacturing is de-globalising, fragmenting into regional hubs driven by resilience, geopolitics, and technology. In this context, Davos has become a classroom of sorts — a place to learn how these trends intersect and what they mean for policy, industry, and society.

TRUE PURPOSE
This is why the obsession with counting MoUs from Davos misses the point entirely. Davos is not about signing memoranda of understanding. It is certainly not about signing MoUs with Indian companies, who already understand India better than anyone else. Reducing Davos to a tally of agreements trivialises its real value. The true purpose of Davos is ideation. It is



SCALING UP. The purpose of Davos has broadened

REUTERS

the partnership were seeded there. That is how serious investments are born: through trust, alignment, and shared long-term vision. Davos accelerates this process by compressing geography and hierarchy. In a single day, one can engage with a pension fund thinking in 30-year horizons, a start-up founder rewriting technological boundaries, and a policymaker grappling with social impact. These cross-currents rarely happen in boardrooms or conference halls back home.

For India, and specifically for reform-oriented States like Andhra Pradesh, this matters enormously. Our ambition is not merely to attract capital, but to attract the right kind of capital: long-term, patient, technology-driven, and aligned with sustainable growth. That requires understanding global capital flows, emerging technologies, and policy best practices. Davos offers a rare vantage point to see all three converge.

As India aspires to be a leading force in AI, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and space, we must resist the temptation to view global platforms transactionally. The real dividends of Davos are intellectual before they are financial. They show up months or years later — in factories built, jobs created, and ecosystems formed.

The writer is Minister for HRD, IT & Electronics, Andhra Pradesh

• BELOW THE LINE



USDA's projections

The US Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) data this month has left the market expressing its lack of confidence in the agency's projections. The latest estimate is significantly higher than what many traders had previously estimated. Eyebrows are being raised particularly on the projections

between December and now. Traders say the long US government shutdown is perhaps the reason for the wide difference, which in some cases is 75 per cent higher from November. A rise in corn prices to \$4.23 a bushel soon after the projection is a vote against the USDA's latest projections.

Mus� vs Ryanair

Elon Musk has been embroiled in a public spat with Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary over the potential of installation of SpaceX's Starlink Wi-Fi on Ryanair aircraft. However, things further escalated recently after X suffered an outage on Friday. Ryanair's official X account, known for its cheeky and sarcastic tone, took a swipe at Musk during the disruption, posting: "Perhaps you

need Wi-Fi, @elonmusk?" Musk didn't stay quiet and responded with: "Should I buy Ryanair and put someone whose actual name is Ryan in charge?" The exchange quickly went viral, sparking a flood of memes, jokes and speculative reactions from users on the platform.

Celebrating the PM

In the season of book fairs and literary festivals, Delhi's Ambedkar International Centre has chosen a singular theme — the NaMo book fair. It is devoted entirely to the Prime Minister, assembling more than 450 books by and about Narendra Modi. The collection ranges from foreign policy and governance to motivational writing and familiar public-outreach formats

such as *Pariksha pe Charcha*.

Philosophy and spirituality are woven seamlessly into the mix, recasting political leadership as moral instruction and personal journey, rather than mere administration. One book goes furthest, with imaginary dialogues between the Prime Minister and God. It invites readers to approach politics not for debate, but as a belief.

Revanth's plainspeak

Very few State Chief Ministers can be as candid as Telangana CM Revanth Reddy when addressing the masses. Recently, while interacting with students of IIT Mahendragarh, he appealed to them to improve their language skills and focus on studies. He said he intended doing good for people, but with no land available for

distribution, the government was improving educational facilities. In the past, land was distributed to the landless poor, tribals, and Dalits.

"Now, there is no land even to give housing plots to the poor," the CM stressed. According to Reddy, education provides solutions to all our problems. "Perseverance, hard work and determination are key to achieving success in our lives," the CM said, adding that the government was constructing Young India Integrated residential school at a cost of ₹200 crore. The critics were quick to point that without saying much, Reddy was hinting at the fact that there is little to offer from the government except facilitating education!

Our Bureaus

Bundelkhand's water heritage being saved

BHARAT DOGRA

Madumar, located in Tikamgarh district of Madhya Pradesh, is an ancient village with a huge tank spread over about 100 acres of land. People of this village take pride in relating mythological stories which establish the ancient origins of this village. This tank goes back to the times of the Chandela kings who had ruled in the Bundelkhand region from the 9th to the 14th century. The Chandela kings are known for the water heritage they left behind in the form of several well-planned and constructed tanks which continue to serve people to this day.

The Madumar tank is one such tank which continues to be an important source of irrigation and fisheries, meeting the water needs of many people and animals.

Its heritage importance is enhanced by its location close to the famous Jain religious centre of Paporaji, earlier known as Pampapur, which consists of about 108 shrines. Apart from their religious importance, they are noted for their architecture and wall paintings and attract many pilgrims. Their history goes back about 800 years.

Another important heritage aspect of this site is that a big and traditional agro-processing centre existed very close to it in the past and its remains can still be seen. Some villagers to whom I spoke said this probably consisted of processing sugarcane juice to make gur or jaggery. However, Kamlesh Kurmi, who has been involved in the renovation work of

the tank closely, says that this centre is likely to have also included processing of edible oil (this area is known for several oilseed crops including groundnut, mustard and sesame).

The prospects of reviving traditional agro-processing here can be considered from the perspective of livelihood support, making available healthier food products and protecting heritage. This will be welcomed by traditional processors who have been increasingly neglected and marginalized in recent times, although the processing done by them resulted in products with higher nutritional as well as medicinal properties. While the Madumar tank obviously has great heritage as well as utility value for common people, its cleaning had been neglected for a long time and therefore a lot of silt had accumulated here.

In an important recent initiative, a voluntary organization, Srijan, which has initiated development initiatives in this region, took up the work of de-siltation of this tank with the support of the Inter-Globe Foundation. This has helped to clean up the tank and to increase its water receiving and retaining capacity. This will reduce distress caused by less than expected rain or a drought situation, as well as an excess rain or flood situation.

Thus, such initiatives not only protect water sources and increase irrigation, but in addition also help to reduce the adverse impact of erratic or extreme weather situations and disasters and hence are particularly useful in times of climate change. Such efforts are an important component of climate change adaptation.

When de-siltation work was taken up, a lot of fertile silt taken out of the tank became available. Farmers used their own resources to carry this silt to their fields, thereby improving the fertility of their farmland. This in turn will be helpful in Srijan's efforts to spread ecologically protective natural farming practices among farmers. Such efforts which are still in the initial stage also include the spread of small orchards and multi-layer vegetable gardens.

The participative nature of these efforts is evident from the fact that farmers are estimated to have spent nearly twice the amount for carrying silt to their fields (about Rs 2.5 lakh) compared to the amount spent on de-siltation of the tank (Rs. 2.5 lakh).

During my recent visit, we had a nice group discussion with villagers under the shade of a peepal tree, sitting on a chabutra or raised platform. Srijan members were discussing plans of taking up tree planting work here. It was decided that only indigenous species will be selected and in addition some flowers will also be grown. This work will be extended to the nearby Garora tank as the two water bodies have been traditionally considered to be related to each other.

If in addition, the traditional food processing is also revived, this can also become a heritage site located close to the famous Jain pilgrimage. In due course of time, as natural farming progresses with vegetable and fruit gardens, these healthy food products can also be marketed here, combining heritage protection with the enhancement of livelihood opportunities.



Srijan is also looking at water heritage protection in a wider context. As Rakesh Kumar, who has been closely involved in these efforts says, ultimately all water bodies and water channels are inter-related and linked to the protection of the important and sacred rivers of the region like the Ken and the Betwa and their various tributaries. Hence the water-related work of the organization extends to many water channels and rivulets, combining a perspective of livelihood improvement, conserving water and heritage protection.

In a water channel near village Maughat, for instance, the focus is more on digging ditches called dohas that will help the water to be conserved for a longer period during the dry season. This is helpful for farmers to get irrigation water but in addition it is helpful for animals and birds to quench their thirst. A gabion-wall structure has also been constructed to conserve water and already one can see more birds collecting near the water conservation site. This work too is

taken up along with promotion of natural farming, and vegetable and fruit gardens in the village.

In some other places it has been seen that several benefits can accrue from repair and renovation of existing structures that have been damaged due to various factors. I visited one such site in Mamau village. Here the check dam constructed earlier had proved to be useful but then someone stole the gates and these could not be replaced for a long time. As a result, the entire structure fell into disuse. Recently Srijan arranged a modest budget to install the gates and take up other renovation work. The result is that not only are about 25 farmers able to irrigate their fields, but the water table in the three settlements of Mohanpura, Dhajrai and Hajurinagar is going up.

Similar efforts to improve damaged structures, particularly check dams, have given good results in villages like Markhera, Rammagar and Banpura.

(The writer is Honorary Convenor, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include India's Quest for Sustainable Farming and Healthy Food, Planet in Peril, Protecting Earth for Children and Man over Machine.)

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

I grow old, I grow old



Like you, I have been growing old from the day I was born. How come that for many years I never thought about getting older. The subject never came up; if it ever did, I deferred it for exploring another time. It may not have seemed an interesting theme to explore. Certainly, it did not seem an alluring subject.

Why would it? Growing old was connected in my mind with frailty and incapacity. The old people I saw walked with a cane or hobbled from step to step. Some were older and needed help to move or to dress. Some didn't see or hear well.

The two exceptions were so exceptional that I still remember them well. I had missed a train connection and stayed a couple of days with a family friend, a famous lawyer. I was a teenager, while he was in his late seventies, and yet we struck a chord immediately. We began talking about politics and literature – he was an avid reader – and ended up talking about justice and jurisprudence. I knew little about those subjects, but I had endless questions. He was both kind and a person of strength and wisdom.

The other was a woman, my father's tennis partner. She was English, a visiting professor in India. She was decades older than me, but she mesmerized me with her gentle grace and pervading

insight. We became unusual friends, and I enjoyed sitting with her for hours sipping tea or debating a modern play. We both loved literature but approached it with different perspectives: mine was sheer admiration and enjoyment, hers was analytic depth and philosophic compassion.

These two persons were pathfinders for me, an inkling of what a large disparity of age could bring to a friendship. Even more, it evoked a new understanding of old age that denoted more than weakness and helplessness. But it took many years for me to reach the age where I began to see what old age means for most people.

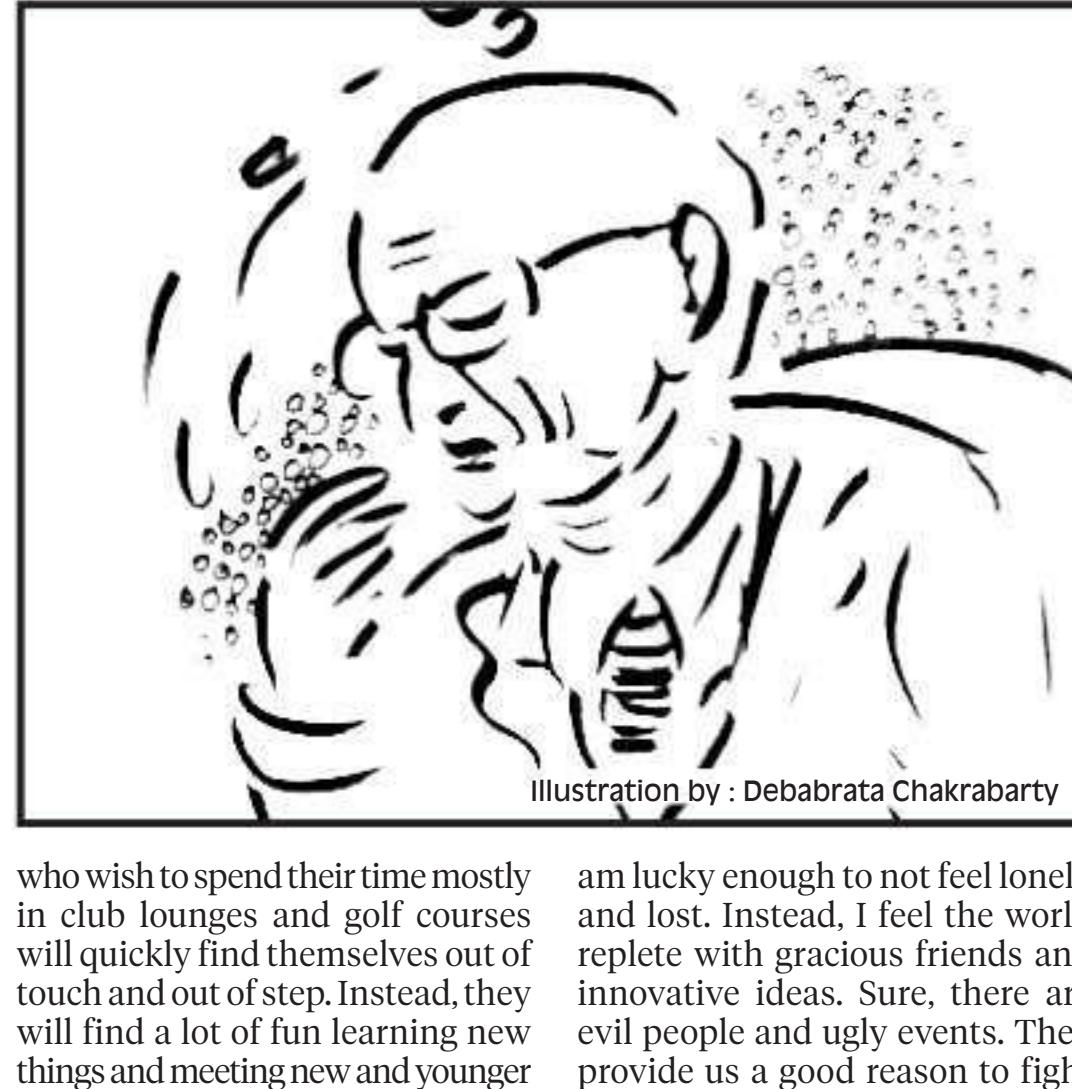
We are all so busy when we are in school or college. The little time left passes with a few dear friends. When we start working, we are even busier. Thanks to technology, work is ever getting more rigorous. Family demands multiply with a wife and children. Social life, often related to work, gets more demanding. Once you emerge from all this in your sixties, you have suddenly lost your work life, your colleagues, your friends. Your children have moved. Often you are lonely and purposeless. Life seems robbed of meaning.

Does it have to go this way as we get older? Do we have to find our life lonely and aimless as we reach our seventies? As people live longer,

this period of inactivity and loneliness gets even more extended. We watch this huge waste of human resources continue unabated. People do not become worthless overnight when they retire from work in their sixties or seventies. For one thing, some of them defer their retirement and continue to work effectively in a new job. They have capacity, experience and the eagerness to contribute – if only they have the opportunity to contribute.

There seems to be the need for some adjustment on both sides. Organizations that have eagerly sought youthful enthusiasm need to pay serious attention to maturity and experience. Technology has long reduced the need for brawn in industry; now, given the quick advent of Artificial Intelligence, there will be greater need for brain and sagacity. In the future, software can be entrusted more and more to look after speed and accuracy; human skill will be required more to provide evaluation and judgment. That is where the old people, earlier cast aside as deadwood, might provide the ballast.

The older people in turn need to assess where the needs lie and update their skills in line with the emerging needs. Old skills simply will not do. Significant changes are expected in the coming two decades; to keep in touch with them will need some time and effort. Those



who wish to spend their time mostly in club lounges and golf courses will quickly find themselves out of touch and out of step. Instead, they will find a lot of fun learning new things and meeting new and younger people.

I was in college when I read TS Eliot's "love song" where he wrote:

I grow old...I grow old...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

I still don't roll my trouser bottoms or wear white flannel pants to seashores that Eliot mentioned, though I often walk on a couple of beaches conveniently near me. I

don't feel myself stale or rusted; I am lucky enough to not feel lonely and lost. Instead, I feel the world replete with gracious friends and innovative ideas. Sure, there are evil people and ugly events. They provide us a good reason to fight for things we care for. An old adage I have heard talks of an empty mind as a devil's workshop. I can't help finding my mind an unusually active workshop, with both devilish and divine preoccupations. It is great fun.

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

Crossword | No. 29354

ACROSS

1. What could produce minor hitch? (8)
5. Twice yearly wife provides fruit (6)
9. Varied crimes by worker? He must be one (9)
11. Small lake sinks lower and lower (5)
12. Character pockets money for annuity scheme (7)
13. Everyone I must restrain runs fast (7)

CHESS **TUBTHUMP**
OIPWEOUN
GUINEAFOWL **WOLF**
SERLLI
LEAD **MORAY** **FIRTH**
IEENNA
WATERS **CATEGORY**
PRECINCT **MALIAN**
ROYAL **JELLY** **BUMP**
SKIP **MASQUERADE**
EONEONAD
STANDSIN **PLAYS**

14. Notorious libertine composed sad, sad requiem (7,2,4)
16. Learning for toddlers – a clue for Gran in it? (5-8)
20. Briefly spray a lilac (7)
21. Resenting competing alongside extremists in election (7)
23. Plan one leaving board in a huff announced? (5)
24. Do I hear a tail-end finally bats, getting the runs? (9)

DOWN

1. Cotton shrinking upset Yankee (6)
2. Minister going topless is a firing offence (5)
3. Obstruction is brief? No way (7)
4. Ate a cracking fish starter in restaurant, and to follow one beef dish (13)

14. Notorious libertine composed sad, sad requiem (7,2,4)
25. Smart bar to east of Croatia's capital (6)
26. It makes star pupils slip up? Rats! (8)

6. Excuse given by a bishop on crack (7)
7. Crew heading off after year in stinking capital city (9)
8. Backed minister to approve law, obtaining an easy victory (8)
10. Flexible new star learned to change characters (13)
11. Procession of cars round Democrat on the move? (9)
12. Images clicked on notebook's screen, first of all? (5)

15. So detective appears in long story divided into several parts (8)
17. Get any swimming around Zulu river? (7)
18. The opposite of how Milton wrote? (7)
19. Bit of loose skin covered up by Italian garment (6)
22. Images clicked on notebook's screen, first of all? (5)

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

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 19 January 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

In the programme for the Delhi session of the Assembly there is abundance of material for contention. That is not a bad thing. Legislative bodies come to know their own qualities in days of stress. The Trade Union Bill may occupy several sittings, and will be followed by the Contempt of Court Bill. There are also to be discussions on the political prisoners, and the cause of the Indians in South Africa. Upon both the Trade Union Bill and the Contempt of Court Bill there is antagonism between the official and the non-official elements, and the Council of State will probably have to do what it can to reconcile the two points of view. A number of smaller measures will fill in the days of what must be a crowded session. This will be the last Assembly of Lord Reading's Viceroyalty, and we may hope that he will be able to look back on it with the satisfaction of something accomplished.

News Items

BENGAL LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

A vacancy having occurred in the Bengal Legislative Council by reason of the resignation of the Hon. Samuel John Best, the Indian Tea Association constituency is being called upon to elect a member in his stead. January 28 has been fixed as the last date by which nomination papers of candidates should reach the Returning Officer and January 29 as the date of scrutiny of nomination papers.

DEATH OF LORD CARMICHAEL POPULAR RULER

FIRST GOVERNOR OF BENGAL TRANQUIL REGIME

(British Official Wireless.)
Rugby, Jan.

Lord Carmichael died in London last night. As Sir Thomas Gibson Carmichael, he succeeded Mr. Gladstone, in 1895, as Liberal member of Parliament. Later he was, in turn, Governor of Victoria (Australia) and Governor of Madras. In 1912 he was appointed by Mr. Asquith's Government to be the first Governor of Bengal.

LAUNCH ABANDONED

GREASED SLIPWAYS BECOME FROZEN

(British Official Wireless.)
Rugby, Jan.

The new torpedo-boat destroyer the Amazon was to have been launched yesterday at Southampton. It was, however, found that the grease used to facilitate launching had frozen hard overnight despite every precaution and the actual launching was abandoned. Lady Chatfield, wife of Admiral Chatfield, christened the vessel in presence of a distinguished gathering. Special interest attached to the ceremony because this was the first destroyer completed in this country since the war. Another is in course of construction. The Amazon embodies the experience obtained during the war and is considered the most advanced type ever built.

GERMANY & LEAGUE

DEMAND FOR RETURN OF COLONIES

(British Official Wireless.)
Rugby, Jan.

The German Association of Colonial Societies has passed a resolution urging the Government to make Germany's entry into the League conditional on the return of all German Colonies "as the property was stolen from Germany in defiance of right." The Berlin correspondent of the Times says that while the resolution need not be taken too seriously there is no doubt it reflects the increasing interest Germany is taking in the future of her former Colonies. It is recalled that 18 months ago Herr Schacht, President of the Reichsbank, proposed an international monopoly company as the best method in which to approach the idea and which was favourably received.

{ OUR TAKE }

Too little for so much disruption

Penalties ought to be severe to make reckless cost-cutting genuinely uneconomical. DGCA ignored this point while imposing penalties on IndiGo

India's aviation regulator imposed an unprecedented ₹22.2 crore penalty on IndiGo on Saturday for the airline's operational collapse that stranded over 300,000 passengers last month. In three days, 2,507 flights were cancelled and 1,852 delayed—the most acute crisis in the country's aviation sector. The unparalleled crisis deserved unforeseen penalties. But the question is not whether the penalty is unprecedented, but whether it is adequate—and the answer is no.

The inquiry committee's findings are unambiguous. IndiGo pursued "minimal recovery margins" while maximising crew and aircraft utilisation, creating a system so brittle that normal operational stress shattered it. The airline had two years to prepare for stricter crew fatigue rules that took effect in November 2025. It chose instead to maintain hiring and pay freezes while expanding planned winter operations by 9.6% compared to the previous year. IndiGo projected "nil impact" from the new rules in October 2025, weeks before the meltdown. The inquiry found the airline "failed to adequately identify planning deficiencies".

Now, consider the monetary consequences. The ₹22.2 crore fine represents 0.31% of the ₹7,263 crore net profit IndiGo recorded in the 2024-25 financial year (with a turnover of ₹80,803 crore). The penalty is a mere blip in its economics—amounting to less than 2.5 hours of the airline's earnings last year. The fallout for its executives is a similar story. Chief executive Pieter Elbers received a "caution" and chief operating officer Isidre Porqueras Orea was "warned". It was the senior vice president for operations who was removed—the only executive to face material consequences. The architects of IndiGo's cost-cutting model appear to have escaped with administrative reprimands. And then there is the spotlight on the regulator's own role. The inquiry cited "inadequate regulatory preparedness"—a rare admission that DGCA failed its oversight mandate, with little known consequence as of now.

Regulators in the West impose penalties calculated as percentages of annual revenue, designed to hurt. India must follow suit. Its aviation market is a duopoly between IndiGo and Air India. When a carrier commanding 60% market share optimises to the point of systemic fragility, costs are socialised across passengers while profits remain private. IndiGo will emerge with market dominance intact, profitability barely dented, and leadership unscathed simply because of the market power it holds. Adequate regulatory deterrence must account for this power asymmetry, imposing penalties severe enough to make reckless cost-cutting genuinely uneconomical.

Political predicament of the two NCPs

The Maharashtra municipal poll results offer at least two lessons. One, the BJP is clearly the preferred party of urban Maharashtra, and its agenda, a combination of developmental aspirations and Hindutva, has prevailed over regional and ethnic sentiments articulated by smaller parties. Two, the non-BJP groups will need to consolidate their vote bases if they seek to challenge the organisational might and financial resources of the saffron outfit. The BJP is also good at leveraging its position as the ruling party in the Centre and in the state. Old forms of mobilisation, patronage, or legacy are no longer sufficient to stall the BJP juggernaut. The Pawars were quick to recognise this, and the first post-result meeting of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) factions decided that the pre-poll alliance in place in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad—two urban bodies where the NCP has traditionally been strong but won by the BJP in recent elections—will continue.

Elections to the 12 zilla parishad and 125 panchayat samiti in Maharashtra, due in early February, will be the first test for the alliance. The NCPs won only 203 seats in the urban civic bodies, but the united NCP was more of a political force in rural areas, where the sugar cooperatives provided the party both personal and material resources. The NCP needs to save this base, and the Pawars coming together may help, but only for now. Sharad Pawar has been exceptionally good at managing the satrap-centric politics centred around cooperatives, but that order is changing. Politics in the state has become transactional and is increasingly centralised, and family loyalty may no longer translate into political backing. Going ahead, the NCPs will need to look beyond Brand Pawar and articulate a new politics to retain their identity and influence.

The post-order moment, for India and the world

The future order calls for rapid improvement in domestic capacities and social cohesion, as well as reframing traditional relationships and diversifying partnerships to mitigate risks and build influence

Every era has its own world order, with its own characteristics, which change with the flow of history. The order of the post-World War II era is unique in forging for the first time a global architecture of institutions, mechanisms, laws, agreed principles and norms, largely fashioned and led by a homogenous West under US leadership. That order was flawed and disorderly, subject to exceptionalism and multiple breaches, but was held together by the illusion of its sanctity.

US military interventions and regime change are not new. Democrats and Republicans alike have done it. The genius of the American-led system was that it enabled the US to pursue self-interest masked as delivering international public goods. The difference with President Donald Trump's Venezuelan raid or statements on Venezuela is that the pre-tence is no longer there.

Trump's personality may be an aberration, but his policies are a high point, if not a culmination, of a US trend in the making for some time. The US is abandoning the international system it created because it no longer finds it useful. It sees the international framework as

letters on its power and the unilateral application of power as the way to advance its interests. As US economic dominance slips and its self-confidence erodes, reliance on its unparalleled military force is higher. The absence of Cold War checks makes it easier. After the Venezuelan intoxicant, Trump will want more. But, resistance chooses its own form and time. Shredding alliance trust, shared economic stakes, and soft power will shrink overall US influence and power. The forces unleashed in the US will last beyond Trump.

The transatlantic relationship, including NATO, was a US Cold War need. For long, it lingered in search of causes to rekindle the bonds. Trump has unthatched a long-adrift relationship. Europe, now buffeted by three major powers, stares at strategic irrelevance, besides a relative decline in competitiveness and innovation. It must now build a future on its many strengths, independent of the US. The Ukraine war may have weakened Russia, but it has not denied its will or its capacity to shape its own security sphere.

China may not need the inspiration of Venezuela or Ukraine to achieve its now unambiguous goal of reunifying Taiwan within a finite time-frame. China's territorial ambitions and appropriations precede the two wars. Its timing and method will follow its own calculations and strategic culture. Currently, its accumulation of power co-exists with internal challenges and external vulnerabilities. At any rate, China will have no interest in a world order that does not suit its new major power status. Nor is it certain that China's exercise of global power would

emulate US goals or methods.

The post-War order is behind us because its creators no longer need it, and the once-excluded new powers have no love for it. We are in a transition with the debris of a broken system, in the uncertainty that follows the end of anything. The moment resembles the past—the power over norms, heightened territorial ambitions, weaponisation of trade policies, democratic recession, resource scramble, racism, religious conflict and so on. How we see the future order depends on our time-frame.

More than the debate on a bipolar or a multipolar world, or the likely winner of great

power competition, it is more important to focus on the forces shaping the world.

Technology is a determinant of economic, military and political power. That, in turn, shapes the dominance of values. The onset of the AI age will have implications at five levels—personal, societal or national, economic, national security and geopolitics. Global economic shifts, disappearance of jobs and unequal access and capacity in new technologies, including AI, will widen inequality within and between nations. The politics of populism and identity will thrive. As Gen Z protests show, generational shifts in thought and methods will be quicker and sharper. Social consensus will be increasingly fragile. Democratic institutions will be under pressure because of delivery gaps and incapacity to cope with social media storms. Economic and social doctrines of the Reagan-Thatcher era are changing.

Internal choices are shaping external outlook. Globalism is giving way to protectionism, universalism to nation-



As Gen Z protests show, generational shifts in thought and methods will be quicker and sharper.

BLOOMBERG

seek energy security by replacing imported fossil energy with renewable and nuclear energy.

Security will see new technologies, domains and warfare methods. Society, space, maritime, cyber, underwater and seabed will be both instruments and theatres of conflicts. As electronics gave the US overwhelming military superiority, new technologies and dominance over new domains will enhance the asymmetry between major powers and the rest. Worse, the comfort that those with nuclear weapons will be rational is diminished. This will spur conventional military buildup and the pursuit of nuclear capabilities in many countries.

The greatest challenge will be to avoid extrapolating past assumptions and choices into the future. Now, focusing on the drivers of the future matters as much, if not more, than simply managing relationships. Disruptions inevitably extract short term costs. For India, preparing for the future order—and help shape it—will require, first, rapid accretion to domestic capacities and social cohesion that impart strength and resilience, as also reframing traditional relationships and diversifying partnerships to mitigate risks and build influence.

Javed Ashraf, a former ambassador, is chairman, India Trade Promotion Organisation (ITPO). The views expressed are personal

{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob



A Dhaka in flux offers an opportunity for New Delhi

Turning from a three-day visit to Dhaka, I am deeply struck by an unshakable sense of historical vertigo. In the streets of the Bangladeshi capital hesitatingly recovering from the July 2024 "revolution", the students are no longer in charge, the interim government has failed to make a mark, a radical Jamaat-e-Islami is riding high on a surge in its popularity, and the old order is sneaking back. The leaders of the so-called revolution have been co-opted by the status quo, and the temptations and realities of power are shaping the status quo itself.

Many of the youngsters who fuelled the 2024 uprising feel the fundamental features of the old status quo remain untouched. For many of them, this was a "wasted revolution" that toppled a regime, but failed to change the anatomy of the old order—marked by class relations, lack of civic facilities, the corrupt bureaucracy and the police and so on. But for those of us analysing Bangladesh from afar, there are several new realities in the country to reckon with.

As the country approaches the general elections—scheduled for early February—the central question for New Delhi is no longer about "who will win", but how India's grand strategy must evolve to meet a neighbour that is reimagining itself: Dhaka's domestic political trajectory and relationship with India which are, in a sense, shaping each other. For decades, Indian policy toward Bangladesh was anchored in a comfortable, but narrow, partnership with the Awami League, which today has become a liability for Delhi. The ouster of Sheikh Hasina shattered that framework and left South Block to navigate a new political landscape where its trusted partner evokes almost universal disapproval, and its traditional detractors are the new frontrunners to rule Dhaka.

My conversations in Dhaka tell me that while the country's domestic politics is fraught with uncertainty, the situation offers a rare opening for India to move from a regime-centric approach to Dhaka to a State-centric grand strategy. The most notable shift is the unmissable metamorphosis of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Long considered in the Indian strategic circles as an anti-India political formation, the BNP is not only the clear favourite in this election, buoyed by the dramatic disappearance of the student unity during the July uprising, the discrediting of the Awami League, Tarique Rahman's return to Bangladesh, and his mother Khaleda Zia's passing, but is also shedding its anti-India image. Domestically, however, the party today finds itself in a curious predicament. In the post-revolutionary atmosphere, the party is increasingly viewed by the youth as the new establishment—the status quo party that might simply replicate the old order with new people. For many youngsters in Dhaka's streets, the BNP's return to power is nothing but a continuation of the old guard they revolted against.

But for India, the BNP's pivot to the centre is an opportunity. The recent meeting in Dhaka between external affairs minister S Jaishankar and BNP chief Tarique Rahman marks a definitive break with the past, those present at the meeting recalled. The BNP of 2026 is positively poised to work with India, driven by the realisa-

tion that governing the country requires a stable and healthy economic relationship with New Delhi. If the BNP is the new establishment in Dhaka, and is willing to more or less assume the role of the old establishment, Delhi must grab the opportunity. It should not matter for New Delhi who the actors in Dhaka are, but what the outcomes for India will be.

Equally striking is the ascent of the Jamaat-e-Islami, currently enjoying its highest level of political support in history. Benefiting from a popular perception for being not corrupt compared to the traditional political behemoths, Jamaat is no longer a fringe element untouchable by mainstream political parties, especially considering that a significant chunk of the erstwhile "revolutionary" leadership is in an electoral coalition with the radical Islamic grouping.

And yet, I suspect that even Jamaat is proving to be a pragmatic actor. The closer they come to power, the more their policy outlook is likely to soften even if the rhetoric remains anti-India until they have to engage with India. So, if New Delhi reaches out, the Jamaat may respond to having a working relationship. A strategy that accounts for a pragmatic Jamaat while that does not suit its new major power status. Nor is it certain that China's exercise of global power are shaping the status quo itself.

First, we must decouple our interests from specific political dynasties in Dhaka for the simple reason that in contemporary Bangladesh and going forward, the default impulse of any establishment would be to proactively engage New Delhi. We should welcome a scenario where not being anti-India is a structural necessity for any party in power in Dhaka.

Second, we must look past the campaign rhetoric in Bangladesh. In the lead-up to February, nationalistic barbs and anti-India slogans are inevitable especially in a country that is still recovering from a violent uprising that overthrew a deeply unpopular regime closely linked to India. New Delhi must maintain prudence and patience, focusing on quiet, substantive engagements, rather than public noise either on our side or theirs. Once the elections are over, the rhetoric will inevitably subside. That's when to make the diplomatic move.

Third, India must actively support the institutional stabilisation of Bangladesh. Whether it is through continued infrastructure credit lines or energy partnerships, India must be seen as a partner to the Bangladeshi people and their aspirations for a reformed status quo. There is an urgent need to change the narrative, and positive actions are great narrative setters.

If New Delhi can navigate the political shift in Dhaka focussing on its national interests, avoiding ideological baggage, political binaries, and past grievances, it can transform the anti-India mood in Bangladesh. The goal is to ensure that no matter who wins in February, Dhaka stays a key node in New Delhi's subcontinental strategy.

Happymon Jacob is distinguished visiting professor, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University, and editor, INDIA'S WORLD. The views expressed are personal

{ RADOSLAW SIKORSKI } FOREIGN MINISTER, POLAND



Europe ... must now strengthen both its defence capabilities and its political will

On rising conflict and changing geopolitics, speaking at the Jaipur Literature Festival

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



Polarisation as an election strategy harms the nation

India's election cycles seem to dim the nation's intellectual capabilities. At a time of deepening conflict among several countries, what are our leaders doing? Instead of binding the nation together in such dangerous times, they are sowing the seeds of discord.

Look at the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections. The Thackeray cousins, who couldn't see eye to eye for many years now, came together. Raj Thackeray's speeches betrayed Shiv Sena's six-decade old anti-Tamil rhetoric, with vocabulary borrowed from Sena founder Balasaheb Thackeray. This gives rise to a question: If non-Marathi people contribute to Mumbai's success, then why should they be denied the same rights to its resources as to the Marathis?

I am also reminded of the Pawar family while talking of stemming the disintegration tide. You may recall how Sharad Pawar's nephew Ajit Pawar carried out a coup against his uncle, within his party. It is clear that the elections to local bodies achieved a reunion, even if temporary, something that the general and assembly elections had failed to achieve.

How did this miracle come about? The answer is not too difficult. The BMC's annual budget amounts to ₹75,000 crore. This is the country's richest municipal corporation, and its earnings and expenditure are higher than the budget of nine Indian states. Balasaheb Thackeray had captured the BMC and steered the Shiv Sena to the peak of its power and glory. Control of Mumbai, the administrative capital Maharashtra and financial capital of India, decides the political direction of the state. To control the city, the political families don't shy away from first triggering coups, then closing ranks, and likely becoming rivals again. Even their whips can disintegrate.

In the recently-concluded BMC elections the BJP, the Shiv Sena (Shinde) and Ajit Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) that share power in the state fought against each other in many seats. That isn't all; in Ambarnath municipal corporation, the BJP and the Congress joined hands to secure the chairman's post, creating ripples in Delhi.

What was the net result of these strange alliances? The BJP steered ahead while the Thackeray and Pawar families were left empty-handed. The time for opportunistic alliances is over. The BJP's expanding footprint indicates this. The elections once again proved that the Congress is becoming a liability for its allies.

The upcoming assembly elections in West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Assam are fanning the next round of polarised politicking.

What the Mamata Banerjee administration did during an Enforcement Directorate (ED) raid in Kolkata was unprecedented. During the raid on election management firm I-PAC, her party workers reached its office and took away files, documents and pen drives. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) alleged that the ED wasn't conducting a raid to unearth financial fraud but was trying to get hold of TMC's election-related documents.

The Supreme Court gave Banerjee a thorough dressing down for her behaviour. The FIRs lodged against the ED officials under serious charges by the Bengal government have also been stayed. Such reports had been lodged in Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu too. But the court later rejected them. Tamil Nadu CM MK Stalin wrote a letter to the PM Narendra Modi on January 11, demanding that the latter talk to the Sri Lankan President to secure the rights of the Lankan Tamils in that country's proposed constitutional reforms. During Lankan PM Harini Amarasinha's visit to India last year, Stalin had demanded that Modi should take the Katchatheevu island back from Sri Lanka. Claims over the island and discrimination against Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka are old issues. But politics has turned into an endless game of presenting old toxic substances in new forms. Stalin's cousin and DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran did his bit by saying in a speech that while Tamil Nadu had the confidence to let its girls study and build careers, "North India tells its girls not to go to work, stay at home, tend to the kitchen and raise children". Elsewhere, former Jammu and Kashmir CM Farooq Abdullah insists on taking Pakistan on board while dealing with the issue of Kashmir. The language Assam's CM Himanta Biswa Sarma is using to win elections is fuelling anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh, leaving its Hindu minorities vulnerable.

Isn't it time for our leaders to weigh their words carefully, particularly in the age of social media where a stray statement made in a local context can incite murderous mobs globally? Why do they forget that the security of the country is above the cycles of elections and power?

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

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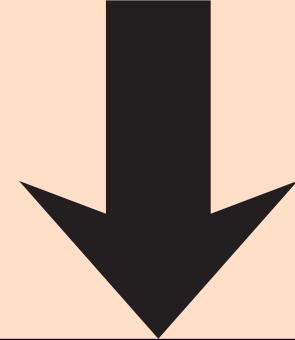
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Bullying tactics

Trump's weaponisation of tariffs over Greenland could undermine NATO

The Trump administration has vowed to slap a raft of European countries with a 10% tariff on "any and all goods" beginning on February 1 which is then set to increase to 25% on June 1, until an agreement is reached on the U.S. demand to purchase or otherwise acquire the Denmark-administered Arctic territory of Greenland. The latest round of tariffs will add to existing 15% U.S.-imposed trade duties on the countries targeted by the White House, which include Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. While French President Emmanuel Macron described the U.S. action as "unacceptable", U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the move was "completely wrong". The targeted nations have sent a small number of troops to Greenland for what they have called a reconnaissance mission, essentially for military exercises that signal and reinforce Europe's collective commitment to defending the autonomous Arctic territory. Such emphasis by the European Union (EU) clearly reflects concern stemming from the fact that American troops recently entered Venezuela and kidnapped and transported its President Nicolás Maduro to the U.S., and Mr. Trump has since gone on record effectively warning that he might consider intervention – for different purposes and in different circumstances – in Colombia, Cuba, Mexico and Iran next.

Leaving aside the neo-imperialist impulse that is implicit in the Trump administration's plans to control non-allied nations' territories based on the threat of military action, or to bully allies by weaponising tariffs against them, such actions are tantamount to a violation of international law, and in the case of the EU, risk degrading years of progress made on transatlantic trade agreements. First, there is a serious issue of no legislative backing by the U.S. Congress and legal basis for the unilateral action taken by the Trump administration in targeting Denmark and other European countries. Second, the Trump administration is likely to face, this week, a judicial ruling against its use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to impose tariffs across the board. Third, European nations may bring into force what is known as the "anti-coercion instrument", a counter-tariff facility that would limit the trade of major U.S. tech firms and related service providers that conduct significant business in the EU. Whatever the denouement of this Trump-made conflict, it will likely take years, if not decades to heal the worsening transatlantic rift that has beset the region. Meanwhile a weakened NATO will stand less able to assist Ukraine in facing off against the depredations of an aggressive Russia on the eastern front. The need of the hour is enlightened leadership, a far cry from what is presently on offer in Washington.

Crisis in education

Higher education institutions need systemic reforms

In an ongoing case relating to student suicides, the Supreme Court of India has issued nine directions to Central and State governments. Recognising the massification of higher education front-ended by privatisation without a commensurate boost in quality, the Court has taken note of student distress covering financial, social, social injustice and academic issues. The Court has invoked Article 142 of the Constitution and seven of the nine directions relate to record-keeping, reporting, and tracking suicides in higher education institutions (HEI) separately. Two directives order the filling of the posts of Registrars and Vice-Chancellors as well as all vacant faculty positions. Evidently, the Court sees these steps as critical to student well-being.

Across India, ground reportage shows that many public HEIs, especially universities, report 50% vacancies. The University of Madras is a case study as it is the premier State-administered HEI in Tamil Nadu – a State which leads the nation in enrolment in higher education and with a stellar record in women's education. With such a storied legacy, the university was known for quality research besides awarding degrees in affiliated colleges through examinations. Teaching became an important component in the late 1970s, but in the last decade, its decline has been pronounced. No new faculty appointments have been made and the teaching strength is half of the sanctioned strength. The university's research component is just about functional. It boasts of centres for advanced studies such as in philosophy, botany and mathematics, but these are a shadow of their original selves. Today, the humanities, science-based and social science research focused on Tamil Nadu, that the government can leverage from its public universities, has been given short shrift. Vice-Chancellor appointments have been stalled by a recalcitrant Governor. The ambiguity thrown in by the Court on the Presidential reference on a Governor's powers may need to be resolved before Vice-Chancellor vacancies can be quickly filled. Filling faculty positions would have to follow UGC process that takes at least six months and a budgetary commitment that may be helped with Union government support. Availability of qualified faculty can be a hurdle. Corruption and political-ideological appointments have affected quality and need to be addressed. Although the four-month schedule prescribed by the Court might seem daunting, the order is a call to action to fulfil the basic requirements of a robust public higher education system before goals such as Viksit Bharat can be seriously aspired for.

Corruption and prior sanction, case of a divided house

In January 13, a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court of India, comprising Justice B.V. Nagarathna and Justice K.V. Viswanathan, delivered a split verdict on the challenge to the constitutional validity of Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption (PC) Act, 1988 ("the section"), in *The Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL) vs Union of India*. Both judgments in this case are exhaustive, exemplifying the best tradition of the Court in bestowing the deepest judicial consideration and exercise of judicial conscience to the issues before the Court. The case had challenged the constitutionality of the section that effectively provided that no police officer would conduct any inquiry or investigation into any offence alleged to have been committed by a public servant regarding any recommendation made or decision taken in the discharge of official functions, without the prior sanction of the appropriate government.

The case was mounted on the premise that corruption is anathema to rule of law and vesting the government with the power to stall corruption investigations (where it may have a vested interest) would allow corruption to go uninvestigated and, hence, unchecked.

Arguments of both sides

In this case, the petitioners argued that the amended section was unconstitutional, being in the teeth of two earlier judgments of the Court. When a Single Directive (a consolidated set of instructions issued to the Central Bureau of Investigation, or CBI, by various Ministries/Departments), requiring prior sanction of the designated authority before initiating investigation against certain categories of public servants, was issued, its legality was challenged.

In *Vineet Narain vs Union of India* (1998) 1 SCC 226, the Court had quashed the Single Directive and held that the final opinion whether to investigate or not has to be made by the CBI and not by anyone else. The executive on its own cannot foreclose inquiry into any allegation of corruption as that would be entering the domain of the investigative agency.

The judgment came in the backdrop of the N.N. Vohra Committee (1993) that presented the frightening criminal nexus between highly-placed politicians, high-ranking bureaucrats, and criminal elements. The Court held that equality before the law under Article 14 and the rule of law itself could only be preserved if investigative agencies are insulated from political, executive and bureaucratic interference.

To bypass the judgment in *Vineet Narain*, the central government enacted the Central Vigilance Commission Act, 2003. Here it introduced Section 6A to the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act (DSPE) Act, effectively reintroducing the Single Directive. A Constitution



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is an advocate in the Supreme Court of India



Cheryl D'Souza
is an advocate in the Supreme Court of India

The split verdict in the CPIL case is about protecting honest public servants while also ensuring an efficient anti-corruption regime

Bench in *Dr. Subramanian Swamy vs Director, CBI & Anr* (2014) 8 SCC 682 declared Section 6A of the DSPE Act to be unconstitutional on the ground that the classification of officers based on status in government service, for the purpose of investigation was discriminatory and violative of Article 14. It also held that such power to interdict corruption investigations would encourage the criminal-bureaucrat-politician nexus and thwart unbiased and efficient inquiry/investigation to track down corrupt public servants. The Court held: "... the signature tune in *Vineet Narain* is, 'However high you may be, the law is above you'. We reiterate the same. Section 6A offends this signature tune and effectively Article 14."

In the CPIL case, the petitioners argued that the Section 17A of the PC Act is distinguishable from Section 6A of the DSPE Act only in the sense that it expands the scope of protection to all levels of public servants and not just to a particular category of public servants (as 6A of the DSPE Act did). The Section does not just ignore the clear findings arrived at by the Court earlier but also chooses to defy the spirit of those findings. It was further argued that the Section runs contrary to the dictum in *Lalita Kumari vs Government of Uttar Pradesh & Ors* (2014) 2 SCC 1, which mandated registration of a first information report and consequent investigation on the disclosure of a cognisable offence.

The government on the other hand defended the constitutionality of the Section and sought to distinguish it from the earlier judgments of the Court on the ground that the Single Directive was struck down as it was merely an administrative order. It added that the Subramanian Swamy judgment was dealing with a distinction made between officers of Joint Secretary and above versus officers below – both of which did not apply to the present challenge to the constitutionality of the Section.

Where the judges differed

Justice Nagarathna, while upholding the petitioner's contentions, held Section 17A to be contrary to the objects of the Act and unconstitutional as the requirement of prior sanction from the government, she held, "forestalls an enquiry and thereby in substance protects the corrupt". The Section shields a class of public servants and revives an impermissible protection which was previously struck down in *Vineet Narain* and *Subramanian Swamy*. She also held that there was a conflict of interest between the government (Minister granting sanction) and the officers whose consent for investigation was sought, since they would often be working in the same department with a meeting of minds about decisions taken, amounting to acts of corruption.

Therefore, such a provision was likely to impede investigation into corrupt officers who may, instead, find protection from higher

authorities within the same institutional nexus, thereby allowing unchecked corruption. She also held that there would be a policy bias in the officials tasked with granting sanction as they would lack neutrality while considering a request for approval for carrying out an inquiry or investigation into a complaint *vis-à-vis* a decision taken by a public servant in their department.

Justice Viswanathan, while agreeing with Justice Nagarathna and the petitioners that leaving the power of consent with the government would render the provision unconstitutional, found no fault with the provision of prior sanction per se. He held it to be constitutionally valid, subject to the condition that the grant or refusal of approval would rest not with the government but with an independent agency before the decision is taken by the government.

He observed that striking down the Section would lead to a policy paralysis as he felt that honest public servants needed to be insulted from frivolous and mala fide police investigations. He held that the Lokpal, conceived as an independent anti-corruption authority, would deal with such cases in an independent manner, and that its recommendations would be binding on the government as the PC Act and the Lokpal Act operate in the same normative field. "Both address allegations of corruption against public servants, both recognise the need for screening, and both seek to balance accountability with protection against misuse".

At the core

The core disagreement between the two judges is on how to strike a constitutional balance between protecting honest decision-making public servants and ensuring an efficient anti-corruption regime. There is partial agreement between the two judges on the provision being unconstitutional if the power of granting sanction for investigation was left with the government. There remains disagreement on whether prior approval before inquiry or investigation by a police officer is an impermissible barrier (making the Section unconstitutional) or whether having an independent agency such as the Lokpal as a filter to prevent abuse would overcome this barrier (thereby upholding the Section's constitutionality).

Differing from her brother judge, Justice Nagarathna stated, "whether prior approval must be given, was the question, and not who, within or outside the government should give the approval."

The matter has been referred to the Chief Justice of India for constitution of a larger Bench to decide the issue conclusively.

Prashant Bhushan and Cheryl D'Souza were counsels for the petitioners in this case before the Supreme Court of India

India-Germany ties can only soar higher



Philipp Ackermann
is the German Ambassador to India

Last week, we witnessed something rather unusual. Television channels, newspapers and social media were full of images/pictures of two very important leaders – Prime Minister Narendra Modi and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz flying kites together in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. It was quite a contrast to the other images of this very substantial meeting. But I actually think that the kite is the perfect symbol to illustrate where Germany's partnership with India is going.

Germany and India have both experienced strong headwinds in recent months. The eroding international trade system is a challenge for both their economies. They both watch the increasing disregard for international law and the disruption of the rules-based global order with great worry. And they both share concerns on the stability in their neighbourhoods. Both countries want predictable conditions. This is what they need for their people to prosper. Based on hard work, on inventiveness and innovation, on education and on science. But it is only in stormy conditions that a good kite flyer shows you what it is capable of – just like the India-German partnership.

Two countries that have economic heft

Chancellor Merz and Mr. Modi are also the leaders of the third- and fourth-biggest economies, respectively, of the world. We are talking about two economic heavyweights. In a few years, India will overtake Germany, to become the undisputed number three in the world. And let me tell you something: Germany will celebrate the day this happens. The world economy is not a zero-sum game, contrary to

A kite is the apt symbol to show where Germany's partnership with India is going

what some leaders think. When India profits, Germany also profits. A stronger Indian economy means a bigger market for German products, and a stronger footprint of Indian companies in Germany sells more competitive products and services for German businesses and consumers.

One of the central messages of Chancellor Merz in India was that a free-trade agreement between Europe and India is what India and Germany need to propel their economies to the next level. And to become more resilient against unpredictable trade wars and supply chain interruptions. This was Chancellor Merz's first visit outside the Western Alliance, and his first time in India. The invitation to Ahmedabad, to Mr. Modi's home State of Gujarat, was a very special gesture of friendship for Germany. There was a lot of substance to discuss and decide upon, but the Chancellor's personal impressions of this trip are just as significant.

The basis of the migration partnership

Here is an anecdote of the visit – it might sound like a small detail, but there is much more to it. Chancellor Merz had a conversation with young Indians who were about to move to Germany. One of these young women had a casual chat with Mr. Merz in German. This young Indian had been learning German for only four months. And I have been struggling with Hindi for four years now. My excuse is usually "Maf kijiye, lekin Hindi kafi mushkil hai" (Sorry, but Hindi is very difficult"), but I can tell you that learning German will also feel like a case of brain jogging at times. The chat that Chancellor Merz had with that young lady epitomises what I admire so much

about Indians. They are nimble and quick to adapt, they always have a game plan, and they know how to get there – with a mix of perseverance, smartness and sometimes disarming assertiveness. Many well-established professional pathways and educational opportunities around the world are closing up. But Germany continues to welcome smart, skilled and spirited Indians. Its migration partnership with India is built on safe, legal and predictable migration.

Platinum jubilee of ties

In 2026, Germany is celebrating 75 years of diplomatic ties with India and I cannot imagine a better start into this year than this visit. Today, India and Germany stand closer together than ever before. Not just because external shocks brought them closer together, but because in the previous years, they set a clear strategic direction for their partnership. In the same sense, I believe that the diplomatic anniversary between Germany and India will set them up for future success.

A European Union-India-Free Trade Agreement, a closer defence partnership between Germany and India, and stronger and stronger bonds between their people will be the building blocks for something truly lasting.

I am convinced that by the end of this year, when Mr. Modi and his cabinet will travel to Germany for the biennial Intergovernmental Consultations, India and Germany will celebrate a year of significant progress in their bilateral relations, a year that has started with flying their kites in the skies of Ahmedabad.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'Real estate' presidency

U.S. President Donald Trump's reported threat to impose escalating tariffs on a set of European nations unless the U.S. is allowed to 'purchase' Greenland reflects a dangerous conflation of trade policy with territorial coercion. What should be economic statecraft is being deployed as leverage against NATO allies, risking retaliation, alliance rupture, and instability in the already contested Arctic. This fits a broader pattern remarks urging Canada to become the 51st U.S. state, talk of a

"world-class" city in war-ravaged Gaza, the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro followed by moves to control the country's oil business, cheerleading Iranian protesters – and now Greenland. Such actions echo a real-estate dealmaker's mindset, not presidential statesmanship. Tariffs, meanwhile, punish American citizens through higher prices. If Congress remains mute, economic bullying may become a substitute for diplomacy.

Gopalaswamy J.,
Chennai

'Lit for Life' 2026

The 2026 edition of the prestigious 'Lit for Life' was a two-day treasure trove literary event – more so for avid readers of this daily and senior citizens like me. The conclaves have been fostering an ecosystem for the forthright exchange of enlightened views on a plethora of topics. For instance, the appeal advocating scientific and data-driven journalism was laudable. Perhaps a book on all the panel discussions can be brought out.

G. Ramasubramanyam,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

It was heartening to have the importance of free speech being highlighted. The issue assumes added significance at a time when the bulk of the media has eroded and the so-called intellectual class has become accustomed to singing from the hymn book of the right wing. It is axiomatic that freedoms of thought and expression are indispensable for unlocking innate potential, creativity and originality.

G. David Milton,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

The prestigious annual

literary event should serve as a source of knowledge building. With brilliant minds across the country engaged in conversations on a variety of subjects, the fest has enabled us to nurture our collective love for literature, promote the reading culture, and connect authors with readers.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

At Melbourne
Legendary Novak Djokovic is dead right in his line that a Sinner-Alcaraz era is the one looming large over

Melbourne. It is time for him to enjoy his game and just try to improve the tally to 25 to create a new world record. To be frank, it is at the Australian Open, where he owns a record 10 titles, that he has the best chance to rewrite history. Who knows, he could be lucky enough not to meet either Sinner or Alcaraz during his semi-final clash and even in the finals.

N. Mahadevan,
Chennai

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

A display plan for the Piprawaha relics

After being dispersed for over a century, ancient gems, charged by their proximity to the historical Buddha's corporeal remains, have been reunited with some other extraordinary relics excavated at Piprawaha, Uttar Pradesh. This partial reunification, made possible by an Indian conglomerate's acquisition of the gems from an overseas seller and their handing it over to the government – is being celebrated by an exhibition in Delhi that Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated earlier this month. How they will be housed once the exhibition closes is an urgent question. If these artifacts are carefully displayed – with lessons absorbed from a study of the ancient cult of relics and with an eye to the future – then this restitution has the potential to shift public opinion of India's beleaguered museums, set new standards for safeguarding its composite heritage, and persuade travellers from afar to circumambulate the land of the Buddha.

Understanding the place of Buddhist relics in early India provides insights into how small, visually indistinguishable, and sometimes unattractive objects, were looked after and appreciated. After the Buddha's passing, his followers periodically divided ash, charred bones and other bodily remains among themselves. These remains were placed in vessels, occasionally with gems and other offerings, and eventually interred in the cores of large hemispherical mounds called stupas. A well-preserved stupa at Sanchi can demonstrate how reliquaries conveyed the power of relics, helped people come close to them, and transformed them. Plausibly first constructed in Ashoka's reign, the stupa was elaborated about two centuries later. New gateways built in the four cardinal directions led to a path that wrapped around the mound's circumference. The



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These historical artifacts are living entities and the museum to be their new home needs to think of long-term plans to engage viewers, historians and students

gateway posts and architraves bore relief carvings of the Buddha's life, worshippers at sacred centres, and royal and auspicious emblems. Taken together, these reliefs prepared viewers to apprehend and properly approach the relics. Figurations of spirits associated with the site acknowledged its long history while depictions of individuals in exotic clothing recognised foreign travellers who were beginning to traverse the trade routes that intersected near Sanchi. Once they were on the pathway that wrapped around the mound, visitors were partially separated from their mundane surroundings by high railings. Once outside the sacred precinct, they found themselves in the company of monastics eager to cultivate friendships.

The success of such strategies to honour and contextualise the Buddha and communicate his teachings can be attested from the support that locales such as Sanchi received from diverse social strata and their rapid growth into major sacred centres replete with many other edifices and institutions. It can also be gleaned from the gradual development of Buddhist enclaves in lands far removed from the landscapes where the historical Buddha lived. For example, in the rock-cut sanctuaries of peninsular India, the Buddha's presence was subtly communicated by monolithic stupas without relics in their cores that were thoughtfully set in spaces laden with sculptures and sometimes frescoes.

A strategy for the future
As little survives of the stupa that originally accommodated the Piprawaha relics, these esteemed artifacts are likely to be moved to a public institution in India after the temporary exhibition in Delhi closes. Merely placing them in sterile vitrines in a museum, as if they are lifeless objects, risks perpetuating the colonial paradigm that privileged seeing relics over their ability to lie

concealed and yet energise and empower communities.

Thus, the museum chosen as their new home needs to publicly discuss and sensibly implement long-term plans for them. These plans should include designing spaces that prepare diverse individuals to properly approach the Piprawaha relics, give them opportunities to spend time in proximity to the relics as they wish: chanting mantras, quietly meditating, or contemplating their aesthetics, and thereafter allowing them to see the world anew. New grant and fellowship programmes should also be formulated to encourage art historians to collaborate with anthropologists, scientists, film-makers, and others to explicate how historical artifacts are living entities that shape and reflect their environments. The chosen institution must also start designing courses to acquaint postgraduate students and emerging heritage professionals with the principles and best practices of stewardship, with a focus on restitution and interpretation. As a part of this goal, the institution needs to begin collaborating with colleges across India to convene workshops that empower communities living near heritage sites by engaging them in preventing and combating the illicit traffic in antiquities.

Teaching communities how to build datasets of cultural assets, helping them understand how trafficking networks often intersect with organised crime, introducing them to the functioning of India's judicial systems, and inspiring them to advocate for updating legislation so that it is aligned to today's ethical concerns and international agreements are also advisable. Once such spaces are designed and initiatives enacted, we can then proudly say that the Piprawaha relics have truly returned to the land of the Buddha and can be fully empowered by their aura and presence.

A municipal corporation, a trifurcation

Instead, the Telangana government should focus on the GHMC's core problems

STATE OF PLAY

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The year 2025 was a milestone for the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC), with the expansion of the area under its purview from 650 square kilometres to 2,053 sq.km after the subsumption of 27 peripheral urban local bodies (ULB). The GHMC is now one of India's largest municipal corporations encircled by the 158 km Nehru Outer Ring Road.

Three key ordinances, in late 2025, amending the Telangana Municipalities Act, 2019 and the GHMC Act, 1955, facilitated the GHMC's expansion and the merger of the ULBs which are either within or through which the ORR passed. The ordinances were passed by the Telangana Legislative Assembly during its winter session. The GHMC has now grown from six zones to 12 zones, 30 circles to 60 circles, and 150 wards/divisions to 300 wards/divisions. With the GHMC Council's term set to end by February 11, 2026, new council representatives are to be elected for the 300 wards in fresh elections.

While no official announcement has been made yet, there is talk that the civic body could be divided into three different corporations – Hyderabad, Cyberabad and Malkajgiri. There has been a hurried appointment of additional commissioners in the Cyberabad and Malkajgiri regions, a devolution of powers as well as the reorganisation of the town planning and engineering departments.

Hyderabad is likely to become the largest of all three corporations (150 wards/divi-



sions). Official sources confirm that it would comprise the zones within the core city and the appended regions towards the airport (Rajendra Nagar, Jalgally, Adibatla and Shamshabad). Revenues could be stagnant in the core city with scope for development in the newly added zones remaining limited due to height restrictions around the airport. Cyberabad would encompass all the localities on the western side, which have developed well due to the existence of information-technology and related industries. They include Kokapet, Raidurgam, Serilingampally, Kukatpally, Patancheru, Dundigal, Shamirpet and Medchal. Here, gigantic towers and rising realty prices, rather than road space, water availability and quality of life, seem to attract NRI investments.

Malkajgiri, the 'third corporation to be', largely constitutes the eastern part of the city, home to retired government and private employees, middle- and lower-income groups, and migrant populations. This area still faces issues related to semi-urban settings and poor infrastructure. There is also a 350-acre city garbage dump which limits the scope for development in 5-6 kilometre radius.

The demerger of the GHMC into three separate corporations thus negates the goal mentioned in the merger order 'to tackle uneven growth, service disparities, and frag-

mented governance in rapidly urbanizing areas...'.

The Hyderabad Corporation would in all probability be dominated by the AIMIM, which is poised to increase its tally from 44 to 70-80 seats in a 150-ward council, after the recent ward delimitation exercise. The hard fact is that the AIMIM, with its unrivalled grip on the heritage part of the city for decades, historically displayed no progressive ethos or developmental vision. Its dominance could affect the growth dynamics and cosmopolitan quality of the corporation, with parochial concerns overpowering the larger goals.

The political motive behind all this is undefined, but the Congress party's voter base could expand. During the 2023 legislative elections, all the city-based Assembly constituencies other than those from the Old City were bagged by the Bharat Rashtra Samithi; the demerger could aid the Congress. There are some who believe that the demerger is to aid Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy's pet project, Bharat Future City, about 60 km away from the administrative centre of the State.

The government could learn a lesson or two from the Delhi experiment of 2012 when Delhi was split into three corporations with a stated goal of better civic management. It was hit by financial strain and operational inefficiencies, and the corporations had to be re-unified a decade later. The Telangana government could focus on the deficiencies that plague the GHMC, such as development disparities, woeful staffing, rampant corruption, lack of planning and innovation in urban infrastructure, and unreliable public transport, rather than losing a decade to learn the hard way.

Telangana's stunning rise and its unhinged growth

However, data on this achievement point to the need for policies to be formulated to spread the fruits of growth across the State

DATA POINT

R. Nagaraj and Vikash Vaibhav

Telangana is the richest among major Indian States, with highest per capita income. In 2022-23, the latest year for which data for all States are available, the figure for Telangana stood at ₹3.54 lakh (at current prices).

For Karnataka it was ₹3.44 lakh, Haryana ₹3.24 lakh, Gujarat ₹3.1 lakh, Tamil Nadu ₹3.09 lakh, Kerala ₹2.9 lakh and Maharashtra ₹2.89 lakh.

This is an impressive achievement as these States were ranked higher in 2013-14, at the time of Telangana's formation in June 2014. Using Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) and District Domestic Product (DDP) data, the State's performance can be assessed in terms of regional concentration and sectoral spread. These two issues were quite central to the demand for a separate State of Telangana. Neighbouring Andhra Pradesh serves as the comparator for this purpose.

Economic size of Telangana
In 2004-05, Telangana's economic size was about three-fourths of Andhra Pradesh (74%). The gap became almost negligible at the time of the bifurcation (96% in 2013-14). Since then, the State's relative size has remained stable (96.5% in 2024-25). The same holds in per capita terms as well (Chart 1). Telangana's per capita income was slightly higher than Andhra Pradesh's in 2004-05 (6%). It steadily rose to 1.3 times by 2013-14, and remained constant since then (1.35 times in 2024-25).

Sectoral composition: At a sectoral level, the relative decline of the agricultural and industrial (and manufacturing) sectors in Telangana has been faster than the national average. The services sector was about 1.25 times that of Andhra Pradesh in 2013-14. This

has steadily climbed to 1.47 by 2024-25 (Chart 2).

Components of the services sector: Which part of the services sector has driven this? Real estate, ownership of dwelling, and Business service' (Real estate and IT) and 'Trade, Hotel, and Restaurants' (THR). Compared to Andhra Pradesh, the former sector jumped from 2 times to 2.7 times during 2013-14 and 2024-25 (Chart 3). This performance is closely matched by the second sub-sector.

Due to this impressive performance, these two sub-sectors constitute about two-thirds of the services sector output in 2024-25 in Telangana: real estate and IT (35.3%), and THR (29.6%).

What about the geography of economic growth? Undivided Andhra Pradesh had 23 districts of which 10 were carved out to form Telangana. Soon after, in October 2016, Telangana was divided into 21 new districts, with two more formed in 2019. Hyderabad was the only district left undivided.

To gain a perspective, we track the output shares of the original 10 districts since 2004-05. For clarity, the illustration shows only two leading districts: Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy (RR). None of the other eight districts ever contributed more than a tenth of the economy of the State since its creation. In 2022-23, the range was between 4.4% (Nizamabad) and 8.9% (Medak).

The dominance of Metro Hyderabad: Hyderabad, along with its neighbouring RR district, is the State's economically dominant region (Chart 4). These two districts (Metropolitan Hyderabad) account for about half of the State's economy (47.5% in 2022-23). They cover less than a tenth of its area (8.7%), and are home to slightly over a fourth of its people (27.9% based on the 2011 Census). Metro Hyderabad's economic share has remained roughly stable over the last decade.

The rise of Ranga Reddy district: RR district was carved out of

Hyderabad in 1978, comprising mostly of its rural areas.

In its original creation, it surrounded Hyderabad from all sides. In 2016, as part of a State-wide strategy, RR district was subdivided into three districts. The smaller RR district covered Hyderabad from the south, Medchal-Malkajgiri from the north while the western part became Vikarabad, with Metro Hyderabad as a contagious area.

In 2014, RR district overtook Hyderabad in the metro region to become the economically leading district, mainly due to the booming IT sector. It is a historical irony that RR district (then an undivided district) was one of India's 250 most backward districts (out of 640) in 2006. It is now one of India's richest districts, with a per capita income of ₹9.5 lakh in 2023-24.

On the flip side, Vikarabad (which was part of RR district until 2019), has now the State's lowest per capita income (₹1.8 lakh).

Telangana's engine

Telangana's rise is stunning. Metro Hyderabad is its engine, contributing nearly one-half of the State's output, driven by two sub-sectors, namely, real estate-IT, and trade, hotel, and restaurants. However, the engine is unhinged from the rest of the State, with its neighbouring district.

Vikarabad, for instance, is lagging, with just 1.5% of Telangana's output. In a deepening democracy, such an extremely uneven growth process can lead to social and political backlash, given the State's long history of people's movements and violent struggles. The situation calls for policies to spread the fruits of growth across the State to redress severe spatial imbalances.

R. Nagaraj was formerly with the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research. Vikash Vaibhav teaches at the School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat

Concentrated growth

The data for the charts were sourced from the Economic & Political Weekly Research Foundation and Dataful



CHART 1: Telangana's GSDP and per capita income (pcGSDP) as a percentage of Andhra Pradesh (in constant prices)

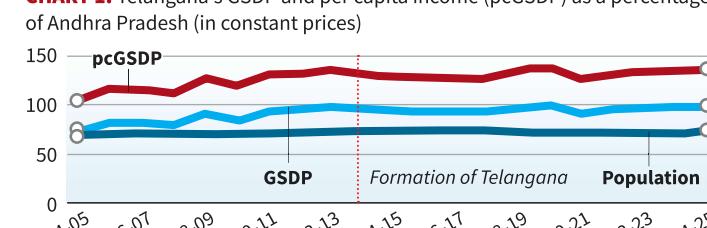


CHART 2: Sectoral performance of Telangana as a percentage of Andhra Pradesh (in constant prices)

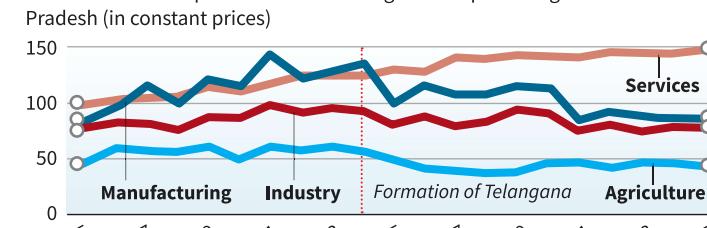


CHART 3: Two major components of Telangana's services sector as a percentage of Andhra Pradesh (in constant prices)

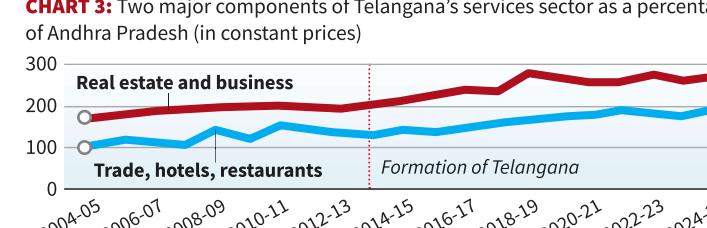
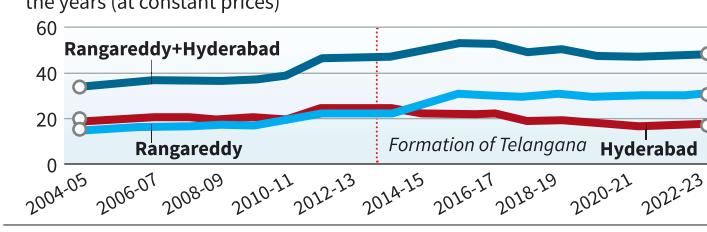


CHART 4: Share of Rangareddy's and Hyderabad in Telangana's economy over the years (at constant prices)



Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of tourists who visited Sri Lanka last year

2.3 In million. Sri Lanka received a total of 2.3 million tourists in 2025, with Indian travellers accounting for the largest share, according to figures released by the tourism authority. "India remains the undisputed leading source market, contributing 5,31,511 arrivals." PTI

Countries affected by Trump's tariffs over Greenland dispute

8 Europeans were reeling from U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement that eight countries will face 10% tariffs for opposing U.S. control of Greenland. The responses to the decision ranged from saying it risked "a dangerous downward spiral" to "China and Russia must be having a field day." AP

Accidents involving public transport buses in Delhi in 2024-25

150 Public transport buses on Delhi roads were involved in around 150 accidents, including 40 fatal crashes, in 2024-25, raising road-safety issues. Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses were involved in 97 road accidents in 2024-25, of which 21 were fatal, resulting in loss of lives. PTI

India's pharmaceutical exports from April to November 2025-26

20.48 In \$ billion. Brazil and Nigeria are emerging as key export destinations for Indian pharmaceutical firms amid global economic uncertainties, as per Commerce Ministry data. Nigeria emerged as one of the fastest growing destinations. PTI

Palestinians killed between date of ceasefire and Jan. 13

447 Those sheltering near the territory's "yellow line" that the Israeli military withdrew to as part of the October ceasefire say they live in fear as Israeli soldiers direct near-daily fire at anyone who crosses or even lingers near it. PTI

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How should India tackle child trafficking?

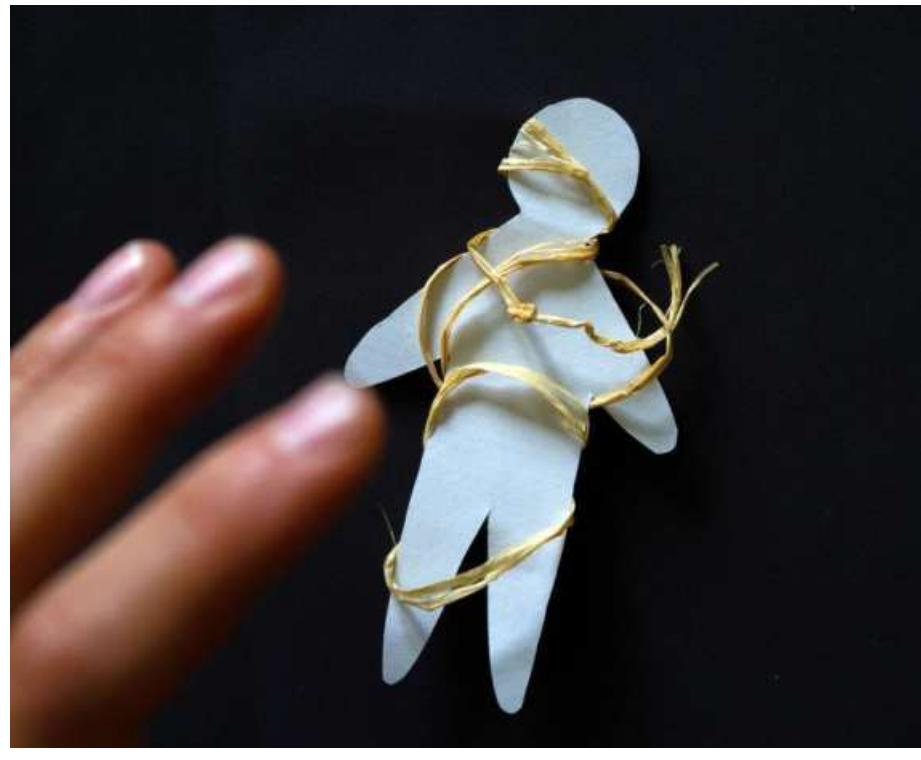
What is the Palermo Protocol? How does the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 define trafficking? How does the Constitution of India protect children from exploitation? How has the Supreme Court reacted? Why is a strong Centre-State relationship important for countering exploitation?

EXPLAINER

C. B. P. Srivastava

The story so far: Child trafficking remains a deeply disturbing reality in India. The Supreme Court in its recent decision in *K. P. Kiran Kumar versus State* has given strict guidelines to prevent such offences, and held that trafficking grossly violates children's fundamental right to life as guaranteed by the Constitution. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, in 2022, about 3,098 children below 18 years were rescued. Between April 2024 and March 2025, over 53,000 children were rescued from child labour, trafficking and kidnapping across India. However, the conviction rate for such offences between 2018 and 2022 was only 4.8%.

What is child trafficking? Internationally, the Palermo Protocol (UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children), 2000 defines child trafficking as 'the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation.' Presently, Section 143 of Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023 provides that "whoever, for the purpose of exploitation, recruits, transports, harbours, transfers, or receives, a person or persons by, using threats; or using force, or any other form of coercion; or by abduction; or by practising fraud, or deception; or by abuse of power; or by inducement, including the giving or receiving of payments or benefits, in order to achieve the consent of any person having control over the person recruited, transported, harboured, transferred or received, commits the offence of trafficking." The word 'exploitation' is wide enough in its scope and includes physical and sexual exploitation as well. It also includes any form of slavery, servitude, or forced



ISTOCKPHOTO

removal of organs.

What are the rights of children?

The Constitution extensively provides for the protection of children. Articles 23 and 24 give protection from human trafficking, begging, forced labour and employment in hazardous industries. Apart from these provisions, the state is also obliged to ensure that children are not abused, and that they are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. They are protected against exploitation and moral and material abandonment under Clauses (e) and (f) of Article 39 respectively.

The BNS under Sections 98 and 99 specifically addresses the 'selling and buying' of minors. On the other hand, prevention of trafficking for sexual exploitation is provided in the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956.

Furthermore, care, protection and rehabilitation for victims of child trafficking is provided under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013 also intends to check such activities by providing a more comprehensive definition of trafficking by including sexual exploitation, slavery, servitude, forced labour, and organ removal. It will cover trafficking irrespective of consent.

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 assumes greater significance in this regard. Apart from defining offences covering sexual assault, harassment and child pornography, the Act includes stringent punishments which inter alia include life imprisonment and even death penalty in extreme cases. One of the most important aspects of the Act is that it is gender-neutral. In order to provide rapid

trials, about 400 fast track courts set up exclusively for implementing the POCSO Act are in operation across India. These courts have set a target to dispose of around 165 cases per year per court.

What has been the judicial approach?

In *Vishal Jeet versus Union of India*, 1990 it was held that trafficking and child prostitution are serious socio-economic problems and hence a preventive and humanistic approach is essential to deal with them. In *M. C. Mehta versus State of Tamil Nadu*, 1996, the Court issued guidelines with a view to prohibiting employment of children in hazardous industries. Moreover, in the *Bachpan Bachao Andolan versus Union of India*, 2011 case, the top court issued directions to address widespread exploitation and trafficking of children.

What next?

The guidelines point out that the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the victims must be considered, especially those from marginalised communities. Society is still unable to protect children and adolescents from being criminals or being victims of crimes. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, migration, disasters and breakdown of the family system push children into vulnerability which strengthens the trafficking chain. In recent years, the spread of social media and online platforms has contributed to such offences, especially in terms of recruitment in the name of jobs or opportunities for "modelling". The government must first ensure that the social, economic and political rights of children are well protected with the help of institutions built for the purpose. Second, it must come down heavily on traffickers and ensure that the conviction rate improves considerably so that a deterrence may be created. Moreover, a strong Union-State relationship is also required because law and order and police are State subjects.

C. B. P. Srivastava is President, Centre for Applied Research in Governance, Delhi.

THE GIST

The Supreme Court in its recent decision in *K. P. Kiran Kumar versus State* has given strict guidelines to prevent such offences, and held that trafficking grossly violates children's fundamental right to life as guaranteed by the Constitution.

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Can the Chinese government arrest its ageing problem?

Why did Chinese President Xi Jinping abolish the one-child policy in 2016? Why has Beijing increased its age of retirement? What are some of the policies China is implementing to increase child birth?

Gunjan Singh

The story so far:

The Chinese population has been consistently declining since 2022. As per the UN, by 2050 the Chinese population will be around 1.3 billion from a peak of 1.4 billion. This also means that the ratio of young to old will change and that around 40% of the population will be over 60. The oft-repeated idea of China getting older before it gets richer seems unavoidable. In the hopes of avoiding this very challenge, Chinese President Xi Jinping had abolished the one-child policy in 2016 and replaced it with a two-child policy. In 2021, he extended it to a three-child policy. However, the decline has continued.

What policies did they implement?

There has been a long list of policies

which the Chinese government has implemented to mitigate the ageing challenge. The most recent one was implemented on January 1, 2026. The government added 13% VAT on contraceptives and condoms. In 2025, the government announced a subsidy of 3,600 yuan (equivalent to \$500 dollars) for new parents for the first three years.

There has also been a waiver of fees for students in the last year of kindergarten while also reducing the fees of kindergartens in the private sector. Moreover, the salaries of kindergarten teachers have been included in fiscal guarantees to ensure that they are timely. Beijing also raised the retirement age last year. For men, this stands now at 63 (up from 60) and for women it is 58 (up from 55 in white collar jobs) and 55 (up from 50 in blue collar jobs). This was adopted not only to manage the declining workforce but also to postpone the added

strain on the government with regards to pension funds. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) has predicted that at the current rate the state pension fund will run out of money by 2035, due to lesser number of people joining the workforce. China has also increased the age cut-off for certain civil service exams from 35 to 38 (people with masters and doctoral degrees can apply till the age of 43). There is also a government-backed campaign to encourage young people to marry and have children and to build a "birth-friendly society". However, the Chinese government continues to insert itself in the lives of its citizens as there have been instances of officials calling young married women asking their menstruation dates and their plans of having children. There is also an effort to reduce the 'bride price' (transfer of money from groom's family to the bride's) too. Moreover, the government has plans

to introduce love courses for single students in universities.

What are the challenges?

For Mr. Xi, increasing birthrates is linked to the 'rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. At the 20th Party Congress, Mr. Xi asserted, "We will improve the population development strategy, establish a policy system to boost birth rates, and bring down the costs of pregnancy and childbirth, childrearing and schooling". Further, in a 2021 speech, Mr. Xi argued that Chinese women should be "good wives, good mothers", and "link their future and destiny with the future and destiny of the motherland". As per Xi Jinping, the onus to manage the Chinese population, rising or falling, is on the shoulders of women.

While on the surface it seems that the Chinese government has been undertaking a myriad of steps to boost child birth, they all seem to be failing. The one-child policy, rising costs of living and healthcare, the high cost of bearing and raising children, high unemployment, all play a crucial role when it comes to family planning. The Chinese government is also struggling to manage the existing gender gap. During the one-child policy, there was a push for bearing male children. There are now 30 million more men than women in China.

Gunjan Singh is Associate Professor at OP Jindal Global University.

THE GIST

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KEYWORD



GETTY IMAGES

Soft matter: the unusual yet persistent physics inside your bathroom cabinet

Every morning, as you use either your toothpaste or shampoo, you engage with soft matter, materials that flow like liquids under force but hold their shape at rest. This fascinating behaviour challenges our understanding of material properties

Indresh Yadav

Every morning, you perform a small physics activity without realising it. You squeeze toothpaste out of a tube. You apply a force and the paste flows out like a liquid. When you stop squeezing, the toothpaste stays on the brush, holding its shape against gravity. It doesn't drip, spread or collapse into a puddle.

This simple act confronts us with a fundamental question in physics: how do materials respond to forces and what makes something like toothpaste flow when pushed yet remain solid when left alone?

Solid or liquid?

In school, materials are neatly divided into solids and liquids. Solids resist deformation and maintain their shape whereas liquids flow under even the slightest force. But toothpaste, shampoo, gels, and creams do neither in the usual way. They belong to a broad class of materials that modern physics calls soft-matter materials: they can behave like solids or flow like liquids depending on the forces applied and the timescales involved.

What makes soft materials different lies in their internal structure. Their basic building blocks are far larger than atoms or simple molecules, yet far too small to see with the naked eye. In personal care products, these building blocks can be small droplets, microscopic clusters or long and flexible macromolecules suspended in a fluid. Because they are relatively large, even gentle actions like squeezing a tube, shaking a bottle or spreading with a brush or finger, can rearrange them.

Equally important are the forces holding these structures together. In hard solids, atoms are bound by strong interactions that lock them in place. In ordinary liquids, the interactions are weaker, allowing molecules to move freely. But the molecules themselves are small and their own structure doesn't change under gentle forces. In soft materials, on the other hand, the forces between the building blocks are weak and easily disrupted. This makes their internal structure fragile but also highly adaptable. As a result, how soft materials behave depends not only on how strongly they are pushed but also on how quickly. The same force applied in different ways can produce very different outcomes. A slow, gentle stress may leave the internal structure largely intact while a rapid or sudden stress can rearrange it completely, allowing the material to flow.

This sensitivity to both force and time is a defining feature of soft matter. Squeeze a tube of toothpaste slowly and it may barely budge. But squeeze it suddenly and it flows out with ease. Shake a bottle of shampoo and it will pour out freely, but handle it gently and it will feel thick and resistant. In each case, the same material responds differently depending on the rate at which it is forced to move.

In fact many shampoos contain long and flexible worm-like molecules dispersed in a liquid. At rest, these molecules are tangled together, forming a loose internal network that gives the shampoo its thickness. When you shake the bottle or pour it out, the molecules are stretched and become aligned with each other, which makes it easier for them to slide past one another.

Under the influence of this motion, the network – the connections between

molecules – continually breaks and reforms. The worm-like micelles can for a brief period break into shorter segments and then reconnect, reducing the resistance to flowing. Thus the shampoo becomes more runny. Once the molecules stop moving past each other, they slowly coil back and become entangled with each other once more. This way the network is restored and the shampoo becomes thicker again.

Toothpaste behaves in a similar way, with microscopic structures that are rearranged under pressure and which reassemble when the force is removed. This behaviour is remarkable because the microscopic building blocks are constantly being reorganised, breaking apart, reconnecting, and reshaping themselves in a reversible way. This repeat making and unmaking allows soft materials to adapt smoothly to external forces.

In the end, what we usually call solids and liquids seems to depend on how a material responds to force over time. On very short time scales, even a liquid can resist deformation like a solid while a solid can slowly flow if enough force is applied or enough time is allowed.

The pitch drop experiment

At the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, scientists have been conducting an experiment since 1927, known as the pitch drop experiment, to test the viscosity of pitch, or bitumen, which is a substance derived from tar. At room temperature, pitch seems like a normal solid and can be shattered with a hammer. But according to scientists, pitch is really a liquid with extremely high viscosity – around 200-billion-times that of water.

To demonstrate this, a physics professor named Thomas Parnell heated pitch and poured it into a sealed glass funnel in 1927. After leaving it undisturbed for three years so it could cool and stabilise, he removed a seal from the bottom of the container, allowing the pitch to drip under gravity. In the last almost 100 years, only nine drops have fallen, with the ninth drop in April 2014. Even though this is excruciatingly slow, the fact that it's dropping at all shows that pitch is in fact a liquid. The next drop is expected by 2030. Similar experiments are underway in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

Physicists study this force and time-dependent behaviour in a field called rheology, which examines how materials deform and flow under applied stress. The roots of this study go back to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who captured it in the aphorism "panta rhei", meaning "everything flows". In soft matter, this metaphor for continuous change, which is in fact a feature inherent to all matter, becomes tangible at the timescales and force levels we encounter in everyday life. Beyond their practical usefulness, soft materials offer insights into the deeper scientific principles of motion, force, flow, and change.

The next time you open your bathroom cabinet, remember you are not just handling personal care products. You are handling materials carefully engineered to balance force and flow, structure, and softness. In their gentle response to a squeeze or a shake lies a rich, hidden chapter of modern physics, playing out of sight, every day.

Indresh Yadav is an assistant professor in the Department of Physics at IIT-Bhubaneswar.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on Indira Gandhi on the occasion of her becoming Prime Minister for the first time on this date 60 years ago

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
Though Indira Gandhi became India's first and only woman Prime Minister on January 19, 1966, she was not the world's first. Which Asian leader has that distinction?

QUESTION 2
Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister following the death of which incumbent premier and where?

QUESTION 3
Indira Gandhi defeated this veteran political figure to become the leader of the Congress Party and by extension the PM. Name the respected leader who became India's PM in the 1970s.



Visual question:
Name this Janata Party leader who defeated Indira Gandhi in the 1977 Lok Sabha elections. THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

Questions and Answers to the January 15 edition of the daily quiz: 1. In 1974, ISRO acquired technology from France in exchange for 100 man-years of engineering work, helping produce parts for this European rocket. **Ans: Ariane**

2. To steer the massive first stage, the PSLV injects this chemical solution into one side of the nozzle's exhaust flow. **Ans: Strontium perchlorate**

3. In February 2017, the PSLV-C37 mission set a world record by launching 104 satellites in a single flight. This Space X mission broke the record. **Ans: Transporter-1**

4. Instead of discarding the PSLV's fourth stage (PS4) as debris, ISRO often repurposes it as a stabilised orbital platform called POEM. Expand POEM. **Ans: PSLV Orbital Experiment Module**

5. The PSLV rocket's first stage solid motor is encased in _____ steel. **Ans: Maraging**

Visual: Between the SLV and the PSLV programmes, ISRO ran this programme for seven years. **Ans: Augmented Satellite Launch Vehicle**

Early Birds: Tito Shiladitya Haridas Pal | Sukdev Shet | Gaurav Deshmukh | K.N. Viswanathan



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

His book club event was shambolic

I do not like going to my new school. The class leader is very arrogant and officious

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of 'shambolic'?

How is the word pronounced?

Cricket fans who watched the recent Ashes series that took place in Australia will be familiar with this word.

Commentators from England used it quite frequently to describe the English team's disastrous performance. Former England captain, Michael Vaughan, referred to his country's preparation for the ill-fated series as 'shambolic'. The word is mostly limited to informal contexts in British English. When you refer to a situation as being 'shambolic', what you are suggesting is that it is disorganised and chaotic. It is difficult to make sense of the situation. The word, which is a combination of 'shambles' and the suffix 'bolic', can be used with people as well.

Don't promote her. She's too shambolic to be put in charge of any department.

As for the pronunciation, the word consists of three syllables; the first rhymes with 'Pam', 'dam' and 'Sam'. The vowel in the second syllable sounds like the 'o' in 'hot', 'not' and 'got', while the final syllable is pronounced like the word 'lick'. The word is pronounced 'sham-BO-lick' with the stress on the second syllable.

What is the meaning of "They made a bomb when they sold the house"?

(John Abraham, Bengaluru)

The word 'bomb' is frequently used in informal contexts to refer to money. For example, if you were to say, 'Ajay's new car cost him a bomb', what you are suggesting is that the vehicle was rather expensive – he spent a lot of money on it. Here are a few more examples.

Sheba spent a bomb on her wedding.

On the other hand, when someone 'makes a bomb' on something, they make a lot of money.

Sashi made a bomb in the stock market.

How is the word 'officious' pronounced? (K. Jambunathan)

The word consists of three syllables; the 'o' in the first, and the 'iou' in the third sound like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'flic' in the second is pronounced like the word 'fish'. The word is pronounced 'e-FISH-es' with the stress on the second syllable. It comes from the Latin 'officiosus' meaning 'full of courtesy, dutiful'. When the word was borrowed into English, it had a positive meaning; it referred to someone who helped people. But over a period of time, the word underwent a radical change in meaning; today, it is mostly used to indicate disapproval. When you refer to an individual as being 'officious', what you are suggesting is that he is meddlesome, someone who keeps annoying people by telling them what they should and should not do – especially about trivial matters.

upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Puerile:

of or characteristic of a child; displaying or suggesting a lack of maturity

Synonyms: adolescent, juvenile

Usage: Nobody liked his puerile jokes.

Pronunciation:

newsth.live/puerilepron

International Phonetic Alphabet: /'pjʊərɪl/ , /pjʊərɪəl/

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

WEB EXCLUSIVE

'Why comparing calls for "Free Palestine" with "Free Iran" is illogical.'
— By Sabine Ameer

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8

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

The Editorial Page

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2026

WORDLY WISE

Force is all-conquering, but its victories are short-lived.
— Abraham Lincoln

The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAM NATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Trump's Greenland grab needs a Europe pushback

DENMARK LOST 43 soldiers in NATO's war in Afghanistan — more per capita than any other ally. That sacrifice, of course, counts for little with US President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly threatened to seize Greenland, a semi-autonomous Danish territory, "one way or the other". What once sounded like bluster is hardening into policy: a deadlocked meeting involving leaders from Greenland and Denmark and US Vice President J D Vance followed by the announcement of fresh US tariffs on eight European nations unless they back Washington's bid to grab Greenland. That the sovereignty of a nation is little more than a bargaining chip is deeply troubling, though such niceties have long gone out of Trump's gilded window.

European troops from Germany, France, Norway and Sweden have since arrived in Greenland to bolster security, while US and Danish officials propose a "working group" on defence concerns. Article 5 of NATO commits members to collective defence: An attack on one is an attack on all. If Washington presses its threat, would Copenhagen invoke Article 5 against the US? Asked whether he would choose Greenland or NATO, Trump told *The New York Times*, "I don't want to say that to you, but it may be a choice." Having already riven the alliance over Russia, Trump is weaponising tariffs and ambiguity to squeeze Denmark into concessions on Greenland. What exactly Washington wants from Copenhagen — more leverage or outright surrender — remains opaque but the trajectory is clear. Even as Trump has forced trade deals from many, his latest power play drives the US-Europe relationship into another downward spiral. Strong-arm tactics win short-term concessions but they also accumulate resistance. A superpower that treats partners with the contempt that Trump has may find itself pushing against a harder wall.

For New Delhi, this frames a fresh challenge. India and Europe are moving closer to signing their trade agreement any day now. US Ambassador Sergio Gor has hit the ground running making all the right noises. A sharp escalation in transatlantic tension will cast a shadow over both these negotiating tables. India should hold firm, secure its interests first by closing the EU deal and a balanced agreement with the US. Lectures about the "rules-based order" or this-is-not-the-era-of-war wisdom may not move Trump but consistency and standing firm will. In a world order that changes by the day, India's strategic compass must be ever finely tuned. Europe will decide how to push back against Trump's brinkmanship. India, meanwhile, should keep its head down and its options open even as it lets it be known, diplomatically but unequivocally, that tariffs are not the same thing as sovereign territory.

AAP government must not hound messenger

HERE ARE times when history repeats itself not as tragedy or farce, but as a troubling combination of both. Since last week, the political conversation in Punjab has been dominated by reports of attacks on businesses associated with the proprietors of the Punjab Kesari group, including notices for excise violations at a Jalandhar hotel, withholding of government advertisements, and police deployment at and around the presses where the newspaper is printed and dispatched from. The owners of the media group have written to Governor Gulab Chand Kataria, alleging that the Punjab's government's actions carry an "extraneous motive to intimidate the press". The state's Aam Aadmi Party government maintains that the freedom of press doesn't extend to excise violations, and its actions against Punjab Kesari followed due process. Ironically, a similar back-and-forth defined the final days of AAP rule in Delhi. When its top leadership was jailed for excise violations and corruption, the party, justifiably, claimed that it was being targeted.

Punjab Kesari's proprietors allege that the AAP government's battle with the group began after the newspaper carried a report on the Opposition's accusations about the party's national convenor, Arvind Kejriwal, on October 31 last year. Unfortunately, this is not the only time the Bhagwant Mann government has faced allegations of intimidating voices it sees as critical of it. Last month, the Ludhiana police filed an FIR against 10 people, including RTI activist Mayank Goyal, after the latter raised questions about who was using the CM's chopper when Mann was on a foreign trip. In November, police checks on newspaper delivery vans for "drugs and weapons" disrupted newspaper supplies across the state. No contraband was found. There is no question that media houses and business outfits of their owners are subject to the law. Yet, the selective application of rules and the timing of the raids lend credence to the accusations of a witch hunt.

Unlike in Delhi, the AAP government in Punjab is not curtailed by Raj Bhavan's veto. What is the party's "Punjab model"? Is it to mimic the overreach it regularly accuses the BJP of? With just over a year to go in its term, the AAP would do well to showcase a governance model for the state, and beyond. It needs to come up with a politics that is not defined by attacking the messenger.

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



To complete reform drive, rationalise food and fertiliser subsidies



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

BY ASHOK GULATI

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi has said that his government is in "Reform Express" mode. It has carried out reforms in income tax, GST, and the job guarantee scheme, and concluded free trade agreements (FTAs). These are commendable moves. US President Donald Trump's tariff shock has stirred the Modi government into implementing long-overdue reform. The results have been better than expected. The first advance estimates project the Indian economy to grow at 7.4 per cent in 2025-26 (FY26). Consumer inflation is also down to 1.3 per cent in December 2025. But will this performance repeat in FY27, as the trade deal with the USA remains uncertain? The answer is not clear, but a lot will depend on how many more reforms the Modi government can undertake. Here are a few areas in the agri-food space that have been crying out for intervention for a long time.

Let us begin by noting that the agri-GDP growth is likely to be only 3.1 per cent in FY26, a substantial drop from 4.6 per cent in the previous year, FY25. The lesser-known fact is that the primary reason for the low consumer price inflation is the

virtual collapse in some food prices. Onion prices are down by 48 per cent in December compared to last year's level, potato prices are down by 35 per cent, and all major pulses are selling at 10 to 30 per cent below their MSPs. Where is the emergency support for farmers from the government? In such a depressed price scenario, it is not feasible for the government to achieve its objective of *atmanirbarta* (self-sufficiency) in pulses, even with its Mission on Pulses and Oilseeds. We need crop-neutral incentive structures — they are currently heavily skewed in favour of water and fertiliser-intensive crops like rice, sugarcane, and wheat. This is a fallout of the massive subsidies doled out by states and the Centre — in particular, free or highly subsidised power and fertilisers, especially urea. This gets compounded by the open-ended procurement of these crops, in some states at least.

If the Modi government is really in "Reform Express" mode, it needs to focus urgently on at least two items in the Union budget. The food subsidy is likely to touch Rs 2.25 trillion and the fertiliser subsidy may go up to Rs 2 trillion, in a total budget of around Rs 51 trillion. Together, these are about 8 to 8.5 per cent of the budget. Both are operating at a sub-optimal level. Let me explain.

The food subsidy is the difference between the economic cost of procuring, stocking and distributing rice and wheat by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the amount it generates from the beneficiaries of the public dis-

tribution system (PDS). In the case of rice, the economic cost hovers around Rs 42/kg, and for wheat, it's around Rs 30/kg to FCI. It gives 5 kg of free rice or wheat to about 813 million people under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana. Roughly 56 per cent of the country's population of around 1.5 billion is covered. The introduction of point of sale (POS) machines in more than 5 lakh fair price shops (FPS) was a significant reform of the Modi government. It helped to reduce massive leakages in PDS. But how rational is giving free food to 56 per cent of the population, when, according to the World Bank's extreme poverty criteria — \$3 per capita/day in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms at 2021 prices — India's poverty came down to just 5.3 per cent of the population in 2022? Even at a higher poverty line of \$4.2 per capita/day, poverty in India was about 24 per cent. One can argue that the extremely poor need to be given free food (*antyodaya*). Viewed from this perspective, only about 5 per cent of the country's population needs free food, while others should pay at least half of the MSP. If not, then this policy is nothing but the biggest political *revali* (dole) the government is giving

consumers for votes. It gives free rice even to rice growers. This is irrational as these rice growers first give all their paddy to the government and get back free rice with enhanced economic cost and subsidy.

How can one reform this system? Scale down the coverage gradually from the current level of about 56 per cent of the population to 40 per cent, then to 25

per cent, and finally to about 15 per cent. If it does not have the political courage to do so, the government should at least embark on direct cash transfers to rice and wheat producers. Further, convert at least 20 per cent of FPS into nutrition hubs, which have pulses, oilseeds, milk, eggs, fruits and vegetables, which are more nutritious than just wheat and rice. Beneficiaries can be given coupons to buy more diversified food.

Now, let us turn to the fertiliser subsidy. It is the second largest subsidy (about Rs 2 trillion) in the Union budget, and bigger than the entire budget of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare (MoAFW) (Rs 1.37 trillion). The excessive subsidy for urea amounts to subsidising toxins. Urea is not being used in a balanced manner — the excessive use of phosphatic (P) and potassic (K) fertilisers is contaminating groundwater and increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. A sizeable part (20 to 25 per cent) also leaks away. The solution is direct cash transfers to farmers and decontrolling fertiliser pricing. If the government can't do that immediately, it can at least bring urea under the nutrient-based subsidy (NBS) and give the same subsidy as on DAP and MOP. Also, shift the fertiliser subsidy from the Department of Fertilisers to MoAFW, which deals with farmers directly.

If both food and fertiliser subsidies can be merged with the augmented PM Kisan scheme, the Modi government is really in "Reform Express" mode.

Gulati is distinguished professor at ICRER. Views are personal

Between belonging and refusal, Jammu lives in me



RASHID ALI

THE CITY & I

IT IS rare to claim a city that is not native to you, and rarer still to feel at home in a city that does not align with your vision of the world. Cities, like people, sometimes demand ideological compatibility. Jammu is such a city for me. I inhabit it without fully possessing it; the city is contumacious enough not to develop affinity with me.

Jammu carries a template that lacks perspicacity. My first encounter with Jammu was in 2005, when I came here to shoot a documentary film. Even then, the city barely registered as a site of aspiration. It still does not. I left without feeling anything special about it. When I returned years later, in 2014, Jammu began unfolding itself. I noticed two distinct strands shaping Jammu's identity: One rummaged in the Dogri language, and the other was an eternal search for a Dogra pride. Jammu chose pride over language.

It is rare for a culture to retain a martial vocabulary while allowing its linguistic inheritance to recede. In that choice, I began to understand Jammu — its assertion as well as its retreat. Jammu's politics remains deeply reactive to what unfolds in the Kashmir Valley. The city seems to define itself not through its own internal coherences or incoherences but in constant relation to Kashmir. This dependence became most visible during the abrogation of Article 370. Jammu overwhelmingly supported the move, interpreting it as long-delayed justice, national integration, and political vindication. At the same time, the city appeared unsettled by the consequences of that decision. There was celebration, but there was unease as well. Jammu exists in a perpetual phase of liminality.

My relationship with Jammu now spans nearly 20 years. I remember comparing it to my native Patna. At the time I made it, the comparison felt obvious and justified. In retrospect, it feels immature — perhaps even arrogant. Or perhaps I simply lacked the patience to understand a city shaped by prolonged uncertainty and the shadow of conflict. Cities like Jammu do not reveal themselves easily. They demand endurance rather than instant admiration.

Ali teaches Media Studies at the Central University of Jammu

The city grounded me intellectually. It forced me to confront a conflict-ridden region without the comfort of easy binaries. Jammu compelled me to read, listen, and think across positions that refused moral simplicity

With the savagery of the current repression, the middle class and those

The danger of impunity for the Iranian regime



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

ONE of the dark pages of European diplomacy in the 20th century is Neville Chamberlain's "appeasement" of Nazi Germany, culminating in the 1938 Munich Agreement, in which he ceded Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland to Adolf Hitler, hoping to prevent war. Nearly 90 years later, US President Donald Trump is repeating the same strategic error by getting into an "if and then" game with the Iranian government. Trump threatened severe consequences should the Iranian regime execute the protesters. But as of January 15, he had softened his rhetoric, claiming to have received assurances that the killing had stopped.

The American president has repeatedly said that help is on its way to Iran. But the bitter fact is that he and his administration are already a week too late. The protests may have stopped for now but international human rights groups have estimated the death toll to be as high as 12,000. While the Iranian government shut down the internet, the shock and horror of the killing of thousands spread through cities and neighbourhoods.

Alongside the killings, thousands were arrested and charged with waging war against God. Similar to the 2022 protests during which hundreds of teenagers were killed, the Iranian authorities have decided to preserve their power at all costs. The regime has relied on lethal force, calling upon the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij militia. It has also been accused of using Iraqi and other foreign militias to suppress the protests because domestic forces may show signs of hesitation to kill fellow Iranians. There have been images on state TV of funeral processions of members of the Iranian security apparatus killed during the unrest. The Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Abdolrahim Mousavi, has blamed foreign powers for the unrest and destruction.

Unlike previous demonstrations in 2009 and 2022, the protests in December and January had the support of the White House and the European Parliament. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz condemned the violent repression, calling the state's response "disproportionate" and "brutal". Yet, the Iranian ambassador in Berlin was not summoned to convey Germany's displeasure. Also, a joint statement issued by Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer did not announce any concrete measures against the regime.

If Trump does not intervene despite his statements, Iranians will interpret this as a huge abandonment and the government will see it as a green light for another wave of massacres. Let us not forget that the killings (mostly of young people) will certainly have an impact on the socio-political imagination of the Iranian nation. With the savagery of the current repression, the middle class and those living in poverty are beginning to believe that only an armed revolt or external intervention can bring down the Islamic Republic. Such a shift towards violence by a peaceful generation would be regrettable, as it would run counter to the idea of Persia as a civilisation of beauty and intercultural and inter-ethnic tolerance.

The writer is director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Nonviolence and Peace Studies, OP Jindal Global University

40 YEARS AGO

January 19, 1986



Wrangling over Chandigarh

Some of the outer areas of Chandigarh city may not go to Punjab on January 26, when the city is proposed to be transferred to that state, according to discussions between Union Home Ministry and Punjab government officials. With the completion of the language survey in all 54 villages of Fazilka and Muktsar tehsils, pending the submission of the Mathew Commission report, steps are being taken to finalise arrangements for the transfer.

Language census completed

The language survey undertaken in all 54 villages, including Kandukhera, was

completed by enumerators under the joint protection of Assam Rifles and Punjab Police personnel. Rechecking of the survey was also completed in the adjoining village of Bazidpur, where a clash between two groups was prevented by state government officials.

Indo-Pak talks

India and Pakistan exchanged draft agreements pledging not to attack each other's nuclear installations as wide-ranging talks between the two sides were marked by New Delhi's serious concern at Pakistan's attitude towards the terrorist activities in Punjab. The visiting Indian foreign secretary, Romesh Bhandari, raised the issue of terror-

ist activities during his meeting with his Pakistani counterpart.

USSR on disarmament

The Soviet Union said it would put into action the entire system of existing negotiations at Geneva, Vienna and Stockholm to move toward the liquidation of all nuclear arms on Earth within 15 years but acknowledged that accords with the Americans would be neither quick nor easy. Leonid Zamyatin, spokesman for the Communist Party, in particular noted that the US Defense Secretary has said that there would be no change in the "Star Wars" programme and that a nuclear weapons test moratorium is unacceptable.



• **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
If there is to be lasting peace in Gaza and the rest of the occupied territories, then the question of Palestinian liberation must be addressed in unambiguous terms. — *Dawn, Pakistan*

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2026

Patent rights and public health: What are Bharat's options?

**SIDEBAR**

BY J SAI DEEPAK

IN MY debut article titled 'Enforcing the Patent Bargain' (IE, January 30, 2023) under this column, I shared my views on striking a balance between enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPRs) and public health obligations in the context of Bharat. The broad undertone of the article was that while Bharat had obligations under TRIPS to enforce IPRs, it equally had the right under TRIPS to protect its national interest in the context of public health, among other things. Simply put, protection of public health concerns through TRIPS-compliant statutory mechanisms to prevent grant or enforcement of "evergreening patents" would not qualify as "protectionism". As a sequitur, I had also taken the position that incentivising unlawful and inequitable conduct of evergreening patentees (especially in the pharmaceutical and agricultural sectors) would come at the expense of statutory rights and legitimate interests of other stakeholders such as the state, society and generic manufacturers. This would lead to sub-optimal and anti-competitive market outcomes.

The purpose of the argument was not to advocate for disincentivising genuine innovation and the investment made towards it. Rather, the point being made was to prevent pharmaceutical innovators from having a second bite at a patent monopoly over substantially the same drug by repackaging it in a manner that does not enhance its therapeutic efficacy. Simply put, the patent regime of the country prevents the grant of a second patent on old wine in a new bottle in relation to any area of technology. With hubris-driven tariff sabre-rattling from certain quarters, this discussion assumes greater significance now since Bharat has not pressed into service all the legal and policy levers available to it to advance its public health goals as well as to deter abusive evergreening behaviour.

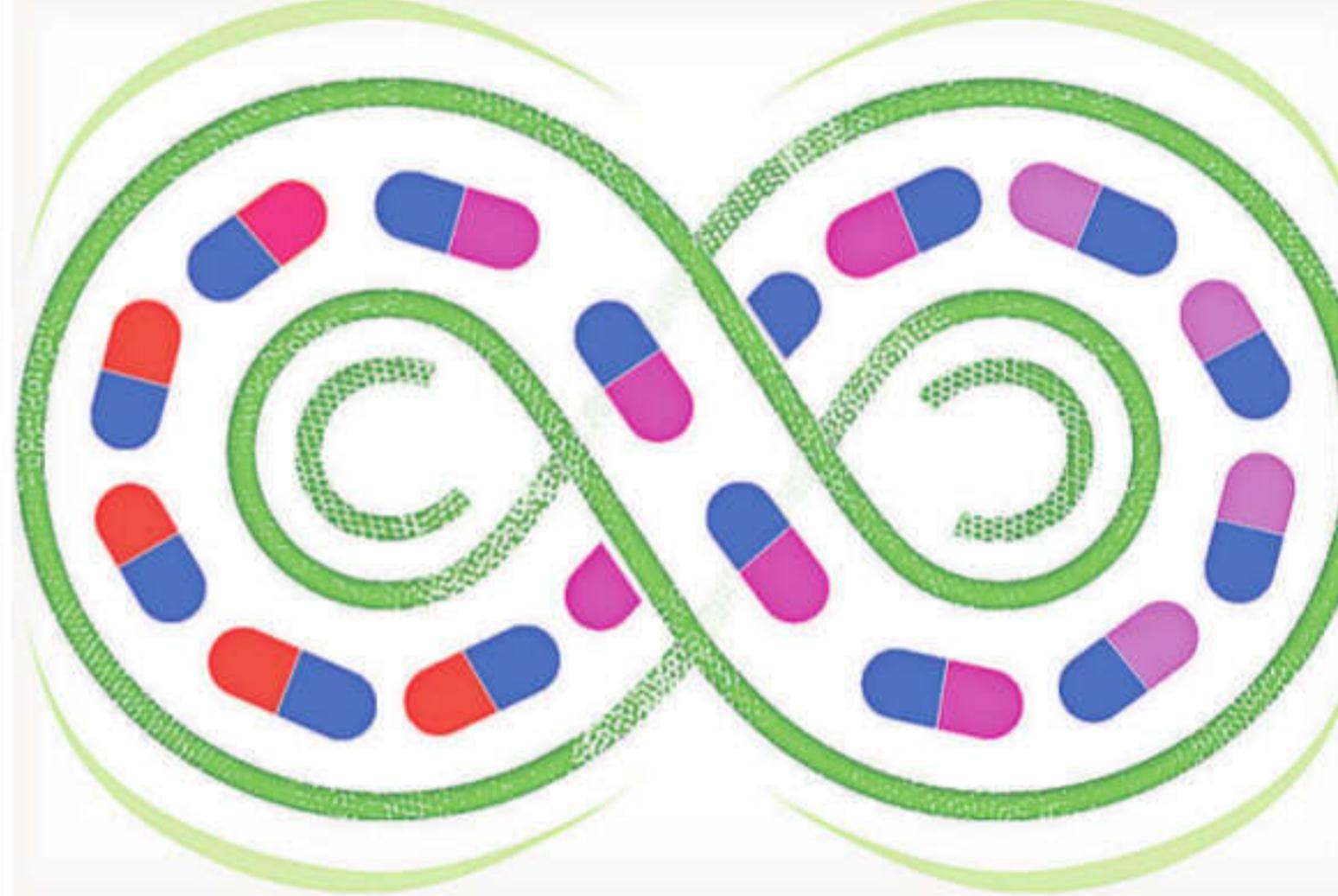


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Given that the conduct of so-called pharmaceutical innovators from the Global North has been called into question in their own countries, Bharat would be well within her rights under TRIPS to take a closer look at the conduct of the very same players within its territory and explore options under its patent framework.

Under Section 47(4) of the Patents Act, the government (central and state) does not need the consent of a patentee to import a patented drug from any jurisdiction for its own use or for distribution in any dispensary, hospital or other medical institution maintained by or on behalf of the government. It can, through gazette notification, extend the same facility to a non-governmental institution if the latter has a record of public service in the realm of healthcare. This wiggle room available under the Patents Act must be explored to ensure adequate availability of patented oncology drugs and the like, especially in rural areas where there is an acute paucity of quality tertiary private healthcare. The prevalence of life-threatening conditions is no longer an urban phenomenon, nor is their affec-

tion limited to the affluent or influential.

Next, under Section 66 of the Patents Act, the central government has powers of fairly wide amplitude to revoke a patent in public interest, after hearing the patentee, if the government is of the opinion that the patent or the mode in which it is exercised by the patentee is mischievous to the state or generally prejudicial to the public. To give effect to this power, the Centre may require the Patent Office to compile a list of patents that affect critical areas such as public health and agriculture, and examine such patents either for evergreening, or the manner of their enforcement or commercialisation to check if the patentee's conduct has been prejudicial to the consuming public. Such an exercise could obviate the

need for protracted conventional adversarial proceedings by private parties for revocation of evergreening/abusive patents, or patents owned by abusive patentees in the pharmaceutical space.

Given that it has been the pharmacy of the Global South, especially Africa, under Section 92A of the Patents Act, Bharat could cater to the public health needs of African nations whose manufac-

turing capabilities in the pharmaceutical sector are either inadequate or non-existent. Simply put, it is possible for an Indian generic drug manufacturer to be granted a compulsory licence by the Indian Patent Office to manufacture the patented drug in Bharat for export to an African nation. Of course, the patentee may be compensated on reasonable terms for the issuance of the compulsory licence.

The Patents Act also has a provision for the application of the power of eminent domain. Under Section 102, it is possible for the central government, through a gazette notification, to acquire for public purposes a patent application or a patent over an invention. The compensation for such acquisition could be arrived at through mutual agreement between the government and the patent applicant/patentee, or a high court can determine such compensation in the event the parties fail to agree on the terms of the compensation.

In addition to such options under the Patents Act, it is also possible for abusive patentees to be hauled up for abuse of dominant position under the Competition Act 2002. With such a wide array of TRIPS-compliant powers which are statutorily available to cater to Bharat's public health needs, given the number of instances of patent abuse through evergreening by "innovators" from the Global North that have come to light in the pharmaceutical space through a spate of judgments, it is time for the central and state governments to draw up detailed patent policies as part of their public health frameworks. While one understands that the issue is not purely legal and there are considerations of optics and pragmatism from the point of view of investment and trade, a calibrated policy framework must be put in place to respond to abusive behaviour, and invoked in public interest against habitual offenders.

In the next article, I will discuss the other side of the equation — creating an ecosystem for innovation.

The writer is a senior advocate practising before the High Court of Delhi and the Supreme Court of India. He is the author of India that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution, and India, Bharat and Pakistan: The Constitutional Journey of a Sandwiched Civilisation

What we don't talk about when we talk about women



PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

IN HER 1993 poet collection, *Book of Light*, Lucille Clifton wrote, "won't you celebrate with me/ what i have shaped into/ a kind of life? i had no model/ ...both nonwhite and woman/ what did I see to be except myself? i made it up/ here on this bridge between/ starshine and clay, /my one hand holding tight/ my other hand..."

It is unknown if Bilkis Manzoor has had the opportunity to read the American poet, even if her journey echoes a similar arc of endurance. The act of self-creation Clifton wrote of is not romantic improvisation but slow, sustained labour. It took Manzoor two arduous attempts at cracking NEET to bridge the distance between Budgam in Kashmir and the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence (SMVDIME) in Jammu's Katra. Manzoor would have been the first doctor in her family but like her batchmates, young men and women who had been admitted in September last year for the MBBS course, her dream stands deferred. Last week, the National Medical Commission withdrew the Letter of Permission to SMVDIME to run the course for the 2025-26 academic session citing grave infrastructural deficits.

SMVDIME had been at the centre of protests because of its Muslim-majority student status since the Pahalgam attack last year. Now, with the closure, its 50 students are to be accommodated in supernumerary seats in other government institutions within the Union Territory. The disruption already places their fragile ambitions at a disadvantage, but its costs are unevenly borne. Young women such as Manzoor, for whom it was their first real encounter with independence, often end up paying more: When intellectual aspirations are dismissed or disrupted, what remains is a narrower imagination of women's presence in public life, one that reduces them to risks rather than possibilities, that makes their bodies the site of collective anxiety.

Horrible instances of sexual assault — the December 2012 New Delhi gang rape, the 2024 RG Kar Medical College rape and murder, to name only a few — have taught India how to respond to that anxiety. Sexual violence provokes outrage, and rightly so; it is a violation that shatters lives, that abases and dehumanises. But when women are edged out of public life — through policy whims, institutional collapse, or politics — the response is often indifference. Violence by paperwork leaves no bruises, only erasures.

Consider Karnataka's hijab ban controversy in 2022, when religion became the central focus, and education the collateral. Scant attention was paid to what happens when girls stop attending school, when aspirations dissolve into domestic inevitability. This is a blind spot in India's gender politics. We deify women, invoke *nari shakti*, woo them as vote banks, but neglect their agency. We grieve after the fact but shrug at the conditions that make women vulnerable to begin with. Protection is prioritised over participation — despite more women graduating from medical courses, for instance, studies show there hasn't been a proportional increase in the number of practising women doctors. But women's agency isn't a neat binary. If anything, it is a tangled web. A woman barred from a classroom today is a woman impeded from independence tomorrow. In India, women occupy a sliver of political office, an even thinner slice of corporate power; female labour force participation remains among the lowest in the world. When women are absent from decision-making tables, policies are made without them — and often against them. Think of the 2023 Wrestling Federation of India scandal, where women athletes toppled a predatory chief after months of agonising protest, only for his proxy to return to power.

What if public conscience extended beyond terrible acts of bodily violation? If it recognised that shutting down a medical college in a conflict-scarred region is not neutral governance but a political act with a gendered fallout? That fewer women doctors means poorer healthcare access, fewer women with incomes means fewer exits from abuse? Public spaces are not gender-agnostic. When women enter institutions in large numbers — hospitals, courts, universities, legislatures — they change what is possible.

The story of SMVDIME's students is disturbing on many registers, but the fate of its women students is particularly unsettling because it is this narrowing of possibility that shapes their lives most decisively. A society that allows educational pathways to collapse without protest should not be surprised when inequalities harden elsewhere.

The writer is senior associate editor, The Indian Express paromita.chakrabarti@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**Fixing Mumbai**

AFTER ITS victory in the BMC elections, the overall objective of the BJP-led alliance should be to raise citizens' quality of life to a level befitting the city's richest civic body ('Mumbai's civic polls are done. Now, fix its problems', IE, January 17). This would require it to spend wisely on infrastructure to prevent suffering during the monsoon, ensure the civic body carries out its duties to make people's day-to-day life hassle-free, and attend to environmental planning. *Y G Chouksey, Pune*

Tariff blackmail

THE US can already set up defence bases in Greenland as per the 1951 Defence of Greenland Agreement. The mineral wealth of the region is the right of the Greenlandic people. In light of these facts, the US move to pressure nations using tariffs till a purchase deal is reached is blackmail ('Trump to hit Europe with 10% tariffs until he gets deal to buy Greenland', IE, January 18). All nations need to stand together against the US's colonial tendencies and criticise it in the strongest terms. *Anany Mishra, Bhilai*



AMIT KUMAR AND MANOJ KEWALRAMANI

Trump was wrong. Tariffs haven't hurt China

FOR THE second year in a row, China has posted a record annual trade surplus, hitting the \$1-trillion mark for the first time. According to the latest data, China's trade surplus in 2025 reached \$1.19 trillion, eclipsing the previous year's \$980 billion. That this surplus was recorded despite mounting scrutiny and pushback with regard to China's industrial overcapacity is impressive. However, it isn't surprising, for at least four reasons.

To begin with, despite the trend towards protectionism, along with increasing securitisation and weaponisation of trade, global trade remained resilient. According to UN Trade and Development's Global Trade Update in December 2025, global trade was projected to exceed \$35 trillion for the first time, an annual increase of 7 per cent. The demand stickiness was aided by an increase in AI-related goods trade and front-loading ahead of tariff hikes to accelerate the overall trade growth in 2025. Given that China is at the heart of the global supply chains, the surge in its total exports is not unexpected. China's exports to the US suffered as tariffs kicked in. But its losses were compensated by an increase in exports to ASEAN (13.4 per cent), the EU (8.4 per cent),

The tariff war unleashed by Donald Trump targeting America's allies, partners, and rivals jeopardised whatever little consensus that was beginning to take shape to counter China's industrial overcapacity

Finally, China's burgeoning trade surplus is a product of its domestic economic policies. For instance, while it is true that the RMB (renminbi) strengthened 4.4 per cent against the dollar in 2025, analysts estimate that the Chinese cur-

rency remains undervalued by as much as 25 per cent. What the 2025 data vis-à-vis the dollar masks is that the RMB depreciated in real terms against the major trading currencies, evident in its weakening of the Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER). Apart from the RMB's value, a domestic industrial policy, fuelled by massive state subsidies, aided China's exports in 2025. The country's solar, EV, and battery sectors continued to thrive on state support. Deflationary pressures in general, and the race-to-the-bottom price wars among companies, further drove down the prices of Chinese goods in the external market, thereby increasing overall exports even as industrial profits in China declined.

In 2025, China's consumption witnessed modest expansion, trailing overall economic expansion. This means not only that China's imports are not increasing in tandem with its GDP, but also that its industrial output is being dumped in external markets. For instance, while China's exports to major trading partners expanded, its imports declined sharply from the EU (0.4 per cent), ASEAN (1.6 per cent), Australia (7.5 per cent), the UK (4.7 per cent), and Canada (10.4 per cent).

Kumar is a research analyst with Takshashila's Indo-Pacific Studies Programme. Kewalramani is fellow, China Studies and chairs the Indo-Pacific Studies Programme at Takshashila



SNEHA PRIYA YANAPPA

THE LONG-AWAITED case alleging violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948 (Genocide Convention) by the Myanmar military in its treatment of the Rohingya has reached the International Court of Justice. On January 12, the ICJ began a series of hearings led by Gambia on the "clearance operations" by Myanmar's armed forces that resulted in the mass forced displacement of more than 700,000 Rohingya people into Bangladesh, where they continue to live in sprawling, overcrowded refugee camps.

Reports suggest that the crimes committed during these operations included

mass murder, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and systematic destruction by fire of Rohingya villages, often with inhabitants locked inside burning houses. Investigations by international institutions have already characterised these as amounting to "genocidal" acts.

The UN adopted the Genocide Convention after the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II. The Convention importantly imposes positive obligations on states to prevent genocide. It also enables any state party to bring a case against another. This case presents a crucial opportunity for the ICJ to clarify its jurisprudence, established in *Bosnia and Herzegovina v Serbia and Montenegro* (2007), on genocidal intent. The debate has largely been about the inference of such intent and whether the "only reasonable inference" standard test can be employed to

gauge it. This is because proving specific intent has been challenging, a reason why even the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and Yugoslavia have inferred its existence from circumstantial evidence.

In *Bosnia*, the ICJ held that large-scale forced displacement, when accompanied by killings, destruction of homes, and systematic targeting of a protected group, could constitute evidence relevant to establishing ge-

nocidal intent, even though displacement alone does not amount to genocide. It will be interesting to see if the court will follow *Bosnia*'s reasoning and recognise that intent can be established through cumulative evidence rather than explicit instructions to kill.

In *Croatia v Serbia* (2015), the ICJ held that although serious crimes were committed during the Yugoslav wars, Croatia had failed to prove the specific intent required for genocide, reaffirming that genocide has a very high evidentiary threshold. In this backdrop, the larger question will be whether genocidal intent against the Rohingya can be legally inferred, with consequences for how the claims against Myanmar are assessed. This assumes heightened importance in light of parallel and emerging genocide claims, notably South Africa's application against Israel, where similar

questions of intent, proportionality, and state responsibility are under judicial scrutiny.

At a time when the world is witnessing an increase in armed conflicts, this case could set an accountability standard where direct orders are rarely documented but patterns of violence are compelling. A finding by the ICJ that Myanmar breached the Genocide Convention would strengthen the legal basis for national courts to recognise the Rohingya as victims of genocide, influencing decisions on asylum, non-refoulement and complementary protection, and reinforce states' obligations to afford them enhanced protection. For the Rohingya, this is a battle to be recognised in a world where they are trapped in a vicious cycle of atrocities and impunity.

The writer is senior resident fellow at Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

A question of justice, for and beyond the Rohingya

Global governance

RECENT ACTIONS by the US indicate a significant pivot towards unilateralism ('Multilateralism à la carte, the Washington way', IE, January 17). Multilateralism plays a crucial role in helping nations confront complex global challenges, but also in many aspects of our daily lives. Today, however, it is confronted with numerous challenges from unilateral approaches to resource constraints, weakening global governance. Adapting to this changing landscape while upholding the core principles of inclusivity, fairness, and cooperation can foster successful multilateralism. *Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh*

Idea Exchange

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2026

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY RICH LESSER

Rich Lesser, Global Chairman, Boston Consulting Group, is a leading voice on global strategy, leadership and geopolitics. During his tenure as CEO, he created new units for BCG's digital business building, advanced analytics, machine learning and AI capabilities. Currently, Lesser is chief advisor to World Economic Forum's Alliance of CEO Climate Leaders. He was appointed to Senior Advisory Councils on International Trade and Economic Policy by both President Trump and President Biden. He is a sought after voice on India's role in the global economy and its strategic choices in a fractured world order

Sandeep Singh: Many countries are grappling with US President Donald Trump's tariffs. How do you see its impact on Indian businesses?

We are living in a period of extraordinary change. I want to acknowledge what I think we all know — President Trump believes deeply in the power of uncertainty. But, I personally remain an optimist about India-US relations. President Trump prides himself on being a tough negotiator. And frankly, India has also been a tough negotiator on trade topics over decades. That's not just the US thing. So the two countries have a lot to work through. Each country has a lot at stake to find a productive working relationship, perhaps not a true alliance. India values its independence greatly. But there's a lot of strategic value to both parties to having an effective working model. I know I'm saying that at a very low point. And no one knows what the future will bring. I will also say, even if an agreement is reached and it's a good one, one shouldn't assume that means everything will be completely smooth. But that doesn't mean it can't be productive.

Joydeep Ghosh: Does Trump's tariffs throw the world into a different kind of turmoil?

I'd say three things. The first, there's an important case in front of the US Supreme Court right now about the main provision President Trump has used around the emergency. He used different provisions for using different laws. Some of those are quite easy to defend and are not won't be challenged in court. But there's actually a reasonable chance that those tariffs may be overturned. That wouldn't mean all tariffs are overturned. And it doesn't mean he doesn't have other provisions he could use. But none of us know. So that obviously would change the dynamics around negotiations. It would then be a very different starting place. If, on the other hand, the Supreme Court affirms those tariffs and if there was an inability to negotiate between the two countries or between the US and other allies and business partners, then I think it will have meaningful impact on the business with the US.

But I say that with a couple of provisos. First, many of the items that are imported from India or Southeast Asia, China or Latin America are not going to be cost-effectively manufactured in the US. You're not going to make children's school apparel in the US or grow bananas in the US. So, in many cases what will matter is two factors, a big one and a small one.

The big one will be the relative tariffs. Are your tariffs higher than other countries who could manufacture the same items? Because that's the competitor. And the second is that also means that costs for US consumers will go up because the likelihood is that those tariffs would be passed through to the US consumer and that will be a suppressant to demand and that will have some economic ramifications for the US economy. There are some sectors where that need not be true. In textiles, can you see the US as a major producer in a cost-effective way?

And the third point is that there was a risk at the beginning of the year that the US change in tariff policy, akin to what had happened in the 1930s, would lead to overall trade wars around the world; everybody ratcheting up tariffs. Most countries have made a strategic decision that whatever their negotiations are with the US, raising tariffs in response is not necessarily good for their own country's strategy. So, we are less likely to descend into trade wars. Obviously, there's a second big issue, which is the growth of China's exports. But I think we're early on to how that will play through.

Anant Goenka: What is China doing right — one trillion dollar trade surplus? In an era where there are tariffs on them too, what can India learn from that?

In my view, China has put an enormous premium on upskilling and upgrading its industrial capabilities, be it in robotics or in integrated supply chains. If you talk to manufacturers around the world, they will say one of the main assets of China is that you have got a whole integrated supply chain that's very efficient. So, you're not just competing your plant against somebody else's plant, you're competing your supply chain against the supply chain in China. They have made massive investments and have done it in everything, from their education system, the quality of engineers and scientists, and increasingly in R&D spending, which is now de facto about the same level as the US, which was 3.6 percent. The US is at about 2.7 percent but the US is a 30-trillion economy.

The most striking chart I've seen recently was at biomedical R&D and how much of the new molecules for the biopharma industry are being sourced out of China. It has grown dramatically in the last 10 years. And that's very innovation heavy, that's not just manufacturing heavy.

Then, there's an important second thing for many countries around the world, not just India. There's this tendency to do things in a way that protects companies to a high degree or such that you pick your winners, you support them and create a sort of safe space. But if you look at the auto industry in China. They are not just picking



ON CHINA'S INDUSTRIAL RISE

One of China's main assets is the whole integrated supply chain that's very efficient. They have made massive investments in education, quality of engineers and scientists and R&D spending



ON USING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

How is India going to encourage usage because AI comes with risks if it's not deployed in a responsible way. It'll be a gift but at the exact same time, it'll fundamentally change the economics of industries

'It's in India's interest to be an innovator in the green economy space, China is already winning'

Rich Lesser: Global Chairman, Boston Consulting Group, on India's role in the global economy, India-US relations, China's capacities in AI and creating efficient industrial ecosystems.

The session was moderated by Sandeep Singh, Resident Editor-Mumbai, *The Indian Express*



(Left) Rich Lesser, Global Chairman, Boston Consulting Group, with Sandeep Singh, Resident Editor-Mumbai, *The Indian Express*. SANKHADEEP BANERJEE

Anant Goenka: Do you think that China will eventually overtake America as the largest economy in the world?

I'm hesitant to make the prediction. I think China's domestic economy is challenged, China's demographics are challenged, but on the flip side, what China is doing industrially is extraordinary, be it in terms of raw capability or relative net exports, it shows enormous strength. So, China will continue to outgrow the US.

We have this tendency to want to draw straight lines and make projections. Certainly, China is building an incredibly robust economy, a very sharp industrial base and it needs to also think about how to translate that into local consumption demand. It has a lot of work to do there.

Anant Goenka: And in renewables and science?

Well, that's a part of it. With the World Economic Forum, we just published our annual report that basically says if you look at the green economy, it's about five trillion dollars of spend on a 100-trillion dollar global economy.

That's a meaningful chunk. It's five trillion dollars of spend growing at the second fastest rate.

About 78 percent of that spend is in mitigation, electric vehicles, low emissions energy, solar wind, battery. About 22 percent is in adaptation and resilience. And the projection is that by 2030, it'll be more than the seven trillion dollar part of the global economy. China is doing exceptionally well in that part of the economy because they are winning on all three fronts. They have the largest base of manufacturing,

They have the largest base of deployment, 60 per cent higher than the next biggest region of the world. And their innovation engine is now doing extraordinary well. It should be a place where India too has the incentive to go. The wealth of this country's growth is extraordinary and it will need much more energy. There will be much more desire for transport. Electric vehicles are getting closer. You can put in the right infrastructure and charge for energy, particularly because there is so much sunshine here. So, India has every incentive, whether it is to be a world economic powerhouse or to support its own country, to address the impact of climate change. It is in India's interest to be a vibrant, strong producer, competitor and innovator in that space. It's a big part of the economy and China is winning.

Anant Goenka: But we seem to have no interest. There is no political will because the votes come for development, for roads, for airports. It's just not there in the vocabulary.

But energy and transport, I would have thought, would be things that people will look into. I don't want to speak for what India should do. I'm just saying that this is a five trillion dollar part of the global economy.

Anant Goenka: And in renewables and science?

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growing to seven trillion. And China by all data is doing very well. And one would have thought that India could be a part of this.

Joydeep Ghosh: There's been the debate in recent times that AI will replace people? Then there's a school of thought which says that there will be newer skills that people will have to adapt to.

It's not an 'or' question, it's an 'and' (question). AI will both encourage and force people to adopt broader skills and give young people more power to deliver value in their jobs. And AI will be able, particularly Agentic AI, will allow for some roles to be substituted by agents, jobs that were historically done by people. We should never frame it as in, will it allow people to grow in skills and build new capabilities or will it substitute? It's going to do both. To a substantial degree, I suspect.

Sandeep Singh: How do you see India taking advantage of AI?

It's important to think about how it's going to participate, how it's going to encourage responsible usage because AI comes with all sorts of risks if it's not deployed in a responsible way.

ON US-INDIA NEGOTIATIONS

The US and India are in an intense negotiation, both sides have strong interests and both advocate for those interests, it's a tough negotiation. Both have a lot of reasons to want it to conclude in a positive way

This is not a, 'do we use AI or not?' I don't see how not to embrace AI. It will be a gift but at the exact same time it will fundamentally change the economics of many industries. And a lot of those jobs are in the service economy of India, be it coding or customer service.

Sandeep Singh: But can it play the role of a catalyst in the higher growth rate that India is on?

A hundred percent. There is no doubt that AI can be an accelerator to productivity growth. Be it for faster learning, building capabilities that didn't previously exist, or in its education system, AI can be a massive support. But it comes with a challenge that we have to acknowledge, that in many cases it will be taking on work that people could do, and in some cases that may be a good trade-off. For instance, in the US, there's a massive nursing shortage. So if you could add tens of thousands of equivalent low-cost nurses who could be making phone calls to elderly people, keeping in touch with them, checking on medical usage or things that you just can't afford to do with nurses there, what a gift to helping people live longer, healthier lives, and so you would make that trade-off. But, in other sectors, such as coding, the advances being made are absolutely extraordinary in terms of its capabilities. So you are talking about opportunity and challenge at the exact limits. It's going to be very complex, both for business leaders and for governments to navigate through this complexity.

Nesil Staney: Will stablecoins change the way currency is viewed as part of geopolitics or will it purely remain a financial market's issue?

I think it will enable some people to take a financial view. But in some parts of the world, governments that are used to controlling currency very tightly. This legislation is brand new and it is too early to judge how it really plays out. Assuming that the underlying assets are well protected and backed up appropriately, many things that were written into the legislation, only time will tell if they succeed.

Joydeep Ghosh: With the US under the Trump administration showing scepticism toward climate change, how is the rest of the world reacting to it?

I've observed several things from several vantage points, because I am the chief advisor to the World Economic Forum's Alliance of CEO Climate Leaders. Most companies have not stepped back from climate comments. That's less true in the financial space, because your assets and lending are tied to what's happening. But nobody wants to be caught in the politics of this.

The truth is the world is off track by 1.5 degrees. By 2050, we will be close to, if not at two degrees. That has three implications. One, weather patterns will be affected, be it heat, flood, drought or wildfire. Two, there is a premium on adaptation and resilience. Every country will need to think very strategically.

We have done some wonderful work. One of the pieces of work I'm very proud of with BCG has been working with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), which helps different countries across the world to model through the economic impacts of increasing temperatures and understanding where is the highest ROI to invest in resilience. I think those investments in adaptation and resilience will continue to increase.

Thirdly, we can assume in a world where temperatures are rising to some degree and no one has a crystal ball and no model is perfect, but that's the most likely scenario — then the attention this issue gets is unlikely to go away over time.

It's hard to believe this isn't one of the parts of the global economy where you have tailwinds behind you because the impacts will continue. I'm not saying to not invest in tech or advanced biology that also have tailwinds, but this is likely to be one of them.

Shubhangi Khapre: Is there an underlying current of mistrust between the US and India due to assertive leadership, or is it just a static position of the two nations protecting economic interests?

Two things. One is the US and India are in an intense negotiation, and when I've talked to experts on both sides, both have strong interests and both advocate for those interests, it's a tough negotiation. Both sides have a lot of reasons to want it to conclude in a positive way. My personal hope is that they will, but nobody knows.

President Trump's first term, I thought he had the best relationships with Prime Minister Modi and Shinzo Abe (Japan's PM). Both did the best job of being able to assert their own country's interests but also work in a very collaborative way. I know it doesn't feel that way right now but it's my hope that we'll be getting back to a productive relationship.

Kshipra Petkar: Do you think the AI bubble is over-hyped or are we still in the early days?

First of all, I worry about the phrase, AI bubble, because I think it lumps things together that should really be separated.

Our expectation is that independent of whether we have the right amount of data centre capacity, many companies who are learning how to use AI to drive mean equal value — not just about giving people new tools, but actually reshaping workflows and inventing new business models — are going to be at the core of their strategic efforts over the years ahead. And we're early on in that, not late in it, and there's no bubble there.

And that's really important to distinguish because most people are just so focused on the data centres, but most businesses aren't living in building and operating data centres. They're living in the real economy of their logistics chain, their customer relationships, the ways they create and grow new businesses. That's their world. In all of those spaces, AI has a meaningful role now.

Sukpal Sharma: We have seen that India and the global south have complained a lot about inequitable access to climate finance. What can the developed world do to make it more equitable for countries like India?

I'll speak bluntly here. I don't think we're providing the financing that people were hoping for to support the energy transition. And I think based on the last two to four years of conversation that it is unlikely going to change anytime soon. We won't talk about the reasons for it, but I think that's the reality.

The most critical thing, therefore, using Bill Gates expression is, we need to lower the green premium of these technologies so that people do it not because they're receiving financing to do it, but because they're actually cheaper technologies to invest in.

And, there, I can think of some financial innovation where we can provide some risk-tolerant capital, even small slices of risk-tolerant capital, maybe through multilateral development banks or other institutions which may help make it easier to deploy capital.



• BUSINESS

SC's Tiger Global case verdict could reshape future of cross-border deals

Soumyarendra Barik
New Delhi, January 18

THE SUPREME Court has held that prominent venture capital investor Tiger Global's \$1.6-billion stake sale in e-commerce firm Flipkart to Walmart is subject to taxes.

This landmark decision, which was being closely followed by foreign investors, could have far-reaching implications for India's startup ecosystem and shape the future of cross-border deals.

Tiger Global had been locked in a legal tussle with Indian tax authorities over the 2018 stake sale by its Mauritius-based entities to Walmart. Though the investment firm had made the investment through its Mauritius-based entities, but the top court observed that the benefit of the India-Mauritius Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) cannot be given to Tiger Global.

A DTAA is a bilateral treaty to prevent the same income from being taxed in both nations — the country where the income is earned and the country where the company is based out of.

Mauritius has been a preferred jurisdiction for investments in India due to the non-taxability of capital gains from the sale of shares in Indian companies until 2016.

A timeline of the case

After acquiring the stake in Flipkart, the Tiger Global entities — Tiger Global International II Holdings, Tiger Global International III Holdings, and Tiger Global International IV Holdings — made investments in numerous Indian companies.

Subsequently, they applied for a "nil" withholding tax certificate from Indian tax authorities. They said their gains were exempt from India's capital gains tax under the "grandfathering" clause of the DTAA since the shares were purchased before April 1, 2017.

Grandfathering means exempting an activity from a new law or regulation.

Tax officials denied this request. Their reasoning was that the Tiger Global entities "were not independent in their decision-making and that control over the decision-making relating to the transaction was designed for tax avoidance was arbitrary and incapable of being sustained."

The Tiger Global entities petitioned the AAR, which, too, dismissed their claim in 2020. The Delhi High Court struck down the AAR order, holding that the belief that the transaction was designed for tax avoidance was arbitrary and incapable of being sustained.

This decision was challenged before the Supreme Court, which reversed the High Court order.

The implications for Indian startups

Amit Baid, Head to Tax, BTG Advaya, said this was a 180-degree shift in how DTAA benefits have been claimed so far. "The ruling has serious implications for private equity funds, hedge funds and FPIs using Mauritius- and Singapore-based structures, including for pre-2017 investments. While it does not automatically reopen closed cases, it significantly strengthens the tax department's hand in reassessment proceedings where permitted by law," he said.

Amit Maheshwari, Managing Partner at tax and consulting firm AKM Global, said the ruling could have "overriding effect on investments which were grandfathered through India-Mauritius treaty amendment and the same may be questioned on the economic reality".

"This judgment has far-reaching consequences for private equity, venture capital, and offshore investment structures. It signals the end of mechanical treaty benefit claims based solely on TRCs (Tax Residency Certificates) and formal residency..." Maheshwari said.

A Tax Residency Certificate is an official document from a country's tax authority. It proves that an individual or entity is a tax resident there for a specific period. This is crucial for claiming benefits under a DTAA.

Maheshwari explained that in the Tiger Global judgment, the court has categorically held that the mere possession of a TRC does not, by itself, preclude scrutiny by Indian tax authorities where the entity is alleged to be a conduit for tax avoidance.

• GEOPOLITICS

'The way Trump is using Monroe Doctrine is not how it was originally conceived'



EXPERT EXPLAINS

ANNE APPLEBAUM

HISTORIAN AND JOURNALIST

FORM MUCH of the post-Cold War era, the global order rested — sometimes uneasily — on a belief in cooperation, shared norms, and the gradual spread of democracy. That belief is now under acute strain. Against this backdrop, **Aishwarya Khosla** spoke to Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and journalist **Anne Applebaum**, a few days after the US attacked Venezuela.

What does the US intervention in Venezuela suggest about how power is being exercised in the global order?

What you see now is Donald Trump following a pattern that has been established by other dictatorships. When Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022, he did so on

the grounds that Ukraine is Russian territory and he can do whatever he wants there. You now have similar language coming from the President of the US — that he can do what he wants in Venezuela because it's in the Western Hemisphere.

I should say that not everybody in the Trump administration talks like that. There is some legal case for the removal of (Nicolas) Maduro, and there could even have been a moral case. Maduro was a very damaging leader. He was part of the Chavista regime that destroyed the country. It would have been possible to create a regional alliance for change in Venezuela, but that's not how Trump chose to do it. And I think that will have negative repercussions.

With recent US actions, some argue that the Monroe Doctrine has returned. Do you think the consequences will be limited to Venezuela or Latin America?

The Monroe Doctrine, which dates to the first part of the nineteenth century, was a statement that there should be no European imperial power in the Western Hemisphere. It was a statement that the US would work against French, Spanish, and British incursions into the region. It was not a statement of American imperial dominance.



US President Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida on January 16. AP

The phrase has been used and misused over many years, and the way Trump is using it is not how it was originally conceived. It's very hard to say right now what it will mean, because US policy towards Latin America over the last 30 or 40 years

has mostly been an attempt to create good trade relations, sometimes to push back against terrorist movements or drug gangs, but it has recognised the sovereignty of Latin American states. Whether that continues remains to be seen.

One thing I think will happen is that once the US openly defines itself as a regional bully and nothing else, many Latin American countries will begin to organise against the US. You will see other countries begin to change their politics because of that.

It's important to remember that Venezuela was a disaster. Maduro was a bad leader. I have many friends in the Venezuelan opposition and I was very sympathetic to them. They wanted Maduro removed. What disturbs me is the language being used and the way Trump talks about running Venezuela as if he were running it, which obviously he is not.

With the US acting more unilaterally, do you assess China's rise as a global power?

If the US declares the Western Hemisphere to be its exclusive area, then you can ignore other powers doing the same. The Chinese might say they are in charge of Asia, which would not be very popular in

India, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, or anywhere else. I don't think anybody wants to be a Chinese colony.

It sets a bad precedent. What it will mean in practice remains to be seen, and whether the Chinese will act on it is unclear. Right now, almost ironically, China is using the language of international law and stability, claiming that's what it stands for, although China is also a dictatorship that can make very whimsical decisions.

Do you see a growing normalisation of authoritarian practices globally?

Yes. My view is that there are two related factors. Much of it has to do with technology and the way we now communicate with each other. Social media has become our main form of communication, and it promotes the most divisive and angry opinions while suppressing better conversation and more rational views. It boosts conspiracy theories rather than analysis.

It's not a coincidence that you see similar phenomena all over the world. Countries that have very little in common — Poland, the US, India, the Philippines — shouldn't share political pathologies, and yet they do. That's because they are connected through social media.

Another part of the story is the enormous inequality that has opened up. A small number of people have become billionaires thanks to the tech revolution, while many others feel left behind. That creates dissatisfaction, anger, and a sense of injustice. This is true in autocratic states as well as democracies. The destabilisation we see is everywhere. The underlying factors are tied to technological change.

Many say international relations are becoming more transactional. What do you think is driving this?

There has always been some degree of transactionalism. Countries have always competed. That isn't new. What I think we're really seeing, though, isn't transactionalism so much as corruption.

In many countries, across the political spectrum, you see leaders combining political and economic power, using political office to make money for themselves while disregarding the impact on their societies. For many politicians, the point of being in government is personal or familial enrichment. That was always present, but the scale is different. Technology, secrecy, and new financial tools have made it easier to hide wealth.

• AGRICULTURE

India's record rice output comes with challenges



HARIKISHAN SHARMA

EARLIER THIS month, Union Agriculture Minister Shrikrishna Singh Chouhan said India had surpassed China to become the world's largest rice producer in 2024-25.

India produced around 150 million metric tonnes while China produced 145.28 million tonnes in that year. India currently accounts for around 28% of global rice production. A decade ago, however, India's rice production was 104.4 million metric tonnes while China's was 148.5 million metric tonnes — pointing to a steady growth in India's output and a stagnation in China's.

While Chouhan described India's pole position as an "extraordinary achievement", this is not all good news. The advantages offered by paddy have led to its cultivation even in water-scarce areas. Its yield is uneven across different states. And the dominance of paddy raises questions over crop diversification and nutritional security.

Steady rise in production

Between 1969-70 and 2024-25, the area (for all seasons) under paddy cultivation increased by more than 36%, yield tripled and production almost quadrupled. A significant jump in area and production came in just the last five years. In 2019-20, the area under paddy was 43.66 million hectares and rice production was 118.87 million metric tonnes. In 2024-25, these figures increased to 51.42 million hectares and 150 million metric tonnes.

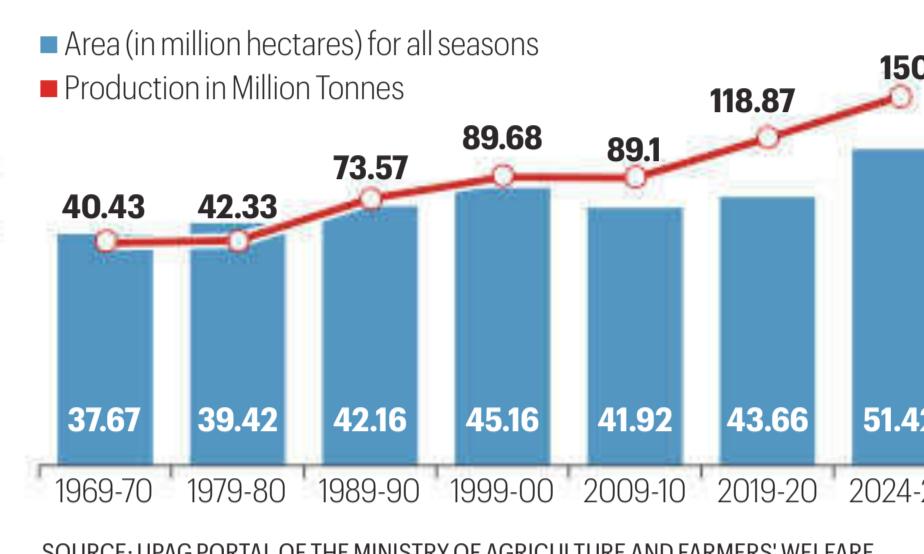
Consequently, India's share in the global output also increased from 21.95% in 2011 to 28% in 2024.

While India and China are nearly neck and neck at the top two places, other countries are far behind. Bangladesh (36.6 million metric tonnes) and Indonesia (34.1 million metric tonnes) are at a distant third and fourth place, respectively.

Rice stocks far exceed needs

With rising production and increasing procurement, the rice stock in the central

• RICE PRODUCTION: THE RISE AND RISE



pool has been consistently rising over the years. As on January 1, 2026, the rice stock (including unmilled paddy in terms of rice) in the central pool stood at 63.06 million metric tonnes. This is much higher than the buffer stock and public distribution requirements under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (Ndfa).

According to the Foodgrains Stocking Norms for Central Pool, which came into effect from January 2015, the rice stock in the central pool should be 7.61 million metric tonnes on the first day of January. In addition to this, about 37.2 million tonnes of rice is required to meet the annual requirement under the Ndfa and other welfare programmes.

In recent years, the government has tried to offload rice in the open market. It has also provided rice for making ethanol. Despite these measures, the stock has remained high.

During the 2023-24 kharif marketing season, the Food Corporation of India procured 525.48 lakh metric tonnes of rice, which accounts for 38.13% of the total rice production in the country, according to Agriculture Ministry officials. Nearly 56.10% of the total rice procurement is from Punjab, Haryana, Chhattisgarh and Odisha, the officials said.

Why paddy is so attractive

Paddy is India's most widely grown crop. It is grown in 614 of India's approximately 800 districts and covered an area of 514.23 lakh hectares as of 2024-25. For con-

Govt push for crop diversity

With more and more farmers preferring paddy, the govt has been focusing on crop diversification

• It is not only looking at farm income and nutritional security, but also conservation of water resources.

Issues with paddy cultivation

The paddy crop is highly water intensive — it takes about 1-3 tonnes of water to produce a single kilogram of rice.

The fact that it is grown so widely means that it has led to a depletion in groundwater levels in several parts of the country. For instance, the excessive withdrawal of groundwater in Punjab has caused several

health and environmental challenges. It has also been grown in states already experiencing a decline in groundwater levels.

The rice yield also diverges widely across states due to factors such as agro-climatic conditions.

In 2024-25, the yield per hectare was 4,428 kg in Punjab, 3,928 kg in Andhra Pradesh, 2,561 kg in Bihar and 2,824 kg in Uttar Pradesh. The national average was 2,929 kg per hectare.

Moving away from paddy

With more and more farmers preferring paddy, the Union government has been focusing on crop diversification. It is not only looking at farm income and nutritional security, but also conservation of water resources.

The Agriculture Ministry recently came up with an idea to incentivise farmers who stop paddy cultivation and start sowing alternative crops. The ministry, late last year, said this incentive could be funded using the savings from the economic cost of rice — which is pegged at Rs 1.36 lakh per hectare.

This figure factors in costs incurred by the FCI on MSP-based procurement, milling, transport and storage.

"Rice stored in the godowns of FCI costs approximately Rs 33 per kg, including procurement costs, milling, transport, storage, etc. Accordingly, assuming the yield of rice at 41.25 quintals per hectare, the government spends about Rs 1.36,000 per hectare. This does not include subsidies given for power, fertilisers and seed," said one Agriculture Ministry official.

So, if one hectare area of rice is left fallow or a crop that is not procured is grown, the government has a "resource saving of Rs 1.36,000 per hectare", said this official. The districts with a lower paddy yield than the national average (2,929 kg per hectare) and lower area coverage can be the focus areas for crop diversification, said officials.

Another official said the idea is to promote oilseeds and crops such as pulses in place of rice so that dependence on imports can be curtailed. India is heavily dependent on imports to meet its domestic edible oil demand. Oilseeds and pulses may be promoted in a phased manner in accordance with their agro-climatic suitability and soil conditions, officials said.

How is the lottery conducted?

The process begins with the Urban Development Department issuing a notification to conduct the lottery. Based on past terms, officials prepare a rotation list of eligible categories. A public draw is then held and a chit drawn.

Only after this step can the BMC convene a special meeting of corporators to elect the mayor from among members, belonging to the category concerned. The mayor is chosen by a simple majority, which in Mumbai means the support of more than 114 corporators in the 227-member House.

What powers does the Mumbai mayor actually have?

As per the Constitution and the Mumbai Municipal Corporation Act, the mayor is the ceremonial head of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, elected for a term of 2.5 years. The role mainly involves presiding over meetings of the general body, maintaining order during debates, and using a casting vote if there is a tie.



The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation is the richest civic body in India. FILE

process neutral. By using a lottery, authorities avoid accusations that political parties or governments are fixing the reservation to suit their interests. Rotation through a random draw also ensures that different social groups get a chance to occupy the mayor's chair over time, rather than one category benefiting repeatedly.

• GEOPOLITICS

'The way Trump is using Monroe Doctrine is not how it was originally conceived'



EXPERT EXPLAINS

ANNE APPLEBAUM

HISTORIAN AND JOURNALIST

the grounds that Ukraine is Russian territory and he can do whatever he wants there. You now have similar language coming from the President of

Go On, Push the Pedal Hard on Car Export

Right time to climb up the EV value chain

India's car exports revved up in a year of trade tension. It now looks set to maintain its tempo. It's time India emerges on the global scene as a serious automobile-exporting economy. The industry, seeded by Japanese and South Korean carmakers, now caters to the third-biggest car market in the world. It's not size alone that differentiates the Indian car market, which has specific conditions that make it a test bed for exports to the developing world. Cars made for India tick the right boxes in Africa, South America and parts of Asia. These are the regions that are driving car sales globally. India is in a sweet spot as a manufacturing base for price-sensitive personal mobility.

In this landscape, the Indian automobile industry is drafting EVs into its product portfolio. This should, with the right gears clicking in place, add more export momentum. Energy transition is occurring at varying speeds in

destination markets for car exports. Acceptability of cars made in India should serve as a springboard for a deeper export push as EVs become mainstream in emerging economies. The baseline scenario would be EV exports maintaining parity with domestic sales. Indian carmakers could push

that up several notches by climbing the EV value chain. The policy environment provides adequate protection for EV makers to acquire critical mass in local sales as well as exports.

Transition to electric mobility incurs substantial costs in charging infrastructure. Indian car buyers, too, are taking a shine to hybrids that get around the hurdle. The jury is still out on whether the future of the automobile is fully electric. The Indian experience will shape policy response among developing economies on how to go about their energy transition. This widens the field for Indian car exports to EVs in mature markets, and some variation on low fuel consumption in others. In any case, India is strategically placed to exploit the manufacturing opportunity as more people around the world acquire the standard of living to be able to afford personal vehicles.

Quickness, It's Still What They'll Shop By

The quick commerce business model survives on 'instant' gratification. So, well-intentioned attempts to slow it down may not work. Disruption brought about in ecommerce by speedy grocery, etc. delivery needs to sustain itself by reaching a bigger basket of produce to the customer's doorstep in around the same time it takes to walk across the neighbourhood store. Since dark stores can't compete with the kirana-keeper in proximity, speed of delivery will remain a key metric for qcomm. The notion of a 10-min delivery may be unrealistic in densely populated, chaotic cities, but some number will be targeted. And that number will tend to push against the frontier of available logistics.

Regulators can raise concern over delivery timelines qcomm companies set internally. These metrics affect working conditions in the gig economy that's driving urban employment. The issue intersects with urban transport networks that are becoming congested as vehicle ownership rises. Since qcomm is pushing up valuation of the entire ecommerce stack, some form of regulatory intervention

is unavoidable. But it must be informed by feedback from municipal authorities that are responsible for creating the infrastructure on which qcomm operates.

Technology will eventually come up with its own set of solutions. Ecommerce has been exploring the idea of automated delivery for a while. Some of these initiatives will become mainstream. Qcomm companies may also need to adapt their business model to the delivery time constraint. Hybrid solutions involving kirana-keepers is a likely fix. Qcomm's phenomenal growth in India affirms the analytical strengths of this form of retailing. With the right smarts, it will come up with the answer to the last-mile problem.



JUST IN JEST

Politicians praising politicians for inculcating sporting culture is funny

Stick to Your Track And Field, Neta-jis

Few spectacles are more hilarious than politicians praising other politicians for inculcating sporting culture. This is most hysterical when after an athlete's or team's sporting achievements, posters display figures from the political world as if they're responsible for all the good work done. Well, cricket bats aren't signed into law. Badminton smashes aren't passed by parliamentary majority. And hosting an international sporting contest isn't really the right platform to showcase a neta's greatness.

In the best sporting cultures, governments and their characters are gloriously invisible. They stay in the shadows like shy mascots, coming out to give out medals, then returning to their own playing fields. Politicians should stick to their natural sports: competitive ribbon-cutting, marathon speech-giving, synchronised handshakes and hugs. Instead, we get surreal displays where you may or may not find any signs of real players, overshadowed as they are by faces that appear on everything that has to do with anything good in the immediate universe. Let's be clear: no child ever picked up a tennis racket because a politician smiled at a podium. They did it because of sporting heroes, mentors, coaches, and sheer joy of play. Politicians should remain silent spectators — unseen, unnoticed, and preferably unheard — while sportspersons run the show.

Completion of India's trade liberalisation agenda should be prioritised through 6 steps of reforms

2026-27 Dil Maange More



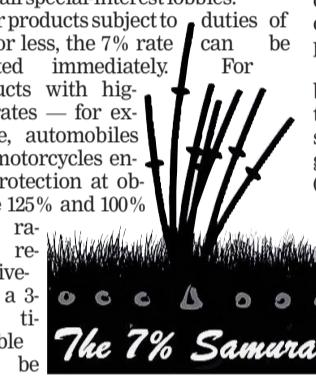
Arvind Panagariya

New York: 2025 will go down in history as the year of economic reforms in India. Turning Independent India into a developed country by the time of its 100th anniversary not merely an exhortation for the Narendra Modi government. It's also walking the talk.

To quote the PM's Dec 30, 2025 LinkedIn post, 'India has boarded the Reform Express.' So, when can a long-reform proponent react but to say, 'Dil maange more?' Let 2027 be the year when India completes all big-ticket reforms. Within this ambition, let completion of the trade liberalisation agenda be on top of the list. This will require six steps:

• **Roll back customs duties** Committing to a uniform 7% rate across imports will ensure that revenue does not decline, resource allocation is minimally distorted, any incentive to misclassify imported products to escape a high duty is eliminated, and the constant lobbying for higher duties by special interests ends. The realisation that raising customs duty in one sector will require raising it for all will preempt all special-interest lobbies.

For products subject to duties of 25% or less, the 7% rate can be adopted immediately. For products with higher rates — for example, automobiles and motorcycles enjoy protection at obscene 125% and 100% duty rates, respectively — a 3-year timetable may be



No detours, please

adopted, with one-third of the necessary reduction introduced in the first year, another one-third in the second and the last one-third in the third.

• **Finish QCO withdrawal** In his LinkedIn post, Narendra Modi included Gof's withdrawal of 22 quality control orders (QCOs) in the 2025 list of reforms. This reform must be brought to its logical conclusion. Unless a compelling consumer safety rationale is provided, or the ability to enforce QCOs uniformly across all domestic manufacturers and imports is demonstrated, all QCOs should be withdrawn.

Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) is hopelessly understaffed to enforce the existing QCOs on domestic manufacturers. This has led to the situation of QCOs being enforced asymmetrically on imports, imparting a clear protectionist bias to the policy regime.

• **Sign off on trade deals** India must bring FTAs with the US and the EU to their logical conclusion, and initiate steps to join Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in Asia. Delay in the India-US

Uniform 7% rate across imports will ensure revenue doesn't decline, resource allocation is minimally distorted, constant lobbying for higher duties ends

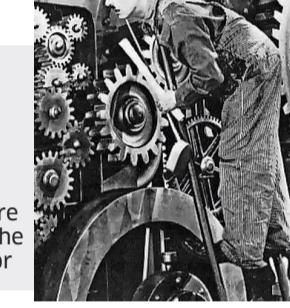
FTA is understandable given its geopolitical challenges. However, delay in the India-EU FTA is inexplicable.

We need to re-examine our instinctive resistance to import liberalisation, giving some consideration to the consumer benefits. Is it fair that only the super wealthy, with the ability to pay customs duties of 125-150%, can have access to top-notch wines and BMWs?

Currently, India's western coastal states and Tamil Nadu are significantly better integrated into the global marketplace than the eastern coastal states of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. To correct this imbalance, it's critical that India also expands its trade footprint in Asia by joining CPTPP. Today, Asia's share in world GDP stands at 36%, followed by North America's at 30.4%, Europe's at 25.3%, South America's at 3.8% and Africa's at 2.6%. In the years to come, balance will shift yet further towards Asia. India needs to take this into account in designing its FTA strategy.

• **Restrain DGTR** Largely hidden from the public eye, Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) in the ministry of commerce and industry has been a source of wholesale administered protection provided through anti-dumping (A-D), safeguard and co-

PMO must extend its model of regular monitoring of major infrastructure projects to the export sector



et with policy-making bodies twice a year to review progress and identify bottlenecks under the PM's chairmanship. These meetings can provide an opportunity to review progress and address the bottlenecks facing exporters.

The writer is chairman, 16th finance commission



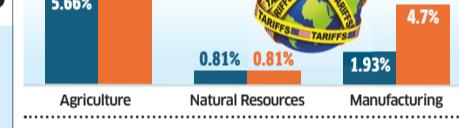
ChatGPT SHAIKI OF THE DAY

There was a stadium not-so-pristine,
With pigeons declaring it their latrine.
As a badminton game rang loud,
A shout, 'Bird poop!' came from the crowd —
So is Swachh Bharat best talked about, not seen?

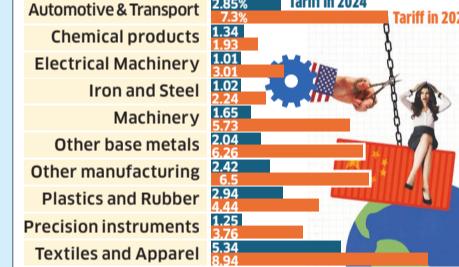
RISING TARIFFS

Use of trade tariffs rose sharply in 2025, especially in manufacturing, led by US measures tied to industrial and geopolitical objectives, lifting average global tariffs unevenly across sectors and trading partners...

Trade-weighted avg. applied tariff on global trade

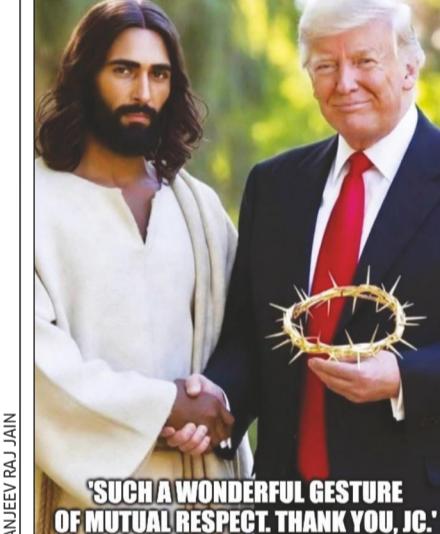


Trade-weighted avg. applied tariff on global trade in manufacturing



SOURCE: UNCTAD's Global Trade Update

MEME'S THE WORD



'SUCH A WONDERFUL GESTURE OF MUTUAL RESPECT. THANK YOU, JC.'

MELODY FOR MONDAY

Vengo A Aclarar El Fantasma

'Vengo A Aclarar' (I'm here to clear things up) by Alexander Garcia a.k.a. El Fantasma is a commanding corrido — traditional Mexican folk ballad — that fuses raw musical energy with lyrical conviction. The song cements Garcia's reputation as one of the most authentic voices in Mexican music.

Released in the eponymous 2017 album, 'Vengo A Aclarar' was not accidental, but a product of Garcia's ability to channel lived experience into song.

India's caution is not illegitimate. Its defensive interests — food security, social protections, regulatory space — are real. But obstruction as a doctrine is lazy policy. India needs a proactive, not reactive, trade strategy.

Three changes would immediately put India on the front foot:

• **Set agendas** India should participate in shaping plurilateral frameworks, securing carve-outs and flexibilities where needed, instead of vetoing everything outright.

• **Adopt variable geometry** India can choose where to join, where to opt out and where to propose alternative pathways — just as ASEAN, EU and African Union do.

• **Use economic heft to negotiate from strength** India, no longer a marginal player, should act like a rule-shaper, not rule-taker, hiding behind procedure.

Most major economies are not comfortable with multilateral paralysis in today's fractured world. If India persists in its current trajectory, it risks waking up to a global trading system rebuilt without its participation, driven by coalitions — including leading developing nations — that increasingly view India not as a voice of 'global south' but as an unreliable future.

A rising power can't afford to sit out the writing of tomorrow's rules. If a post-WTO architecture emerges, the prospect of which is no longer hypothetical, India will be left far more isolated than plurilaterals within WTO ever could make it.

The writer is former chief, trade policy and trade facilitation, International Trade Centre, Geneva



Reinventing Sermons

NARAYANI GANESH

Scrolling social media, I came across this entry on Threads:

"I am a Catholic. Recently, during a mass, the priest mentioned in his homily that 'after we have done the works, after we have done praying, the next thing we do is BTS.'

Being a BTS fan, when I heard these letters, I could sense a loud clashing of cymbals in my ears! And then, the priest continued: 'BTS stands for Believe, Trust and Surrender to our Lord. Amen to that Father.' Now I have a new meaning for BTS. But I will never forget my BTS idols — Bangtan Sonyeodan (Bulletproof Boyscouts)."

BTS, a South Korean boy band with seven members — Jungkook, V, Jimin, Suga, RM, J-hope and Jin — has become hugely popular globally, for their positive, motivational lyrics, promotion of mental health and self-love among youth, with vibrant dancing and funny reels of their daily activities.

That the priest found it opportune to use BTS as metaphor in his sermon is only one example of how spiritual leaders and life coaches are increasingly becoming more youth-savvy and are riding the pop bandwagon to popularise eternal values, reflection, rejuvenation and universal harmony. Creative reinvention is key to propitiating ideas and life lessons, as ancient wisdom imparted repeatedly in a stereotypical manner has few takers, especially with increasing distractions and short attention spans. Hooking the audience with a key word or phrase, a popular song or group or even shocking them into attention with a dramatic story are all ways by which leaders seek to achieve a captive, attentive audience.

Chat Room

When Industry, Univs Team Up

Apropos the edit 'In Academia, a New Kid on the Block' (Jan 17), India can learn from China, which embarked on an innovative programme to create world-class institutions as part of the '80s economic reforms. Leading universities established tech startups managed by faculty that became successful enterprises, backed by strong government support. Universities became centres of excellence catering to a vital economic need. India produces high-quality research output, but ranks 66th in academic-industry collaboration, hindering the economy from realising its full potential.

Chandresh Kumar Dogra, Jalandhar

Coercive Diplomacy

Apropos the news report '...POTUS Threatens Levies for Not Backing US on Greenland' (Jan 17). True national security relies on the voluntary cooperation of allies, not the forced acquisition of land. Using trade penalties to bypass the self-determination of Greenlandic people sets a precarious precedent: it suggests that

in the modern era sovereignty is no longer absolute, but merely a line item in a negotiation. We must ask if the 'hard way' is worth the cost of our international soul.

Vijaykumar, Raichur, Karnataka

An Empty Possession

Apropos the edit 'A Gift Trump Simply Couldn't Refuse' (Jan 17). US President Donald Trump has acquired the Nobel Peace Prize medal, not the prize itself. As a courtesy, recipient Venezuelan Maria Corina Machado handed her medal to Trump, whose craving for the Prize is well known. Trump has chosen to keep the medal but ignored the implied responsibility. No one is updating the laureates' list. Still, now that the medal is sitting on his desk, will it trigger or even nudge behavioural change?

Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

Letters to the editor may be addressed to edit@timesofindia.com



Go on, thumb a ride



Far more money has been lost by investors trying to anticipate corrections, than lost in the corrections themselves

Peter Lynch

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Rammath Goenka

TIGER GLOBAL RULING DENTS INDIA'S PITCH FOR TAX CERTAINTY

THE Supreme Court's verdict in the *Tiger Global* case marks an important shift in India's tax and investment jurisprudence. By siding with the tax department and denying treaty benefits to Tiger Global's Mauritius-based entities on capital gains from the 2018 sale of unlisted Flipkart shares, the court has decisively reinforced a substance-over-form approach to cross-border investments.

The ruling makes it clear that possession of a tax residency certificate and compliance with limitation-of-benefits provisions, though necessary, do not by themselves guarantee protection under a tax treaty. Tax authorities, the court held, are entitled to examine whether an offshore structure has genuine commercial substance or is merely a conduit designed to avoid tax. This substantially widens the scope for scrutiny of fund structures that have long been used by foreign investors routing capital into India.

The judgement also narrows the effective reach of the grandfathering provisions under the India-Mauritius tax treaty. While the exemption on capital gains for shares acquired before April 1, 2017, remains on paper, the court has clarified that such protection is conditional rather than automatic. Even legacy investments can be denied treaty benefits if the underlying structure lacks economic substance. For foreign investors, this introduces fresh uncertainty over the treatment of transactions previously assumed to be insulated from dispute.

From the revenue department's standpoint, the verdict validates its long-standing view on treaty abuse. For the government, however, the implications are more complex. Tax certainty has been a central plank of India's effort to attract global capital. A ruling that permits deeper *post-facto* scrutiny risks unsettling that narrative, particularly if it encourages the reopening of past transactions. It also revives concerns over aggressive tax enforcement—concerns the government sought to allay through the 2021 settlements of the Vodafone and Cairn cases.

The decision represents a departure from the Supreme Court's earlier position in the *Azadi Bachao Andolan* case, which had accorded decisive weight to Mauritius residency certificates. Along with more recent rulings on treaty interpretation, including on the most-favoured nation clause, it signals a judicial trend towards tighter oversight of tax treaties, with potential diplomatic and commercial fallout.

India's tax authorities are entitled to curb abuse and artificial structures. The challenge now is to ensure that legitimate investors are not drawn into prolonged uncertainty. The *Tiger Global* judgement strengthens enforcement; whether it undermines confidence will depend on how carefully the government calibrates its response.

CLOSE WATCH KEY TO BHU BHARATI TRUST

AND is an emotion, especially for farmers. It is also the most valuable with land rates in Telangana rising astronomically over the past decade. When the Congress government enacted the Telangana Bhu Bharati (Record of Rights in Land) Act, 2025, replacing the controversial Dharani portal launched by the previous government amid widespread allegations of land grabbing, it raised many hopes. Therefore, the scam that surfaced this month in Jangaon district has been a rude awakening.

The Act is ambitious and much needed, as it seeks to map and digitise land records, making them tamper-proof, in line with the central government's Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme. It is better framed than Dharani because it decentralises power, making the system more transparent and hassle-free. However, implementation is easier said than done. If Dharani triggered large-scale complaints of land grabbing by manipulating titles on the portal, Bhu Bharati now faces an unexpected problem. According to state revenue minister Ponguleti Srinivasa Reddy, an audit covering the previous five years unearthed 4,800 cases of irregularities.

Here, land titles were not changed, at least as far as is known. Instead, the *modus operandi* to siphon government money appears ridiculously simple. Internet operators collected registration fees from farmers as prescribed by rules, but used the edit option to reduce the amount on the portal and pocketed the difference. For example, if ₹10,000 per acre was paid, the amount was edited to show ₹1,000, with the balance taken away. In one shocking instance, a challan was issued for even ₹1. The estimated loss to the exchequer is about ₹52 crore, though unofficial sources place it far higher. At least 3,000 irregular cases were detected in Rangareddy and Yadadri Bhuvanagiri districts alone, raising fears that the statewide numbers could be much larger.

The government has ordered a comprehensive audit of all transactions from 2020 and vowed to spare none. *Prima facie*, it is evident that despite decentralisation and relaxed norms, poor monitoring has enabled corruption. It is logical to suspect that this could not have occurred without collusion from government officials. Authorities claim the so-called glitch has been rectified, but that a one-time audit is not enough; continuous monitoring is essential. Farmers must verify details themselves. Instead, revenue officials are serving notices on farmers, a practice which deserves firm criticism.

QUICK TAKE

WEALTH IN WORDS

THE Economist's recent article on Jane Austen and money is thoughtful and enjoyable. It shows how wealth shaped both her life and her novels. Austen demonstrates that money alone cannot bring happiness, but it is essential for security and social standing. The article gives concrete examples, like the sums needed for a carriage, servants or a proper household, linking them to characters such as Emma, Marianne, and Miss Bates. Like Adam Smith, Austen recognised that wealth could advance society but did not guarantee virtue or happiness. The Bank of England's £10 note, replacing Darwin with Austen, wryly signals the cultural shift from evolution to economics as a defining lens on life. Indeed.

DOMESTIC and international observers acknowledge India's medium-term economic prospects. FY27 is shaping up to be one of the strongest years for economic activity since FY19, at least according to high-frequency data. Policy actions during FY26 have driven this momentum and laid a foundation for growth.

An illustration is public capital expenditure. After a slowdown in FY25, government capex rebounded in FY26. Year-to-date, capital expenditure is 25 percent higher than the period last year, while revenue expenditure has grown by less than 2 percent. This divergence highlights the government's preference for investment-led growth, prioritising projects with financial returns, such as urban mobility, highways, airports, shipyards, and port infrastructure. The expansion of operational metro rail networks, the pace of highway construction, capacity additions at airports, and improvements in turnaround times at major seaports are documented.

In contrast, revenue expenditure—comprising subsidies and welfare spending—has been restrained. While such spending delivers societal returns, these benefits materialise over a longer horizon. For now, the government prioritises the creation of return-generating assets to revive economic momentum, even if early gains accrue unevenly across sections of the population.

It's a bet. India's growth strategy needs a 'dual engine' approach—capex for immediate momentum, social investment for long-term inclusivity. The external environment and India's capital supply make this challenging. Elevated interest rates and interest payments could burden the exchequer, manifesting in vicious cycles that impact growth. Yet this shift may be pragmatic, but only if it is paired with an assurance. Societal and developmental expenditure must scale up once global conditions stabilise and fiscal space improves for a government operating under a perennial deficit. There is a risk of entrenching a K-shaped growth trajectory. Large sections of the population—particularly in Aspirational Districts and parts of eastern India—may remain excluded from the gains of growth.

A comparative assessment of macroeconomic indicators over the past year underscores the economy's resilience. Retail inflation has declined by 390 basis points, driven by a correction in food prices, which have fallen by over 1,000 basis points since December 2024. This moderation has not come at the expense of farm

incomes, as prices had risen from an exceptionally high base; annualised price growth for farm output has remained buoyant at 5 percent or higher.

Urban consumption sentiment has staged a recovery after a prolonged slowdown. The downturn began even before the pandemic in 2019. The Reserve Bank of India's Consumer Confidence Index—which captures households' willingness to spend—is now at a six-year high. This improvement is reflected in indicators of discretionary spending, such as passenger vehicle sales. Demand for entry-level cars has revived, and Bollywood box-office collections have reached a three-year high so far in FY26.

Consumption remains a pillar of India's growth model, accounting for 60 percent of the national income. India's domestic consumption base has historically acted as an economic 'iron dome' during global stress. This resilience was seen

during the Asian Financial Crisis, the Global Financial Crisis or the taper tantrum. That buffer appears active again, even as global trade dynamics shift.

The blemish in an otherwise resilient macro backdrop has been the depreciation of the Indian rupee against the US dollar. This has occurred despite record-high foreign exchange reserves and a comfortable current account position. At this point, geopolitical considerations seem to drive the rupee's weakness more than economic fundamentals.

The rupee could regain some lost ground once a trade agreement with the United States materialises. Foreign investors may also regain confidence in Indian markets. Foreign investor risk appetite towards India appears constrained by strains in India-US relations. A trade deal could resolve this uncertainty.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman will present her ninth consecu-

GROWTH PLAN: CAPEX, JOBS, SOCIAL SPEND

DEBOPAM CHAUDHURI

Chief Economist, Piramal Enterprises



SOURAV ROY

EPICS STILL SPEAK

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE



IN the ongoing holy month of Magh, and in recognition that Indian epics are deeply internalised and encoded at levels we may have perhaps lost touch with, I would like to share a few points about our epics this week.

A fascinating unity of purpose holds these epics together that you'll notice too whether you are deeply Hindu, nominally Hindu, of another persuasion, or an atheist. So, let's review what constitutes an Indian epic.

Expectedly, its deep components are unique to India compared to other epics in the old universe of discourse. To take the three most famous epics of the western world, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Greek) and the *Aeneid* (Latin), the themes seem quite similar at first—men vs fate, with the jealous gods in the thick of it all, the warring heroes and villains, the patient women who endure, the women who are sacrificed to serve the larger male cause, the journeys, adventures, deaths, laments, victories and the life-code points made at great personal cost.

But while the old gods of the Greeks and Romans lost their devotees, as did the other old gods of Europe, the gods, heroes and heroines of epic India have stayed very much alive and are still loved by millions. The three foundational Indian epics remain the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. They were written in Sanskrit and inspired retellings in many other languages.

Regarding the *Ramayana*, I like to stick with the root epic, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, which others acknowledge as their official source, while adding, opposing, questioning or nuancing bits with their own 'masala'. Moreover, I stay with the first six books, which officially end the epic with the hero's homecoming and coronation and the *phala shruti* or list of listeners' benefits.

The seventh book is generally considered a *prakshipta*, or a later addition or interpolation. In my view, it certainly adds unsustainable twists and turns, and so I choose to cheerfully discard it.

To partially illustrate the rationale for this choice, let's take an iconic modern book as an example. *Gone with the Wind* is complete the way Margaret Mitchell wrote it; it's the original book. It leaves us longing to know more about Scarlett and Rhett, and if somebody writes a 'sequel', as somebody did, which I've read, it may be interesting, but it's not by Mar-

garet Mitchell. The style and substance differ. It may be worth keeping or amount to just one read out of curiosity. But it's not Margaret Mitchell's story, the one we like. That's how it is for many with the Valmiki *Ramayana*.

In my case, this is not because I don't celebrate plurality—who can help responding to the beauty of the *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas, for example? I recognise that the *Ramayana* has dialogued unceasingly with the Indic bandwidth and beyond. I've spoken at the National Museum, Bangkok to wrap an eight-country international *Ramayana* dance festival, about how the *Ramayana* is 'the Epic of Asia' in ways not fully counted yet. There's even a version in Mongolia.

While the old Greek, Roman and other European gods lost their devotees, the gods, heroes and heroines of epic India have stayed very much alive and are still loved by millions. This can be illustrated by the many renditions of the *Ramayana* across the Indian subcontinent and beyond

I choose to stick with the root story because I don't want to be confused or confuse others. Therefore, I don't 'buy' the *Uttara Kand*, the seventh book that has allegedly been tacked on to Valmiki's *Ramayana* later.

I curl my lip at the Lakshman rekha—how literal a device, though touchingly respectful. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ravana drags Sita away by her hair and holds her in his arms. But Tulsi, bless

his heart, couldn't handle the sacrificial thought in the 16th century of Ravana laying his hands on Sita. Much as I honour and appreciate Tulsi's chivalry, it's another reason why I choose to clinically stick to Valmiki. It's the *Ramayana* 'as it is' without the little zari curtains.

This view need not be a cause for quarrel. As Tulsi himself says, "*Hari anant, Hari katha ananta, kahat sunat bahuvidhi sab santa*", meaning, God is infinite and so are the stories about God, which are told and heard in different ways by saints.

That being noted, what are the five points that define an Indian epic? The first point is that it concerns itself with the Paramatma or Supersoul or God, the macro-cosmic entity guessed at, sketched, debated and discussed from the time of the oldest Indian scriptures.

Thereby, an Indian epic's second point is that it features the Jivatma or individual soul, and its awareness or ignorance of its relationship with the Supersoul.

The third point of an Indian epic is that the events described in it must illuminate the path by which an individual soul can merge into or attain the Supersoul without enduring any more lives on earth. This liberation from the cycle of birth and death is called moksha, and the epic must contain and illustrate the *prapta upay* or means to achieve moksha.

Fourthly, an Indian epic must illustrate the advantages, principally the state of grace or sublime happiness obtained by moksha. Attaining this 'fruit of liberation' is called *phala prapta*.

Fifthly, the Indian epic must complete the matter by detailing through the events it describes, the *prapta virodh* or obstacles to attainment. How else may a listener be fruitfully instructed in which attitudes, actions and responses to avoid?

And there you pretty much have it, that the modest endeavour of the Indian epic is to unite persons muddling along in life with the highest spiritual or cosmic energy out there and deep within us. An Indian epic has work to do, which it tirelessly does even today.

(Views are personal)



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Iranian fate

Ref: *Iran inferno* (Jan 18). History reminds us that when governments yield to personal ambition at the expense of national fate, disaster ensues. The Islamic Republic is resting on the repressive habit of defying reality to hold on to power. The agonising catch-22 for India demands immediate diplomacy over belligerent action.

Faseehul Huqq, Malappuram

Humanity's safeguards

Beyond strategy papers and power politics, escalating tensions around Iran threaten ordinary lives. Each provocation narrows the space for dialogue and widens the risk of a war that civilians will pay for first. History shows such conflicts rarely stay regional. Prudence, empathy, and diplomacy remain humanity's last safeguards.

Minhaj, Kozhikode

Marital autonomy

Ref: *The crisis of relationship recession* (Jan 18). In India marriage as an institution is not dying. It is undergoing significant structural and ideological evolution, particularly in urban areas where women are relatively more educated and financially independent. Marriages must become a conscious choice rather than a societal necessity.

N Rama Rao, email

Toying Congress

Ref: *Cong leadership* (Jan 18). Despite limited outreach and huge vulnerabilities, Congress is toying with various options. It suffers from inner party indiscipline and leaders express divergent opinions in public. The high command should decide alliance strategy quickly to set the right direction.

Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Wooing voters

Ref: *AIADMK's poll sops* (Jan 18). The AIADMK joining the voter-wooing bandwagon is no surprise. This reckless race worsens the state's debt and reflects political expediency over responsibility. In contrast, Naam Tamilar Katchi leader Seeman's firm opposition to freebies reflects rare fiscal maturity.

K Venkatasubramanian, Chennai

Mumbai contest

Ref: *Shinde tends flock* (Jan 18). The real battle has now inevitably shifted to the mayoral and deputy-mayoral posts, which have become more crucial than the municipal elections themselves. So, there may not be any end to horse-trading and such other things.

P V Prakash, Mumbai

European leaders should support Trump on Greenland

Conflict within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) over Greenland is rather unfortunate as it is bond to divert attention from a disturbing fact—both China and Russia are eying its vast resources. It is to the credit of United States President Donald Trump that he brought attention of his country, other western nations, and the entire world to the impending menace; sadly, his actions to preclude Chinese or Russian influence over the mostly ice-covered Greenland, which is rich in natural resources, including critical minerals, are being thwarted by European leaders who seem to have developed some kind of antipathy towards the US President. So Trump announced tariffs on the eight allies, who are

strongly opposed to his proposed takeover of Greenland, whose sovereign is the Kingdom of Denmark. He is clear that he will take control of the island "the easy way" or "the hard way. US officials point out that with 1.5 million tons of rare earth mineral reserves, Greenland cannot be allowed to become the playground of the wannabe hegemons, China and Russia. The US logic, according to geopolitics analyst and bestselling author Tim Marshall, is "rooted in energy security, future-proofing supply chains (especially minerals) and in the strategic denial of competitors."

The logic is impeccable. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, however, doesn't believe so; he finds the US' move "completely wrong." French

President Emmanuel Macron echoes a similar sentiment and states that Trump's actions are "unacceptable." The comments were in response to Trump's additional 10 per cent tariff on goods from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, and Finland. Set to become effective on February 1, it could climb to 25 per cent. Trump has made his plans for the takeover of Greenland evident a year back. Before he became the United States ambassador to the United Nations last May, Michael Waltz said in his capacity as national security advisor, "This is about critical minerals. This is about natural resources." It is quite astonishing that even the European allies of the United States are bickering with Trump over the issue; they

must realize that by doing so, they are supporting dangerous hegemons.

By opposing Washington so vocally and publicly, they may believe that they are defending the principles of sovereignty and international law, but principles divorced from power and strategy can quickly become empty slogans. At any rate, China and Russia have no respect for such lofty principles. If western dithering and internal squabbles create an opening for China or Russia to deepen their influence in Greenland—through investment, debt, political leverage or military presence—the consequences will be felt far beyond the Arctic. It would weaken NATO's northern flank, compromise western access to critical resources, and hand strategic

advantages to powers that have little respect for the very norms Europe claims to uphold. Moreover, there is a certain irony in Europe's posture. Many of the same leaders who now recoil at Trump's bluntness have repeatedly warned about the dangers of overdependence on Russia for energy or on China for manufacturing and rare earths. The painful lessons of gas dependency exposed by the Ukraine war should still be fresh in their minds. Greenland represents an opportunity to avoid repeating such mistakes, to secure alternative sources of critical materials within the Western strategic ecosystem. Squandering that opportunity out of political spite or transatlantic pique would be deeply irresponsible.

With BJP riding on 2nd Modi wave, bigger challenges up ahead for oppn parties

Looks like the saffron party's development agenda is resonating with voters; BMC victory yet another example

P MADHUSUDHAN REDDY

After electoral setbacks to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in some crucial states in the 2024 General Elections, a talk gained traction that the saffron party's decline had started and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's charisma is gradually fading out. Modi, aiming at a third consecutive term as the Prime Minister, went to the polls with a target to secure around 400 MPs for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha. That was the reason why the BJP coined the 'Abki Baar 400 Paar' slogan for that election. It created a history of sorts by winning 282 seats in 2014 and formed the government at the Centre under Modi's leadership. NDA's tally was 336 then. BJP increased its seat count to 303 in the 2019 polls, while that of the NDA rose to 353.

The party expected a similar incremental increase in seats in 2024. But the saffron party received major setbacks in its key states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Haryana. Consequently, its seat count was reduced to 240 seats, below the half-way mark, and that of NDA fell to 293 seats. The last-minute tie-up with the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh saved it the blushes as the alliance secured 21 seats.

It was the first time in his long political career that Modi did not get a clearcut poll mandate for his own party. His aggressive push on Hindutva also didn't help. The impact of the near adverse outcome was clearly visible in



As I mentioned in many of my earlier columns, the Indian National Congress will remain central to any attempt to dislodge BJP from power at the Centre as the Grand Old Party (GOP) still has presence across the country and is the only alternative to the ruling dispensation in a few key states

his body language when the results for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls were out.

However, the saffron party shifted gears post the 2024 General Elections and started focusing more on its development agenda and welfare schemes for women instead of pushing its Hindutva strategy aggressively. Within a few months after it yielded ground to the Congress in the Lok Sabha polls in Haryana, the BJP made a stunning comeback by retaining power in the state. It won the Assembly polls in October 2024 despite many surveys predicting its defeat.

In the Maharashtra Assembly polls more than a month later in November, the Mahayati alliance led by BJP won hands down by emerging victories in 235 seats out of 288 seats. The scale of the victory was so high that none of the opposition parties won enough seats to secure the status of the Leader of the Opposition (LoP). In the Lok Sabha elections a few months earlier, Mahayati won only 17 MP seats out of 48 seats. This shows the kind of turnaround the BJP-led alliance achieved in the Assembly polls.

In 2025 too, the BJP continued its winning streak by defeating Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Delhi Assembly polls in February. Last November, the BJP-led NDA secured a landslide victory in Bihar by pocketing 202 of the 243 seats that were up for grabs. Two days ago, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), the country's richest municipal body with an annual budget of Rs 70,000 crore, saw BJP's surprise surge. BMC was the bastion of Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray's family for over 25 years. It will now have a BJP Mayor! Mahayati also won most municipal bodies in the state this time. All these victories seem to indicate that BJP's development agenda is resonating with voters, both young and old.

Further, the saffron party seems to be on a strong footing in the states which will go to polls later this year. In West Bengal, BJP reached a stage from where it can storm to power in the event of the Mamata Banerjee-led All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) losing the upcoming Assembly polls scheduled for April. BJP won 77 MLA seats

in the 2021 polls. In Tamil Nadu too, it gained some traction. There should be no surprise if BJP will be part of the winning alliance in the event of DMK's defeat. Both Bengal and Tamil Nadu are to go to polls around the same time. These two states are a kind of final frontiers for the saffron party as Tamil Nadu is known for its strong anti-Hindi stand and West Bengal remained an epicentre of Leftist politics for a long time.

In the 2014 General Elections, the country witnessed a BJP wave fuelled by the Narendra Modi phenomenon and the momentum continued into several state Assembly polls thereafter. With a string of stunning electoral victories after the 2024 General Elections, the BJP seems to be riding on the second Modi wave. That will obviously pose a bigger challenge to the opposition parties.

But as I mentioned in

many of my earlier columns, the Indian National Congress (INC) will remain central to any attempt to dislodge BJP from power as the Grand Old Party (GOP) still has presence across the country and is the only alternative to the

ruling dispensation in some key states. But does it have the wherewithal to blunt BJP's developmental narrative? The Congress could have showcased its developmental performance in Telangana to counter BJP's development narrative at the national level. Telangana has all the ingredients to fuel rapid growth on economic and development fronts. It has a mega city in Hyderabad that can be leveraged for overall development of the state. Sadly, that's not happening as the state is weighed down by unbridled welfare schemes and high-value freebies. On his part, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy announced a slew of mega projects, including the Musi riverfront development, expansion of metro rail and massive development of educational infrastructure. But all these projects need massive funds which the state lacks.

Telangana's performance in attracting private capital is also not that great despite the presence of major IT and pharma hubs in Hyderabad.

This is largely due to lack of an aggressive approach to attract investors. Further, the aggressive investment push by Andhra Pradesh led by its Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and IT Minister Nara Lokesh also took the sheen off Brand Telangana as an attractive investment destination. That way, the Congress government in Telangana is unable to present an optimistic narrative to its people. So, Telangana is unlikely to give a platform to Congress to portray itself as a development-oriented party to check the BJP's narrative. Therefore, like many other opposition parties across India, Congress can't take on

BJP effectively unless it reinvents itself and counters the saffron party's strategies effectively. It should also take other political parties along with it to pose a formidable challenge to the saffron party. All said and done, there are only two ways to defeat BJP and Modi. One way is that BJP and Modi should defeat themselves. That can only happen if there is severe anti-incumbency against the Modi government. Going by his track record, Modi doesn't yield ground to the Opposition once he enters the portals of power. The second option for Congress is to convince voters that it can offer a better alternative to BJP. Will that happen?

In this era of artificial intelligence, there seems to be a transformational change in the country's political landscape as well. Those who continue to rely on the old school politics of empty rhetoric, false narratives, false promises and propaganda tactics will not last for long in power. Further, such people or parties will not come to power easily even when the right opportunities arise. Sometimes, inefficient parties may come to power when voters exhibit seething anger against the incumbent government. But that's more like a flash in the pan. Indian voters are increasingly looking for those who can genuinely develop their state and the country as a whole. Unless the opposition parties correctly decipher these changing dynamics in Indian politics and adopt their strategies accordingly, the BJP and NDA, the alliance that the party leads, will continue to win, one election after another. That's the reality.

Naxal Mukt Bharat as a step towards democratic politics

NAYAKARA VEERESHA

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has made it abundantly clear that it is aiming to achieve a Naxal Mukt Bharat by March-end. The massive surrenders by members of CPI (Maoist) since June 2025 indicates that they are on the right path vis-à-vis the stated objective. The violence and counter violence unleashed by the Indian State and the Maoist party is never going to solve the problem at hand. The revolutions in Cambodia, China, Columbia, Cuba and Vietnam provide ample evidence of the expansion of communism across the globe. Inspired by these international developments, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was established in 1920 immediately after the Second World Congress of the Communist Third International. The Marxist-Leninist politics in India was pursued by activists such as Muzaffar Ahmad, S A Dange, and Singaravelu Chettiar, among others.

On one side, the movement was led by Charu Mazumdar and named Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in 1969 and People's War Group (PWG) under the leadership of Kondapalli Seetharamaiah and Dr Kolluri Chiranjeevi in 1980. The goal of PWG was to "uplift the downtrodden tribal people who are

considered the lowest rungs of Indian society."

The revolution didn't take place in West Bengal, while the Andhra Pradesh government formed a special Grey-Hounds police force to fight the people's guerrilla forces in 1989.

Augmented by the national and international developments the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), PWG and the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) came together to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in 2004.

According to the Global Attack Index, 2016, the CPI (Maoist) was one of the top terrorist organisations in the world.

The demise of the central

committee members of the CPI (Maoist) in a series of encounters reflect the assertive approach of the Union Government to put an end to the political ideology of Marx-Lenin-Mao. The insurrectionary zeal of adivasis was tapped and exploited by the CPI (Maoist) to achieve their political goal of "new democratic revolution" through "protracted people's war." The party perceives "this revolution is the part of world proletarian revolution, which has begun with the Great October Revolution of Russia as a historical continuum."

The Government of India refused the Maoist party's willingness to hold talks and adopted zero tolerance to

Russian Revolution signifies the need to look at the constitutional methods to resolve issues of socio-economic and political inequality and the concerns of rights and justice to the most disadvantaged sections of the society. The decline of political morality among the national and regional parties is effectively corroding the constitutional philosophy and democratic tradition in the country.

Peace and non-violence have significant lessons for both the modern Indian State and the CPI (Maoist) party to strike a balance between revolutionary vs. parliamentary politics.

Democracy requires insurrection as an active part of citizenship. What is going on in the Fifth Schedule areas is a fight for the issues of land rights, equality and justice and not so the sovereign challenge to the Indian state.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Pune, Symbiosis International (Deemed University). Views expressed are personal)

LETTERS

A R Rahman must move out of India

A R Rahman's latest BBC Asian Network interview has irresponsibly amplified his unsubstantiated claims of communal bias in Bollywood, without adequate rebuttal. He went to London for fame and money and became a music director who is too expensive for Indian film producers. If he does not like living in India, then he should move out of the country and stop making baseless accusations against India. *Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, Hanumakonda-506009*

Stop targeting Rahman

Music maestro A R Rahman's remark that there could be communal bias in Bollywood that perhaps explains why he is getting less work than he otherwise would have got should be taken in the right spirit. Discrimination based on caste and religion are realities that cannot be wished away or denied. There is no need to pounce on the iconic musician who has done so much for the country with his uplifting music. Nobody can claim that the country is entirely free from the scourge of communalism. Saying that he is not getting work for professional reasons and not for his religious identity is to question his prodigious talent. Now that the Oscar-award winning composer has clarified that he had no intention of hurting feelings, there should be an end to trolls against, lest the music world ends up the loser. *G David Milton, Maruthancode (TN)*

No avakai talk at Avakai-Amaravati festival

During the recent Avakai-Amaravati Festival of Cinema, Culture and Literature, the aroma of the summer special and year-long preserved pickle was conspicuous by its absence. Given this lacuna, one wonders why the event was so named. Avakai smells acrid, tastes pungent and sour and makes for an excellent dish when taken along with rice. Some prepare this delicacy with sugar and jaggery. There are varieties like kaya, mukka senaga and pesara, among others, though mukka avakai is the most popular. At least, some participants should have spoken about this unique annual flavour. Meanwhile, magaya is also an important annual dish. *N Ramalakshmi Secunderabad-10*

Revanth's praise of Modi is appreciable

It is good to know that Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy could not hide his admiration for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, even while clarifying that his loyalty to the Congress party would not be sullied. Apparently, unlike Shashi Tharoor, he didn't wish to antagonise the party high command. It is important for the Congress to learn to appreciate and support the good work being carried out by the Centre in different sectors. Let us hope that Revanth Reddy will continue with this attitude with the Centre to garner a lion's share in central assistance for the state. *K R Parvathy, Mysuru*

Course correction essential for TG CM

The 'I respect Modi as PM but won't compromise during polls' remark by Telangana Chief Minister after being in office for two years hardly makes any sense nor does it serve any purpose. His timely proactive actions and their results should speak loudly on his relationship with Modi. Repeated statements of this nature only give room for doubts. Silent and meaningful dialogue between the state and the Centre is a sure way to get big projects to Telangana. As he suffers from lack of administrative experience, Revanth Reddy should not hesitate to seek advice and guidance from those with abundant subject experience and expertise. Till now, he has done little to prove that he is on that track. He needs to focus on administration and optimise appropriate use of the income on development and welfare schemes. Making loud statements of his intentions is no substitute for meticulous planning by expert bureaucrats. Any further delay in course correction might prove costly for him and his party in the next Assembly elections. *M V Nagavender Rao, Hyderabad-4*

Go beyond monetary penalties against IndiGo

DCA's imposition of ₹22.20 crore penalty on IndiGo Airlines for lapses in 2025 is a welcome step. However, passengers may strongly feel that merely levying a fine does not constitute adequate punishment for what appears to be a deliberate act of operational over-optimisation and regulatory neglect. Over three lakh passengers were stranded, many of them senior citizens and families, facing immense hardship due to flight cancellations and delays. Such large-scale disruption and breach of public trust cannot be brushed aside with a monetary penalty alone. IndiGo Airlines must be held accountable in a manner that truly deters future lapses. Regulatory bodies should consider passenger compensation mechanisms, and stricter operational audits to ensure transparency and preparedness. *Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad*

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

AI tool 'Raksha' to boost child safety in K'taka

BENGALURU: With the nationwide launch of an AI-powered tool 'Raksha' to combat various crimes against children such as child trafficking, child marriage and the alarming spread of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Material (CSEAM), Karnataka may find the tool as a crucial opportunity to combat the rising crimes in the state. As per the National Crime Records Bureau 2023, of the total 177335 crimes against children across the country, Karnataka recorded 8929 such crimes in 2023. Developed by Just Rights for Children, the unique tool analyses nationwide data and deploys advanced AI capabilities to enable real-time mapping, track heat zones, identify vulnerable families and track the organized crime of trafficking. The tool named 'Raksha' was launched at 'Prosperity Futures: Child Safety Tech Summit' which is the official pre-summit event of the AI Impact Summit 2026. The Summit was organised by Just Rights for Children (JRC), along with strategic partner India Child Protection, in affiliation with MeitY.

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

**CONTRAPUNTO**

Sometimes, the tree shakes and creaks, and it means that a new land is arriving at the top

ENID BLYTON, *The Enchanted Wood*

IndiGoing To Change?

Feb 10 is when India's biggest airline will face a new test, as new pilot duty rules kick in. DGCA better watch out

In slapping IndiGo with a ₹22.2cr fine – the steepest ever for an Indian airline – for massive flight disruptions last month, DGCA has sent out the right message. Additionally, IndiGo has to submit a ₹50cr bank guarantee whose release is tied to implementing the new flight duty norms for pilots. Plus, IndiGo's senior VP of operations control centre has to be removed. DGCA's probe into the IndiGo schedule collapse found over-optimisation of operations, inadequate regulatory preparedness and shortcomings in management structure and operational control. As management gurus would put it, the airline failed to identify skill deficiencies and maintain sufficient operational buffer.

But even if this sounds like management jargon, it's what turns a smooth flight into a catastrophe. The airline business is a highly sophisticated operation. Any operational deficiencies can lead to a huge domino effect. That's precisely what happened to IndiGo in Dec. Its failure to adequately plan for the new flight duty norms wrecked its flight schedule and stranded tens of thousands of passengers across the country.

But will the slap on the wrist by DGCA make a difference? At the heart of the problem is the fact that India's aviation sector today is practically a duopoly, with IndiGo holding around 61% marketshare. Therefore, the airline is essentially too big to fail as customers have few other options. True, aviation is a tough business the world over. But it is for GOI and regulators to look at how entry barriers can be lowered and the market made more competitive – we have argued before for a relook at the steep tax on aviation fuel.

But even regulators need to get their act together. IndiGo during the Dec crisis wasn't able to meet even a fraction of the schedule approved by the regulator. But the DGCA report addresses flight disruptions only between Dec 3 and 5, whereas thousands of flights were cancelled or delayed beyond Dec 5 too. Why this slack for IndiGo? Plus, what happens beyond Feb 10 when the exemption from the new flight duty rules for IndiGo Airbus A320 pilots ends? Can IndiGo stick to its schedule beyond Feb 10 or will we see another round of chaos? Also, following the probe report, the onus has been put on IndiGo to course correct. But will it? Many argue more heads should have rolled at IndiGo, including that of the airline's COO. DGCA was found to have had lax oversight over IndiGo. It should not be lenient now.

Nostalgia Lies

The new year began with longing for recent past. That's not a good way to figure out how to negotiate the present

The new year is so young, and already the young are dising it. '2026 is the new 2016' is what they're trending across social media. Celebrities have seized the fad. It's images of what they were up to a decade ago that are going viral, what they are cooking up today is far less buzzy. That a society's elders are prone to deep sighing about 'the good old days' is one thing. For some of them, yes, their best days may well be behind them. But a larger culture displaying nostalgia for a year from a decade ago is something else. The flip side of this is that precisely because 2016 is not so long ago, the fact of it not being that objectively great is fully present with us, both individually and collectively.

But the further back we go, the less we can rely on memory and history, which are anyways fallible. Agnes Arnold-Foster points out in her book, *Nostalgia: A History of a Dangerous Emotion*, marketers love the emotion because it makes us so willing to part with our money. It is as easily exploited by politicians too, in 'Make X Great

Again' refrains. Indeed, the way both the right and the left cash in on nostalgia has earned it the label, 'the latest opiate of the people'. Expressions of desire for the past communicate dissatisfaction with the present. And in a fast-changing society that upends lots of certainties, the appeal of nostalgia is quite predictable. But so is its populism and intellectual vacuity. When we engage in a public debate, we should pay attention to how it is intended to affect the world in which we actually live, what kind of othering/shrinking it is seeking to promote.

Social media is also a very intentional agent in all this. Between its constant documentation and algorithmic features like 'memories', the recent past is hyper available for romanticisation. The deepest danger here is how much a preoccupation with the past enfeebles human progress. Stagnation is no solution. Retromania weakens our ability to envision and achieve a desirable future.

Thinking of you

Means I will spam you. Call you? Forget it

Ratna Manocha

 Ping! Ping! goes the phone. I glance at it lazily and it's The Lad. Like a dutiful, doting mother, I pick it up to see what is so urgent. It's an Instagram alert. The Lad has forwarded three reels in quick succession. Since I'm a typical Indian mother I have to go through what he has sent. After all, if he has taken the trouble to send it, it must be significant, so I get to work right away. The first was about how Punjabi was spoken by our forefathers, the second about the connection between Indian mothers, their sons and the Bata brand, and the third was a random English rap.

I message, asking why he was sending me these forwards. No reply. Soon, the phone pings again. This time the post is about Indian mothers and their daughters-in-law. Is there a hidden message in there somewhere?

Next morning, I catch the bull by the horns and call to ask why he was spamming me all of Sunday. "Oh I was thinking of you so I just sent those to you," was his nonchalant reply. Wouldn't it have been easier to pick up the phone and call me? "It's the same thing, I'm connecting with you any which way. It's pebbling. It means that even when I am online and distracted, I am still thinking of you."

Next morning, after breakfast, I'm on a mission. I scroll through my Insta account and send five reels to him, in quick succession. How to check if the avocado is ripe, which exercises to do when one has a sedentary job, the correct way to eat chia seeds, how to lessen screen time for one's children and finally, which pillow to use for a good night's sleep.

I waited for a response. None came. The next day I was back at work. Diligently, I scrolled through Insta posts and again shot off the ones I thought would be of use to him. I waited, in vain. When he called that evening, I told him petulantly that I'd been thinking of him and there'd been no news from him. "Why didn't you call then? Or message" he asked a tad impatiently. "How am I supposed to know you are thinking of me? What were you doing?" Pebbling, I replied.

**Laying Waste To The West**

Trump's belligerence on Greenland is splitting the Western alliance. Depending on what he does, Nato could collapse. Thing is, many MAGA heavyweights will relish that

Rashmee Roshan Lall

Several months after a chilling scenario about possible Russian aggression in Europe became a bestseller, it may be time to update both cast and script. The book, by German international relations professor Carlo Masala, is titled *If Russia Wins: A Scenario*. Set in 2028, it imagines the audacious Russian military takeover of a small town in Estonia some years after Ukraine has been strong-armed into an unfair peace agreement. Not only does the plot affirm Russia's dastardly intentions towards the Baltic states and Europe, it serves as a test of Nato. It fails. Though collective defence is a founding principle of the 32-member military alliance, Nato offers no pushback.

Fast forward to 2026. Trump's desire to seize Greenland is roiling transatlantic trade and politics. Trump restated his "psychological" need for the world's largest island soon after the Jan 3 kidnapping of Venezuela's president and capture of its oil reserves. By mid-Jan, the US president's focus on Greenland has begun to seem deadly serious, even sinister. White House says the acquisition of Greenland is a "national security priority of the United States" and the use of military means is "always an option".

Trump issues steep rising scale of extra tariffs on seven EU countries and UK for opposing his wish to take Greenland. Europeans bristle and call the act and its intention "unacceptable" and "completely wrong". EU leaders continue to offer a verbal defence of mineral-rich Greenland's settled status as an autonomous territory of Denmark. They stress the need to uphold the UN Charter, not least "sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders," which a top Trump aide dismisses as "international niceties".

EU and Britain have even despatched small numbers of troops to the ice-covered island as a symbolic show of Nato's resolve to protect Greenland. The stated enemy is Russia. Sotto voce, European officials and diplomats start to whisper the unsayable: the American threat. Cue an updated alternative book title to that bestseller on malign Russia: *If Rogue America Wins*.

For the first time since 2019, when Trump's wish to buy

Greenland was greeted with gales of laughter, the mood has turned sombre. The frozen Arctic island with an ironic name genuinely seems under threat. In a strange and scary twist, it comes from US – Nato and Europe's main security guarantor and keystone of the rules-based international order set up after World War II.

For, it's entirely plausible that US could take a slice of territory in Europe without a single shot being fired. It could just despatch troop reinforcements – a few thousand extra personnel – to the existing US Pituffik Space Base on Greenland's northwest coast. Last March, Trump told Congress that US troops



might just show up on Greenland one day. In a scenario reportedly gamed out by Danish officials, Trump could lay claim to Greenland by simply announcing via a late-night Truth Social post that the territory is now an American "protectorate".

Britain has begun to worry that Trump may champion his buddy Javier Milei's demands the Falkland Islands be handed over to Argentina some 44 years after winning a 10-week war to repulse Argentine invasion of the British territory.

Unsurprisingly, Thucydides' famous quote is trending, even among those who know nothing about the Peloponnesian war: The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. It says something that Trump plans to soon start building a triumphal arch in Washington DC, loosely modelled on European

victory monuments from a bygone age. He fancies himself in the mould of the late-19th century president William McKinley, who led a sustained bout of American expansionism with the annexation of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, Philippines and American Samoa.

Is it a given that European countries, colonisers of yesterday, are forced to submit to a new imperial order? Only if they did nothing at all. A massive military defence of Greenland appears unlikely, a point on which both Trump's aides and Danish legislators seem to agree. White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller has already contemptuously ruled out the need for force because "nobody's going to fight the United States militarily over the future of Greenland". And a Danish lawmaker recently said it was absurd to even consider defending against invasion of an enormous island of ice, nearly four times the size of France.

But it's not like Europe has no leverage. Jeremy Cliffe of the European Council on Foreign Relations has argued for "threatening Trump with serious deterrent measures, and if necessary implementing them". Cliffe suggests "tariffs, taxes and bans on US firms; sell-offs of US Treasuries; expulsions of American troops; sanctions on individuals".

Others on the continent are starting to speak in warlike terms once considered unthinkable for longstanding Western allies: Remove the nearly 70,000 US troops stationed across Europe; close some military installations; refuse to refuel US ships at European ports.

A parallel PR operation aimed at ordinary Americans – many of whom cherish their European heritage – could help. While MAGA ideologues might be pleased to see Nato dead, Average Joe may not be thrilled at the prospect of hostilities with the British, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and others.

The danger in letting Trump get Greenland "one way or the other", to use his words, is it sets off a chain reaction. Rogue America wins. So does Russia, as the bestseller posited. US, Russia and China carve up spheres of influence to mutual satisfaction.

And who's to say Trump won't someday be minded to turn a greedy gaze on Scotland's Isle of Lewis, where his mother was born and raised before she immigrated to US? And a new international disorder would become the way of the world.

'Anti-Hindu bias? Wikipedia is led by its volunteers'

Maryana Iskander, outgoing CEO of Wikimedia Foundation – that runs Wikipedia – talks to **Himanshi Dhawan** about duelling with the challenges of neutrality and content reliability

Online encyclopedia Wikipedia completed 25 years last week. It has grown to include more than 65mn articles – written by nearly 250,000 global volunteers including over 10,500 in India. It was recently critiqued by some commentators in India for its "anti-Hindu bias".

• **What has been your biggest learning and challenge in running Wikipedia?**

When I first started as CEO four years ago, I realised that Wikipedia was a digital wonder of the world, unlike anything else. That perception has only grown, and it is because of the people – the volunteers and staff – behind it. Wikipedia shows that people can come together to share information and reach consensus based on facts. It has faced countless challenges and endured by keeping its mission and values as the north star. Through it all, it has remained human, transparent, and for the public good. I'm certain that whatever lies

ahead, Wikipedia and its community will keep on doing what they do best: providing reliable, trustworthy, human-created and moderated knowledge for all. One of my main takeaways is that Wikipedia's future depends on all of us. Each of us has a role to play in protecting it for the long term and shaping the future internet we want to see.

• **How has Wikipedia grown in India?**

India contributes the fifth highest number of views to Wikipedia in the world, with about 800mn page views per month. India has the third largest number of contributors to the English edition after US and UK. On average, between Jan 2024 and Nov 2025, Wikipedia (across all 300+ languages) was viewed 798,424,226 times and edited by 10,520 contributors every month in India.

• **How is the platform addressing fake news and content reliability?**

Wikipedia is a living encyclopedia that is always improving. For 25 years, its global volunteers' community



has moderated content and set policies to ensure that information on the platform is fact-based, neutral, and based on reliable sources. Together, their unique, collaborative systems have helped to effectively combat misinformation on the site. Volunteers vigilantly defend against information that does not meet the site's policies. If flawed information is added, hundreds of thousands of volunteer editors quickly fact-check, debate, and correct it transparently. The whole process of content moderation is open and transparent. Everything from the way an article grows and evolves over time, the citations used to verify the facts, content discussions amongst editors, are all publicly available on the article's history and talk pages.

• **How would you respond to complaints of anti-Hindu bias and inaccuracies?**

Neutrality is one of its most fundamental principles, which means always striving to write articles based on reliable sources, fairly, proportionally and without bias. Its volunteer editors welcome feedback – if there are articles where we're not getting it quite right, they say, please jump in and help us! I encourage anyone with concerns to engage constructively to report violations or make suggested changes.

• **At a time when public discourse has become increasingly divisive, how do you ensure that content is representative of diverse views?**

Wikipedia is an encyclopedia written to inform, not persuade. It is not about promoting any specific point of view, but about delivering reliable knowledge written by people, and guided by clear policies and open governance based on neutrality and reliability. It demonstrates how many people from all walks of life can effectively reach consensus based on facts. Studies have shown that when a larger number of volunteer editors contribute to an article from diverse backgrounds it produces higher quality articles. Anyone can join as a volunteer. We encourage readers to engage as editors on the project.

• **But it reflects a predominantly white-male point of view.**

Closing knowledge gaps is an important priority to ensure that we are sharing the sum of all knowledge. Many communities have been left out of historical narratives and traditional sources of knowledge – an issue that many institutions and publications today are trying to address. We are working to create better support mechanisms for underrepresented voices, including training programmes, partnerships, and dedicated grants to strengthen participation from underrepresented communities.

• **Wiki paused AI summaries in June last year. How are you planning to use AI in the future?**

We have been exploring ways to make Wikimedia projects more accessible to readers globally, including through opt-in experiments such as the AI summaries, which had a focus on making complex Wikipedia articles more accessible to people with different reading levels. Our usual process includes discussing with volunteers to make decisions on whether and how to proceed with building features. It is common to receive a variety of feedback from volunteers, and we incorporate it in our decisions, and sometimes change course – this is what continues to make it a truly collaborative platform.

Calvin & Hobbes**Invoking Ram Is Not Religious But A Moral Imperative**

Acharya Lokesh

When I think of Ram, I do not see a distant deity sitting on a throne in heaven. I see a human being who chose the harder path when the easier one was available. And in that choice lies the real secret of Ram.

In today's world, we are surrounded by choices – convenience or conscience, success or integrity, comfort or courage. Ram teaches us that dharma is not something we speak about; it is something we walk, often silently, sometimes painfully, but always sincerely.

Ram could have stayed in the palace. He could have questioned his exile. He could have protected his privilege. Instead, he chose to protect a promise. That single decision makes him eternal.

Ramayan is not only a story of battles and kingdoms. It is the story of a man who refused to betray his values, even when it cost him everything. Ram shows us that strength does not lie in domination but in restraint. Real power is the ability to remain gentle when one has the right to be harsh.

This is why, even today, remembering Ram is not just a religious act – it is a moral one. When we bring his story into public spaces, we are not performing ritual; we are rebuilding ethical memory.

Every person today is fighting an unseen war – anxiety, anger, insecurity, and loneliness. Ramayan tells us that the real Lanka is not outside; it is within. Ram is not just a character; he

is the ego that kidnaps our peace.

Ram's journey is a soul's journey to reclaim harmony. When he walks through forests, he walks through wilderness of the mind. When he defeats Ravan, he is reminding us that no darkness, however powerful, is permanent. This is why Ram katha is not nostalgia, it is therapy for the soul.

Ram's relationship with Sita is one of deep respect, not possession. She is not an ornament of his kingdom, but the strength of his soul. Through her courage and grace, we learn that true spirituality honours the dignity of every being. A society that forgets this dignity loses its moral foundation – no matter how advanced it becomes.

In a restless world, people are



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacredspace

Do you want to make progress? If so, then take each problem not as a challenging rival, but as an encouraging friend of yours, who is helping you to arrive

DECCAN Chronicle

19 JANUARY 2026

Stop using 'infiltrators' issue in poll campaign

Elections are occasions for political parties to present their points of view before the people and appeal for their votes, but some find them an occasion to drive home a message of hatred between people. Othering of people under one pretext or another is sadly an effective ploy that parties with communal agendas have been successfully implementing to strengthen their side and ride to power.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP are no strangers to this tactic, either, as they have in fact perfected it and have been successfully deploying it from the start. Mr Modi's statements directed at so-called "infiltrators" in West Bengal, which is going to elect an Assembly in a few months, are aimed to portray the state as a safe haven for Bangladeshi illegal immigrants who cross the border into Indian territory for various reasons, mostly economic.

It is curious that the Prime Minister, who sits at the top of a mammoth mechanism protecting the border, forgets his position and blames the state's politicians who have very little role in it. It may be remembered that the Border Security Force tasked to guard the border with Bangladesh comes under the Union home ministry which works under the overall policy guidelines of the Prime Minister and hence the responsibility for lapses, if any, must be laid at the Prime Minister's table.

Mr Modi's averments would have been credible had he taken steps to stop infiltration, identified law breakers and sent them back to their homes. Using them as a bogey to attack rivals during electioneering does not behove him.

Mr Modi's averments would have an element of credibility had he taken steps to stop infiltration, identified law breakers and sent them back to their homes. Using them as a bogey to attack political enemies during electioneering does not behove him.

Mr Modi has hinted at a dangerous possibility, too. In his eagerness to appeal to the hardliners within his party, he has promised to take "big action" against "infiltration" after the BJP comes to power in the state and cited the example of the West. If Mr Modi has in mind the model of US President Donald Trump and his actions against illegal aliens, then it will set a dangerous precedent for India.

The illegal, even murderous, tactics officials of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement of that country employ against those whom they suspect are undocumented people have raised a storm for them to negate every single value the US claims it represents. The murder of a citizen and the torture of even American Indians under questionable circumstances have raised a big stink over the legality and credentials of the very drive Mr Trump has initiated. India cannot afford to witness a similar unleashing of governmental high-handedness here.

The Prime Minister is used to referring to the term, "demographic change", while campaigning in border states but this time he has even referred to "changes in appearances and habits of people" and "differences in languages and tones". These are incendiary words. No one will have an objection to the Union government moving legally and systematically and stop infiltration, but attempts to put certain sections of the people under the cloud of suspicion and putting one group of citizens against another are equally unacceptable.

Infiltration and its impact are issues of national importance; reducing them to electioneering topics is a disservice to the country.

IndiGo action: Too little, too late

Airline regulator Directorate General of Civil Aviation's (DGCA) decision to impose financial penalties of over Rs 22 crore on InterGlobe Aviation, the operator of IndiGo, for the massive disruption in December, is a classic case of regulatory action that is too little and too late. The airline's operational collapse — over 2,500 flight cancellations and nearly 1,850 delays — stranded and distressed lakhs of passengers, disrupted business schedules, cancelled marriages and projected an image of systemic dysfunction in the aviation sector.

According to the inquiry committee, the primary causes for the disruption were over-optimisation of operations and inadequate preparedness, along with deficiencies in system software support for the revised Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) provisions, and shortcomings in IndiGo's operational control. In a capital-intensive, price-elastic sector such as aviation, where several airlines have gone bankrupt, is operational optimisation inherently a flaw — or a commercial necessity? Did the civil aviation ministry inquire with airlines about their preparedness before implementing revised FDTL norms? More importantly, why did the regulator fail to detect systemic weaknesses in operational control?

When a single privately run airline, whose management's primary goal is to make a profit for its shareholders, controls about 65 per cent of domestic air traffic, its failure ceases to be a private corporate lapse and becomes a national vulnerability. But officials allowed such concentration to persist without implementing robust stress-testing of systems.

Regulators are not meant to be reactive agencies that take action after damage has been done. The regulators must think like chess players, anticipating the second- and third-order consequences of every policy change and every step taken by the dominant player. But the aviation regulator was sleeping on the job.

Closing the December crisis with a financial penalty alone, therefore, would be a regulatory failure. The logical conclusion to this crisis is long-term reform of oversight, of market concentration norms and regulatory practices.

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Subhani



INSV Kaundinya defines India's maritime region

Sanjaya Baru

Sanjayovacha

I've been interested in Sanjeev Sanyal's stitched ship project from day one, and not just because Kaundinya happened to be my mother's *gotra*. Sanyal deserves fulsome praise for his intellectual curiosity, initiative and enterprise. Inspired by the depiction of a sailing ship in a painting in the Buddhist cave temples at Ajanta, Sanyal set out to prove that ancient Indians could build a ship with wood, rope and resin and make it sail across the waters around the sub-continent.

Half a century ago the Indian Navy commissioned Admiral K. Sridharan to record this history in his book *A Maritime History of India* (1982). Sridharan points to maritime links of Indian kingdoms both on the west coast, in Gujarat and Malabar, and the east coast, all the way down the Coromandel (Koramangala) Coast dating back to over two thousand years. A vibrant ship-building industry thrived both in Gujarat and in the Andhra region and these vessels could travel both to the Arab coast to the west and the Indonesian coasts to the east.

The maritime historian K.M. Panikar noted in his 1945 monograph, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (1945): "Millennia before Columbus sailed the Atlantic and Magellan crossed the Pacific, the Indian Ocean had become an active thoroughfare of commercial and cultural traffic." Several historians, including Ashin Dasgupta, Sinnappah Arasaratnam, K.N. Chaudhuri, Kanakalata Mukund and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, have written about the Indian sub-continent's maritime links with its wider Asian neighbourhood.

The European historian Fernand Braudel notes in his tome, *Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th to 18th Century: The Perspective of the World*, that the Indian Ocean region — from the Arab coast to the South China Sea — was the "greatest of all the world economies" of the pre-industrial, pre-capitalist era. "The relationship between these huge areas," wrote Braudel, "was the result of a series of pendulum movements of greater or lesser strength, either side of the centrally positioned Indian subcontinent.... Through all these vicissitudes however, India maintained her central position: her merchants in Gujarat and on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts prevailed for centuries against their many competitors — the Arab traders of the Red Sea, the Persian merchants of the Gulf, or the Chinese merchants."

European colonialism altered the nature of India's relationship with the waters around it. They ceased to be a bridge to prosperity and became a route to the deindustrialisation and destruction of Indian economy. Since European conquest came via the sea, much of the discourse on the sea focused excessively on maritime security and defence, to the relative neglect of its economic potential.

Given the nature of colonial commerce and the dominant thinking around the world on the role of trade in development, independent India turned inwards on the economic front and forsook its maritime potential.

The nascent Indian ship-building industry died a slow death. In 1950 India had a bigger ship-building industry than South Korea. A decade later it was all but dead despite the fact that the Second Five-Year Plan, which laid the foundations of industrial development, envisaged further development of a nascent ship-building industry.

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ter on transport outlined the objectives for the ship-building industry as follows: (a) To cater fully for the needs of coastal trade with due regard to the possibility of diverting some traffic from the railways to coastal shipping; (b) To secure an increasing share of India's overseas trade for Indian ships; and (c) To build up the nucleus of a tanker fleet.

However, the development of ship-building and development of ports and harbours was constrained by the limited requirements of an inward-oriented industrial and external trade policy. India's inward-orientation on the economic front lasted for close to four decades during which maritime commerce and the maritime economy never entered the imagination of India's economic planners and maritime strategists.

It is only after 1991, when Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao opened up the economy to foreign trade, that both the maritime economy and India's naval capability secured policy attention.

Under successive Prime Ministers greater attention has been paid to the need to bolster India's maritime capability. This has been sustained both by the fact that India's share of world trade has increased over the past three decades and by the need to acquire better naval defence capability.

It is only recently that India is focused on the potential of the "Blue Economy", on Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA) and has an Indian Ocean strategy named SAGAR — security and growth for all in the region complemented by a port development programme called "Sagar-mala". Defence minister

The Second Plan's chap-

Rajnath Singh made an interesting remark in his address to the Naval Commanders Conference, referring to India as an "island state with land borders". For a North Indian politician to articulate this view is a welcome departure from an obsession with land neighbours.

INSV Kaundinya's successful sailing calls attention to not just the long history of Indian maritime capability but also the contemporary importance of maritime neighbours in defining the Indian neighbourhood. Two decades ago, I had questioned the external affairs ministry's definition of India's neighbourhood that remains largely defined by land connectivity.

The only change made by the Narendra Modi government to the limited perspective offered by the "Neighbourhood First" policy has been to exclude Pakistan and include Myanmar and Thailand by replacing Saarc with Bimstec.

I have long urged a more expansive view of neighbourhood that includes Indonesia to the east, a mere 80 nautical miles away from Indian territory, and Oman to the west. It is useful to remember that the Indian cultural footprint remains firmly embedded in both these maritime neighbours.

A deeper awareness of this neighbourhood and its interaction with the Indian sub-continent is also important for crafting domestic politics and policy at home. The inclusive and plural definition of India as home to a multiplicity of religions, languages and ethnicities makes it easier for it to deal with a neighbourhood that includes Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic neighbours.

Both Indonesia and Oman have retained Indian cultural footprints and have not shied away from the history of their Hindu inheritance.

It is only a multi-religious, pluralistic India that can proudly and rightly lay claim to the history of ancient civilisations and interactions.

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

LETTERS

COST OF FREEBIES

With AIADMK unveiling its promises of increasing the Magalir Urimai Thogai by Rs 1000/- and offering free travel for men, the ensuing TN Assembly elections will surely witness the raining of freebies. The offer of freebies will ultimately cause severe stress on the state's finances. In effect, the party secures the victory at the cost of the public funds and amounts to squandering away of scarce revenues. The situation may come to such a dangerous pass that to infuse funds back to the public exchequer, the rulers will have to resort to the inevitability of increasing the prices.

JALLIKATTU SAFETY

Recently three people including a spectator were killed in separate Manjuvittu events in Tamil Nadu. Every year we lose a few precious lives in Jallikattu where each death brings great sorrow and pain to the concerned family. Though the Supreme Court allows the controversial bull taming with a few guidelines, the authorities should focus on more safety procedures to prevent deaths, atleast among spectators who should be behind impregnable barricades. There should also be a strict ban on the practice of awarding fancy prizes such as cars, motorcycles and even government jobs to draw the attention of more youth to the risk taking game.

P. Victor Selvaraj, Palayamkottai

ENCROACHED LAND

It is not only shocking but unfortunate that the Supreme Court has stayed a verdict by Madras High Court permitting the Tamil Nadu government to recover 31.37 acres of government lands encroached by SASTRA Deemed University in Thanjavur almost 30 years ago. When the TN government finally succeeded after 40 years of struggle to retrieve the lands from the university, the stay on the Madras High Court orders by the Supreme Court came as a great blow to them. When it was brought to the notice of the judges of the Supreme Court that showing leniency to SASTRA, the encroacher would open a pandora box and there is a risk of many encroachers of government lands finding shelter under their recent stay order to be followed by their verdict, they have said that in the case of SASTRA, the lands were being used for education, which is on a different footing from a commercial site.

Tharcius S. Fernando, Chennai

Chandrakant Lahariya

Antibiotics must be protected to ensure the healthy future of planet

The discovery of penicillin, followed by the introduction of other antibiotics, revolutionised medical science and is widely regarded as the greatest medical breakthrough of the twentieth century. Antibiotics transformed once-fatal infections into curable conditions and made modern medicine possible. It is estimated antibiotics alone increased average life expectancy by nearly 23 years.

Yet, in less than a century since the most widely recognised antibiotic (penicillin) was discovered in 1928, a new and grave crisis emerged. Bacteria are increasingly becoming resistant to the antibiotics available to us. Medicines that were effective just a few decades ago often fail to treat the same infections today. This is known as "antimicrobial resistance" (AMR). WHO has listed AMR as among the top 10 global threats to public health.

This has also led to the emergence of so-called "superbugs" (bacteria that don't respond to most antibiotics). When antibiotics fail, even simple infections become difficult to treat. Routine medical procedures like surgeries, chemotherapy, or care for premature newborns become far riskier. Hospital stays grow longer, treatment costs increase and the burden on health systems intensifies.

The causes of this crisis are largely human-made. The most important driver is the overuse and misuse of antibiotics. In India, antibiotics are often prescribed and consumed for viral illnesses like the common cold, cough or seasonal fever — on which these drugs have no

effect. Antibiotics are prescription-only medicines, but are commonly sold as over the counter without prescriptions. Many people start antibiotics on the advice of chemists, neighbours or by using leftover medicines from previous illnesses. Each such misuse gives bacteria an opportunity to adapt, survive and become stronger. Often, antibiotics are prescribed unnecessarily due to diagnostic uncertainty, patient pressure or fear of complications, where follow-up care is difficult. Many patients demand antibiotics from doctors.

Another major factor is the extensive use of antibiotics in animals and agriculture. They are often given to livestock in high doses to promote faster growth in animal farms or to prevent disease in crowded farming conditions. Resistant bacteria that develop in animals do not remain confined to farms. They spread to humans through food, water and the environment. Poor waste management further worsens the problem. Antibiotic residues and resistant microbes from hospitals, pharmaceutical manufacturing units, farms and households enter rivers, soil and groundwater, eventually finding their way into the food chain. This creates ideal conditions for resistance to spread silently and persistently.

The economic and social consequences of antimicrobial resistance are severe. WHO estimates that if current trends continue unchecked, antibiotic resistance could claim up to 10 million lives globally each year by 2050 and result in economic losses exceeding \$10 trillion. In India alone, it is estimated that around 2.6 lakh deaths in 2021 were associated with infections where

antibiotics were ineffective due to resistance. A multicentre study across 10 Indian hospitals found that patients infected with multidrug-resistant bacteria were nearly twice as likely to die as those individuals with infections susceptible to the available drugs.

The impact of this challenge is worse on middle-income and lower-income groups. With a large share of healthcare costs in India paid out of pocket, resistant infections often lead to repeated hospital visits, prolonged illness, loss of wages and catastrophic medical expenditure. For many families, what begins as a simple infection can spiral into debt and long-term financial insecurity. Antimicrobial resistance is not just a policy or public health issue; it is a direct threat to individual households and livelihoods.

Globally, countries are beginning to recognise the gravity of this threat. Several high-income nations have strengthened surveillance systems to track resistance patterns, enforced strict regulations on antibiotic use, and invested heavily in research to develop new drugs and alternative therapies. India, too, has initiated policy-level responses, but much more must be done. Antibiotics must be sold strictly against valid prescriptions, and pharmacies should be regularly monitored and held accountable.

However, policies alone will not succeed without public awareness and responsible behaviour. There are a few critical messages that every citizen should know. Preventing infections through hand hygiene, safe drinking water, vaccination, and good nutrition is one of the

most effective ways to reduce the need for antibiotics. People should proactively inform their doctors about all medicines they are taking, including antibiotics. Antibiotics should never be started without medical advice, never shared and never reused. Even when prescribed by a doctor, antibiotics should not be stopped early or altered without consultation, and the full course should be completed. Medicines prescribed for past illnesses should not be used again for similar symptoms, as the cause may be different and bacterial and viral infections may have the same symptoms. There is no role of antibiotics against viral infections.

It is important to remember antibiotic resistance is not new. Bacteria carrying resistance genes have been found in samples dating back nearly 30,000 years. Resistance to medicines is a natural survival mechanism of pathogens. What is new and deeply alarming, is the speed at which resistance is spreading today — driven almost entirely by human misuse of antibiotics. This means the crisis is not inevitable; it is preventable. While the world urgently needs new antibiotics, it also needs to use existing ones wisely. Drug development is not keeping pace with rising resistance. The goal must be not only to cure infections today but to ensure that these life-saving medicines remain effective for our children and grandchildren. The choices we make will determine the future.

Dr Chandrakant Lahariya is a leading practising physician and health policy specialist

Legal tangle

Investment requires long-term certainty

The recent Supreme Court judgment in the matter involving the Indian tax authorities and Tiger Global and others (assessees) is being seen as a landmark in India's tax jurisprudence. It is likely to have a significant bearing on existing foreign investments in India and future inflows. The matter is related to Tiger Global's Mauritius-based entities selling shares in Flipkart, which was incorporated in Singapore and had business and assets in India. The shares were sold at the time when Walmart Inc, incorporated in the United States, bought a majority stake in Flipkart. The assesses approached the Indian tax authorities, seeking an exemption from tax on gains. However, the tax authorities noted that the assesses were not eligible for exemption under the India-Mauritius Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA). After years of legal contestation, the Supreme Court last week upheld the position of the tax authorities.

The India-Mauritius DTAA has been under scrutiny since it was signed in 1982. It was always seen as a route to avoid tax. The DTAA and the related provisions were amended over time to reduce tax avoidance, but the latest judgment might completely shut this route. When the assesses in this matter approached the Authority for Advance Rulings (AAR), it concluded that the transaction was designed to avoid tax. The AAR found that management control of the companies concerned was not with the board of directors in Mauritius. It further ruled that an exemption under the DTAA was granted to residents of Mauritius for gains arising from the sale of shares in Indian companies. In this case, gains arose from the sale of a Singapore entity. Therefore, it did not qualify for exemption. The Delhi High Court, however, rejected the AAR conclusions, but its verdict, in turn, was overturned by the Supreme Court last week.

Several issues have arisen after the Supreme Court judgment. There is no dispute on India protecting its tax sovereignty. However, it is worth asking whether different interpretations of existing laws and conventions or retrospective reading of the laws, should be allowed to disturb the investment environment. In principle, based on existing laws and conventions, an entity invests in a particular jurisdiction. Thus, is it fair or in the country's interests to reprimand existing investors with a different interpretation of the facts? To be fair, large global entities do structure their transactions in a way to reduce tax liabilities. However, if a country is not comfortable with such arrangements, it must close loopholes prospectively.

A retrospective reading of the law seriously affects the business environment. In the present case, for instance, the validity of the tax residency certificate has been questioned, which means revisiting a longstanding convention. Further, grandfathering provisions were also rejected by the Supreme Court on the grounds that while the shares were acquired in the prior period, the sale happened after the general anti-avoidance rules and provisions came into force. This again is debatable. It is also worth highlighting that in his concurring judgment, one of the judges penned an advisory on tax sovereignty and how India should enter into tax treaties with other countries. It must be noted in this regard that the executive, under the powers provided by the law, is best positioned to decide on the kind of agreement to have with any country at any given point in time. It is also best placed to determine the right balance between attracting investments and maximising tax revenue. However, agreements must be adhered to in both letter and spirit, and not be sacrificed for maximising short-term revenue.

A year of disruption

Donald Trump's first year has unleashed chaos globally

The first year of United States (US) President Donald Trump's second term has been far more tumultuous and eventful than was the equivalent period of his earlier term (2017-21). In 2017, when he first took office, Mr Trump was hamstrung by being relatively unprepared, with a minimal set agenda and an administration that was nominally supportive but staffed in many places with old-line Republicans who were not completely on board with his agenda and mistrustful of his instincts. This has not been the case in his second term. He has tamed the Republican Party and turned even those who were critical of him once, such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice-President J D Vance, into strong supporters.

The President himself has been far more radical, resentful of the cases levelled against him in his time out of office and very willing to test and even break the bounds of presidential powers. The results domestically for the US have been dire indeed, with institutions such as the Federal Reserve besieged and likely to fall, and entire cities like Minneapolis thrown into chaos by the presence of unmarked, ununiformed, and apparently unaccountable federal agents terrorising their populations. Mr Trump openly speaks about the chances of an unconstitutional third term, various agencies of the US federal government openly hint at a white nationalist agenda in their messaging. His senior advisor Stephen Miller has argued in public that not just immigrants but also the children of immigrants are unwelcome in America.

For the rest of the world, the impact of the first year of the second Trump presidency has been similarly consequential. The President has used tariffs and market access as a brute-force club with which to try and beat allies and rivals alike into submission. He has gone out of his way to alienate those who have long been the US' closest supporters, such as Canada and European countries. In the past week alone, he has threatened a military takeover of Danish territory, forcing Europe to discuss how it could protect itself against its treaty ally, and the Canadian Prime Minister has signalled that his country is moving significantly closer to China in order to deal with the consequences of an unfriendly US. The global efforts to control climate change have been a particular target of the administration's ire: Domestic efforts to build renewable-energy capacity have been rolled back, the US has left the Paris Agreement, and, most recently, it exited multiple international bodies and frameworks, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The global economy exists in a state of uncertainty and confusion.

Some in India, when Mr Trump was re-elected, welcomed his arrival. They hoped a US that was more realist and transactional, and less moral and ideological, would be a fit partner for India. Such beliefs were soon laid bare. If anything, India has been a particular target for Mr Trump and his officials. The country has been exposed to the highest tariff rates currently applied, and attempts to negotiate a trade deal have run up against the wall of the President's disregard. The question now is not how bilateral relations will improve under Mr Trump but what New Delhi can do to ensure that this partnership survives his presidency.

A blockbuster memoirist returns to China



LAUREN HILGERS

In February 1988, when Jung Chang was 35 years old, her mother made a visit to London from Chengdu, China, after months spent wrangling the permissions for a travel visa. Chang had been living outside China for nearly a decade, working as a linguist, and left her mother alone during the day with a tape recorder set up at the dining table next to a bouquet of early daffodils.

The older woman spent weeks recounting family stories that spanned nearly a century: invasions, wars,

famine. By the end of that summer, she had produced 60 hours of tape covering seven decades of political and social upheaval. It seemed to Chang at the time that her mother "knew writing was where my talent, and my heart, lay, and was encouraging me to fulfill myself by supplying me with material."

Over the following decades, Chang went on to become one of the world's most influential and popular chroniclers of China's modern history. Her memoir debut, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, was published in 1991 to international acclaim, eventually selling over 15 million copies in more than 40 languages.

Wild Swans began with Chang's grandmother - once a concubine to a Northern Chinese warlord - and recounted her mother's work as a communist spy, her parents' life as party officials during the famine of the Great Leap Forward and her own days as a

student and Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution.

Chang's mother, De-hong, was the linchpin of that book, daring, savvy and warm. "My father's devotion to communism was absolute," Chang wrote. De-hong, however, was different. "Her commitment was tempered by both reason and emotion. She gave a space to the private; my father did not."

Now, Chang has written an epilogue of sorts to *Wild Swans* and to her life's work. *Fly, Wild Swans: My Mother, Myself and China* operates as several things: An account of her journey as a writer, a chance to correct the record and a paean to her mother. There is little revelation to be found here in Chang's reflections on modern China, but for those versed in her family history, this updated account is illuminating even as it retreats familiar ground.

After a brief prologue, the book opens with a swift recap of the events covered

in *Wild Swans* and then pivots to Chang's arrival in London in 1978 at age 26 as a university student - an experience she compares to "landing on Mars."

Despite being heavily chaperoned, Chang tests the boundaries of her freedom there - with the encouragement of her mother, who always seems to know when to push her daughter and when to let her make her own decisions.

Chang continued to research and write after the success of *Wild Swans*, and in this new account she revisits some of the controversies that followed her assertion, for example, in 2005's *Mao: The Unknown Story*, which she co-wrote with her Anglo-Irish husband, Jon Halliday, that a particularly famous episode in the Long March, the Battle of Luding Bridge, was not much of a battle at all.

Meetings and interviews with former Red Guards and party officials stand

alongside the events of Chang's expatriate life: Love affairs, struggles with cancer, visits to her mother. Chang is not an overtly introspective memoirist, but she returns frequently to the shifting standards of personal freedom in her own world and the one she left behind. While Chang researched the biography of Mao, she writes, "the regime was of course watching me, but the surveillance was discreet."

Chang published two more books after *Mao: The Unknown Story*, but these take up only a small part of *Fly, Wild Swans*. The account of her writing life shifts, toward the end of the book, to focus on the increasingly controlling leadership in Beijing. In 2018, President Xi Jinping announced that "slander" of any national heroes could result in imprisonment. Chang began to suspect she was being monitored even

outside China.

In *Wild Swans*, Chang recounted a delusion her grandmother suffered shortly before her death in 1969, imagining a denunciation meeting in which she recalled being forced to stand on a small table facing an angry crowd. "It was as though," she writes, "she felt in her own body and soul every bit of the pain that my mother suffered."

Decades later, facing her own death, Chang's mother must also consider political realities. In a moment of weakness, De-hong begs her daughter to return to her in China. And then she remembers herself. "Do your own things well and be happy, and I'm happy," she tells Chang. "Don't come back for this."

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The value of the Mauritius treaty

High private investment requires sound tax policy and the rule of law

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY KUMAR MOHANTY



Recent developments regarding the India-Mauritius tax treaty have once again brought the foundational principles of cross-border taxation into sharp focus. A recent ruling, which emphasises that tax authorities can look beyond the tax-residency certificate (TRC) to deny treaty benefits, has generated fresh anxiety among global investors. The deeper issue lies in India's shifting stance on the taxation of capital and the preservation of the rule of law. To understand the gravity of this moment, we must look beyond the daily news cycle to the foundations: How tax policy shapes economic growth.

In international trade, we have achieved intellectual clarity through value-added tax (VAT). VAT operates on the destination principle. Exports are zero-rated, ensuring that Indian steel leaves our borders free of domestic taxes, carrying the market price and devoid of all indirect taxes. Imports are taxed at the same rate as domestic goods. This ensures neutrality: The tax system does not distort the choice between an Indian product and a foreign one. A similar philosophy is seen in the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM): Each country chooses its own carbon tax rate, but international trade is not distorted. Such neutrality is essential for harnessing globalisation.

When this reasoning is applied to finance, such neutrality requires "residence-based taxation". Income from capital is taxed in the hands of the recipient, in their country of residence, not at the source where the investment is made. If a United States (US) pension fund invests in India, the returns should be

taxed in the US, not in India.

This is not merely a theoretical preference; it is a strategic necessity for a capital-scarce economy. India requires a vast amount of capital to fund economic growth, which calls for foreign capital. Global capital seeks the highest post-tax risk-adjusted return. If India imposes source-based taxation — taxing foreign investors at our borders — we reduce their post-tax returns. To compensate for this tax cost, global investors

demand a higher pre-tax return from Indian assets. Investment projects that would be viable at a 10 per cent cost of capital become unviable at 14 per cent. Source-based taxation acts as a tariff on capital, creating a friction at the border that retards investment, increases costs for Indian firms, and slows growth in gross domestic product (GDP). Ideally, India would have a low or zero tax rate on capital domestically to encourage capital deepening also. But even without that, adhering to residence-based taxation for foreign investors is critical.

For many years, we achieved this outcome through a "second-best" institutional arrangement. We utilised tax treaties to achieve de facto residence-based taxation.

There is a healthy role for hypocrisy in public affairs. In electoral democracies, populist rhetoric frequently demands that the state "tax the rich" or "tax foreigners". However, the adults in the room understand that we have to create conditions for economic efficiency. Hence, the edifice of global capitalism often runs through efficient taxation obtained



AJAY SHAH & RENUKA SANE

through tax-neutral conduits. Successful countries have generally managed a nice hypocrisy of saying populist things in public while ensuring that the world economy is properly organised through such mechanisms. In similar fashion, the Mauritius route allowed India to have residence-based taxation, ensuring that despite the vagaries of domestic tax policy, the cost of capital in India stayed down.

This equilibrium required legal certainty. The bedrock of this certainty was the Supreme Court judgment in the Azadi Bachao Andolan case, and the principles articulated by Justice B N Srikrishna. The standard was clear: A valid TRC issued by the Mauritian government was final. The Indian tax officer could not go behind this document to question the investor's status.

This framework began to unravel in 2016. The tax treaty was amended to include a Limitation of Benefits (LOB) clause. While the stated intent was to curb abuse, the amendment fundamentally altered the rules of engagement. It replaced the objective standard of the TRC with subjective tests regarding the commercial substance of the entity. This shift empowered the tax department to "look through" the residency certificate. The recent ruling is the consequence of this shift, where the TRC is no longer a shield against the investigatory powers of the taxman. The mistakes of 2016 have come back to haunt us in 2026.

The 2016 shift coincides with broader difficulties in private investment. The structural break in foreign ownership of listed Indian companies is striking. Foreign ownership rose from 8.38 per cent in 2000-01 to a peak of 19.19 per cent in 2015-16. Since then, this metric has stagnated and reversed. By 2024-25, foreign ownership had dropped to 16.04 per cent. In a successful emerging market, we expect "home bias" to decline over time. As the economy matures and integrates with the world, the share of foreign ownership in equity assets should steadily rise. But it hasn't.

The judiciary needs to act as a check on executive overreach. The essence of the rule of law is predictability. When courts reopen settled questions or allow the retrospective application of new standards, they increase the ex ante risk of investing in India. A foreign investor today must price in not only the business risk but also the risk that the tax treaty signed today will be reinterpreted tomorrow. We are now in the grip of tax authorities who have weak knowledge of economic growth, and a judicial system which has failed to uphold the sanctity of contracts and the fidelity of the TRC.

A country cannot be better than its thinkers. Four policy projects should be high on the agenda of the people who care about Indian economic growth: Remove customs tariffs, remove blockages of input credit in goods and services tax, get to a carbon tax, and get to residence-based taxation. This understanding must diffuse into the bureaucracy, the revenue department, and the judiciary.

The authors are, respectively, researcher, XKDR Forum, and managing director, TrustBridge Rule of Law Foundation

Reclaiming lost crops

Of the roughly 7,000 plant species used historically as human food, only about 150 are now cultivated on a significant scale, and merely 30-odd are used to meet the bulk of the nutritional needs of the people. In fact, just three grain crops — rice, wheat, and maize — account for over 60 per cent of the food intake. Most of the remaining edible-plant species have either gone extinct or are being grossly underexploited mostly because they do not conform to the modern lifestyle-driven dietary habits and the current farming systems.

Foods based on neglected or underutilised plants include numerous nutrient-dense cereals and pseudo cereals like ragi, quinoa, kuttu, kodo, and kangni; fruit varieties like ber and karonda; and vegetables like moringa and amaranthus. Many useful herbs and plants having healing properties have also fallen into disuse. This has resulted not only in the unwarranted shrinkage of the contemporary food basket but also the disappearance of the niche markets for these products, and livelihood loss for those resource-poor farmers who have traditionally been the main producers of these crops.

Interestingly, many of the neglected and commercially under-tapped food crops, often referred to as "orphan crops", have significant nutritional and therapeutic traits because of their unique nutrient profiles. These were the smart foods of the past, and have the potential to become the superfoods of the future as well. While some of the gradually vanishing foods, notably coarse cereals like millets, are sought to be rehabilitated through national and international campaigns, no such move has till now been forthcoming for fruit and vegetables going out of cultivation. Even policymakers and researchers are guilty of disregarding these undeservedly undervalued fruit and vegetables. They are focused largely

on improvement of the commercially important finer food products rather than endeavouring to enhance the productivity and profitability of the underutilised, but nourishing, foods.

The National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (Naas) has done well to draw attention to this group of plants through a recent publication titled "Underutilized Fruits and Vegetables for Nutritional and Health Security". Released in October 2025, this Policy Paper (No. 140) has picked 10 varieties of fruit and 10 vegetables, which have undergone a significant decline in production and consumption. These are the products which were quite common till the recent past but are rarely seen in the market these days.

The underused fruit varieties identified by Naas are aonla, bael, jamun, ber, custard apple, karonda, phalsa, tamarind, wood apple, and mulberry. The list of similar vegetables has amaranth, moringa, basella, winged bean, faba bean, pointed gourd, round melon, cluster bean, yam bean, and jute mallow.

The publication has pointed out that these underexploited fruit and vegetables can play a vital role in ameliorating the nutrition of undernourished, and malnourished, people. Besides, thanks to their capacity to thrive in diverse, as also adverse, agro-climatic conditions, including arid, semi-arid, and rain-dependent ecosystems, these crops can ensure sustainable production in areas where major crops often fail. Hardy species, such as ber, karonda, lasoda, and khejri, require few inputs and can survive on rainwater. Plants of aonla, tamarind, custard apple, and bael can withstand drought and perform well on poor-quality soils. These are also ideal crops for growing under low-investment wasteland horticulture systems because of their capacity to withstand climate change and innate resistance to pests and diseases.



FARM VIEW

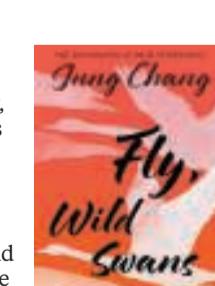
SURINDER SOD

Outlining ways and means for resurrecting such fruit and vegetables, the Naas paper has suggested that large tracts of fallow (uncultivated) and degraded lands be used to grow these sturdy crops, requiring low initial investment and meagre aftercare. This would, in turn, transform unproductive landscapes into sources of food, nutrition, and rural livelihoods. Naas essentially projects these crops as "treasures of nutritional and therapeutic resources".

Fruit varieties like tamarind, custard apple, bael, khirni, karonda, phalsa, mulberry, wild noni, and wood apple are excellent sources of vitamins, minerals, and dietary fibres, which are essential for numerous physiological functions. Their inclusion in a regular diet could help combat malnutrition, anaemia, hidden hunger, and lifestyle-related disorders. Thanks to their fine composition of vitamins, minerals, dietary fibre, proteins and bioactive compounds, these crops can play a pivotal role in improving community nutrition and health, especially in vulnerable populations.

However, many of these uncared-for fruit and vegetables have a short shelf life and, therefore, require some post-harvest preservation treatment to facilitate their year-round (read off-season) availability to the consumers. Some of them are traditionally preserved through conventional methods, such as sun-drying and pickling, by rural communities. But commercial processing of the minor fruit and vegetables into value-added and shelf-life-extended products can go a long way to boost their marketability and profitability. The need is to encourage industrial-scale processing of these varieties of fruit and vegetables through various government schemes being implemented for the promotion of horticulture in the country. This would benefit both producers and consumers of the undervalued, but highly valuable, traditional fruit and vegetables.

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FLY, WILD SWANS: My Mother, Myself and China

by Jung Chang

Published by Harper

336 pages

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BJP on top after civic poll victories

The ruling BJP-led Mahayuti has asserted its dominance in Maharashtra with an emphatic victory over the Opposition in last week's civic elections. The BJP is the largest party in the state now and is in a commanding position across all regions. The party and its allies, the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and the Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), have won 26 of the state's 29 municipal corporations. The BJP is the largest party in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, the country's richest municipal corporation (BMC). It is set to have a BJP mayor, marking an end to three decades of Shiv Sena rule. The BJP will also control most of the state's important corporations, such as Pune, Nagpur and Nashik. The party's dominance is a continuation of the dominance it established in the 2024 Assembly elections and the civic elections held last year.

The results show that the BJP's slogan of triple engine growth has appealed to urban Maharashtra. The credit goes to the party rather than the alliance. There was competition between constituents of the alliance. The Ajit Pawar-led NCP joined hands with the Sharad Pawar-led faction of the party, but the alliance as a whole was not weakened by such dissensions.

The Mahayuti is not an ideologically coherent alliance, but it is a platform on which parties came together to share power. It has now proved that it can retain power and extend it to all levels of the administration. The BJP, which was once the Shiv Sena's minor partner, is now the anchor of the alliance, and holds the position the Congress once enjoyed in the state. It was through clever political management, which included splitting and weakening the Opposition, that it established itself as the state's No 1 party, and it does not seem to have any challenge in the near future.

If Eknath Shinde's rebellion weakened the Thackeray legacy in Maharashtra, the loss of the BMC has dealt a decisive blow against it. The coming together of the Thackeray cousins Uddhav Thackeray and Raj Thackeray could not salvage it, and their campaign based on the narrow 'Marathi manoos' plank failed to make an impact. That is a sign that cosmopolitan Mumbai has rejected the exclusivist and nativist pitch once championed by the Shiv Sena. The desperate alliance between the NCP factions did not make an impact even in their strongholds. The Congress has been reduced to insignificance in most parts of the country's most urbanised state. The fact that the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) of the Congress, the Shiv Sena UBT and the NCP-SP could not present a respectable fight shows how one-sided the state's politics has become.

Three decades of Shiv Sena rule come to an end in Mumbai

Film certification board's overreach

Film certification has been problematic for long, and in recent months, considerations not normally associated with it are seen to be influencing it. The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) has the mandate to certify films on the basis of their suitability for public viewing, but the exercise has sometimes turned into control through censorship. The recent controversies over two films — actor Vijay's *Jana Nayagan* and Sivakarthikeyan's *Parasakthi* — show the CBFC acting beyond itself. The impact is big because cinema is a mass medium with a reach larger than other art forms; it can influence areas such as finance, law and order, and politics. The developments have assumed extra significance in Tamil Nadu, where films have had an important role to play in society and politics. While films have influenced politics and may even be political, the CBFC should not be influenced by politics.

The CBFC suggested such a large number of cuts in *Parashakti* just before its release that it raised doubts about its motives. The film has a theme set in 1960s Tamil Nadu, when the state saw the rise of the Dravidian and anti-Hindi movements. The film made a fictional rendering of historical events through the filmmaker's perspective. But the problem with the large-scale changes and revisions sought by the CBSE is that they change the narrative and even the perspective of the film. That is not within the remit of the CBFC. Words like "public order", "decency" and "morality" are often used as tools of censorship. Certification should not become censorship.

Its actions against two Tamil films raise strong suspicions about its motives

Jana Nayagan, a big budget film which was to be released on Pongal, is caught in legal wrangles. It had been issued a U/A 16+ certificate but the CBFC chairman decided to refer it to a Revising Committee days before its scheduled release. An order of the Madras High Court, directing the CBFC to issue the certificate, was reversed by another bench, and on appeal, the Supreme Court told the filmmakers to go back to the High Court. The High Court decision is awaited. The delay and the legal battles have major financial implications. It has been observed that the CBFC uses its power selectively. *Jana Nayagan*'s travails may have been occasioned by its political content or message. The CBFC should not be guided by any considerations other than the principles laid down by the Cinematography Act and the rules under it. But it follows other guidelines.

Iran's uprising and its fallout

All options — regime change, reform, and repression — will have consequences both for the country and the world

ALVITE NINGTHOUJAM

In what could be considered the largest anti-government protest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian citizens have taken to the streets since late December 2025, demonstrating against the regime's deteriorating economic management and demanding political change.

Rising inflation, exacerbated by Western sanctions, alongside restrictions on women's employment, has fuelled Iran's economic crisis. Compounding these grievances are long-standing frustrations over strict social restrictions imposed on women since the theocratic regime assumed power in 1979.

These socio-economic challenges have persisted for years, yet civilian efforts to advocate for reform or transformation have been systematically suppressed by authorities closely aligned with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The ongoing developments underscore widespread disillusionment and a profound desire for comprehensive change in the country.

The swelling protests have fuelled perceptions that the Supreme Leader's influence is weakening, challenging his legitimacy. However, predicting the regime's imminent collapse would be premature.

'Regime change' would require sustained and substantial grassroots mobilisation within Iran to materialise. Critical questions remain regarding protesters' resilience against state repression and their capacity to sustain momentum.

Unlike the 1979 revolution, the ongoing uprising lacks a unifying figure, significantly impacting its trajectory and effectiveness. While Reza Pahlavi, son of the deposed Shah of Iran, has appealed for a "free, peaceful Iran" and emerged as a potential alternative to the current regime, it remains unclear whether the Iranian society will accept him as a fitting replacement.

Amid these developments, the regime is likely to remain resilient in preserving theocratic rule, ensuring that the foundational values of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, namely, Shiite ideology, remain intact.

Several plausible scenarios merit consideration regarding Iran's internal trajectory. First, the regime could become increasingly repressive once the protesters' momentum diminishes.

While authorities have reportedly halted executions following US pressure, the possibility of full regime control cannot be ruled out.

Second, protesters may continue

demonstrating resilience in their commitment towards toppling the regime and achieving political transformation. This outcome would require considerable strength, substantial financial and moral support, and cohesive leadership to guide the movement's direction. Without clear political and strategic vision, a power vacuum could plunge the country into prolonged socio-political crises.

Third, the regime may be compelled to negotiate with the protesters. This scenario remains uncertain, as the regime's commitment to preserving Shiite ideology makes substantive compromise on core socio-cultural principles unlikely, though limited economic reforms may be possible.



What does it mean for the US, Israel, the GCC?

Israel: Given its longstanding antagonism with Iran following the 1979 revolution, Israel views regime change as vital, perceiving Tehran as an 'existential threat' to its survival. This outcome represents Israel's preferred resolution to the ongoing crisis. Its immediate concern is Iranian retaliation should the US initiate military operations.

Iranian leadership has already warned that Tehran would strike back against Israel and US bases in the region, with both adversaries having engaged in direct military confrontations in 2024 and 2025.

However, should the Iranian regime survive this uprising, it will continue to pose a major challenge for Israel. Even in the event of a change in government in Iran, rebuilding trust between the two nations that have been completely estranged since 1979 would require considerable effort and time.

The United States: Like Israel, the US seeks a regime in Iran amenable to Washington, Israel, and regional allies.

Following the hostage crisis (November 1979 and January 1981), Iran and the US have remained adversaries despite recent attempts to mend ties.

While the Trump administration favours regime change, it remains uncertain whether he would prioritise this or negotiate with the Iranian leadership to avert a regional catastrophe.

Even if the regime survives, the US would seek an Iranian leadership that de-emphasises its nuclear programme for military purposes, ceases support for regional proxies, adopts a less antagonistic posture toward Israel and

Arab neighbours, and limits alignment with countries like Russia and China.

Successfully negotiating such a deal would provide the Trump administration greater leverage in pursuing its Middle East policy with fewer constraints.

These demands, however, will be difficult to negotiate given the entrenched mistrust between Tehran and Washington, as well as with Israel. Nonetheless, US military action, including air operations and cyber attacks, against the IRGC-linked establishments cannot be ruled out, a scenario that could engulf much of the Middle East, particularly the Gulf region.

The Arab Gulf States: While neighbouring Arab Gulf states may remain relatively unconcerned as long as uprisings remain confined to Iran, the uncertainty surrounding potential US military action has become a grave concern.

Although a weakened Iran would serve the strategic interests of the Gulf states, they oppose military adventurism from the US or Israel that could trigger a broader regional conflict. This apprehension stems primarily from the high probability of Iran targeting US military bases located in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Turkey.

Compounding this is the potential disruption to oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20% of the world's oil passes, severely impacting the regional economies that rely heavily on hydrocarbon trade.

Moreover, GCC countries in particular have no desire to be drawn into another conflict as they undertake significant socio-economic reforms programmes aimed at reducing oil dependency.

Disrupting the gradually improving ties with Iran would also be contrary to their interests. This likely explains why Saudi Arabia informed Iran that Riyadh would not allow its airspace or bases to be used for any military operations against Iran. Tellingly, Arab Gulf states prefer a regional balance of power between Israel and Iran and not allowing either rival to exercise dominance over the other.

The current Iranian uprising underscores the deep-seated socio-political and economic problems that have plagued the country under theocratic rule since 1979. Even if the present phase of unrest subsides in the coming days, the underlying grievances demand substantial structural reforms, particularly to improve living standards across multiple fronts.

Such transformations, however, will be a protracted endeavour, as Iran's challenges are deeply entrenched and cannot be resolved through superficial adjustments alone. The path forward, whether through regime change, negotiated reform, or continued repression, will have profound implications not only for Iran's domestic stability but also for the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

(The writer is deputy director, Symbiosis School of International Studies, Pune)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Living in the no-gift zone

Saying no became a lesson in living lighter

SAHANA PRASAD

Thank you, very thoughtful of you!" I said. "But I am sorry; I cannot accept this gift." She looked crestfallen. "You don't like the colour? We can exchange it for your preference. I have preserved the bill." I patted her head and said a firm no. It wasn't the colour or the material, but my personal oath not to take anything home, except groceries, milk, vegetables and the like, I assured her.

The occasion was a wedding, where close family members are given saris or dresses as return gifts. Most Indian families practise give-and-take, making it an important ritual at functions. Inevitably, it leads to a pile-up in one's wardrobe, adding to

already cluttered spaces.

For the past eight years, I have practised and perfected the art of saying "no" to gifts of any kind. I have also completely stopped buying stuff. Yes, you read it right! Every object adds to our physical and mental space. Each becomes a responsibility and an attachment. As we grow older, we need neither. A minimalistic lifestyle suits ageing, much like less make-up does.

When my mother passed away, clearing her wardrobe, filled with exclusive and expensive saris, was an immensely painful experience. I gritted my teeth and kept a couple in her memory. The rest I donated to our house helps and her nurse, and I gave away the remaining lot to a charitable organisation near my house. It was not an easy decision, but it brought a sense of relief.

"But why? You are still young; you wear saris regularly!" my friends told me. "I already have a big wardrobe of

saris. Tell me, how many can I wear? And most importantly, what happens to them after me?" A valid question, isn't it? There is no limit to our desires and no limit to how much we can hoard.

The same dilemma arose when my daughter-in-law received a bunch of saris as wedding presents. "I can't carry all this to the US. You can use whichever you like. Let me leave them in your wardrobe," she said. My mind wavered — such beautiful saris! As my fingers stroked the material, my resolve hardened. "No. Please give them to your mother. Let her safeguard them or use them."

A friend once brought a pre-loved *kurta* to a meet. "Can I give you this? I haven't used it much, and I thought it might suit you." "Sure," I said, adding quickly, "But no more gifts, okay? I don't want to accumulate even pre-loved dresses. It defeats the purpose of not buying new ones."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Flawed SIR process needs overhaul

The SIR process is flawed, as evident from the notice issued to Bharat Ratna and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. The Election Commission's approach seems to be overly technical, lacking a broader perspective. This has led to allegations of deliberate humiliation of a prominent scholar critical of the BJP-led Union government. If

someone of Sen's stature faces such treatment, ordinary citizens battling electoral roll deletions are likely to suffer more. The EC should adopt a systematic approach, involving states and voters, to ensure a proper and thorough process.

SKamat, Mysuru

that sovereignty is no longer absolute.

Vijaykumar HK, Raichur

Health for children

I refer to 'Eggs and milk powder in Kalyana Karnataka...' (Jan 18). The decline in malnutrition among school children in Kalyana Karnataka is welcome news. To build on this, regular medical check-ups should also be conducted in schools to detect health issues early and nip them in the bud.

A K Shariff, Mysuru

The PM has rightly observed that Indian trains are much appreciated by foreign nationals. But it overlooks the fact that foreigners often travel in premium trains, unlike the general Indian population, who continue to suffer due to poor management.

Pahal Agarwal, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed — not handwritten — will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT



God above has decided that there will be a Mahayuti Mayor.

Devendra Fadnavis, Maharashtra CM

I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.

Susan B Anthony

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

AI, copyright and the public domain

Generative AI has challenged norms of copyright law in ways no prior technology ever has

SUNDAR ATHREYA H

The public domain is the backbone of copyright law. The law functions on a delicate balance between the rights of creators, owners and users. It ensures that future creators can rely on previous works, once their protection period has expired, to generate new creations. Though the duration of copyright protection is considered long by many experts (life of the author plus 70 years in the USA, and life of the author plus 60 years in India), it is tailored to balance the market interests of both owners and creators.

Beyond the said period, a work is free for any user to use, adapt or remix as part of their creative work (provided it does not mutilate the previous work in any form or erode the moral rights of the creator).

In 2026, the first set of Nancy Drew books and Disney's 1930 animated film *Mickey Mouse* from *The Chain Gang* will enter the public domain. These works will then be available for any user to publish or adapt. In India, the works of famed singer G N Balasubramanian will enter the public domain this year.

Public Domain Day is celebrated across cultures as a way to nurture creativity. The 2026 edition is unlike any other in the past. Over the last year, generative AI has expanded beyond the imagination of both its users and its creators. It has challenged existing norms of copyright law in ways no previous technology ever has. This may diminish the importance of the public domain in the future.

Generative AI, like its human counterpart, learns from existing material to create new works. This is not a problem *per se*, since copyright law was designed to promote learning and creativity after all. In its present form, the law does not distinguish between human learners and generative AI platforms. The only difference is in the massive speed at which AI systems can train and create. At present, these platforms learn from both copyrighted and non-copyrighted material to generate further.

Whether the policy promotes the interests of generative AI companies or those of copyright owners, it is the public domain that stands to suffer. While generative AI platforms are logically expected to grow in the future, the public domain and the interests of creators should not be completely abandoned.

(The writer is an assistant professor at KIIT School of Law)

'India is now mimicking Europe – the very damage Gandhi warned us against'

While secularism refers to the separation of religion and State, debates have persisted about how it differs from religious pluralism. Akeel Bilgrami delves into the genesis of secularism, different ideological strands in the Indian freedom movement, and the roots of contemporary Hindutva nationalism. Excerpts.

• You're here as a part of the jury for the Infosys prize. Could you tell us something about that?

This is an annual prize in six different areas, and I am on the jury for the humanities and social sciences. I think it's very worthwhile, partly because the winner then has to spend a month of sabbatical lecturing in educational institutions in India. Anything promoting intellectual exchange is great.

• Can you explain the historic and material conditions in which Western secularism arose?

Western secularism arose because of

Akeel Bilgrami, philosopher and professor at Columbia University, in conversation with Sujay B M

THE
DEEP TAKE

certain consequences of European nationalism. For centuries, State power was justified as the monarch's divine right. But the rise of modern science in the 17th century undermined this justification, leading to the emergence of the entity of the nation. The nation-state

became fused, where a feeling for the nation was created to justify the state. A century later, this began to be called nationalism. This national feeling was created by finding an external enemy inside the territory — Protestants in Catholic countries, and vice versa. With emerging statistical forms, concepts of majority and minority emerged, and this subjugation was called majoritarianism. This caused backlash by minorities, resulting in civil strife. Secularism emerged to repair the damage.

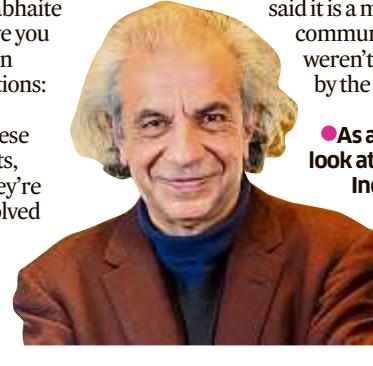
• Referring to Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, you point out that there was an "unself-conscious pluralism" across the centuries in India...

I am referring to people living side by side, which is undermined by nationalism, as in Europe. When you choose a particular group to despise, you generate the 'other'. But there is no other when people (Hindus and Muslims) worship in the same Dargahs. *The Dis-*

covery of India is very close to Gandhi's thinking. But there were differences between Gandhi and Nehru too regarding their vision for independent India.

• Why do you think the genesis of today's Hindutva nationalism started around the Emergency (1975-1977)?

Many feel the roots of this sort of Hindu nationalism started in the 1920s. The Congress had quite a strong (Hindu) Mahasabha element. I believe you need a distinction between two notions: the roots and antecedents. These were antecedents, which means they're probably unresolved questions. But I don't believe the roots set in until the 1970s and 80s.



• During the freedom struggle, while Gandhi, Nehru and some revolutionaries emphasised communal harmony, the RSS stood by its core position: *Hindu Rashtra*...

All sorts of things were there. There was the left, the Hindu right and the Ambedkarite strand. But the Gandhi-Nehru strand was undeniably the major one. Ranadive (CPI leader) said it is a miracle that the communists survived and weren't just swallowed up by the Gandhi Congress.

• As an academic, how do you look at textbook revisions in India, where topics like the Mughals have faded mentions?

It's a brazen form of undermining academic freedom. It also happened in Pakistan, and

we are really becoming like Pakistan and Europe. Gandhi said we never had that damage and wondered why we should mimic Europe. But the very same reason why he wasn't a secularist is a reason to be a secularist now. Because we are now mimicking Europe.

• How do you see the denial of bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam?

Criticising the government is anti-national? It doesn't happen unless you've really gone completely authoritarian in the way that McCarthy was. You need some agency to call out corruption. If you can't do that, a real sense of people's sovereignty gets eliminated. UPA 2 fell because people were able to call out corruption, and this government is as corrupt as UPA 2, if not more. *Read the full interview at deccanherald.com*

K N HARI KUMAR

Part 1

Subramanian Swamy, the BJP's former Rajya Sabha member, was involved in studying the draft alternative Constitution. He told *Frontline*, in 2017, that the BJP leadership actively considered working on this draft, but he dissuaded them from going ahead. "For one, I told them that the existing Constitution has enough elements of a Hindu Rashtra. I told them that we already are a *de facto* Hindu Rashtra and there is no need to become a *de jure* one. In my opinion, adopting a new Constitution is not possible unless there is a revolution. Besides, our Constitution already has enough of Hindutva in it," he told the correspondent. He said this was his response when he and a few eminent lawyers were asked about their opinion on adopting a new Constitution. "This was shortly after I had joined the BJP [by merging his Janata Party with it at the time of the 2014 Lok Sabha election]. Swamy said that after the government was formed, he was asked for his opinion on this issue. The draft alternative Constitution had been prepared by 'some Vidyarthi Parishad member' in 2000-01, but that document was discarded for now, he said.

The suddenness and swiftness with which the Gen Z protests in Nepal last September took an extremely violent, destructive turn and blew the lid off the political regime has surprised everyone. Recent, similar upheavals in our neighbourhood include: the overthrow of the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh in 2024 and the meltdown of the regime in Sri Lanka in 2022. In 2021, a *coup d'état* replaced the democratically elected government with a military junta in Myanmar, and an insurgency and civil war ensued. Two decades earlier, a Maoist-led decade-long insurgency and civil war in Nepal led to the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a republican constitutional democracy. Even earlier, in 1971, a civil war led to the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

On the other side of the globe, Donald Trump has, from Day One of his second Presidency as he had promised, effected drastic changes across a wide range of domestic and foreign policy areas aimed at radical transformation, revolutionary even, in the American nation. Also noteworthy is that Trump returned to power after being indicted for the January 2020 attempt to overturn the result of the Presidential election, which he had lost. This was surprising not merely because it occurred in what was considered a centuries-old, stable democracy whose last major crisis was more than 150 years ago. But also because it was generally believed that in the post-Second World War period, the advanced Western nations were immune to the kind of instability and radical transformations that have characterised the Global South and the less developed countries of Eastern Europe.

For better and worse, the radical changes in those other countries in recent decades include: The revolts of the "Arab Spring" in the early 2010s, which brought down some dictatorial regimes, and the attempts, mostly unsuccessful, at setting up stable democratic governments in the aftermath. The slow but progressive authoritarian Islamisation of Ataturk's secular, modernist Turkey, and the breaking of the back of its guardians, the military, by President Erdogan. Going back a few more decades, there have been: The

Order in chaos, resilience amid anxieties: Why India remains a stable democracy



DH PHOTO BY PUSHKAR V

India's Constitutional continuity signals hope in an age marked by political upheavals and democracies under strain. The first essay in a three-part series underlines an erosion of the nation's inclusive foundations, but argues that its institutions are built to resist breaches

disintegration of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the erstwhile Soviet Union. The violent overthrow of the secular dictatorship of the Shah and the establishment of an Islamic theocracy by a mass upheaval led by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. Besides, there are the many political instabilities and military dictatorships in Latin American countries and in the newly liberated nations of Africa and Asia, after they established independent, nationalist governments following the overthrow of Western imperialist domination, in the aftermath of World War II.

The recent developments in our neighbourhood, particularly, have once again focused analysts' attention on the remarkable stability and continuity of Indian constitutional democracy. Despite being extremely contentious, unruly, and at times violent, Indian politics and public life have been contained, barring the interregnum of the 21-month Emergency within the overarching constitutional democratic framework established after Independence. In contrast with what Trump attempted, the losing parties have accepted defeats in State and national elections. Even Mrs Indira Gandhi relinquished power after losing in the general elections held under the Emergency. In this article, I aim to explore what explains this phenomenon and identify its contributing factors.

Divisions and exclusions

There are doubtless critics who will question my characterisation, especially with reference to the rise to dominance of the Narendra Modi-led BJP in Indian politics and society. They cite many developments and features to argue that the Modi government has transformed India into a majoritarian or illiberal democracy or electoral autocracy, that the BJP-RSS has captured the Indian State, that there has

been "democratic backsliding", or even that there is an undeclared Emergency. The construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on the same land where the Babri Masjid once stood and was earlier demolished, after securing a Supreme Court verdict. The lynchings of Muslims by mobs linked to the Sangh Parivar and kindred organisations, mostly on suspicion of cow-slaughter. Illegal punitive demolitions of constructions belonging to, and evictions and deportations of Muslims. The various forms of continuous harassment of Muslims, and to a lesser extent, Christians.

The passing of the Citizenship [Amendment] Act (CAA), which discriminates against Muslims and some other minorities. The campaign and laws against alleged induced religious conversions under slogans like "love jihad", "rice bag", etc., and "urban naxals" aimed at Muslims, Christians and leftist intellectuals, activists and protestors. Detentions of some leftist and Muslim activists and protestors for long periods, with bail given to some of them after considerable delays. Hindutva activists accused of terror were let off by the courts. The policing of social conduct, particularly of women, and diverse forms of attacks on inter-religious, especially Hindu-Muslim, gender relationships. The reduction of Muslim representation in positions of power and influence, such as legislatures and ministries. Forcibly pushing suspected illegal Muslim immigrants into Bangladesh. The attempt to rewrite history from an RSS-BJP interpretation of the "glory" of the Hindus, especially in ancient times, and the exclusion and/or denigration of the role of Muslims historically. Reinterpreting modern science, including medicine, Indian history and culture from a Hindutva perspective, and attempts to effect changes in the medical, education and other systems. Replacing Muslim names

with Hindu ones. Giving a Hindu religious colouring to all aspects of public life.

The abrogation of Article 370 and continuing Central intervention in Jammu and Kashmir, bypassing the democratically elected State government.

The extra-judicial encounter killings of suspected criminals. Suppression of criticism and protests against Modi, particularly. The various methods employed to suppress and bulldoze the Opposition in Parliament and outside, including the refusal to allow debate on key issues. The use of Central investigative agencies against Opposition leaders, especially in States where they are in power, to discredit them, to subdue them, to cut off their sources of political funds, and even to bring them into the BJP or NDA fold. The revanchist rhetoric against Pakistan for its proxy terror attacks in India.

Furthermore, certain statements and actions by the NDA Government and its leaders have raised suspicions regarding their intentions and plans. There is the warning from the Prime Minister in his Independence Day Speech last year about the national security risk arising from "democratic imbalance due to infiltration and illegal migration in border areas" and the launch of a High-Powered Demography Mission to address it.

Subsequently, RSS leader D Hosabale, less constrained perhaps because he does not hold a government position, has added "conversion, and higher rate of growth in some communities" as reasons for this alleged imbalance. Taken together with the passing of the CAA in 2019, the statements to extend the National Register of Citizens (NRC) from Assam to other States across the nation, the revised norms for voter registration in the rushed SIR in the run-up to the Assembly elections in Bihar, the extension of SIRs to other States, and the unprecedented, very considerable delay in the national Census without giving any reasons – all these have heightened anxiety. Do these presage attempts to make Muslims (and possibly Christians) second-class citizens, if not disenfranchise them altogether?

In their defence, the BJP-RSS argument would probably be that the NDA Government is only attempting to identify and send back illegal immigrants, and not Muslims who are Indian citizens; that they are trying to reverse "appeasement", not fair and equal treatment; that they are only trying to prevent religious conversions through inducements, fraud and force, not genuine change of faith; and so on.

In addition to the fact that there is much truth in the above charges, even if sometimes exaggerated and one-sided, there are other serious violations of democratic norms, procedures, and institutions. On certain occasions, constitutional authorities and institutions have been less than impartial, if not blatantly partisan, favouring the ruling BJP and Prime Minister Modi. A recent example is the failure of the Election Commission to halt the disbursements through direct cash transfer in the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana, which was launched just ahead of its announcement of the schedule for

the Bihar Assembly elections by Prime Minister Modi instead of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, as earlier announced. Not only was the disbursement made just days before each of the two phases of polling, but there was also a promise of substantial additional disbursement after six months. Media reports have noted that the Election Commission suspended disbursements from long-standing welfare schemes during elections in Tamil Nadu in 2004 and 2011, on the grounds that this violated the Model Code of Conduct. A PIL filed at the Patna High Court alleging that the scheme was used to influence voters after the Model Code of Conduct was in force failed to halt the disbursement. Opposition protests to the same effect were also of no avail.

Pointers to the past

Needless to add that such examples are hardly the exception. However, many, if not most, of them arise from weaknesses in the Constitution itself or from the practices of earlier governments, which have paved the way for subsequent governments to exploit them for their very different purposes and ends. One example is the encounter killings of leftist extremists and insurgents, especially in the border states of northeastern and northern India. Other examples include the evisceration of Article 370 from Nehru's time onwards, and the use of Central investigative and intelligence agencies against Opposition leaders, a practice Indira Gandhi had begun and often used. On some points, Modi has implicitly claimed that he is more democratic than earlier Congress Prime Ministers. For example, he has charged that those Prime Ministers had misused Article 356 for partisans ends by dismissing democratically elected Opposition State governments 90 times. He could also, justifiably, claim that he has not superseded senior Supreme Court judges, as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi did in the 1970s, in an attempt to control the judiciary. Subsequently, after imposing the Emergency, she completely subjugated the judiciary.

Conversely, when the founders and their successors adopted and established democratic norms, practices, and institutions, those precedents often became entrenched and were much more difficult to violate. Despite Modi's three successive electoral victories in the general elections and many wins in the States, constitutional democracy, in its electoral and party-political aspects at least, continues not merely to survive but thrive. Elections to State and national legislatures are held on time, Opposition parties are vociferous and unyielding in and outside Parliament and State legislatures, results are honoured, and transitions to the winners are smooth and uncontested. Considering that one of the BJP's senior-most leaders, LK Advani, had, early in Modi's tenure as Prime Minister, said that he did not think another Emergency was unlikely because that in power [that is, Modi] lacked commitment to democracy, this is an amazing turnaround. The question arises, what accounts for it?

OUR PAGES

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1976

Forget Left-Right row, work for poor: Sanjay Gandhi

Bangalore, January 18
Youth Congress leader Sanjay Gandhi today called upon young men not to get bogged down in the Rightist-Leftist controversy but to take up programmes to help the poor and the down-trodden. Mr. Gandhi asked the youth to take the lead in constructive programmes such as propagation of family planning, adult education and tree planting. He quoted Mahatma Gandhi: "whatever in doubt about a particular programme, judge it whether or not it would help the poor and the down-trodden."

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2001

Agni-II successfully testfired

Balasore, Jan 18 (UNI & PTI)
India successfully test-fired Agni-II, an intermediate range ballistic missile, from the Inner Wheel Island in the Bay of Bengal today, sources said. Agni-II, the longer range and upgraded version of the missile, was testfired at 1011 hours in its final operational configuration. "The flight test results have indicated that mission objectives were met satisfactorily," Prof RN Agarwal, Programme director said. The flight was witnessed by Defence Minister George Fernandes and Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal A Y Tipnis.

OASIS | SURYAKUMARI DENNISON

Putting problems in perspective

Sherlock decamped with the money we paid him when he embarked on his illusory investigation.

"It has been a bad year for you," remarked a young acquaintance. She went on to say that it had been no better for her. Her husband had never held a steady job, and she had been unemployed for a few months. She had two children to educate, and was struggling financially. I was reminded of a former colleague whose husband had recently succumbed to cancer. She too was pro-



viding single-handedly for her family. I realised then that I could not label 2025 as a 'bad year'. Of course, the theft was a black mark on the calendar, and the mere thought of the smooth-talking sleuth upset me. I had to tell myself firmly not to dwell on unsavoury episodes and experiences, and be grateful instead for the good things that had come my way. Not least was the fact that I continued to be favoured with health and strength. Above all, I had woken up to each of 365 days; a blessing denied to so many.

Precious lives were cut short in air crashes, stampedes, bomb blasts, terrorist attacks, landslides, flood and fire. Those were just the disasters that made the headlines in our country. No doubt, similar catastrophes abounded the world over, leaving thousands heartbroken and mourning their loved ones. Even if not personally affected by a horrendous tragedy, every person on the planet would have faced trials and troubles, to a greater or lesser degree. I wish my jewellery would have survived, but reviewing the year that has ended, I try to put my problems in perspective.

UAPA problem

Poor conviction rate raises troubling questions

It's far easier to arrest an individual under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) than to prove the charges against him/her. The facts speak for themselves: 5,690 people were arrested between 2019 and 2023 under this law across India, but only 5 per cent were convicted. The gulf between detention and justice is alarming. In recent years, the Act has come under intense scrutiny due to the apparent overreach of probe agencies, raising critical questions about justice, due process and the fundamental rights of the accused. The low conviction rate is particularly glaring in the case of Jammu and Kashmir, where just 0.62 per cent of those arrested were sentenced during the period concerned. In Punjab, despite a rise in arrests from 30 in 2019 to 50 in 2023, not a single conviction was recorded. This disparity highlights a deep systemic flaw: suspects are being detained under a stringent anti-terror law, but they remain in legal limbo for years, often without trial or conviction. In 2023, more than half of the cases had been pending for over three years.

The law's expansive definition of "terrorism" has increasingly emboldened agencies to use it against political dissenters, activists and minority groups, blurring the lines between legitimate protest and acts of terror. Among those who have been subjected to prolonged pre-trial incarceration are Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, who were recently denied bail by the Supreme Court in a 2020 Delhi riots case.

Misuse of UAPA should invite strict action so that the law remains a genuine safeguard against terrorism and doesn't become a tool of oppression. The onus is on the executive and the judiciary to ensure that individuals detained under UAPA are granted a fair, time-bound trial. Unless course correction is done, the spectre of wrongful detention and miscarriage of justice will continue to haunt the Indian legal system.

Bouquet culture

All-pervasive ritual needs a recall

THE customary image follows a set pattern — a Chief Minister calling on a Central minister with an impressive bouquet of flowers or a rich state-specific art or craft item. Any visiting dignitary, too, is bombarded with offerings. There is logic in the argument that these are tokens of respect and that such gestures matter. What's problematic is how the culture of indulgence percolates down the line. Government funds are similarly put to use at just about every meeting or event, even ironically if the purpose of the discussion is shortage of funds and seeking additional financial help. At public functions, the stage is filled with a tasteless display. Huge amounts are spent on gaudy souvenirs and unnecessary takeaways. Wasteful expenditure then becomes an established norm, with no questions asked. It also sends a message of misplaced priorities — that money is never an issue for governments, where and how to spend it certainly is.

The unending love for flowers — even if at public expense — is heartwarming, but why is a warm greeting not enough? If the uplifting presence of flowers helps in arriving at decisions that can uplift the lot of the swarming millions, the practice should be passionately followed. If it helps in having a more civilised political discourse, absolutely go for it. There is no evidence to support these claims. It's not simply a call for austerity and putting an end to meaningless rituals. It's a plea for a more responsible and measured way of functioning.

A bouquet represents warmth and hope on behalf of the people, but it's been reduced to a mandatory accompaniment and handout meant for the camera. It's sadly now a metaphor for lazy and costly government habits that serve little purpose. May better sense prevail.

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 1976

Thein accord

IN less than three months, the dismal echoes of the Thein project have made way for the bright hopes, thanks to the spirit of accommodation displayed by Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir. On October 22 last year — Bhakra Dedication Day — Union Irrigation and Power Minister KC Pant gave the chilling report that the project had been "indefinitely postponed". His observation that the Centre "has no funds to think of the project, for the present" disappointed the people of Punjab. If the tempo of the state's all-round progress is to be maintained, ample energy has to be made available for farms and factories. But the heavy power cuts in recent years caused much frustration. Vast hopes had, therefore, been pinned on Thein. For this reason, the complete understanding just reached between Punjab and J&K will be widely hailed. It opens up new vistas of economic prosperity. The differences between the two states on this project were wide-ranging, but most of these have now been resolved. The issue of rehabilitation of all families likely to be uprooted by the construction of the dam reservoir is also reported to have been settled. Hence the prolonged controversy between Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan over the Bhakra oustees is unlikely to be repeated in this case. According to an announcement, work on the composite project may begin "in the very near future" after consultations with the Centre and the Government of Himachal Pradesh, a small part of whose territory will also be submerged. It is to be hoped that, in accordance with the spirit of the times, the other states would also help expedite an overall settlement in the interests of the region.

The meaning of Mumbai's vote for BJP

The city that voted for stability should now demand fulfilment of its aspiration



AJIT RANADE
STRATEGIC ANALYST & ECONOMIST

MUMBAI's municipal elections were held four years late. That delay, amounting to constitutional breach, says much about Indian democracy. India's richest municipality was kept in administrative suspension, without elected representatives and without consequences, indicating a deeper comfort with democratic deferral. Remember that constitutional self-government at the third tier is not optional.

The BJP has improved its seat tally compared to 2017 and emerged as the largest party, aided by the split in the Shiv Sena that had once anchored the alliance. Across Maharashtra, the BJP-led alliance has dominated civic bodies, winning most municipal corporations where elections were held.

Yet Mumbai's result refuses to yield a single neat political interpretation. That is because Mumbai is not merely a city, but more like a city state. Its budget dwarfs those of many Indian states, and its economic weight is large enough to become a meaningful share of national output and taxes. It is India's financial capital, Bollywood's stage, the country's biggest labour magnet, a playground for creative artistes and hence a cultural engine whose pluralism and a cosmopolitan nature are as valuable as its money.

And yet this Maximum City is embarrassed by minimum accountability. Its governance is famously complex, a "spaghetti bowl" of agencies like the BMC (civic body), MMRDA (regional planning), BEST (transport), MHADA (housing), SRA (slum rehab), MSRDC, railways and more, each with partial responsibility, overlapping jurisdiction and carefully designed escape

routes from blame. Planning is separated from execution, transport from land use, housing from connectivity, and accountability from everything. When the city fails, no single institution can be held answerable. The electoral contest for the BMC was about control over patronage, planning, land, permissions, contracts and the right to shape India's most valuable urban geography.

There is a striking paradox. Mumbai generates extraordinary wealth, and yet its residents experience extraordinary fragility. Mumbai's real estate is as valuable as gold, and a gateway to power. Yet an enormous share of the population lives in slums with minimal civic promises fulfilled. In the same city that hosts the country's richest households and its most expensive square foot, ordinary life is spent navigating broken footpaths, overcrowded trains, unreliable drainage and the annual monsoon lottery of whether water will enter your home.

This is why Mumbai's ambitions have often collapsed. Consider the great promise made in 2006 when the then Prime Minister announced an ambitious plan to turn Mumbai into an international financial centre (IFC). Mumbai had the financial institutions, the human capital, the depth of markets and the global visibility.

If any Indian city could com-

pete with Singapore, Dubai, Hong Kong or London in financial services, it had to be Mumbai. Plans were drafted, committees were formed, reports were published, and the story was told with conviction. Two decades later, Mumbai is still not an international financial centre. It remains India's financial capital — a domestic title — but the global destination status never arrived.

The IFC plan did not fail because of lack of bankers, entrepreneurs, lawyers or capital. Mumbai failed because it lacked what global cities require: coherent governance and high-quality infrastructure delivered at scale. This is where Gujarat's GIFT City managed to steal a march — not because it possessed Mumbai's cultural or market depth, but because it offered policy alignment, friendly regulation, fiscal incentives and administrative push from the top. Mumbai remained trapped in the politics of discretion.

Mumbai's financial autonomy is limited since even the property tax rates are determined by the state

The government closest to people's lives is the civic administration, but civic politics is behaving like state politics.

The mandate for a triple engine again, like in 2017, signals that voters have chosen stability in a fragmented field, and remain committed to cosmopolitanism. The Opposition failed to offer a credible civic vision beyond anti-incumbency. The bogey of a threat to Marathi Asmita did not work. But the deeper message is that Mumbai has started voting with low expectations. The city has become habituated to dysfunction, not outraged by it. This is a dangerous normalisation.

Mumbai's central problem is not only who rules; it is what powers the city-government actually has. Indian public finance and governance still treat cities as administrative appendages of state governments, not as economic engines that require autonomy, capacity and long-horizon planning. The Chief Minister holding the urban development portfolio has become predictable precisely because that department controls the golden goose: land, permissions, development control, and the levers through which politics can monetise urban growth.

If Mumbai is serious about being a world-class city, it needs structural change. It needs single-point accountability for metropolitan outcomes; de-fragmentation of agencies; fiscal autonomy that does not reduce the municipality to an accountant at someone else's mercy; a predictable rule-of-law permissions regime; and a civic compact that treats public goods as non-negotiable. Most importantly, it needs citizens who do not outsource disappointment.

Mumbai has always been a city that contains multitudes: dreams and despair, wealth and vulnerability, glamour and grime, cosmopolitanism and cruelty. But it cannot remain, indefinitely, a city that funds the nation while failing itself. Mumbai voted for stability. But now it must demand fulfilment of its aspiration. The city of dreams can no longer afford the governance of drift.



COMPETITIVE WELFARE: Voters are treated as beneficiaries rather than citizens who have rights. ANI

The city of dreams can no longer afford the governance of drift.

government. The impressive coastal road project needed funding from the Centre or other sources. The metro network depends much on an external purse. Mumbaikars, apart from their financial orphand hood, also pay a hidden tax, which is in terms of numerous permissions, for building, redevelopment or utilities.

The compliance cost is unpredictable, and consumes time. The delays impose a cost and become translated as higher real estate prices and eventually worsen inequality. There is a strange and perpetually large mismatch between excess stock of luxury supply and unmet demand for affordable housing. A few years ago, it was reported that Mumbai had an inventory of more than two lakh unsold flats.

The issue of affordable housing was hardly headlined in the manifestos. Nor was flood control, solid waste management or road repair. The BMC elections brought freebie theatre to civic polls. Manifestos promised rebates, concessions, free bus rides and cash transfers, with no mention of from where the finances would come. In this competitive welfarism, the voters are treated as beneficiaries rather than citizens who have rights. Civic accountability cannot be replaced by a relationship of gratitude from beneficiaries.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable — the art of the next best. — Otto von Bismarck

The age that allowed a fantasy to ripen

RAJESH DHAWAN

I grew up in a small town whose residents believed that the world ended at the last bend of the river. Yet every evening, the transistor radio unsettled that certainty. The newsreader opened a window to distant cities — Bombay, London, New York — crowded, confident places where laughter floated faintly in the background, as if real life were occurring just beyond my hearing.

I sat on the verandah steps, bare-kneed and mosquito-bitten, letting those unseen worlds seep in like monsoon dampness into old walls. The night smelled of kerosene and anticipation; everything felt pending, as though the world itself was holding its breath.

The heroes of that time lived on glossy posters. Film stars leaned against dream cars, cricketers were frozen forever in the follow-through of a perfect cover drive and singers sang with their eyes closed, the song unfinished because the photograph cut it mid-air. Between algebra problems, I struck private bargains with fate: if the ceiling fan completed 10 slow revolutions before the teacher turned around, the exam would go well; if the dragonfly on the windowpane stayed until tiffin time, the class monitor might finally notice me. These rituals were earnest, ridiculous and entirely sincere.

It was an extravagant age of promises. Advertisements insisted that a new pen could correct handwriting, a fairness cream could rewrite destiny and a coaching institute could shape the future with confident upward arrows. I skipped samosas and saved bus fare to buy these miracles in instalments, only to discover that ink still blotted, the mirror refused cooperation, and mathematics retained its old indifference. Disappointment did not cure hope. It merely taught me to ration it — to distribute it carefully across borrowed notes, toppers' notebooks and late-night study schedules. Even in failure, something luminous persisted: the stubborn faith that effort itself carried a quiet grace.

What I did not know then was that this hopeful excess was already preparing itself for nostalgia. As change accelerated, yesterday began to soften. With each technological leap — from black-and-white to colour television, from trunk calls booked days in advance to phone calls that arrived uninvited at dinner — memory edited out inconvenience and polished rough edges into warmth. The past did not become better; it became kinder.

Today, when news arrives faster than the speed of comprehension and opinions announce themselves fully formed, that old make-believe seems almost dignified. The world then moved slowly enough to allow a fantasy to ripen — to copy a song carefully into a notebook, to sing it badly on the terrace without anxiety or audience. Perhaps the real loss is not the fragility of childhood illusions, but the impatience of present certainties. In remembering that earlier faith, I reclaim something quietly defiant — the conviction that life was still malleable, and that, for a brief and unrepeatable period, I was new.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Key issues getting sidelined

Apropos of 'Modi govt's cultural ambition' (*The Great Game*); can the construction of museums help in tapping the nation's biggest asset, the demographic dividend? Can it generate adequate employment, ensure inclusion, ameliorate the lot of small and medium businesses, boost the economy and the manufacturing sector? Several people died after consuming contaminated water in 'Smart City' Indore recently and over 250 were killed in a plane crash in Ahmedabad last year, but have the double-engine governments in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat taken suitable measures to avert recurrence of such tragedies? Is there any accountability?

PK SHARMA, BARNALI

Blowing the cultural trumpet

With reference to 'Modi govt's cultural ambition'; the Yugeen Bharat is a cultural trumpet disguised as a museum and it's a distraction when real India is still waiting for jobs, schools, and hospitals. Officially, it inspires national pride, but unofficially, its soft-power engineering rewriting history, glorifying Hindu nationalism and mainstreaming Sangh ideology under the pretext of maintaining cultural heritage. Curators cherry-pick golden ages, erase caste violence and whitewash contributions of Muslims, Sikhs and Dalits. Museums don't fix hunger. Even if the exhibit is stunning, it won't fill empty stomachs or create jobs. Real change needs factories, not frescoes.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Fight hidden agendas

Refer to 'Our universities are losing their creative vitality'; when political powers prioritise indoctrination over inquiry, free expression becomes the first casualty. Furthermore, the mushrooming of private players has transformed these centres of wisdom into marketing houses obsessed with profit and loss. Administrative glitches and coercive mechanisms have no place where curious minds seek truth. Ideas should sprout as naturally as leaves on a tree. We must fight the hidden agendas that muzzle creative aspirations. We need creative

solutions to protect our universities as sanctuaries for hassle-free exchange of ideas.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

China's expansionist tendency
Apropos of 'China's renewed interest in Shaksam valley'; issues between India and China date back to the British era. After independence, India made efforts to resolve Sino-Indian boundary dispute which continued at various levels including military and diplomatic conferences. Even the platforms of G20, BRICS and SCO were used to find solutions. But China has been strengthening its infrastructure, defences and communication lines to augment its policy of expansionism. At present, China is focusing on Shaksam valley for easy access to Skardu for pursuing economic and strategic interests.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Women good at stress busting

Apropos of 'Students' well-being'; educational institutions can follow the lead of the recently proposed initiative at IIT Kharagpur, where women on campus, faculty and staff, are prepared to guide students facing emotional pressure, which is a brilliant idea. Though it is a gender-neutral issue, for ages, women have played a crucial role in providing mental health support and a source of emotional support, both for other women and for men. Women often form strong social networks and provide a sense of community, along with being skilled at empathetic listening that is beneficial for mental well-being.

VAIBHAV GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

Councillors will have to deliver

It refers to 'Maha success'; Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation is the richest municipal body in India. The BJP will take control of Mumbai for the first time in BMC's history. Issues like monsoon flooding, infrastructure collapse and garbage-strewn beaches need serious attention. The elected councilors will carry the burden of huge expectations and they don't have any choice but to deliver on tall promises.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Punjabi language needs a new lease of life



PARAMJIT S JUDGE
EX-PROFESSOR, SOCIOLOGY,
GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

PUNJABI Suba (or reorganised Punjab) will complete 60 years of its existence in November. It is important to assess what has been achieved with regard to forging a linguistic identity, which was the primary objective for which a Punjabi-speaking state was demanded and formed.

We need to understand the politics of language which has plagued the state, resulting in the ambivalence of Punjabis towards their *maa boli*.

Punjabi has two scripts — Shahmukhi, which is prevalent in Pakistani Punjab, and Gurmukhi, which is used in Indian Punjab. Much before the introduction of these scripts, Punjabi was written in two other scripts, Lande and Takri.

It is quite probable that both scripts originated from Sharda script. Lande was being used even till the late 20th century by the traditional business community

in Punjab. It is evident from the fact that excise and taxation officials in the state were taught to read this script. On the other hand, Takri was used in the Jammu region falling between Ravi and Chenab rivers. At present, Takri has been completely replaced by the Devanagari script.

What progress has Punjabi made since 1966? It was expected that successive state governments would promote the language wholeheartedly.

However, a trend has developed among the middle class to speak Hindi. Both Hindu and Sikh families whose children study in public schools frequently converse in Hindi as well as English at home. The focus on these languages is perceived to be an attempt to help the kids compete at the national and international levels.

The Punjabi language has seen promising growth in the fields of literature and music. We are witnessing the rise of Punjabi literature in poetry as well as fiction. Similarly, Punjabi music is now dominating the national scene, going by the popularity of Punjabi songs in Hindi movies.

Singer-actor Diljit Dosanjh has elevated Punjabi music to the international arena; Sidhu



SIDELINED: Successive state governments have done nothing concrete to enrich the language. FILE PHOTO

Moosewala also played an important role in popularising Punjabi.

Despite these achievements, Punjabi has failed to become an academic language, though Punjabi University, Patiala, has significantly contributed to its growth. Some social scientists from this university have also made commendable efforts to translate technical terms into Punjabi, but still, it is not sufficient.

A major contribution of the university has been the simplification of Punjabi writing, which has

saved it from creating unnecessary challenges for writers. In natural sciences, no such effort has proved to be fruitful.

The future of the Punjabi language faces a twofold challenge. The first is related to the translation of technical terms as well the usage of terms/words by borrowing from other languages. The second is the publication of standard books by translating them from other languages, particularly English.

Punjabi scholars tend to use Sanskritic sources to find new terms/words, which

are difficult for the general reader to comprehend.

Such a practice is common among literary critics working in universities and colleges.

Technical terms in general cannot be translated as such in many cases and it is better to retain them in the original form. For example, the botanical names of various plants and trees have different linguistic sources. Punjabi scholars need to learn from English, which has turned out to be the lingua franca of the intellectual discourse in various specialised fields.

It is important to understand that the development of English has been spurred by its ability to take words and concepts from other languages.

Punjabi has suffered a major setback due to the migration of the state's youth to countries where the knowledge of English is crucial. The majority of the youth who have studied in English-medium schools struggle to write in Punjabi.

Ironically, a few years ago, when the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee elections were held, candidates contesting for the post of president were asked to write in Punjabi. One of them, who had earlier served as the

president of this Sikh body, could not do it properly.

Efforts should also be made to find how many political leaders in Punjab can write in Punjabi.

Over the years, state governments have been continuously engaged in rhetoric, but have done nothing concrete to enrich the Punjabi language for the holistic development of the youth.

If the present government is honest in this regard, then the first step towards this goal is to fill vacant posts of Punjabi teachers in linguistics at the university and college levels.

Secondly, there is a need to invest in the translation of standard texts into Punjabi with the clear-cut objective of providing readable texts to students as well as readers in general.

Unfortunately, the absence of standard texts in Punjab has created conditions for the growth of cheap, substandard help books which have been flooding markets for the past six decades.

No attempt has been made to compel such money-minting publishing houses to either mend their ways or stop ruining the academic culture. Will any political party in power undertake such a step? At this moment, it does not seem probable.



The language has seen promising growth in the fields of literature & music.

RIP Angel Chakma. More stories from the North-East



SANJOY HAZARIKA
INDEPENDENT COLUMNIST

NEWS from across India and the world has overwhelmed the media — and an incident from December has quietly vanished from the headlines. Barely a month back, a young man from Tripura, Angel Chakma died as a result of wounds he suffered during an attack by thugs in Dehradun, putting the focus back on the discrimination that many from the North-East continue to face whenever they step out of their safe spaces, be it at home or in the areas where they now happen to live.

Angel Chakma appears to have been forgotten.

Yet, in this short space of time — the Trumpian threat to Greenland, a Canadian Premier building a strategic partnership with China, the strange spectacle of the legal struggle of stray dogs in India and one of their own, the peace dog Aloka trotting with Buddhist monks in the US — all these incidents have taken over the front pages, headlines and social media reels that inform and define us these days.

But apart from the angry

and anguished calls for justice, the rage that pours from newspaper columns and studio discussions, which seem to have limited impact on people going about their daily lives (not to speak of governments), there are different responses shared by people from the region on a daily basis.

Many of them have embedded themselves in other states and also are seen or heard on a regular basis. They are visible because they are good at what they do in their chosen professions.

They include teachers and sportspersons, singers and artists, chefs, actors, film directors and writers. I think of two here who are making a mark. They don't have to self-advertise or hit the streets, because their chosen works are statements in themselves.

I met Dhiraj Rabha for the first time last year. He's a young installation artist from Assam's Goalpara district, just 30, with a smiling countenance and a relaxed air. Behind that exterior, lies a complex story, rooted in a troubled past that is reflective of the challenges that Assam itself faced in the 1990s and 2002. In the past years, Dhiraj has made a mark at Goa's Serendipity Festival, in the Bengal Biennale, in an intense workshop held in Guwahati on a boat on the Brahmaputra and on land.

Most recently, we met at the Kochi Biennale which draws artists from across the world, not just India or South Asia, over a three-month



ADVERSITY: Dhiraj Rabha grew up in a camp which shaped his life and thinking. FACEBOOK

period. Lakhs of visitors including artists, art connoisseurs and tourists, meet, mingle and share experiences as they converse and learn from each other.

Dhiraj's father Dhananjay Rabha was a member of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the group that espoused separation from India and was subsequently banned by the Central government.

After 14 years or so in ULFA, with both his children having been born in exile, Dhananjay returned in a wave of surrenders by former rebels. He and his family were given space in a camp set up in rural Goalpara. They never received any financial compensation and it is the only

home that Dhiraj has known and which has shaped his life and thinking.

Most of his experiences that have translated into art have been influenced both by the suffering that his mother, Kaushalya, went through and the 25 years that he's been based in the camp. She was the one who fled from home to home, from one hiding space to another; protecting her small children when the security forces came hunting for them.

Dhiraj says, with a gentle laugh, that his elder sister is affectionately called Army buri (old woman) because she was born during such a time of flight and fear. Their living place is simply known locally as the SULFA (Sur-

rendered ULFA) camp.

On a whim, Dhiraj, who was always interested in drawing, applied at the Santiniketan in West Bengal and got admission to a four-year undergraduate course followed by two years in a master's programme.

He made friends, honed in-born talent and learned new skills. As he developed the idea of an installation based on his life experience, he decided to hold the first exhibition in the camp among the people who were his neighbours and friends.

People from the village, who often wondered what lay behind those walls, and former camp inmates came to watch. The audience was captivated, deeply moved. In the early years, he says, there were some 400 people in that camp, today there are barely four families.

As he researched the project, poetically called *The Quiet Weight of Shadows*, he extensively interviewed former militants to understand their lives and found that their stories were a resistance to and a contradiction of imposed narratives by the State and the establishment media. "Many left to join (ULFA) at the time out of emotion, they had no idea about the ideology, they left because others were going and risking their lives, they had no political convictions," he remarked, acknowledging that those who took up arms "at times went out of control."

As a visual and installation storyteller, Dhiraj's powerful work is an attempt to address his pain.

on the past but a multi-layered effort to address the trauma of those times. A field of glowing, speaking, carnivorous flowers shares history and underlines the point that revolutions and states devour their own while a broken and burnt house could be representative of the loss of memory and the harm.

"I wanted to collect stories, I did not try to apportion blame or say what is right and wrong — there are enough people doing that." He is now thinking about a new project — he does not want to be stuck with a "ULFA" artist tag — and is looking at how greedy corporate and political forces have cast covetous eyes on the rich natural resources (especially minerals) of the North-East.

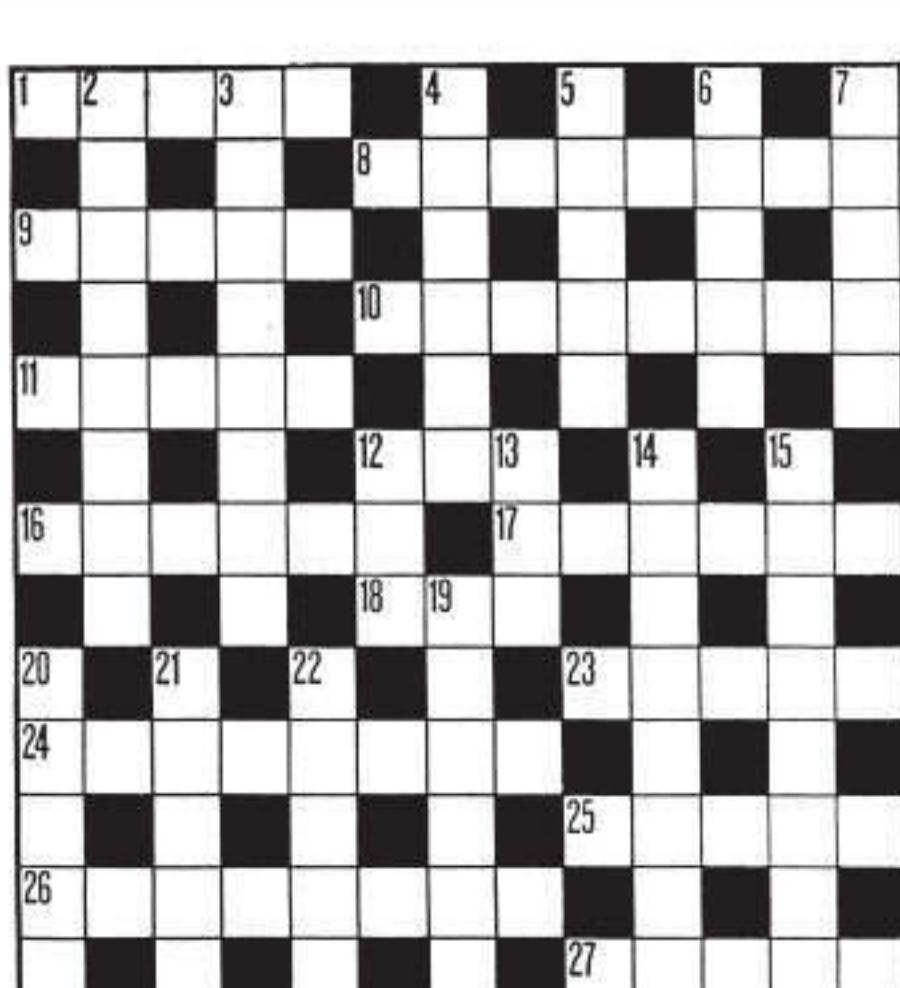
Others too are making different statements. In Goa, there's Monalisa Baruah and her husband Saurav, whose restaurant Soul Chef — which serves North-East cuisine — has been a runaway hit for over a decade.

Through nuanced and, at times, spicy entrees and dishes that include black sesame chicken, the beloved *masor tenga* (Assamese sour fish in a tomato gravy), the smoked pork with bamboo shoots, the savoury Shillong pork noodles and the aromatic *joha* rice of Assam, Monalisa has brought the region on a platter to Goa.

In the spirit of transparency, I will say that she's my niece and I'm exceptionally proud of her.

Also, please note, Soul Chef serves no dal.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Restorative (5)
- 8 At heart (4,4)
- 9 Delivered (5)
- 10 Mere gossip (4,4)
- 11 Silly self-satisfied smile (5)
- 12 Single thing (3)
- 16 Receiving attention (2,4)
- 17 By walking (2,4)
- 18 Racket (3)
- 23 Shining with heat (5)
- 24 Refuse admittance to (4,4)
- 25 Robust (5)
- 26 Legitimate target (4,4)
- 27 Bedeck (5)

Saturday's Solution

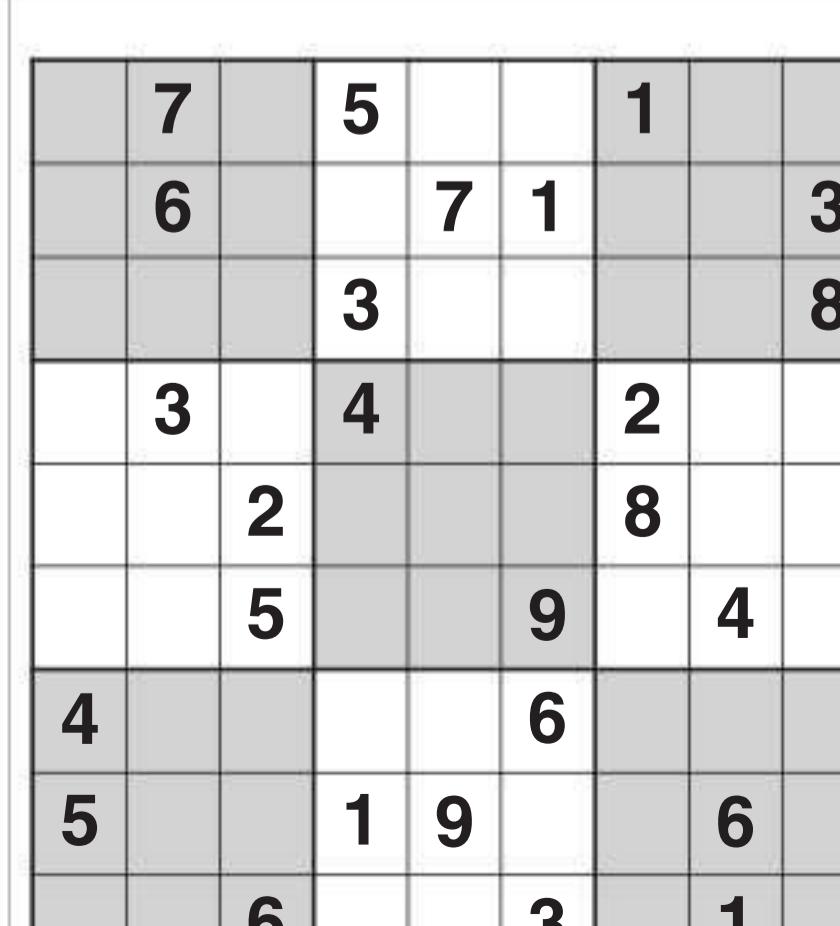
Across: 1 Background, 6 Pass, 10 Suave, 11 Vigilance, 12 Lacerate, 13 Value, 15 Actuate, 17 Turn out, 19 Erratic, 21 Keyed up, 22 Might, 24 Province, 27 Last ditch, 28 Prowl, 29 Neon, 30 Blow-by-blow.

Down: 1 Base, 2 Character, 3 Geese, 4 Obviate, 5 Neglect, 7 Annul, 8 Stereotype, 9 Cleverly, 14 Watermelon, 16 Attitude, 18 Old school, 20 Capital, 21 Know-how, 23 Gesso, 25 Imply, 26 Slow.

DOWN

- 2 Receptive attitude to ideas (4,4)
- 3 To abuse (3-5)
- 4 In direct confrontation (4-2)
- 5 Pace (5)
- 6 The present time (5)
- 7 Limbless reptile (5)
- 12 Singular (3)
- 13 Very long period (3)
- 14 Unawares (3,5)
- 15 Earnest if naive reformer (2-6)
- 19 Prepared to fight (2,4)
- 20 Formidable (5)
- 21 A characteristic (5)
- 22 Diameter of a bullet (5)

SU DO KU



SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 19, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 29
- Margshirsh Parvishtha 6
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 1, up to 2:15 am
- Vajra Yoga up to 8:45 pm
- Ultraflash Nakshatra up to 11:53 am
- Moon in Capricorn sign
- Gupt Navratri Start

FORECAST

SUNRISE: 07:19 HRS

MONDAY

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	22	07
New Delhi	25	08
Amritsar	14	07
Bathinda	14	08
Jalandhar	14	07
Ludhiana	23	05
Bhawani	20	07
Hisar	20	07
Sirsra	20	07
Dharamsala	21	03
Manali	15	02
Shimla	18	05
Srinagar	12	-05

The First Decade of the Startup Revolution

The first decade of India's startup innovation industrial revolution has been completed. On this occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed startup founders and entrepreneurs. He stated that the startup industry has been very successful in its first decade. He added that the day is not far when startup founders will lead the world in technology. It is worth noting that India aims to become a leader in the global industrial revolution. India believes that the innovation of startup industries will make it remarkably successful. Startup industries are those where new entrepreneurs, with new ideas and innovations, become the backbone of the country's industrial sector through successful outcomes. The foundation of these industries lies in new initiatives and new innovations. It is also hoped that new young entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises will give this revolution new courage, new confidence, and innovation.

The Prime Minister believes that after a decade, startup industries should now take the path of leadership because we have surpassed even major countries in the field of artificial intelligence. If this is fully utilized in startup industries, costs will decrease, production will increase, and the country's neglected middle class will gain an economic foothold. It should be remembered that in these ten years, the country's experience has shown that wealthy individuals have also developed startup units to take advantage of the concessions and exemptions offered to startup industries, and young innovators did not get the opportunities that were envisioned. Recently, the upper limit for startup industries has also been increased so that banks and financial institutions do not hesitate to provide them with benefits. In this way, the dominance of the country's wealthy is increasing in this sector. We believe that while they will invest the money, there are many young people in the country with exceptional talent. It would be better if they were given preference.

However, the performance of startup industries in these ten years has shown that sufficient attention has not been paid to manufacturing and research. Research and development are the very foundation of startup industries. How can there be progress without these? Remember, today's research will become the country's intellectual property tomorrow. In 2014, there were only 4 startups in the country; today, their number has increased to more than two lakh. India has become the world's third-largest hub for startup industries. Now, because the investment limit has been increased, there are more than 125 active unicorn companies with a valuation of one billion dollars or more. The pace of startups is constantly accelerating. Many unicorn companies have also issued their shares or IPOs. These companies are providing employment on a large scale. Now, the need is to accelerate the pace of young people establishing startups in towns, small and medium-sized cities, and also in rural areas. This will expand the entrepreneurial spirit of the common man in the country. Of course, there is more risk in startup industries, but taking risks is now commonplace. Indian startup founders do not lack confidence. It should be recalled that the hope with which the startup industry began a decade ago, that is, that it would give the small and ordinary citizens of the country a chance to move forward in this sector, has not been fully realized. Secondly, the innovation and research that was expected from the startup industries has not fully materialized. In such an environment, how can the startup industry fully flourish?

Abhishek Vij

Trump becomes a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize!

US President Donald Trump was lobbying and scheming to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for establishing peace, but he didn't get it. He wanted this year's Nobel Peace Prize to be awarded to him because, according to him, he had stopped seven wars. Only time will tell whether he stopped wars or started them. Can kidnapping the Venezuelan president, attempting to seize Denmark, and threatening Colombia be considered Trump's peace efforts? But he continued to demand the Nobel Peace Prize, citing his great achievements. Well, he didn't receive the Nobel Peace Prize, but now an interesting thing has happened: Maria Machado, the opposition leader in Venezuela and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, presented her Nobel Prize to Trump during their meeting. Donald Trump was very pleased and posed for photos with Maria Machado as if the award had actually been given to him. But can awards be shared in this way? The award states that it is being given to Maria Machado for promoting peace with strength and advancing diplomacy. The opposition is the opposition everywhere. Therefore, the Venezuelan opposition leader is also describing the actions taken against her country as establishing peace. That's why Maria Machado signed and presented her Nobel Prize to him. Trump confirmed this, calling Maria Machado a wonderful woman and showering her with praise. On the other hand, the Nobel Committee did not approve of this action at all. The awards committee said that once Nobel Prizes are announced, they cannot be revoked, nor can they be shared with anyone. There is also no rule for transferring them to someone else. The name announced for the award is the final decision, and that name remains valid forever. Therefore, sharing the award or dividing it with someone else is unacceptable under any circumstances.

Why trying to be happy is making us miserable



Parneet Sachdev
Chairman of Real Estate Regulatory Authority and a leading author

The Inner Realm

Contemporary happiness research, particularly the global datasets compiled by the Gallup World Poll and synthesized in the World Happiness Report, shows that while average life evaluations have remained stable or modestly improved at a global level since the mid-2000s, several high-income societies exhibit stagnation or decline in subjective well-being, especially among younger cohorts (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs, 2024). The finding is striking not because happiness has vanished, but because it has become fragile—highly sensitive to comparison, expectation, and self-judgement.

THE HAPPINESS PARADOX
The deeper question, therefore, is not whether people are happy, but why the conscious pursuit of happiness so often produces its opposite? At the global median, some measures of life evaluation have trended modestly upward over the last decade, with an increasing share of people rating their lives highly enough to be called "thriving." Yet this aggregate pattern conceals critical fractures: *in many high-income societies, especially among young people, life satisfaction and well-being have stagnated or declined, even as general indicators suggest improvement.*

In some cases, younger generations are expressing lower satisfaction with life than older adults, a reversal of historical patterns—suggesting that our pursuit of happiness may have become counterproductive.

THE HEDONIC TREADMILL AND PERFORMATIVE HAPPINESS
Modern psychology offers an important clue. Decades ago, Philip Brickman and Donald Campbell articulated what later became known as the hedonic treadmill: *human beings adapt rapidly to changes in pleasure and success, returning again and again to a baseline level of well-being* (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). Neuroscience has since confirmed this insight at a biological level. Dopamine, the neurotransmitter most associated with reward, is not designed to produce sustained contentment. It spikes in anticipation and novelty, then quickly recalibrates. *The brain is*

engineered for pursuit, not for permanent satisfaction.

In this light, the cultural instruction to "be happy" becomes psychologically perverse. It urges the mind to extract lasting fulfilment from a system that is neurologically incapable of providing it. When happiness is treated as an achievement rather than a state of harmony, the individual begins to monitor emotions constantly. The question we should ask ourselves is *"Is my life meaningful?"* Instead, we are programmed to ask *"Am I happy enough?"* This subtle shift transforms natural emotional fluctuation into perceived failure.

This is where **performative happiness** enters modern life. In an era dominated by visibility and social comparison, happiness is no longer merely felt; it is performed. Smiling faces, curated gratitude, and relentless positivity signal success in the social marketplace. Yet research in social psychology consistently shows

The deeper question, therefore is not whether people are happy, but why the conscious pursuit of happiness so often produces its

that excessive emotional self-monitoring intensifies distress rather than alleviating it. When individuals believe they should be happy, negative emotions are experienced not only as pain, but as personal inadequacy (Ford & Mauss, 2014).

THE ANCIENT WISDOM
Long before neuroscience articulated these mechanisms, spiritual traditions warned against precisely this error. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna describes a *Shitaprana*

"He who is not disturbed by sorrow, who does not crave pleasure, who is free from attachment, fear and anger, is called a sage of steady wisdom."

-Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 56

He describes the qualities of a person with *Shitaprana*, or steady wisdom, who achieves inner peace by transcending emotional reactions. Happiness here is conspicuously absent as a goal. *What replaces it is alignment—a state in which the individual is no longer enslaved by emotional oscillation. The Gita does not reject joy; it rejects dependence on joy.*

The Buddha articulated the same truth with radical clarity. He writes in the Dhammapada

"The craving of one given to heedless living grows like a creeper. Like the monkey seeking fruits in the forest, he leaps from life to life (tasting the fruit of his kamma)"

Dhammapada Ch 24, verse 334

The Buddha observes that craving is the root of suffering, not because pleasure is evil, but because clinging converts experience into bondage. *Modern affective neuroscience echoes this precisely: the brain's suffering circuits are activated less by pain itself than by resistance to pain. Acceptance dampens limbic reactivity; struggle amplifies it.*

Sikh spirituality also offers a psychologically sophisticated articulation of this principle through the concept of *bhana manna*; the active acceptance of Divine Will. In the Guru Granth Sahib, acceptance is not passive endurance. It is conscious alignment with reality as it unfolds. "In His Will is peace," the scripture repeatedly affirms, not because circumstances are pleasant, but because resistance has ceased.

THE SOLUTION—INNER ALIGNMENT

This distinction is crucial. *Acceptance, in its spiritual sense, is often misunderstood as resignation. In truth, it is the very opposite. Passive resignation says, "Nothing can be done." Active acceptance says, "I see clearly what is, therefore I can act wisely."*

Contemporary psychology has rediscovered this insight through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which shows that psychological suffering decreases not when unpleasant thoughts disappear, but when individuals stop fighting them and re-engage with purposeful action (Hayes et al., 2012).

The common thread across neuroscience, psychology, and scripture is unmistakable: peace emerges when the mind stops arguing with reality.

This is what may be called **inner alignment**—the state in which one's perceptions, values, and actions are no longer at war with the present moment. Inner alignment does not guarantee pleasure, but it restores coherence. And coherence, not happiness, is what the nervous system interprets as safety. Importantly, this orientation does not diminish ambition or responsibility. The Gita's doctrine of *karma yoga*—action without attachment to outcomes—is

not an invitation to inaction, but to clean action. Likewise, Sikh acceptance of *Bhana* never negates effort; it purifies it. One works fully, but without the corrosive demand that reality must reward effort with happiness.

BEYOND PERFORMANCE: TOWARD A LIFE THAT IS ALIVE

Tools for happiness, when framed correctly, are practices of alignment. One such practice is **non-resistant awareness**—the deliberate naming of experience without judgement. Neuroscientific studies show that simply labeling emotions reduces amygdala activation and restores prefrontal regulation (Lieberman et al., 2007).

Another is **purpose-anchored action**, where effort is guided by values rather than emotional payoff. This mirrors both karma yoga and modern motivational psychology, which finds that intrinsic motivation sustains well-being more reliably than reward-driven striving.

A third, often neglected tool is **deliberate reduction of comparison**. Social comparison intensifies dissatisfaction even in objectively improving conditions. Reducing exposure to constant evaluative stimuli—especially digital—has been shown to improve mood stability and self-perception (Twenge, 2019).

Finally, the most powerful tool remains **Meditation in Deep Surrender**. This is a tool that is often referred to as Vibrant Celestial Meditation. Extracting the essence of our scriptures, this form of meditation allows the infinite energy of the Superconsciousness to act and restore the pristine balance inside. In a state of surrender to the divinity within, the awakening happens spontaneously. That stirring, accompanied by profound inner reactions is the most powerful tool of inner alignment.

The Bible says

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:33

This profound verse speaks of the journey to peace as an expedition to the inner realm and not to the outside world. How then do you seek the inner kingdom, the seat of the infinite Superconsciousness. In a state of letting go. As we surrender in meditation, the life force awakens. These principles align with a growing body of psychological research indicating that mindset and meaning often shape well-being more than circumstances alone.

Happiness is not a goal to chase; it is a landscape revealed when resistance falls away and acceptance opens the heart.

(Views expressed are the author's own).

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

In matters of conscience, the law of the majority has no place.

-Mahatma Gandhi

India's youth: Driving innovation, growth, and a confident future

India stands at a defining moment in its development journey, powered by one of the largest and most dynamic youth populations in the world. With energy, creativity, and growing access to education and technology, Indian youth are increasingly shaping the country's economic and social transformation. Across sectors—from agriculture to technology, from entrepreneurship to public service—young Indians are redefining what progress looks like. Education has played a central role in this shift. Over the past two decades, access to schools, colleges, and universities has expanded significantly, even in remote regions. More young people than ever are pursuing higher education, professional training, and specialized skills. Digital learning platforms, online certifications, and hybrid classrooms have further democratized knowledge, allowing students from diverse backgrounds to compete on equal footing. Skill development initiatives have added fresh momentum.

Programs focused on technical skills, digital literacy, and vocational training are helping youth become job-ready and adaptable. Young professionals today are not limited to a single career path; instead, they are multi-skilled, flexible, and prepared to evolve with changing market needs. This adaptability has become one of India's greatest strengths in a rapidly transforming global economy.

Entrepreneurship is another area where Indian youth are making a powerful impact. Start-up culture has spread beyond metropolitan cities into smaller towns and semi-urban areas. Young entrepreneurs are launching ventures in agribusiness, clean energy, health technology, education, logistics, and creative industries. These start-ups are not only generating employment but also solving real-world problems, improving efficiency, and boosting local economies. Technology has acted as a major enabler. Affordable internet access, digital payments, and mobile-based platforms have

protecting soil and water resources. This renewed interest in agriculture is vital for long-term food security and environmental sustainability.

Public service and governance have also attracted a new generation. Young professionals are entering civil services, local governance, social enterprises, and community leadership roles. Their exposure to technology and global ideas is helping improve transparency, efficiency, and citizen engagement. Youth-led initiatives in education, health, and environmental protection are creating meaningful change at the grassroots level.

Women's participation is steadily expanding across sectors. Young women are emerging as leaders in business, science, sports, journalism, and public administration. Improved access to education, skill training, and digital platforms has enabled many to pursue independent careers and contribute to household and national incomes. Their growing presence is reshaping workplaces and social norms alike.



opened new avenues for work and innovation. Freelancing, remote employment, and the gig economy have allowed young people to collaborate with national and global markets from their hometowns. This shift has reduced dependence on migration and encouraged balanced regional development. India's youth are also playing a growing role in strengthening the rural economy. With better access to information and modern tools, young farmers are adopting sustainable practices, precision agriculture, and value-added farming. Many are combining traditional knowledge with technology to increase productivity and income while

Startups fuel innovation, inclusion and India's ascent



Shri Piyush Goyal
Union Minister for Commerce and Industry

The Startup India initiative has evolved into an inclusive and innovative ecosystem across the country, channelising youthful entrepreneurial energy to create jobs and accelerate economic growth, paving the way for achieving Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Shri Narendra Modi's Viksit Bharat 2047 mission.

India now has one of the world's largest startup ecosystems. Today, entrepreneurship has become a nationwide movement that is reshaping India's economic landscape and becoming a new engine of growth and job creation.

This transformation did not happen overnight. When the PM announced Startup India from the ramparts of the Red Fort on the Independence Day in 2015, he articulated a clear and ambitious vision that entrepreneurship must take root in every district and every block of the coun-

try. Startup India has come a long way since it was launched by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) on January 16th, 2016. Startups are energising some of the most critical sectors of the economy. IT services, healthcare and life sciences, education, agriculture, and construction account for the highest concentration of startups. New ventures have emerged across more than 50 other industries including climate tech and infrastruc-

ture. This breadth reflects innovation and resilience across diverse segments, particularly the sectors that are critical in national development priorities. Innovation & AI - A defining shift over the past decade has been the growing focus on innovation and deep technology. India's rank in the Global Innovation Index has improved from 8th in 2015 to 38th last year, and the government's support for deep tech ventures will improve it further. The number of AI startups is rising rapidly, building on the PM's Digital India initiative. The PM's vision for building a deep-tech nation has led to the establishment of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, and the launch of the India AI Mission and the Research Development and Innovation Scheme. India's startups are also innovating across areas like aeronautics, aerospace and defence, robotics, green technology, Internet of Things and semiconductors, amongst others. The sharp rise in intellectual property creation reinforces this trend. Indian startups have filed more than 16,400 new patent applications, reflecting a stronger focus on original innovation, long-term value creation, and global competitiveness. Pan-India Growth - Equally significant is the pan-India support of entrepreneurship. From just four states with startup

policies in 2016, India today has more than 30 States and Union Territories with dedicated startup frameworks. There are now DPIIT-recognised startups in every state and UT, underscoring the depth of institutional support and grassroots participation. More than 2,00,000 startups have been recognised so far, representing a decade of sustained, policy-led ecosystem development. In 2025 alone, more than 49,400 startups were recognised, the highest annual growth since Startup India began. Inclusion has been a cornerstone of this journey. Women-led entrepreneurship has emerged as a major strength, with more than 45 percent of recognised startups having at least one-woman director. Further, about half the startups are based in non-metro cities, highlighting the growing role of Tier II and Tier III cities as engines of innovation and employment.

Local to Global - As Indian startups scale, the world is increasingly their marketplace. To support global ambitions, Startup India has built strong international partnerships. Twenty-one international bridges and two strategic alliances now facilitate market access, collaboration, and expansion across key economies, including the UK, Japan, South Korea, Sweden and

Israel. More than 850 startups have already benefitted from these initiatives.

In my recent visits to Sweden, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Israel, startups were an integral part of India's business delegations. These engagements provided a platform to showcase Indian innovation globally, while exposing our entrepreneurs to innovation and business practices in developed economies. Reforms, Market Access - Improving the ease of doing business has been central to enabling this growth. Eligible startups can avail of a tax holiday for three consecutive years within their first decade. More than 4,100 startups have already received eligibility certificates. Over sixty regulatory reforms have reduced compliance burdens, facilitated capital raising, and strengthened domestic institutional investment. The abolition of angel tax and the opening up of long-term capital pools to Alternate Investment Funds have further strengthened the startup funding ecosystem. Access to markets has been prioritised. Through the Government e-Marketplace, over 35,700 startups have been onboarded, securing more than five lakh orders worth over Rs 51,200 crore. These efforts are complemented by strong financial

support. Over Rs 25,500 crore has been invested by Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs) under the Fund of Funds for Startups scheme, benefiting more than 1,300 enterprises. Additionally, collateral-free loans worth over Rs 800 crore have been guaranteed under the Credit Guarantee Scheme for Startups. Startup India Seed Fund Scheme with an outlay of Rs 945 crores provides financial assistance to startups for Proof of Concept, prototype development, product trials, market-entry and commercialization.

Cultural Change - Indian startups heralded a significant cultural change in the country, where children were encouraged to aim for jobs in a few sectors such as government service, engineering or medicine. Today, many young Indians aspire to be job creators, not job seekers, and their families respect and encourage entrepreneurial ambitions.

India's startup journey is ultimately a story of confidence in our young entrepreneurs, in policy-led growth, and in India's capacity to innovate for the world. As we move confidently towards our mission to become a developed country by 2047, startups will remain central to building a prosperous, inclusive, and globally competitive India.

Reconnecting people with nature and each other



many, the closest encounter with soil is a potted plant on a balcony. Community gardens offer a solution, a small but significant way to reintroduce nature into urban life. They allow people to engage physically with the environment, planting, watering, and nurturing life from the ground up. This simple act of gardening can foster mindfulness, reduce stress, and even improve mental health. Studies have shown that exposure to green spaces, no matter how small, can elevate mood and incre-

ase overall wellbeing. But the impact of community gardens extends far beyond the individual. These spaces are social equalizers. Neighbors who might never have interacted now find themselves collaborating on a common project. Children learn from adults, adults learn from children, and everyone gains a sense of shared purpose. Gardening in a community setting encourages cooperation, patience, and empathy—qualities that are often eroded in the fast-paced, individualistic culture of modern cities. In this sense, community gardens are not just about plants; they are about cultivating relationships and a sense of belonging. Food security is another significant benefit. By growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs, communities can supplement their diets with fresh, nutritious produce.

Urban green spaces: Small investments, big benefits



nic disease. Even short daily walks among trees can reduce blood pressure, improve cardiovascular health, and boost energy levels. Mental health benefits are equally significant. Exposure to natural environments has been linked to lower stress, reduced anxiety, and improved mood. In busy urban settings, where noise, crowds, and fast-paced routines can overwhelm residents, even small green areas offer respite. Simple acts, such as sitting on a park bench, listening to birds, or observing sea-

nal changes, help calm the mind and foster mindfulness. Green spaces are therapeutic in ways that are often subtle but deeply restorative. Social cohesion is another key benefit. Parks, playgrounds, and urban gardens serve as gathering spaces where neighbors meet, families bond, and communities connect. Events, workshops, and casual interactions in these spaces strengthen social ties and build a sense of belonging. Children learn teamwork, respect, and community responsibility when playing or helping in these shared areas. For adults, these spaces encourage networking, collaboration, and informal support systems. Environmentally, urban green spaces help combat pollution, moderate temperature, and support biodiversity.

Integrated nutrient management for sustainable Indian agriculture



Dr. Kancheti Mrunalini
(Scientist at the ICAR-Indian Institute of Pulses Research, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh)

For decades, the story of Indian agriculture has been one of intensive growth, but this progress has come at a hidden cost to our most precious resource: the soil. Today, as we face the dual challenges of a growing population and a changing climate, the "more is better" approach to chemical fertilizers is hitting a wall. To ensure our long-term food security, India must pivot toward Integrated Nutrient Management (INM)—a

What is Integrated Nutrient Management?

INM is not about abandoning modern fertilizers, but about using them more judiciously in combination with organic and biological sources. It is a balanced "diet" for the soil that includes: Chemical Fertilizers: Applied in precise doses based on actual soil needs. Organic Manures: Utilizing farmyard manure (FYM), compost, vermicompost, and green manures. Bio-fertilizers: Tapping into beneficial microbes like Rhizobium, Azotobacter, and Mycorrhizae to naturally fix nitrogen and solubilize phosphorus. Crop Residues: Recycling what is grown back into the earth.

The Pillars of Soil Health
To understand why INM works, we must look at the three pillars of soil health: physical, chemical, and biological. INM improves soil structure and water-holding capacity. For a farmer in a rainfed

region, this means the soil acts like a sponge, retaining moisture longer during dry spells. It balances pH levels and ensures that macro and micronutrients are actually available to the plant roots rather than being locked in the soil or washed away. Perhaps most importantly, INM stimulates microbial diversity and earthworm populations. These "tiny engineers" are critical for nutrient cycling and sustaining productivity in intensive systems like the rice-wheat or sugarcane belts.

Best Practices for the Indian Farmer

Moving INM from the lab to the field requires practical, site-specific strategies. National initiatives like the Soil Health Card Scheme are already providing a roadmap by recommending fertilizer applications based on actual soil tests rather than guesswork. Key management practices include the split application of nitrogen to match

critical crop growth stages and the use of slow-release options like neem-coated urea. Simple, low-cost tools like the Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) in rice help farmers decide exactly when to apply urea, reducing waste and environmental runoff. Furthermore, integrating legumes into cropping systems can naturally enhance nitrogen fixation, benefiting the entire system's productivity.

Field-Level Impact and Economic Gains

The relevance of INM is most visible at the farm level. Long-term field experiments across India show that integrated use of fertilizers and organics sustains higher yields than chemical fertilizers alone. For the average farmer, the benefits are tangible: Lower Costs: Partial substitution of expensive chemicals with on-farm organic resources reduces the need for external inputs. Resilience: Better root growth and soil tilth make crops

more "climate-resilient," helping them withstand the stresses of drought. Quality: Inclusion of micronutrients like zinc and iron results in visible improvements in both crop yield and produce quality.

A Sustainable Path Forward
Beyond the individual farm, INM aligns with India's national priorities for environmental sustainability. By minimizing nutrient losses through leaching and volatilization, this approach reduces environmental pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. As we look toward the future of Indian agriculture, it is clear that we cannot simply "mine" our soils indefinitely. Integrated Nutrient Management provides a scalable, farmer-centric pathway that ensures our farming systems remain viable for generations to come. It is time to treat our soil not just as dirt, but as a living system that requires a balanced, sustainable diet to feed a nation.



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

*The power to question is the basis of all human progress
Indira Gandhi*

Jan Vishwas Bill sparks questions over motive

The Goa Government, during the final minutes of the final day of the winter session of the Goa Legislative Assembly, pushed through the Goa Jan Vishwas Bill, 2026, thereby ratifying an ordinance that was promulgated by the Goa Governor in early December. By its own admission, the government states that the bill aims to decriminalise and rationalise minor offences, ease the compliance burden on businesses and citizens by substituting imprisonment clauses with monetary penalties, and substituting fines with penalties to further enhance trust-based governance.

On the other hand, the Opposition has, in opposing the Bill, said that it is being brought solely to help shield those responsible for allowing Birch by Romeo Lane, the nightclub where 25 people lost their lives in a fire on December 6, which was allowed to illegally operate without a fire and several other licences.

The Bill makes changes to several existing acts, including the Fire Force Act, the Goa Panchayati Raj Act and the Goa Municipalities Act

and has 'decriminalised' lapses, taking away prison time and replacing it with just fines. Perfect for allowing the officials who allowed Birch to operate without licences to get away by just paying a fine. For example, sections 20 and 21 of the Goa Fire Force Act that previously allowed imprisonment up to three months

for officials who failed to enforce fire safety requirements have been reduced to a maximum Rs 10,000 penalty in the Bill. This means that fire safety officers who neglect inspections or ignore violations now face only fines and not jail time.

Section 252 of the current Municipalities Act criminalised operating clubs and entertainment venues without proper licenses, but the Jan Vishwas Bill has converted this to a Rs 50,000 fine. Unauthorised or unsafe construction was treated as a criminal offence warranting court-ordered demolition; however, builders will now escape with a Rs 1 lakh penalty. It's not about Birch alone. It is just one of the clubs that were violating the norms. The government's own inspection report has led to the shuttering of 22 illegally operating nightclubs and high-footfall establishments.

But the real question that the government needs to come clean on is why they are making the law effective from December 2, 2025. Officially, the government has said that this is because it was on this date that the Goa Governor signed the ordinance. The Jan Vishwas Ordinance, though it shows as being signed on December 2, was notified in the official Gazette only on December 9, three days after the Birch Fire incident.

If the government is really serious about its claims that there is no correlation between the Birch incident, and the subsequent scrutiny of illegally operating nightclubs and that the timing of introducing the bill has nothing to do with the incident, then, why does the government not, as suggested by the Opposition, make the bill effective prospectively and not retroactively from December 2, 2025?

Why did the government bring the bill as an ordinance, a provision that is to be used only in emergencies, when waiting for the House to convene and pass the law via a regular process is not an option? All these inexplicable moves only give credence to the Opposition's claim that the Bill is being brought to help those officials and business leaders found guilty of violations in operating nightclubs in the State to get away lightly. If the government is serious about its claims to the contrary, it should prove so, not by mere words, but by actions.

OPEN SPACE >>

Time to give cities a voice

In Goa's villages, the gram sabha is more than a statutory body. It is a forum where citizens speak, question, object and shape decisions that affect their daily lives.

From roads and garbage to land use and local welfare, villagers have a recognized space to put their point across directly to the officials. Yet, paradoxically, Goans living in cities do not have a comparable platform.

As urbanization accelerates and civic problems multiply, this democratic gap is becoming increasingly untenable. Cities like Panaji, Margao, Vasco and Mapusa face complex and persistent issues. Municipal councils are expected to handle these challenges, but decision-making often remains distant from the people most affected by it.

Council meetings are limited, public consultations are rare, and citizens usually engage only when a crisis erupts or when it is already too late.

Margao's Shadow Council offers an important and inspiring alternative. While it has no statutory powers, the Shadow Council derives its strength from public participation, consistency and moral authority.

Democracy cannot stop at the village boundary. Cities, with their density and diversity, need even more robust platforms for dialogue. One possible solution is the creation of Urban Sabhas or Ward Sabhas, mandated by law and integrated into the functioning of municipal bodies.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

*The power to question is the basis of all human progress
Indira Gandhi*

Unveiling Goa's tribal legacy

Transitioning tribal festivals from annual events to frequent occurrences could provide many benefits enriching cultural life & supporting local economies



► The writer is a resident of Margao who strongly desires to bring about some socially relevant changes with his musings

PACHU MENON



With fascination for 'Life-Seeing' gaining preference over 'sight-seeing', the need for authentic experiences that are representative of the local culture is gaining a new high among tourists globally.

Reports suggest that tourism officials in major urban destinations have observed that guests now seek immersive experiences and a connection with local identity and lifestyle, valuing regional specialties, crafts and culture.

Tourism modules are ever-evolving, and reflect the dynamic nature of the tourism industry itself.

The evolution of tourism modules is a continuous process of adapting educational and operational frameworks to meet contemporary demands and future challenges, ensuring the industry remains relevant and sustainable.

Innovations are a primary driving force for growth and structural change in the tourism industry, leading to enhanced visitor experiences, improved efficiency, and sustainable development.

These changes, driven by competition and evolving consumer demands, span technology, business models, and sustainability practice.

Destinations must evolve beyond stale, repetitive itineraries and half-hearted efforts to attract visitors, who quickly tire of monotony and seek authentic, diverse experience, requiring genuine investment in varied offerings to stay competitive and engaging.

Demonstrating innovations within existing resources is a novel and highly effective way to increase tourism footfalls by creating unique experiences, enhancing efficiency, and differentiating a destination without massive overhauls, using digital tools, sustainable practices, or re-imagining local culture and creating memorable competitive offerings.

This approach leverages inherent assets -- like nature, history, or community -- and transforms them into modern, attractive experiences, meeting the demand for authentic, sustainable travel and boosting local economies.

In this respect, the 'Aadi Lokotsav 25' organized at AdarshGram, Amone, in association with Aadharsh Yuva Sangh and Balram Shikshan Sanstha and the Directorate of Tribal Welfare and Tribal Research Institute, along with the Directorate of Art and Culture, with participation from tribal communities across the state and beyond,

Tribal festivals showcase the rich cultural heritage through traditional dances, music, costumes, and rituals alongside vibrant displays of handicrafts, handlooms and authentic cuisine

stands out as a unique experiment that, as an annual event, has the potential to become a tourism attraction.

More than being a vibrant celebration of the country's ancient culture and a symbol of the nation's folk cultural consciousness as it was made out to be by visiting dignitaries from outside the state, the three-day event was a colourful carnival of folk art and tribal culture of the state.

Tribal festivals usually showcase the rich cultural heritage through traditional dances, music, costumes, and rituals alongside vibrant displays of handicrafts, handlooms, natural products, and authentic cuisine.

The Silver Jubilee celebration of the festival aims to preserve and promote the unique culture, heritage, and traditions of Goa's indigenous communities.

Introducing the public to diverse tribal traditions, and fostering appreciation for indigenous culture, the event offered an authentic glimpse into the lesser known traditions of Goan tribal communities, moving beyond the state's famous beaches to its rich cultural interior.

The state-level tribal sports festival, also focused on promoting a strong sports culture among tribal youth and reviving traditional indigenous games.

While ample opportunities exist to unveil Goa's tribal legacy to tourists for sustainable tourism, one can't but nurture a genuine feeling that not enough homework has been done to make this a successful endeavour.

However, Goa's tribal festivals are perceived to be in a rut due to a combination of historical marginalization, the overshadowing influence of mainstream tourist-oriented events like the Carnival, and socio-economic challenges that hinder cultural preservation efforts.

Events like the Carnival continue to be commercialized by the government to attract tourism, making them synonymous with Goan festivity in the public eye.

In contrast, tribal festivals often remain localized, rural, and less commercialized, struggling to compete for attention and resources with these large-scale state-sponsored spectacles.

Tribal communities have historically faced social exclusion, land displacement, and limited access to essential services, which impacts their ability to focus solely on cultural preservation.

Modern challenges like youth migration to cities for better opportunities also weaken traditional participation.

The influence of Western culture, modernization, and globalization has led to a decline in interest among the younger generation in traditional practices, as they are exposed to new forms of entertainment and lifestyles.

However, tribal communities are actively challenging 'backward' perceptions, and the commodification of their culture by reclaiming their narratives, through self-representation, leveraging modern education and media, and implementing community-based tourism models that prioritize cultural integrity and self-determination.

These initiatives demonstrate a proactive shift where tribal communities are asserting their voices, ensuring their cultures are seen not as static relics of the past but as dynamic, living traditions that adapt and thrive in the contemporary world.

As local organizations continue to organize events to promote and preserve their unique heritage, food, craftsmanship, and games, festivals like the 'Aadi Lokotsav' serve as platforms to showcase the richness and dynamism of tribal cultures to a wider audience.

Tribal festivals currently hold a significant place in the cultural landscape of states and are often annual events. However, many believe that, rather than remaining annual fixtures in the cultural almanac, they should occur more frequently to better serve their purpose.

Transitioning tribal festivals from annual events to frequent occurrences could provide benefits, enriching cultural life, supporting local economies, and strengthening communities.

Tribal festivals are a key component of tribal tourism, blending cultural celebration with economic development.

However, the current tourism model, driven by profit and volume, creates significant hurdles for the development of authentic, respectful, and sustainable tribal tourism, requiring a fundamental shift in priorities and policy.

But reports from various studies made on this subject suggest that tribal festivals also require careful management to remain true to their origins, as challenges related to authenticity and commercialization may crop up.

THE INBOX >>

Goa needs urgent road safety reforms

Road Safety Weeks are observed throughout the year in Goa, yet road accidents continue to claim lives. While some roads are well tarred, it remains unclear whether proper road engineering standards are followed during construction. A recent and worrying cause of fatalities is the installation of cement block dividers on Goa roads. Unlike road signboards, speed breakers, and speed limit boards—which require the Collector's approval—these dividers are often erected without any public notification or visible approval.

PWD road engineers, in consultation with elected representatives, frequently install such dividers arbitrarily, ignoring side roads, village MDR speed limits, and inadequate setbacks near commercial establishments. Traffic enforcement also remains weak due to limited manpower.

Goa urgently needs a strict Road Safety Enforcement Committee comprising qualified road safety experts to identify accident-prone black spots and correct flawed road designs.

Appointing professional road engineering consultants can help redesign roads to be safer and more efficient. Ultimately, drivers and riders must also strictly follow traffic rules.

GREGORY E D'SOUZA, Siolim

Pay parking at Vasco a good move by MMC

The Mormugao Municipal Council has decided to introduce pay parking on Swatantra Path road and in front of the municipal building in Vasco city on a pilot basis. The decision was taken collectively at a municipal meeting chaired by Chairperson Girish Borkar, along with councilors.

RAJU RAMAMURTHY, Vasco

Weak enforcement enabling land grabs

Over 3,200 illegal construction cases are

clogging the State's panchayat judicial

system, reflecting a deliberate weakening of local governance in favour of the con-

Reality check for the men in uniform

The recent disclosure in the Pernem twin murder case, in which a Russian national has confessed to multiple killings, including that of an Assamese woman in Arambol, highlights serious lapses in law enforcement.

It is deeply troubling that the Arambol case was initially registered as a natural death and the body handed over to the family without a proper investigation. Such negligence raises uncomfortable questions about the efficiency and seriousness of policing in Goa. This comes at a time when Chief Minister Pramod Sawant has repeatedly praised the police for a high crime detection rate. However, incidents like this, along with a spate of robberies in Margao, Parra, Verna and Nuem, tell a different story.

The focus must now shift from self-congratulation and award ceremonies to honest introspection. The Assembly should demand accountability and reforms that lead to real improvements in crime detection and prevention. The people of Goa deserve policing that is vigilant, responsible and capable of ensuring public safety.

ALWYN FERNANDES, Benaulim

The initiative aims to streamline roadside parking, which is currently unregulated and often chaotic, with two-wheelers and four-wheelers parked haphazardly without any charges. The introduction of hourly paid parking is expected to bring better order and ensure fair access to parking spaces, particularly benefiting four-wheeler owners in the busy city area.

Additionally, with the fish market now shifted to a new building, the area previously used as a temporary fish market near the vegetable market can be considered for parking, subject to the consent of the landowner.

RAJU RAMAMURTHY, Vasco

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Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location



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struction lobby. Illegal construction poses serious environmental threats, with buildings encroaching on protected areas, green belts, forests, and floodplains, destroying fragile ecosystems and biodiversity.

To address this growing menace, authorities must strictly enforce zoning laws and use tools such as satellite imagery and AI to detect unauthorised developments in real time. Homebuyers tempted by unusually cheap properties must exercise due diligence. Buildings with serious legal flaws should face demolition without compensation, and RERA registration must be mandatory for new projects.

K VILIP, Chorao

Trump an unlikely Peace Nobel laureate

Donald Trump is widely regarded as an unlikely candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, which recognises sustained contributions to peace, conflict resolution, and international cooperation.

While his administration brokered initiatives such as the Abraham Accords, his broader record is marked by deep polarization, withdrawal from multilateral agreements, confrontational rhetoric, and actions that escalated rather than reduced several global tensions.

Alfred Nobel's vision of peace was not episodic or transactional; it demanded consistency, moral leadership, and respect for democratic norms. Trump's "America First" approach often strained alliances and weakened international institutions that traditionally support global stability.

Once awarded, a Nobel Prize cannot be revoked, cancelled, or erased. The Nobel Prize is permanent—whether honoured or controversial—and critics argue that Trump's record does not clearly demonstrate a genuine pursuit of mutually beneficial peace.

NELSON LOPES, Chinchinim

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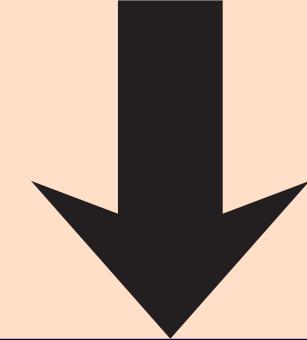
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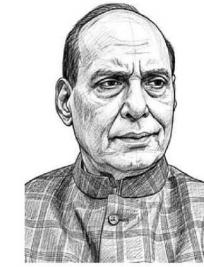
“ Our position on Greenland is very clear – it is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and its future is a matter for the Greenlanders and the Danes to decide

KEIR STARMER
British Prime Minister



When Trump dictates India not to buy oil from Russia and accept the tariff that US proposes. What is Modi doing? Modi is not uttering a word, neither questioning nor condemning the US

D Raja
CPI General Secretary



Wars have become very complex and are not limited to borders but even energy, trade, tariff, supply chains, technology and information are now part of its new dimensions

”

RAJNATH SINGH
Defence Minister

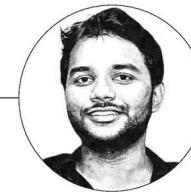
Structural flaws in higher education

Despite having one of the world's largest higher education networks, including over 1,300 universities, the academic and research standards in India are woefully short of international standards. They fare poorly in the global rankings, puncturing the oft-repeated narrative of being a 'Vishwaguru'. A recent nationwide survey has revealed several structural flaws in the higher education sector, particularly concerning the faculty. Nearly one in three faculty members reported receiving no formal training on how to teach before entering the classroom, and among those who did, almost 70% found that training ineffective, the Jetri Faculty Worklife Report 2025 has pointed out. There are over 1.6 million faculty members teaching over 40 million students spread across higher education institutions in the country. One of the key findings of the study, based on responses from 547 faculty members across public and private institutions, was that nearly a quarter of faculty end up spending most of their time on administrative tasks that are critical to institutions rather than students. This imbalance suggests that institutional priorities may crowd out time for student-focused interactions. In contrast, globally ranked institutions prioritise faculty-student interactions and project-based learning more than anything else. Faculty members who spend more time on student-centred work tend to remain longer at their institutions, suggesting that meaningful teaching may help retain the faculty. When faculty feel unable to do the work they value most, disengagement follows.

One of the flaws is that nearly a quarter of faculty end up spending most of their time on administrative tasks rather than students

Many faculty members juggle teaching, research and administrative duties without enough support to manage competing demands, leaving them overwhelmed, feeling caught between priorities and struggling to maintain balance. As they are increasingly pulled away from student-focused tasks, the critical bonds that drive both student and faculty engagement risk fraying — affecting the heart of the academic experience. The surveyed faculty members admitted to feeling ill-equipped to address students' mental-health issues, diverse learning needs, and the responsible use of AI tools. Another big challenge pertains to student motivation. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents cited lack of student engagement as a huge challenge. It was observed that student commitments did not come from a place of genuine passion, as they seemed to care more about collecting activities they could put on their resume. Teaching methods also play a major role in driving student engagement. The survey has shown that lecture-based abstract teaching remains the overwhelming default for faculty. The faculty development programmes remain patchy and fragmented, often designed to meet regulatory requirements rather than build sustained capability. This leaves higher education faculty without a coherent pathway for growth. It is time policymakers did some serious introspection on the initiatives needed to improve academic and research standards in our universities.

Under KCR, governance rested on institutionalised trust; under Revanth, auto-debit risks turn citizens into presumed defaulters



NAYINI ANURAG REDDY

Governance is not just about schemes or statements. It is about instinct. About how a government sees its people when no one is watching. Does it begin with trust, or does it begin with suspicion? Today, Telangana stands at a clear ideological crossroads.

On one side is a model that believes the State's first responsibility is to credit confidence, capital, and dignity directly into citizens' lives. On the other is an emerging approach that speaks of automatic deductions, enforcement-first governance, and direct access to citizens' bank accounts. This is not a debate about traffic challans alone. It is about two fundamentally different ideas of the state.

Trusting Citizens, Under KCR

Under K Chandrashekhar Rao's BRS administration, Telangana quietly built one of the most extensive auto-credit governance architectures in the country. The idea was simple, yet radical in Indian politics: if the state owes something to its people, it should reach them directly, predictably, and without intermediaries. Rythu Bandhu became the clearest expression of this philosophy. Investment support was directly credited to farmers' accounts, season after season, without applications, approvals, or discretion. Farmers did not have to prove anything. They did not have to plead. The state trusted them to decide how best to use the money. That trust reshaped rural Telangana's economic rhythm and soon became a national reference point.

The same logic extended across welfare. Kalyana Lakshmi and Shaadi Mubarak credited dignity into households at a critical moment. Aasara pensions ensured social security arrived



automatically. KCR Kits, Aarogya Lakshmi, and other direct benefit schemes followed the same pattern. Dalit Bandhu took the idea even further. It was not charity or subsidy, but capital. Direct support meant to create livelihoods, credited without middlemen and bureaucratic choke points.

This philosophy was not limited to income support alone. Schemes like Rythu Bima extended auto-credit governance to risk itself, with Rs 5 lakh insurance claims reaching bereaved farming families directly, often within days, without litigation or insurance intermediaries. Kanti Velugu treated preventive healthcare as a state responsibility rather than an individual burden, removing discretion from diagnosis itself.

Mission Bhagiratha reframed drinking water as a guaranteed service, not a favour mediated by access or influence. Even 24x7 free power to agriculture reflected the same instinct: trust first, verification later, support without daily policing. Together, these interventions revealed a coherent governing logic.

The state absorbed complexity, so citizens did not have to navigate it. Delivery was designed to be automatic, predictable, and non-negotiable.

Beyond Welfare

This auto-credit instinct was not limited to welfare alone. It extended decisively into development and investments. Telangana's industrial policy was built on trusting investors rather than policing them. Through TS-iPASS, projects received time-bound, automatic approvals instead of discretionary clearances. TS-BPASS applied the same logic to banking permissions, alongside several other first-of-their-kind reforms. The state removed friction not by lowering standards, but by replacing suspicion with certainty.

Former Industries Minister KT Rama Rao institutionalised this approach, making speed, predictability, and rule-based clearances Telangana's biggest competitive advantage. Investors were not asked to wait endlessly at government doors; the system cleared the path automatically.

In essence, this was auto-credit for enterprise, by crediting confidence, time, and opportunity upfront, allowing growth to follow naturally. Across sectors and demographics, the pattern

was consistent. The state credited first. The citizen decided next. Friction was reduced. Interfaces with government offices were minimised. This was not accidental. It reflected a worldview that believed governance works best when trust is institutionalised, not negotiated daily.

One of the least discussed yet most consequential outcomes of this approach was how it quietly dismantled layers of political mediation. By routing benefits, permissions, and approvals directly through systems rather than representatives, the state reduced the everyday dependence of citizens on intermediaries, brokers, and local power centres. Welfare no longer flowed through recommendation letters or discretionary signatures. Permissions no longer required proximity to influence. This mattered deeply in a society where access to the state had long been uneven.

Auto-credit governance did not just transfer money; it redistributed power. It weakened patronage without confrontation and flattened hierarchies without slogans. Citizens interacted with rules, not individuals. Entitlements became predictable rather than negotiable. This also insulated governance from political cycles. Benefits did not change with loyalty, alignment, or visibility. They arrived because the system recognised eligibility, not because someone vouched for it. In doing so, Chandrashekhar Rao's administration reduced the emotional and transactional costs of citizenship itself. The state was present, but it was not intrusive. Authority existed, but it was procedural.

Revanth's Approach

Against this backdrop, Chief Minister Revanth Reddy's recent comments on auto-debiting traffic challans mark a

When enforcement becomes automatic, and trust becomes conditional, power moves closer to the system and further away from the individual

sharp philosophical departure. Linking vehicle registrations to bank accounts and enabling automatic deduction of fines is being presented as an efficiency measure. But efficiency cannot be the only lens through which state power is exercised. A challan is an allegation, not a conviction. Due process exists precisely to allow citizens the right to contest, explain, or appeal. Auto-debit collapses that distance.

More importantly, it signals a shift in mindset. The default assumption changes, from citizen as a participant in governance to citizen as a potential defaulter, from persuasion to extraction, from consent to compulsion. This concern deepens when viewed alongside other remarks about using satellite surveillance and technology to reassess welfare eligibility, including Rythu Bandhu. When technology is spoken of primarily as a tool to exclude, deduct, or withdraw, rather than to include, credit, or empower, it reveals a governance instinct that deserves closer scrutiny.

The divide this moment exposes is not administrative or legal. It is ideological. Governments reveal their worldview not through speeches, but through the systems they normalise. What a state chooses to automate tells citizens how it truly sees them. Automation is a statement of belief. When a government automates credit, it embeds trust into the architecture of governance. When it automates deduction, it embeds authority. Neither is accidental. Each reflects a different starting point about human behaviour, responsibility, and the role of the state.

State and Citizens

Telangana's experience over the past decade demonstrated a distinct instinct. The state designed systems that reduced dependence on discretion and increased predictability. Money moved without intermediaries. Permissions moved without negotiation. The government's presence was felt not through constant intervention, but through reliable outcomes.

A shift in this instinct, even when it appears casually, in a policy aside or a random speech by a Chief Minister, matters deeply, because governance is cumulative. When enforcement becomes automatic and trust becomes conditional, the relationship between the state and the citizen subtly changes. Power begins to move closer to the system and further away from the individual. Ultimately, the question before Telangana is simple and enduring: Should governance begin with trust and intervene when it is violated, or should it begin with control and permit trust selectively? That answer defines more than policy. It defines the character of the State itself.

(The author is an MBA graduate, entrepreneur, and policy enthusiast working to highlight governance gaps & public grievances)

Letters to the Editor

Nobel politics

The recent presentation of Maria Corina Machado's 2025 Nobel Peace Prize medal to President Trump, during their white house meeting on January 15, 2026, has sparked understandable controversy. While Machado described the gesture as symbolic gratitude for the US's support in Venezuela's pursuit of freedom, it risks politicising one of the world's most prestigious awards. The Norwegian Nobel committee has been unequivocal: the physical medal may change hands, but the Nobel Peace Prize title cannot be shared, revoked or transferred. Machado remains the sole laureate for all time. This episode underscores the need to preserve the Nobel's independence from geo-political symbolism.

PH HEMA SAGAR, Secunderabad

Polio success

An ambitious health programme aimed at saving lives and preventing morbidity merits an unflinching dedication on the part of stakeholders. When a massive initiative is a vaccination drive, pertaining to a highly contagious viral disease like poliomyelitis that crippled hundreds of children every day, the focus could not waver an inch, and it did not. India's last wild poliovirus case was reported on January 13, 2011, in Panchla in West Bengal's Howrah district. 15 years down the line, and after the administration of the first oral polio drop on March 16, 1995, India can hold its head high knowing well that polio is now history in the country. During the country's battle against poliomyelitis, it was taken to a magical level never seen before in a major health programme, barring, of course, the smallpox elimination drive.

GANAPATHI BHAT, Akola

Profound irony

The episode involving US President Donald Trump and the Nobel Peace Prize has exposed a troubling distortion of one of the world's most respected honours. In a deeply awkward gesture, Venezuelan leader Maria Corina Machado, chose to symbolically hand over her Nobel Peace Prize to him, blurring the line between personal politics and institutional legitimacy. The irony is profound, given Trump's record of military strikes, coercive diplomacy and economic confrontation through tariff wars.

N SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

Breather for employees

This refers to 'Teachers Federation demands PRC'. The 2nd pay revision to Telangana government employees and teachers was due on July 1, 2023. The then BRS government had constituted the PRC in October 2023. As per the terms of reference, the commission was to submit recommendations within six months, and they did some groundwork towards the same. However, the Congress government that came to power in December 2023 kept all issues pertaining to employees and pensioners on the back burner as it had to prioritise the implementation of its six guarantees. However, the release of DA on the occasion of Sankranti is a breather for the employees to combat inflation. The government is showering freebies on certain sections of society but ignoring important, long standing demand of pay revision and health insurance coverage. Pensioners are the worst sufferers as they are spending a considerable portion of their pension on age-related health issues. If the government is keen on the welfare of the employees, it should immediately implement PRC and introduce EHS before the end of this financial year.

DINANATH SHENOLIKAR, Hyderabad

India in the hotspot

■ The Straits Times

Aloka, stray dog who walked 100 days for peace

Aloka does not fit neatly into any category that people usually look for when they ask about dogs. His breed is uncertain – most say he is likely an Indian pariah dog, whose name means divine light in Sanskrit. His age is estimated at around four years. There is no record of his birth, no owner, and no early photographs.

■ Bloomberg

Top court says Tiger Global liable for Flipkart taxes

India's Supreme Court has held that Tiger Global's capital gains from its stake sale in Flipkart to Walmart Inc. are taxable under domestic law. The court overruled a Delhi High Court ruling that allowed Tiger Global to claim exemptions under the India-Mauritius tax treaty.

■ Independent

Coal power falls in India & China for first time in...

Coal-fired power generation fell in both China and India in 2025 for the first time in more than five decades, as non-fossil energy sources grew fast enough in both countries to meet rising electricity demand. Electricity generated by coal plants fell by 1.6 per cent in China and by 3 per cent in India last year.

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Greenland crisis

Trump's aggressive bid to grab Greenland strains US relations with Europe

If Donald Trump's announcement of a US takeover of Greenland had rattled Denmark and other US allies in Europe, his threat to impose punitive tariffs against them in case of their refusal to fall in line has exacerbated the tension. European Union leaders on Saturday warned of a "dangerous downward spiral" if the US President carried out his threat. "Tariffs would undermine transatlantic relations and risk a dangerous downward spiral. Europe will remain united, coordinated and committed to upholding its sovereignty," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU Council President Antonio Costa said in posts on X. The bloc's top diplomat Kaja Kallas said tariffs would hurt prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic, while distracting from the "core task" of ending Russia's war in Ukraine. Ambassadors from the European Union's 27 countries met on Sunday for an emergency meeting to discuss their response to the tariff threat.

Meanwhile, thousands of people took to the streets in Greenland and Denmark on Saturday in protest against the proposed US takeover. Greenland is sparsely populated but resource-rich and its location between North America and the Arctic makes it well placed for early warning systems in the event of missile attacks and for monitoring vessels in the region. Trump has previously said Washington would get the territory -- currently under Denmark's authority -- "the easy way" or "the hard way". European countries have rallied to Denmark's support. They have argued that the security of the Arctic region should be a joint NATO responsibility. France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands and the UK have dispatched a small number of troops to Greenland in a so-called reconnaissance mission. European leaders have decided to convey their opposition to Trump at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland this week.

Trump had talked of purchasing Greenland in 2019 during his first time in office, but Europeans have only now realised how serious he is about acquiring it by any means necessary. This time, his desire seems to be prompted not only by security and economic concerns, but also by territorial expansion. The annexation of Greenland, a Danish-owned, self-governed territory, could spell the effective end of NATO. The US military operation in Venezuela had already demonstrated the US determination to dominate the Western Hemisphere, of which Greenland geographically is a part. Trump's latest tariff threat puts US ties with Europe under severe test. With the sole option in its toolkit being intense diplomacy, the EU is set for a bumpy phase in its historic relationship with the US in the light of Trump's designs on Greenland, initially seen as a brazen boast.

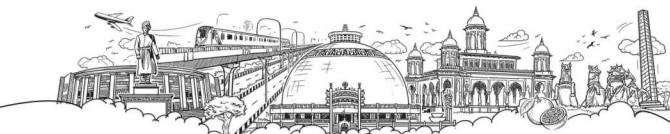
Yawning gaps

SC push for 25% EWS quota under RTE law calls for urgent enforcement measures

Over 15 years back, the Right to Education (RTE) Act mandated private, unaided schools to reserve 25% of seats for students belonging to economically weaker sections (EWS). The objective was social inclusion in public education in India. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds could not access quality education in private schools and it was necessary to fix a statutory quota for them. The government reimbursed the additional cost incurred by the schools. Despite repeated admonitions from the government, evidence shows that the EWS quota is frequently under-implemented -- in Delhi's 2025-26 school cycle, 3,506 of 33,212 EWS seats in private unaided schools were vacant. Similar situations prevail in states like Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Studies by civil society organisations have also documented discriminatory practices faced by underprivileged pupils, including informal fees, classroom segregation and denial of facilities.

In this backdrop, the Supreme Court's recent observations on the implementation of Section 12(1)(c) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 is a decisive attempt to bolster the true spirit of the law. Calling the 25% admission mandate for children from economically weaker sections a "national mission", the court said this obligation is central to the constitutional vision of equality and is not a peripheral welfare measure. There are "systemic gaps" in the rules of implementation that have historically hindered the successful integration of EWS students into elite private institutions. The court has directed authorities to establish a transparent, centralised online admission portal in every state to minimise human interference and ensure that the selection process is based strictly on merit and eligibility within the reserved category.

The court's intervention is grounded in the reality of poor compliance across states and Union Territories. The right flowing from Section 12(1)(c) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 must be enforced through binding rules and not left to discretionary guidelines. The court has correctly identified procedural failure as a central cause of exclusion. The absence of binding rules and reliance on advisories, lack of transparent admission portals and weak grievance redressal mechanisms have allowed schools to evade accountability. By directing states to frame enforceable rules under Section 38 of the Act, consult child rights commissions, publish clear admission criteria and establish time-bound complaint mechanisms, the apex court has identified areas of structural weaknesses. The wisdom of the verdict must now be complemented by sustained administrative commitment.



Will Sergio be able to restore warmth in India-US relations!

Sergio Gor, the new US ambassador to India, is considered most powerful figure in Team Trump


Dr Vijay Darda

Dilli door hai.. is a very famous Hindi proverb in India. But is Delhi far away for the US too? This question arises because it took seven months for the US ambassador to reach Delhi after the announcement of his appointment. So, should we now hope for the realisation of another proverb: 'Better late than never'! Will the new ambassador Sergio Gor be able to restore warmth in the India-US relations?

There have been instances of delays in the appointment of the US ambassador to India earlier too, but the issue is more significant now because the earlier warmth in relations has turned into bitterness, and the US is struggling with a crisis of trust. From the departure of Kenneth Juster in January 2021 until the arrival of Eric Garcetti in April 2023 -- a period of more than two years -- there was no US ambassador in India. The reason behind this is somewhat complicated. Joe Biden though finalised Eric Garcetti's name, several allegations were levelled against him. The investigation into those allegations took a long time. Eventually, Garcetti arrived in New Delhi. But couldn't someone else have been appointed and sent to Delhi in the meantime? US Senator Mark Warner had remarked at the time that while on one hand we talk about improving relations with India, on the other we are failing to appoint an ambassador. Back then, it was perceived that Biden wanted to send a message downplaying India's status. Nevertheless, Garcetti eventually came to India



The India-US ties are undoubtedly at a very delicate stage. Therefore, the challenges ahead for the US ambassador are numerous. India wishes him the best!

■ ■ ■

and completed his tenure in May 2025.

President Donald Trump appointed his trusted confidante Sergio Gor as the US ambassador to India, but it took him nearly seven months to officially assume his duties. Meanwhile, the ambassador to several other countries, including China, had already been appointed by December 2024. This again raises the question of delay. Moreover, Sergio Gor has been dual-tasked with the responsibility as Special Envoy for South and Central Asian Affairs. This signifies that his role will be extremely pivotal. However, the question remains that amid these major responsibilities, to what extent will he be able to advocate for a fair relationship with India? Upon taking charge in India, he expressed the view that his top priority would be to improve the relationship between the US and India. I am hopeful in this regard because he is an individual with a direct connection to Donald Trump. He is considered one of the most powerful fig-

ures in Team Trump. Trump himself has mentioned Gor's close ties with the Trump family and also showered him with praise on social media. Gor also shares a friendship with Trump's son Donald Trump Junior. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that he might persuade Trump that it will be impossible for the US to keep China in check in this region without ensuring a warm relationship with India. Due to various other global factors, India can be a reliable partner for the US. In fact, over the last decade, this very perspective brought the US and India onto the same track. However, the relationship at present appears to have derailed, making the task somewhat difficult. Nevertheless, I am confident he will succeed because he possesses the art of making the impossible possible. He understands Indian culture well. He knows that India is a nation that values friendship and recalls how India supported Trump during his election. The mild-mannered Sergio Gor understands that ties and com-

merce between the two nations should flourish, and there should be genuine goodwill between their people.

One thing is certain that the primary duty of any country's ambassador is to prioritise his or her own nation's interests. Sergio Gor is a staunch follower of the 'America First' policy. When Trump spoke of acquiring Greenland, and Donald Trump Junior visited the territory shortly thereafter, Sergio was right there with him. I mention this example so you can understand that even while stationed in New Delhi, Sergio's heart will beat for America and there is nothing wrong with that. However, if he is to succeed in the responsibility of improving relations, he must also understand India's interests.

People in India are asking: Has the US we trusted and worked with to improve relations given us a fair response? Why is the US still favouring Pakistan? China is buying oil from Russia, Europe is buying gas and the US itself is buying uranium, so why is the 'tariff attack' directed only at India? Now, there are even threats of 500% tariffs. Does the US want to control the world's most populous nation through intimidation? Sergio Gor will have to find answers to all these questions and present India's perspective to Trump. Only then will he succeed in his effort to pour sweetness back into the relationship. India's best wishes are with him.

The author is the chairman, Editorial Board of Lokmat Media and former member of Rajya Sabha. vijaydarda@lokmat.com



YOUR LETTERS

Youth power

The foundation of every state is the education of its youths and a nation's youths are the trustees of its posterity. The National Youth Day (NYD) is observed on January 12 to mark the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. There cannot be a better slogan than "Ignite the self, impact the world" on NYD. It is common knowledge that the world was never so young and youngsters are potent instruments in nation building where they substantially offer inputs to politics, society, civics and sports. The world recognises youths as "change partners" who play a significant part in fostering peace and harmony. Youth power requires empowerment and correspondingly the youths must be used to spread awareness on education, environment, drug abuse to name a few. World leaders have to build the future for the youths as well as help build the youths for the future of the nation.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola.



Lives touched, legacy built over time


Prof Chander Mahadev

Sumalatha's journey began nearly two decades ago when waste management was a far cry from today's structured system. Thanks to ITC Mission Sunehra Kal and FINISH Society which ushered in the winds of change.

Back in time, the work felt chaotic, with mixed garbage piling on her cart daily. Now, Guntur has evolved into a city more conscious of cleanliness, and Sumalatha has witnessed every step of that transformation. "The job is strict now, but in a good way," she reflects with pride. Households insist on daily collections, treating it as an entitlement rather than a favour. Segregation has woven itself into the community fabric -- dry plastics, papers and metals separated from wet organics as a norm. If she misses one street or runs late, complaints start flooding the Guntur Municipal Corporation (GMC) portal, triggering swift oversight.

Monitoring has tightened, accountability has sharpened, yet Sumalatha is all smiles. "People care about cleanliness now," she says. "They expect us to come and they expect us to guide them on how to do it right." The GMC, too, has stepped

up, addressing green workers' concerns with unprecedented speed whether it is equipment shortages or route adjustments. This dialogue has turned pressure into partnership, fuelling her passion rather than draining it.

A pivotal shift came through the ITC-MSK-FINISH Society's interventions, which revolutionised Sumalatha's daily grind. Earlier, she hauled heavy, soggy loads of unsegregated waste -- wet kitchen scraps mingled with recyclables, making each trip a physical ordeal.

Many households now segregate diligently, slashing the volume of wet waste she handles. Early ones among them practice home composting, turning vegetable peels and leftovers into nutrient-rich soil right in their backyards. What remains flows efficiently to cluster compost bins, community units that process organic waste on-site. Roadside litter accumulations have dwindled, as have haphazard dumping habits.

"My burden has lightened," Sumalatha notes, "and with it, my dignity at work has grown." No longer just a collector of filth, she's an educator, a facilitator of Guntur's green ambitions. This evolution elevates her role, making her a respected figure in lanes she once shied away from.

Monitoring has tightened, accountability has sharpened, yet Sumalatha is all smiles. "People care about cleanliness now," she says. "They expect us to come and they expect us to guide them on how to do it right." The GMC, too, has stepped

up, addressing green workers' concerns with unprecedented speed whether it is equipment shortages or route adjustments. This dialogue has turned pressure into partnership, fuelling her passion rather than draining it.

These include plastics, cardboard, metals, stuff that households set aside cleanly. This haul goes straight to local recyclers, fetching a modest but reliable second income. "It's not a lot, but it helps," she smiles. "It feels good that nothing is wasted." What was once buried in mixed garbage now validates her expertise, transforming daily grind into a cycle of value. In a job often undervalued, this stream underscores her contribution to both community hygiene and personal resilience.

Sumalatha doesn't just preach sustainability, she lives it. While some sanitation workers advocate composting without practicing it themselves, she maintains a home

The author is a former professor of journalism. Views expressed are personal.

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GK Editorial

Winter hope for tourism

The challenge is to ensure that this revival is not fleeting but marks the beginning of a more resilient, inclusive and future-ready tourism economy

After a bruising 2025, Jammu and Kashmir's tourism sector is cautiously turning a corner. The scars of the Pahalgam terror attack last April, compounded by erratic weather and prolonged closures, had shaken confidence in one of the region's most vital economic lifelines. Yet, as winter settles over the higher reaches and snow blankets Kashmir's mountains, early signs of revival are becoming visible.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's outreach to the travel fraternity in Mumbai last week was telling in both tone and intent. He did not pitch postcard images of Kashmir's beauty. Instead, he spoke of trust, partnership and shared responsibility. Tourism in Jammu and Kashmir cannot be rebuilt on marketing alone; it rests on confidence among travel agents, tour operators and, ultimately, tourists themselves.

The Chief Minister's acknowledgement of Maharashtra-based travel operators, especially for standing by the Valley after the Pahalgam attack, underlined how critical these partnerships are in times of crisis. When destinations face uncertainty, it is the travel trade that often decides whether confidence returns or fear lingers. Encouragingly, the administration's message is now being reinforced by data on the ground. Chief Secretary Atal Dulloo's assessment that tourist arrivals are picking up as conditions improve reflects a slow but steady recovery. Winter tourism is playing a key role. Snowfall in Gulmarg and other higher reaches has revived skiing, winter sports and snow tourism, drawing domestic visitors eager for experiences that are both scenic and secure.

But this moment of recovery also comes with a warning. As Dulloo rightly noted, the return of tourists must not mean a return to overcrowding. Traditional hotspots in Kashmir have repeatedly exceeded their carrying capacity during peak seasons, straining infrastructure, ecology and local communities. The proposed SPREAD initiative, aimed at decongesting these areas by developing new, eco-sensitive, year-round destinations, could be a turning point if implemented with seriousness and transparency.

Equally significant is the focus on Jammu, where rising pilgrim footfall offers untapped potential. Converting short religious visits into longer, experience-based stays could rebalance tourism between the two regions. After a tough year, winter has arrived not just with snow, but with possibility. The challenge for Jammu and Kashmir now is to ensure that this revival is not fleeting but marks the beginning of a more resilient, inclusive and future-ready tourism economy.

REFLECTIONS

The chili smoke of superstition

Why we still choose myths over medicine



Irrationality
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harrowing was the fate of my wife's young cousin in 1987. A highly educated mother of two, she was diagnosed with diphtheria—a throat infection easily treated with modern medicine. Instead, she fell victim to a "Khidmatghar" who prescribed a primitive, tribal ritual: inhaling the smoke of burnt dry red chilies. After days of this agonizing "treatment," she succumbed to the illness, leaving behind a devastated family.

These tragedies mirror the famous incident at the village of Burzahama, where thousands flocked to a "miracle spring." The aftermath saw hundreds hospitalized with gastric complications, forcing SKIMS to issue urgent public warnings to stop the madness before more lives were lost. Today, this culture of deception has moved to our digital screens and even our public transport, where "smart" salesmen sell standard medical products to the curious, often leading them straight to a hospital ward.

The tragedy of Burzahama, the miracle yeast, the chili-smoke rituals, and today's viral "healers" all share a common root: the exploitation of hope. It is high time that government agencies take appropriate and decisive action against these so-called healers. Furthermore, there must be stringent action against fake medical practitioners who dupe the public by displaying fraudulent certificates in their pharmacies and profiles. These imposters do not treat; they harm. As we navigate an age of unprecedented information, our greatest challenge is discernment.

This phenomenon is merely an old poison in a new bottle. The history of the Kashmir Valley is littered with such incidents where logic was sacrificed at the altar of superstition. Decades ago, a rumor spread that diabetes could be cured by a "miracle yeast" kept in a clay bowl. Thousands fell for the ruse, resulting in severe health setbacks and lost lives.

The human cost of this irrationality is deeply personal to me. In the late 1970s, a self-styled healer advised a friend's brother to treat high sugar levels with honey. The young man fell into a deep diabetic coma and passed away in the prime of his life. Even more

We must honor those we have lost by refusing to let history repeat itself. True "service to humanity" lies in the evidence-based work of science and the protection of the law, not in the empty, and often dead, promises of a fraudulent pharmacy.

The writer is a former civil servant.

Let's Guard J&K's Green Treasure

It's our collective responsibility to protect our forests for our survival, future generations



Eco-Watch
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Imagine Jammu and Kashmir without forests; visualise images of desert in mind! It is a stark reality that we are fast losing deodar, kail and fir trees due to prolonged dry weather, higher temperatures and mainly due to increasing human activities.

Felling of trees for construction of roads and laying of transmission lines have taken a heavy toll on forests and is seen as one of major contributors of erratic weather patterns in J&K. As this was not enough, forest fires triggered by prolonged dry spell are posing serious threat to the green treasure.

It is alarming that 310 cases of forest fires have been reported in the last 10 months—affecting more than 880 hectares across J&K. The Sindh Forest Division reported the highest number of incidents, with 67 fire incidents damaging 111.06 hectares, Kamra followed with 52 incidents affecting 67.90 hectares, Anantnag recorded 37 fires damaging 60.25 hectares while Bandipora reported 29 incidents, impacting 60.35 hectares. Liddar reported 25 incidents, damaging 110.95 hectares respectively. Kulgam Forest division was worst-hit with 22 fire incidents affecting 307.85 hectares, the highest in Kashmir. Tangmarg and Kehmali divisions reported 18 incidents each, damaging 36.05 hectares and 43.55 hectares, respectively.

The Jammu Vigilance Forest (JVF) Division recorded 16 incidents affecting 41.21 hectares, while Awantipora reported nine incidents damaging 30.70 hectares. Shopian, Langate and Pir Panjal divisions recorded five incidents each, with losses ranging from 1.70 to 4.02 hectares. Due to raging forest fire, a series of landmine blasts occurred along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu's Poonch district.

Zabarwan mountain range in Srinagar is witnessing frequent forest fires from last over a month. Amid dry spell, grass and vegetation in forests is devoid of moisture, making these highly combustible with constant sunlight exposure. What makes the situation worse is lack of exper-



tise and equipment to detect and control forest fires.

J&K has a forest cover of 21,387 square kilometres and a tree cover of 2,867 square kilometres respectively. 11% of J&K forest area falls under very high to moderate fire-prone categories. As per The Global Forest Watch (GFW), a platform providing data and tools for monitoring forests, states that in 2010, J&K had 660 Kilo Hectare (kha) of natural forest, extending over 8.3% of its land area. In 2023, it lost 51 kha of natural forest, equivalent to 55.7 kt of CO2 emissions. From 2001 to 2023, J&K lost 4.19 kha of tree cover, equivalent to a 0.39% decrease in tree cover since 2000, and 1.98 Mt of CO2e emissions. From 2013 to 2023, 76% of tree cover loss in the union territory occurred within natural forest. The total loss within natural forest was equivalent to 173 kilotonnes of CO2 emissions.

As per GFW, J&K's five dis-

tricts Rajouri, Kathua, Udhampur, Doda and Reasi were responsible for 53% of all tree cover loss between 2001 and 2023. Rajouri had the most tree cover loss at 526 ha compared to an average of 199 ha. From 2001 to 2023, J&K lost 4.19 kha of relative tree cover, equivalent to a 0.39% decrease since 2000 and 0.18% of all tree cover loss in India.

Beyond the forest fires, encroachments and haphazard development are causing extensive damages to forests.

Forests are an important part of our eco-system and any disturbances or damage to this natural creation is bound to have serious implications on us. We pass on the blame of erratic weather patterns to climate change but forget what destruction we are causing to our fragile ecosystem. We too are contributors rather accused in J&K's environmental destruction. How can we compensate for the loss of even a tree with money?

It is our collective responsibility to save our forests, our green treasure, our lifeline for our survival and future generations.

Author is Executive Editor, Greater Kashmir

Kashmir's Waste Crisis

Blaming the state is easy, owning responsibility is harder

Introspection

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Last year, during a visit to Leh, we carried homemade lunch with us while travelling. We forgot to pack plates and assumed we could easily buy disposable ones from the market. To our surprise, we tried at a local market on the way to Leh but could not find disposable plates or spoons anywhere. Even when we offered to pay extra, shopkeepers refused.

That was the moment we realised that protecting a place from garbage is not only the job of authorities—it is equally the responsibility of people, of you and me. Back home in Kashmir, the contrast is stark, although Ladakh is not that clean either.

For years now, the default response to Kashmir's growing filth has been predictable: blame the administration, blame officers, blame municipal councils. While governance failures are real and undeniable, this convenient narrative has allowed society to absolve itself of responsibility. The uncomfortable truth is that Kashmir's waste crisis is as much a social failure as it is an administrative one.

Gone are the days when Kashmir was celebrated as a paradise on earth. Today, the valley increasingly resembles a dumping ground. We check air quality index now. Heaps of plastic, polythene, diapers, kitchen waste and animal waste occupy our lands, agricultural fields, river-

banks and lake shores. Worse, this waste seeps into water bodies, damaging ecosystems, poisoning aquatic life and permanently scarring the valley's natural beauty.

The question we must ask—honestly—is simple: who is responsible?

According to recent data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey, Jammu and Kashmir's literacy rate stands at around 82%, placing it among the more literate regions in the country. In simpler terms, almost every household has at least one educated person capable of distinguishing right from wrong, civic sense from civic apathy. Yet paradoxically, the same educated society is often seen contributing the most to this mess.

Jammu and Kashmir generates approximately 1,470-1,500 tonnes of solid waste every day. Shockingly, only about 20% of this waste is scientifically treated. The remaining bulk ends up dumped along roadsides, in forests, and into rivers and streams. Srinagar alone generates 550-600 tonnes of waste daily, most of which is pushed to the already overburdened Achan landfill, now facing a serious capacity crisis.

The situation in towns like Sopore is even more alarming. Despite producing around 33 metric tonnes of solid waste daily, Sopore has no designated garbage dumping site. Other districts too fall in this line. This failure at the policy and planning level is undeniable. But does the absence of dumping sites justify dumping waste into rivers, wetlands and orchards?

Visit any tourist spot frequented by young people. Is there a single location free of trash? The answer is obvious. Yet, the same society is quick to sermonise about cleanliness and environmental protection, often directing anger exclusively at municipal bodies and officials.

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The uncomfortable truth is that Kashmir's waste crisis is as much a social failure as it is an administrative one.

In recent months, departments like the Baramulla Municipal Council and Sopore Municipal Council have been seen working tirelessly—cleaning riverbanks, streets and neighbourhoods with limited manpower and infrastructure. Their efforts, however sincere, are destined to achieve only partial success. Why? First, because the absence of proper waste processing and dumping facilities is a policy failure beyond their control. Second, and more critically, because public behaviour continuously undermines whatever progress is made.

Every day, people can be seen carrying dustbins filled with household garbage and casually dumping them on riverbanks as if it were a routine civic exercise. Ironically, many women keep their homes and yards spotless, only to dispose of waste during

morning or evening walks by throwing it into nearby streams. Cars stop along bridges and roadsides, and garbage is tossed into rivers without shame—sometimes by the very people who speak loudly about cleanliness drives and civic responsibility.

This hypocrisy lies at the heart of Kashmir's waste problem.

We cannot endlessly blame the administration while actively participating in environmental destruction. Civic sense does not begin and end with government notifications. It begins at home—with waste segregation, refusal to litter, and the courage to call out wrong practices, even within our own families and neighbourhoods.

Yes, the government must create infrastructure: scientific landfills, waste-to-energy plants, segregation systems and stricter enforcement. But infrastructure alone cannot fix a society that has normalised dumping waste into its own lifelines.

If this collective apathy continues, the consequences will be irreversible. Kashmir risks losing not only its ecological balance but also its reputation as a world-class tourist destination. A valley choking on plastic and filth cannot sell itself as paradise.

The choice is stark. Either we continue pointing fingers while drowning in our own waste, or we accept that saving Kashmir begins with changing Kashmiri behaviour. The administration must act—but so must we.

Noor ul Haq is an independent Journalist from Kashmir.



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Opinion

The Curious Case of Perfection

The new policy has both positive and negative implications



Board Results

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The recent results of class 10th and 12th classes announced by the Jammu and Kashmir Board of School Education (JKBOSE) sparked a debate over the prevailing system of evaluation.

More than a dozen students were awarded 100 percent (500/500) marks in their class 10th examination which stirred widespread debate over the unprecedented awarding of 100 percent marks in annual examinations.

From the last one year, JKBOSE surprised everyone - parents, teachers, and education experts as it was able to declare the result of two classes (10th and 12th) on the

same day, something which was never witnessed before.

On April 30 of 2025, JKBOSE declared the result of class 10th and 12th on the same day and this year again the result of two classes was declared on a single day.

Besides giving surprise with the declaration of result of two classes, JKBOSE surprised all the stakeholders by awarding 500 marks over a dozen students.

A similar trend was witnessed in the Class 10 annual examinations of 2021, when nearly 15 students secured full marks, triggering intense discussion over the credibility and robustness of the Board's evaluation mechanism.

Educationists and subject experts expressed serious concern over this emerging pattern and argued that such results project an unrealistic sense of perfection and leave no scope for academic improvement.

While many academics conceded that securing full marks in subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, or Accountancy may be theoretically possible, awarding 100 percent marks in language subjects like English, Urdu, and Hindi has raised eyebrows even among

seasoned evaluators.

Traditionally, from primary to high school levels, students were rarely awarded full marks in language papers, even after attempting all questions correctly.

Minor deductions—often considered inevitable in language evaluation—were the norm.

The current trend, however, has left educators puzzled, prompting them to question the sudden emergence of academic "perfection."

Undoubtedly, students should not be denied the right to aspire for excellence. Achieving a perfect score in any exam can indeed be an extraordinary accomplishment.

No doubt it reflects exceptional talent and hard work. Yet, concerns arise when such outcomes risk fostering a sense of absolute perfection among teenage students—an outlook that may breed overconfidence and, in the long run, prove counterproductive.

While a perception has gained ground that JKBOSE has altered its evaluation criteria to facilitate full marks, the issue warrants a deeper understanding.

Over the past few years, the government has adopted a policy of awarding grace marks to students

across the board. This practice is distinct from the long-standing provision of five statutory marks meant solely to help students qualify for examinations.

Experts say the decision to award additional grace marks is taken by the Result Declaration Committee of JKBOSE to assist students who narrowly fail examinations and to improve overall pass percentages.

The decision is taken while comparing the pass percentage of the past few years.

The policy has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, grace marks help prevent school dropouts by enabling weaker students to progress academically and complete their schooling up to Class 12.

However, the absence of a well-defined framework to determine eligibility for such marks remains a major concern.

Once JKBOSE compiles the result, it is submitted before the committee for approval. Along with granting approval, the committee also decides on the extent of grace marks to be awarded, based largely on the actual pass percentage.

In this process, grace marks are awarded uniformly, without adequately considering individual merit, resulting in some students' aggregate scores rising to an improbable 500 out of 500.

Ideally, the grace marks should be strictly limited to students who are genuinely at risk of failing and such marks should be restricted to students scoring below a defined threshold—say, 300 to 350 out of 500.

Students who already secure distinctions or scores above 400 marks should not be eligible for grace marks.

The motive should be to help students pass the exams, not to artificially elevate already high scores to perfect ones.

JKBOSE officials defend the decision of awarding 100 percent marks saying students focus on conceptual components which as per NEP-2020 gives a justification to the evaluators to award full marks in all the subjects. The Board officials attribute to the implementation of NEP-2020 which focuses on conceptual learning.

The idea behind opposing the decision to award 500 marks is not to dishearten or discourage the students, or undermine their

hard work. It is about a broader concern that the 100 percent score is creating needless curiosity about perfection.

The marks obtained at JKBOSE level should ideally reflect both achievement while keeping some scope for further growth. It should not give any sense of perfection to students at this early age but encourage them for continuous learning and improvement.

In the current education system which has widened its horizons, mere achieving marks in an examination does not set the bench marks but it must give students a confidence and courage to face real world challenges. The canvas should not be fitted for only grades but overall academic excellence.

This is the right time that educators, policy makers, administrators and parents shift focus from grades to overall academic excellence. They should push the students to move beyond numbers and inculcate the essence of intellectualism and personal growth. Qualifying JKBOSE is not the ultimate aim but it is just a step in long academic journey of the student. Giving them hope of perfection now can prove disastrous in future.

Listen to the Silence

It carries unsaid fears, unmet needs, and quiet desperation. It demands to be noticed before it becomes absence

Human Interest

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Abdul Rahman (name changed) was a man shaped by routine and restraint, raised in an era when endurance was praised and emotional excess was quietly discouraged. He had grown up believing that fatigue was physical, not mental, and that hardship could always be overcome by discipline. Complaints were luxuries; survival required grit. These beliefs were not cruel in his mind. They were protective, inherited wisdom passed down from fathers to sons, polished by time and necessity. His son, Ayaan (name changed) was twenty three years old. When Abdul Rahman was of that age, he was newly married, working long shifts at a local manufacturing unit, saving every rupee he could. Ayaan's life did not resemble that road. He held a university degree that remained unused, framed not on a wall but buried in a drawer. His days were irregular, his sleep fragmented. He delivered food through a mobile app, drove for hours and returned home exhausted. To Abdul Rahman, it looked like idleness. He saw a young man who woke late, lacked urgency and appeared content doing work that did not build status or security. He mistook withdrawal for apathy and quiet for comfort. What he did not see was a mind in constant motion, measuring failure in automated rejection emails, counting losses in unpaid internships, watching opportunity retreat behind invisible digital gates. Their conversations followed a familiar pattern, and criticism was its constant rhythm.

Abdul Rahman corrected Ayaan the way one corrects a habit—frequently, automatically, without malice but without pause. If Ayaan slept late, Abdul Rahman remarked on wasted mornings. If he woke early, Abdul Rahman asked why it had taken so long to develop discipline. If Ayaan mentioned an interview, Abdul Rahman asked why it had not already turned into an offer. If days passed without news, Abdul Rahman warned him that employers sensed hesitation. Criticism threaded itself into ordinary moments.

At the dining table, Abdul Rahman commented on Ayaan's posture, his silence, his distracted gaze. While watching the news, he spoke aloud about young people who lacked resilience. When neighbours' children succeeded, Abdul Rahman mentioned it casually, as if observation were not comparison. He believed these remarks were guidance. He believed repetition would harden resolve. He did not notice how each comment, small on its own, accumulated into a weight Ayaan carried quietly. Abdul Rahman spoke of responsibility, self-respect, and perseverance. Ayaan listened. When he spoke, his words were careful, often apologetic. He mentioned about the job market, the cost of rent, the impossibility of entry-level roles demanding years of experience. He spoke

of applications sent daily, of interviews that never came, of wages that dissolved into fuel costs and loan interest.

Abdul Rahman heard these explanations as excuses, shaped by a generation he believed had grown too comfortable blaming systems instead of confronting them. He reminded Ayaan of his own youth. Of the years when men did not talk about anxiety, when security came from loyalty to a company, when homes were modest but attainable. He spoke of a time when hard work felt like a contract with the future. Ayaan did not argue. He rarely raised his voice. His resistance took the form of silence, a silence Abdul Rahman misread as indifference.

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Tears stared rolling down and he felt deeply hurt.

One day Ayaan was sitting in a kitchen. Abdul Rahman asked if Ayaan had just woken up. The irritation rose easily, practiced by repetition. Ayaan replied that he had just returned from work. He had been making deliveries since morning. The word work landed poorly. Abdul Rahman dismissed it without meaning. Delivery driving was not a future; it was a pause. He spoke sarcastically, comparing it to a hobby, measuring it against the milestones he himself had reached by that age. He spoke of marriage, responsibility, and independence. He asked why Ayaan could not even cover his own fuel expenses. Ayaan placed the spoon down carefully without even touching the food, he was fed up with these unsolicited advices. He felt an uninvited guest in his own home. He looked thinner than Abdul Rahman remembered, his face pale, his posture slightly folded inward. He spoke about employers who wanted experience no fresh graduate could possibly have. He spoke of trying, of running from pillar to post in search of a job which never was offered. Abdul Rahman interrupted him. He said the math always worked if effort was honest. He said hardship was not new. He dismissed the idea that the present was uniquely difficult. He compared eras as if they shared the same terrain. When Ayaan said he was tired, Abdul Rahman reacted with disbelief.

Tiredness, to him, was earned on factory floors and construction sites, not in working as a delivery boy. He criticized Ayaan in front of his uncle and aunt. Tears stared rolling down and he felt deeply hurt. He had an unpunctuated faith in his papa and expected that he will voice his concern and defend him when others choose to be the mute spectators. With his limited income he had brought winter cap and gloves for his father it was shelved with a cold and unappreciative response. The kitchen fell quiet. Ayaan did not defend himself. He did not explain that his exhaustion lived in his thoughts, not his muscles. He did not say that waking each day felt like dragging himself through invisible

mud. Instead, he apologized. He said he was sorry for not being the son his father had been at that age. He said he was sorry that the world no longer responded to effort the same way. Then he hugged his father. It was not a strong embrace. It was a surrender of weight, a brief resting of a tired body against someone he still hoped might understand. He promised he would not be a burden anymore. Abdul Rahman went to bed that night believing he had succeeded as a father. He believed firmness was love. The next morning, the silence felt different. Abdul Rahman woke early, ready to force a new beginning. He planned to take Ayaan with him, to search for work face to face, the way things used to be done. He knocked on the basement door. He called out. There was no response.

On the pillow lay Ayaan's phone and a folded piece of paper. Fear arrived before comprehension. The note explained everything Abdul Rahman had refused to hear while there was still time. He wrote that he had no fight left. By the time Abdul Rahman reached the old bridge, the truth had already hardened into reality. Emergency lights reflected off the river. Ayaan's dead body was being fished from the river. In the months that followed, people offered comfort in familiar phrases. Abdul Rahman listened politely. Slowly but painfully, Abdul Rahman understood that Ayaan had not been weak. He had been weighed down. Ayaan's tiredness had been a warning, not a flaw. Six months passed.

On Fridays Abdul Rahman visited the grave of his son and spoke aloud, recounting ordinary things he once took for granted. He apologized repeatedly, though apology could no longer repair anything. He began to see Ayaan everywhere—in young men working endlessly without progress, in graduates burdened by debt, in faces lit by screens and isolated by circumstance. He recognized a generation pushed to run faster on a road that no longer led forward. Silence, he learned, is never empty. It carries unsaid fears, unmet needs, and quiet desperation. It demands to be noticed before it becomes absence. Abdul Rahman no longer believes that toughness alone builds character. He believes compassion is its companion. He believes presence matters more than lectures, and understanding more than pride. At the factory, Abdul Rahman began noticing younger workers differently. There was Zoya, a graduate working below her qualification, quietly sending small money home each month which was appreciated by her parents. Her exhaustion mirrored what he had dismissed in Ayaan. As Abdul Rahman walks back through the gate, one truth follows him home, heavier and clearer with time: a struggling, imperfect, living child is worth infinitely more than any lesson proven too late.

Listen to the silence—before it becomes eternal.

Dr Showkat Rashid Wani, Senior Coordinator, Centre for Distance & Online Education University of Kashmir

Scholarships

Scholarship Name 1: Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam Young Research Fellowship 2025-26

Description: Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam Young Research Fellowship 2025-26 is being provided by Technology, Education, Research and Rehabilitation for the Environment (TERRE) Policy Center. It supports students having secured undergraduate, postgraduate, or PhD degrees in environmental research, and recognises young Indian researchers having made significant contributions to environmental protection.

Eligibility: Application is open to citizens of India, who are between 18 to 25 years old as of 31st December 2025. Applicants must be pursuing or must have completed an undergraduate or master's degree in any field (M.Sc./M.E./M.A.) or a PhD degree in a related field.

Prizes & Rewards: A fellowship of up to 25,000 and a certificate.

Last Date to Apply: 31-01-2026

Application mode: Online applications only

Short Url: www.b4s.in/gk/APJF2

QR Code: <https://d1e9eg0t05513.cloudfront.net/static/images/scho-media/2025-261768281342.png>

Scholarship Name 2: JMI Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Scholarship 2024-25

Description: The JMI Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Scholarship 2024-25 is being offered by the Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. It supports students from economically weaker sections pursuing full-time regular undergraduate or postgraduate courses.

Eligibility: Application is open to citizens of India, who are bona fide students of Jamia Millia Islamia enrolled in a full-time undergraduate or postgraduate courses and have secured a minimum attendance of 75%. Applicants must show good conduct, satisfactory academic performance. They must have passed their previous examinations. They must belong to an economically weaker section with a family income not exceeding 2,00,000 per annum.

Prizes & Rewards: Fee reimbursement of 10,000 per annum.

Last Date to Apply: 25-01-2026

Application mode: Offline to: Office of the Dean, Students' Welfare, JMI (Dr. M. A. Ansari Auditorium)

Short Url: www.b4s.in/gk/JMIA1

QR Code: <https://d1e9eg0t05513.cloudfront.net/static/images/scho-media/2024-251768281332.png>

Scholarship Name 3: GSK Global Capability Centre Scholarship Program 2025-26

Description: The GSK Global Capability Centre Scholarship Program 2025-26, introduced by the GlaxoSmithKline Global Capability Centre (GSK GCC) offers financial support to first-year MBBS students pursuing their studies in government medical colleges across India. The initiative aims to ease educational expenses, enabling deserving students to pursue their medical studies without facing financial burden.

Eligibility: Students must be enrolled in the first year of an MBBS program in a government medical college. Applicants must have scored at least 65% marks in Class 12 Board examinations.

Prizes & Rewards: Selected students will receive a scholarship of up to INR 1,00,000 per year for 4.5 years.

Last Date to Apply: 20-01-2026

Application mode: Online applications only

Short Url: www.b4s.in/gk/GSKGCC1

QR Code: <https://d1e9eg0t05513.cloudfront.net/static/images/scho-media/2025-261768281351.png>

Scholarship Name 4: Science Academies Summer Research Fellowship Program 2026

Description: The Summer Research Fellowship Programme 2026 is a collaborative initiative of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Bengaluru, Indian National Science Academy, New Delhi, and National Academy of Sciences, India, Prayagraj. It supports exceptional students and educators in pursuing research in the fields of science, engineering, and medicine.

Eligibility: Application is open to students from Class 10 up to Postgraduation having secured a minimum of 65% average marks in core subjects. They must be pursuing specified subjects in STEM. Teachers in universities/colleges are also eligible to apply.

Prizes & Rewards: An opportunity to pursue a fellowship under the guidance of experienced mentors.

Last Date to Apply: 31-01-2026

Application mode: Online applications only

Short Url: www.b4s.in/gk/SASF1

QR Code: <https://d1e9eg0t05513.cloudfront.net/static/images/scho-media/science-academies-summer-research-fellowship-program-20261768278577.png>

Scholarship Name 5: Tata Capital Pankh Scholarship Program 2025-26

Description: Tata Capital Limited provides financial support to enable students from underprivileged families to achieve their educational aspirations.

Eligibility: The Tata Capital Pankh Scholarship Program 2025-26 is open to Indian students currently enrolled in Classes 11 and 12, general graduation, specialised discipline programme, polytechnic/diploma, or ITI courses at recognised institutions in India. Applicants must have secured a minimum of 60% marks and 80% for professional graduation in the preceding academic year. Additionally, the annual family income from all

OPINION

Mayor Frey's Season of 'Love'

MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

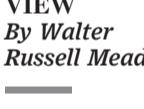
In a better time, few outside Minneapolis would be able to name its mayor. This isn't a better time. The tragic shooting of Renee Good while she was using her SUV to thwart Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents from enforcing the law saw to that. Along the way, Mayor Jacob Frey has been on the nation's TV screens. Far from urging the people of Minneapolis—a sanctuary city—to let ICE agents do their job, he asks local police to "fight ICE agents on the street."

Renee Good would still be alive if she'd obeyed the order to get out of her car.

Renee Good wasn't a career criminal. She was an instantly recognizable type: a liberal do-gooder who seemed to believe that her political positions rendered her immune from the consequences of refusing an order from a duly authorized agent of law enforcement.

Now she's dead; her three children have lost a parent; and her name has become a slogan for the anti-ICE protest. Amid all the coverage of this sad story, seldom is the most pertinent fact even mentioned.

Davos Men Create Hard Times

GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

Davos, Switzerland Last year the Davoisié practiced denial. This year they know fear.

As the skies over Switzerland darken with the usual billionaires' jets, the old Davos agenda is falling by the wayside. It isn't only the great nations fighting over trade or the growing tensions between the West and revisionist powers like China and Russia. It isn't even only Donald Trump's fixation on the conquest of Greenland and the divisions in the West. Mr. Trump has exposed and deepened.

From the burned-over battlefields of Ukraine to the rainforests of Africa, from the sands of the Sahara to the mountains of Iran, ethnic and religious conflicts are on the rise. The same sort of hatreds tore Europe apart from 1850 through 1945 as multinational, multicultural empires split up, driving millions from their homes and killing millions more. That's what's happening, or threatening to happen from Kurdistan to Nigeria. The flight of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh; ethnic unrest in Pakistan, Iran, Syria and Turkey; religious and tribal conflicts across West Africa and into the Horn; and the long struggle between Hutus and Tutsis in the Great Lakes re-

gion of Africa are all part of this pattern.

A century of European diplomacy struggled and mostly failed to contain the tensions and wars that broke up the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires into dozens of successor states. Serial waves of conquest, murder and ethnic cleansing tore once-peaceful communities apart, setting neighbors at one another's throats. More than a million Greeks fled what is now Turkey, and millions of Turks fled the Balkans as the Ottoman empire fell into decay. The dark nationalism of imperial Russia drove millions of Jews west and Muslims south.

As recently as the 1940s, involuntary mass transfers of populations from their ancestral homes formed part of the diplomatic tool kit. After waves of depopulation, ethnic cleansing and mass murder reshaped much of the Eastern and Central European landscape under Hitler and Stalin, the West accepted mass expulsions of millions of Germans from former German and Polish territories to the east and the Sudeten Germans from what was then Czechoslovakia. Millions of Hindus and Muslims were forced from their homes at the partition of British India, and well into the Cold War mass expulsions and ethnic cleansing marred the records of countries like Burma, Egypt and the former British colonies in East Africa.

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In the initial years of the post-Cold War era, that effort seemed to be succeeding. Today it looks as if the great Western project might have failed. As democracy retreats globally, ethnic and religious conflicts intensify. Mobilizing

The modern West tried to exorcise these demons. Franco-German enmity helped stoke and shape the century of ethnic conflict; in post-World War II Europe, Franco-German reconciliation became the foundation of what many hoped would be an enduring era of postethnic politics. The European Union and the

The comfortable postwar order gives way as old conflicts and demons return.

trans-Atlantic community sought to create a rules-based international order of democratic states to banish such horrors from the world. National frontiers could never again be changed by force. Race, ethnicity and religion would no longer drive world politics.

Much of post-Cold War Western history is the story of an effort to consolidate postethnic and postreligious democracy at home and to export it to the Balkans, the former Soviet lands of Europe, the Middle East, postcolonial Africa and beyond.

In the initial years of the post-Cold War era, that effort seemed to be succeeding. Today it looks as if the great Western project might have failed. As democracy retreats globally, ethnic and religious conflicts intensify. Mobilizing

such feelings rather than suppressing them seems to be the path to power in much of the world. Hindutva in India, religious nationalism in Israel, MAGA populism in the U.S., Islamism in much of the Muslim world, far-right parties across Europe—the cosmopolitan outlook that characterized the peak Davos era is steadily losing ground.

The hope was that democracy combined with economic growth would cure ethnic and sectarian hate. That seemed to be the lesson of Europe's experience post-1945, but this was too sanguine and too simplistic a reading of a complicated history. For more than a century, rising ethnic conflicts in Europe coexisted with and were often driven by rising levels of economic growth and democratic activism.

The spread of literacy and the appeal of democracy (often interpreted as the right to ethnic self-determination) sharpened the national and ethnic rivalries promoting generations of European war.

Something similar is happening across much of the world. With the increasing ethnic and religious diversity of many Western countries, ethnic tensions and the curse of identity politics are on the rise from Minneapolis to Milan.

In past years, Davos Man tried to build a new kind of world. In 2026, he worries more about how to survive the collapse of an order he once took for granted.

With His Pen, Trump Can Save Cubans

By Jeffrey Scott Shapiro

When President Trump returned to office, I joined an immigration law firm to represent Cuban refugees seeking asylum. Mr. Trump has secured the border but has made it near impossible for refugees to seek relief from persecution. Application fees and detentions have skyrocketed, asylum hearings are being rushed to clear the backlog, and many immigration judges—who can be fired by the attorney general—are rejecting 90% to 100% of applications.

In the case of Cubans, there is a specific issue being litigated in the federal courts that Mr. Trump could resolve with the stroke of a pen. Doing so would end the litigation, ease the immigration courts, and spare Cubans a life under communism.

Started arbitrarily issuing some migrants "humanitarian parole." Some of those who weren't issued humanitarian parole but released into the U.S.—including more than 500,000 Cubans, according to advocacy groups—were issued a form, the I-220A. In 2023

A bureaucratic snafu leaves them in danger of deportation to the communist island.

The Board of Immigration Appeals ruled that an I-220A was merely "conditional parole." Under Section 212 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the only way a migrant can avoid mandatory detention is if he receives "humanitarian parole."

Petitioners in the Second and 11th U.S. Circuit Courts of

Appeals argue that since I-220 recipients were released, by definition they received humanitarian parole. This distinction is significant for Cubans, since those who receive humanitarian parole can seek a green card under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. The overwhelming majority of Cubans who were issued an I-220A tried to come into the U.S. lawfully.

The president doesn't have to wait for the courts to rescue these poor souls. He could use his executive authority to recognize the I-220A as humanitarian parole, making the 2023 rule moot. In doing so, Mr. Trump would save hundreds of thousands of Cubans from a life under communist oppression and keep many families together. It would also relieve the immigration system so it can focus on applicants from other countries who weren't living under totalitarian rule.

This change would affect only Cubans. For all other migrants, humanitarian parole entails no right to residency and is revocable at the government's discretion.

Congress passed the Cuban Adjustment Act because the U.S. recognizes the cruel oppression taking place on the communist island. Mr. Trump has echoed these sentiments when visiting Miami and often depicts himself as a champion of those who risked their lives to seek freedom in the U.S. Giving those Cubans with an I-220A a fair chance to adjust under the 1966 law would be a heroic gesture—and send an unmistakable message that this administration stands against communism and with the exile community, where America belongs.

Mr. Shapiro is a journalist and lawyer. He served as director of Radio and Television Marti, 2017-21.



TYRONE SIERRA/REUTERS

sides aren't equal. The president has the legal authority to do what he is doing. Those trying to interfere with ICE's actions don't. If ICE is really the problem, why is there no crisis in red states?

Mr. Frey clearly feels he is riding high. But there's still the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution, which gives the federal government authority over immigration. What's more, Mr. Trump promised to enforce the immigration laws during his campaign, so he can claim a mandate.

The protesters are dancing on a fine distinction between expressing opinions protected by the First Amendment and preventing federal law enforcement from carrying out lawful orders.

To make it specific: Must the members of a church have their First Amendment right to religious worship disrupted simply because a pastor works for ICE, as happened Sunday at Cities Church in St. Paul?

In June 2020 Mayor Jenny Durkan of Seattle described the occupied protest around her city's east police precinct as "a summer of love." Channelling Ms. Durkan, Mr. Frey on Sunday described events in Minneapolis this way: "I think it's important to tell the whole country that this is not just about resistance here in Minneapolis, it's about love."

And Mr. Frey's obscenity is at the heart of that message.

Write to mcgurn@wsj.com

BOOKSHELF | By Michael O'Donnell

Dispatches From Genêt

The Typewriter and the Guillotine

By Mark Braude

Grand Central, 432 pages, \$32.50

For two weeks in March 1939, as Hitler completed his annexation of Czechoslovakia and Europe braced for war, a lurid murder trial captivated Paris. Eugen Weidmann, a German drifter, had killed six people during a spree in 1937, apparently for no greater reason than a need for petty cash. His date with the guillotine would prove to be the last public execution in France. Among the reporters who covered the trial was Janet Flanner of the *New Yorker*. "Only a typical postwar German like Weidmann," Flanner wrote, "unfamiliar with the value of money as the rest of the free world knows it, would have killed so many people for so little."

Weidmann and Flanner are the subjects of Mark Braude's "The Typewriter and the Guillotine," an absorbing, expertly paced work of narrative nonfiction. Despite the twin billing, Flanner is the book's star, with Weidmann making more of a supporting appearance. Mr. Braude, a historian and the author of "Kiki Man Ray: Art, Love, and Rivalry in 1920s Paris" (2022), writes in the tradition of Erik Larson, who has published multiple bestsellers that set interpersonal dramas and true-crime accounts against the backdrop of great world events, such as the Chicago World's Fair ("The Devil in the White City," from 2003) and the rise of the Nazis ("In the Garden of Beasts," 2011).

What sets Mr. Braude's work apart from Mr. Larson's—and what elevates it—is his interest in intellectual history. "The Typewriter and the Guillotine" covers the *New Yorker*'s first years and charts its course as the magazine figured out what it aimed to be. Its co-founders, Harold Ross and Jane Grant, approached Flanner soon after creating the magazine in 1925 to

offer her a regular "Letter From Paris" column. Grant hoped Flanner could give readers "dope on fields of the arts and a little on fashion, perhaps."

Flanner was a perfect fit for the breezy tone of the magazine's first decade. A lesbian free spirit living in Paris since 1922, she had grown up in Indianapolis and written an arts column for the *Indianapolis Star*. Flanner and her partner, Solita Solano, lived in bohemian splendor at the Hotel Napoleon Bonaparte on the Left Bank, where they wrote unsuccessful novels and drank "black French coffee which tasted like death," according to Flanner. Among their circle were Margaret Anderson, James Thurber and Ernest Hemingway, who had his own favorite chair in Flanner's apartment, built low-slung for nursing mothers.

Writing for the *New Yorker*, Flanner "became the unofficial historian of the fading *vieux Paris*, lamenting the closings of once-iconic cafes and the shuttering of specialized shops," Mr. Braude writes. Glamorously writing under the byline Genêt, she filled her dispatches with more fizz than champagne. Many of her stories were about masked balls and celebrity divorces. Yet she could not avoid—and was not always up to—commenting on gathering events. In one column from 1935 she wrote blithely, "if war comes this year, it might come at the beginning of July, if it's hot, heat and history having an undeniable affiliation in European affairs." She also played down the sinister nature of the Nazi propaganda film "Triumph of the Will" (1935), writing that it provided "two hours of Hitler, fabulous flags, acres of marching men, shovelers, trumpeters, etc."

As these tone-deaf lines indicate, Flanner was a gifted writer but not a political seer. Friends even worried that the Nazis had won her over. Yet if Flanner was no oracle, she was also no fascist. Hoping to create the *New Yorker*'s signature voice of amused detachment, she used her reporting to reveal broader insights. In a three-part profile of Hitler, she ably conveyed the Führer's menacing appeal. He "has mystical tendencies, no common sense, and a Wagnerian taste for heroics and death. He was born loaded with vanities and has developed megalomania as his final decoration."

As the *New Yorker*'s correspondent in Paris, Janet Flanner initially focused on society gossip. The specter of war was in the air.

In this context came the Weidmann affair, which Flanner covered from the trial through the execution. Weidmann killed a chauffeur, a dancer, a nurse, then a series of men he had lured into phony investment schemes, using their pocket money to pay his rent. Flanner's reporting on the trial could be uneven. Reaching for a brush that might paint the case into a broader European context, she applied strokes of crass national stereotype: Weidmann the ultimate Aryan, his typically pliant and rudderless French confederates and an American victim whose weakness for "sociability with strangers" spelled doom. Although Weidmann's crime spree is this book's narrative conceit, it was neither the height of Flanner's career (she wrote for the *New Yorker* until 1975) nor her best moment.

Nor was the war: She left France in October 1939 and did not return until after the liberation of Paris in August 1944. A.J. Liebling, her replacement, covered World War II from Europe and Africa and witnessed the invasion of Normandy. This change in personnel helped build the magazine's journalistic muscle and was probably best for its readers. There were plenty of intrepid female war reporters, but on Flanner's sole trip to a battlefield, she dressed in pink pants; red, fur-lined cowboy boots; and matching mittens.

Mr. Braude is suitably critical of his subject for her sometimes glib approach to life-and-death matters, and he pegs her appeal as "delivering hard news as if it was light gossip." Yet he offers this defense of her reporting: "In hanging on to that way of writing, her unconventional approach, mannered style, and absurdist wit, was she not, in her own way, offering a rebuke to tyrants and their followers who insisted that the world should not be beautiful or funny but only hateful and ugly?"

Whether or not that rebuttal is persuasive, in the end Flanner redeemed herself. After returning to France, she moved past society gossip and vapid crooks like Weidmann to write notable profiles of Philippe Pétain and Charles de Gaulle. In 1945 she visited Buchenwald days after its liberation, writing to her editor that the concentration camps were the essential story of the war. Most significantly, Flanner reported from the trials at Nuremberg, writing that a group of Nazi prisoners "seem already waxen and posthumous, like museum figures of the members of some nefarious long-ago regime which had failed." Here at last was a trial worth covering, matched with the right correspondent.

Mr. O'Donnell is the author of "Above the Fire." His next novel, "Concert Black," will be published in April.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Greenland War of 2026

For more than 75 years, the fondest dream of Russian strategy has been to divide Western Europe from the U.S. and break the NATO alliance. That is now a possibility as President Trump presses his campaign to capture Greenland no matter what the locals or its Denmark owner thinks.

Mr. Trump on Saturday threatened to impose a 10% tariff starting Feb. 1 on a handful of European countries that have opposed his attempt to obtain U.S. sovereignty over Greenland. The tariff would jump to 25% on June 1. Presumably this tariff would come on top of the rates Mr. Trump already negotiated in trade deals last year (10% for Britain, 15% for the European Union).

The targets are Denmark (which owns Greenland), Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and the United Kingdom. All participated in a recent military exercise on the world's largest island that was intended to reassure Washington that Europe wants to work with the U.S. to defend Greenland from Russia and China.

But Mr. Trump isn't taking alliance cooperation for an answer. He wants the U.S. to own Greenland, its ice, minerals, strategic location and 56,000 residents. And he seems prepared to push around everyone else to get it.

There are good reasons for Washington to care about Greenland, including the island's strategic position and untapped reserves of rare-earth minerals. Mr. Trump isn't the first President to suggest buying it outright, but the U.S. already has a high degree of access to the island, and Denmark is willing to negotiate more. Tariffs in the cause of bullying imperialism is the wrong way to make a deal, and they might stiffen opposition on the island and in Europe.

Mr. Trump is taking reckless risk with the NATO alliance that advances U.S. interests in the arctic. If he doesn't believe us, he can look up Norway, Sweden and Finland in an atlas. The latter two joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization recently, and already are discovering that with Mr. Trump no good strategic deed goes unpunished.

The economics are nonsensical too. All of the countries on his tariff list except for the United Kingdom are members of the European Union with a common trade policy. This means any

tariff he imposes on those countries will have to extend to the entire 27-member bloc. So much for the trade deals Mr. Trump negotiated to great fanfare last year with the EU and the U.K.

Members of the European Parliament, which still must approve the U.S.-EU agreement, are threatening to put that pact on ice. This bullying

plays poorly with the European public, making it harder for politicians to give Mr. Trump what he wants on Greenland or anything else. The message to these countries is that no deal with Mr. Trump can be trusted because he'll blow it up if he feels it serves his larger political purposes.

The Greenland Tariff War of 2026 imperils other U.S. priorities. The trade tax on Britain could upset an agreement Mr. Trump struck last year under which Britain will pay more for pharmaceuticals in exchange for Washington dropping tariffs on medication imports from the U.K. Speaking of which: Why Mr. Trump would want to head into midterm elections foisting higher prices on voters worried about affordability is a mystery.

* * *

No one should underestimate the shock his Greenland project is producing among allies. Along with his tariffs and his tilt toward Russia against Ukraine, he is alienating Western Europe in a way that will be hard to repair. It's true that Europe may not be in a position to resist if Mr. Trump really wants to go to war over the island. But say good-bye to NATO.

The sad irony is that China and Russia may be the biggest winners, though Mr. Trump justifies his Greenland necessity in the name of deterring both. Canada's Prime Minister bent the knee to Xi Jinping last week, and Britain's PM is heading there this month. The EU and South American countries have struck a big free-trade pact.

The West is in the process of a diplomatic and economic hedging operation against Mr. Trump's might-makes-right diplomacy. Whether or not Mr. Trump believes it, the U.S. needs friends in the world. He seems to think that if he captures Greenland, history will remember him as another Thomas Jefferson (Louisiana purchase) or William Seward (Alaska). The cost of his afflatus to U.S. interests will be greater than he imagines.

Why the Tariff Case Is Such a Big Deal

The world is waiting for the Supreme Court to rule on the legality of President Trump's "emergency" tariffs, and Mr. Trump's weekend tariff spree against European allies underscores again why his abuse of his authority needs to be reined in.

Mr. Trump unleashed a new tariff volley against several European countries (see nearby) to coerce Denmark to sell or cede Greenland to the U.S. He cited no legal authority for doing so. He simply said he is imposing the tariffs.

Though he didn't say this, presumably he is doing so under what he has claimed is his power in an "emergency" under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. But what emergency? Greenland isn't under threat of invasion, and Denmark has said the U.S. can have more or less free run of the island for defense purposes.

But Mr. Trump wants ownership of the island on his legacy resume, so he is likely to say that control of Greenland is an emergency even if it isn't in any normal understanding of the term. The only observable emergency is the threat to the NATO alliance that Mr. Trump's demands and tariffs are creating.

The episode puts in sharp relief how open-

Trump's weekend spree shows how unlimited his claim of power is.

ended Mr. Trump's claim of tariff emergency authority is. He can declare an emergency on his own, he can decide which countries and goods he can hit with the border taxes, and at what rate. This means he can use tariffs essentially whenever he wants for whatever reason he wants. Congress gave him no such expansive power under

IEEPA or any other statute.

Tariff apologists will say the Greenland tariffs show the uses of border taxes for foreign policy, but the taxing power is Congress's under the Constitution unless expressly delegated to the President.

U.S. trade rep Jamieson Greer said Monday that if the Supreme Court overturns Mr. Trump's tariffs, the President will quickly rely on other tariff authorities. But those delegations are more limited on what goods, for what reason, and for how long they can be imposed. They don't allow tariffs for any emergency that Mr. Trump conjures for whatever political purposes he desires.

Like Joe Biden's abuse of the spending power on student-loan forgiveness without Congressional assent, Mr. Trump's abuse of the taxing power cries out for a Supreme Court correction.

Georgia Needs the Right Tax Cut

More Republican-run states are joining the parade to cut income taxes, but how a state does it matters for economic growth and political sustainability. A proposal now gaining some steam in Georgia would fail on both counts.

The proposal, supported by Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and state Sen. Blake Tillery (R., Vidalia), would phase out the state income tax for some voters by 2027. The current rate is a flat 5.19% for all taxpayers and has been declining periodically from 6% before 2019.

A report by the Georgia Senate Special Committee on the Elimination of Georgia's Income Tax says the Jones plan would make the first \$50,000 for individuals and \$100,000 for joint filers tax free in 2027. That would cover two thirds of Georgia's workforce.

The Senate report says that "other families and businesses would see a significant reduction in their state income taxes with reductions planned over a period of several years to get their state income tax liability to zero." Details on the latter to follow.

This structure and timing miss the economic growth mark. What matters to growth is the tax rate at the margin, or the next dollar of income, that will increase the supply-side incentive to work and invest. The Senate proposal is a demand-side tax cut that would boost consumption for a time but also reduce the incentive to work more once taxpayers hit

Some tax cuts are better than others, and this one could backfire.

the \$50,000 or \$100,000 threshold.

The means-tested tax cut also won't do much for small businesses, many if not most of which pay at the individual rate. They're the businesses that hire the most people.

The individual income tax finances about 40% of the state's general fund, so cuts need to happen in a way that allows growth to replace the lost tax revenue. This doesn't mean dollar-for-dollar tax and spending cuts, but it does mean being wary about not blowing a hole in the state budget so large that it would backfire politically.

No doubt Mr. Jones, who is running for Governor this year, wants to avoid being cast as favoring a tax cut "for the rich." But his unwillingness to refute the class-war attacks head-on as a candidate doesn't inspire confidence that he'd do so as Governor.

All the more so if two-thirds of taxpayers are already off the rolls. That means only taxpayers in the upper half of the middle class would benefit from the next cut. This would also make it easier for Democrats or class-war Republicans to raise taxes because most Georgians wouldn't be affected if rates rise.

The Peach State certainly should move toward eliminating the income tax to compete with zero-tax Florida, Tennessee and Texas. But the better way to do this is by retaining the current flat-tax structure and gradually moving the rate lower until it gets to zero.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mitt Romney: My Country Before My Tax Bill

My proposal to increase taxes on the rich prompted the Journal to run both an editorial ("By All Means Raise Mitt Romney's Taxes," Dec. 22) and an op-ed ("Tax Me," Mitt Romney Says, Pointing at You," by Clifford Asness and Michael Mendelson, Jan. 8).

The nation's fiscal standing merits such attention and debate. We agree that continuing to add to the national debt at a rate far greater than the growth of the economy can't go on forever. When debt held rises above the size of the entire economy, lenders are likely to demand ever higher interest rates to compensate for the growing risk, particularly on longer-term debt instruments. Or they may decide not to lend at all. At some point, there are no good options left, only default, devaluation of currency, or draconian tax hikes and spending cuts.

I propose measures that would raise tax revenue from high-income people and, by increasing retirement age, reduce entitlement spending for lower- and middle-income people. Republicans hate the former, and Democrats hate the latter. But due to the 60-vote cloture requirement of the Senate, political reality means that both parties will have to give something up if fiscal catastrophe is to be avoided.

I don't like raising taxes, even on the rich like me. Nor do I like increasing the entitlement age eligibility. I can recite the unfairness and drawbacks of either course. But worse than those drawbacks is the potential for calamity if no action is taken.

My proposals leave a great deal of

latitude for the specifics to be negotiated. A bipartisan committee could work out the specific reforms if the process is fully supported by the president and Congress.

In their op-ed, Messrs. Asness and Mendelson suggest that fiscal math, and perhaps fairness, would require tax increases broader than raising taxes on those with a high income. But the new 15% tariff already accounts for much of that, as its burden falls disproportionately on low- and middle-income families. They also dismiss my suggestion to eliminate the tax-free step-up on large estates, saying that to do so would result in double taxation—a capital-gains tax and an inheritance tax. But double taxation already applies to everyone subject to the death tax: During their life, they pay taxes on income and capital gains and at death, the inheritance tax. It's only those who qualify for the tax-free step-up in basis that escape double taxation.

Messrs. Asness and Mendelson mischaracterize my argument by suggesting that my claim—that the rich have been "playing by the rules"—only applies to carried interest. That observation applies to all the tax measures I described. The op-ed further asserts that I would escape the measures I propose. In reality, I would be subject to every single tax increase, at a personal cost of many millions of dollars. At this stage of life, I'm a great deal more concerned about the future of the country than the size of my tax bill.

MITT ROMNEY

Salt Lake City

Does the U.S. Benefit From Its Base in Qatar?

Walter Russell Mead is right: Iran is next ("Trump Captivates the Globe," Global View, Jan. 13). The regime is teetering on the brink of collapse, fighting for its survival by waging war on its own people and shredding President Trump's declared red line along the way. We should expect Mr. Trump to help Iranians push this radical terror-sponsoring regime at war with America into the ash heap of history.

As part of the ongoing military preparations, the U.S. has partially evacuated Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar—one of our most important bases in the Middle East. The question is whether we should send critical assets back to a base that needs evacuation.

In October 2024, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed Al Thani said that Qatar would "not accept any attacks or wars to be launched against other countries or peoples, whether in the region or beyond"—meaning America

can defend Qatar, but can't defend America by using Al Udeid as a base of operations against Iran.

After Mr. Trump struck Iran's uranium-enrichment sites, Tehran responded with a missile attack on Al Udeid. Should America keep all its strategic eggs in one basket? Experts have suggested replicating assets at other bases in the Middle East for operational redundancy.

In a world where the U.S. was conducting military operations in Afghanistan and then Iraq, Al Udeid made perfect sense. But in today's world of staring down Iran and its large missile and drone force—and given Qatar's restrictions on offensive operations—perhaps it shouldn't be home to an over-concentration of sensitive U.S. assets.

RICHARD GOLBERG

Senior adviser, Foundation for Defense of Democracies Chicago

America Is Losing the Biotech Fight to China

Arthur Herman's op-ed, "America Is the Sole Superpower Again," (Jan. 15) asserts that China is "sliding into a distant second place" in the battle for economic, military and technological supremacy.

While America is resurgent in many fields, we are on course to lose American dominance in perhaps the most important sector, biotechnology. America's biotech industry supports more than 10 million jobs, \$3 trillion in economic output and gives America the capability to beat back pandemics and defeat biological warfare. Not to mention delivering medical miracles in cancer, rare diseases and other areas.

China's biotech industry, fueled by extensive government support and massive industrial espionage, has grown exponentially in the past decade. China now conducts nearly as many clinical trials—and already conducts more cancer trials—as we do. The value of Chinese biotech companies has increased more than 100-fold over the past decade.

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As the National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology recently warned, there's a real possibility that China's biotech capabilities "may soon eclipse [ours]. And if that happens, the United States may never be able to catch up." That's why it's so critical for the Trump administration and Congress to ensure America maintains our current slim lead—by modernizing the FDA, ensuring regulatory stability and predictability, providing transparent decision making, supporting early-stage research, and confronting unfair trade and pricing practices abroad.

JOHN F. CROWLEY

CEO, Biotechnology Innovation Organization Washington

I read Karl Rove's touching op-ed about the passing of his dog, Doc Holiday, and it brought back all the memories of extraordinary pets I have loved and lost ("A Good Dog Meets His Maker," Jan. 15).

I have never owned a dog, but I have had the privilege of loving countless cats and, for seven years, a small chipmunk. Nothing has brought more joy to my life, other than my daughter and husband, than my pets. I empathize with Mr. Rove beyond measure.

MARY GLUM

Carmichael, Calif.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



CORRECTIONS

Robert Browning's poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" was first published in 1864.

The Jan. 10 book review "Skin Saggy, Trousers Rolled" misstated the date.

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OPINION

Hit Iran in Its Shadow Bank Accounts

By Michael Doran

Whether or not President Trump orders a military strike on Iran, he ought to seize the billions of dollars its rulers have hidden offshore. Freezing these assets could have an effect comparable to military attack—at a fraction of the risk.

The U.S. Treasury knows where Iran's money is, but successive administrations have hesitated to act for fear of damaging relations with a valued ally—the United Arab Emirates. It's time to reconsider that calculation.

To evade U.S. sanctions, Iran has built an elaborate shadow banking system—a network of shell companies and financial intermediaries that

Dubai-based financial institutions help Tehran escape sanctions. The U.S. has the means to stop it.

allows the regime to move money at scale. This system allows Tehran to sell oil illicitly to China and launder the proceeds to procure export-controlled technology for its military and nuclear programs.

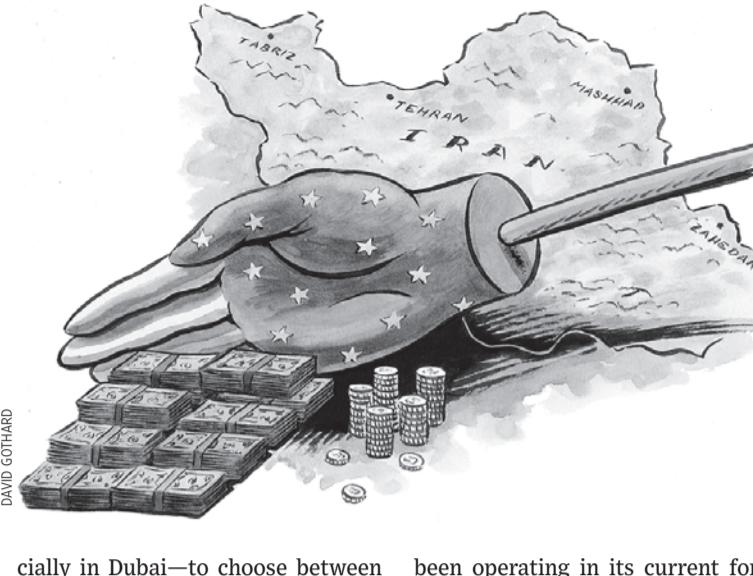
In a report last October, the Treasury Department gave an address for the problem, stating that "companies based in the U.A.E. (99 percent of which were located in the Emirate of

Dubai) transacted the highest volume of [Iran's] potential shadow banking funds . . . and received more funds than any other jurisdiction." This system keeps the Iranian regime alive with Dubai serving as its economic lung.

In a now-routine pattern, Chinese buyers pay for Iranian oil with funds that flow into U.A.E. bank accounts through a maze of shell companies operating abroad. Iranian actors thus systematically exploit the Dubai banking system's opaque corporate registries and permissive regulations to gain access to global financial services.

Until now, sanctions enforcement has amounted to a game of whack-a-mole. After Washington designates front companies, Iran dissolves them and shifts the money elsewhere. That approach has failed. Last week, the U.S. Treasury issued a new tranche of sanctions on companies aiding Iran's illicit oil trade. The targets included Iranian banks and U.A.E.-based shell companies, but not Emirati banks. Again, Treasury refrained from penalizing the banks that process and hold Iranian funds yet claim ignorance of their origin. As a result, the sanctions didn't alter the incentives of the Emirati banking system and—following October's explicit warning—signaled to Dubai's banks that they can persist without serious consequence.

What's required now is a strategy that targets not shell companies but banks that knowingly host and move Iranian funds. This means freezing Iranian assets already in hand and forcing the banks involved—espe-



cially in Dubai—to choose between compliance and punishment.

Any financial institution that facilitates Iranian transactions should face immediate and substantial fines. Further misbehavior should be answered with sanctions against at least one bank—a move that would leave no doubt about the consequences. Compliance would be swift. Banks understand the risks. They will end the charade.

How much money is involved? United Against Nuclear Iran, the leading tracker of Iranian oil exports, estimates that Iran sold 609 million barrels of oil to China in 2025. At \$50 a barrel (a conservative estimate), those sales would have generated \$30.45 billion.

Iran's shadow banking system has

been operating in its current form since 2019, when the first Trump administration designated Iran's central bank as a terrorist entity, forcing Iran to externalize its financial operations. It's how the Islamic Republic survives sanctions, pays its security services, and underwrites the lavish lifestyle of its elite while ordinary Iranians absorb the cost of economic collapse.

Not all this money sits in Dubai. In July, the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control pointed to Hong Kong and Turkey as two other jurisdictions where Iran's illicit profits flow with impunity. This same Treasury report designated 22 entities "for their roles in facilitating the sale of Iranian oil that benefits the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force."

Seizing the regime's money

doesn't require new legislation. It requires enforcement of existing authorities and coordination with regulators in those jurisdictions. A single decisive move—freezing the accounts—would cripple the regime's ability to function.

Such action wouldn't harm Iranian protesters or the broader population. This money doesn't circulate in Iran's domestic economy and its seizure could be reversed. But freezing it would strengthen America's hand by denying Tehran resources for repression and rearmament. It would also preserve leverage for future talks and prevent regime insiders from escaping with assets that belong to the Iranian people.

Although Iran built this shadow banking system, it has become a Chinese asset, allowing Beijing to profit from U.S. sanctions by purchasing Iranian oil at a steep discount while insulating itself from enforcement. This system also pulls the U.A.E. into China's economic orbit, binding an American ally to a financial architecture that serves Beijing's interests. Mr. Trump grasped this logic when he cut China off from Venezuelan oil. That same logic applies here.

After years of tightening sanctions, the U.S. has reached a point where financial action against Iran can finally have some bite. Moving now against the regime's offshore cash would enforce existing legal mechanisms while raising the price on dictatorship.

Mr. Doran is director of the Middle East center at the Hudson Institute.

A Look Back at the War That Is About to Begin



EDITOR AT LARGE
By Gerard Baker

Historians differ about the real origins of World War III. Some think its roots lay in the disastrous U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s, which weakened American authority in the world, emboldened

rivals, and sapped domestic support for assertive military projection overseas. Some cite Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the first major land offensive in Europe since World War II, breaking an 80-year taboo on armed conflict for territorial advantage. Some argue that the rise of China from the 1990s onward made conflict more or less inevitable, the world falling again into the Thucydides Trap of an emerging power posing an existential threat to the strategic hegemon.

But there's general agreement about the crucial precipitating factor that led to the third global conflict in a little over a century: the brief and—or so it seemed initially—stunningly successful U.S. victory in the Battle of Greenland in early 2026.

It wasn't much of a battle, to be sure. President Trump, fresh off his

swift and effective intervention in early January to topple and bring to trial in the U.S. Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela and his wife (who were later pardoned by President JD Vance and now run a chain of retail cocaine stores based in Palm Beach, Fla.), doubled down on his "Donroe corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine.

He insisted that the U.S. needed to annex Greenland for its own security and that of the wider Western Hemisphere and initially sought to pressure Denmark, the Arctic island's sovereign authority, to sell it. Deploying his favorite diplomatic tool, import tariffs, Mr. Trump—not unreasonably—expected the Europeans to cave, as they typically did when confronted with the reality that decades of dependency and complacency had left them powerless in the face of strength.

But the Danes, a proud people whose soldiers had fought and died alongside Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan, refused. When Mr. Trump ordered U.S. forces to seize the island, Denmark enlisted a handful of nations to help with the resistance—a coalition of the willing, but not very able.

It was never a contest. In addition to Danish and Greenlandic forces armed for winter warfare, the allies included a shipload of British Royal Navy admirals; a Canadian armored

detachment handpicked in compliance with the nation's strict commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion; a German fleet of battery-powered armored fighting vehicles that had to be abandoned when the only charging stations in Nuuk, the territory's capital, broke down; and a Dutch infantry battalion that was

The U.S. easily won the 2026 Battle of Greenland, but the consequences proved convulsive for all.

forced to withdraw because of a shortage of ammunition, and discovered that shouting "bang-bang," as they had been trained, was of little effect in battle.

Humiliated, the Europeans and Canadians retreated but regrouped, committed to do whatever they could to retaliate. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formally dissolved in late 2026. Europe expelled American troops. Deprived of its forward operating bases there, from which vital missions had been conducted across the world over the last 75 years, the U.S. tried to strike

deals with Arab governments for bases in those countries. But domestic popular hostility to American military deployment, and continuing tensions over the U.S. alliance with Israel, meant there was to be no Middle Eastern replacement for Ramstein or Lakenheath.

The European Union escalated the economic warfare. It banned all American imports; U.S.-produced technology was regulated to within an inch of its life and eventually blocked completely. Baidu, Tiktok and BYD replaced Google, Instagram and Tesla in European homes and businesses. Military procurement from U.S. defense contractors ended. Only loyal Hungary agreed to take a couple of F-35s—on generous financing terms. The iconic McDonald's restaurant on the Champs Elysées became an interactive museum of American obesity.

The fallout did almost as much harm to the U.S. as to Europe. The dollar sank, pushing up retail prices in America and causing a run on Treasury bonds that flattened mortgage lending and battered corporate finances. Seizing their opportunity, Russia and China demonstrated the value of allyship and pounced. Russia suspended its campaign in Ukraine and quickly moved on the Baltics. With NATO gone, Europeans were

deeply divided about whether to offer support; but as a harsh winter descended, the desperate need for cheap energy soon forced them to assent to Russian control over large swathes of Eastern Europe.

China imposed a blockade on Taiwan. With U.S. warships that once patrolled the strait now deployed chasing drug boats in the Caribbean and mopping up Inuit resistance on Greenland's coasts, Taipei quickly capitulated. Then, in a devastating move, Beijing ordered the release for open-source access of all of its most sophisticated artificial-intelligence algorithms. The explosion of supply of the technology crushed the U.S. market, cratering the valuations of the big U.S. tech companies, which had been built on their supposed AI dominance.

America's strategic superiority was constrained by the limitations of the new geopolitical realities, and it had no intention of starting a nuclear war. Instead, along with its remaining three allies—El Salvador, Qatar and Senegal—it struck an uneasy peace, a tripartite charter that replaced the American-denominated global order with a condominium of Russia, China and the U.S. dominant in their respective regions.

Still, we'll always have Greenland.

Hawaii Tries to Evade the Second Amendment

By John R. Lott Jr.

Blue-state gun laws are back before the Supreme Court. The justices barred states in 2022 from requiring concealed-handgun permit applicants to demonstrate a need for the license. Rather than comply with the *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen* in good faith, Hawaii and four other states sharply restricted where concealed carry is allowed. On Tuesday in *Wolford v. Lopez*, the court will hear oral arguments in a challenge to the Hawaii law.

Hawaii's statute flips the traditional concealed-carry rule on private property open to the public, such as grocery stores, restaurants, malls and gasoline stations. Instead of allowing permit holders to carry unless a property owner objects, the law imposes a default ban on carrying unless the owner consents to firearms' being brought on his property. The Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the law, pointing to a "national tradition" of banning firearms on private property "without

the owner's oral or written consent."

That approach has no historical foundation. Neither in 1791, when the Second Amendment was adopted, nor in 1868, when the 14th Amendment applied it to the states, were there laws broadly barring people who could legally carry firearms from ordinary businesses. Nevertheless, Hawaii's attorney general argues the law preserves a historical tradition in which concealed weapons "were not commonly carried in public."

Hawaii defends its law on public-safety grounds, but those claims collapse under scrutiny. Attorneys general for 17 states and the District of Columbia assert in a friend-of-the-court brief that many major retailers "generally prohibit" firearms in their stores. But some stores the brief mentions—such as Walmart, Walgreens and Kroger—reference open, not concealed, carry in their store policies.

The public-health research cited in briefs supporting Hawaii's law is similarly flawed. A brief filed by two gun-control advocacy groups cites

data from Philadelphia stating that people in possession of a gun are more than four times as likely to be shot in an assault. But the data lumped together law-abiding concealed-carry permit holders and criminals or gang members carrying illegally.

Americans use guns defensively roughly 1.7 million times each year. While less than 0.2% of adults in Hawaii hold concealed-carry permits, nationwide there are approximately 21 million permit holders. Outside California and New York, more than 9% of adults have a permit—and more carry concealed weapons in "constitutional carry" states, where no permit is required.

Permit holders are extremely law-abiding. Less than 1% of those with licenses lost their permits a year for firearm-related violations in Florida and Texas from 1987 to 2011. Police rarely commit firearms crimes, but concealed-handgun permit holders are even more law-abiding. According to an analysis by the Crime Prevention Research Center, those with permits in the same two states are

only 1/12th as likely as police officers to be convicted of firearms offenses.

Another CPRC analysis highlights how concealed-carry permits actually enhance public safety. We used the FBI's active-shooter definition—incidents in which a gun is fired in public and not part of another

The Supreme Court should strike down a law that effectively bans firearms on most private property.

crime—but included incidents from several sources outside the FBI's own list of active shooting events and used ChatGPT to verify that these cases met the FBI's criteria. According to this data, armed civilians stopped 199 of 562 attacks from 2014 to 2024, amounting to 35.4% of incidents. By comparison, police stopped 167 incidents, or 29.7%. Armed civilians consistently proved both safe and effective—arriving on the scene

faster than police, resulting in fewer people killed.

In the 199 civilian interventions, bystanders were accidentally shot only once, and civilians never interfered with police. Civilians died in only two incidents and suffered injuries in 49 cases. In 58 incidents, civilians stopped attacks that otherwise would have become mass shootings.

Uniformed police, despite superior training, faced greater risks and higher error rates in the 167 incidents they stopped. Officers accidentally shot bystanders or fellow officers five times. Nineteen police officers were killed and 51 were wounded. While neither group stops every attack, the data shows that the presence of armed civilians improves outcomes.

Police play a critical role in stopping crime, but during active shootings their uniforms create a tactical disadvantage. Attackers can delay until police leave the area, pick another location, or target officers first. Because police are less likely than concealed-handgun permit holders to be immediately on the scene, six times the number of victims are shot in incidents stopped by police compared with civilians on average.

Hawaii's law is a clear effort to nullify the right to carry, but a Supreme Court ruling in favor of the plaintiffs could clearly define where guns can be banned and eliminate many gun-free zones across the country. If states can't provide real protection with more than a "Gun Free Zone" sign, they must allow people to protect themselves.

*Mr. Lott is president of the Crime Prevention Research Center. He is a co-author of a friend-of-the-court brief in *Wolford v. Lopez* with the Peace Officers Research Association of California and the California Association of Highway Patrolmen.*

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EDITORIALS

Why Chicago hotels have a case for taxing themselves. And why we worry

The number of Americans who feel politically homeless is rising. Understandably so

A record 45% of American adults now identify as political independents, according to new Gallup polling — up from 33% in 1990. That's a big change.

As the ranks of the politically homeless grow, the share of Americans who call themselves Democrat or Republican continues to shrink. That's hardly surprising. Both parties increasingly reward the loudest, angriest voices within their coalitions, leaving many voters unwilling to claim a label that no longer reflects how they see themselves. Gallup found that many independents still lean toward one party; nonetheless, their reluctance to wear a partisan badge is telling.

It points to a broader problem: Our political leaders are mistaking a small but furious online minority for the country itself.

There's a name for the system that thrives on that confusion: the rage economy.

It's a concept increasingly used by voices such as TV journalist Chris Cuomo and state legislators such as Texas state Rep. James Talarico who discussed the term in a Jan. 13 conversation with Ezra Klein of The New York Times. Talarico, a Texas Democrat, is in a high-stakes U.S. Senate primary against U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett. In his conversation with Klein, Talarico rails against billionaires who he describes as profiting off of news networks, social media platforms and algorithms that divide us instead of bringing us together.

"Because anger sells. Hate sells. Fear sells," he said. "These billionaires and their platforms are engineering our emotions so they can profit off our pain. They are selling us conflict, and they're calling it connection. It's almost like feeding someone empty calories, and I think it has left people starving for actual community, for real relationships."

Sounds about right, and we expect that such a raw expression of frustration and, yes, outrage, over a media universe hellbent on making us hate each other resonates with most people, especially that growing percentage of Americans identifying as independent.

The online outrage cycle has intensified a kind of pendulum politics, swinging sharply from one administration to the next — two nonconsecutive Trump presidencies sandwiching a Biden era shaped by COVID and cultural battles that often felt overamplified and out of touch with how regular, reasonable people feel.

As we approach the 2026 midterm elections, the signals should be clear: More voters appear to be searching for a return to moderation and common sense. Will politicians take heed? We're hopeful, but skeptical at the same time.

Both parties are unpopular at the moment. Recent RealClearPolling averages say 52.5% of Americans regard the Republican Party unfavorably. That's slightly better than the Democrats who stand at 56.2% when it comes to those unimpressed.

Perhaps what we should learn about partisanship during the second Trump era is that while Democrats and Republicans are engaged in mudslinging, a growing number of Americans — especially younger Americans — want no part in it. Most Gen Z voters — and roughly half of millennials — identified as independents in 2025, according to Gallup. We suspect they realize that attack ads and one-upmanship does nothing to benefit the American people.

As both parties worry about how to come out ahead in 2026, we'd encourage less power-grabbing and more soul searching. Winning at the ballot box is step one, and step two is delivering a country — or a state or a city — that works for the people who live there.

Our political leaders are mistaking a small but furious online minority for the country itself.

Anyone who has stayed in a hotel in a high-tax city like Seattle or New York is familiar with how that nightly \$200 hotel room turns into \$235 or more once numerous taxes are added. Both U.S. states and cities from Omaha to Memphis love to smack visitors with high lodging tax rates, mostly because taxes that are not paid by locals are far less likely to receive scrutiny when elections come around.

Smarter minds, though, understand the nature of reciprocity and retaliation. We're all nonlocals when we pay tax out of town and one increase sparks another. You may have noticed new fees for Americans to enter many countries as a tourist. They spread after the U.S. slapped fees on visitors.

Chicago already has a high hotel tax rate of 17.9% — No. 16 among the top 150 markets according to a comprehensive survey from HVS, a respected global consultancy in the lodging industry. That's already far higher than Phoenix (12.57%), San Diego (12.50%) and Las Vegas (13.38%), at least in terms of the typical ad valorem taxes applied to room rates. These comparisons are complicated by the existence of flat fees per night in some cities, such as New York, which mean that cheaper hotels actually have higher effective tax rates there (something that would seem to go against the principals of New York's new socialist mayor, Zohran Mamdani).

Some cities also have created special districts with their own taxes, often plowed back into the district itself or used for a convention hall or some other such tourism-related entity. That's essentially what the city of Chicago's tourism agency, Choose Chicago, is trying to push through City Hall.

Choose Chicago wants an additional 1.5% tacked onto guest bills of hotels with more than 100 rooms in the Central Business District, near McCormick Place and in the Illinois Medical District. During a recent meeting with us, board Chair Guy Chippioni and recently appointed CEO Kristen Reynolds said that, after meeting with 3rd Ward Ald. Pat Dowell, they'd extended their target promotional zone farther south. This is Chicago, after all.

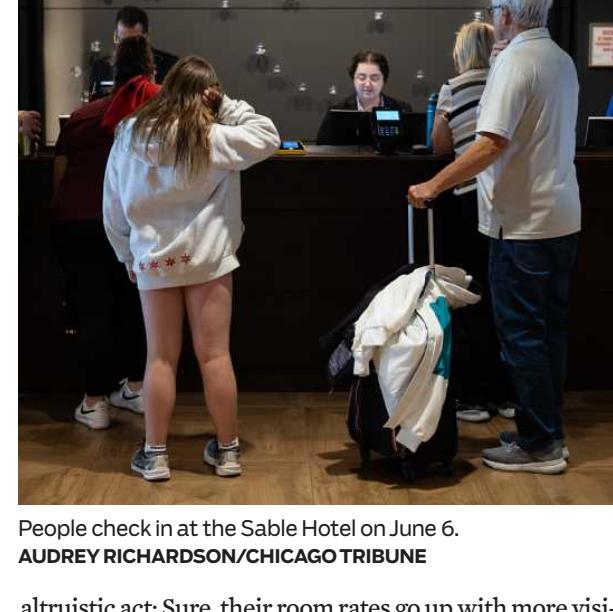
What would Choose Chicago do with the 1.5%? Fund itself, essentially. Currently, this destination marketing organization has about \$33 million in annual revenue; with the new 1.5% tax — or "assessment" as they prefer to call it, being marketers — that revenue is projected to roughly double.

With an assist from Michael Jacobson, the all-in CEO of the Illinois Hotel & Lodging Association, the pair came armed with reasons we should support this new, ahem, tax.

Many were related to the importance of the tourism business to Chicago; we needed no convincing there, being long aware of the number of Chicago jobs (well over 100,000) tied to visitors. We've also long seen untapped tourism potential in Chicago, especially when it comes to European and South American tourists who tend to be infatuated with New York, Los Angeles and Orlando and could use an education on our city's charms. We also believe that Chicago tourism has severely lagged other cities in post-pandemic recovery, especially when it comes to international visitors. We won't bore you with all those statistics; any fool can see this is a vital industry to our toddlin' town. And it needs a jump-start.

Choose Chicago's other arguments for doubling its own budget (and maybe then some) involve the amount of promotional spending by competing cities. Las Vegas spends nearly half a billion dollars promoting itself each year and even after this new tax, Orlando still will spend more. As Chippioni and Reynolds see it, this allows these competitors to steal business from Chicago, running promotions that Chicago cannot afford to duplicate and staffing offices Chicago cannot afford to open.

Chippioni is a savvy player, and he knew he was speaking to a board that is no fan of raising taxes. So he emphasized that in this case, the hoteliers are "assessing" (LOL) themselves. The lodging folks see this as an



People check in at the Sable Hotel on June 6.

AUDREY RICHARDSON/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

altruistic act: Sure, their room rates go up with more visitors, but restaurants and theaters also get busier. If hotels are making this magnanimous gesture, their argument goes, they should rightly dictate how the new money gets spent. Ergo, the cash will come in and the hoteliers will oversee how it gets spent, as overseen by Choose Chicago.

We also sensed that the hoteliers quietly were implying that if they don't raise this tax, there is a chance the city will decide to do so. And who might we better trust to ensure that the money goes to the right place? You likely can guess.

All in all, then, we think the hoteliers have a good case for their new taxing district and tax, which they say will be applied for five years, although the likelihood of it going away after that point is roughly akin to you getting an upgrade to the presidential suite, if there was one, at the Hampton Inn.

But it's disingenuous to say that the hoteliers are the ones "paying" the assessment/tax. Certainly, in a competitive business, room rates greatly affect the choices of cash-strapped customers. But it's the guests who are paying the bill, and in Chicago, they are not all from thousands of miles away, either. Plenty of suburbanites stayed downtown after the Sundance Bears thriller. Some Chicagoans need extra space on occasion for family or if their water pipes burst. There is shared sacrifice here.

We also wouldn't want to see this become a Choose Chicago slush fund used, say, to double everyone's salary. If they are going this way, rather than just writing checks, we think hoteliers must be transparent about where the money is going. They've promised the City Council and the media full audits and aldermen should insist on that; in the past, we've found Choose Chicago events heavy on the self-congratulations. If hotel taxes are rising, the city's tourism agency should pivot to more frank annual meetings and ensure there are quantifiable results. (Our guests suggested an additional \$3 billion in visitor spending in Chicago could flow from this initiative, turning \$20 billion into \$23 billion.) In our view, that will also mean not just volume but more effective campaigns (with better slogans than past messaging) and focusing on areas where there are numerous attractions for visitors. We'd also like to see some of the money used for tourist-friendly improvements and co-promotions that would also benefit those of us who live here.

So, we endorse this request of the City Council. And we have a kicker. Our mayor constantly argues businesses don't pay their fair share of taxes; this will hit many of them, especially during conventions. So there you go, Mayor Johnson.

ON THIS DAY 101 YEARS AGO: TAKE YOUR 20 PER CENT, BUT GIVE US ELECTRIFICATION

With a 20 percent raise in suburban fares in prospect, commuters may fairly ask their favorite railroads what they are getting for their money. Those who ride by steam to and from the city every day are not as a group threatened with economic hardship by the raise in rates. They can afford to pay the costs of transportation, but they will kick strenuously if that transportation is not good.

Electrification is the answer to modern suburban transportation problems. But excepting the Illinois Central railroad, electrification in Chicago is as remote as it is in Peking. Some spacious plans for a new consolidated station recently included plans for electrification; but what are plans and what is electrification on paper? There have been many of them, but they come to nothing. New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston increase and improve the electrification of their terminals. Chicago sits pat.

There is cheap money in America. Bankers long for borrowers. There is economic need for electrification and a prospect of sure returns. It is an open opportunity for aggressive action. Only the aggressive action is not forthcoming.

Why are the railroads so tender and tentative? We have a sound railroad system for the year 1900, but modern railroading will have to get over the idea that all great railroading is a finished job if our transportation is to get any better. The good railroad of 1900 could ignore electrification, motor service, air service, and other modern developments, but the railroads of 1870 will not go far today if they don't snap out of fifty years ago.

What Chicago needs is an electrification psychology in our railroad offices. Give us that and we will accept the 20 percent increase.

Tribune editorial board, Jan. 20, 1925

EDITORIAL CARTOON

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MICHAEL P. RAMIREZ

OPINION

Law enforcement needs to be more visible on the CTA

By Paul Vallas

Recent stories highlight violent crime on the CTA, including an unprovoked attack on a 26-year-old woman that led to her being set on fire on a Blue Line train and a deadly Pink Line shooting.

City leaders continue to ignore what is really needed — a larger permanent police presence and proactive law enforcement.

While the mayor congratulates himself for last year's reported reduction in violent crime, 2025 saw the second-highest level of transit-related violence in the past decade.

Today, the CTA assigns approximately 135 Chicago police officers to system security. Supplementing that with off-duty officers working overtime and a patchwork of private security guards falls far short of what is required to protect the nation's second-largest public transit system, encompassing 146 stations and 127 bus routes across Chicago.

The CTA's inadequate response to U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy's demand for a comprehensive safety plan has been to expand the Chicago Police Department's voluntary program from around 77 to 120 officers a day and, more recently, to deploy violence interrupters. This is no substitute for a fully resourced CPD transit unit — a unit with enough full-time officers to enforce the law and maintain a visible presence throughout the transit system. Contrast the CTA's meager transit security with that of New York's system: New York assigns over 1,000 officers to transit security.

The city should establish a fully resourced public transit unit led by a deputy superintendent for public transit safety and adopt a citywide nuisance ordinance. The CTA budgeted \$88.47 million for security last year, while the state's transit rescue package includes security grants. This gives the agency enough funding to hire more than 500 additional full-time CPD officers dedicated exclusively to transit if it eliminates private security contractors who are poorly trained and unarmed and lack arrest authority.



A security worker and a K-9 dog patrol along a Blue Line train platform at the Clark/Lake station on Dec. 16 in Chicago. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The city should establish a fully resourced public transit unit led by a deputy superintendent for public transit safety and adopt a citywide nuisance ordinance.

Those additional officers would allow for CPD staffing at all stations and regular patrols on platforms and trains, while ensuring rapid response to panic button alerts. Officers should be empowered by city ordinance to hold offenders accountable for fare evasion, vandalism, property damage, harassment of riders and CTA workers, and other violations. Accountability should include substantial fines.

Let's be clear: Crime remains a

primary concern for both riders and transit workers. Surveys indicate that nearly half of all passengers cite safety concerns as their top issue, and the CTA's unions report the same. Keith Hill, president of the CTA bus operators union, said he wasn't satisfied with police presence on the CTA — particularly on city buses. "We don't see police," he said. Fear of crime continues to depress ridership — still down 30% from pre-COVID levels —

and contributes to staffing shortages, absenteeism and unreliable service.

The mayor and CTA leadership have failed to recognize the direct connection between public safety and financial viability. Without a significant restoration of ridership to pre-pandemic levels, Chicago's transit finances will remain on life support. The state's recent Regional Transportation Authority financial rescue — largely a bailout for the CTA — will be temporary unless the agency makes safety a genuine priority. Today, fare collections cover barely 20% of operating expenses, a catastrophic imbalance for a system once sustained largely by rider revenue.

The state has thrown the CTA

a financial lifeline — but it will not last unless we restore public confidence and ridership. That starts with real law enforcement, not token programs or cosmetic policy gestures. The CTA's future depends on making safety its highest priority, committing enough police officers to maintain a constant presence and empowering them to enforce the law effectively. This is not a question of funding — it's a question of leadership and priorities.

Paul Vallas is an adviser for the Illinois Policy Institute. He ran against Brandon Johnson for Chicago mayor in 2023 and was previously budget director for the city and CEO of Chicago Public Schools.

Edgewater needs a plan for Broadway, not just upzoning

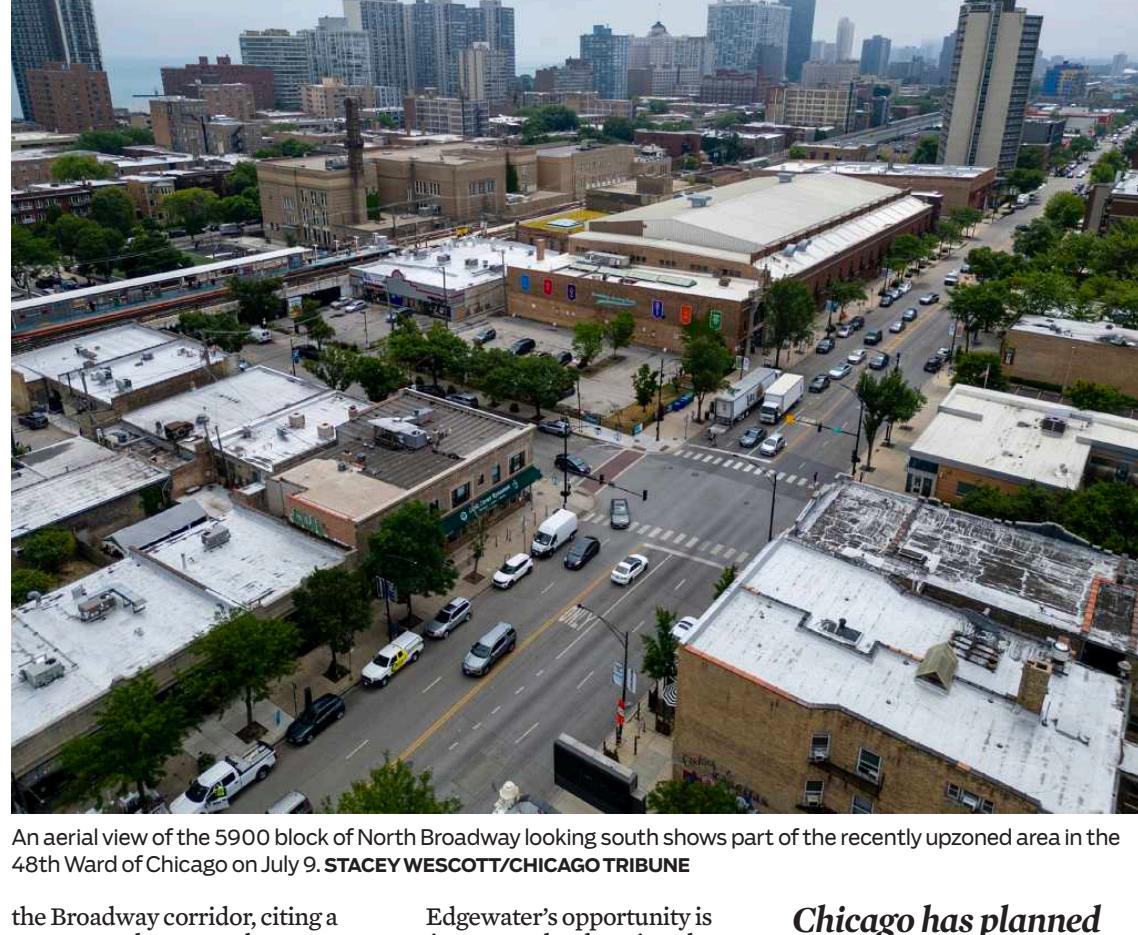
By Todd Baisch

Chicago faces numerous overlapping challenges: an affordable housing shortage, climate volatility, declining transit ridership, struggling small businesses and streets still designed more for cars than people. These challenges are evident in Edgewater, especially along Broadway. Yet at this pivotal moment, the city of Chicago is failing to do what cities must do when change is inevitable: plan for it.

The Department of Planning and Development and Ald. Leni Manaa-Hoppenworth, 48th, recently pushed through a major upzoning of Broadway despite neighborhood opposition calling for basic corridor planning. City leaders asserted that the zoning change would facilitate affordability, economic vitality and a more livable neighborhood. But they have put the cart before the horse. Zoning alone is not a vision, and it will not deliver those outcomes.

The city's zoning windfall for developers fails to address the fundamental questions that shape successful urban places, especially near transit. Where should density be concentrated? How should people walk, bike, drive and access transit? How do we preserve valuable historic districts and buildings while accommodating growth? And how do we improve upon the development pattern that has defined Broadway for decades? Many smaller developers who dominate Chicago's commercial streets are structured for one-off projects. They do not assemble land, plan multisite districts or invest in shared infrastructure unless the city establishes a clear framework and participates financially. Transit-oriented hubs will not emerge simply by layering on zoning bonuses.

The city has said it is not pursuing further planning along



An aerial view of the 5900 block of North Broadway looking south shows part of the recently upzoned area in the 48th Ward of Chicago on July 9. STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

the Broadway corridor, citing a 2018 CTA plan created to secure federal funding. This is despite the fact that the Department of Planning and Development has produced detailed corridor plans in many other parts of Chicago, providing clear direction for developers and translating community priorities into built form. Planning Commissioner Ciere Boatright has championed vision-driven planning. From the Edgewater community's perspective, it is unclear why that leadership is not being applied here, particularly after the city's massive investment in rebuilding the Red and Purple lines.

Edgewater's opportunity is unique. No other location along the Red Line north of downtown has as much underused land adjacent to multiple rebuilt CTA stations. Nearly 1 million square feet of underused land near three modernized stations (within a tax increment financing district) could accommodate roughly 3,200 new homes along with much-needed retail. This rare opportunity warrants thoughtful planning and should not be left to the whims of the marketplace alone.

The most glaring example is the CTA's pending disposition of three parcels near the Bryn

Chicago has planned corridors such as Clark Street and Western Avenue. Broadway deserves the same.

Mawr station without a master plan. One large site is earmarked for Chicago's green social housing initiative. At the same time, adjacent late 19th-century buildings along Bryn Mawr Avenue remain unprotected and vulnerable to demolition. These buildings could anchor a vibrant retail

district similar to the successful Armitage Avenue corridor near the Brown Line. Without a coordinated vision, new development risks becoming a series of isolated projects that do little to revitalize the district or set a strong precedent for the corridor. Projects of this scale require city leadership, including tools such as tax increment financing to support infrastructure, public space, historic preservation and small business retention.

This failure is especially troubling given the city's more than \$2 billion investment in rebuilding the Red and Purple lines. Ridership remains below pre-pandemic levels, and the CTA faces a serious fiscal shortfall. Development near stations is essential to restoring transit use, but only if it is guided by intentional planning, not just upzoning.

Design quality is also at stake. Much of the development along the Red Line follows an economics-driven formula: lot-filling buildings yielding basic apartments and minimal street engagement. Few create destinations or a strong sense of place. Edgewater has the opportunity, and responsibility, to do more.

This is a once-in-a-generation moment. The community cannot do this alone, and broader planning is not being advanced locally. That responsibility rests with the city of Chicago.

Chicago has planned corridors such as Clark Street and Western Avenue. Broadway deserves the same. If we get this wrong, we lock in mediocrity for decades. If we get it right, Edgewater can become a model for how Chicago grows, intentionally, equitably and with vision to establish a new Broadway. Chicago should choose planning over shortcuts.

Todd Baisch is a 36-year Edgewater resident, architect and design strategist.

OPINION

The Trump administration launches Phase 2 of the Gaza plan. Will peace materialize?



Daniel DePetris

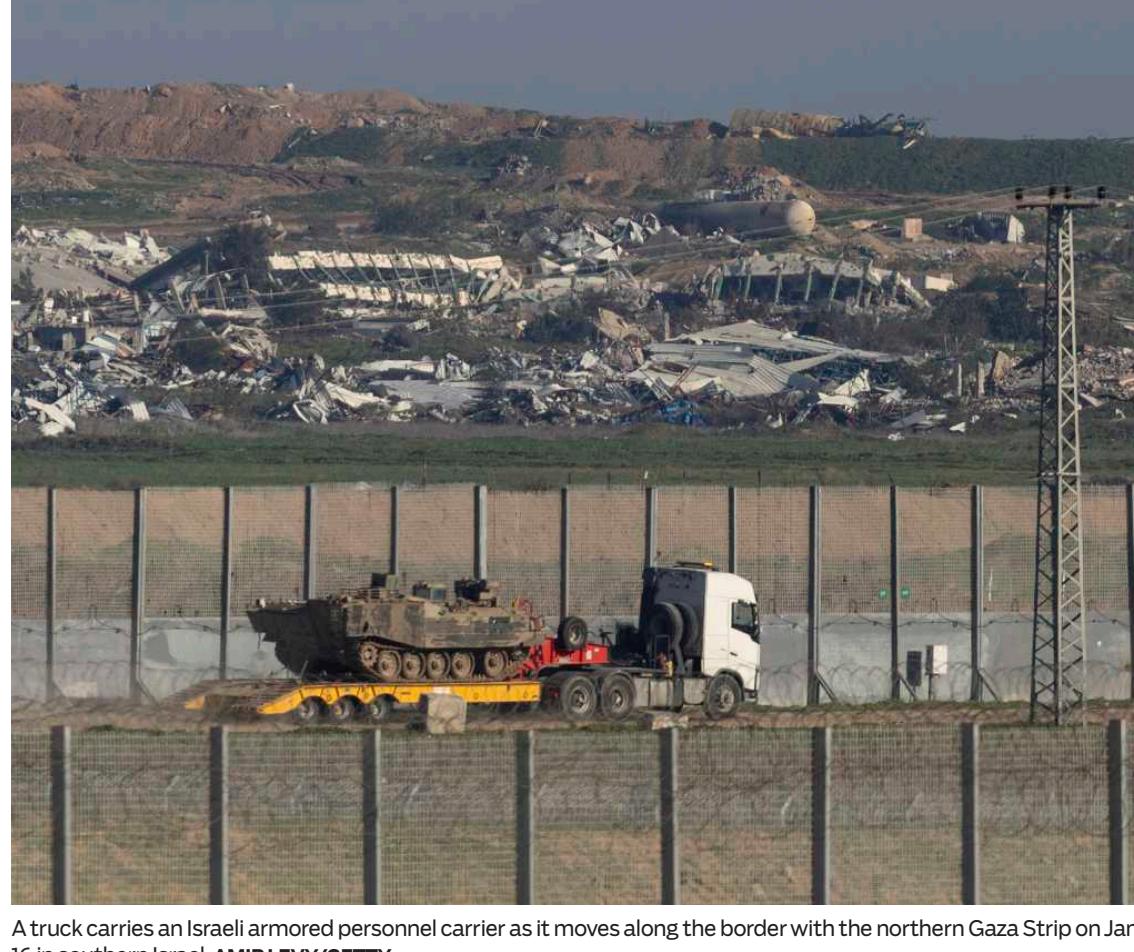
You may have missed it due to the firehose of international news over the last week. But in between the CIA director traveling to Venezuela to meet deposed dictator Nicolás Maduro's replacement and President Donald Trump's on-again, off-again flirtation with bombing Iran, the White House made a pretty big announcement on Gaza: The 20-point peace plan negotiated with Israel and Hamas last October is moving to the next phase.

The Trump administration is understandably giddy at the developments. U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff, Trump's point person on the Gaza file, delivered a declaratory statement through social media on Wednesday celebrating the conclusion of Phase 1, which resulted in some tangible achievements — the release of all living Israeli and foreign hostages from Gaza, an acceleration of humanitarian aid into the territory, a partial pullback of Israeli troops and a significant reduction in the violence.

"For the first time in Gaza in almost a long time, there's no Palestinian Authority, and there's no Hamas governing it," another Trump administration official told reporters. "This really has the potential to be the beginning of a new era."

The key word here is "potential." Because as much as the White House would like to proclaim its policy on Gaza as a clear accomplishment, Trump's entire peace plan still rests on a weak foundation.

First, we need to put something in perspective: What the Trump administration insisted was a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza was in reality anything but. There was still plenty of shooting and bombing going on, just at a lower level. This was probably inevitable — for instance, when Phase 1 of the deal was signed in October,



A truck carries an Israeli armored personnel carrier as it moves along the border with the northern Gaza Strip on Jan. 16 in southern Israel. **AMIR LEVY/GETTY**

hundreds of Hamas militants underground found themselves on the Israeli side of the so-called Yellow Line, which was the point where Israeli forces deployed until other aspects of the peace plan were settled. The Israel Defense Forces continued targeting Hamas commanders in the interim, and IDF patrols, particularly near the Gazan city of Rafah, were at times being ambushed by Hamas gunmen who either didn't get the memo or didn't agree with the decision to stop firing to begin with.

On Thursday, the IDF killed 10 Palestinians in Gaza, including a senior Islamic Jihad commander. Eventually, the casualties piled up: More than 400 Palestinians have been killed since the supposed ceasefire was agreed to.

The continued violence, however, is only half the story. The other half is the nature

and structure of the agreement Trump pushed through. None of the systemic disputes that have divided Israel and the Palestinians have been addressed yet. While this might seem like an oversight, it was actually by design. The Trump administration made the conclusion that bundling everything together into one package — in other words, solving all the problems at once — was untenable. It was highly unlikely Israel, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority would come to terms on how Gaza should be governed, when (or even if) the IDF should withdraw and when (or even if) a comprehensive peace process should be initiated. Linking the resolution of all these issues simultaneously to a ceasefire meant that large-scale fighting would persist for the foreseeable future.

There was logic in not being

too pie-in-the-sky. But there was a cost to the decision as well. What the Trump administration effectively did was defer the hard issues to a later date, hoping that with time, Israel and Hamas would be able to piggyback on the positive momentum formed by the reduction in violence and prisoner releases into Phase 2. But there's no sign of this happening.

Israel, for example, seems to be treating the Yellow Line as a new de facto border with Gaza when, in reality, it's meant to be a temporary placeholder until a viable Palestinian security force is developed. Hamas, which is supposed to demilitarize, disarm and demobilize as a military force, is no closer to doing so today than it was last year. And if Hamas refuses to disarm, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stated unequivocally that Israel will resume the war.

There are other problems as well. While the Trump-chaired Board of Peace and members of the technocratic Palestinian administration in Gaza have supposedly been stood up, we still don't know which countries will be participating in the International Stabilization Force or what its mandate is. The answer to the second question will determine the answer to the first; countries such as Azerbaijan, Indonesia and Egypt that were originally interested in participating have since registered objections because they don't want their soldiers involved in forcefully disarming Hamas.

If those objections persist and Hamas refuses to hand over its weapons voluntarily, then the Trump administration will have to spend even more time searching for, training and equipping Palestinian police officers who are willing to do the job themselves. This, of course, would be a whole lot easier if the Palestinian Authority's security forces could be tapped for the duty, but Netanyahu is adamantly opposed to giving the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority any role in the process.

None of this even begins to account for the longer-term problems that have plagued the Israeli-Palestinian peace process since the dawn of the historical conflict. Assuming everything falls into place, Gaza becomes a Middle East version of Cancun and Hamas is erased from the map — all of which sounds fanciful at the moment — we still have the age-old dilemma of squaring an independent Palestinian state into the round hole that is Israeli domestic politics. The latter views the former as a clear and direct threat to Israel's national security, if not to its very existence.

Trump can celebrate now. But the road to an actual peace is littered with the kinds of deep potholes that can overturn the peace train.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Illinoians' health care

As January kicks off, most people are hoping the new year will bring a brighter future. But for many Americans who depended on subsidies through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to afford their monthly health care premiums, 2026 is already looking bleaker.

The ACA subsidies introduced in 2021 and extended through the Inflation Reduction Act officially expired on Dec. 31. While Congress is attempting to reinstate them, it is likely that any such effort would be vetoed. The result is that many premiums have more than doubled, leaving millions of Americans in the perilous position of having no health insurance to help cover the care they will undoubtedly still need.

In this national health care crisis, it is now up to the states to take action. Fortunately, Illinois has long treated health care inequity as a priority and has been proactively working for years on solutions.

In 2022, the state created the South Side Healthy Community Organization (SSHCO) — through Health-care Transformation Collaboratives — as a free service to help uninsured patients and those on Medicaid get access to better health care in a part of the city where health outcome disparities are high. SSHCO also subsidizes providers on the South Side so that residents can access care in their own community, provides a free doula program for new mothers, and connects patients to primary care physicians, healthy food and even transportation.

Patients have completed more than 138,000 appointments with providers we subsidize since our inception. Now, our services and others like ours are even more critical to Chicagoans left in the cold by the expiration of these subsidies.

As health care costs skyrocket, SSHCO will continue to provide stability and support to these newly uninsured residents. But as state-funded organizations step up — such as SSHCO, whose funding expires in 2026 — my hope is that our state and local leaders will prioritize support for the work we do to help all Chicagoans live the healthy lives they deserve.

— Kimberly Hobson, CEO, South Side Healthy Community Organization

How to reduce our ills

Todd C. Smith's analysis of the dramatic decline in opioid deaths in the Chicago area is beautifully nuanced and hopeful ("Who deserves credit for the drop in Cook County's opioid overdose deaths?" Jan. 15). Yes, it takes a village for progress in protecting our children, and his outlining just how the public health, police, and private and familial components worked together to make the success happen is refreshingly supportive and points the way to how to reduce other societal ills.

— Margaret Sents, Glenview

Done without bombast

Thank you for publishing Todd C. Smith's informative op-ed on the drop in Cook County's opioid overdose deaths. He carefully lays out the ongoing problem; credits



Pages from the U.S. Affordable Care Act health insurance website are seen on a computer screen in New York on Aug. 19. **PATRICK SISON/AP**

federal, state and local authorities for progress that has been made; and urges continued collaboration to sustain that progress.

I particularly appreciate the fact that he did so without the threatening and bombastic rhetoric I have come to expect from federal officials at all levels.

— Frank Vondrak, Oak Lawn

Strategy for the GOP

The GOP in Illinois could win north of Interstate 80 (even in Chicago) if Republicans would simply change their approach and message. Under no circumstances can a Republican candidate win in Chicagoland if they refuse to denounce the actions of the current president as un-American and unethical. While polls continue to show that voters disapprove of President Donald Trump's actions on immigration, tariffs and other ill-timed moves across the world stage, their sentiments are directed at how they are being carried out, not necessarily on what is being done.

For too many years, Chicagoans have been under the Democrats' thumb, and it has repeatedly beaten them down with high property taxes, bizarre financial moves (think parking meters and the Skyway leasing), a stubborn homicide rate, political corruption, and countless nefarious deals and actions, all under a party that continually pushes the failing narrative that things would be much worse if Republicans ran the show.

However true this unsubstantiated rhetoric may be, we are never given the chance to find out. If Republicans truly hope to make inroads into the northern part of Illinois, they must make their message more palatable to the conservative Democrats who would love to give them a chance but do not want the circus or the obfuscation currently being stoked and shown in Trump's White House. They must resist the urge to parrot unsubstantiated claims and seek out facts. Scaring residents about high crime levels that buttress against factual numbers that clearly show the opposite, only reeks of desperation.

Yes, taxes in the state and city are high, but how can they be lowered without disrupting services needed by

the poor and vulnerable? How can gun rights be protected and expanded without feeling the need to justify military-grade weapons in the mix?

There are these and other fault lines in the Democratic landscape that can be exploited, especially in Chicago.

— Ephraim Lee, Police District councilor, Chicago

I vote for principle

Paul Miller's op-ed ("Will 2026 be the year Illinois GOP primary voters learn politics?" Jan. 8) about Illinois GOP voters improving their lot says supporting President Donald Trump is "a must for any GOP nominee." That's a concern he acknowledges by adding "any disagreement with the president is regarded as a mortal sin." Those of us favoring a two-party system want Republican success to achieve anywhere close to political parity.

Miller's advice is for Republican voters in the primary to adhere to the Buckley Rule: "Support the rightward most viable candidate." Even, as Miller maintains, the candidate is unlikely to win, in order to "advance your cause and ideas."

I think the emphasis needs to be on "viable," concentrating on the kitchen table issues rather than ideological.

Despite Miller's practical advice, the elephant in the room, the core of the problem, can't be ignored: Trump and his knee-jerk MAGA supporters.

I vote for principle over a Republican candidate beholden to Trump — a party of principle, not power and profit over people.

— Richard Palzer, Clarendon Hills

Pass elder parole bill

One place the Illinois General Assembly should be looking for savings to help fill the budget gap is the Illinois prison system. (See the Jan. 11 article "State lawmakers return to Capitol facing budget gap.") We are incarcerating over 29,000 individuals at an average per-person cost of \$52,000 per year, for a total annual cost of over \$1.5 billion.

Senate Bill 86, now pending, would establish an "elder parole" process for about 1,150 people who are at least 55 years old and have been in prison for 25 years or more. These individuals are the least likely to reoffend as they mature and age out of crime and the most expensive to keep in prison due to the costs of medical care as they are treated for the diseases of old age and end-of-life care. Under SB86, these individuals would be able to have a hearing at which the Prisoner Review Board would decide whether they are ready to be released and rejoin society, consistent with public safety and other relevant factors.

As the members of the General Assembly look to reduce expenses, they should be seriously considering the passage of this bill.

— William J. Nissen, attorney, Chicago

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COMMENT

Editorials

Institutional strengths solidify foundation for a confident start to new five-year plan

Its performance in 2025 shows that China's economy benefits from a strong capacity to plan for the long term while acting pragmatically in the short term. The economy grew by 5 percent year-on-year in 2025, meeting the annual target and bringing the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) to a successful close. For a country navigating a volatile global environment and structural economic adjustments at home, this has been a hard-won achievement.

Behind the headline figure, China's GDP surpassed 140 trillion yuan (\$20 trillion) for the first time, employment remained generally steady, foreign trade hit a new high, foreign exchange reserves stayed above \$3.3 trillion, and quarterly growth stayed within a reasonable range. Such solid growth against strong headwinds illustrates the advantages of coordinated macro policymaking and effective policy transmission from central decision-making to local implementation.

The significance of the 5 percent growth goes beyond scale, as it lays the groundwork for a steady start to the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period, during which external uncertainties persist, domestic demand requires further strengthening, and the transition from old to new growth drivers entails more targeted input. Addressing these challenges demands continued reliance on the country's institutional strengths — strategic planning, policy coordination, pragmatic reform and high-standard opening-up, as stressed by the annual Central Economic Work Conference held last month.

Notably, the past five years have further consolidated the fundamentals of the Chinese economy. The trade structure has been further diversified, the advantages of a complete industrial system have been better leveraged and the potential of China's super-large domestic market has been further unleashed. This has helped cushion external shocks while creating room for policymakers to deploy policy tools promptly to stabilize growth and promote upgrading.

That is reflected in the strong momentum of high-tech and high-value-added exports over the past five years despite some major economies' attempts to "decouple" from China or "de-risk" their trade and industries. China's role as a major trading partner for more than 150 countries and regions highlights the depth of its global economic linkages.

Far from derailing its development, external pressure serves to prompt China to double down on optimizing its economic structure and upgrading its industry. High-tech manufacturing expanded its share in industrial output, final consumption contributed more than half of economic growth and progress toward establishing a unified national market was advanced. Meanwhile, institutional reforms helped unleash market vitality by fostering fair competition. It should be clear that the more some external forces try to contain China's development by stifling its inno-

vation and isolating it from the world economy, the more China has turned to innovation-driven growth and opened its door wider to the world. In doing so, it has integrated more deeply with the global economy on the basis of high standards. As World Economic Forum President Borge Brende observed, China is consolidating its traditional strengths while expanding into new frontiers, and remains a major contributor to global growth driven by innovation.

That China continues to rank among the fastest-growing major economies, given the strong headwinds it has encountered, is remarkable not only for its estimated 30 percent contribution to global growth but also its symbolic significance. Faced with the United States' economic coercion and trade bullying, while some major economies chose to be submissive, some hesitated and others have gone with the US flow, China responded resolutely through its own development and stability. The resilience of the Chinese economy and the progress it has made should awaken some major economies to the fact that openness and cooperation remain the keys to development.

China has reaped the ripple-effect benefits of openness, cooperation and innovation-driven growth as advances in digital manufacturing, artificial intelligence, green energy and advanced equipment manufacturing have not only boosted productivity but also improved the economy's capacity to adapt to uncertainties. During the new five-year plan period, China will continue to increase its R&D investment, strengthen its innovation ecosystem and deepen its integration of technology with industry to foster new quality productive forces.

At the same time, China will continue to cultivate domestic demand as the main growth engine, with greater emphasis on boosting consumption, especially service consumption, and improving income distribution. Supply-side reforms will focus on upgrading traditional industries while nurturing emerging ones, ensuring that new growth drivers can offset cyclical pressures. Reform will remain a key lever, with deeper market-oriented measures to improve efficiency, lower logistics and transaction costs, and better align incentives across regions and sectors.

All these endeavors aim to ensure that China does its own things well to help form a dual circulation pattern that is mutually reinforcing. This will not only enable the country to better adapt to external uncertainties but also allow other countries to benefit from China's development through practical cooperation.

The Chinese economy has always developed by overcoming challenges, thus developing a strong capacity to adapt to changes. With stable fundamentals, proven policy tools and a clear reform orientation, China is well positioned to navigate future challenges and ensure that the new five-year plan period begins with confidence, capacity and steady progress.

Wake-up call for Europe to review its dependency

Tensions between the United States and its European allies over Greenland are escalating, with US President Donald Trump threatening on Saturday to impose a 10 percent tariff starting Feb 1 on eight European countries that have opposed his takeover plan for the Danish island.

In response, European Union leaders are mulling a package of tariffs on 93 billion euros (\$107.7 billion) of imports from the US as part of possible retaliatory measures. The aggressive land-grab bid of the US administration is a stark reminder of the long-standing power imbalance within transatlantic relations.

At the heart of this dispute lies a fundamental principle of international law: respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. There is no doubt that the US' tariff threats, ostensibly aimed at coercing European acquiescence to its territorial ambitions, undermine this principle. Europe's united front in defense of Danish sovereignty over Greenland — if the united front holds — is a testament to its commitment to the principle.

European leaders should be clear that being an ally of the US is meaningless in the calculus of "America First". By signaling its readiness to impose retaliatory measures, including tariffs and market bans, the European Union is signaling belated assertiveness in response to the coercive tactics of the US.

The situation underscores the necessity for Europe to review the nature of transatlantic relations and reduce its reliance on the US as a pillar of support for its security. The notion that US interests inherently align with European stability has been challenged repeatedly, from trade disputes to differing stances on climate change and security. Europe's status as the largest market for US exports, valued at over \$500 billion annually, should empower European leaders to negotiate from a

position of strength rather than subservience.

As it navigates this complex situation, Europe must do so with a clear understanding of its interests and the role it wishes to play on the world stage.

The current crisis presents an opportunity for Europe to reassess its relationship with the US based on mutual respect and on an equal footing. The latest dispute over Greenland is indicative that Europe's interests are not necessarily aligned with those of the US.

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent's remarks on Sunday about European "weakness" and the necessity of US control over Greenland for "global stability" reflect the condescending view that the US holds toward Europe. This should serve as a wake-up call for those in Europe still intent on toeing the US line on issues ranging from security to the economy and trade. Such statements not only insult European capabilities but also ignore the continent's potential to act as a powerful, independent player on the world stage.

European countries should reflect on their foreign policy and economic development strategies over the years to understand why Europe finds itself in such an awkward position.

If protecting the "security" of other countries can be used as a pretext for the US administration to openly seize the territory of other nations, then what essential difference is there between this aggressive form of US security protection and the so-called "substantial aggression and security threats" that it claims to be helping European countries defend against?

The current frictions over Greenland serve as a crucial inflection point for Europe. It is a clarion call for the continent to bolster its strategic autonomy, diversify its partnerships, and assert its role on the global stage. By doing so, Europe can ensure that its future is not dictated by the diktats of a bully, but is instead shaped by its collective interests.

Jin Ding



Opinion Line

Judicial justice must stand in full light of transparency

In a development that is as perplexing as it is troubling, it recently came to light that China's official online portal for court judgments was quietly blurring or erasing the names of presiding judges from published rulings. This was not a minor technical glitch but what appeared to be a deliberate act — one that several legal experts have criticized as reducing solemn judicial decisions to something resembling "anonymous storytelling" or, in a more cynical reading, "legal fiction".

The Supreme People's Court, China's top court, to its credit, responded with commendable speed, denouncing the practice as "wholly inappropriate" and mandating its immediate correction. This episode strikes at the core of a foundational bargain between the courts and citizens: that true justice must not only be done, but must be unmistakably and undeniably seen to be done.

For years, China has consistently championed judicial transparency as the nonnegotiable cornerstone of legal reform. The celebrated launch of China Judgments Online, the official website established by the top court to disclose verdicts, was a bold pledge of openness, a promise to let the disinfecting power of sunlight flood the halls of justice. This was pow-

erfully reinforced by live-trial broadcasts and the strategic publication of landmark cases — all orchestrated to build public trust through unwavering visibility.

The guiding principle is clear: transparency is the rule, the expectation. Secrecy is a narrowly defined, legally constrained exception reserved for protecting State secrets or shielding the vulnerable, such as victims of domestic abuse or minors.

Yet, the redaction of judges' names represents a self-inflicted wound to this very principle. A judge's signature on a ruling is not a trivial formality; it is a responsibility toward litigants and the public.

In the public eye, this act of anonymization can feel eerily like justice operating behind a veil, fostering suspicion where there should be trust, and inviting speculation about fragility where there should be an image of unshakable strength.

Contrast this with the exemplary handling of the disturbing case involving a man surnamed Mu, who mentally abused his ex-girlfriend. It was highlighted by the top court in November as a landmark ruling that confirms humiliation and degrading treatment of family members as forms of domestic violence.

In the release of that case, the top

court balanced necessary privacy with crucial transparency. While protecting the identity of the victim, it laid bare brutal facts of psychological manipulation, the rigorous legal logic applied, and the broader societal message, clarifying that domestic violence "is not limited to physical abuse such as hitting", and that Mu's sustained humiliation and demeaning behavior toward a family member amounted to psychological violence.

That was transparency executed with confidence and purpose. The name-redaction scandal feels like just the opposite — a needless retreat into the shadows. The top court's corrective order is a vital first step. But this incident cannot be dismissed as a one-off flaw. It follows a pattern of awkward stumbling in the march toward transparency.

Ultimately, the authority of the judiciary is built day by day, verdict by verdict. That in turn builds public confidence. For justice to be truly credible, its architects must stand in the full glare of accountability. The promise of "open justice" demands nothing less than courageous, consistent, and complete visibility — starting with the clear, proud signature of every judge on every public judgment they write.

— CAO YIN, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Enhance legal support for high-quality employment

Editor's note: Employment is a priority for improving livelihoods. China Daily spoke to Ban Xiaohui, an associate professor at the School of Law, Wuhan University, on how strengthened legal protection can help realize this goal. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

In practice, nonmarket factors still constrain labor mobility and job matching efficiency, limiting individual development opportunities and weakening overall resource allocation. Improving rule-of-law safeguards for employment therefore requires strengthening the enforceability of the principle of equal employment, refining anti-discrimination rules, clarifying legal liabilities and raising the penalties for violations.

Meanwhile, fair competition review mechanisms should be further advanced and institutional barriers that hinder labor mobility should be removed in accordance with the law. By ensuring unified rules and equal opportunities, employment outcomes can better reflect individual capability and contribution, thereby boosting worker confidence and market vitality.

Safeguarding employment must remain centered on workers' rights and firmly uphold legal standards. Laws relating to basic labor standards should clearly define minimum wages, working hours, rest and leave, and occupational safety and health as universally applicable and nonnegotiable legal baselines. This will prevent the hidden erosion of labor conditions amid intensified competition and the emergence of flexible employment.

Also, social security systems should be further improved and better aligned with the emerging forms of employment. Legislative and institutional innovation should be advanced to clarify responsibilities, rights and remedies in flexible employment. At the same time, the use of algorithms in workforce management and income distribution should be regulated to ensure that technological progress does not come at the expense of labor rights.

The rule of law should be used to improve the alignment between labor supply and industrial demand. Structural employment challenges largely stem from mismatches between skills profiles of workers and the needs of industrial upgrading. Strengthening rule-of-law safeguards for employment requires a more stable institutional framework for vocational skills development and lifelong learning. This includes strengthening legislation on vocational education and skills training, standardizing skills assessment and certification, improving training quality and transparency and investing more in human capital development.

There should also be incentives to encourage enterprises to adopt remuneration and promotion systems based on skills and performance, ensuring reasonable returns

on investment in training and fostering positive interaction among workers, enterprises and industries.

Law-based governance mechanisms should be strengthened to enhance employment stability and the capacity to respond to risks. Amid economic fluctuations, population aging and the rapid advance of artificial intelligence, employment risks have become more diverse. Promoting employment requires not only addressing traditional cyclical challenges but also managing job displacement and structural adjustments driven by technological change.

Employment monitoring and early-warning systems also need improvement, with greater attention to AI applications and digital transformation, as well as to key industries, regions and groups. Technology governance should follow an employment-friendly approach, guiding AI development to improve efficiency while supporting job transitions, and avoiding excessive disruption in employment stability. In addition, labor dispute resolution mechanisms should be strengthened, enforcement efforts intensified and employment risks kept within manageable bounds through institutionalized and routine governance arrangements.

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VIEWS

Facts on the ground: reading China's economy

For years, China's economy has confounded the pessimists. While skeptics have routinely scrutinized every new challenge or external shock as a prelude to inevitable decline, facts on the ground speak for themselves: While not immune to headwinds, the Chinese economy has proved far more resilient than many expected.

Latest official data reinforce the assessment. Despite external shocks and domestic challenges, the Chinese economy expanded by 5 percent in 2025, a pace that met the set target and remained robust by global standards.

A closer look at the data reveals the resilience of China's economy, with solid momentum in equipment and high-tech manufacturing, steady expansion in modern services, and continued optimization of the trade structure.

China, notably, managed to secure such gains amid an extremely volatile trade environment, a structural property-sector correction, and lingering domestic imbalances between supply and demand.

By leveraging timely policy adjustments, trade diversification, and an economy large enough to absorb shocks, China navigated a chal-

lenging year without sharp dislocations many analysts had predicted.

The pillars that underpinned China's growth over the past decades remain firmly in place. A domestic market of 1.4 billion consumers continues to anchor consumption, while China's extensive, flexible supply chains ensure manufacturing continuity.

Stability is further reinforced by consistent policy design. Long-term five-year planning, along with targeted fiscal and monetary measures and a dedication to structural reforms, provides predictability for both markets and investors.

As pressures mount on traditional growth drivers, a new vanguard of forces has come to the fore, with innovation now central to China's growth momentum. New energy vehicles, photovoltaics, robotics and artificial intelligence are fueling a transition from quantity-driven expansion to quality-led growth. This technological leap is paralleled by a rapid green transition in the country, where

renewable capacity is expanding at a world-leading pace.

Beyond policy and scale, China's most subtle yet formidable asset lies in its people — from diligent workers on the factory floor to brilliant minds in research labs. Their collective ingenuity and grit form the solid bedrock of the economy and will serve as a perpetual engine for the country's future growth.

This strength aligns precisely with the country's dual strategy of investing in both physical infrastructure and human capital for the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-30). By recognizing that investing in education and skills development is as vital as building smart factories, China is effectively upgrading its "human engine" to drive its future trajectory.

Furthermore, China's commitment to openness amplifies these internal strengths. Policy reforms, global partnerships through trade agreements, and measures to attract and protect foreign investment have created a more predicta-

ble business environment, integrating China into the world economy while reinforcing a stable growth trajectory at home.

That said, a sound understanding of the Chinese economy requires more than just affirming its strengths. It also demands an objective assessment of both entrenched structural issues and emerging headwinds. As highlighted by the Central Economic Work Conference, China continues to face a complex landscape where external pressures are intensifying and domestic imbalances, particularly the friction between robust supply and lackluster demand, remain pronounced.

However, these are fundamentally the growing pains of a structural transition. By leveraging the core advantages provided by its governance system, ultra-large economic scale, comprehensive industrial chain and vast reservoir of talent resources, China is well-positioned to deal with these risks, just as it has weathered numerous challenges before.

In an uncertain global landscape, China's strength may lie less in how fast it grows, and more in how steadily, and how sustainably, it keeps moving forward.

XINHUA



LIMIN / CHINA DAILY

Carlo Dade

Food can be re-engagement recipe for Beijing, Ottawa

The agreement reached between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney is rightly being celebrated in both countries and most global capitals. In a world filled with daily trade news that ranges from alarming to depressing, a rare, bright note is needed and well-received.

However, the immediate questions arise as to what does this mean, is it significant or symbolic, and what next?

In answering these questions it is ironic that the answer may lie with food. What has been the major cause of so much friction in the Canada-China relationship in the past could now become the basis for building a new form of bilateral engagement geared to meet the looming challenges for both countries arising from the new world trade order being created largely by the Americans.

The reasons for this lie as much in our shared history as in current events.

For China, the era in which access to food, and more recently oil, once appeared certain is over. For Canada, a rules-based global system where agriculture was the path to export growth and prosperity is also looking far less certain.

Yet, beneath these shared anxieties lies a deeper, more fundamental convergence of interests that makes the case for agricultural cooperation.

In having to feed over 1.4 billion people with only about 10 percent of the world's arable land, China needs to guarantee its food security.



But these differences need not affect cooperation on one of humanity's most basic needs.

Canada, meanwhile, has a vast agricultural production capacity and an export-dependent farming sector that relies on access to global markets. China remains Canada's second-largest agricultural export destination, worth billions of dollars annually.

What makes this convergence particularly compelling today is the changed global environment. Trade uncertainty is no longer episodic, but structural. During crises, many countries imposed agricultural export restrictions — from India's rice export bans to grain restrictions by Argentina, Russia — to restrict domestic supply. Climate shocks, political upheavals and wars are disrupting supply chains with increasing frequency. In this volatile landscape, the past certainty of supply and market access is no longer certain.

The recent loss of access to previously guaranteed Venezuelan oil is but one of a growing number of examples.

Only a few countries, including Canada, stand out in this regard. Unlike many major agricultural exporters, Canada has never weaponized agricultural trade. It imposed retaliatory tariffs against food imports from the United States, but has almost never banned or restricted food exports for domestic security or political purposes. Even during the difficult Cold War era, when the US pressured allies to join its embargo of grain sales to China, a different prime minister from the Canadian Prairies, John Diefenbaker, refused to bow to pressure. Canada instead chose to stick to its values and sold wheat to China during the 1950s — prioritizing food over geopolitical alignment.

This history matters for two reasons. First, for a nation where food security carries profound political and social significance, the reliability of supply partners is paramount. While China has access to agricultural imports from several countries, many have histories of restricting exports during domestic crises. Others have used food as leverage in diplomatic disputes. Canada's consistent commitment to maintaining agricultural trade flows regardless of political tensions represents genuine value. Second, as seen with the recent blockage of oil through coercion, history may be rhyming if not repeating itself.

Canada is also one of the world's few "swing" agricultural exporters — nations that consistently produce significant surpluses beyond domestic needs. This

structural advantage means Canadian exports are less vulnerable to supply disruptions that plague countries where domestic consumption consumes most production, and food exports are restricted during crises.

The key to unlocking this potential is to guarantee certainty. This starts by removing food as a pawn on the chessboard of political negotiations. Two countries may have differences over politics, economic models and domestic governance. But these differences need not affect cooperation on one of humanity's most basic needs.

Carney's visit presents an opportunity to translate shared interests into concrete outcomes. Agriculture may seem a modest starting point compared to grand strategic partnerships. But modest beginnings built on genuine mutual benefit are more durable than ambitious frameworks that collapse under political strain. For China and Canada, the path to renewed relations runs through the prairies and the farms that feed the people of both nations.

The author is the director of International Policy and the New North America Initiative at the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary and a member of the Mexican Council on Foreign Relations. He is the co-author of a 2020 study, *When Interests Converge: Agriculture as a Basis of Re-engagement with China*. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.



Kang Bing

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Do not disturb please! Senior citizens are taking classes

I am in a few dozen WeChat groups and I found that the most active ones are those for some of the classes I am attending at universities for senior citizens.

I am in this Chinese painting class and my classmates there are always enthusiastic to show off their work. Then there is this other WeChat group for a singing class I go to and whenever I open that chat group, I am prepared to be bombarded with audio clips of worn-out voices — high, low or hoarse. Most of my classmates are around 70 years old and they take their classes and homework seriously. After all, many of them are fully fulfilling their childhood dreams.

China's first university for the elderly opened 40 years ago in Shandong province. It took a long time for Chinese people to accept that it was perfectly alright for senior citizens to go to university to learn something new after retirement. For a long time, people held the view that educational resources were scarce and should not be wasted on retired people. It was only in 1996, when a law made it clear that senior citizens have a right to continue their education, that universities for the elderly began to sprout.

Those interested in fashion can take classes on how to pose as a model. Then there are classes teaching street dancing, rap singing and even ballet.

According to Ministry of Civil Affairs data, by the end of 2024, there were 105,000 universities for senior citizens in China, enrolling 30 million students. That year, China's population of people aged above 60 was recorded at 310 million. It means less than 10 percent of the retired people had access to universities designed specifically for them. Senior citizen's demand for university education remains high.

Unlike other universities which are approved and supervised by education departments at different levels, the universities for senior citizens are operated by town-to-provincial level local governments.

Formal universities usually run one or two teaching institutions for senior citizens, to meet the needs of their retired employees, while many ministries and large-scale State-owned enterprises also operate such universities for their retirees.

When I tried to enroll in a district-run university five years ago to learn Chinese painting, I had to wait till someone backed out because the classroom could accommodate no more than 40 students. Now, it is much easier thanks to more universities coming up and the fact that now senior students can even take classes online. These universities are nonprofit and the tuition fee for one semester is just 300 yuan (\$43).

The singing class is even cheaper — costing only 160 yuan per semester. Managed by a university in my neighborhood, whenever there are vacancies in a class, it accepts people like us. The teachers in these elderly schools are mostly retired professionals who know our demand well.

"Take it easy" is what they keep on reminding us. The subjects offered include classical literature, poetry, calligraphy, painting, paper-cutting and Peking opera singing. Those interested in fashion can take classes on how to pose as a model. Then there are classes teaching street dancing, rap singing and even ballet. A new subject starting from the upcoming spring semester is artificial intelligence. I assume it is designed to teach us how to use AI to make our lives more colorful and convenient.

Within a 1,000-meter perimeter of my home there are at least four universities for the elderly. The first one is the one I go to, to learn singing; the second one is run by the national pharmaceutical group; the third one is operated by the district authorities; and the fourth one, in the basement of an apartment building just across my street, is operated by my community service center and offers free classes in singing, dancing, painting, musical instrument playing and many more.

Some people have criticized the coming up of such universities for senior citizens, arguing that names of universities should not be randomly used by institutes that come up in small buildings or in their basements. They insist that such universities should be streamlined and put under the supervision of a single government department.

As an insider, I sneer at this proposal. After all, I like this model that makes it cheap and convenient for us to learn whatever we want to learn in a relaxed manner. The introduction of more formalities, I believe, will lead these universities nowhere.