

A weaker rupee

Friday’s fall in the currency should tell the markets that RBI might not always support the currency

FRIDAY’S SHARP DEPRECIATION in the rupee dragged the currency all the way to 89.40 vis-à-vis the dollar. That’s a clear message to the markets—they should not expect the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to keep supporting the Indian currency. The all-time low, it appears, was because stop-losses were triggered amidst local demand for the US currency which has been appreciating in the past three days. Hoping that a trade deal with the US would be finalised soon, some players had apparently bet on the rupee appreciating in the near term. In fact, on Thursday, Governor Sanjay Malhotra had said the pressure on the rupee would ease once a “good” trade deal with the US was signed. However, if the markets were hoping that the RBI would intervene, they have only themselves to blame. No levels are really sacrosanct, not even 89 to the dollar, and the markets must understand this. They clearly believed otherwise because going by reports, most of the stop-losses were triggered when the 88.8050 level—the previous record low—was breached.

Indeed, one cannot fault the RBI for not supporting the currency or holding it at a specific level. There is no certainty on when a trade deal with the US will be clinched. Already, the RBI’s interventions in the currency market have deprived the money markets of liquidity leading to a deficit in the system on a few occasions. The central bank’s foreign exchange reserves have dropped around \$10 billion since mid-September, according to official data cited by *Bloomberg*. It’s better to save the ammunition than exhaust precious reserves to shore up the rupee at this point. Economists point out that in terms of the real effective exchange rate, the rupee is more or less fairly valued. On Friday, the central bank reportedly stepped in to support the rupee only at levels of 89.40.

To be sure, importers with unhedged dollar exposures would be in trouble but they have only themselves to blame. Companies that have dollar earnings of course will see a boost to their bottom lines. The rupee could continue to trade at these levels or fall further if the dollar strengthens even more; the one-month offshore rate fell as much as 1% to 89.86 on Friday. To be sure, an India-US trade deal should see exports to the US bouncing back and cushioning the merchandise trade deficit which, in October, widened to a record high of \$41.7 billion from an already elevated \$32.2 billion in September, well above expectations.

There’s no cause for alarm although a weaker rupee would, no doubt, push up the import tab especially as the country will now be importing less of the cheaper crude oil from Russia.

However, on the plus side, exports should become more competitive, allowing exporters to gain share from their rivals. In FY26 so far, the rupee has depreciated by 4.4% which is way more than the fall in the Bangladeshi taka and the Vietnamese dong, the two countries that India competes with in the world market. A weaker rupee might also bring in more foreign flows. Even otherwise, with services exports remaining resilient, we should not see too much of a spike in the current account deficit.

Seizing opportunities

There are openings on agri with US and pharma with China

THERE IS NO doubt that India must engage more closely with both the world’s leading economic powers; notably the US and China that account for a fifth of its global trade. Escalating tensions between the two nations who are competing for hegemony has threatened to fragment global trade and investment flows broadly into US-centric and Sino-centric blocs. Although there is a fragile trade truce between them, India must be autonomous in dealing with both these powers and seize the emerging opportunities. The challenges are similar as both use coercive economic measures to impose their will on relatively weaker economies. US President Donald Trump has slapped additional sanctions of 25% on India—besides the 25% reciprocal tariffs on goods—for importing Russian oil and has signalled that a bilateral trade deal is imminent. China has blocked shipments of rare earths, fertilisers, and tunnel boring equipment to India although some of these restrictions are easing as relations are normalising.

India must seize the fresh openings for its farm exports, with the US exempting 200 agricultural products from its reciprocal tariff regime. Although immediately there are only modest gains like for spices, there are huge opportunities in the future for our high value-added crops like bananas, citrus fruits, water melons, and vegetables like tomatoes that feature on the list, some of whom have faced regulatory hurdles in the US. In return, we can lower duties on walnuts, apples, cranberries, and blueberries which we do not produce or do so in limited quantities. Being a *demandeur* in negotiations suggests a different construction to opening up the agricultural sector than reflexively defending it at all costs. Experts like Dr Ashok Gulati have argued that the sector is not that vulnerable as popularly believed, as 80% is reasonably competitive.

India’s agriculture has shown resilience and is an important part of the country’s growth story, registering an expansion of 4.6% in FY25, with decadal growth of a similar order of magnitude. The growth process has been associated with a rising share of the non-crop sector like livestock—with milk production remaining dominant—fishing, and aquaculture in the overall gross value output for agriculture and allied activities. Although the share of the crop sector has declined, it still remains the largest contributor. This sector comprises cereals, pulses, oilseeds, and other field crops and horticulture. The former are grown in 92% of gross cropped area and by a vast majority of farmers in the countryside.

High-value horticultural crops like fruits and vegetables (and spices) have rapidly gained ground and are as important as cereals in crop sector output. We can certainly leverage these opportunities if we are less defensive in our trading stance.

Similarly, there are interesting possibilities of exporting more to China, a prospect that has proved elusive for India. Our position vis-à-vis China appears more akin to a third world country that exports raw materials like iron ore and intermediates for plastics while importing manufactured goods like electrical and other machinery, transmission apparatus for radio and telephony, active pharmaceutical ingredients, auto parts for two-wheelers, etc., resulting in a massive bilateral trade deficit. This imbalance alone accounts for 35% of India’s global trade deficit. All of this can certainly change with greater bilateral cooperation as peace and tranquility has returned to the disputed border.

Both nations have reportedly begun talks for a reverse-trade model for drugs. India imports bulk drugs from the dragon, converts them to finished dosage forms, and exports these back to China—a prospect that could unlock exports of \$6 billion. India’s world-class generic drug manufacturers can also leverage the gradual opening up of China’s tightly regulated drug market and participate in tenders under its volume-based procurement. Despite the intensifying trade rivalries between these two leading powers, India must seize the opportunities for agri products in the US and pharma in China as both nations are its largest trading partners in the world.

WHILE IT MAY NOT DELIVER PARIS TARGETS, IN ITS ABSENCE WE MAY SEE A TEMPERATURE RISE OF 3°C OR MORE

Contradictions and utility

SOMIT DASGUPTA

Senior visiting fellow, ICRIER

cated for climate change. Say, Mr Gates, what resources are we referring to? The developed nations are finding it difficult to cobble together \$100 billion a year, let alone the \$300 billion a year decided in the last meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) at Azerbaijan. They are engaging all kinds of statistical subterfuge in order to reach \$100 billion a year. Commercial loans are being cited as climate funds from developed to developing countries when they actually should be grants or, at best, concessional loans. As it is, the developing nations are debt-ridden and will go down further in the red if climate funds are disbursed on purely commercial terms. Moreover, the Loss and Damage Fund which was initiated to give succour to countries facing serious damages has a committed budget of only \$800 million. Returning to Gates, if one looks up his interview on the subject, one finds a very confused man who does not know how to defend this volte face. Not surprisingly, the Trump administration immediately gave a thumbs-up to Gates’ memo.

Coming to the contradictions at

COP30 in Belém, one can quote several instances. The most glaring example is the presence of a large number of delegates from the fossil fuel industry. Surely, they are not coming each year to witness their own demise, but just the opposite. They want to ensure no decisions are taken that could give them a quick burial. It is said that in percentage terms, the presence of the fossil fuel industry is the largest during COP30, bigger than any other country delegation with the exception of Brazil. Such delegations, in a way, have the blessings of the host country since they have a vested interest in the continuation of fossil fuels. Take the case of Brazil itself. It is the eighth-largest producer of oil and is exploiting fossil fuels even at the mouth of the Amazon. This is similar to Azerbaijan (which hosted COP29) whose economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuel exports. There are other examples too, like Qatar (COP18).

In the case of Brazil, there are other stark contradictions. Brazil has taken the initiative of starting a new scheme called Tropical Forest Forever Facility. The objective of this scheme is to incentivise

the preservation of tropical forests. The irony is that Brazil cut down trees in the Amazon rainforest to build a four-lane highway to help host COP30. Brazil, however, denies it saying that the construction of the road had begun much before it was decided to host COP 30 at Belém. While this may be debatable, the fact remains that thousands of trees were felled to build the road.

In the meantime, the first draft of the COP30 communique has been tabled. It includes subjects like climate finance, moving away from fossil fuels and unilateral trade measures. The subjects are nothing new but contentious, and the issue is of reaching a consensus. Going by the past probability, one knows the outcome beforehand. The moot point is whether COP can deliver any good, given the pulls and pressures each country faces on phasing out fossil fuels, the availability of finance, and a host of other issues with conflicting interests. As it is, the interest of countries seems to be on the decline as the number of heads of government taking time out to attend COP meetings has gone down considerably. Further, less than half of the 195 countries involved have submitted revised nationally determined contributions, and many of those submitted are lacking any lustre. So this begs the question, is it time to dissolve COP? The answer is an emphatic “no”. If COP were to be disbanded today, it would lead to an unbridled growth in emissions. At least a few sane minds are putting their heads together in search of a solution. While COP may be unable to deliver the PA targets, in its absence we may see a temperature rise of 3°C or more.

Views are personal

Time to focus on real exchange rate

AJAY SHANKAR

Distinguished Fellow, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development

THE REAL EXCHANGE rate does not usually feature in discussions on the economy. The Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI) decisions on the interest rate are eagerly awaited. The goods and services tax rates have been revamped, a Diwali gift to the consumer. President Trump brought import duty rates to the centre stage and demanded that India lower them. The fiscal deficit is always a matter of concern.

But the exchange rate is rarely talked about. It has been falling, and the decline makes headlines. Those opposed to the government cite it as a failure with the widespread view in the political class that a strong currency is a sign of the economy being strong and a depreciating currency indicates a weakening economy. The term “real exchange rate” is not often used. Excluding economists, it is not understood by most.

The real exchange rate is the nominal exchange rate between two currencies adjusted to reflect the difference in the inflation rates in the two countries. Let us assume that the exchange rate was ₹100 for a pound sterling in 2024 and remains so in 2025. The inflation rate in India in 2024 was, say, 6% and 2% in the UK. The difference in the inflation rates was 4%, which makes what is produced in India 4% more expensive. Imports become relatively cheaper and exports more expensive by 4%. The real exchange rate of the rupee vis-à-vis the pound has appreciated by 4%. This appreciation has the same effect as a 4% reduction in import duties across the board. Clearly, movements in the real exchange rate have an enormous impact on the economy and its performance.

This needs far more attention.

The successful East Asian economies understood the power of the exchange rate and chose to artificially keep it depreciated to give domestic manufacturing and value addition a greater boost. This aided their remarkable export-led growth. Their central banks kept buying dollars and building up reserves to keep depreciating their currency.

A few years after the reforms of 1991, the RBI adopted a policy of having a market-determined exchange. This had become the international practice by then with the end of the era of fixed exchange rates after the second World War. Normally, the real exchange rate appreciates over time with increase in productivity and exports. India has been sui generis in experiencing real exchange rate appreciation in the absence of these due to two special factors. The first, steadily increasing remittances from overseas Indians—from \$2 billion in 1990 to \$12 billion in 2000, and \$135 billion in 2024. Secondly, the inflow of money from institutional investors for gains in our stock market, distinct from inflows for actual physical investments. The result has been a steady market exchange rate for some years, while the real exchange rate appreciated as our inflation rates are higher than our major trading partners. Then there are episodes of sharp depreciation of the

market rate precipitated by foreign institutional investors choosing to exit the Indian market. This usually happens when they begin to see the real rate appreciation as unsustainable and choose to exit to maximise their gains before the rupee falls.

According to the international agency CEIC, India’s real exchange rate in 2024 was about 18% higher than that of 2005. According to the RBI, it has appreciated over 8% since 2015. This has effectively made most of our formal import duties negative. This is not understood in the public domain.

Trump has been calling us “tariff king”. But the effect of this real exchange rate appreciation, to use a motoring metaphor, is like driving the economy with the hand brakes on. No wonder our industrial performance has been so disappointing. That we still have positive, albeit modest, industrial growth is a reflection of the strengths of our entrepreneurs.

Not letting the real exchange rate appreciate is an essential prerequisite for achieving our full potential of increasing manufacturing and domestic value addition. (This is not a sufficient condition. Competitiveness has to keep improving.) The government and the RBI have to decide that the appreciation of the real exchange rate would be prevented by the RBI buying dollars. There can be no objection to this. Artificial depreciation, as the East Asians did, is not suggested. The RBI’s inter-

An RBI announcement that henceforth it would maintain a stable real exchange rate would send the market signal for greater domestic value addition and job creation

The govt and the RBI could clearly communicate that the rupee is still overvalued and that this depreciation is a positive development

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AI enthusiasm must be grounded in reality

“The real value of AI” (FE, November 21) wisely underscores the need to separate real technological progress from the runaway hype around artificial intelligence (AI). The comparison to past tech bubbles feels apt, as unchecked optimism threatens to revive old mistakes—namely confusing early promise with immediate, sustainable returns. While AI’s

potential to transform industry is immense, we need sober assessment, not irrational exuberance. Valuations built more on speculation than on substance do little to support responsible innovation or sustainable business. To ensure AI truly benefits society, leaders and investors should promote clear standards, practical frameworks, and measured expectations. Only by grounding enthusiasm in reality can we avoid another wasteful bubble and guide AI towards

lasting, positive change for all.

—M Barathi, Bengaluru

Prioritise fundamentals

Apropos of “The real value of AI” (FE, November 21), the discourse on artificial intelligence’s (AI) impact is both timely and crucial. While AI promises transformative changes, there’s a palpable risk of hype overshadowing genuine value. Influential voices like Sundar Pichai and Ruchir Sharma caution against over-expectations

and misaligned investments. The tech boom often outpaces real-world applicability, leading to potential bubbles—reminding us not to put all our eggs in one basket. This highlights the need for balanced growth, blending ambition with pragmatism. To harness AI’s true potential, businesses and policymakers must prioritise fundamentals over frenzy. —K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

‘Al-Falah shouldn’t have existed’

First, Pahalgam, then Delhi, two major terror-related incidents within eight months have shocked the nation. Are there lapses on our part, or is there something else driving this surge?

Vikram Singh, former UP DGP, decodes the dichotomy in an interaction with **Anurag Kumar of The Statesman**. In 1974, Singh joined the Indian Police Service (IPS) and held the post of Director General of Police (DGP) in Uttar Pradesh from June 2007 to September 2009. He retired in May 2010. He was awarded the President's Police Medal for Gallantry in 1986.

Edited excerpts:
Q. There has been a spike in terror-related activities in India. Are there lapses at the Intelligence level, or is it a failure of policing at the ground level?

A: Every terror attack is a cause of great concern and introspection. And there cannot be anything that is cent percent perfect. We should assess ourselves and identify our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Every such incident should pass through a stringent SWOT analysis.

You mentioned Pahalgam and Delhi. I would be living in a fool's paradise and would not be doing my duty if I could say that everything was well under control and the terrorist got a bloody nose. No, it is not that. In Pahalgam, there were multiple security failures. The district authorities, perhaps, were blissfully unaware, and the reinforcements and the QRT (quick response team) were not there.

As far as the Delhi blast is concerned, yes we could have done much better. Al-Falah University, its recognition, its starting, and its initiation all have a huge question mark. Such a university should never have come about. The promoters

have served for three years in Tihar. And then all the accreditations and the approvals are basically fake.

Q. How do you assess India's current internal security environment?

A: I deem it to be A+++ . It could not have been better. Never has internal security been as robust as it is today. Naxalism is almost at its end, breathing its last. You have this unfortunate incident on 10th November (Delhi blast). It was the first-of-its-kind in 14 years. I would say the last Delhi blast was in September 2011. And this is the first blast after that. Therefore, I would say that we are working on it. We are working on Pahalgam.

Q. Has the nature of terrorism evolved recently, and how are security agencies dealing with it?

A: Shifting of gears is the standard operating procedure of all terrorist organisations. Jaish-e-Mohammad and Azhar Masood are known to be shifting gears. They have a 24X7 R&D (research and development) wing. It was a devious and malicious game to hire radicalised doctors. You can see how devious the minds of terrorists are, how the mind of a terrorist works.

Q. Are there still lapses between the Centre and states when it comes to Intelligence sharing?

A: The Intelligence Bureau, RAW, and other intelligence agencies have a robust system of exchange of intelligence. But there are certain states, primarily like Kerala and West Bengal, which perhaps would be very reticent and reluctant to share intelligence for obvious political reasons.

Q. Do you think India is adequately prepared for coordinated multi-city terror strikes?

A: Very much! locations of NSG camps and paramilitary forces all over are fully geared to take on any misadventure planned by the terrorist organisations.

Q. What reforms are most urgently needed in India's policing system?

A: Firstly there is Prakash Singh vs Union of India, the seven points given by the Honourable Supreme Court in the year 2006. Now, it has been almost 20 years since the judgment was passed. It should have been the law of the land. Let us faithfully implement what was given by the Supreme Court - the model police code. Also, there should be security of tenure of all field officers, starting from the station house officers to the DGP.

Also, extra budget. Futuristic technologies like machine learning, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Augmented Reality should be part of the curriculum now. The days of the 'lathi' and 'danda' (sticks) are over.

Q. How big a challenge is misinformation and propaganda posing to national security?

A: The fake news, disinformation, and absolute lies seem to have overtaken social media. A smaller percentage of the population is now reading the newspapers daily. So, they are being fed by social media. Therefore, I would say that cyber patrolling, social media patrolling, which has been started by Uttar Pradesh and many other states, is not only a requirement, but it is a compulsion today.

Q. What lessons has India learned from its past terror attacks?

A: Every terror attack has its own set of questions and its lessons drawn. Complacency has no place in policing today. You should anticipate and be prepared for a



worst-case scenario. The response time has to be minimal. Your systems and procedures should be in place to prevent panic, apprehend the culprits, and restore normalcy. A lot more needs to be done, and we have miles to go before we sleep.

Last but not least, the technology. You see, the type of technology the terrorists are using today, the police will have to be at least a generation ahead of them. Otherwise, the police will lose the game.

Q. After decades in policing, what one ‘weakness’ in the Indian security apparatus concerns you the most?

A: Corruption. If there is one thing that is even worse than corruption, it is complacency. You see the two incidents that you have in Pahalgam and Delhi, it is complacency. Nothing is going to happen to me. Nothing is going to happen here. And in the process, we allowed the grass to grow underneath our feet.

We allowed those undesired elements to have a base and a launching pad in Al-Falah University. The university got its approvals from three successive governments.

What were the compulsions? Was it corruption, complacency, or both? I mean, nothing shocks and surprises me any longer. I could tell you that policing is a full-time job. There is no possibility of making reels or going for fashion shows. If you are so passionate about your social life, then the police is not a job for you.

Q. Do you think there is an improvement in UP's law and order under Yogi Adityanath?

A: Adityanath said "mitti mein mila dunga" (will reduce to dust) for mafias, and he literally did that...Atiq, Ashraf, and all are reduced to dust.

Q. India has declared the Delhi blast a terror attack. Do you think we are close to another war with Pakistan?

A: If anybody has ventured into the unknown and dialled the wrong number, well, there will be consequences. And the nation would be very much prepared for Operation Sindoor 2. That is on the cards. But whether it be Pakistan, Bangladesh, or both, that remains to be seen. But I am sure there will be consequences.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 22 November 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

A Prime Minister has an actual salary of about £3,500. He has to pay a heavy proportion of the costs of housekeeping in Downing Street. He is fortunate if he has not to pay at least one of his private secretaries from his own purse. Even his week-end home has already become a tax. Mr. MacDonald says: — “Chequers, that gracious gift of peace and refreshment, though it may properly be added to the enjoyment of the office, must be regarded, in spite of Lord Lee's endowment and a body of the most generous and considerate of trustees, as a minus quantity in its cash emoluments.” So that even the arrangements made for a break in the hard round of the Prime Minister's life involve him in financial embarrassment. The salary ought certainly to be raised. Even a Prime Minister is worthy of his hire.

News Items

FRENCH FINANCE DEBATE

DWINDLING SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT

PARIS, NOV.

THE Government has narrowly weathered the first storm in the Chamber. After unanimously passing the second reading of the Finance Bill the Chamber agreed by 294 votes to 250 to proceed with the committee stage.

In the earlier proceedings the Government's situation became critical when the Socialists threatened to abstain from voting.

Following M. Painleve's refusal to promise not to resort to inflation beyond the additional 1,500 million francs the sitting was twice suspended to permit of negotiation. The Socialists eventually decided to favour the committee stage. —Reuter.

ITALIAN GOLD BONDS

OVER-SUBSCRIPTION OF NEW YORK ISSUE

LONDON, NOV.

THE New York issue of 100 million dollars of Italian gold bonds, bearing seven per cent interest at 94.5, and maturing on December 1st, 1951, has been over-subscribed. —Reuter's Special Service.

MADRAS EXODUS

THOUSANDS LEAVE FOR BURMA PADDY SEASON

MADRAS, NOV.

THERE has been a rush of passengers for Rangoon from Madras this week, and two steamers left last week carrying more than 3,000 persons. To-day the steamer Ekma, carrying mails and passengers for Rangoon, left with 1,700 passengers. More than 800 passengers had to be detained for want of accommodation. This huge exodus is stated to be on account of the paddy season in Burma, for which thousands of coolies usually migrate during this period to find work in the fields, returning in April or May.

UTTANGI RIOTS

GOVERNMENT REPORT ON POLICE FIRING

MADRAS, NOV.

IN connexion with the Uttangi riots, during which there was a clash between two sects of the Lingayats and the Police, the Government has, on the reports of the District Superintendent of Police and the Magistracy of Bellary, expressed belief that but for the action of the authorities the riot would have had disastrous consequences, and been attended by a greater loss of life than that which actually occurred. Appreciation is also expressed at the conduct of the officials and reserve police, and those who co-operated with the police in inducing the rioters to disperse.

United everywhere except at home

BIBEK RAJ KANDEL AND CHRISTINA MONROE

On his first day as New York's mayor-elect, Zohran Mamdani posted a photo on Instagram of himself eating momos, a Nepali dumpling beloved across the South Asian diaspora in the city. Within hours, Kathmandu's social media lit up: The first thing he did after winning one of the world's most visible political offices was eat something most savoured in the Himalayas.

India had every reason to celebrate. He was still the son of Indian immigrant parents, a story of diaspora success that resonated deeply, even among those who disagreed with his politics. Across the border, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis joined in too, seeing in Mamdani both a Muslim trailblazer and a South Asian figure who transcended national lines. In that brief moment, Mamdani, born in Uganda and now an American Mayor, somehow became everyone's man, a reminder that South Asia can feel united everywhere except at home.

Just days before Mamdani's victory, a young participant from Pakistan was meant to attend a South Asian youth workshop in Dhaka, but there was no direct flight. She had to detour through Dubai, spending a night in transit and nearly a thousand dollars to cover a distance shorter than Srinagar

to Chennai. Fly east of Lahore; it should be a three-hour hop, at least on the map. Geography has rarely felt so political. The irony was that the regional dialogue was on youth and new leadership in a region that can barely meet.

Across South Asia, even basic mobility has turned into a geopolitical test. Islamabad-Dhaka flights remain suspended. India-Bangladesh visas have been on hold since the tension following former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's exit. Bangladesh and Nepal sit only a sliver of land apart; a barely 21-kilometre Siliguri Corridor keeps them effectively sealed off by land. Pakistan and India, once tied by rail and road, have seen cross-border movement frozen for years.

Bhutan is open to India and Bangladesh but maintains a premium-priced entry regime not designed for wider South Asian mobility. And Sri Lanka and the Maldives, both deeply plugged into Gulf routes, are better connected to Dubai than to any of their neighbours. In a region of nearly 1.9 billion people, more than a quarter of humanity, even basic mobility has become a test of strained political relationships.

Yet this was once a region where ideas moved freely. The same routes that today bristle with checkpoints once carried monks, merchants and scholars. From Taxila to Nalanda, from Lumbini to Paharpur, knowledge

travelled freely, shaping Vedanta, Buddhism and later Mahayana traditions. South Asian civilisations met, debated and learned from each other for centuries. It's strange when you think about it: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were one country, born from the same story of liberation, even if their national paths later diverged. Today, that intimacy has thinned so far that even a cross-border call can feel like a security breach.

But nature reveals what politics tries to conceal. Each summer, the same wall of heat moves across the subcontinent, from Jacobabad to Delhi, reaches the plains to Janakpur and Khulna. A landslide here, a flood there, a cyclone on one coast and a delayed monsoon on another, and suddenly the headlines from Karachi, Delhi, Dhaka and Thimpu look almost copied and pasted: Hospitals overwhelmed, power grids failing, bridges washed away, and landslides swallowing entire villages. Nature keeps reminding South Asia it shares the same climate system, the same risks, even if its politics insists otherwise.

And the sharper contrast is East Asia: Even with deeper strategic divides, the region doesn't shut itself off this way. Japan and China barely trust each other; Seoul and Tokyo spend years arguing over history; China and Taiwan are stuck in a permanent political standoff. And



yet the region moves. Nearly 90 flights a day run between Hong Kong and Taiwan despite strained ties.

South Asia has hard disputes. India and Pakistan make that obvious. But the region isolates itself even where the politics don't demand it. Search “Manila to Singapore” and you get hundreds of flying options, from red-eyes to budget carriers. Two cities with different systems and currencies stay effortlessly connected. Meanwhile, South Asian cities a short hop apart struggle to keep even one reliable route alive.

But Nepal is in a position where it can offer a starting point for South Asia's re-imagination.

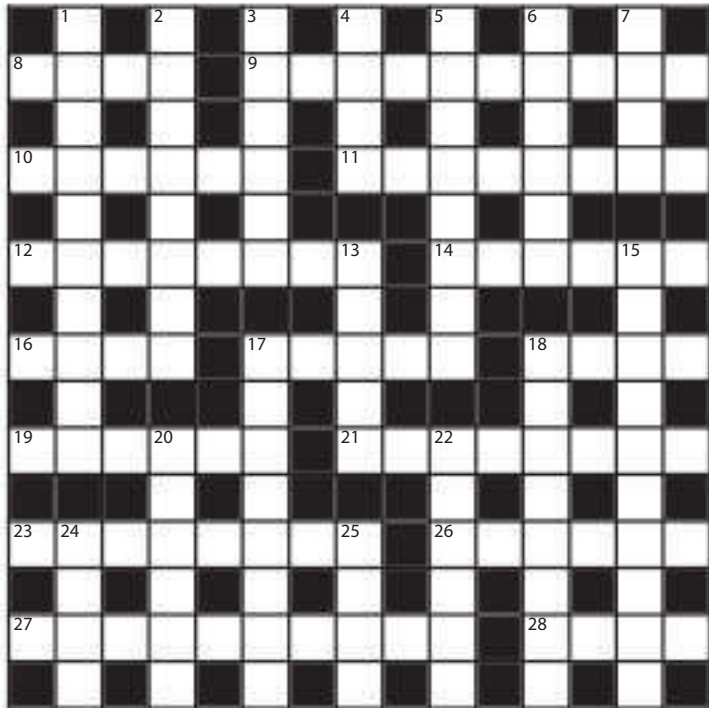
Nepal, unlike any other country in the region, maintains open borders with India, a visa-on-arrival for almost everyone, and carries a political culture that has never weaponised mobility. It is the one

South Asian capital where an Indian, a Bangladeshi, a Pakistani, a Sri Lankan and a Bhutanese can still sit at the same table without navigating embassies, security clearances, or months of paperwork, and share the very food that once moved from these mountains to the world. But openness alone won't take Nepal very far. A country can welcome everyone, but it still needs institutional confidence that the region can trust and the politics that don't wobble with every season.

If Nepal steadies itself, it can offer the region a place where things are actually discussed and done. Nepal's openness is a geo-sanctuary asset'. But it only works if Nepal recognises its leverage and finds its footing first. South Asia doesn't always have to find its unity in momo diplomacy in New York.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN.

Crossword | No. 293299



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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



Editor's
TAKE

G20 in Johannesburg: This time for Africa

The G20 Summit in Johannesburg marks a historic first on African soil, spotlighting Global South's rising influence and urgent global challenges

As the leaders of the world's influential nations gather in Johannesburg for the G20 Summit from November 21 to 23, the event is laden with symbolism and substance. This is the first time the G20 is being held in Africa – a testament to the steady rise of the Global South on the world stage. What began in New Delhi as an initiative is finally taking shape, making the Global South heard across the world. The Summit is important – challenges abound on the strategic front, economic uncertainty persists, and multilateralism sidelined – no other platform gives so much traction to the Global South. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's presence in Johannesburg from November 21 to 23, signals India's continued commitment to shaping this evolving global order. India's G20 Presidency in 2023 was indeed a defining moment when the Global South received a significant boost with the African Union being admitted as a permanent member.

Right now India is emerging as a powerful voice of Global South, it is taking up issues concerning welfare of the Global South, and thereby the majority of humanity that still lives on meagre resources. Whether it be the environment or conflict zones, most developing nations are on the receiving end. This G20 Summit presents an opportunity to ensure that development concerns, equity, and representation are voiced and heard by one and all.

The agenda set by South Africa reflects these priorities. The Summit focus is on trade flows disrupted by geopolitical conflicts, development financing gaps, and the mounting debt burden affecting several low – and middle-income nations. For India, as for the rest of the Global South, reforming global financial institutions, procuring concessional finance, and ensuring that digital infrastructure become available to all nations are paramount concerns.

Another major issue coming up for discussion at the Summit is planetary resilience, which is crucial for the survival of the of planet but developing nations once again are worst affected. With disasters intensifying and global warming accelerating, the G20 faces the urgent challenge of bridging the credibility gap between climate promises and actual delivery. India has always emphasised "climate justice" and differentiated responsibilities while pushing for affordable energy transitions, resilient food systems, and strengthened disaster response frameworks.

Additionally, access to rare-earths and critical minerals, technology to mitigate climate change and the governance of artificial intelligence will dominate discussions. India has consistently advocated for transparent, equitable access to critical minerals essential for the clean-energy shift. Another highlight of this Summit is the bilateral meetings on the sidelines, such as the IBSA (India-Brazil-South Africa) Leaders' Meeting, a forum gaining importance. The absence of US President Donald Trump, who dismissed the legitimacy of South Africa hosting the Summit, is hardly surprising. It gives the G20 a chance to redefine its role and emerge stronger.

The battle for Indianness in education

What began in the 1950s as a quiet preference for British affiliations soon evolved into a deep-rooted belief that true academic excellence lay in the West. This shaped not just careers, but mindsets, policies, and even politics



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

In the mid-1950s, Dr Radha Krishnan was emerging on the political firmament and was often sought after. Those were the days when any association with a British university, more specifically Cambridge, Oxford or London, was a special background for making a career in India.

The pattern changed in the decades to come, but the allure of foreign affiliation remained high in the Indian employment market and, indeed, in the Indian psyche.

London, Cambridge, Oxford and more did not exactly go away, but there emerged on the scene, alongside, institutions like Boston, Yale, Harvard and more. This showed in the employment market. A degree or placement from these institutions was a high recommendation for employment in India. The Planning Commission was a particular favourite for the influential with this background to return to India. Careers were made there, and prominence was assured.

The Government, both at the Central level and at the State level, kept the slogan of Indianness alive, but their ability to convert it into a dignified employment pattern was missing. A degree from, say, 'Ujjain University' and the like may have had a lot of worth, but it was not reflected in the employment market. Indianness was a slogan, not the prime attraction for careers. This was true at the graduation level, at the post-graduate level, and certainly at the PhD level. This fact of image and pricing was reflected in many political statements but never found its way into the employment market. This was unfortunate for the growth of the Indian education system.

It is true that in the sixties, many useful and worthwhile Central universities emerged, as did the IITs, IIMs and more. However, the malaise remained. Students graduating from IITs or with a certification from the IIMs also sought their careers abroad and were hardly attracted to the Indian market.

Hence, the situation emerged where talent was drawn to IITs and IIMs as well as distinguished Central universities, but graduating from there did not merit serious attention for staying back in India. This was popularly condemned as 'brain drain', but nothing operational was effectively done. There was a sense of status deprivation for Indian degree holders. Clearly, this did not bode well for nation-building. The flaws were obvious and many. Some of them were well recognised but seldom acted upon. Illustratively, if an Indian student went for a PhD topic abroad, his choice of topic was determined by the specialisation of his supervisor and the resources available in the institutions of his



STUDENTS GRADUATING FROM IITs OR OBTAINING CREDENTIALS FROM IIMs ALSO SOUGHT CAREERS ABROAD AND WERE SCARCELY ATTRACTED TO THE INDIAN MARKET

The writer is an internationally acclaimed management consultant

dailypioneer
 @VinayshilG
 vinayshil-gautam-3488128

choice. This did not help the growth of an Indian-oriented IIT or IIM orientation. This situation persisted through the seventies and the eighties. A few people tried to flag this problem, but even an Indian-oriented political leadership was unable to reverse the trend. In fact, the influential members of the system, in many ways, reinforced it by sending their wards abroad for education and employment. They could do this more freely because they were influential in the Indian system, and the non-Indian universities from prestigious learning centres of the West knew how to develop relationships with them. They saw it as an opportunity to create a relationship of obligation with an influential class of Indian decision-makers.

What is said above was no secret and so obvious that it would be like missing the writing on the wall. Yet, as stated, nothing was done. There were many theories projected to explain this, but while these theories may explain and enlighten, they did not alter the trend or its effect. Gradually, the resistance, if any, to this Western-oriented learning came from a political coterie which was essentially anti-West. This is in reference to the Indian Left parties, such as the Communist Party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and some socialism-oriented Indian parties, such as the Praja Socialist Party and the Samyukt Socialist Party, et al.

The Indian parties of Left orientation lacked the range and depth to set up universities in India with a particular bias or correction of an existing bias. The communist variations of populist parties were a little more endowed with range. They started sending some of the brightest students in their range of influence

to Moscow for PhD work and other studies. The language barrier there was strong, and going to the US was an easier option than going to Moscow (where learning Russian would be a prerequisite). All put together, the options did not really emerge, and the pull factor of English-oriented education, first in the UK and then in the US, continued to rule the roost. It still does. A few attempts were made to set up institutions with a particular bias, such as JNU, but the experiment produced mixed results and later revealed its own biases.

All told, the Indian system of education went by default, and the lethal blows delivered during early British rule and colonial dominance continued to shape Indian politics, Indian education and therefore Indian writing to a very large extent. It is interesting to note that successive education policies announced by the Central Government did little beyond rhetoric to effect meaningful change.

The Indian education system, rich as it was, did not receive any serious institutional support or place in the employment market. Indian degrees such as Sahityacharya or Teerth had little draw in the domestic education market, and the route to employment remained tied to degrees such as Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, Master of Science and the like. This lack of cusping with the Indian employment market had a negative impact on the growth of 'Indian' education.

The last few years have seen an attempt to reverse these trends, but the results have yet to come in. Persistence and perseverance with clarity of thought will perhaps show the way forward.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Shaping India's next generation of innovators



MEENAL MAJUMDER

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

In October this year, five students from modest government schools packed their bags and boarded a flight to Panama City. They were on their way to represent India at the FIRST Global Challenge – an international robotics competition featuring teams from 193 countries. Their journey began far from global attention, in a small and often overlooked Atal Tinkering Lab on their school campus.

These are not the students who typically find themselves on global STEM stages. For Gouresh, the team's lead programmer, the lab opened a doorway to a long-standing fascination with machine logic. For Ningaraj, raised by a single mother working in housekeeping, it offered pos-

sibilities that once seemed distant. A decade ago, such a story would have been difficult to imagine. Their achievement is about much more than competition results. It reflects what can happen when potential meets opportunity-and it raises an urgent question: how many such stories can India create?

Why Tinkering Matters

Tinkering labs offer something most Indian classrooms still lack: the freedom to explore, experiment, and fail safely. With robotics kits, microcontrollers, 3D printers, hand tools, and guided instruction, these spaces encourage inquiry-driven, hands-on learning. Students learn to solve real problems, collaborate, iterate, and apply theory to practice.

The five students who competed in Panama spent months after school-often late into the evening-teaching themselves coding, electronics, and mechanical design. Mentors from the Amazon Future Engineer Makerspace, run by The Innovation Story, supported them throughout. Within six months, the team built a functional, competition-ready robot designed to help other robots navigate obstacles – a fitting metaphor for what a supportive ecosystem can unlock. More importantly, the experience reshaped how they saw themselves: the lab did not merely teach robotics; it taught them to think like innovators. India has islands of excellence in STEM-Atal Tinkering Labs,

private competitions, and nonprofit maker initiatives-but these remain fragmented. Over 10,000 Tinkering Labs now reach around 10 million students, yet with more than 1.5 million schools, access is still uneven, especially in government and rural institutions. This gap represents a lost opportunity. As India moves towards a projected \$7 trillion economy by 2030, innovation capacity will determine how much growth can be unlocked – and who participates in it. Tinkering is often treated as an add-on, limited to competitions or one-off projects, but impact remains shallow when learning is episodic. To truly cultivate problem-solvers, tinkering must shift from a project to a core learning approach. This means integrating hands-on making into the timetable, training teachers for inquiry, linking labs to local challenges, ensuring ongoing mentorship, and building industry exposure. In short, tinkering must evolve from programme to pedagogy. India's future innovators will emerge when schools create space for curiosity and encourage students to become creators, not merely consumers. The talent exists; now intent must match it. Innovation depends not only on tools in students' hands but on the belief placed in their potential. India's innovators of tomorrow will emerge by design – if the nation chooses to design that future today.

The writer is the Founder of The Innovation Story

DELHI'S DUST CRACKDOWN NEEDS REGIONAL ACTION PLAN

Apropos "Govt imposes ₹2.36 crore fines for dust norm violations" (News report, Nov. 21). The decision by the Delhi Government to impose penalties, shut down non-compliant construction sites, and strengthen inspections marks a long-overdue shift from symbolic declarations to genuine enforcement. For years, Delhi residents have endured suffocating air every winter, watching pollution levels rise while endless committees and task forces produced little more than paperwork.

The adoption of real-time monitoring, dust-control audits, and public display boards tracking compliance is a meaningful step because it places responsibility squarely on those who profit while harming public health. Dust from construction remains a major contributor, and

strict oversight should deter habitual violators who treat rules as optional.

However, it is important to recognise the limits of acting alone. Much of the toxic haze still comes from crop-residue burning and unchecked industrial emissions in neighbouring states, a stubborn and uncomfortable reality. How the Government can regulate polluters beyond its jurisdiction remains a question often raised but seldom answered.

A cooperative clean-air framework involving Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and the Centre – with defined accountability, measurable targets, transparent reporting, and shared funding-offers the only credible path towards breathable air.

SAKUNTHALA | TAMIL NADU

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Combatting risks in food production

Despite the implementation of the Food Safety and Standards Act (2006) and its regulations (2011), many small and medium-scale industries continue to operate without registration, which remains a serious concern, as various reports indicate. Surveys show that around 35 per cent of food units in the state function without FSSAI registration, while nearly 40 per cent fail to comply with basic hygiene standards. Consequently, foodborne diseases have increased by 22 per cent over the past five years, according to health department estimates.

Unregistered units often use substandard oils, old grains, harmful chemicals, and unsafe plastic packaging, exposing the public to serious health risks. Consumption of such unsafe food can lead to kidney and liver damage, food poisoning, digestive disorders, developmental delays in children, and, in the long term, a heightened risk of cancer, as reports suggest.

Although FSSAI regulations are essential for safeguarding public health, many small businesses avoid compliance, citing higher costs. The government must therefore enforce stricter regulations, provide the required training to small units, and ensure that food safety is treated as a fundamental human responsibility, not just a legal obligation.

VIJAYKUMAR | KARNATAKA

Honouring Jhansi's iconic warrior queen

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi remains one of India's most enduring symbols of resistance, a sovereign who defied both colonial conquest and patriarchal erasure. Born Manikarnika Tambe, she evolved into a warrior-queen who governed, strategised, and ultimately led her people into battle when the British sought to annex her kingdom under the Doctrine of Lapse. Her refusal to surrender Jhansi was a civilisational declaration that sovereignty, once awakened, could never be subdued.

Her legacy extends far beyond the battlefield. Lakshmibai shattered the gender norms of her time: she read, wrote, trained in arms, and ruled with authority. She was no ceremonial figurehead but a decisive leader who embodied the Shakti principle in its fullest form.

The iconic image of her riding into battle with her infant son strapped to her back is more than national legend; it is a timeless invocation of the warrior-mother archetype, uniting courage, care, and command.

As India commemorates her 191st birth anniversary, Lakshmibai's story continues to inspire. She endures not just as a martyr of 1857, but as a sovereign who refused to fade from history. In remembering her, we do not mourn a fallen queen; we honour an eternal flame.

SABITA KUMARI | HAZARIBAGH

A defining moment for Tejashwi

Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Tejashwi Yadav has long been regarded as a chip off the old block and a naturally gutsy figure in Bihar's political landscape. With his father stepping away from active politics, the 36-year-old leader entered the Bihar Assembly elections with a clearly defined responsibility.

A strong party base remained his greatest asset, and the loyalty of steadfast RJD workers offered him significant support. Though the Mahagathbandhan performed poorly in the elections, the outcome is by no means an accurate measure of Tejashwi Yadav's popularity. On the contrary, had he managed social engineering and handled the Congress more effectively, the results might well have been different.

His major shortcoming lies in the absence of long-term strategic planning, and he is not generally seen as a round-the-clock political operator. Nevertheless, the hard work and commitment he displayed did not go unnoticed.

He has youth on his side, and he has his people. The year 2025 was seen as his acid test. Though he may have fallen short, his extended role as Leader of the Opposition will be scrutinised closely. Power is transient, but public goodwill is invaluable.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

An advaitic critique of Marxism and its inner limits

Marx said that philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it. Advaita responds that when the interpreter awakens, the world does not take long to change. Marxism is not wrong in seeking justice; it is merely incomplete in believing that justice can arise without awakening

FIRST
Column



ACHARYA
PRASHANT

I return from an intense, heartwarming tour of Kolkata, a city whose warmth embraced me again.

I spent a fortnight walking its lanes, speaking in its historic halls, signing books in its beloved bookstores, speaking with morning walkers at Rabindra Sarobar about Tagore and Camus, and listening to adda that still carries the old fire. Kolkata is alive with literature, music, argument, and a rare human gentleness. Yet one also notices the quiet scars that history leaves behind: whispers of a bygone ideological season whose fragrance, and at times its constraints, still linger in the air.

Bengal's middle class today leans heavily towards government-linked jobs. The energetic private-sector youth, ubiquitous in cities shaped by enterprise, are relatively fewer here, one outcome of decades of aspiration shaped by an ideology that distrusted competition and risk. One cannot miss the sight of abandoned factories and hand-pulled rickshaws.

Bengal's reality is shaped by the trauma of Partition, the freight-equalisation policy, long central neglect, and decades of ideology that shaped not just policy but imagination. Ideology as the primary influence invites an Advaitic understanding.

Where Marxism Begins: With the Collective, Not the Individual

Marxism begins by declaring that liberation is a social project. Individual freedom, it argues, is shaped entirely by class relations; the worker under capitalism experiences a false freedom constrained by forces beyond his control.

Advaita sees a fundamental flaw in this approach. Yes, material conditions shape consciousness. But liberation does not belong to groups, because suffering does not belong to groups. Suffering is always personal. Awareness is personal and so is insight. No crowd has ever woken up; only individuals do.

Marxism asks you to begin with class consciousness; Advaita with consciousness itself. Marxism names your outer enemy; Advaita the one within. Marxism says bondage arises from property relations;



MARXISM
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ECONOMIC
RELATIONS

The writer is a teacher,
founder of the
PrashantAdvait
Foundation, and an author
on wisdom literature

acharya_prashant_ap
@Advait_Prashant
prashantadvait

Advaita says it springs from ignorance, independent of what you own.

A society that shifts the onus of liberation entirely from within to outside is bound to keep seeking villains, revolutions, and structural replacements. Every such search ends in disappointment because the seeker's own inner centre remains unexamined.

Class Consciousness: The Collective Ego

Marxism instructs individuals to see themselves primarily as representatives of a class. You become a worker, a bourgeois, a petty bourgeois: not an individual with a being of your own, but a product of economic relations.

Advaita sees this as the enlargement of the ego.

The personal ego says, "I am this body." The collective ego says, "I am this group." Both are illusions that bind and blind. Class identity is not awakening; it is only a change of costume.

Some of the finest Marxist thinkers, Gramsci and Lukács, hinted that the collective we might, under rare conditions, become a mirror in which the individual glimpses the whole. Advaita insists that even this glimpse remains second-hand until the individual uses the mirror to see the seer.

Many young people can fluently speak of class struggle but rarely examine their

own inner struggle. They diagnose exploitation but not their own fear or insecurity. When an ideology teaches you to study society but not yourself, to analyse the world yet avoid asking "Who am I?", vision becomes distorted.

Economic Reductionism: The Marxian Error on Utility

Marx defined use-value as the ability of an object to satisfy needs. But he never deeply examined need itself.

To see the real worth of anything, you must know its full cost: the damage it causes, the labour it exploits, and the inner bondages that make you crave it.

A worker can be as unconscious in consumption as a capitalist is in ownership. Ignorance, not class, determines exploitation. Proletariat and bourgeois both suffer

from lack of seeing. That seeing must extend beyond economics. Culture, religion, and morality are not mere shadows of production; they cast human bondages as powerfully as the factory floor.

Marx saw culture, religion, law, and morality as products of economic relations, secondary to whoever owns the means of production. But the social structure is far more than production systems. People die for nations, preserve traditions, and sacrifice for faith or family, none of which follows the logic of class interest. Bondages are not just material; they arise

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The Chaitanyanand case and the perils of blind faith exposed nationwide now



ATUL
SEHGAL

About two months ago, another case involving a godman accused of sexual misdemeanour and financial crime came to light, adding to the growing list of such individuals who have gained infamy while holding important positions in socio-religious spheres. A self-styled godman, Chaitanyanand Saraswati, aged 62, was arrested in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, on September 28, 2025 in connection with serious allegations of sexual harassment and financial fraud. The arrest was made by the Delhi Police, and he was remanded to five days of police custody.

Chaitanyanand faced accusations of sexually harassing at least 17 female students from the Sri Sharada Institute of Indian Management in Vasant Kunj, New Delhi, where he formerly served as director. Students alleged that he used abusive language, sent profane messages, and engaged in inappropriate physical contact. The charges also included criminal conspiracy, cheating, and forgery. He is suspected of committing financial fraud worth over ₹40 crore, and authorities have frozen assets worth ₹8 crore.

According to the police, Chaitanyanand lured students-many from the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) — with promises of foreign trips. He reportedly pressured some victims to comply with his demands by threatening to ruin their academic careers. He allegedly confiscated their phones and installed hidden cameras in the women's hostel to monitor their movements. Chaitanyanand had been evading the police for nearly two months after complaints were filed in early August 2025. He fled Delhi and was later tracked to Agra, where he was arrested at a hotel. Upon his arrest, police recovered fake visiting cards in which he posed as a diplomat for the United Nations and BRICS. He also allegedly used forged degrees and multiple names for passports and bank accounts.

The religious body Sri Sharada Peetham, with which he was formerly associated, has severed all ties with him, citing his illegal, inappropriate, and harmful actions. There is a regular emergence of fake and criminally inclined godmen in our country. Many of them have been running hermitages or ashrams with a huge following of devotees who once wor-



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shipped them as divine beings before they were criminally charged and incarcerated. Why do people throng the abodes of fake godmen? And why do gullible students fall prey to morally debased teachers inclined towards sexual exploitation?

The issue is deep and complex. People in this country are given to hero worship. Hero worship blinds devotees into eulogising and submitting before human figures perceived as demigods or total benefactors. They surrender their bodies and souls in expectation of bounties or bliss.

This mindset is a product of illogical, unscientific, and superstitious beliefs that have wreaked havoc on society for a long time. It is time we woke up to this bitter truth and reset our ideological bearings.

Even more shocking is that certain persons donning saffron clothes and active in academic work within religious institutions exhibit morally debased behaviour. Is there something wrong in the functioning of our academic institutions? Or are there serious ideological gaps in our community that breed such charlatans?

We need to look into this matter seriously to find real answers. But one thing is unequivocally clear-our society needs urgent education and grooming to stem the rot of superstition and blind devotion that plagues it. Hero worship is deeply ingrained in our society, and fraudsters and fake godmen exploit it ruthlessly, playing with the emotions of their gullible followers.

In this context, male teachers indulging in predatory sexual behaviour towards female students are not uncommon. Many more cases

occur than are ever reported or exposed. Students are often threatened or blackmailed into surrender and silence. Society instantly stigmatises victims, while perpetrators deny wrongdoing and exploit a weak legal system-often relying on networks of corrupt bureaucrats and politicians who shield the guilty.

Our social values are not safe unless we make our law enforcement system effective. Principles of morality will remain mere principles unless there is a sound and foolproof mechanism to nail criminals and award them severe punishment. Crime thrives where law enforcement is weak. Strengthening it is the foremost need of the hour.

Our ancient political strategist Chanakya clearly stated in the Arthashastra and Chanakya Neeti that crime thrives in a state devoid of strong laws with punitive teeth. The present government has taken commendable steps to rescind outdated laws and enact new ones. But the Indian Police Act, still in force, is a colonial-era legacy and needs to be recast sooner rather than later. The Indian Penal Code has been revised but requires more stringent provisions to deter and punish such criminals. Perhaps the most important requirement is building a legal system in which trials and related proceedings are time-bound and courts deliver judgments within fixed periods. Justice delayed, derailed, or denied amounts to a travesty of democracy and good governance.

The author is a management
consultant based in New Delhi

@dailypioneer
@atul49561
dailypioneer

India's young and the politics of presence now emerging



MALIKA
PANDEY

At a conference recently, a question from the audience stayed in the air long after the discussion ended: Will India's young also take to the streets like the protesters in Tanzania, Peru or Nepal?

Across continents this year, young people have risen against political systems that felt unresponsive. In Peru, students challenged governments weakened by distrust. In Nepal, first-time voters turned frustration into new political groups. In Tanzania, crowds of young citizens gathered in public spaces to demand dignity. These movements were not driven by one ideology. They were driven by a feeling that institutions had stopped hearing them.

India's youth have watched these moments carefully, but without the impulse to replicate them. For all its flaws, Indian democracy still provides avenues for peaceful change. The question in India is not whether youthful anger will erupt, but whether youthful intelligence will choose to engage. The greater danger is not forced silence. It is a quieter habit of stepping back and letting others decide the future.

India has more young people than any other country. Over 40 per cent of the population is below twenty-five, and nearly 460 million are between fifteen and twenty-nine. Yet the spaces where decisions are made remain mostly shaped by older generations. The word youth is used so loosely that it now includes people well into their forties, far removed from the urgency and imagination of early adulthood. At events that claim to champion youth voices, the speakers themselves are often closer to mid-life than to youth. India celebrates the idea of being young, but hesitates to trust the young with actual responsibility.

Those who do enter public life encounter a gentle but persistent scepticism. Their ideas are welcomed but rarely acted upon. They are asked to wait, as if responsibility must always follow age rather than ability. Yet democracies are renewed not by guarding experience but by cultivating judgement. Trust is not something that automatically comes with age. It is something societies must extend if they want continuity and renewal.

There is also a popular belief that this generation has inherited comfort. The reality is more complex. It has inherited polluted air, climate anxiety and an overwhelming flow of informa-

communism will oppress. If desire remains, every system will be misused.

No system can redeem an unconscious mind, and outer change without inner seeing merely rotates power. A real revolution begins when a person examines the structure of her own desire, not merely society's structure: when she asks not "Who owns the factory?" but "Who owns my being?"

Kolkata as a Mirror, and a Vision

Whoever has sat in a College Street coffee house overhearing loud arguments about Sartre and Satyajit Ray, heard temple bells mingle with the sounds at dawn, been hugged by strangers after a talk, knows that Kolkata loves the sublime. On my last day, as participants of my Gita Samagam program burst into a spontaneous uproar of Ekala Chalo Re and the auditorium reverberated with hundreds of voices demanding one liberation, I found myself dissolving in the moment.

Bengal's inner tapestry remains colourfully vibrant. What did fade, for a while, was touch with reality, for charming visions often make one lose sight of the inner.

Time may show that the ideological season left Bengal richer. A renewed realism is returning: slowly, unevenly, joyfully. Young Bengalis are launching sustainable startups, filming vegan commentaries on phones, writing code in Salt Lake, rediscovering the fearless creativity that once produced Tagore, Ramanujan, and Satyajit.

If Bengal's youth reclaim their individuality, it will not be by rejecting their collective memory but by adding a new chapter born of direct seeing, not ideology. The same soil that nourished Vivekananda and Ramakrishna can nourish a generation compassionate and enterprising, rooted and free, collective when it serves society, individual when it serves Truth.

Marx said philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it. Advaita responds: when the interpreter wakes up, the world doesn't take time to change.

Marxism is not wrong for seeking justice. It is incomplete in believing justice can come without awakening. When awakening does come, whether in a Dakshineswar temple, a Russian factory, or a Wall Street floor, one sees that every great outer revolution begins with the courage to challenge one's inner structures.

tion. What appears as privilege often hides burdens that earlier generations did not have to confront.

Yet today's young bring a distinct ethic to work and life. They do not equate success with exhaustion. They value focus, clarity and careful thought. But these strengths must move beyond private life and enter public life. Reflection without participation can become distance.

India's institutions do not need revolution. They need the quiet resurgence that becomes possible only when younger minds are allowed to shape them. Some beginnings already exist. Platforms such as MyGov, youth consultations and public fellowships have opened small doors. These now need to develop into deeper forms of inclusion.

Every ministry could establish a Young Fellows' Council to advise on implementation. District administrations could form advisory groups that bring students, researchers and entrepreneurs into local planning. Parliament could host an Annual Youth Session where citizens under thirty present proposals to committees. These ideas are not dramatic shifts. They are practical steps to ensure younger voices are part of governance.

Universities also have a role. Education cannot be only about exams and employment. It must prepare young people to participate in public life. A period of work in a panchayat, a municipal ward office or a government mission should be part of learning. Corporations can support Public Innovation Labs where young innovators work with officials on sustainability, technology and inclusion. None of this requires new bureaucracy. It requires trust in the abilities of the young.

Earlier generations built institutions in an age of scarcity. Today's young must help make them responsive in an age of complexity. If they can combine technical skill with civic empathy, India's progress will not depend on sudden upheavals. It will grow through steady, thoughtful reform.

The protests in other nations are warnings rather than templates. They show that when young citizens feel unheard, they find new ways to express dissent. India must ensure that its young find purpose within institutions, not frustration outside them. The politics of absence has lasted long enough. What the country now needs is a politics of presence: patient, grounded and committed. The future will not arrive on its own. It will be shaped by those who choose to step forward.

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The writer is a public policy
professional with years of
experience working across
key ministries of the
Government of India

mailikapandey28
@dailypioneer
malika-pandey-
035783182



OPINION

The
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{ OUR TAKE }

Sound mind in
a sound body

Educational institutions, backed by family and the State, must address students' mental health issues

A 16-year-old's suicide note blaming harassment by teachers at his school in the national capital — and other such recent incidents, including the death of a nine-year-old at a Jaipur school — hold up a mirror to the inadequate attention paid to the mental health needs of students. This is a critical failure, especially when pre-adolescents and adolescents choose the path of suicide and self-harm. While this requires action at all levels, a significant part of the problem is the lack of capacity and training among school staff, including teachers, to identify concerns and take mitigatory measures. This deficiency is exacerbated by insensitive/callous handling or even active contribution, as alleged in the Delhi incident.

Student suicide numbers paint an alarming picture — as per the latest data (for 2023) from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), such deaths accounted for 8.1% of all the suicides in the country. Decadal trends (2013-2023) show student suicides rose faster than overall suicides in the country, underscoring the need for urgent intervention. There is a raft of scientific literature on the need for careful handling of young adults, adolescents and, increasingly, pre-adolescents. The latter two are periods in human biological development when several hormonal shifts begin and activity in specific areas of the brain that regulate risk-reward perception and emotion-processing surges, causing a spike in risk-taking behaviour and heightened emotional sensitivity. Throw in genetic and social influences — with social media significantly altering self-perception and behaviour among the young — and the vulnerability of these age groups significantly rises. Competition and academic pressures exacerbate this already fraught situation.

While all this is known, action to prevent suicide and self-harm among students remains inadequate. To be sure, schools and colleges are increasingly appointing counsellors, and there are several State interventions oriented towards mental health support for adolescents and young adults, including the Manodarpan counselling services and the Tele-MANAS toll-free helpline. But protecting mental health among the young needs more than just counselling services. It needs the staff in the classrooms, play areas and the corridors to be sensitive, responsive and, most importantly, watchful. Schools and colleges must intensify mapping behaviour, risk monitoring, and sensitivity training among teachers and other staff. The last is particularly important because it is the fulcrum on which all other school-level interventions to protect students are leveraged. To illustrate, in many suicide cases, parents and peers report complaints about bullying at school being met with indifference or even dismissive responses from teachers (as it was in the Jaipur case).

There is also an urgent need to review the use of social media by people in this vulnerable (and impressionable) age group. Australia's pathbreaking ban on social media accounts for those under the age of 16 goes into effect in December. It is aimed to protect children from online risks, and India would do well to take a close look at the rule.

Finally, while schools need to become kinder and more considerate spaces, social isolation, especially familial isolation where there seems to be a rising lack of connection between parents and young children, needs correcting as well. Parents also need to be better listeners. An "all-hands" approach, led by educational institutions, but backed by parents and the State is the only way to deal with this looming crisis.

{ THIRD EYE }

Barkha Dutt



Delhi to Nowgam,
a twisted trail of
terror networks

The complex reality about Kashmir is that radical Islamist ideology and white collar terror networks coexist with brave policemen and investigators who expose them

This past week, the twin realities of the Kashmir Valley were on disturbing display. On the one hand, the country confronted the chilling details of the gang of radicalised doctors turned terrorists who fuelled the car bomb blast in the Capital. The National Investigative Agency (NIA) confirmed that the blast in Red Fort was the handiwork of a suicide bomber, Umar un-Nabi.

Since then videos recovered from the bomber's phone uncover the twisted mind of a terrorist, including one in which he calmly justifies suicide bombings as a 'misunderstood concept'. In another video — there are reportedly 12 such videos that investigators have recovered — he talks of "defeating India" and claims that inspiration can be drawn from the Afghan Mujahideen, who were able to overthrow world superpowers.

At least twelve people, just hapless bystanders, many of them abjectly poor, going about their day's work, have been killed in the Delhi blast. Despite the questionable decision to go public with the busting of a terror module in Haryana's Faridabad, where 2,900 kilograms of explosives were recovered, the police actually averted a major catastrophe. We know that multiple cities were being targeted: Experts like Lieutenant General KJS Dhillon have pointed out that the ammonium nitrate recovered was enough for 20 bombs, not just the one that caused death and devastation in Delhi.

While you process and internalise that statistic, a small, residential police station in Nowgam in Kashmir tragically demonstrated what

the impact of such bombs could have been for the general public. Explosives recovered from Faridabad had been ferried back by road from Haryana to Kashmir, evidently as mandated by standard operating protocols. While forensic experts, administrators, and policemen were examining the explosives, including 350 kgs of ammonium nitrate, something went horribly wrong. The police station was blown to bits and reduced to rubble. At least nine people were killed, 32 others injured as the explosives went off in a terrible accident. While questions have been raised about the wisdom of moving bomb-making explosives by road, it doesn't take away from the fact that every life lost in Nowgam was in the line of duty for the country. At one of the many funerals in the aftermath of Nowgam, a grieving mourner broke down and said, "yeh Hindustan ke liye mara (he died for Hindustan)." The image of policeman Arshid Ahmad, who died in the blast, playing with his toddler daughter went viral after his death.

The police force of Jammu and Kashmir, hardened over the decades by insurgency and terrorism, has always been one of the bravest in India. They have had extraordinary experience in counter-terrorism, often joining the Army in hunting down terrorists. By 2020, 1,700 policemen had been killed in anti-militancy operations over three decades. Those numbers would be even higher today. It's worth underlining that an alert SHO in Nowgam first spotted the appearance of Jaish-e-Mohammed posters. His

FOR TOO LONG, SOME ON THE IDEOLOGICAL LEFT HAVE POSITIONED THE SITUATION IN KASHMIR AS AN ENTIRELY POLITICAL PROBLEM THAT CAN ONLY BE SOLVED BY POLITICAL MEANS.

Why Delhi can refuse to
extradite Sheikh Hasina

The death penalty handed down by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunals (ICT) to the ousted Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina, who is in India, for perpetrating crimes against humanity, has kicked up a storm. Ironically, Hasina revived the ICT in 2010, allowing in absentia trials, which the Mohammad Yunus regime weaponised against her. While Hasina's sympathisers have denounced the verdict, calling the entire process reminiscent of a kangaroo court, the ruling has left India in a diplomatic predicament. It has revived the debate on Hasina's extradition from India to Bangladesh.

The propensity to bring politics into discussions about Sheikh Hasina is inescapable. However, the problem arises when foreign policy commentators selectively employ the law to validate their political positions, leading to partisan analysis. Thus, it is imperative to dispassionately segregate the legal wheat from the political chaff and address conspicuous misconceptions. First, some argue that under the 2013 India-Bangladesh extradition treaty, any extradition request must be accompanied by evidence of the crime committed. This is not correct. While the original text of the treaty, in Article 10(3), included this requirement, along with other provisions such as the sharing of arrest warrants, the 2016 amendment removed it. Article 10(3) of the India-Bangladesh Extradition Treaty now requires only an arrest warrant and evidence that the person requested for

extradition is indeed the person for whom the arrest warrant has been issued. This amendment, enacted when Sheikh Hasina was the Bangladeshi PM, aimed to expedite the processing of extradition requests. Ironically, Hasina has been at the receiving end of the same amendment when Bangladesh formally requested India to extradite her in December 2024, based on arrest warrants issued against her.

Today, this provision does not apply to Hasina's case as she has already been convicted. Bangladesh will need to submit a new extradition request to India. The relevant provision for this is Article 10(4) of the treaty, which applies to a person who is already convicted or sentenced. This article mandates two conditions for a convicted person to be extradited: First, a certificate of conviction or sentence must be provided; and second, the person must not be able to challenge the conviction or sentence. Since Sheikh Hasina can challenge the ICT's verdict, a request for her extradition may not be made under Article 10(4) until she has exhausted all her legal remedies under Bangladeshi law.

Another key misconception concerns the political exception to extradition requests. Article 6 (1) of the India-Bangladesh Extradition Treaty states that an extradition request may be refused if an offence is of a political character. This has led many to argue that India can



Two decades ago, you could still have a convivial disagreement and a political debate in Kashmir. Over the years, not just did positions harden, but culture also changed.

PTI

granular, on-ground investigation led to the uncovering of the Faridabad terror module and helped save countless lives.

This is the complex truth of Kashmir today: Radical Islamist ideology and white collar terror networks are uncovered by brave Kashmiri policemen and investigators. India's response must factor in both realities going forward.

For too long, some on the ideological Left have positioned the situation in Kashmir as an entirely political problem that can only be solved by political means. They have either ignored or looked away from the inconvenient truth of religious extremism and the impact it has had on the Valley.

As a reporter who cut my teeth on the ground in Jammu and Kashmir, I am a witness to this generational shift. Two decades ago, you could still have a convivial disagreement and a political debate in Kashmir. Over the years, not only did positions harden, but culture also changed, and religious orthodoxy became more pervasive. As social media shrunk borders, many young Kashmiris identified themselves as part of a global *ummah*. Political correctness must not stop us from confronting this reality of Islamist extremism. The doctors' terror module is, in fact, a sequel to 2016, when Burhan Wani and other upper-class, well-educated young Kashmiris picked up the gun. The Al-Fa-

lah University terror link is another illustrative example that education is not necessarily an antidote to extremism.

But if some on the Left want to deny the reality of religious radicalism, others on the Right are guilty of looking at Kashmir through a disturbingly selective lens. The tendency, especially in vitriolic social media commentary, to vilify all Kashmiris is not just unfair and inappropriate, but it is also playing into the hands of those very radical extremists who want to pit Indian against Indian. A 2014 speech by national security advisor Ajit Doval, viral again in the aftermath of the Delhi blast, points out that 90% casualties of Islamic terrorism are Muslim. In the Red Fort blast too, the bomb did not distinguish between Ashok Kumar, the bus conductor, and Mohsin, the e-rickshawallah, both of whom were killed. Religious or ethnic bigotry as a response to religious radicalism actually lets the terrorists have the last laugh.

In India's responses to terrorism, we will need to learn to show the State's toughness where needed and the State's empathy when required. Kashmir threw up two truths this week: We will need to grade our responses accordingly.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

refuse Bangladesh's extradition request because Hasina is charged with political offences. This, again, is incorrect. Article 6(2) of the treaty categorically states that certain criminal offences, such as murder, are not political offences. Since Hasina has been accused and convicted of crimes against humanity, her case does not fall under the political exception.

So, is there any other provision in the Extradition Treaty that India can rely on if it wishes to refuse Bangladesh's request for extradition? The answer is yes. Article 8(I)(a)(iii) of the treaty states that a person may not be extradited if "he satisfies the requested State that it would, having regard to all the circumstances, be unjust or oppressive to extradite him" because "the accusation against him" has not been made "in good faith in the interests of justice". This provision may apply to Hasina's case. Given the circumstances in which the trial against Hasina proceeded and the manner in which ICT convicted her, without following necessary procedural safeguards, it demonstrates deep-rooted vendetta and political animosity. Thus, her conviction is not in good faith and does not serve the interests of justice.

Another argument being advanced by some is that the interim government of Mohammad Yunus is unelected and thus illegitimate. Accordingly, an illegitimate government has no mandate to oversee a trial of this nature. While one may question the procedural and substantive fairness of the ICT's trial against Hasina, the unelected nature of the interim government, by itself, does not render the trial or the sentence invalid under international law. Yunus's regime is the *de facto* government of Bangladesh, with which most countries, including India, maintain diplomatic relations. While

it lacks democratic legitimacy, Yunus's regime effectively controls Bangladesh. Thus, it is a legal government under international law.

Finally, what about the chatter on the International Criminal Court (ICC)? Hasina has repeatedly challenged the Yunus regime to refer the case to the ICC at The Hague. But this isn't as straightforward as some may think. Conceptually, the ICC does not replace or displace the jurisdiction of domestic courts. It functions on the principle of complementarity, firmly enunciated in the Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the ICC. The initial responsibility and the right to prosecute international crimes is of national courts. The ICC has secondary jurisdiction.

In Hasina's case, since Bangladesh's ICT was already seized of the matter, the ICC could not have heard it. Only if the domestic court is unable or unwilling to hold the perpetrators of international crimes accountable can the doors to the Hague be opened. One ground for establishing unwillingness of the domestic court is if the proceedings are not conducted independently or impartially. In Hasina's case, it can be argued that the ICT's proceedings were neither impartial nor independent; therefore, the matter is admissible to the ICC, subject to other conditions being satisfied.

Authoritarian rulers should be held accountable for their abuses. But, under no circumstances should the principles of due process and human rights be compromised in doing so. In navigating the Hasina conundrum, India should be guided by its national interests, the rule of law, and its moral compass.

Prabhash Ranjan is professor and vice dean (research), Jindal Global Law School, O P Jindal Global University. The views expressed are personal

Aligning national ideals
to build a common future

We are living through the greatest burst of innovation in human history. Artificial intelligence (AI) is rewriting language. Quantum computing promises to decode nature itself. Private rockets are racing toward Mars. Everywhere, humanity is reaching higher, faster, farther. But amid all this velocity, something essential risks being left behind — not our intelligence, but our imagination. Not our capability, but our conscience.

We talk about moonshots for medicine, energy, and climate. What we need now are moonshots for meaning — an audacious renewal of the human spirit to match our technological ascent. When President Kennedy called for America to reach the moon, he wasn't just issuing a scientific challenge.

He was offering a moral one — to dream beyond fear, to cooperate at scale, to choose greatness. The same call now echoes for this generation — but our frontier is no longer space. It's the human spirit itself.

India understands this instinct better than most. For millennia, this land has believed that knowledge without wisdom is incomplete — that the outer and inner journeys must evolve together. From the *Upanishads* to Digital India, the Indian imagination has always been about expanding human possibility, marrying technology with transcendence.

Today, India is launching its own moonshots — literally and figuratively. Chandrayaan-3 placed the tricolor on the lunar south

pole. Digital Public Infrastructure is revolutionising inclusion. And yet, India's greatest innovation may not be technological at all. It may be the belief — ancient and alive — that progress must serve the soul.

In Israel, I see a parallel spirit. A people who reversed an ancient language and turned deserts into data farms. A nation that sees innovation not just as profit, but as purpose. From drip irrigation to AI security systems, Israeli creativity often begins with a moral question: How can this serve life? That is the bridge between our nations — and the invitation to the world. To build not only the smartest future, but the most human one.

Because the next revolution will not only be digital. It will be civilisational — a fusion of faith, science, and imagination to expand what it means to be human. We must design technology that strengthens, not weakens, our shared humanity. Machines that amplify curiosity, not cynicism. Systems that encourage wonder, not division. Tools that help us see one another more clearly — not as data points,

but as souls.

India and Israel can lead this charge together: Two ancient civilisations reborn as innovation nations, reminding the world that progress without purpose is power without direction. Let us treat ethics as infrastructure. Let us fund moral imagination the way we fund quantum labs. Let us build new alliances between scientists, sages, and storytellers — between Bengaluru and Be'er Sheva, between Jerusalem and New Delhi — to ensure our tools reflect our deepest values.

Humanity's next leap won't be from Earth to Mars, but from capability to consciousness — from intelligence to wisdom. If we can align our technology with our ideals, we will not only extend life; we will elevate it. That is the moonshot that matters most: To build a future as brilliant as our minds, and as luminous as our souls.

Avi Jorisch is CEO, Israel Economic Forum, senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, and author of NEXT: A Brief History of the Future. The views expressed are personal



Avi Jorisch

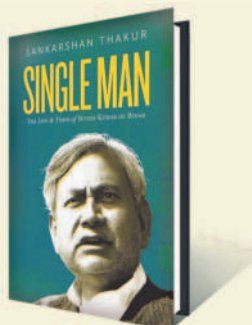
{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

MAKING OF NITISH KUMAR'S POLITICAL LIFE

Nitish Kumar was sworn in as chief minister of Bihar for the tenth time on Thursday, following the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)'s sweeping victory in the recent assembly elections. In his book, *Single Man: The Life and Times of Nitish Kumar*, Bihar expert and editor, the late Sankarshan Thakur, carefully but thoroughly examines the political life of a man who very few had pegged for such success.

Through *Single Man*, readers are familiarised with the context in which Kumar, then an engineering student, was baptised in politics. Many anecdotes — some recounted to Thakur by those privy to Kumar's earliest years in politics, some gleaned from the author's interviews with Kumar — tease out aspects of his political career (he had considered quitting politics after early electoral rejections) as well as the story of Bihar. *Single Man* is an important read as Bihar again yokes its future to a singular leader.



Single Man: The Life and Times of Nitish Kumar
Sankarshan Thakur
2014



Blow to States

The Supreme Court should have upheld timelines for Governors and President

By holding that the judiciary cannot fetter Governors and the President to “one-size-fits-all” timetables or usurp their functions by assuming “deemed consent” of proposed Bills by States, and also clarifying that these authorities cannot resort to “prolonged and evasive inaction”, the Supreme Court’s answer to the 16th Presidential Reference appears as a constitutional balancing act. But, substantively, it is a blow to federalism as it effectively allows Governors unchecked powers to block or delay State legislation without constitutional accountability. This opinion contradicts a progressive judgment in April 2025 that had prescribed three-month timelines and used Article 142 to grant deemed assent to some Bills passed in the Tamil Nadu Assembly. The Court invoked separation of powers to reject timelines and Article 142’s use, but this empowers Governors at the cost of State rights. The judgment claims that Articles 200 and 201 prescribe no deadlines, but disregards explicit constitutional text. In Article 200, the Governor must declare his decision “as soon as possible” – the Court called it too “elastic” to support timelines, rendering constitutional text unenforceable. The Court’s assertion that Governors are not bound by the Council of Ministers’ aid and advice contradicts constitutional history. The framers explicitly removed the phrase “in his discretion” – a phrase in the Government of India Act, 1935 – from Articles 200 and 201. Even the Sarkaria Commission recommended a six-month period for Governors to decide on Bills.

The Court did rule that withholding assent must be followed by returning the Bill to the Assembly. But the judgment rules that even if the Assembly passes the Bill a second time, the Governor retains the option to reserve it for the President. This kills the binding nature of the legislature’s second passage. Consequently, whether at first instance or after reconsideration, a Governor can refer a Bill to the President under Article 200. Once there, Bills can languish indefinitely as the judgment ruled that the President has no obligation to consult the Court. The Assembly has no recourse to re-pass Bills in a binding manner, and the judgment provides no guidance on when referring a Bill to the President is appropriate. While the judgment talks of a “limited mandamus” for prolonged inaction, it refuses to define what constitutes a “reasonable period of time”, forcing States into legal battles to prove delay. By removing procedural safeguards (timelines and deemed assent), extraordinary remedies (Article 142), and oversight (judicial review of actions under Article 200), the Court’s opinion has allowed the possibility of executive overreach. States have little mechanism to challenge arbitrary delays, no automatic approval after reasonable periods, and no remedy when Bills are referred to the President, even on subjects under the State List. And these are situations that have recently transpired in many Opposition-ruled States. The Court appears to have found a way to turn the letter against the spirit of the Constitution.

Overcoming resistance

Version 2 of the National Action Plan on AMR requires fresh commitment

The introduction of the second iteration of the National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance is an acknowledgement that, but for some marginal gains, implementation of version 1 was, at best, sluggish. In a welcome move, the Centre has released a further version of the policy, though the details are not yet available in the public realm, to give the nation a booster shot at trying to fix the rather humongous AMR problem that the country has had to contend with, increasing volumes to boot. In October, WHO released its Global antibiotic resistance surveillance report, which recorded that in 2023, approximately one in three bacterial infections in India were resistant to commonly-used antibiotics. Globally, it was one in six confirmed infections. It spelt out why India was disproportionately affected – factors included a high infectious disease burden, overuse and misuse of antibiotics and gaps in the surveillance and healthcare infrastructure. *E.coli* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* have exhibited high resistance to critical antibiotics, making the very last line of drugs ineffective. But human health is not the sole footprint AMR possesses; there is scarcely a field in the food chain where its cold arms have not touched – from veterinary practices to contaminating soil and water health and, thereby, agriculture and aquaculture. This ubiquitous spread of AMR has spurred scientists to push the One Health technique – it integrates the prisms of human health, animal health and environmental health – to handle growing resistance in communities.

The time is, no doubt, ripe for India to take AMR seriously and push for an enhanced, committed antibiotics stewardship programme. While the first National Action Plan played a key role in raising the profile of AMR, the actual implementation suffered. It is true that the country expanded its national surveillance programme by adding a solid laboratory network (thanks, in part, to the COVID-19 pandemic), it also scored a win with the ban on Colistin as a growth factor in the animal husbandry sector. However, the programme flailed as it failed to secure potent collaborations with States. A few States drew up their own policies, but only Kerala implemented it well enough to see a slight drop in AMR levels in the community, recently. This policy will have to tackle every aspect of AMR’s causative factors, including the rampant overuse and misuse of antibiotics. The One Health approach will have to be strengthened, and better co-ordination with States ensured. This time around, the policy will have to be the real deal and deliver, against resistance.

The global push to ease industrial norms has recently extended to one of the most visible symbols of environmental responsibility – green cover within industrial estates and individual industries. The growing trend of reducing green-cover requirements for industrial estates, units within estates, and standalone industries is often celebrated as a step toward “ease of doing business”. However, the rationale for such relaxation – frequently based on international examples where minimum plantation norms appear lower – often lacks ecological context. While these relaxations may simplify compliance and enhance land-use efficiency, they raise a critical question. Are we mistaking convenience for sustainability?

While industrial development inevitably entails ecological alteration, including the clearing of vegetation and habitats, it is critical to recognise that on-site green belts cannot compensate for the broader ecological losses associated with land conversion. Green belts primarily provide localised benefits such as microclimate regulation, dust suppression and visual greening. But they do not restore forest functions, biodiversity or ecosystem resilience. Their role remains mitigative, not restorative.

Empirical evidence from multiple regions shows that well-designed green belts can reduce total suspended particulate matter (TSP) by up to 65% and lower ambient noise levels by 10 decibels-17 decibels in industrial or roadside environments. Vegetation acts as a filtering and dispersing surface, improving air quality and reducing thermal stress. However, these gains are spatially limited and cannot replicate the complex ecological services – such as carbon sequestration, hydrological regulation, and habitat connectivity – provided by intact or semi-natural landscapes.

Research across biomes reinforces that industrial plantations and internal green belts are poor substitutes for natural forests, wetlands or connected ecosystems. They tend to be narrow, mono-specific, and vulnerable to degradation over time. In short, green belts mitigate local operational impacts but do not reverse the ecological costs of industrial land use.

Why global parallels are misleading

Policymakers and planners often point to other nations where the mandated green-area ratios for industries are lower. However, such comparisons rarely account for differences in population density, ecological capacity and economic structure – all of which shape a country’s environmental resilience.

A nation with vast open spaces and lower



P. Ragavan

is a researcher in the field of vegetated coastal habitats such as mangroves

Industrial on-site green cover and green belts are poor substitutes for natural forests, wetlands or connected ecosystems

population pressure can afford smaller on-site green ratios because its surrounding landscapes still provide ecological buffering. In contrast, in densely populated and industrially intensive regions, green buffers play an essential role in maintaining liveable conditions. Applying the same percentage everywhere is like prescribing the same diet for everyone – regardless of age, activity, or health. These differences underline a key point: policy transfers across countries must be ecologically calibrated. Borrowing a numerical target for green cover from another region – without considering population density, ecosystem stress, and climate zones – does not constitute evidence-based policymaking.

A balanced, landscape-level strategy

Rather than merely reducing plot-level green cover, particularly when uneven requirements for different industry types create uncertainty and inconsistency, a more balanced and scientifically informed approach would integrate industrial growth with landscape-scale greening. Partial relaxation of internal green cover accompanied by mandatory off-site greening commitments could ensure that industrial expansion coexists with ecological renewal. Such commitments could include: developing regional or State-level green reserves adjacent to industrial clusters; restoring degraded lands and buffer zones around protected areas or river basins and enhancing ecological health of protected areas; and integrating industrial greening efforts into national or regional green credit or carbon offset programmes, ensuring accountability and measurable ecological outcomes.

This two-tiered strategy, of combining on-site mitigation with off-site restoration within the region/State, would help transform industries into partners in ecological stewardship, not merely compliance actors. On-site green belts can serve as localised “healing zones”, while landscape-level greening functions as the ecological immune system sustaining the broader environment.

By adopting this integrated approach, future industrial expansion can often be accommodated within existing premises, optimising land use while reducing the need for new green-field developments. This reduces additional habitat loss and promotes the restoration of surrounding ecosystems through coordinated afforestation, wetland rehabilitation, and habitat connectivity measures.

Such a strategy embodies the true essence of Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) where economic development is in synergy with ecological renewal. Localised plantations within factory premises may contribute to environmental

management, but the real sustainability dividend comes from restoring natural systems beyond industrial boundaries.

Ultimately, the strength of future economies will depend not only on industrial productivity but also on the resilience of the ecosystems that sustain them. The power of NbS lies not in decorative greenery within factory walls, but in linking industrial progress to the regeneration of living landscapes ensuring that growth and nature thrive together.

The future of industrial sustainability will not be defined by how many trees stand inside factory gates, but by how deeply industries root themselves in the health of the landscapes that surround them.

Green belts within industrial premises function much like medicine applied directly to a wound – immediate and localised. Expanding natural green cover around industrial clusters, on the other hand, is comparable to strengthening the body’s overall immunity –long term, systemic and preventive. Both approaches are indispensable, and neglecting either would be akin to attempting to heal an injury on the right hand by treating the left. While industrial flexibility is important, ecological safeguards cannot be compromised for short-term convenience.

Industries as ecological stewards

The contribution of industries to national growth and the comfort of modern life is undeniable. Yet, their ecological footprint during construction and operation remains an unavoidable reality. Traditionally, ecological stewardship has been entrusted to local communities through initiatives such as community forestry, joint forest management, and local conservation programmes. Industries, by contrast, have long been perceived as entities to regulate or penalise, rather than as partners to empower in environmental stewardship.

Industries drive national growth yet create ecological impacts. Traditionally, communities led stewardship, while industries were regulated. Today, sustainable development reframes this role, emphasising industrial stewardship through green belts, biodiversity offsets, and circular practices. Allowing calibrated reductions in on-site green cover, balanced by compensatory duties, encourages industries as ecological partners. Informed citizen participation further strengthens this hybrid approach, promoting a practical, future-ready balance between development and environmental protection and lasting resilience

The views expressed are personal

The new direction for India should be toward Asia

The photograph of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in an animated conversation at the 2025 Tianjin Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in early September this year exhibited elements unifying them, which has been the hallmark of meetings of the G-7. Just a month later, at the Busan Summit 2025, the photograph of U.S. President Donald Trump, who looked uneasy, and Mr. Xi, who looked calm, at the “G2” summit, acknowledges the power shift to Asia.

The U.S. Secretary of State told the Senate that the story of the 21st century will be written in Asia. The global trend was then obscured by now U.S. Ambassador to India Sergio Gor laying out the U.S.’s priorities: ‘pull India’ to its side away from China and get India to stop buying cheap Russian oil. Mr. Modi later made clear that India’s future cannot be dictated by others.

A critical moment for foreign policy

India’s foreign policy is at an inflexion point as it is on the cusp of becoming one of the largest economies, and the U.S. is upending multilateralism and reducing India’s strategic policy space in several key domains as India’s relations with China improve and those with Russia strengthen. Is the U.S. thwarting India’s rise to prevent another China? With China, it should be a case of ‘trust but verify’ as negotiations for an international border in Ladakh advance with it having the potential to settle the Kashmir issue and investment that may follow. Russia is a 75-year-old tested partner and its S-400 was the game-changer in ‘Operation Sindoor’.

For India, the choice is not binary, as western analysts argue, tilting towards the U.S. or China. The new direction for India should be toward Asia, whose market will be larger than the U.S.

Asia is coming together in a form very different to the way the West came together, not based on colonialism or global rules but shared value chain interests. Countries in the region want



Mukul Sanwal

is a former United Nations diplomat

Asia is at the centre of the world and India should focus on self-sustaining growth

partnership with India, as it has the technological capacity and economic heft to balance China.

Asia, with two-thirds of the global population and wealth, is again at the centre of the world. BRICS, with overlapping membership and policies, the SCO, with its stress on geo-security-economics, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a political-trade grouping, are going to be intertwined. The door to re-entry into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is still open. This is where trade concessions should be made, which will be outside World Trade Organization rules, including *modus vivendi* on trade with China, as an alternative market to the U.S.

Hard decisions

India has moved away from the hesitations of a developing country, ring-fencing its growth, to an emerging power, confidently engaging others as a peer. U.S. pressure has led to a new national consensus on acceptability of hard decisions.

First, operationalisation of ‘strategic autonomy’ should be based on India’s uniqueness having two global agendas. It has the highest growth rate, huge potential till 2100, the largest labour pool and the highest number of the poor. Within the United Nations, India’s foundational sustainable development interests are closer to the Global South. India will need to clarify its understanding of ‘partnership’ linking value chains and adjusting priorities without diluting them to avoid accepting the agendas and frameworks of others.

Second, the new rules will be very different to the old ones. Asia had no answer to Europe’s gunboats and later leverage, and interdependence gave immense advantage to the West. Interconnectedness of the digital economy is reflected in technological capacity, not diplomacy, leading to military capability. Assumptions of foreign, technology and security policies are being questioned as innovation interconnections determine economic growth, political influence and military strength. For

India, there can be no compromise on national data, endogenous technology innovation, local defence production and inclusive growth.

Third, cyber warfare should be the central pillar of national security, based on India’s comparative advantage, and not theatre commands as land-based threats have changed. China has stepped back from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which Pakistan has substituted with expensive Asian Development Bank loans. It has strategic support from the U.S., a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia and increased influence, along with the U.S., in Bangladesh. The U.S. is seeking the Bagram base in Afghanistan. India has also secured a six-month waiver from U.S. sanctions on Chabahar Port which gave India an opening into Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia.

The evolving neighbourhood landscape suggests the need for a national debate on reorienting defence allocations – halving the size of the Army and reducing numbers of large (imported) platforms for endogenous Artificial Intelligence (AI), air defence, space, missiles and drones where India has world-class capability – to factor in the need for continuing innovation, with spin-offs for growth.

An AI future

Lastly, shaping the global AI future is necessary for double-digit inclusive growth. Bernstein, a wealth management firm, in a report has asked questions about India’s ₹10,372-crore AI mission, warning that it could become inconsequential on the global stage. It also said that U.S. companies could dominate AI. A Parliamentary Standing Committee has emphasised the need for indigenous research in foundational AI models to ensure sovereign capability. Funding should increase at least 20-fold to support national strategic collaboration, high-end computational resources, proprietary models and talent development driven by the Prime Minister’s Office. AI sovereignty is now the key requirement to be a global power by 2047.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

State Bills, timelines

The answer of the Supreme Court of India to the Presidential reference, under Article 143, is disquieting and goes against federal principles (Front page, November 21). The decision of the Constitutional bench has the potential to lead to an anarchic state of affairs. If a Governor of a State indefinitely sits on Bills

passed unanimously by the Legislature, there is now very little that the courts can do. The Court has said that a Governor cannot sit on Bills indefinitely, and in such circumstances, limited judicial review is permissible directing the Governor to pass orders within a reasonable time. This is precisely what the Justice J.B. Pardiwala-led Bench had done earlier by

fixing a three-month period. In matters affecting democratic principles such as federalism, swift action is paramount. The Court has virtually upended the rule of law as a Governor can now, at his will, subvert the democratic will of the people expressed through the Legislature. This decision is a massive setback to the constitutional vision as the

Executive can now play its own card. A fixed timeline has to be prescribed
M.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

The Court’s verdict was expected to settle a persistent constitutional irritant. Instead, it delivers a reprimand without a remedy. The Court affirms that Governors cannot hold Bills indefinitely, yet it

pointedly avoids prescribing even a minimal timeline, leaving intact the ambiguity that has enabled Raj Bhavans to convert inaction into political leverage. The federal implications are hard to miss. It is largely non-BJP-ruled States that have borne the brunt of prolonged gubernatorial inaction, often at politically sensitive moments. When unelected authorities can

slow-walk legislation without consequence, the balance of Indian federalism tilts subtly, but significantly, against States, especially those outside the ruling coalition at the Centre.

M. Jameel Ahmed,
Mysuru

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

GROUND ZERO



Assistant Conservator of Forests and SARPA State nodal officer Muhammed Anwar Y. leads a workshop for snake rescuers in Alappuzha in 2024. KERALA FOREST DEPARTMENT

A snakebite that sparked a change

Last month, Kerala declared snakebite envenomation a notifiable disease. Though snakebites are common in the State, a 2019 incident triggered a systemic overhaul. A 10-year-old girl had died of a venomous snake bite in a school in Wayanad, and people were outraged. Since then, a digital rescue network has been launched and school infrastructure upgraded. **Sarath Babu George** reports on Kerala's quest for zero snakebite mortality

On October 10, following in the footsteps of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, Kerala declared snakebite envenomation a disease of public health importance under the Kerala Public Health Act, 2023. This notification is in accordance with the Centre's directive to implement the 2024 National Action Plan for Snakebite Envenoming, an initiative to halve snakebite-related deaths in India by 2030. Of the nearly 78,600 snakebite deaths annually reported worldwide, over 64,000 deaths occur in India, according to a study published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Nature Communications*, in 2022.

Dr. Ajan M.J., Assistant Director, Health and Family Welfare Department, who is the State nodal officer for snakebite envenomation management, says the notification will enable more accurate tracking of snakebite cases, including their frequency, severity, and geographic spread. "This, in turn, will provide clearer epidemiological insights by revealing trends, hotspots, and vulnerable populations. More importantly, it will help us ensure adequate stock of ASV (anti-snake venom) in high-incidence regions and in boosting hospital readiness," he says.

This moment did not appear out of nowhere. It was shaped, painfully and irrevocably, by a sequence of events that forced the State to confront the cost of human-wildlife conflict.

Danger in a crevice

On the morning of November 20, 2019, Shehala Sherin, 10, set out for school with a lunch box in hand. Sherin, a Class 5 student at the Government Sarvajana Vocational Higher Secondary School in Sulthan Bathery in Wayanad district, was accompanied by her cousin Nihal N. Firoy, also 10 years old.

On that cool afternoon, when she was in the classroom, Sherin's foot slipped into a crevice beneath her bench. She cried out. Her parents Abdul Aziz N.V. and Sajna Aysla later learnt that a venomous snake curled up there had bitten her.

"A place that should have been a haven for our child became the beginning of our nightmare," says Aziz, recalling the worst day of his life.

To make matters worse, there was a delay in taking Sherin to the hospital. "She was lying in pain as people stood confused around her. I arrived at the school at 3:50 (p.m.) and took her to the hospital." Sherin had been bitten nearly 40 minutes earlier. There was already redness and swelling in that area and she was in visible pain.

They rushed the child to a private hospital nearby, which referred her to the Sulthan Bathery Taluk Hospital, nearly 2 kilometres away. "While the hospital had an adequate stock of ASV, they did not have ventilator support," says Aziz. The doctors recommended that she be taken to the Kozhikode Government Medical College, nearly 90 km away.

"Her condition had deteriorated rapidly by then. On the way, the ambulance went to the Vythiri Taluk Hospital, where doctors again said they could not handle the case," Aziz says. From there, Sherin was shifted to a private hospital in Chelod, around 5 km away. At 6:15 p.m., she was pronounced dead.

Within five years, snakebite-related deaths have reduced from 123 in 2018-19 to 34 in 2024-25

MUHAMMED ANWAR Y.
Assistant Conservator of Forests

"The classroom floor had cracks and no pest control checks had been carried out," alleges Aziz. "No one took responsibility for the safety of children in that school. Not the teachers, not the administration."

The incident exposed the inability of the State to handle snakebite cases even though 123 people had died of snakebite during 2018-2019. The preventable death of a child led the Kerala High Court to initiate suo moto proceedings on December 9, 2019. This resulted in major school infrastructural upgrades and safety guidelines.

Using snakes as a weapon

Just months after Sherin's death, a snakebite again dominated headlines in Kerala. In May 2020, a bank clerk from Kollam city, Sooraj Kumar, used a venomous snake to kill his wife, Uthra. He clutched the Indian cobra by its hood and pressed it near Uthra while she was sleeping. The agitated snake bit her twice, killing her. Cobra venom can kill a person in hours by paralyzing respiratory muscles.

This was not Kumar's first attempt at killing his wife, the investigation revealed. Two months earlier, he had tried to kill Uthra by releasing a Russell's viper, another venomous snake, into the bedroom. The viper had bitten her, but she survived after hospitalisation. While that was dismissed by the family as an unfortunate accident, Uthra's parents filed a police complaint after her death. The police arrested Kumar.

During their investigation, the police learnt that Kumar had bought the snakes from traditional snake charmers and unlicensed handlers who illegally keep wild snakes in captivity. His motive was to get hold of Uthra's gold and claim her life insurance payout. The Additional District



An Indian cobra. KERALA FOREST DEPARTMENT

and Sessions Court-VI, Kollam, deemed the case "rarest of the rare", and sentenced Kumar to a double life term along with 17 years of rigorous imprisonment.

Yet another tragic incident occurred in July that year when Zakir Hussain, a snake catcher, died after being bitten by a cobra he had rescued from a house in Navaikulam, Thiruvananthapuram. He reportedly carried out the rescue by grabbing the snake with his bare hands, as was the prevalent practice then, and displayed it proudly to onlookers. "The snake bit him on his right wrist and the venom rapidly spread through the vein," says Assistant Conservator of Forests, Muhammed Anwar Y.

The success of SARPA

Kerala, with its dense tropical forests, extensive wetlands, and high population density, has for years grappled with the deadly threat of snakebites. The region is home to more than 130 snake species, of which around 10 are venomous, according to the Forest Department.

Snake envenoming, often occurring in agricultural fields, forested areas, and urban spaces, has always presented a major health challenge. Data from the State Health Department show that nearly 5,000 cases of snakebites are reported annually in the State. Yet, the actual figures could be far higher, with many snakebite incidents going unreported, particularly in rural areas. Besides the human toll, over the past decade, nearly 70% of the wildlife-related deaths reported in Kerala have been due to snakebites, according to the department.

The deaths of Uthra and Hussain and especially Sherin were turning points in the State's response to the crisis. "They prompted the Forest Department to launch SARPA (Snake Awareness, Rescue, and Protection App) in August 2020," Anwar points out. The mobile application connects people with trained rescuers, provides first-aid information on snakebites, and assists people with identifying snake species.

The senior forest official adds that the initiative is the first of its kind in India. With traditional rescue methods deemed unscientific and risky, snake rescuers and department officials are now trained in the scientific 'bag and pipe' method using safety gear. This is a technique that involves the use of a pipe inserted into a sturdy cloth bag to guide a snake to safety without direct physical contact. So far, nearly 6,200 people have received training under the programme. These include people from a cross-sections of society, including doctors, professors, advocates, IT professionals, casual labourers, and researchers.

Anwar, who is also the State nodal officer of SARPA, says the initiative has been successful. "Within five years, snakebite-related deaths have reduced from 123 in 2018-19 to 34 in 2024-25," he says. There have been 14 deaths so far during the ongoing fiscal, with the latest being reported on November 21, when an infant was bitten by a cobra in Malappuram. "Nearly 58,000 snakes have been safely rescued and released back into their natural habitats," he adds.

Pramod G. Krishnan, Chief Wildlife Warden, says the recent declaration of snakebite envenomation as a notifiable disease will be a "shot in the arm" for Kerala's goal of zero snakebite deaths by 2030. The Forest Department is now all set to launch the second phase of SARPA with expanded resources and training.

Environmental and lifestyle shifts have also contributed to fewer human-snake encounters. "The elimination of open defecation, near-universal LPG coverage and reduced dependence on firewood, and mechanised farming practices have all helped," says Dr. Jaideep C. Menon, Professor, Adult Cardiology and Public Health, Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences, Kochi.

Besides, the Local Self Government Department, the General Education Department, and other departments have adopted many precautionary measures. "Safety audits are being regularly conducted in schools before each academic year to identify and rectify potential hazards," Anwar says.



Where fear and hostility once dominated, there is now a sense of awareness and respect for these often misunderstood reptiles.

SANDEEP DAS
Herpetologist

The State has also prioritised supplying safety equipment, including gumboots and gloves, to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) workers, given the risks of snake encounters in rural regions.

Shyamala M., a MGNREGS worker in Palode, Thiruvananthapuram, points out that she is now given gloves while carrying out tasks such as clearing vegetation. "Last year, one of my colleagues was bitten by a hump-nosed pit viper. Incidents like that used to be common," she says.

Wayanad-based physician Dr. Rajesh Kumar M.P., who also serves as a SARPA educator, says efforts are being made to spread awareness about snakes and venomous species, particularly among the youth. SARPA Padam, an educational programme, is being rolled out across educational institutions. Awareness sessions are also conducted for groups such as Kudumbasree.

The hurdles that remain

Despite achieving significant progress in handling snakes and preventing snakebite-related fatalities, Kerala still faces challenges, however.

Nationally, snakebite mitigation largely centres around the Big Four snake species – the Indian cobra, the common krait, the Russell's viper, and the saw-scaled viper. However, in Kerala, the hump-nosed pit viper is increasingly responsible for snakebite cases. The viper is an endemic species to the Western Ghats.

Dr. Menon attributes the rise in hump-nosed pit viper bites to the shift in agricultural patterns from paddy cultivation to plantation-based cash crops, such as rubber and cardamom. The venomous species is known to prefer cool, moist environments, such as dense forests and plantations. It is mostly found in leaf litter and thick bushes.

The polyvalent ASV that is produced in India utilises venom from the Big Four. However, studies have shown that it is ineffective in neutralising the venom of the hump-nosed pit viper.

Dr. Menon, who also heads the ICMR-Collaborative Centre of Excellence in Snakebite, stresses the need to establish regional venom collecting centres. "This is necessary to improve antivenom production by developing both region-specific and species-specific antivenoms," he says.

At present, like most other States, Kerala relies on the ASV produced from the venom extracted by the Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society in Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu. The Irula are an indigenous community known for their traditional skills in snake and rat catching. In July 2025, while inaugurating the World Snake Day observance in Thiruvananthapuram, Forest Minister A.K. Saseendran announced plans to locally produce ASV to address the perceived ineffectiveness of current antivenoms due to geographical variation in venom potency.

Sustaining SARPA's momentum is another challenge, according to a senior forest official. Of the 3,300 trained and licensed snake rescuers, fewer than 1,000 remain active. "While many snake enthusiasts have undergone training in snake rescue, they are rarely available on short notice, given their daily jobs," the official says.

A rapid response team (RRT) member in Pathanamthitta points out that snake-related emergencies in the region are primarily handled by Forest Department personnel, largely due to the lack of licensed snake handlers in the area. While RRT teams have been effective in managing a range of emergencies, their resources are increasingly being stretched, particularly as forest fringe areas report a rise in conflicts involving other wild animals such as elephants and wild boars. To address the issue, the department is mulling steps to ensure at least one active licensed snake handler in each local body.

Persisting medical challenges too remain a significant barrier to effective snakebite management. "There is clinical hesitancy in administering ASV, primarily due to fear of anaphylaxis (a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction). This is often linked to inadequate training and insufficient infrastructure to manage complications," says a health officer.

Timely and effective pre-hospital care too is vital in reducing snakebite-related mortality. While emergency services exist, most snakebite victims still rely on private transport. Experts have called for strengthening ambulance services to include snakebite management protocols, and for implementing a hub-and-spoke model, where community health centres and taluk hospitals support a network of primary health centres.

Herpetologist Sandeep Das says Kerala's focus on snakebite mitigation in recent times has had a cascading effect on conservation efforts. "Snakes play a vital role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem by controlling rodent population. This in turn helps reduce the spread of zoonotic diseases," he says.

Das, who has been actively involved in SARPA and Snakepedia, a comprehensive database on snake species found in Kerala, adds that there has been a perceptible shift in public attitudes towards snakes. "Where fear and hostility once dominated, there is now a growing sense of awareness and respect for these often misunderstood reptiles. Increasingly, people are recognising their ecological importance and the need to respond to encounters with scientific knowledge, rather than fear-driven actions like killing them on sight," he says.

As the State pushes towards its goal of zero snakebites, the systemic overhaul sparked by a child's death continues to serve as both a cautionary tale and a catalyst for change.

Gas chamber

Delhi needs urgent action to mitigate air pollution crisis

The toxic blanket of smog that smothers the National Capital Region (NCR) and adjoining areas from October to January is as normalised in these parts as the onset of winter. Air quality dips sharply as winter temperature and low wind speed worsen the cumulative effect of vehicular pollution, stubble burning, industrial and construction activity and firecracker use.



This year is no exception with the Air Quality Index (AQI) worsening from ‘very poor’ to ‘severe’ category, levels that would trigger health emergencies elsewhere in the world. The WHO has repeatedly warned of acute respiratory and cardiovascular risks from such exposure. Despite this, the response from the local administration has ranged from apathetic to actively misleading. The Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP III), designed precisely for these conditions, has been reduced to a token checklist with no enforcement worth mentioning. Schools remain open, construction rumbles on, and heavy-duty commercial vehicles continue to pour into the capital. What is troubling is that the local administration is busy obfuscating data and obliterating signs pointing to the extremity of the air pollution crisis. Around Diwali, when firecrackers triggered severe pollution, the AQI remained at 351, admittedly still ‘very poor’, but only six points down from from the previous day reading of 345 and conveniently short of ‘severe’.

The reason? Only eight of the total 39 stations to monitor ambient air quality were functioning in the 24 hours during Diwali when pollution levels peak in Delhi. If all the centres had logged in uninterrupted hourly data as they are supposed to, the AQI levels would have been much worse i.e., in the ‘severe’ and not ‘very poor’ category. Citizens’ uproar over the studied indifference has had little impact. Instead of fixing monitoring gaps, the local government has since taken to spraying water around the pollution monitoring centres supposedly to bring the AQI readings down. None of this changes the reality on the ground. The AQI levels in Delhi have remained dangerously high in the last ten days, reaching 428 on November 11 and 404 on November 13 and touching 391 on November 20. The readings are similar in the entire NCR region and adjoining districts. As the head of pulmonary medicine and sleep disorders at AIIMS has said, Delhi’s extremely poor air quality is nothing short of an emergency.

Long-term strategies that include electrifying public transport, reducing crop-burning and enforcing industrial standards are essential. But immediate actions are unavoidable: shut schools, halt construction, restrict commercial vehicle entry, and above all implement vehicle-rationing measures like odd-even without delay. These measures are disruptive, no doubt, but not nearly as dangerous as the health-care costs (for the working poor in particular who have no choice but to be outdoors), and productivity losses caused by a capital city choking on its own air.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



Do we need large banks now?

With lacklustre credit demand from industry and the need to reduce infra financing by banks, they aren’t required for now

POINT BLANK.



LOKESHWARRI SK

The Indian banking sector has been an island of calm, standing steady when turbulent winds buffeted global financial systems. While there have been phases when non-performing assets ballooned, or some segments or entities witnessed lot of stress, the conservative approach adopted by the Indian central bank has largely ensured that the sector sails smoothly, largely unscathed.

It is against this background that the ongoing discussion on creating large, global scale banks, needs to be viewed. The idea appears to be led by two factors. One, some seem to think that not having large banks is depriving the Indian economy, particularly the private sector, with funds needed to scale up and grow.

Two, Indian banks rank quite low among the large global banks, based on assets. This is being used to argue that for the economy to scale to \$7.3 trillion by 2030, the size of the banks needs to be much larger so that they can fund organic and inorganic expansion of companies. While this may be partially true, there does not appear to be a need for large banks at this juncture when viewed from demand perspective. Demand for bank credit from industries has been very weak in recent past and infrastructure financing is best left to development financing institutions. M&A deals have not been too big in the recent past either. With non-bank sources of finance also reviving, it may be best to go slow on this front.

THE GLOBAL GIANTS

A glance at the S&P Global’s list of world’s largest banks, ranked according to their assets as of April 2025, shows that the top 20 banks are behemoths wilfully created by countries to support political agendas or through excessive exposure to market risk.

Chinese government-owned banks such as Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Agricultural Bank of China, China Construction Bank and Bank of China are well ensconced in the first four ranks, holding assets worth a whopping \$22 trillion. Twenty-one banks based in mainland China find a place in the top 100 with seven in top 20. Ranks five and six are occupied by the

World’s largest banks by assets ranked by S&P Global (April 2025)

Present rank	Bank	Headquarters	Assets (\$ billion)
1	Industrial and Commercial Bank of China	Mainland China	6,688.74
2	Agricultural Bank of China	Mainland China	5,923.76
3	China Construction Bank Corp.	Mainland China	5,558.38
4	Bank of China	Mainland China	4,803.51
5	JPMorgan Chase & Co.	US	4,002.81
6	Bank of America Corp.	US	3,261.52
7	HSBC Holdings PLC	UK	2,989.81
8	BNP Paribas SA	France	2,809.83
9	Crédit Agricole Group	France	2,693.58
10	Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group	Japan	2,628.12
Indian banks in top 100			
43	State Bank of India	India	846.64
73	HDFC Bank Ltd	India	494.06

How Indian banking industry compares (March 2024)		Assets (\$ billion)
Total assets of all scheduled commercial banks in India		3,383.2
Total assets of public sector banks		1,866.7
Total assets of private sector banks		1,267.6

Source: S&P Global Market Intelligence, RBI

American giants, JP Morgan Chase and Bank of America followed by HSBC holding of UK and BNP Paribas and Credit Agricole Group of France. Japan’s Mitsubishi UFJ is the other bank which finds a place in the top ten largest banks by asset size.

ASSETS OF INDIAN BANKS

Only two Indian banks are featured in this list, SBI and HDFC Bank. While SBI has improved its ranking from 47 in 2024 to 43 now, HDFC Bank has moved up one place this year to 73. But the assets of Indian banks are nowhere close to the global giants. SBI’s total assets amounted to \$846 billion and HDFC Bank held assets worth \$494 billion.

In fact, the total assets held by Indian scheduled commercial banks, as of March 31, 2024, amounted to just \$3.38 trillion. This is only half of the assets of Industrial and Commercial Bank of

China, which occupies the top position.

Some media reports are suggesting that consolidation of public sector banks could be one way to create large banks.

In 2020, 27 PSU banks were consolidated into 12 to form larger entities. Consolidation of public sector banks is not a bad idea as it can provide heft to the large PSBs, improve governance and efficiencies and ultimately benefit the customer.

But doing so with the intention of creating global scale large banks may not really work. The total assets of all PSU banks equal \$1.8 trillion as of March 2024. Even if all the PSU banks were merged into one entity, the bank would still be ranked 18th on the global large banks list. But then, merging PSU banks is more easily said than done given the cultural differences within the organisation and the pushback from the workforce.

Allowing increased foreign or corporate ownership in banks comes with its own bundle of risks. The tight fiscal situation of the Centre may hinder government creating a large bank out of budgetary resources. With Indian savers already parking most of their savings in banks, there is little room to increase the deposit base to create large lending entities.

With Indian savers already parking most of their savings in banks, there is little room to increase the deposit base to create large lending entities

Creating a desi Big 4 in accounting, a tall order

The Big 4 accounting firms offer a bouquet of services, apart from accounting and tax. Will Indian regulators allow that?

Mohan R Lavi

Over the last year or so, there has been much talk and discussion about creating an Indian Big Four in accounting. While the Government seems to have triggered the idea, the accounting fraternity seems unsure if the Government is really serious about this.

The sheer ambition of the task could make one hesitate in even taking baby-steps in going ahead. Data on Indian accounting firms present a very fragmented picture (see Table). Getting such an eclectic set of accountants to move out of their comfort zones and agree to join hands with others is not going to be easy. Operating culture, locational restrictions, type of practices and individual chemistry amongst the constituents could pose challenges during transition.

The small and medium accounting firms have always lived in a cocoon of familiarity — known clients, resources that do not cost the moon and sticking to bread-and-butter practices of accounting and tax. Areas such as M&A

Snapshot of Indian accounting firms

Type of firm	Number of firms	% of total firms	Professionals employed
Sole Proprietorship firms	72,696	~72.6	73,365
Partnership/LLP (2-3 partners)	21,750	~21.7	51,868
Partnership/LLP (4-5 partners)	3,563	~3.6	16,931
Partnership/LLP (6+ partners)	2,129	~2.1	41,478
Sole practitioners	3,791		
Total (approx.)	1,00,138	100	1,83,642

advisory, cross-border tax consulting, and technology consulting would not interest many of them.

Assuming that a majority of these firms are convinced to come on board, the challenge of a sustained effort crops up. It took the existing Big Four many decades to build that brand name. Will the concept of Indian Big Four be sustained over four or five decades? State Bank of India was established in 1955, and after 70 years it ranks 43rd in the world in terms of asset size. Applying a similar logic, an Indian Big Four can be expected somewhere around 2095. Would all the parties involved remain invested in this idea till then?

REGULATORY HURDLE

Regulation can be a major stumbling block. The existing Big Four accounting firms offer a bouquet of services apart from accounting and tax. Their consulting arms sponsor events and advertise their sponsorship. Would the regulator of accountants in India permit the consulting arm of a local accounting firm in Mumbai to sponsor/advertise a pro-kabaddi league match in Mumbai? Would the regulator of accountants permit a valuer to join an accounting firm as a partner? If we need a home-grown Big Four, both these questions should be answered in the positive. Also, it would need the three

IS THERE A NEED?

The more important question is, do we really need large banks at this juncture? The three segments that are intended to benefit from large banks are corporate borrowers, infrastructure finance and M&A finance.

Credit growth to industries has been quite sluggish in recent times and banks have channelised more credit to individual borrowers to sustain their operations. Share of loans to industry has decreased from 39.5 per cent of bank credit in August 2016 to 21.5 per cent in August 2025. But in the same period, share of credit to retail or individual borrowers has increased from 22 per cent to 33 per cent.

Most companies have been postponing large capital investments in recent years, except for few industries such as renewables and chemicals, leading to lower demand for project finance.

Two, they have been using non-bank sources of funds such as internal accruals, the corporate bond market and external commercial borrowings to meet their financing requirements. This is not a bad thing. Not only does it prevent concentration of default risk in the banking sector, but the bond markets will also get a boost if more companies begin looking beyond banks for funds.

It is moot whether commercial banks should tie up their funds in infrastructure financing. Not only does it lead to asset-liability mismatches, but it also increases risk given the long gestation and pay-back period in these projects. It is for this reason that the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure Development was set up in 2021 to support long-term infrastructure financing in India, it has already sanctioned loans worth ₹2.03 lakh crore as of end March 2025. Infrastructure financing is best handled through such development institutions which can access long-term loans from global multilateral institutions to finance their operations.

It can be argued that more funding is needed for M&A financing. But the average value of M&A deals between 2019 and 2024 was only ₹3.7 lakh crore per year. This is not very difficult to service with the assets held currently by the banking sector.

Finally, PSU bank consolidation may not be a bad idea, but there appears little reason to try and create large banks which can be counted among the top 20 global biggies.

regulators — ICAI, ICMA and ICSI — to fuse into one. History is proof that this is easier said than done. Professional fees can prove to be a deal-breaker. The fees charged by existing firms are a miniscule of what the Big Four would be charging for similar type of goods or services. The threat of client attrition is a reality that should not be simply glossed over.

This leads us to a question: Should the Government even try continuing towards the Indian Big Four goal? Having commenced this is in right earnest, it should keep at at for some time on a sustained basis. Some clarity would emerge in a couple of years on whether this project is worth pursuing or not. The following scenarios could emerge: creating an Indian Big Four firm is possible; creating an Indian Big Four firm is impossible; the 100,000 Indian firms could classify themselves into 2,000 very large firms, 50,000 medium firms and 48,000 small firms; and whatever happens, status quo will be remain in India. Finally, the stakeholders can always say, ‘at least we tried’, if the effort does not take off.

The writer is a chartered accountant

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Transparency and trust

Apropos ‘All you need to know about the DPDP Rules, 2025’ (November 21), the push to give citizens control over their digital footprints is long overdue. In an age where data is currency, the right to consent and the obligation to delete are not luxuries — they’re essentials. The rules rightly demand accountability from companies, but the gaps are worrying. Cross-border data transfers remain murky, and the independence of the Data Protection Board feels more symbolic than structural. Without robust oversight, even the best rules risk becoming toothless. Privacy isn’t just a technical issue — it’s a civic one. A simple fix? Make breach reports public. When companies know that violations will be visible, not just fined, they’ll take data protection

seriously. Transparency, not just penalties, is what builds trust.

M Barathi
Bengaluru

Climate-friendly deposits

This refers to ‘How your savings can fight climate change’ (November 21). The piece rightly points out a blind spot in our climate conversations — where we park our money. While many of us recycle, reduce and reuse, few consider that our savings might be quietly funding fossil fuels. Banks and funds often operate with little transparency, leaving consumers unaware of the carbon footprint behind their deposits. The call to shift towards climate-conscious financial products is timely and necessary. Green bonds and ethical funds aren’t just buzzwords — they’re tools for real

change. If enough people demand accountability and move their money accordingly, financial institutions will be forced to rethink their priorities. A simple first step: ask your bank where your money goes. Civic pressure, when paired with financial choices, can be a powerful lever for climate action.

K Sakunthala
Coimbatore

Push for corporate bonds

Apropos ‘Bond booster’ (November 21), the editorial captures a persistent weakness in India’s financial system — a corporate bond market that expands in size yet remains shallow in real participation. When nearly all issuances continue to be routed through private placements, the average saver is effectively shut out, and the market

never gains the depth or price discovery it needs. Lowering the face value of bonds and offering selective discounts may draw a few new investors, but these steps feel cosmetic when liquidity on exchanges stays so thin. At the same time, easing compliance for smaller issuers is sensible, provided transparency is strengthened rather than diluted. India’s growing pool of retail investors deserves simpler disclosures, reliable platforms and clearer risk labels. If SEBI pairs its reforms with consistent investor education and a serious push to move more issuances to public markets, corporate bonds can finally become a trustworthy avenue for ordinary households, not just a private playground for institutions.

SM Jeeva
Chennai

Safe digital future

This refers to ‘Responsible, trusted use of AI critical for India, says Google’ (November 21). Google’s call is timely. As India pushes towards a tech-driven “Viksit Bharat”, safety must stay at the centre. The grant for child-safety systems and training teachers is a positive move. Many rural families and small schools lack strong digital access, so protections reach them slowly. Scam detection and privacy-friendly tools are welcome, but wider awareness and support are needed. Digital trust cannot grow only in cities; it must reach every user. With stronger digital literacy at the grassroots, AI can truly empower citizens. When safety, access and guidance improve together, AI will serve India and strengthen public confidence.

S Balasubramaniyan
Villupuram, TN



Did the people have a say in the making of the Constitution?

A new book, based on archival research, offers an original take on the framing of the Constitution as a participatory process

Gautam Bhatia

In 2020, I was part of a constitutional challenge to the government's plans to "redevelop" the Central Vista in New Delhi. One of the arguments that we made was that these plans had been formulated—and were now proposed to be implemented—without any public participation. Public participation was a fundamental constitutional value, not just in India, but across the world, where it was increasingly coming to be understood that the relationship between the people and their government was not simply limited to the periodic casting of the vote; rather, democratic accountability required the continuing participation of the people in decisions that impacted them. The redevelopment of the nation's primary democratic symbol—we argued—was certainly a decision that fell within such a category.

In choosing to uphold the government's redevelopment plan, the Supreme Court observed that the founders of the Indian Constitution had chosen a model of "representative democracy" rather than "direct democracy"; that is, one where the people delegated the task of governance to their representatives with the only constitutionally mandated form of accountability coming through the cycle of elections. This is what—the court said—distinguished the Indian Constitution from its counterparts in South Africa and Kenya, which did explicitly enshrine public participation rights when it came to law-making and executive action.

I have no reason to believe that a better argument would necessarily have changed the court's decision. However, if Rohit De and Ornit Shani's book, *Assembling India's Constitution*, had been published at the time, we would have definitely had a *stronger* argument, and a stronger critique of the court's eventual dismissal of the right to public participation as a constitutional value.

Assembling India's Constitution is a work of historical reconstruction. Its authors take on the near-uncontested claim during the previous 75 years, that the making of the Constitution was a



top-down affair, guided by elite figures in the Constituent Assembly. From the time Granville Austin wrote his first and canonical book, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (1966), about the framing of the Constitution, this consensus has held. It has been held both among scholars who have seen it as a largely positive thing (elite consensus was the only way that a Constitution for India could have been drafted in 1947), and a negative thing (by virtue of its framing, the Indian Constitution has always lacked democratic legitimacy in some fundamental way).

This consensus has held primarily because the *materials* that scholars have consulted (this author included) have been limited to the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly, the magisterial six-volume collection by B. Shiva Rao that provides certain "select" documents associated with the Assembly (the hint is in the word "select"), and a few other contemporaneous documents. *Assem-*

bling India's Constitution departs from this consensus on the strength of archival research: its authors make the claim that the process of Constitution-making was deeply democratic, and involved a significantly broader and deeper manner of public participation than what has hitherto been known.

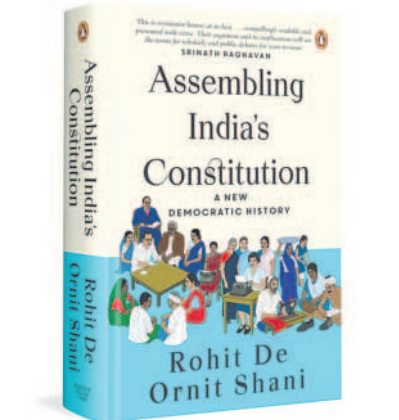
This argument is developed through six chapters, where the authors examine (among other things) the correspondence sent to the Constituent Assembly from across the country, and at various stages of the process. These constituencies include, of course, the ordinary men and women of the country, but they also include a range of actors that we might not have associated with the process of Constitution-making: from student groups to the colonial judiciary.

In three of the most fascinating segments of the book, the authors examine claims (including "model constitutions") that are advanced from the princely states (and especially Manipur), from the colo-

'Assembling India's Constitution' is an original work of constitutional history and imagination.

SANJEEV VERMA/HINDUSTAN TIMES

The book succeeds in its central argument, which is that there was both broad and deep public participation in the framing of India's Constitution.



Assembling India's Constitution: By Rohit De and Ornit Shani, Penguin Random House India, 400 pages, ₹799.

nial legislatures in the provinces, and from the tribes. In another segment, the authors discuss how the Constitution was "taken on tour" in various "far-flung" parts of the country: where people could not access the Assembly, the Assembly went to them. Just about everyone had something to say about the Constitution—and, what is even more striking, the secretariat of the Constituent Assembly had a process through which such correspondence was catalogued, filed and actually placed before members of the Constituent Assembly for their consideration.

Assembling India's Constitution succeeds on multiple levels. It succeeds as a work of history. It succeeds in inaugurating a new account of the framing of India's Constitution. And it succeeds in its central argument, which is that there was both broad and deep public participation in the framing of India's Constitution.

Beyond that, however, the following question arises: what, then, follows from this? As a practising lawyer as well as a writer on the Indian Constitution, for me, this question takes two forms. First, what—if anything—does this mean for *interpreting* the Constitution today? The writers are clear that their argument is not that the voluminous correspondence that came from the people of India to the Constituent Assembly actually had a tangible impact upon the language of the final document. In that way, the people did participate, but it is unclear whether—and to what extent—they were heard.

This distinguishes the process of the framing of India's Constitution from the more famous participation-oriented stories of constitutional drafting. For example, the framing of Kenya's 2010 Constitution involved a *formal* process of public hearings and consultations across the

length and breadth of Kenya. This was followed by a voluminous report that summarised the inputs that had come in from the people, both topic-wise and on the basis of geography. The impact of these inputs can then be traced through how the language of the draft changed in each iteration, often in direct response to public suggestion. The process of drafting, thus, was a *conversation*.

In the Indian process, however, other than the acknowledgements from the secretariat of the Constituent Assembly, it appears to (largely) be a monologue, as one of the conversational partners—the one that held all the power—remained silent. How, then, can we harness this rich history of participation into understanding how we should read the Constitution today? Can we?

The second part of the question is: what has been the impact of this history having been erased from our public and legal culture for the last 75 years? At one level, the answer is simple: it has distorted our debates about the Constitution. At the level of constitutional practice, it has had another distorting effect: it has led to judgements like Central Vista, where our courts reach facile conclusions about how public participation has never been a fundamental constitutional value, and cannot inform constitutional adjudication today. This, once again, is in stark contrast to jurisdictions like Kenya, where the history of public participation is so woven into public culture, that no judge or court can ignore it when deciding cases on constitutional validity.

It is here that *Assembling India's Constitution* might be of use to lawyers in court. While the Constitution does not explicitly guarantee a right to public participation, there are laws—such as the Forest Rights Act—which do so. Armed with De and Shani's historical arguments, the case for public participation being an enduring constitutional value, right from the beginning of our constitutional journey, can help in providing such laws with a constitutional foundation, and in pushing back against their dilution or evisceration. As with the Central Vista case, of course, there is no guarantee that the quality of constitutional argumentation will change constitutional outcomes, but it never hurts to have a string in the bow.

Whether constitutional lawyer, historian, or simply an interested citizen, *Assembling India's Constitution* is an original work of constitutional history and imagination, and one that rewards a close and careful study.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based advocate and legal scholar.

The secret history of the Hindi language

Tyler W. Williams reveals how political, cultural and economic forces shaped Hindi publishing in the subcontinent

Aditya Mani Jha

At the Arya Samaj school in Ranchi where I studied, one of the fixtures was a *havan* (Hindu fire ritual) held on Saturdays, our Sanskrit teacher leading the chanting of the *mantras*. One sneaky morning, I rifled through the book in question and discovered that it contained the weekly *havan mantras* copied out in longhand, alongside colloquial Hindi instructions for vocal emphasis, tone and tenor, like stage directions.

For my teacher, the medium was the message. The words written in his little book were inextricable from the circumstances that led to their inscription. The physical form in which books are produced, as well as the material and social circumstances of production, play a crucial role in our understanding of the history of the Hindi language.

As a historical framework this is especially relevant for Hindi since Hindi publishing as an organised industry is no more than 100-odd years old, when the demand for a common tongue for India's freedom movement resulted in the standardisation of the language. These factors also ended up shaping how Hindi was established as a versatile language of the masses in the subcontinent—a medium for poetry, politics, devotion and even revolution.

These two interrelated arguments form the core of Tyler W. Williams' excellent book, *If All the World Were Paper: A History of Writing in Hindi*. As he explains in the introduction, each chapter "reconstructs a 'scene' of vernacular writing in early modern north India, explaining how ideologies of writing, textual genres, practices of inscription and performance, and material text artefacts worked together to form an organic whole."

The scenes being described pertain to specific genres or kinds of texts: the *pem-*

katha (epic romance), the *pothi* (scholastic book), the *gutaka* (handwritten personal notebooks like the one described in this essay's opening paragraph) and, finally, the *granth* or *vani* (Sikh scriptures collecting the sayings of a particular guru).

In the chapter on the *pem-katha*, for instance, Williams analyses 14th-century poet Maulana Daud's epic Sufi romance *Candayan* (1379). Daud leaves a number of linguistic clues indicating the influence of Amir Khusrau's *rekhta* (mixed) verses that incorporated both Hindi and Persian lines, like the poem *Sakal Ban Phool Rahi Sarson* (*Yellow mustard blooms in the field*), often sung during the Hindu springtime festival of Basant Panchami.

The author shows us how the ideal of a polyglot emperor, well-versed in a number of languages, including Sanskrit and Persian, was described in verse by Daud—scholars like Sheldon Pollock and Christian Novetzke now locate this point in history as the beginning of the subcontinent's multilingual literary culture, propagated by Sultanate courts and spread across the land by their occupants.

Similarly, the chapter on the *pothi* describes how *nirgun* (without attributes) Bhakti writings (from the 17th to the early 19th centuries) created a new kind of "written vernacular". Though they followed the grammar and morphology of Hindi, these texts included well-chosen stock phrases like "*ganeshaaya namah*" (obseance to Ganesha) and "Arjun *uvacha*" (thus Arjun spoke) to evoke the "feel" of a classical language like Sanskrit. Williams is especially attentive to the handwritten idiosyncrasies of the text. Red ink was used for meta-textual commentary, following older traditions, where the *pothi* was copied out in multiple languages for various rulers of the time.

Generally speaking, meta-text is a versatile tool for the kind of analysis we see in



A book is an artefact that belongs to the realm of the physical.

ISTOCKPHOTO

If All the World Were Paper. Premodern Hindi manuscripts (12th-16th centuries) are unusually detailed and descriptive when it comes to meta-text, including an array of phrases describing the physical act of writing—*racha* (Sanskrit verb for "create"), *granth-bandh*, *gaanth* (literally, "to tie") and so on, each indicating a different mode of production for these historically important texts.

Williams describes his research methods in detail, explaining how the physical inspection of manuscripts as well as close reading yield vital clues and hypotheses. There is a crucial third technique involved here, too, one that students of the digital humanities are finding increasingly relevant: "distant reading".

The phrase describes the aggregation of large amounts of text and the subsequent quantitative, computer-led evaluation of the same. A computer's deep dive into a mountain of premodern texts can tell you how often a word or phrase or string of characters occur in a certain saint or poet's corpus. In the hands of an interdisciplinary academic like Williams, distant reading can be the beginning of a hypothesis—or the means to definitively prove one.

The million-dollar question is, why is any of this important? Why should we study the materiality of books? What can we learn about the texture of lived reality by smelling the ink, so to speak?

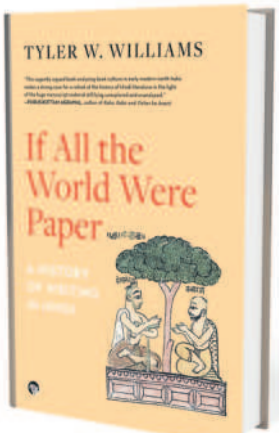
There are any number of examples from around the world that demonstrate

the importance of this endeavour. In the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Vilnius, Lithuania, you can see several samizdat exhibits—"samizdat" is the Russian word for banned, censored or underground publications produced under the Soviet regime, often written by hand and concealed in plain sight. Pamphlets would be hidden in the binding, words in old newspapers would be strategically highlighted to create encrypted passages, invisible ink was used in certain cases. Because these techniques were used to evade Soviet censors, studying the samizdat texts can tell us a lot about the sociopolitical temperature at any given point in the history of the erstwhile USSR.

And we needn't go far from home to understand the importance of materiality in the literary context. Take journalist and writer Akshaya Mukul's masterful non-fiction book *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* (2015). It told us how the Gorakhpur-based Gita Press played a central role in shaping a "Hindu consciousness", especially among north Indian middle-class families. More recently, scholar Aakriti Mandhwani in *Everyday Reading: Middlebrow Magazines and Book Printing in Post-Independence India* (2024) explained how the rise of Hindi magazines like *Sarita* and *Dharmyug* in the 1940s contributed to nascent middle-class aspirations after independence.

A contemporary student of history cannot stop at reading the words themselves. They must investigate the economics behind the production of the book, pause to inspect the ink, typeface, binding, and other accoutrements of printing and publishing. At the end of the day, a book is an artefact that belongs to the realm of the physical, and upon its body is imprinted the story of its life for those persistent enough to join the dots.

Aditya Mani Jha is a Delhi-based writer.



If All the World Were Paper: By Tyler W. Williams, Speaking Tiger, 336 pages, ₹699.

China can’t afford to ignore its army of gig workers



JULIANA LIU

Pivoting to a tech-driven growth model after the collapse of the property sector is a sensible move for China. The strategy has helped Beijing win a trade truce with Washington. But it may take years for the country’s industrial giants to mature enough to create enough jobs.

In the meantime, some 200 million people — equivalent to about 40 per cent of

the urban labour force — are stuck in the gig economy. That experience lies at the core of writer Hu Anyan’s bestselling memoir *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing*, a raw, darkly comical work newly available in English. Policymakers must move more quickly and decisively with reforms to support this large and powerful group of consumers that the slowing economy can’t afford to do without.

The book takes readers behind the scenes of an e-commerce worker’s daily grind, in an echo of Anthony Bourdain’s restaurant industry account *Kitchen Confidential*. It affirms the need for Beijing to give legal protections, health insurance, and social security benefits to these workers. It’s an idea that is likely to find support from Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, JD.com Inc, and Meituan, a trio of delivery giants trying to add drivers as they battle for

market share. They are already offering more benefits than mandated by the state.

Hu’s low-wage jobs as an overnight worker at a logistics warehouse and a delivery driver were often exhausting, dehumanising, and alienating — experiences that gig workers in other countries will no doubt recognise. But the difference in China is the sheer scale of size and competition. Everything is just much bigger, faster, and more ruthless.

Some of Hu’s most compelling insights from his three years in the industry were about going to the bathroom. Or, rather, not going. During his time in the packaging facility, he worked 12-hour overnight shifts. The warehouse was so hot that the author “sweated so much I never once needed to pee while on shift.”

As a driver in Beijing, he did occa-

sionally relieve himself. But because time was money, he began calculating whether going to the toilet was worthwhile from a financial perspective. Each idle minute costs seven US cents, a consequential amount given he was working six days a week, aiming to make \$1,000 a month. Hu stopped doing delivery work at the end of 2019 after his most-generous employer folded. Since then, the national employment picture has become more precarious.

Gerard DiPippo, an associate director at the RAND China Research Center, estimated that the 12.5 million jobs that were created in the year through June undershot the pre-pandemic trajectory by about 1.6 million. Online data has shown a decline in new job postings, he said, while part-time and gig roles have become more prevalent. About 15 million have left the construction

industry over a decade with many landing in the services sector, which includes ad-hoc delivery work.

The deterioration in employment should give officials more reason to act. For now, though, they seem to be content to wait things out. Politically empowered from battling Washington to a standstill on trade on the strength of the country’s industrial prowess, Beijing has put even more emphasis on high-tech industries as a growth driver.

But ignoring the freelance economy would be a mistake. Over the past five years, a number of national administrative guidelines have been issued, setting out a legal basis to provide benefits and protections to these types of workers. This is potentially a major innovation in labour law. However, it lacks enforcement and implementation

teeth, so the situation on the ground hasn’t materially changed, according to Ou Lin, a Chinese employment law expert at Lancaster University in the UK.

Now, policymakers should waste no time in creating the necessary framework to improve conditions for gig workers. Beijing won’t face any pushback from e-commerce giants — they’ve been gradually offering their riders more benefits as a recruitment tool. Still, having a more solid legal foundation would set the stage for sustained and steady improvements for freelancers, without relying on the whims of the big players.

Beijing’s bet on its industrial sector hasn’t quite paid off in terms of job creation and wealth distribution. Hu has had his Cinderella moment and no longer needs to toil away as a gig worker, thanks to the success of his writing. For so many others, freelancing is still their livelihood. They shouldn’t be ignored.

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Bloomberg

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Shivakumar’s crucial weekend



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Earlier this week, Karnataka politics saw a decisive turning point. Two remarks highlighted this.

“When I first became finance minister, I was mocked that this Kuruba can’t even count sheep. I took that as a challenge and went on to present 16 Budgets,” Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said as he presented the state Budget earlier this week. He added: “I’ll present the 17th Budget, too.” The Congress leadership in the state tried to look carefully expressionless.

Within days, his deputy and state Congress chief, D K Shivakumar, presented an enigma wrapped in a mystery and cloaked as a threat when he said at a party event: “I cannot hold the post (of Congress chief) permanently ... it has already been five and a half years and in March it will be six.” When asked about leadership change in the state government, he advised reporters to “consult an astrologer”. And so, Karnataka’s quest for a November revolution ended — not with a bang but with a whimper.

The background is well known. In November, the Congress government completed two and a half years of its tenure in power. According to a supposed understanding reached between the two tallest leaders in the Congress in the state in 2023 just after the Assembly polls, Mr Siddara-

maiah would be chief minister for the first half of the five-year term, followed by Mr Shivakumar. In the interim Mr Shivakumar was made deputy chief minister.

Congress General Secretary K C Venugopal may have unwittingly (though this is unlikely) had earlier provided substance to the power-sharing arrangement by saying that Mr Shivakumar would serve as state party president until the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, suggesting he might get another job after that.

In Karnataka rotating chief ministerships have not worked so well. In 2006, Janata Dal (Secular) leader HD Kumaraswamy, now a Union minister, engineered a kind of coup to form a coalition government with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with 45 legislators on his side as against the BJP’s 79. He had forged a gentleman’s agreement to share power for 20 months each before the Assembly polls, which were supposed to be held in 2009, but reneged on his part of the deal. B S Yediyurappa became chief minister, but for just seven days, as Mr Kumaraswamy withdrew support from the coalition, forcing the government to fall. That was a rotation arrangement between two different parties. In this case, even if Mr Shivakumar wanted to oust Mr Siddaramaiah, whose support would he take? The shrewd politician that he is, Mr Siddaramaiah figured his rival had no option but to lump it. And the high command in New Delhi saw no reason to rock the boat.

The Congress in Rajasthan saw the same story being played out. In 2018, Sachin Pilot, state Congress president, led the Congress to victory in the Assembly elections but Ashok Gehlot became chief minister. Mr Pilot, who implied some assurances had been given to him at the time of the elections, rebelled, tarring his own gov-

ernment with charges of corruption and preparing to jump ship by forming a government with the BJP’s help. The party averted that crisis but he never got to be chief minister.

For Mr Shivakumar, the stakes are higher. Mr Pilot is not yet 50 and has many more years in politics. Mr Shivakumar is 63, and if the Congress doesn’t return to power — as seems likely — in 2028, when Assembly elections are due, he will have to wait till 2033 to become chief minister. He will be 71.

Mr Shivakumar is a Vokkaliga. Heads of the Vokkaliga mutts openly backed him for chief minister in 2023. But it has turned into an interminable wait and the religious leaders are privately wondering if they made a mistake in putting their weight behind him.

With Mr Siddaramaiah’s announcement that he would be the one presenting the next state Budget as well, Mr Shivakumar has begun making his moves. Many of the members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) loyal to him are camping in New Delhi. Mr Shivakumar reckons this is the time to strike — when the party leadership is on the defensive after the disastrous performance in Bihar. His MLAs have never shied away from reminding anyone who’s listening that he is the biggest resource-person for the Congress. There are many examples of his resource-raising and organisational skills: In 2002, when he corralled MLAs in a resort to prevent floor crossing, which would have caused the state government (in which the Congress figured) in Maharashtra to fall, and on many later occasions.

The upcoming weekend could be the start of another chapter in the life of the Congress government in Karnataka.

The tribute to Tejas

It is a brilliant, reasonably priced, and mostly homemade aircraft with a stellar safety record; only two crashes in 24 years since its first flight. But its crash is a moment of introspection

The unfortunate Tejas crash and the pilot’s death at the Dubai Air Show are a shattering moment. The Indian Air Force (IAF) is too strong, proud and professional to let this weigh it down. For India’s policymakers, however, this is a useful juncture to reflect on whether they’ve been, and are being entirely fair to the IAF, given what it needs. Or in the demands they place on the IAF, the compromises and “adjustments” they seek.

It is also important, however, that we take a deep breath and remind ourselves that pilots are particularly tough people. Among the toughest of them will be found in the IAF because globally they are some of those few who remain perpetually in operational mode.

It is not to say that the Indian Army and Indian Navy enjoy long tenures in peacetime. The IAF stands out for special mention for three reasons. One, it is the first responder in most escalatory or punitive situations, given the Modi government’s every-act-of-terror-is-an-act-of-war-deserving-instant retaliation doctrine. Second, because the IAF is the only one of the three services where combat is carried out almost exclusively by its officers, who form a small, tightly knit community. And third, of the three the IAF is the most technology-dependent.

Once again, since we understand the inter-service competition, we must acknowledge that technology is critical to the other two as well. It is just that in the air force, the fighting elements — the instruments to guide, control and protect them on the ground — all bristle with ever-changing electronics.

To the IAF’s challenges we can add a fourth. Unlike the army and the navy, where numbers can sometimes fill technology gaps here and there, the IAF has less leeway. Further, since the capital cost of combat-aviation assets is not as high as that for the navy, it is more possible for Pakistan to keep pace, even edge ahead in some areas — especially because it is customised for air-to-air warfare in very short skirmishes. And the Chinese are always there to help.

Since the mid-1950s, when the Americans started giving the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) their latest fighters, the IAF has mostly been forced to play catchup. In 1965, it fought the PAF with a supersonic and missile advantage in F-104 Starfighters. By 1971, deepening relations with the Soviet Union brought parity and in the seventies the Pakistanis were still recovering.

By 1984 the picture changed dramatically as

the first F-16s arrived, gifted by the United States (US) five years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This, however, is not a history of reconstruction of the seven-decade race for air superiority in the subcontinent. It is more about the critical dilemmas India has battled on this front. Of these, Tejas is one outcome and a reasonably good one. It’s a brilliant, reasonably priced, mostly homemade aircraft with a stellar safety record, given only two crashes in 24 years since its first flight. But, is it the best we could have done by 2025? Is it still playing catchup with the competition? Couldn’t we have done this much earlier? Remember that when Manohar Parrikar as defence minister arm-twisted a reluctant IAF 2015 to accept Tejas Mark 1A, the deliveries were committed in 2022. Now, we will be fortunate if the first squadron becomes fully operational by early 2027. There is a tactical and strategic price to pay for five-year delays.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has produced several iterations of the JF-17, with no claims to it being more than 57 per cent “indigenous”. It is a joint venture of the Pakistan Aircraft Complex (PA) and Chengdu Aircraft Corporation. The Tejas Mk 1A inductions in the next few months might fill some of these gaps, but Hindustan Aeronautics’ struggles with synchronising the new, swadeshi electronic warfare (EW) suite with its Elbit (Israeli) radar and missile integrations and some other technologies have increased the delays and the adversaries, meanwhile, will not stay frozen. Since these are mostly software issues these have also deprived Hindustan Aeronautics of the usual excuse of delay in the arrival of GE engines.

Once again, while it is a great idea to have your own fighter, we serve ourselves poorly by being constantly trapped in a catchup situation. That is central to the many air-power dilemmas we are talking about.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

In the late 1950s, when the Pakistanis were getting their first Sabres, Jawaharlal Nehru’s government searched for alternatives. The Soviet linkage had not yet come up, the commitment to true non-alignment was heady but it also led to self-denial for the military, especially the IAF. The first IAF jets, Vampires from Britain and the French, Dassault Ouragan (Toofani) were obsolete on arrival, inducted in 1953. The IAF’s acquisition of British Hunters and the Gnat, which the Royal Air Force had discarded, was a quick fix and the gap with the missile-equipped Sabres and night-capable

Starfighters remained.

Foreseeing this, in the mid-1950s Nehru decided to build a domestic, supersonic jet fighter. He spotted German Kurt Tank, designer of a most successful Luftwaffe fighter FW-190 (FW for the Focke-Wulf), more than 20,000 copies of which flew and fought in World War II. Since Tank was no Nazi, he was among those in demand internationally. He was initially hired by Argentina but soon unemployed as Juan Peron lost power. Nehru brought him to India as director of the Madras Institute of Technology. Tank quickly put together a team of Indian engineers. One of them was a young man called APJ Abdul Kalam.

The design of what was named HF-24 Marut was great. But there was no engine. In the course of time Tank left and India persisted.

The aspiration of breaking the sound barrier was never realised. The maximum it did was Mach .93 and that with two Orpheus engines, which India was making for the tiny, single-engine Gnat. A project to build an engine jointly with Egypt failed. But so strong is the fighter nationalism that India still built 147 copies, of which 28 crashed. It was fully retired only in 1985 and nobody in the IAF shed a tear.

Some similar waffling has bedevilled the Tejas. The government first cleared what it then called the light combat aircraft (LCA) in 1983. The head of the Defence Research and Development Organisation then, a fine metallurgist VS Arunachalam (in his forties), would sometimes say, in self-deprecating humour: Call it “the last chance for Arunachalam”. Between him and fantastic aeronautical scientists they put together a great team. We had a design ready soon enough.

Then, it took another 18 years to take its first flight, having been named Tejas by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It took another 15 years for initial operational clearance (IOC), another further four for full operational clearance (FOC). The story continues.

This is the short and regrettable story of Indian air power getting caught in a desperate seven-decade technology race from behind. Lately any valid customer’s impatience with the IAF or demand for new foreign fighters has been attacked viciously on social media. There are suggestions that until the IAF is willing to accept something, maybe “10-15 per cent” below the ideal, our domestic technologies can’t progress. Anybody asking for a faster filling of the gaps is dismissed as “Import Bahadur”. The forces, trained to keep silent, unfortunately, make a poor lobby for themselves. Or they’d tell you that in a combat nobody offers you a handicap because you are catching up.

This tragic loss in Dubai and the sacrifice of an incredibly skilled young life are an important moment to reflect on our self-inflicted limitations and air power gaps. For clarity, there is nothing to suggest something was wrong with this aircraft, or its type, the Tejas Mark 1. But it reminds us of our lackadaisical approach, and brings about change, this sacrifice would have achieved something critically important for India.

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Screens are the new mirror

EYE CULTURE

AYUSHI SINGH

My Instagram feed has recently been looking a little different, yet strangely familiar. Almost every frame shows a woman in a red saree posed against the same warm ochre wall, lit by the same gentle sidelight, her shadow falling in a gentle arc behind her. The faces change, the drapes shift, but the image barely does. Their skin appears cinematically smooth, the colours deepened to a quiet glow, the expression held in that delicate place between candid and composed. It’s as if the photos were taken in a single room, one where the front camera understands exactly what we hope to see.

These portraits come from Google’s Gemini Nano, the “Nano Banana” trend that turns regular selfies into retro-style images. The tool smooths the skin, adjusts light, and folds everyone into the same nostalgic frame. One filter, repeated with surprising consistency.

This moment has been a long time coming. A few years ago, photographs posted online looked like the days they emerged from. Facebook albums held rugged corridors, awkward birth-days, red-eye grins, and flashes that washed out half the room. They weren’t flattering, but they were unguarded and that honesty carried its own weight. Early Instagram had the same roughness: A Valencia sky, a half-bright food plate, edges that blurred simply because no one cared enough to fix them.

Gradually, that texture receded. Filters grew subtler but more decisive.

Faces softened. Facetune became routine. Good angle and golden-hour lighting stopped being lucky and became instructions. Editing apps like Lightroom and PicsArt added their own AI (artificial intelligence) touches of lifting shadows, smoothing skin, brightening eyes — small shifts that eventually shaped the default way a photo “should” look. Around the same time, studies on Indian campuses began noting rising discomfort among students about their appearance, often linked to hours spent scrolling through curated feeds.

And then the pandemic arrived with a magnifying glass none of us asked for. Zoom calls became small, persistent mirrors. Pores, jawlines, uneven tones — all of it appeared harsher. Psychologists globally started reporting the same pattern. People weren’t comparing themselves with celebrities but with their own on-screen reflection, flattened and unflattering. A study from the American Psychological Association later found that young adults who halved their social-media use reported marked improvements in body image within weeks. The pressure wasn’t aspiration; it was the sheer weight of self-surveillance.

So when tools like Gemini Nano offered a gentler skin and softer light, the instinct to try them came less from vanity and more from wanting a brief escape. The red-saree portraits weren’t only aesthetically appealing. They allowed people to momentarily step outside the bluntness of the front camera. The nostalgia was styling. The comfort lay in meeting a version of themselves that felt warmer, less

exposed, and easier to accept.

But comfort has its limits. The more convincing these portraits become, the more quietly they reset the benchmark. The screen stops recording and begins guiding. It shows not just who we are but who we might look like with a few quiet adjustments. Once that suggestion settles in, the unedited version feels unfinished. Compliments now gain weight only when they arrive beneath a post as heart-eye emojis. Studies across regions have noted the same cycle: The more time people spend retouching or monitoring their appearance online, the less comfortable they feel with their reflection offline.

Even so, a quieter resistance has taken shape. Many used the AI portraits purely for the pleasure of it — a brief step into a cinematic frame. Others leaned in the opposite direction posting raw, uncorrected photos as a kind of soft rebellion. Photos with swollen eyes, uneven tans or hair that refused to stay in place now feel like small acts of honesty.

Perhaps this is the paradox we now inhabit. The screen lets us try on versions of ourselves that feel polished or dramatic, yet it also pulls us away from the face the mirror recognises without hesitation. “Mirror, mirror on the wall...” once belonged to fairy tales, now we say it quietly to our front cameras, knowing it’ll always show something slightly unreal, a reflection almost but not quite like us.

The mirror was kinder. It told the truth without asking us to be perfect for it. The screen, for all its glow, is far more unforgiving for it remembers every angle we wish it didn’t.

What a fall, my countrymen!



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Haye O Rabba! What is happening at WPP?

The world’s largest advertising network has just hired the world’s most famous (and expensive) consulting firm, McKinsey, to help “reset” its strategy. And almost on cue, there are media reports that say that Havas Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Yannick Bolloré has been in touch with WPP, discussing an “investment” or “consolidation”, perhaps even a buyout. Phew!

Let us start with the McKinsey hiring first. It is a clear signal that trouble at WPP is real. And consequently, the solutions being sought are not necessarily gentle. It is no longer about killing iconic agencies (JWT, Young & Rubicam, and Wunderman), merging entities (Grey into Ogilvy), or rechristening businesses (Group M to WPP Media) or just trimming headcount by 7,000-odd employees — the conflagration is mighty more serious and needs fire engines to be summoned — and that too

without delay. So, McKinsey is here. And now.

WPP’s shares have fallen more than 60 per cent since the beginning of 2025, and continue to trade near 27-year lows. The business’s market capitalisation has fallen by more than 80 per cent over the past eight years — it was valued at 25 billion pounds in 2017; today the value is closer to 3.3 billion pounds. After two profit warnings in three months and a full-year revenue decline expected to be possibly as steep as 6 per cent, the patience of shareholders has obviously thinned out pretty much. Incoming CEO Cindy Rose’s blunt verdict of “unacceptable performance” kind of sums up the seriousness of the problem at WPP.

What was once a daunting and dominant creative empire, with mammoth and magical media cloud today resembles a jumbled-up tech-and-data wannabe with unwieldy and messy realities of scale, tottering, old, and shaky legacy structures, and ever moving client expectations. All further complicated by declining revenues and a new elephant in the room called artificial intelligence (AI). What is McKinsey’s mandate? For those who are aware of McKinsey would know they aren’t coming in to discuss the next “big idea” that will excite creatives and pave the way for more Cannes accolades. Or discuss “reshaping” the organisation by playing musical chairs. They’re at WPP to “stress-

test choices” and, more importantly, to force decisions that lead to rising revenues and sustainable profits. That’s it.

Now to Yannick Bolloré and his plans. WPP shares rose sharply amid market speculation that the advertising group could be the subject of a takeover by a rival or a private-equity buyer. Havas, which was listed on Euronext in Amsterdam last December and is controlled by the billionaire Vincent Bolloré, reportedly held internal talks about a potential bid on WPP. Media reports vary on whether actual contact was made with WPP top echelons or not, but the news itself helped WPP stock gain 11 per cent in just a single day. There have also been other “inspired” reports which suggested that private-equity groups — Apollo and KKR — have been looking seriously at some WPP assets.

For the record, KKR did last year acquire WPP’s PR company FGS Global. So an interest in the larger WPP company cannot be completely ruled out. And Havas, the smallest of the global advertising holding companies, had previously tried to build scale, particularly in relation to its media buying and selling capability by investing in UK (United Kingdom) media-buying entity Aegis. Vincent Bolloré exited with a substantial upside when Dentsu gulped down Aegis in 2012. Yannick Bolloré could well have been planning something similar with WPP — in

whole, or in part, this time again. Earlier this year Accenture, the US consultancy group that has built up a large advertising business, also reportedly held talks with WPP over a potential deal or partnership. As they say, there is never smoke without fire — though for now Havas at least has negated press reports, and denied any dialogue with WPP. But who knows?


The WPP appointment of McKinsey is not about tightening alone. Sure there will be much bloodshed and a large number of job losses in the days to come. But the mandate really is to get WPP to shape up, speed up, simplify, streamline, and smarten up. The game will change from maximal (more clients, more agencies, more offices, more people, more revenue) to optimal (more profits, more return on investment). And the culture at WPP’s agencies will have to go through a cataclysmic change — from creatives and campaigns to clicks and conversions in an increasingly machine-to-machine world driven by AI.

What a fall for WPP! From a celebrated advisor to Coca-Cola, Ford, Google, Microsoft, Nestlé, Unilever, IBM, Apple, Amazon, and Pepsi to one seeking wiser counsel from McKinsey! This must have taken WPP swallowing a lot of pride, and eating the humble pie.

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The author is chairman of Rediffusion





A thought for today

What of soul was left, I wonder,
when the kissing had to stop?

ROBERT BROWNING

Bad Optics But...

Tejas, despite Dubai tragedy, remains vital for IAF

It was a terrible tragedy, bad optics for India, and it put a sharper focus on a critical indigenous defence project. The pilot didn't survive the Tejas crash at Dubai Air Show. And images of India's fighter jet tumbling to the ground at one of the world's biggest showcases for aviation tech, have multiple implications. Accidents and crashes are not unknown at air shows. Back in Aug, a Polish Air Force pilot was killed when his F-16 jet crashed during the rehearsal for the Radom Air Show. Add to this crashes during training and routine peace-time flights – in July, a US Navy F-35, one of the most advanced fighters in the world, crashed in California.

But current military-geopolitical circumstances mean that Dubai's Tejas crash attracts greater attention. Coming after Op Sindoor, which saw aerial battles with Pakistan, the crash will certainly get the rumour mills churning. That Pakistan's Chinese-origin JF-17 was also taking part in Dubai will add masala to the narrative. This crash is, there's no getting away from it, awful PR for India. But more substantive issues are at stake.

The Tejas project has been hit by massive delays in production. For example, deliveries of Tejas MK1A were to start from Feb 2024. But thanks to engine delivery delays by America's GE and other issues with integration of electronic warfare suite and specialised munitions, deliveries will only begin next year. IAF has been poorly served by those in charge of Tejas. But indigenisation must continue despite setbacks. IAF's squadron numbers are down, especially with the retirement of MiG-21s. Given India's strategic-security challenges, thanks to a China-Pakistan nexus, Tejas is absolutely vital for IAF. It's supposed to bulk up the air force to the point where multi-theatre deployment is not an issue. Dubai is a tragic reminder of that imperative.

Apes Knew, Do We?

Kissing is evolutionary tradition. Moral police, take note

Trust scientists to take the thrill out of kissing, tracking its roots back 21mn years ago to find most apes locked lips – before modern 'we' happened, let alone modern romance – as they chased a most unromantic question: why did this germ-sharing behaviour evolve at all? They call it 'an evolutionary conundrum', essentially since there's no benefit to kissing, how come the 'behaviour' survived millennia? Neanderthals and humans 'shared oral bacteria' even 112,000 years ago – if that passes off as a smooch. There wasn't enough data to see if apes canoodling was platonic/affectionate, or sexual as in tied to mating. Regardless, the study has piqued interest in the obvious follow-up – when did romance enter the locked lips picture? And onwards to a not-so-scientific field – why on earth do some cultures frown upon kissing when it is, verily, timeless tradition?

Enter human behavioural scientists in 2015 who studied romantic-sexual 'lip-to-lip contact that may or not be prolonged' in 168 cultures. That definition alone is a 'kiss of death' for a kiss in a peer-reviewed journal. Their findings? Kissing isn't nearly as universal as believed. Just 46% of cultures kiss. And, more socially complex the culture, higher the frequency of kissing. Which simply means that moralising judges, rude and crude cops, judge aunties & WhatsApp uncles everywhere are but sad products of lame homogeneous societies, not guardians of tradition.

Silicon Valley Didn't Turn Right, We Read It Wrong

Its old liberal face was a triumph of PR

Remember when Elon Musk was in Hillary Clinton's camp? He said Trump didn't "seem to have the sort of character that reflects well on the US". That's broadly the story of most tech "bros" – Mark Zuckerbergs and Eric Schmidts. Twitter's Jack Dorsey gushed in 2010: "Wow...I had the honour of sitting right next to Secretary Clinton."

Some pundits explained this liberal slant as morality – most billionaires were setting up philanthropic trusts at the time. Others said it was self-interest, because govt projects padded tech revenues. But now when the tech world makes no pretence of progressive politics at all – Meta's ditched diversity; Musk wielded a chainsaw on stage "for bureaucracy" – an alternative explanation is needed. Journalist **Jacob Silverman** provides it in his book *Gilded Rage: Elon Musk and the Radicalisation of Silicon Valley*.

Although Musk figures on the cover and in the title, the book is not about him. But as the biggest billionaire of all, and briefly Trump's right hand, he's an exemplar of the class. "He became the most high-profile example of a dramatic rightward political shift among top tech executives and venture capitalists, and his public persona utterly transformed," Silverman writes.

The question is why. And it would be a mistake to look for answers in the months leading up to Trump's re-election, because "This new political reality didn't start with Elon Musk or Peter Thiel or the 2016 election..." Look back far enough, and the tech industry began life in the military's lap. It made its earliest chips for American ICBMs. In the post-9/11 era, "tech companies...established a massive, indiscriminate surveillance apparatus at home."

Even when tech bros were cultivating a friendly, politically-correct image,

the reality was that they "marketed themselves like utopian college campuses but governed themselves as ruthless surveillance states". Silverman cites Twitter, whose largest outside shareholder was Saudi billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, and the relationship went beyond money. The Saudi state was able to "track dissident thought...unmask pseudonymous accounts and trace their owners, who were then arrested". How? The Saudis had "a spy ring inside Twitter itself".

To imagine the tech universe as liberal and progressive even though it consorted with the most repressive regimes – in 2016, Uber got \$3.5bn from Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund – is delusional. What we fell for, Silverman says, was its PR.

So, why have the "bros" embraced reactionary politics now, why are they raging despite having everything? One, Trump's re-election "moved the window of acceptable political opinion firmly to the right, (and) a wealthy class already predisposed to authoritarian beliefs readily followed". Two, they aren't exactly young anymore, and see that they have failed to change the world in any fundamental way. San Francisco, home to Silicon Valley, is decaying. In Thiel's words: "We wanted flying cars, instead we got 140 characters." Three, they consider themselves superior to the rest of humanity and miss the adulation that waned after a string of scandals last decade. So, they need a new power trip.

Loose monetary policies since the pandemic gave them the opportunity. Easy money enriched billionaires massively, even though most – like Trump acolyte Vivek Ramaswamy, for whom Silverman worked briefly – have nothing useful to show for their fortunes. The only use they've found for their billions is to amass power for power's sake.

Big Bang, Work-In-Progress

GOI's junked archaic, anti-entrepreneurship labour laws. But mega factories need more liberal rules. States that relax provisions further will attract big investment & create jobs

Arvind Panagariya



Chairman,
16th Finance
Commission

PM Modi has taken the courageous step of replacing 29 archaic labour laws, most of them predating Independence or the founding of the Republic, with four unified labour codes. If there ever was a mother of all reforms, this one is it. Personally, for this author, with dozens of op-eds, several academic articles, and multiple books making the case for the reform behind him, this is the culmination of a 25-year-long odyssey.

So politically challenging has been this reform that every govt since Narasimha Rao's considered it but failed to gather the courage to make any substantive progress on it.

The four codes cover (i) wages, (ii) industrial relations, (iii) social security, and (iv) occupational safety, health and working conditions. According to the 2nd National Commission on Labour, appointed to look into labour law reform as far back as 1999, the then-existing laws carried mutually inconsistent provisions, varied definitions of the same terms, and outdated clauses. A wit later stated that you could not implement 100% of Indian labour laws without violating 20% of them.

Rigid labour laws hurt entrepreneurship by constraining its growth, as well as workers by trapping them in low-productivity informal employment. A key provision in the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, forbids enterprises with 100 or more workers from laying off workers under any circumstances. This draconian provision, complemented by other rigidities in the policy regime, encouraged firms, especially in labour-intensive industries, such as apparel, to remain small. In these industries, labour costs account for a high proportion of total costs and, due to intense competition globally, profit margins are small. Therefore, firms fear becoming stuck paying their workers for life without revenue if they become unprofitable.

Counterpart firms in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and China do not face similar policy rigidities. As a result, firms in these countries are significantly larger than their Indian counterparts and are better able to exploit scale economies.

Economists have often described Indian firms as "dwarfs" because of their permanently small size. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), only 20.5% of non-agricultural workers, or 11% of all workers, were employed in enterprises with 20 or more workers in 2023-24.

Indeed, it is the highly flexible labour (and land) markets that attracted Hong Kong and Taiwanese entrepreneurs to move their firms lock, stock, and barrel a few miles across to the Chinese coast, once China decided to open its economy to foreign investors.

These entrepreneurs brought complementary inputs, such as capital, technology, and world-market links, and became catalysts for what would later become the Chinese economic miracle. With a deep labour pool and flexible labour markets, firms in China can grow rapidly and specialise to take advantage of scale economies.

Two measures in the new Industrial Relations Code (IRC) make the Indian labour market more flexible.

- First, it introduces a provision for a written fixed-term contract, beyond which the firm is not obligated to continue employing the worker.
- Second, the code raises the threshold below



The Falling Dagger: A Relationship That's No Longer Love

To stay on in it is to keep suffering. Exit is the only wise course. You may be tempted to maintain the toxic tie out of revenge. Don't. Just close this chapter so a nice new one may begin

Sivakumar.Sundaram@timesofindia.com



Our ancestors, long before psychology became a discipline, devised ways to read human compatibility. They turned to the stars. Astrological charts were not mystical curiosities but practical tools, a proxy to gauge whether two individuals' energy fields would align. Planetary positions at birth were believed to reflect the invisible architecture of our personalities and destinies, like a cosmic fingerprint.

For many today, this may sound archaic. Astrology is dismissed as unscientific. And yet, even the most rational of us have felt the undeniable pull or the quiet repulsion of another's presence. Some people light up a room, while others drain its air. These are not figments of imagination but what can only be called energy fields. Call it chemistry, vibe, aura, or resonance, our ancestors gave it planetary names, we call it biology or psychology. The labels differ, the experience is universal.

Compatibility wears two faces. The tangible: upbringing, education, lifestyle, food habits, values, money. These are visible and measurable. The intangible: a flow in conversations, silences that feel easy, instinctive empathy, even laughter that rises in unison.

Dating, stripped of its cultural packaging, is an exploration of these energy fields. Can my being sit comfortably with yours? Can our rhythms harmonise without one drowning the other? Whether through horoscopes or shared playlists, the quest is the same: alignment, harmony, compatibility, shared values and beliefs.

Yet alignment is no guarantee. Despite care and intention, some relationships turn corrosive. The warmth of energy becomes a cold drain. The question then is not how to repair, but whether to endure at all.

When I wrote 'The Cage Of Expectations: Love Mostly Means Forgiveness' (Sept 27), some readers cautioned: forgiveness cannot become endurance, for

that may normalise toxicity. They are right.

Forgiveness is a balm for misunderstandings, disappointments, even deep hurts in fundamentally healthy relationships. It clears the air, dissolves ego, restores balance. But in a toxic relationship, forgiveness is like pouring water into a leaking bucket. No matter how much you give, it empties into the void. Endurance here is not a virtue but a slow poisoning.

An investment analogy | Life is a series of investments – education, careers, friendships, marriages. Not all succeed. In finance, the greatest trap is loss aversion: throwing good money after bad, hoping a failing stock will rebound. Investors call it "averaging down".



More often, it becomes the tragic act of catching a falling dagger. And what happens when you try to catch a falling dagger? You bleed.

Toxic relationships are falling daggers. They are not good stocks in bad weather; they are structurally broken. To cling to them is to bleed endlessly, waiting for a miracle. The only wise course is release.

Exits are painful. They come with costs, emotional upheaval, material division, social judgement. The ego resists. It whispers: "Don't let them win. Hold on till they break." But in this battlefield, no one wins.

Revenge scorches both the enemy and the self.

Exits are liberation. Just as surgery saves a body from malignant growth, an honourable exit saves the soul from corrosion. When one door closes, others open. To keep pounding on a locked door is only to bruise yourself.

Life is too precious to be spent in corridors of resentment. Time, invoked in our traditions as Mahakal, does not pause for our inner wars. While we remain entangled in conflict, the world keeps spinning, offering joys and opportunities we fail to see.

Ego and the illusion of punishment | Ego complicates exits. It convinces us that clinging on inflicts punishment on the other, that silence or withdrawal is revenge. But every blow aimed outward ricochets inward. The cage we think we are locking around another is the very prison we inhabit.

Ego is often the obstacle to forgiveness, which in its truest form cleanses energy fields. But to clarify: forgiveness is never a licence for toxicity. It was pointed out by some readers that "endurance" risks reinforcing unequal burdens, especially on women. That concern is vital. Endurance is not a medal to be worn; it is a chain to be shed. And once we recognise the weight of that chain, the choice becomes clear, for clinging to a toxic relationship is like catching a falling dagger. The longer we hold on, the deeper the cuts; only release can save us.

So what is the way forward? In finance, it is cutting losses. In medicine, it is surgery. In relationships, it is the honourable exit.

Exits are not failures. They are recognitions that some investments will not yield, and that wisdom lies not in eternal hope but in timely release. An exit does not close the book; it merely ends one chapter so another may begin.

Forgiveness in healthy relationships is freedom. Exit from toxic ones is survival. Both are acts of love, one for the other, the other for the self. Because in the end, love is not meant to drain. It is meant to heal. Not to imprison, but to set free.

Calvin & Hobbes



Follow The Gita To Boost Workplace Productivity

Meena Om

The proposal to increase work hours to fourteen hours a day, six days a week, for the sake of productivity, keeps surfacing repeatedly. Gita offers better solutions – guidance.

Employees could inculcate the habit of offering their finest, truthfully and diligently, to the *Param Chetna*, Supreme Consciousness. Instead of setting targets, putting in long hours, and rushing to complete projects by hook or by crook, it is essential to perform karm to the best of our ability. Plants grow according to the rhythm of nature. Similarly, businesses or projects also come to fruition in time. During the growth period, one can cut through ignorance and imperfections such as indiscipline and procrastination by being true to oneself.

Measure output on the four scales of:

truth, love, karm and light. Be truthful in your work; be 'lovable' – work harmoniously for the welfare of all; karm – work with all capacities, without complaint; light – study to be skilled at the task in hand and dispel doubts or misconceptions regarding it, because 'work is worship'.

Be a conscientious employee. Work without feeling guilty or carrying any emotional baggage or grudges against anyone, including the employer.

Fourteen hours of labour with two hours of rest, for instance, may not be conducive. Employers need to assess whether long work hours leading to fatigue, or fewer hours leading to greater focus, will increase productivity.

Human beings have already overtaxed the mind for selfish reasons. It is time to understand how effort, one's karm, can

contribute to the welfare of humanity.

If the golden rule of working with complete dhyana, using the mind, intellect, physical capacity, is applied, the benefits cannot be less than divine, making the remuneration a secondary consideration. Monetary gains should not be the primary consideration. Work satisfaction can accrue from sincere effort, rather than assessing monetary commercial or material gains.

It is not healthy to bind anyone with hard and fast rules so that it becomes a bondage. Instead, motivate people to work willingly by applying their full capability for better productivity.

The joy of karm lies in being attentive towards one's growth; experiencing satisfaction from working dutifully and rightfully, inspiring others towards


collective growth and progress.

Work should not trap one in a certain image, otherwise all energies will go into maintaining that image, limiting growth.

When in *samarpana*, absolute surrender, whatever comes before you, consider it godsend. Always be in gratitude and pray: 'Prabhu, you have given me so much *jnan* and *buddhi* that I am capable of doing this work with my whole being, as worship and with gratitude.'

A pleasant workplace, fostering a respectful, cheerful and harmonious attitude, along with enthusiasm towards a common goal, is more important than long work hours generating irritation, burden, and unpleasantness, which will never produce results of the desired level. Quality over quantity comes with a sense of belonging. Do your best by using all faculties, without calculation, politics or mind games.

Sacredspace



The law of nature is: Do the thing, and you shall have the power, but they who do not the thing have not the power.

Ralph W Emerson

Of Life And Love

STORIES OF THE WAY WE ARE

More often, it becomes the tragic act of catching a falling dagger. And what happens when you try to catch a falling dagger? You bleed.

Micro Dramas Eyeing Mega Market in India

Cheap to produce & scalable, they leverage AI

Micro dramas, where plots last as little as 90 secs, are surging in the biggest entertainment markets. Developed in China during Covid, their exports to other giant entertainment markets like the US and India have been swift. The vertical format goes well with smartphones, and creating such content costs a fraction of what video streaming services shell out. Yet, despite having overtaken BO revenues in China, micro dramas are not a direct threat to the legacy entertainment industry. For one, China does not have an entertainment industry of the scale of Hollywood, which would have to buy in to make it a global export. But the format is no passing fad. Micro dramas, as snackable content between regular entertainment 'meals', are big business.

Platforms are targeting this content to audiences precisely. These are typically viewers of drama on TV who can be hooked by vertical-format video that is an improvement over what TikTokers typically generate. The cost allows immediate scaling up and opens the field to an entirely new set of creative artists. There isn't much room for creative expression, but that could change as the format matures.

Since this content is distributed over social media platforms, there is advertising support in place. This could intensify as micro dramas capture more eyeballs. This is where the Indian market becomes interesting for import substitution. US streaming services have shaken up India's entertainment industry, and Chinese-styled micro dramas are stirring it as well.

AI adds a twist to the creation of short-form content. Tech companies operating social media platforms are seeking content to increase user engagement. They could train their bots on user data to ramp up screen time and advertising revenue. It's better than users doomscrolling through the antics of people and their pets, which has come to define user-generated content. It doesn't matter if the three-act play is squeezed into less than 3 mins, so long as the audience is hooked.

Mai-Baap Re Baap State Again in Action

In a country where government service delivery remains, well, patchy, Maharashtra's new resolution mandating that public officials 'stand and greet' MLAs and MPs, listen attentively to their concerns, and speak politely on the phone feels not just ironic but a tad touched by a 'Macaulay mindset'. The order goes further — requiring courtesy registers, 2-mth response deadlines, invitations to key district events and fixed meeting slots, all backed by the threat of disciplinary action for non-compliance.

While these may read as measures to enhance decorum, the veneer of civility disguises a deeper problem: India's infantilisation of its citizens. Public representatives may embody their constituencies, but that hardly justifies elevating them to a pedestal complete with obligatory standing ovations, mandated politeness and scripted courtesies like in a comedic scene from a Hindi 70s film. Such directives signal that deference to power matters more than strengthening public-facing institutions, or improving service delivery. They recast bureaucracy not as a system meant to serve people, but as one performing reverence for those in office. Besides, such ritualised respect is ripe for misuse. Who decides how much courtesy is enough? What if an MP or MLA misbehaves? The scope for subjective interpretation — and selective enforcement — is enormous. Rather than policing gestures of deference, the state government would do better to withdraw this 'mai-baap re baap' order, and focus on what actually matters: strengthening institutions and ensuring delivery of public services to the last mile. Respect should flow organically — not prodded through catechisms and orders that mistake professional adults as children in constant need of discipline.

JUST IN JEST
It would be nice for guvs and prezzies to have a timeframe, but no hurry

Elasticity, That Right To Have All the Time

In the 1992 Nirvana song, Kurt Cobain sings, "Take your time, hurry up/ Choice is yours, don't be late." More than 30 years later, it looks like the Supreme Court is a fan. In an observation, it declared that governors and presidents are under no obligation to act on state assembly bills within any fixed timeline. The court did affirm that it would be *nice* for them to stick to a timeframe. But they can't be told to 'get on with it'. Why? Because that grand old yoga manual of governance, Constitution, allows for 'elasticity' in time. Sure, we understand that it's not for the court to tell guvs and prezzies to not keep the meter running. But, then, someone should, no?

The word 'elasticity' itself stretches like a rubber band around the nation's collective patience, snapping only occasionally when someone remembers that democracy was supposed to be about decisions, not indefinite waiting rooms. The Supreme Court's observation cements India's tryst with its reputation as a country where time is not linear, but a polite suggestion. Elasticity means business — and not just court business — is a trampoline: bounce as high as you like, land whenever you feel like it. It's the true rubbery backbone of Indian governance. Why rush when eternity to mull over things 'carefully' is available? After all, in India, bills don't get passed, they ooze out.

What began as a rebellious, messy, human-centric form of advertising is being asked to grow up

Still Under the Influence?



M Muneer

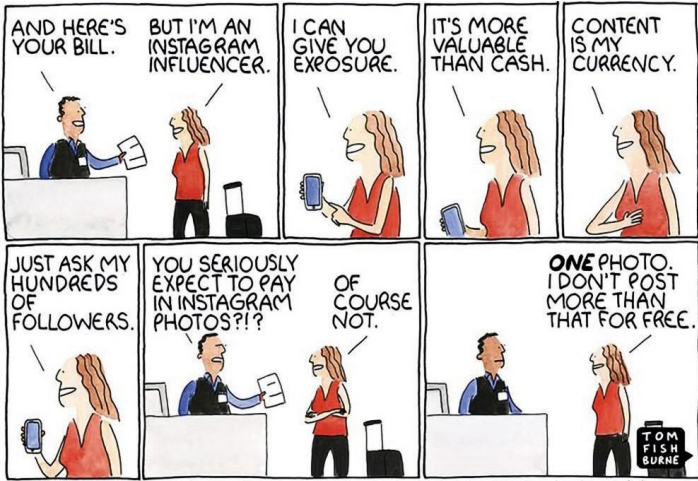
Once upon a scroll, influencer marketing was at the head of digital media — rebellious, raw and ridiculously lucrative. Zip to today, when the creator economy is officially trading its flower crown for a boardroom blazer. What began as a friendly side-hustle is now a multibillion-dollar enterprise... that's starting to crack under its own weight. Is influencer marketing, as we know it, dying? Or, is it reaching a critical inflection point?

The market still looks shiny. Influencer marketing expenditure in the US is projected to surpass \$10 bn this year. In India, the figure is ₹3,600 cr. Global brands are pouring cash into social campaigns, signing creators left, right and centre, and even restructuring ad budgets to put social media before traditional TV spots. To the untrained eye, it looks like the industry is thriving.

But with great budgets come even greater questions — mostly about ROI, credibility, and whether this whole 'influencer thing' is delivering results. Marketers now want more than vibes.

The influencer of 2025 is a far cry from the selfie-posting hobbyist of 2015. Today's creators are not just promoting products, they're also running media kingdoms across Instagram, YouTube, newsletters, livestreams, podcasts, (outside India) TikTok, and probably a secret Discord server.

As brands shift from one-off collaborations to full-scale creator-led campaigns, influencer marketing is being treated like any other established media channel. That means planned campaigns, standardised metrics, performance expectations and, yes, ROI calculations. It also means creators are now expected to deliver on KPIs, impressions, conversion rates and campaign attribution. Welcome to adulthood, influencers. Agencies are now being hired specifically to manage creators. PE firms



Diminishing currency

are buying up influencer businesses. Retail networks are building creator affiliate programmes. Even some brands are bringing influencer management in-house, seeking control over creative chaos.

But with this new infra comes complexity. What used to be a straightforward brand-to-influencer deal now involves a multi-tiered approval chain of agents, legal teams, platform partners and content strategists. The 'col-lab' is now much beyond a creative spark with a carefully planned, legally binding, multi-platform game. This growing ecosystem is a sign of progress, if not a warning. When everything becomes a system, personality risks becoming a product.

As money flows in, creators are demanding higher fees. And who can fault them? Their influence drives real traffic and tangible sales. But with those rising fees comes an awkward question: is the juice worth the algo-



Influencer marketing is not dying, but evolving. And evolution, as always, comes with growing pains

arithmically suppressed squeeze?

Without traditional pricing models like CPMs (cost per mille/ thousand), it's hard to quantify what a creator post should cost. Some price tags are reasonable. Others are, well, aspirational at best. And while some creators drive massive impact, others deliver beautifully edited content that results in chirping crickets.

For years, influencer marketing ran on likes, comments, and that nebulous metric known as 'engagement'. But those days are fading fast. Today, marketers demand the exact number of clicks, conversions and sales a creator generated. Unfortunately, influencer marketing still struggles with basic measurement. Tracking isn't standardised, reporting is inconsistent, and the tech hasn't quite caught up to the promises.

This measurement gap is holding the industry back from achieving true mainstream legitimacy. Without clear ROI, influencer marketing remains an expensive gamble. And when every marketing rupee is scrutinised, that's not a great look.

Perhaps the most ironic outcome of influencer marketing's rise is the very thing it's at risk of losing: authenticity. What once made influencers powerful — their relatability, rawness, unfiltered opinions — is slowly being swallowed by brand gui-

delines, legal disclaimers, content calendars, and paid partnerships that require approval by 14 different stakeholders. The result? More polish, less personality.

Audiences are beginning to notice. Consumers can sniff out a scripted post from a mile away. The danger here is erosion of trust. And once that happens, the *influence* in influencer marketing becomes a dirty word.

Another looming challenge is fragmentation. Extremely decentralised, platforms, formats, audience demographics and monetisation models vary significantly from creator to creator. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. What works on YouTube may flop on Instagram. A creator with 10,000 followers might outperform one with a million. While some creators are building loyal communities, others are just racking up followers with viral fluff.

It is messy, and it's going to get messier. Until the industry can some-

Creators are now expected to deliver on KPIs, impressions, conversion rates and campaign attribution. Welcome to adulthood

how wrangle some sense of order — with better tech and pricing models, or smarter attribution tools — influencer marketing will be an unpredictable, if largely successful, gamble.

So, is it over for the industry? Not exactly. But the vibe has definitely changed. Influencer marketing is not dying, but evolving. And evolution, as always, comes with growing pains. The next few years will determine whether this industry can transform into a mature, measurable and sustainable channel. Or if it collapses under its own complexity and contradictions.

Creators will need to balance authenticity with professionalism. Brands will need to get smarter about value and performance. And the platforms, as always, will keep changing the rules mid-game.

The writer is co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation



THE SPEAKING TREE

What's in A Prayer

SUMIT PAUL

What you call a prayer is but begging. 'Don't pester the universe with your begging. Be thankful for all that has been bestowed upon you. Just ask for more opportunities to be grateful to the universe.' Persian mystic Hakim Sanai's invaluable advice should be followed by all. When you don't ask for anything, you're sure to get something. A prayer is not an entreaty. Nor is it an imploration. A prayer is a wordless communication with the cosmos. It's a silent commune with your own self. Life itself is a prayer if you think that it's a contemplative journey.

A true prayer connects you with your inner Self. It's a meditative process, not a ritualistic time-bound action to please someone. This very thought that a prayer is to placate a draconian 'Supreme Being' far away in the firmament is primitive. A seeker prays not to please anyone or to get something in return. He prays to acknowledge his own presence and existence in the vastness of universe. The famous dictum of Rene Descartes, Cogito, ergo sum — I think, therefore, I'm, is actually a gesture of gratitude towards the universe for all existence — individual, collective and all-encompassing.

Be thankful for the very existence that you've got because your existence is the essence of a prayer. Let your whole existence become a prayer. Remember, a prayer is not the relegation of self or abnegation of ego. Both are symbols of existence. So, there's no need trying to get rid of the self and ego. Sublimate them to that level: Khuda khud tujh se poochhe bata teri raza kya hai — God himself should ask, what's your wish, according to Allama Iqbal.



Life's a Lottery

For 20 years, Ramesh bought a lottery ticket every single day. His wife begged him to stop, his children staged interventions. Even the shopkeeper started giving him pity discounts.

Finally, one morning, he won ₹100. Jubilant, he declared, 'Persistence pays off!' His family stared at him, calculating that he had spent ₹14,600 to earn ₹100. But Ramesh wasn't bothered. He wrote a book, 'The Power of Never Quitting', which became a national best-seller. It's now being turned into a streaming series.

The Other Air BnB

Ten years ago, Arjun launched a startup selling bottled air. Investors laughed him out of every pitch meeting. 'Who would buy air?' they scoffed. Then, Delhi smog arrived to stay. Suddenly, his 'Premium O₂' subscription service was hotter than momos at a cricket match.

Arjun introduced surge pricing during Diwali. 'Buy two breaths, get one free', and even offered 'Limited Edition Swiss Breeze'. By the time regulators caught up, Arjun had already retired to the Maldives, where he sold coconuts branded as 'Hydration 2.0'. Lesson: To get rich, invent something useless today that will become essential tomorrow. Bonus points if it's literally invisible.

Chat Room

GST Cut = MRP Cut. Elementary

Apropos 'GST Cuts Don't Always Cut Prices' by Arvind P Datar and G Natarajan (Nov 21), GST 2.0 reflects India's ability to pursue bold, forward-looking reforms even amid global uncertainty, but there are doubts over transmission of price cuts to the consumer. Clarity is needed over treatment of accumulated input tax credit on products whose duty has come down. It is hoped that producers have passed on the tax benefit to consumers and haven't appropriated the gains. In the absence of an anti-profiteering mechanism in place, the government must keep an eye out for possible sharp practices by producers. Otherwise, with this forward-looking measure, India won't be reinforcing the foundations of a more resilient, inclusive and competitive economy. Pradeep Kumar Surat

These Stables of Trust Need Cleaning



Shally Bhasin & Varun Pathak

In September, Chhattisgarh High Court acquitted former Madhya Pradesh State Transport Corporation billing assistant Jageshwar Prasad Awasthi after being found innocent of charges of bribery involving ₹100. The thing is, he was accused of his misdemeanour in 1986, spent the subsequent 39 years fighting his case, and was convicted in 2004. Now, the 86-yr-old Awasthi is seeking compensation for the years 'stolen' from him.

This is just one instance that exemplifies why India's judiciary is facing its worst credibility crisis today. Both in terms of perception and reality.

► **Chronic backlog** Pendency of more than 5 cr cases has resulted in a gradual erosion in credibility. Jus-

tice, as in Awasthi's case, has been delayed and, therefore, denied, livelihoods have been lost, liberty has been extinguished, and suffering has been enhanced for many hapless citizens. A decade in litigation is considered a brief, fortunate time.

Apathy has resulted in the judicial process itself having become punishment. Litigants in commercial matters often use delay as a tactic to avoid paying, with many arbitrating the stake for making unfair gains. Such delay has created a new industry of commercial litigation in neutral countries.

► **Appointment of judges** The issue of nepotism in the judiciary refuses to die down. Lack of meritorious appointments, at times, raises more questions about institutional integrity. Judges embroiled in cash scandals don't help matters. The joke doing the rounds, 'Why retain a lawyer when you can retain a judge?' points to a serious picture. Recognising merit and rejecting nepotism is vital for morale and institutional integrity.

Also, insufficient judge-to-population ratios, inadequate infrastructure and outdated court procedures

have lingered for decades. Frequent adjournments, lack of continued training for judges and lawyers, weak case management systems, and procedural inefficiencies have all resulted in the very judicial system creaking. Then there are charges of cases of judicial independence being challenged.

Recent clashes between the Supreme Court and some high courts are increasingly volatile. Last month, Allahabad High Court opposed any move by Supreme Court to lay down criteria for seniority in the district judiciary, arguing that such directions would 'interfere with the constitutional powers and duties of the high courts'. This, in addition to confrontations with the executive. To make matters worse, uncivil interactions of

Well, yes, tarik pe tarik



The writers are partners, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas, New Delhi

EU and I Can Greenhouse Industry



Tanmaya Lal & Per Andersson

In September, the new EU-India Strategic Agenda was endorsed by Council of the European Union. This sharpens the strategic intent of a partnership between the largest democracy and top global economies. It has broad implications at a time of disruptive global shifts and mounting common challenges.

The pressing need for global climate action is one such common challenge. Even as COP30 ended on Friday, there's a serious push for an FTA between India and the EU. The India-EU FTA will be a catalyst, for areas including green transition, at a time of trade chaos.

Today, Europe and India are among the top four emitters in the world, although with vastly different historical emissions. Emissions from heavy industry account for a quarter globally. What the EU and India do separately and/or together — and *how* — will matter. Steel, cement and heavy transport sectors are all critical industries with global interdependency. Focusing on the green industrial

transition is a core strength of the new partnership. It offers opportunities to develop technology solutions and business models relevant beyond the two regions, especially for the developing world.

Technology is advancing, but not fast enough. IP rights are essential, but not always easy to navigate. They sometimes need a facilitator and framework to get started. Leadership Group for Industry Transition (LeadIT) is a growing global initiative, started and co-chaired by India and Sweden, that fosters global cooperation through PPPs. The recent announcement at COP30 on steel, cement and heavy vehicle cooperation in India offers a good model.

Investment decisions in heavy industry are fewer and larger. EU instruments could play a decisive role, combined with national EU governments' incentives. If anchored in the Indian support system, they are

well placed for real impact.

India's federal governance model provides for sharing of legislative and executive powers, policy mandates, and revenue between the Centre and 28 states. In Europe, the expanding EU (with 27 countries) has been evolving a complex model of cooperation, with member states ceding some autonomy in select areas while retaining ultimate sovereignty in others.

Industry policies are at the EU's heart. Energy-intensive EU industry pays for emitting. Exporters to the EU will face the same carbon price under CBAM in the coming years. EU industries are dependent on the regulatory ambition of the union. But EU member states remain important for national industries. EU institutions do not own mining fields or steel production. Yet, some countries do. Signals from national policymakers are important.



Right climate for transition

estments, innovation, technology development and talent. States align their industrial policy with national policies and signals. In India, public support for industry is primarily at the national level. Their counterparts in the EU are often at the individual country level.

The emerging carbon credit system in India's steel sector has been launched and will be introduced gradually, incentivising producers and the market. The cement industry, both in India and the EU, is less exposed to global trade. But to enable substantial decarbonisation, the inner workings of cement production need to be decarbonised. In the transport sector, the heavy vehicle segment has, up until today, been the most difficult to electrify on its own, and other alternative solutions are being explored.

The success of industry decarbonisation globally will be driven and determined by a few high-emitting sectors. While the EU and the instruments at its disposal are central, incentive for key green industry needs to be well anchored in EU member states, which are leading green industrial transition initiatives, complementing actions at federal and state levels in India. A partnership may succeed if it is designed in an equal and inclusive manner, modelled on existing pathways.

Lal is former secretary (west), MEA, GoI, and Andersson, is head of secretariat, Leadership Group for Industry Transition (LeadIT)

A student’s death, a society in the dock

IT TAKES a village to raise a child, and between home and school exists a compact to nurture curiosity, offer steady ground when the world grows unkind, and safeguard vulnerability. The death by suicide of a Class X Delhi student lays bare the fragility of that promise. “Sorry mummy, *aapka itni baar dil toda, ab last baar todunga...*” The heartbreaking note left behind by the 16-year-old — a child allegedly worn down by months of censure and public shaming by teachers — shows what happens when a young person feels stranded in the very spaces in which they are meant to be nourished.

Across India, such tragic stories have become far too frequent. The National Crime Records Bureau registered 13,892 student suicides in 2023, accounting for around 8.1 per cent of the total deaths by suicide in the country. The numbers have grown by 65 per cent over a decade. The surge not only outpaces the national suicide growth rate, it is also a reflection of the unyielding academic stress, growing socio-economic uncertainty, and the increasing cultural pressures the young find themselves mired in — the shrinking space afforded to mistakes and the ever-expanding demands to be perfect or to conform; the inordinate amount of social-media exposure and the loneliness and inarticulation of youth in a world that is ostensibly more connected.

The school has placed four members of its academic staff under suspension. The Delhi government has set up a high-level probe committee. But the cycle of blame and retribution fails to address the deeper challenges. In classrooms and coaching centres, in family dining rooms and social gatherings, the architecture of young people’s distress is often visible in fragments — independence tamped down as insouciance, silence mistaken for sullenness, perfectionism praised until it calcifies into anxiety. For many adolescents, their interior worlds are crowded with apprehensions they struggle to name. While schools and parents speak the language of care, the grammar of everyday life tells a harsher truth. It is this contradiction that now confronts parents and educators with unprecedented urgency. How does one build environments where ambition does not eclipse well-being, where attention extends beyond performance metrics, where counselling truly creates safe spaces for children to speak up, to falter without fear, where they are seen for who they are? The road ahead lies not only in creating systems that recognise distress early, but in reshaping the cultural impulses that ignore vulnerability. It is time for that deeper work to begin.

Trump’s Ukraine plan crosses Kyiv’s red lines

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump’s 28-point plan to end the war in Ukraine offers substantial concessions to Russia. In mid-October, he had urged Kyiv and Moscow to “stop where they are” and proposed an end to the conflict by allowing the Donbas region, the majority of which is under Russian control, to “be cut the way it is”. The new plan advances that proposal. Its first sub-point under item 21 states: “Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk will be recognised as de facto Russian, including by the US.” Other concessions include barring Ukraine from joining NATO, reducing its military capacity, lifting sanctions on Russia — even as Moscow is to be hit by Trump’s sanctions on its largest oil firms from November 21 — and paving the way for its reintegration into the global economy through the G8. Not only do these cross Ukraine’s red lines, they also mirror Moscow’s maximalist positions articulated after its invasion. Yet the plan, drafted by Trump’s special envoy Steve Witkoff and Kirill Dmitriev, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, was reportedly prepared without consulting either Ukraine or Europe, consistent with Trump’s unilateral style of deal-making.

Two things are clear. First, Ukraine is significantly weakened. Russia has intensified its air strikes, and in Kyiv, a corruption scandal has engulfed the Volodymyr Zelenskyy government. The Ukrainian President’s cautious response — that he is ready for “constructive” and “honest” work — reflects this fragility. Second, Trump, by far the most “pro-Russia” US President since the Cold War, is pressing ahead with his bid to reset Washington-Moscow relations, even if it emboldens Putin and leaves Europe more insecure with Russia edging closer to its eastern flank.

For Delhi, the prospect of rival powers warming up to each other is sobering, especially as India now faces an additional 25 per cent US tariff as a penalty on purchases of Russian crude. Delhi must navigate the US-Russia binary with care, deepening its strategic partnership with the US while preserving long-standing defence ties with Russia. The next milestone in the road ahead will be Putin’s upcoming India visit.

Guwahati’s small step is a giant leap for cricket

THE TAPESTRY of Indian cricket will get richer as Guwahati becomes the 28th venue to host a Test match in the country. From cricket under the mighty Dhauladhar ranges and the shores of the Indian Ocean, to the coast of the Arabian Sea and now the Eastern Himalayas, the game has breached all geographical frontiers of a sprawling nation. The city might not brag about a rich lineage of cricketers, but it has hosted international games regularly since 1983, largely at the old Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium.

The stadium in Barsapara could not have dreamt of a grander competition. In Kolkata, South Africa showed why they are the world’s best Test team with a clinical victory over India, who are desperate to square the series and arrest their decline at home. The stakes are multilayered, from personal redemptions to tactical vindications. Weave in the challenges of time, the unusual team and lunch breaks, and the occasional spotting of creepy crawlies of the venomous kind, the match has enough ingredients to fill the stands and make it a blockbuster. A balanced pitch, an absorbing game, and an Indian victory could settle the beginner’s nerves and make it a regular in India’s Test circuit. It could take inspiration from Dharamshala, which didn’t have a storied past, but promptly became a player and crowd favourite.

Guwahati’s small step into Test cricket could be a giant leap for cricket in the North East, an untapped region for the sport, but one with incredible potential. Even though Riyan Parag is the lone familiar face from the region, it has a throbbing sports culture. The IPL and Women’s World Cup saw sold-out face-offs; football and badminton are feverishly followed. It has nurtured boxers like Shiv Thapa and Lovlina Borgohain, nourished athletes such as Hima Das and sprinter Bhogeshwar Baruah. Somewhere in the stands, over the next five days, a few Test dreams would blossom under the mild Guwahati Sun.

The Editorial Page

Our new legal doctrine: Infinite elasticity with Centre pulling the strings

THE SUPREME Court’s decision in the President’s Special Reference No 1, 2025, concerning the scope of gubernatorial powers under Article 200, is an obligingly ambiguous piece of judgment. It creates the real possibility of subverting representative government through seemingly technical reasoning. In the guise of clarification, the five-judge bench has effectively displaced its earlier judgment in *State of Tamil Nadu v Governor of Tamil Nadu*, which had articulated a workable constitutional structure by imposing indicative time-lines for the governor to act on bills. Since a bill acquires legal force only upon assent, the governor’s refusal to act, neither assenting or withholding assent, nor referring the bill to the president — amounts, in practice, to a constitutional veto without accountability.

Stripped of technical detail, the stakes are constitutional, not procedural or formal. The Court thankfully affirms that a governor cannot withhold assent simplifier. A bill must be returned with reasons. It then advances a “dialogic” theory of Article 200, treating the governor and the legislature as jointly participating in producing law. No law without the governor’s assent. Simultaneously, the Court insists that the governor retains discretion in granting or withholding assent. Without such discretion, it reasons, the governor’s role would become redundant. The governor’s office serves as a constitutional check, nudging legislation towards constitutionalism, ensuring consistency with the broader legal framework, or responding to exceptional circumstances by requesting reconsideration.

The central difficulty lies in how “discretion” is conceptualised. Discretionary authority cannot be exhaustively codi-

fied; it presupposes judgment. But the question the Court does not answer is: Judgment in service of what constitutional objective? The present crisis arises because governors, acting less as impartial constitutional guardians and more as political agents of the Union, have deployed their powers by strategically withholding action for prolonged periods, thereby frustrating the representative process through inaction. This is not constitutional dialogue.

The Tamil Nadu judgment attempted to address this pathology. The advisory opinion now holds that such time-lines are incompatible with the “elasticity” inherent in discretionary functioning, and inconsistent with the separation of powers. At an abstract level, this may sound defensible. But the reasoning is troubling precisely because it avoids the normative core of the constitutional problem. Elasticity is not a constitutional end in itself; it is a means. And whatever elasticity means, it cannot encompass indefinite inaction that nullifies the democratic mandate. The earlier judgment recognised this: The elasticity of discretion must be disciplined by constitutional purpose, not kept hostage to arbitrary silences.

Crucially, the Court does not explain why a presumptive six-month period would impair the substance of a governor’s discretion. Nor does it reconcile its concern for separation of powers with its own jurisprudence in areas such as speakers’ powers, where it has not hesitated to impose time-lines or procedural constraints. Separation of powers cannot be treated as a formal doctrine; it must be integrated with



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

Requiring state governments to litigate to vindicate legislative supremacy is, in itself, an egregious distortion of the separation of powers. Courts, already prone to drifting into the executive’s orbit, will now find themselves asked to adjudicate governor-legislature impasses with no guiding principle

the overarching commitment to democratic self-government and the principle that constitutional powers are held in trust for representative institutions. The dialogue between functionaries is a dialogue to that end.

But this advisory opinion licenses a strange dialogue where the governor can effectively say, “I, as a functionary, have discretion and am in dialogue with you. I will just not tell you when I will speak. My silence may be indefinite.” Such silence is not dialogue; it is the assertion of unaccountable power. It subverts every principle of democracy and federalism. The Court must also be naive not to notice how the power of delay has actually been used.

But now comes the supreme irony. This is, after all, the Supreme Court of India. One thing is certain: Almost every major judgment tends, in one way or another, to expand the Court’s own discretionary authority. Having extolled judicial restraint, emphasised the sanctity of discretion vested in constitutional functionaries, and defended the virtue of “elasticity,” the Court abruptly backtracks. It concludes by holding that, in certain circumstances, it may take cognisance of gubernatorial inaction and issue “limited directions” to remedy it. The governor may have immunity as a high constitutional functionary, but the effects of their inaction, the Court suggests, may still be subject to judicial review.

This is problematic for several reasons. First, it offers a hopelessly indeterminate remedy. The judgment provides no indication whatsoever of the circumstances in which the Court will

intervene. By contrast, the Tamil Nadu decision had at least the virtue of articulating a presumptive threshold: Six months. But when does delay become a subversion of democracy? After six months? One year? Three?

Second, this approach perversely invites more litigation and strategic political behaviour, and therefore more judicial power. The original judgment did create a judicial rule. But it was a democracy preserving rule that actually did not infringe on the governor’s substantive discretion, and gave legal predictability. When should a state government approach the Court? Under what principle could it claim that inaction has crossed the constitutional line? The advisory opinion replaces this with a vacuum. Worse, it offers a governor a sly route to abdication: Simply sit tight until someone else invokes judicial process.

Requiring state governments to litigate to vindicate legislative supremacy is, in itself, an egregious distortion of the separation of powers. Courts, already prone to drifting into the executive’s orbit, will now find themselves asked to adjudicate governor-legislature impasses with no guiding principle. And when the Court is finally approached for “limited directions,” what standard will it apply? In the absence of clear criteria, its decisions will inevitably appear discretionary and politicised. Precisely what the Constitution sought to avoid.

But perhaps that is the deeper logic at work. Our new doctrine of constitutional law is simply — law as infinite elasticity with the central government pulling all the strings.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

Modi 3.0 shows an appetite for economic reform



S MAHENDRA DEV

Along with direct tax reforms, the latest GST reforms are a major step towards simplification of the GST structure. With rates fixed at two main slabs of 5 per cent and 18 per cent, this would leave consumers with higher disposable income

THE POST-COVID era has seen old assumptions give way to a new set of challenges. Globally, inflation became a concern again due to supply chain disruptions and excessive stimulus in advanced economies. At the same time, tariff-related uncertainties increased considerably, creating new barriers for exports. It is in this tumultuous period that India has emerged as a global bright spot due to its policies.

The present government, now in its third term, has accelerated the pace of reforms by introducing major new measures, and also institutionalising them which is reflected in the state of the economy today. Due to limited space, we will discuss only some of the reforms undertaken in the third term so far.

In the face of persistent global uncertainties and headwinds, India has remained one of the fastest-growing major economies. The first quarter of FY 2025-26 recorded a robust 7.8 per cent growth. Growth is expected to be around 7 per cent this fiscal year. The government improved the quality of public expenditure by shifting the composition of spending decisively toward productive capital outlays. This is an important structural reform. The Union government’s indicators of fiscal discipline on deficit and debt-to-GDP have improved progressively. The quality of expenditure, approximated by capital expenditure as a share of total expenditure, has risen sharply from about 12 per cent in FY 2020-21 to nearly 22 per cent in FY 2024-25 (RE).

There have been significant tax reforms. While increasing capital outlays, the government has made a concerted push for boosting consumer sentiment by increasing the “nil tax” slab to Rs 12 lakh in the Union Budget 2025-26. Coupled with a standard deduction of Rs 75,000, this effectively raises the tax-free threshold to Rs 12.75 lakh. The income tax laws have been simplified to remove obsolete provisions, to make business easier and life simpler for citizens. Along with direct tax reforms, the latest GST reforms are a major step towards simplification of the GST structure. With rates fixed at

two main slabs of 5 per cent and 18 per cent, this would leave consumers with higher disposable income. The government has made the four labour codes effective which will streamline and simplify labour laws.

Recently, RBI has undertaken reforms by announcing 22 additional measures aimed at strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of the banking sector, improving the flow of credit, promoting ease of doing business, simplifying foreign exchange management, enhancing consumer satisfaction, and internationalisation of the Indian rupee. Given the uncertainties surrounding trade, the government has a clear focus on export competitiveness and diversification. India is negotiating trade agreements with various partners. The most recent example is the India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), which will considerably expand market access.

It is worth noting that over the past decade the government has undertaken far-reaching reforms such as IBC, GST, RERA, along with FDI reforms, the insurance sector, etc. The Prime Minister has announced from the ramparts of the Red Fort in August that we will fast-track domestic reforms. The economic policy push has laid the foundation for private sector investments and a revival has begun with new private sector capex plans rising sharply in the first half of 2025-26. There are major opportunities for private investment in AI (data centres), electronics, renewables, electric mobility, petroleum refining, chemicals, etc.

Thus, the third term of the government has introduced major fresh reforms, apart from benefiting from the earlier ones. It is also focusing on efficient implementation by institutionalising them. As compared to global headwinds, there are many domestic tailwinds such as low inflation, rate cuts and RBI measures to strengthen banking. The reforms undertaken and other steps taken will put India on a higher growth path with inclusion and sustainability in the short-, medium-, and long-term.

The writer is Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM)

We need a culture where a child feels heard and seen



AMEETA MULLA WATTAL

Why are we not worried that our children can’t cope with anxiety, are unable to express and articulate their feelings? As parents and teachers, if we are not able to render basic skills that deal with a child’s health, happiness, sanity and survival, then whose interests are we serving?

OVER FOUR decades ago, I taught in a school and wrote the anthem that its scholars still sing in their morning assemblies — the same school where a tragedy of great magnitude occurred this week, when a child, unable to cope with stress and bullying, ended his life.

What are the emotional loads that our children carry today that we can’t perceive? Why does a child apologise to his mother for breaking her heart and to his father for not being able to live up to his expectations? It is time for collective introspection. Today, our priorities are skewed with every case that occurs; instead of compassion, we deal in sensation. An incident of this kind should shake the conscience of the entire community.

As parents and educators, we hold an enormous responsibility for the children who spend time in our care. How do we ensure emotional safety above academic excellence, pastoral care above discipline, mental health infrastructure above school structures? How do we identify distress in children? What we need today is systemic reform.

Suicide is a complex problem. For parents and educators, monitoring the thoughts and emotions of a child can be very challenging. It is essential to strengthen family-school partnerships and create circles of support, which will help solve complex mental health conditions. Even today, we do not have a national child safety and wellness framework, uniform protocols that focus on mental health emergencies and grievance redressal. We need a culture where a child has a voice and feels seen and heard. Why are we not worried that our children can’t cope with anxiety, are unable to express and articulate their feelings? As parents and teachers, if we are not able to render basic skills that deal with a child’s health, happiness, sanity and survival, then whose interests are we serving?

The time for fault-finding is over. We must now ensure that no child feels alienated and unable to reach out to a parent, a friend, or a teacher. An act of suicide, particularly by a child, stems from being emotionally overwhelmed, not having the ability to see beyond the moment and being unable to solve a problem. Situational triggers can occur both at home and in school.

Children rarely plan for the future. The adolescent brain is wired for intensity rather than balance. The pressures of being a disappointment often close down help-seeking behaviour.

As a society, we are driven by aspiration and achievement, and our children are paying the price. It is no longer a school problem or a parent problem. It is a problem of societal apathy.

We have to create a new spirituality for our children, where an emotional anchor is more important than a report card and where we build a world where every child matters.

The writer is chairperson and executive director, Education, Innovations & Training, DLF Schools and Scholarship Programmes

40 YEARS AGO November 22, 1985



Superpower optimism

US PRESIDENT Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev concluded their summit with a joint statement saying that while “serious differences remain on a number of critical issues,” they agreed to accelerate nuclear arms negotiations. After two days of talks, both leaders expressed optimism, largely because of a decision to meet again in 1987.

No trade ties with China

INDIA WILL not normalise trade relations with China while shelving the border dispute, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said. Earlier, answering a number of supplementaries

on the recent Sino-India talks External Affairs Minister B R Bhagat, said India had made its position clear on the boundary issue in all sectors and it would not give up territory which is legitimately Indian.

Kashmir solution

DECISION TO end the current political uncertainty in the border state of Jammu and Kashmir appears to be in the offing. This is the inference one gets from the sudden departure of PCC (I) chief Mufti Saeed, to Delhi by a special plane. The Congress (I) circles here were tight-lipped as to why Mufti rushed to Delhi in a special plane when there was no apparent urgency. Political circles speculate that the PCC (I)

chief might have been called to Delhi by the PM to consult him on the Kashmir solution, which has been awaiting final decision for a long time now.

Rare dowry case judgment

INA “rarest of the rarest” case, a division bench of the Rajasthan High Court awarded the death sentence to a woman holding her guilty of “barbaric” murder of her 18-year-old daughter-in-law eight years ago. Justice Lodha said, “Even a stone would have melted” at the plight of the Pushpa, daughter of a class IV employee of the State Electricity Board, who was burnt alive by her mother-in-law, Lichhma Devi, in the kitchen of her in-law’s house in Jaipur.



Labour laws poisonous regulatory cholesterol, new codes clean up, usher in regime of trust



MANISH SABHARWAL

THE WONDERFUL 1954 Hindi novel *Maila Aanchal* by P N Renu captured the defeat of idealistic politics in Bihar — *sa-mata, nyay and jan-shakti* — by entrenched hierarchies, transactional politics, and elite manipulation. The recent Bihar elections suggest change: The promise of a government job for every family was dismissed as out of touch with reality — it would cost five times the state’s annual budget — by a patronising dynast whose worldview is ruling, not governing. But they did remind us that job creation in backward states needs new ideas. Yesterday’s notification of labour codes empowers chief ministers to craft fertile habitats for formal, high-wage, high-productivity private employers. Notifying labour codes helps backward states because their migration — taking people to jobs instead of jobs to people — is hardly god’s will. Bihar’s unemployment has stayed in the narrow 3-10 per cent range since 1991, but unemployment is the wrong metric for backward states. Most Biharis toil in employed poverty (jobs that don’t pay enough) or unviable self-employment (self-exploitation). Bihar’s challenge is the shortage of high productivity employers (only five listed companies, only 9,217 ESI paying employers, and 99 per cent of MSMEs classified as Micro) and lack of high productivity sectors (54 per cent work in agriculture, only 5 per cent work in manufacturing, 0.5 per cent financial services, 0.4 per cent in technology and less than 1 per cent in modern retail/pharma).

Essentially, the flow of jobs in Bihar since 1991 has not changed the stock of jobs since 1961. In contrast, the share of Karnataka’s GDP from software services has grown from 5 per cent in 1991 to 63 per cent today, while the share of Tamil Nadu’s GDP from manufacturing has grown from 7 per cent in 1991 to 34 per cent today. Nationally, India makes half of all the medicines consumed in America and exports more software than Saudi

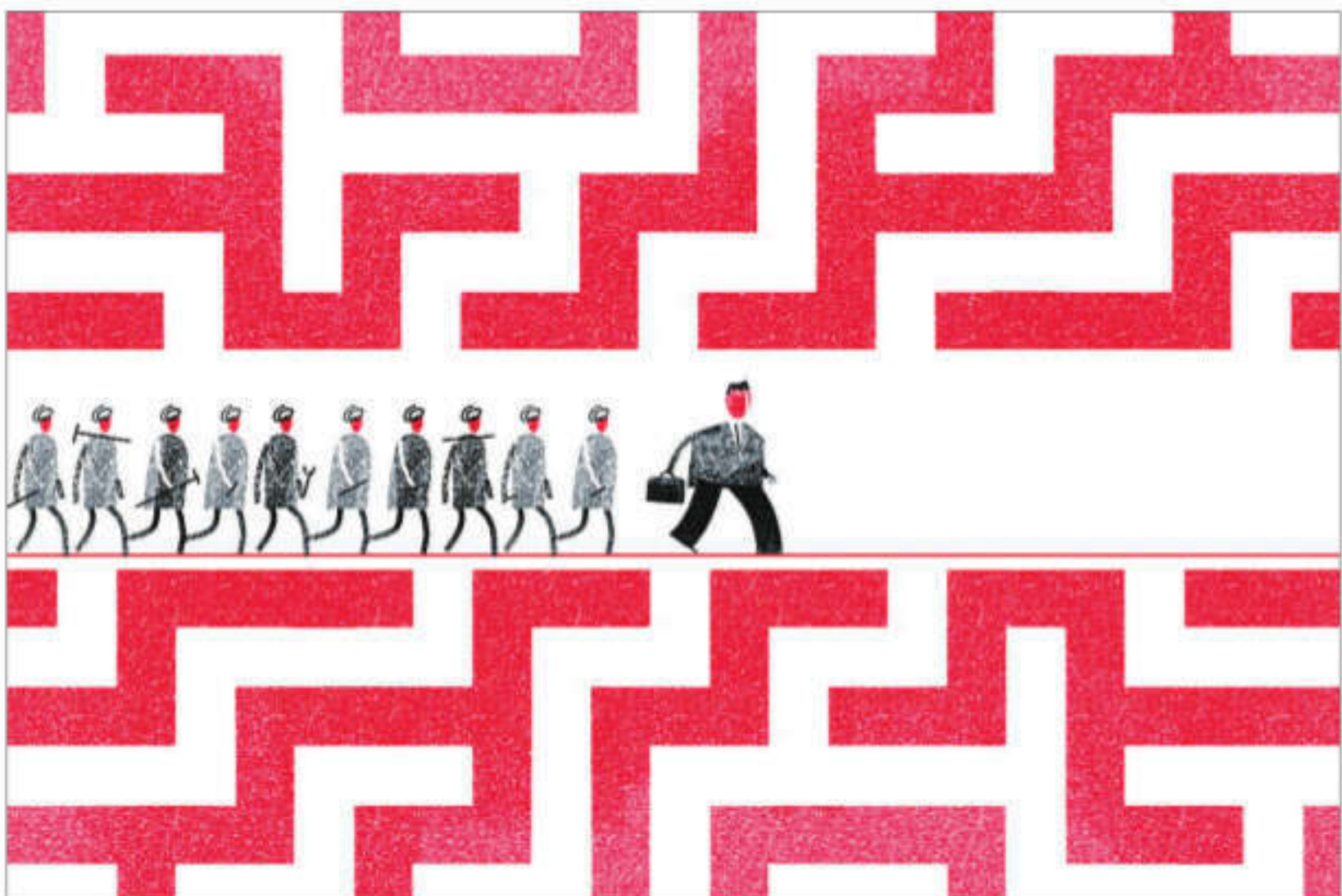


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Arabia does oil. Government spending made a small contribution to these transformations relative to policies that encourage high-productivity employers to hire high-wage employees through the simplification, decriminalisation and digitisation of new labour codes that consolidate 29 Acts into four codes.

The new labour codes reduce 1,228 sections to 480, 1,436 rules to 351, 84 registers to 8, 31 returns to 1, 8 registers to 1, and 4 licences to 1. It decriminalises 65 sections that weaponise thousands of compliances. It expands social security to gig and unorganised workers, removes unfair restrictions on women, and enables portability of benefits for inter-state migrant workers. It reduces corruption by tackling multiple definitions of wages/employee/worker, mandatory physical records, multiple licences given for short durations, prosecution without notice, a non-randomised inspection regime, no time limitation on past case inquiry, the power to re-open past cases *suo motu*, and an unreasonable EPFO-assessed appeal deposit

Trade unions had a vested interest in the previous labour law regime because their membership is mostly older people. But the self-interest of a vocal but organised labour aristocracy can hardly be national interest when 65 per cent of our population is below 35 years old

amount of 75 per cent.

The four labour codes are not perfect; there should be only one. But they represent a huge leap in making India a better habitat for good job creation. They also offer us a small peek into a legislative future when India’s regulatory cholesterol is replaced by a regime of trust, which abandons ineffective notions of jail provisions as a deterrent, replaces prior approvals or licences with perpetual self-registration, acknowledges that arming inspectors to enforce the unenforceable breeds corruption, accepts that everything is permitted till prohibited, and concedes that process is punishment only for the innocent. The labour codes embrace a trust-based regulatory regime that will, hopefully, restrict the administrative state to two instruments: Acts passed by Parliament and Rules notified in the Gazette. In the past, multiple instruments used to create compliance, such as guidelines, circulars, government orders, regulations, directions, notes, policies, and many others, often diminished accountability, bred discretion, and undermined the rule of law.

States that attract the new good jobs of the next decade — they are probably over 50 million up for grabs — will shift from a bird’s eye view to a worm’s eye view of the daily life of employers.

India’s labour laws have been our most poisonous regulatory cholesterol; they hurt small employers more than big employers with networks, money and power. They blunted the migration of Chinese factory refugees to India. They ensured 50 per cent of our labour force was self-exploiting in marginal self-employment or farm employment. They bred a sense of humour about the rule of law because of corruption arising from differences in how the law was written, interpreted, practised, and enforced. Labour inspectors often paraphrased Stalin to brag, “Show me the company and I will show you the crime”. Trade unions had a vested interest in the previous labour law regime because their membership is mostly older people. But the self-interest of a vocal but organised labour aristocracy can hardly be national interest when 65 per cent of our population is below 35 years old.

The new labour codes give states considerable discretion in varying their rule-making. History suggests this matters; the Central Factories Act has been amended only three times since independence — 1954, 1976, and 1987 — while various state-administered Shops and Establishment Acts have been amended more than 1,900 times (more than 180 times by Maharashtra alone). The delegation of powers under the new labour codes recognises that per capita incomes vary 10 times between our richest and backward states; this is four in China, three in Europe and two in the US.

It would be naïve to suggest that jobs are the only solution for backward states. But the new season of the excellent TV series *Maharani* starts with the anger of a fictional Bihar Chief Minister at the central government for not granting “special status” as a solution to catching up with “Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu”. A cynical response from the fictional central government could be redirecting the fictional CM to Ghalib’s quip *Dhool chehre pe thi/ Main aaina saaf karta raha* (the dust was on my face/ but I kept cleaning the mirror). A superior response is notifying the labour codes.

The writer is with Teamlease Services

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MbS is back

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘MbS gets red carpet in DC, he will ask for more’ (*IE*, November 21). The warm reception extended to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Washington signals a major diplomatic reset, but it also raises difficult questions. The US appears willing to overlook Saudi Arabia’s human-rights record in pursuit of strategic and defence cooperation. With discussions on F-35 jets, AI technology and regional alliances, the stakes are high. Most troubling is how easily Jamal Khashoggi’s assassination seems to have faded from political memory. Diplomacy must not come at the cost of moral accountability.

Azoo Rana, Chandigarh

Timelines case

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘SC takes welcome step back, restores balance’ (*IE*, November 21). The Supreme Court’s retreat from rigid timelines on gubernatorial assent is a measured recalibration. By reaffirming that courts cannot dictate executive timelines, the bench restores constitutional equipoise, while also empowering states to resist indefinite delays with nuance. The Court underscores that constitutional fidelity lies not in assertion but restraint. Judicial review must not mutate into judicial command.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow

Victory of belief

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Curaçao’s World Cup fairytale’ (*IE*, November 21). The inclusion of Curaçao, a country with a population of just 1.56 lakh, in the 2026 Football World Cup, is a victory of self-belief — a prerequisite for success in competitive sports, particularly when the competitors are nations like Brazil or Argentina, bristling with superstars. Football is a unique leveller and Curaçao have a precedent to fuel their optimism. Football has repeatedly shown that national success depends on critical qualities such as commitment, expert coaching, motivation and willpower. Size is not everything. India should take note.

YG Chouksey, Pune



PANKAJ BUTALIA

AS A senior resident of Delhi, I have watched with dismay how, over the last 11 years, the pollution level in the city has only moved one way. In 2015, an Air Quality Index (AQI) level of 400 was considered hazardous, unsafe. Stubble burning, dust bowl, firecrackers, and low-quality diesel were terms we learnt. The Supreme Court sprang to life and issued bans. A new government in the state announced radical policies, including “odd-even” traffic management — a policy it never really had the guts to implement properly. Non-government agencies threw their hats in the ring and asked to be put on committees, which would help the state resolve issues. It seemed that for once, the world was in sync, and this poison in our lungs would be sent packing soon.

Cut to 2025. A newly elected state government runs to the Supreme Court and asks for the ban on green firecrackers to be lifted. The court passes an order it knows it cannot implement — to limit the firecrackers to two nights and two hours each night. I recorded non-stop firecrackers until 3.30 am on Diwali night. Then I gave up. The next morn-

The elite, the bureaucrats, the rich businessmen, the politicians, the judges, even if they are aware of the damage of air pollution, are not bothered. I ask myself why? Then I realise they all have a device called the ‘air purifier’

Welcome to Delhi, where denial mixes with smog

ing, we were told the AQI was 1100 plus. Oh well, that must be the new normal then. The Chief Minister then decided to “seed clouds”. The clouds turned down the seeding. Suddenly, there was a break in pollution levels - very temporary because the monsoon had delayed stubble burning and also acted as a calming effect on the roaring AQI. But look out for November, we were told. That was when the dust bowl, the overwhelming number of motorised vehicles and the stubble burning would join hands in their coordinated attack.

Morning AQIs regularly range between 600 and 1100 but the system only releases the lowest reading of the day. Politicians are busy fudging statistics. Sprinklers come up near pollution gauges so that readings seem more moderate. And, we the people are unaware of the damage it is doing to our lungs. The Prime Minister has not spoken in a convincing manner about the pollution he lives in every day. Nor has the central government made it an issue to take up with any seriousness. Lest it seem that this is a Delhi-centric problem, take a look

around. Half the country’s going down the poisonous air hole.

The elite, the bureaucrats, the rich businessmen, the politicians, the judges, even if they are aware of the damage of air pollution, are not bothered. I ask myself why? Then I realise they all have a device called an “air purifier”. Posh buildings have air purifiers. I have two small purifiers in my house. But if you remove even 50,000 air purifiers from the city, which presumably provide relief to two lakh people, what about the remaining 22 million who have to make do without any such relief? There’s a cynicism at work here. The poor have no life, anyway. If pollution does not kill them, hunger will. The lower middle classes live with kerosene, diesel and garbage. They never mind. So how many are we left with? The few thousand who are aware of what this criminal neglect is doing to their babies, the young, unaware of how their parents are sacrificing them to the greed or ignorance, or even helplessness of today? The feeble old, who have little time left anyway? Human beings have a great capacity to rationalise away what they do not want to deal with. It’s called living in denial. Welcome to the brave new world.

The writer is a Delhi-based filmmaker

As Mission Ram Mandir concludes, let’s seek Ram Rajya



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat will be in Ayodhya next week for the Dhwajaarohan ceremony — hoisting of the sacred flag in the precincts of the newly built Ram temple. Coming together for the second time in less than two years, the two leaders of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement will proclaim the conclusion of Mission Ram Temple, a five-century-long campaign that saw royal wars, street fights and court battles. As the flag rises high, it will symbolise the culmination of a saga of faith, self-respect and sacrifice.

The flag being hoisted in Ayodhya will carry symbols of Ram’s lineage that represent an enduring link between the human and the divine on the one hand, and a value system, which the medieval poet Tulsi Das described as “Raghukul reeti”.

For centuries, the mission of the people was to liberate the birthplace of Bhagwan Ram. Now that the mission has been accomplished, what next? For some, the answer could be to look for other grievances. But for many others, the road ahead would be to set the ball rolling for Mission Ram Rajya. Many leaders, including Lal Krishna Advani, who undertook the historic Rath Yatra, publicly proclaimed many times that the ultimate objective of the movement was to build Ram Rajya.

On a visit to Ayodhya as part of his Bharat Uday Yatra, Advani, as the deputy PM, said in April 2004 that Ram was not



ILLUSTRATION: KOMAL

merely a religious figure but an epitome of a perfect ruler. “I have often used Ram Rajya to describe our goal of making India a developed economy and a world power by 2020,” he said, adding that the Ram Temple in Ayodhya will be a “vibrant symbol of a strong, prosperous and harmonious India”. As India continues to embark on that path, it is important to renew that commitment.

Hinduism insists that men should be “seekers”, not merely “believers”. Ram Rajya represents the seeking of a life of values that Ram personified, not merely worshipping him. Ram was a god for many. Gandhi called him his personal deity. Ram’s historicity never bothered Gandhi. What mattered was the concept of “Ram Rajya”, which essentially meant equal rights for “prince and pauper”. “Praying to God for our own protection is a sin as long as we do not protect the weak,” he told the saints of Ayodhya in February 1921, citing the example of how Ram protected Sita. There is no way to achieve Ram Rajya or Swaraj without observing this *svadharma*, he told them.

B R Ambedkar had a different view. Commenting on Ram’s dismissal of Sita to the forests the second time, he quipped that “there are not wanting Hindus who use this as grounds to prove that Ram was a democratic king when others could equally well say that he was a weak and cowardly monarch”. Gandhi and Ambedkar looked at the concept of Ram Rajya from their respective prisms. But both insisted on a just system where the weak are protected and human dignity is upheld.

Delivering the Ramnath Goenka Memorial Address recently, PM Modi alluded to the same, stating that not “election”, but “emotion” should drive political leadership. He emphasised that when there is an inner restlessness to waste not a single minute to ameliorate the hardships of the poor, then continuous hard work becomes the driving force. He attributed the Bihar election results to “governance carried out with this emotion and commitment”.

Ram also represented what Valmiki described as “Maryada Purushottam” — “ideal manifestation of dignity and decency”. He epitomised great moral virtue, not only as an ideal king, but also as an ideal son, husband, brother, friend and even an ideal enemy.

In the vitiated public discourse today, we glorify Ram for offering dignity to the views of a washerman in his kingdom, yet, at the same time, don’t hesitate to troll a brilliant woman cricketer for her religious beliefs. It is time that the country turns to that personal ideal of *maryada* of Ram, besides the ideal of Ram Rajya, which Gandhi summed up as “the sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority”.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

New Bihar will miss Sachchidanand Sinha’s wisdom



ABHIK BHATTACHARYA

IT IS often believed that ideas generated in academia rarely reach the people for whom or with whom they are collaboratively produced. They find a space in political discourse only when they resonate with the lived realities of the people in ways that do not require conceptual unpacking. “Internal colonialism” — a framework that explores regional exploitation and disparities within a country — is one such idea. Since the 1970s, political parties in the Bihar-Jharkhand region have not only embraced it as one of their core concerns, but it has also fed into social justice politics. The framework was

first used in 1973 by socialist thinker Sachchidanand Sinha to understand Bihar’s political economy. Sinha died on November 19, a day before Nitish Kumar took oath for the 10th time, in a landslide verdict that endorsed his promises of further “development”. For his government, the message from Sinha’s works couldn’t be more timely — it needs to introspect, even in victory.

Born in 1929, at Parsawani in Muzaffarpur district of Bihar, Sinha began engaging in politics at an early age. He joined the Quit India movement and, after Independence, met the socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia, worked as an editorial member of his journal, *Mankind*, and participated in the JP movement. However, Sinha was more an ideologue than a political activist. He used Lohia’s

critique of Karl Marx to understand the economic crisis of Bihar, which gives massive resources to help the Indian state achieve its dreams of “development”, but receives minimal support — a political contention that shaped the state’s de-

Sinha used Lohia’s critique of Marx to understand Bihar’s economic crisis, which gives massive resources to help India achieve its dreams of ‘development’, but receives minimal support — a contention that shaped Bihar’s demands for special category status

mands for special category status.

Lohia argued that Marx underplayed the role of surplus generated by workers in the colonies to feed the Industrial Revolution. So, imperialism was not the final stage of capitalism; it was, rather, its first stage. This critique, extended and contextualised by Sinha in his book *The Internal Colony: A Study in Regional Exploitation*, was also invoked by the scholars and political leaders in Jharkhand to emphasise exploitation by Dikus, mostly feudal lords from Bihar and white-collar workers.

Sinha’s impeccable political understanding is reflected in two consecutive works — *Emergency in Perspective: Reprieve and Challenge (1977)* and *The Permanent Crisis: After Janata What? (1978)*. While in the former, he criticised the

Emergency, in the latter, after observing the political rumblings within the Janata Party for power, he captured the uncertainty of its political future.

A staunch critic of consumerism and a believer in Gandhi’s idea of “development”, he embraced an austere lifestyle. For him, development must be “non-violent”. Overconsumption is violence against nature; it could never serve the interests of the marginalised. One of the last Lohiaite titans, a person who neither aspired to a smartphone nor to live in a smart city, Sinha’s life offers clues to a society that is yet to find a balance between consumption and sustainability.

The writer is a senior assistant editor, The Indian Express, abhik.bhattacharya@expressindia.com

THE KOLI PROJECT

JUSTICE DENIED, JUSTICE DELIVERED

This was a basket case to begin with. He was branded the ‘Nithari cannibal’, the man who allegedly lured children to their death at his employer’s house in Noida. Two decades and 13 death sentences later, Surrender Koli is a free man. NIRBHAY THAKUR, SOHINI GHOSH & VINEET BHALLA piece together how his defence team, working against all odds, secured his acquittal

FOR TWO decades, Surrender Koli was a branded man. The main accused in the Nithari serial killings of 2006, he was the "cannibal" who allegedly lured children to his employer's house in Noida, murdered them, and "ate their flesh" – his actions cited as evidence of human depravity at its worst.

And then, at 7.30 pm on November 13 this year, Surrender Koli walked out of Kasna Jail in Greater Noida, clad in a blue shirt, black trousers, and a navy-blue jacket.

On November 11, the Supreme Court acquitted Koli in the last of 13 cases against him, calling the investigation "botched" and a "manifest miscarriage of justice". The verdict was the culmination of a decades-long legal battle that his legal team fought, against unimaginable odds.

This is the story of how Koli walked free – defying 13 death sentences and a near-certain date at the gallows.

The crime that shook a nation

In December 2006, skeletal remains of children were discovered in a drain behind House D-5 in Noida's Sector 31 – the residence of businessman Moninder Singh Pandher. As the drain was dug up, more remains tumbled out. A total of 19 bodies, mostly of poor children who had gone missing from the surrounding Nithari village, were eventually recovered. The nation watched as a story of necrophilia and cannibalism was fed to a frenzied public and the media.

On December 29, 2006, Pandher and his domestic help, Koli, were arrested. The case against Koli was built on two main pillars: his detailed confession before a magistrate and the recovery of bodies, allegedly at his disclosure.

In his confession – leaked to the media even before his trial began – Koli provided a chillingly detailed account of a macabre routine. He admitted to luring girls into the bungalow, often with promises of work or chocolates. Once inside, he would strangle them, sometimes with their own scarves, until they were unconscious or dead. He then confessed to dismembering their bodies with a knife or axe, cooking and eating parts of their flesh and disposing of the remains in the gallery behind the house and the drain in front.

Within a few years of his arrest, in 2009, he was sentenced to death in the first of the 13 cases against him – the murder of a 14-year-old girl, referred to as Victim XYZ in court records. The Allahabad High Court upheld his sentence. In 2011, the Supreme Court dismissed his appeal, calling him a "serial killer" and deeming the case one of the "rarest of rare".

Koli's mercy petitions were dismissed by the Uttar Pradesh Governor in 2013 and by the President in 2014. His review petition against the Supreme Court's 2011 decision was dismissed by the Supreme Court in 2014.

With the highest court having sealed his fate, Koli was destined for the gallows.

The team that fought

It was then – in 2014, eight years after his arrest – that Koli's case found its way to Yug Chaudhry, a Mumbai-based senior advocate who specialises in death penalty litigation. Along with his team of advocates Payoshi Roy, Siddhartha and Allahabad-based nun Sister Sheeba Jose, Chaudhry took on a case that seemed legally hopeless.

A doctorate in English Literature from the University of Oxford and a Bachelor of Law from the University of Cambridge, Chaudhry describes himself as someone who has a "visceral loathing for the death penalty". But that was not his only motivation for taking up the case.

"I was interested in this case because it was based on utterly flimsy and fabricated evidence... A crime of gigantic proportions was being pinned on a domestic servant only because he would not have been able to defend himself," says Chaudhry, whose team has been teaching Koli's case at law schools in Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Mumbai. "Students are always shocked that the courts could convict him on such flimsy evidence," he says. A Dalit from Mangru Khal village in Almor district of Uttarakhand, Koli had been working for Pandher since July 2004, two years before the Nithari cases came to light. Having dropped out of school due to poverty, Koli had come to Delhi as a migrant labourer, leaving behind an ailing mother, a pregnant wife and an infant daughter.

When Chaudhry's team first met him, Koli was a broken man. He had become deeply distrustful of the legal aid system – the lawyer assigned to him had joined several lawyers in beating him up when he was first presented in court in January 2007.

He had also been kept in solitary confinement since his arrest eight years ago. "This was wholly unconstitutional. Solitary confinement can only be granted through a judicial order for a maximum of three months," says advocate Roy, who now practices independently in Mumbai.

Isolated and facing certain death, Koli started learning the law inside his cell. "He didn't have faith in the legal aid lawyers and understandably so," says Chaudhry. "He started learning how to cross-examine witnesses on his own. He showed exceptional courage."

The team's first major challenge came on September 2, 2014, when a Ghaziabad

court issued Koli's execution warrant and he was shifted to Meerut jail. Koli, alerted by the suddenness of the move, managed to contact Chaudhry.

What followed was a dramatic midnight intervention that saved Koli's life with hours to spare. Senior advocate Indira Jaising, who had been roped in by Chaudhry, received calls on September 7 about Koli's impending execution, scheduled for 5.30 am the following morning.

The legal ground for Jaising's intervention was a Supreme Court judgment of September 2, 2014, which held that all review petitions in death penalty cases must be heard in open court by a three-judge bench. Koli had not been given this opportunity, Jaising argued – his review petition had been heard earlier that year by the judges in their chambers.

"The DG (Prisons) confirmed that the execution had been planned for 5-5:30 am the following morning, the hangman had been called and preparations were underway," she recalls.

Jaising, who got to know that her urgent application for stay on the death warrant was assigned to Justice H L Dattu's bench, immediately rushed to the judge's residence. Waiting on the pavement outside, she coordinated with the court registry. Soon, Justice Dattu sent for Justice Anil R Dave and a two-judge bench was constituted at the judge's residence. At 1 am on

September 8, just four hours before the scheduled hanging, the execution was temporarily stayed.

The court subsequently re-heard the review petition in open court, till which time the death warrant remained suspended.

Long road to freedom

While the Supreme Court later dismissed his review petition in an open hearing in October 2014, the first real ray of hope came in January 2015.

A bench of the High Court, headed by then Chief Justice DY Chandrachud, commuted Koli's death sentence in the case of Victim XYZ to life imprisonment. The court did not acquit him but found that an "inordinate and unexplained delay" of 2.6 years in the disposal of his mercy petitions by the state and central governments infringed upon his right to life under Article 21.

The High Court also held that Koli had been kept in unconstitutional solitary confinement since his trial court conviction in 2009. The judgment also highlighted serious procedural lapses, including that the Governor's office acted on the "manifestly erroneous" belief that it was bound by judicial findings.

"The 2015 judgment was very vital for our case," says Chaudhry. "Had the death sentence not been commuted, Koli would have been executed and the truth would have remained buried forever."

This victory, however, only applied to one case. Between 2010 and 2021, Koli went on to be sentenced to death in 12 other Nithari cases.

The 2011 Supreme Court judgment had a devastating impact on these subsequent trials. By branding him a "serial killer" and describing House D-5 as a "virtual slaughterhouse", the apex court's verdict cast a long shadow over the lower courts, effectively prejudicing his right to a fair trial in the remaining cases.

Siddhartha of Koli's legal team explains the predicament: "When the Supreme Court described Koli as a 'serial killer' even when trials in other cases were going on, how could one expect a fair trial in the other cases?"

Trial court records from the subsequent convictions show a clear pattern. In at least six of the 12 conviction orders reviewed by The Indian Express, the Ghaziabad trial courts cited the 2011 Supreme Court judgment as binding precedent. They noted that since the apex court had already upheld the legality and voluntariness of Koli's confession, there was "no question of this court reaching a different finding".

The 'cannibal' narrative

For eight years since 2014, Chaudhry's team fought a gruelling battle in the Allahabad High Court. "Between 2016 and 2023, the matter was heard five times by

five different benches," says Roy. "I must have easily spent three or four months at a stretch every year in Allahabad."

The breakthrough came on October 16, 2023. A High Court bench of Justices Ashwani Kumar Mishra and SAH Rizvi, which was hearing all the appeals against the previous conviction orders, acquitted Koli in the 12 cases, systematically dismantling the prosecution's entire case. The CBI's appeals against these acquittals were dismissed by the Supreme Court in July this year. The Supreme Court commended the High Court for "withstanding" media pressure to deliver the judgement and called the trial court orders as being "on the basis of media trial".

This created a legal paradox: Koli stood acquitted in 12 cases based on a complete discrediting of the evidence, yet remained convicted in the first case based on the very same material. To correct this "manifest injustice", the Supreme Court took up Koli's curative petition in the original case – that of Victim XYZ. On November 11, a bench of Chief Justice of India B R Gavai and Justices Surya Kant and Vikram Nath applied the same reasoning from the 12 acquittals, overturned the court's own 2011 judgment and ordered his immediate release. His co-accused, Pandher, had already been acquitted in all cases against him by the Allahabad High Court in 2023.

The case against Koli, once seemingly iron-clad, crumbled under scrutiny be-

cause its two foundational pillars were found to be vitiated.

The first pillar was the confession, which the High Court found was recorded after Koli had been in uninterrupted police custody for about 60 days, without meaningful legal aid. Under the Code of Criminal Procedure, the maximum period of permissible police custody is 15 days. Through these 60 days, he was not allowed to meet his family or any lawyers.

In subsequent letters to the court and in his statements to court during trial, Koli had alleged systematic torture: he claimed he was subjected to electric shocks and had water poured into his mouth, had his nails pulled out with pliers, petrol injected into his anus, his genitals were burnt and that was hung upside down. He also alleged psychological torture, stating that the police forced him to memorise names and facts and threatened to "leave (his) family to the mercy of the frenzied mob who were baying for his blood".

The High Court, in its 2023 judgment, accepted these allegations, noting that the confession itself contained references to tutoring and torture, rendering it involuntary and inadmissible. The failure to conduct proper medical examinations, despite Koli's offers to show his scars, further weakened the prosecution's case.

A botched investigation

The second pillar – the recovery of the bodies – was equally flawed. The defence argued that the police and public already knew about the remains. "Even before Koli pointed out the location, digging had started in the area," Chaudhry says. "In fact, body parts were being found in that area months before Koli's arrest." The recovery site – an open strip of land – was not under Koli's exclusive control, a key requirement for evidence to be admissible under the Indian Evidence Act.

Even the forensic evidence presented at the initial trial was problematic. Dr T D Dogra, then head of Forensic Medicine at AIIMS, recalled a "chalk-marking exercise" in which Koli, in police custody, was asked to demonstrate on a cadaver how he cut the bodies. The Allahabad High Court later ruled this demonstration inadmissible, deeming it an extra-judicial confession made while in police custody.

The court also slammed the investigation for its glaring omissions. The theory of cannibalism was never substantiated with forensic evidence. No bloodstains or human remains were found inside Pandher's house. The police's claim that Koli hacked the bodies with a crude axe was contradicted by forensic opinion that suggested the bodies were severed with "surgical precision".

Most damningly, the investigation never pursued the organ trade angle, which had been flagged by a committee of the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development in a 2007 report. The Chief Medical Superintendent of Noida had deposited to the committee that the torsos of all the bodies were missing and the remains were dismembered with "surgical precision", leading him to suggest that the cannibalism narrative could have been a "ruse to divert attention". The report also flagged that the resident of the adjoining house, D-6, near which many of the skeletal remains were found, was a doctor previously arrested in a kidney scam.

Despite the committee recommending a probe, the CBI and police failed to probe this lead or even interrogate the doctor.

"There is not a single organ that has been found; only heads and legs," Chaudhry points out. "The bones have been acid-washed. This was a very organised crime of organ trade."

The human cost

For Koli, the acquittal comes after 19 lost years. He is, in Chaudhry's words, a "totally broken person who had been psychologically deeply scarred".

His family was destroyed. "His brothers were called siblings of the cannibal," says Roy. "They lost their jobs. They were harassed so much by the media and by the CBI that they had to change their names and distance themselves from him just to survive."

Roy and Siddhartha recall that in 2014, Koli's mother travelled to jail to see him after she got word that he would be executed. She passed away a few years later. Koli never got furlough or parole through his 19 years in prison.

He is estranged from his wife, who went on to remarry, and his two children, a daughter now in her early 20s and a 19-year old son. Since he was arrested when his wife was pregnant with his son, he has never met him.

Throughout the ordeal, Koli's resilience kept his legal team going. Chaudhry recalls him saying, "Do whatever you have to do... I'll manage in jail from my side. Don't worry."

His lawyers say that while Koli is happy to be free, he is also afraid of being hounded by the media or people who still believe he is guilty.

Chaudhry says Koli's case will serve as a cautionary tale on the dangers of a justice system susceptible to media trials and investigative lapses. "Whenever there is a media trial, justice is the biggest casualty. Evidence which would have been rejected by a law student was accepted by judge after judge, including by judges of the Supreme Court."

DECEMBER 2006



NOVEMBER 2025



(left) On December 29, 2006, Koli was arrested with his employer Moninder Singh Pandher; 19 years later, on November 13, he walked out of Kasna Jail in Greater Noida, a free man

• GLOBAL

Row over Eden Gardens pitch: tricky science of preparing a turner

Venkata Krishna B
Chennai, November 21

INDIA'S LOSS to South Africa in the first Test at Kolkata, where they failed to chase 124, has put the spotlight on the Eden Gardens pitch. From the first hour, where pacer Jasprit Bumrah removed opener Ryan Rickelton with a delivery that kept a tad low and Aiden Markram with one that climbed awkwardly, the pitch behaved unpredictably. One batsman scored a 50; the match finished three days.

Since pitch-making isn't a specific science, a thin line separates a track that helps spinners from a wicked wicket where batting is impossible.

What is an ideal pitch?

A pitch is considered good in India when it has help for pacers in the first morning, before it gets better for batting on Day 2 and gradually starts taking turn from Day 3, with Day 5 supposedly the most challenging to bat. There have also been pitches where it takes turn from Day 1, but batsmen are still able to score without having to worry about survival. But making such a pitch isn't foolproof, as there are natural elements involved.

When teams give specific instructions, like a seaming deck or a turner, things can go wrong. Since the arrival of WTC, host teams have preferred result-oriented pitches, in an attempt to maximise home advantage.

While a drier pitch helps spinners, if a pitch is too dry, its top layer can start flaking apart, causing the ball to bounce and turn in an uneven and unpredictable way.

And what happened at Eden Gardens?

A combination of factors, including a request from the Indian team to prepare a turner.

At Eden Gardens, the ground staff had stopped watering the pitch four days ahead of the Test. "When you stop watering, this is what happens," says veteran curator Nadim Memon from Mumbai.

With hardly any sunshine on offer in hazy conditions, it is learnt that the ground staff even let the pitch open so that it absorbs moisture. But it crumbled from Day 1, with batsmen battling for survival as the up and bounce and sharp turn caused all sorts of problems for both teams. "The pitch wasn't watered for more than three days, which means it is already dry. And when rolling is done on a dry pitch, it will bring uneven bounce into play because the pitch isn't binding. Since the upper surface is dry, it will cause uneven bounce," Memon, who oversaw the famous Wankhede pitch in 2004 where the Test ended in three days with Michael Clarke claiming 6/9, says.



K L Rahul during the Eden Gardens Test match. PARTHA PAUL

What is a turner?

Traditionally, Indian pitches are flat and deteriorate over the course of five days, by bringing spinners to play from Day 3 or 4. However, it is not possible to predict the degree of turn.

According to Memon, it is possible to prepare a turning pitch where there is balance between bat and ball, which was missing at Eden Gardens. "Preparing a turner is simple. You have to ensure there is no grass, there is less watering and less rolling — mostly with a half-tonne roller. When this happens, it won't crumble quickly. You have to ensure there is enough moisture for rolling."

Another curator, who wishes to remain anonymous because of contractual obligations, prefers to add an asterisk to this. "You have to remember, this is winter. Now if a team asks for a turner, they wouldn't be aware of the local conditions. Only the local ground staff will know how a pitch will behave in certain months. If a team arrives only a few days before a match and puts in a request — be it for a seaming deck or one that takes turn — a curator will have no choice but to alter a few things," he explains.

Memon wants to put across a message as well. "The Eden curator is getting a lot of criticism, but it is the BCCI central curators who oversaw the preparation. The pitch preparation should be left to the respective state curator because he is the one who knows the conditions inside-out. To bring in neutral curators isn't helping anyone."

So was the Kolkata pitch a 'turner'?

Out of 40 wickets, 16 were taken by pacers who thrived on the variable bounce on offer. So the pitch wasn't a turner, but one that behaved differently from what India and the ground staff wanted.

In the months leading up to the Test, Kolkata had witnessed heavy rain. With it not being watered for four days, the black soil pitch was going to crumble even without extreme sunlight.

The curator explains where this can go wrong. "Be it a seaming deck or a turner, everything depends on overhead conditions, nature of soil and grass and watering. A curator will be preparing a good pitch and then when instructions are given, he has to alter his plans. Since the natural elements are out of ground staff control, there is always scope for things to go wrong."

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• ECONOMY

How India's agri exports posted impressive growth



HARISH DAMODARAN

INDIA'S AGRICULTURAL exports are growing at a faster pace than overall merchandise exports. Government data show the value of farm produce exports in April-September 2025, at \$25.9 billion, to have registered an 8.8% jump over the \$23.8 billion for the corresponding six months of 2024.

That's more than the 2.9% growth of India's total goods exports, from \$213.7 billion in April-September 2024 to \$219.9 billion in April-September 2025.

During the 2024-25 financial year, too, India's farm exports grew by 6.4% (from \$48.8 billion to \$52 billion), as against the measly 0.1% rise for all merchandise exports (from \$437.1 billion to \$437.7 billion).

Export growth drivers

Table 1 shows India's leading agricultural export items, whose value of shipments exceeded \$1 billion in 2024-25.

The export growth this fiscal has been powered by non-basmati rice, buffalo meat, marine products, coffee, and fruits & vegetables.

In non-basmati rice, the buoyancy has been thanks to the lifting of restrictions on shipments, imposed between September 2022 and August 2023 to rein in domestic food inflation pressures. That included an outright ban on exports of broken and white non-basmati rice, and a 20% duty on par-boiled shipments. With those curbs gradually eased, on the back of consecutive good monsoons from 2024 and overflowing stocks in government godowns, non-basmati exports are on track to overtake the \$6.5-billion record achieved during the last fiscal.

Buffalo meat exports are also set to surpass the previous high of \$4.8 billion in 2014-15, if the present growth rate is sustained for the rest of this fiscal. Equally significant are marine products, the exports of which have gone up by 17.4% in the first half of this fiscal and could end up bettering the \$8.1 billion all-time-high of 2022-23.

The US accounted for \$2.7 billion or 36.2% of India's marine products exports of \$7.4 billion in 2024-25. Given that, one would have expected the over-58% effective tariff levied by the US President Donald

TABLE 1

• India's top agricultural export items

	2024-25*	Apr-Sep 2024*	Apr-Sep 2025*	Growth in %
Marine Products	7405	3385.82	3974.94	17.4
Non-Basmati Rice	6527.98	2251.3	2871.05	27.53
Basmati Rice	5944.49	2869.88	2763.46	-3.71
Spices	4451.97	2091.02	2146.89	2.67
Buffalo Meat	4060.54	1806.15	2187.08	21.09
Coffee	1805.57	932.47	1048.75	12.47
Fruits & Vegetables	2068.93	848.8	948.9	11.79
Tobacco	1979.01	986.12	993.96	0.8
Processed F&V	1805.83	852.82	918.4	7.69
Oilmeals	1346.8	698.66	585.39	-16.21
Oilseeds	1343.98	628	632.2	0.67
Castor Oil	1152.37	622.09	612.29	-1.58
TOTAL	51951.15	23768.61	25867.48	8.83

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE.

TABLE 2

• India's top agricultural import items

	2024-25*	Apr-Sep 2024*	Apr-Sep 2025*	Growth in %
Vegetable Oils	17366.26	8806.46	9991.77	13.46
Pulses	5477.28	2187.21	1031.87	-52.82
Fresh Fruits	3043.7	1299.58	1549.15	19.2
Cashew	1669.43	937.13	1590.5	69.72
Spices	1625.42	761.24	725.59	-4.68
Raw cotton	1219.32	477.38	676.71	41.75
Alcoholic Beverages	1115.36	511.42	563.52	10.19
Natural Rubber	1069.05	592.71	542.09	-8.54
TOTAL	38,542.23	18,444.42	19,528.88	5.88

*IN MILLION DOLLARS

Trump's administration to have hugely impacted Indian seafood exports. However, the data for April-September 2025 over April-September 2024 points to an increase in exports (from \$3.4 billion to \$4 billion), despite a 0.4% dip to the US (to \$1.3 billion). Indian seafood exporters have seemingly absorbed the Trump tariff shock by ramping up shipments to markets such as China, Vietnam, the European Union and Canada.

Coffee exports from India have more than doubled from \$738.9 million in 2019-20 to \$1.8 billion in 2024-25. The current fiscal is likely to see it top \$2 billion. The surge has been less due to the quantity of exports (up from 5.2 million to 6.2 million 60-kg bags between 2019-20 and 2024-25) and more courtesy of skyrocketing prices from global ending stocks for 2024-25 depleting to a 25-year low.

Exports of fruits & vegetables have been registering steady growth, both in fresh (from \$1.4 billion in 2019-20 to \$2.1 billion in 2024-25) and processed (from \$958.5 million to \$1.8 billion) forms. That trend has been maintained in the current fiscal year.

A rollercoaster ride

Indian farm exports have exhibited considerable volatility in the last decade, collapsing from \$43.3 billion in 2013-14 to \$32.8 bil-

lion in 2015-16, before recovering to \$41.9 billion in 2020-21, \$50.2 billion in 2021-22 and a peak of \$53.2 billion scaled in 2022-23.

The above trend has broadly mirrored movements in international agri-commodity prices. The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food price index plunged from an average of 119.1 points in 2013-14 to 90 points in 2015-16. The index — a weighted average of world prices of a basket of food commodities over a base period value (in this case, taken at 100 for 2014-16) — stayed below 100 points till 2019-20, and then soared to 102.4, 133.1 and 140.6 points in the following three fiscals.

As the FAO index has come down from those highs, it has been reflected in India's agriculture exports falling to \$48.8 billion in 2023-24 and \$52 billion in 2024-25. Some of that has also been a result of export clampdowns — on a host of produce, from wheat, rice and sugar to onions and de-oiled rice bran — by the Modi government as part of its inflation-containment policy measures.

The export performance in the second half of 2025-26 will be influenced both by global prices and the Trump tariffs.

The FAO index averaged 126.4 points in October 2025, well below the record March 2022 level of 160.2 points immediately after

Key Points

Despite Trump's tariffs, agri exports grew faster than general merchandise exports.

These numbers were powered by non-basmati rice, buffalo meat, marine products, coffee, and fruits & vegetables.

• GDP: GRAPHS, DATA & PERSPECTIVES

As the US boycotts G20, can the forum make a difference?

Udit Misra

New Delhi, November 21

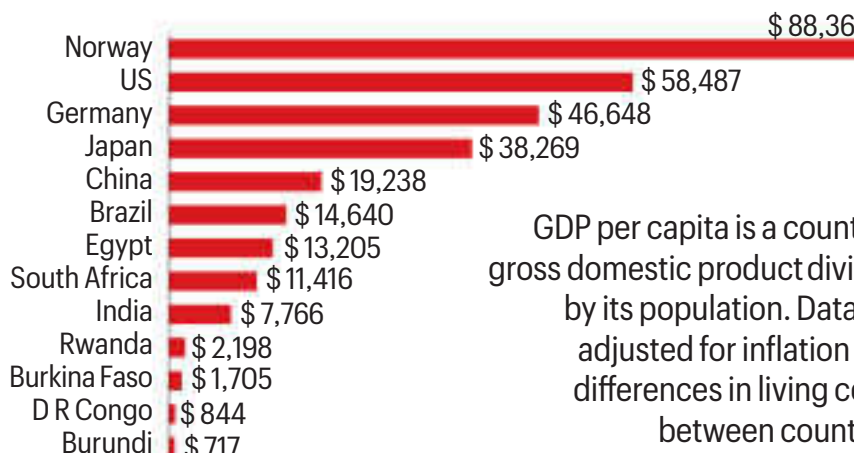
THE G20 summit is scheduled to start on Saturday in Johannesburg. This is the last event before South Africa hands over the presidency of G20 to the US. However, alleging that white Afrikaners are being "slaughtered" in South Africa, President Donald Trump has refused to attend this summit. The US now plans to send a junior embassy official to take part in the closing ceremony meant to mark the handover to the next summit.

A US boycott means there may not be a joint declaration from the summit in South Africa. Moreover, with the US taking over the presidency, it also begs the question: What lies ahead for the G20's mandate?

As the events since the start of Trump's second term as US president have shown, without the US involvement, little can be achieved, at least in the short term. For instance, the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules of trade have not stopped Trump from imposing punitive and sweeping tariffs that are reordering global trade flows every day.

One of the problems is that G20 itself is a

CHART 1 GDP per capita, 2022

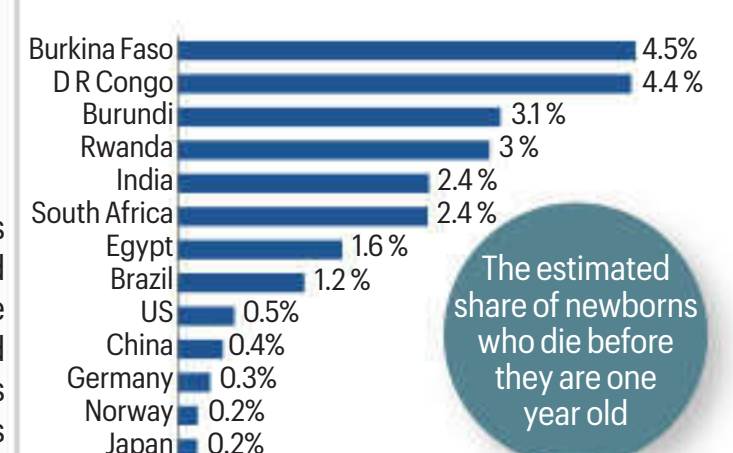


SOURCE: BOLT AND VAN ZANDEN-MADDISON PROJECT DATABASE 2023 & OUR WORLD IN DATA. NOTE: DATA ARE EXPRESSED IN INTERNATIONAL \$2 AT 2011 PRICES

misnomer. The grouping was created in 1999 after the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, which showed that the G7 (or the seven most advanced economies) could not control matters as the world was far more unified thanks to rapid globalisation under the WTO.

The initial idea was to have an informal forum for the finance ministers and central bank governors of the most important industrialised and the biggest developing econ-

CHART 2 Infant mortality rate, 2023



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY GROUP FOR CHILD MORTALITY ESTIMATION (2025) & OUR WORLD IN DATA

omies to discuss international economic and financial stability. After the 2007-08 global financial crisis, the G20 was "upgraded" to the level of Heads of State/Government to ensure necessary crisis coordination.

But the G20 today includes the G7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, the US), the European Union, the Russian Federation, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, the Republic

Russia invaded Ukraine. But it isn't just the general index. The cereals' subindex, at 103.3 points in October 2025, was the lowest since August 2020. That for 'sugar', at 94.1 points, was also the lowest after December 2020. Past trends show that bearish global commodity prices adversely affect Indian exports.

As for the Trump tariffs, the 26.9%, 45.1% and 17.8% drop in exports of marine products, spices and basmati rice, respectively, to the US in September is proof of their starting to bite. On the positive side, there are indications of a trade deal between India and the US materialising before the year end, even as Washington has apparently softened its earlier confrontational stance.

Moreover, Trump, on Friday, rolled back his sweeping tariffs on several food products — including items like spices, coffee, tea and fresh fruits, in which India has export interests.

Import trends

Like with exports, India's farm produce imports have posted higher year-on-year growth during April-September 2025 (5.9%, from \$18.4 billion to \$19.5 billion), compared to overall imports (4.5%, from \$358.9 billion to \$375 billion).

But unlike exports, which are well diversified, India's import basket is quite narrow and limited to a few commodities (Table 2). At No. 1 position is vegetable oils, the imports of which have risen by 13.5% in April-September this fiscal and are poised to close in on the \$20.8 billion high of 2022-23.

At the second spot is pulses, where imports touched an unprecedented \$5.5 billion in 2024-25. The current fiscal year has seen a sharp decline because of a bumper domestic crop and the Modi government reimposing import duties that were withdrawn during the high-inflation period from mid-2023 through much of 2024.

The imports that have shown major expansion in recent times are of fresh fruits and raw cotton. In 2024-25, India imported fresh fruits worth over \$3 billion, out of which \$1.1 billion was from the US. In April-September this year, imports were at \$1.5 billion, with the US' share at \$780.6 million or 50.4%. India has, thus, become a key market of the US, especially for almonds, pistachios, walnuts and other dry fruits.

In raw cotton, India has turned from a net exporter to an importer. Imports are on course to cross \$1.5 billion this fiscal, which is an outcome of domestic production shortfalls from no new yield-enhancing technologies after Bt cotton.

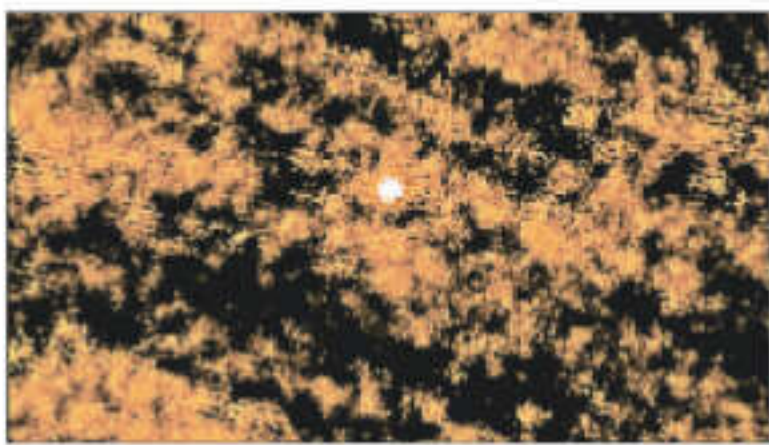
2 THINGS TO KNOW

NASA releases new images of Comet 3I/Atlas: what are interstellar objects?

NASA ON Wednesday released new images of Comet 3I/Atlas, an interstellar object which was first spotted on July 1. It is the third interstellar object that scientists have discovered so far, after 1I/'Oumuamua and 2I/Borisov.

Interstellar objects are celestial bodies that originate outside the solar system, and are not gravitationally bound to a star. They can come from other solar systems and be thrown into interstellar space due to collisions or be slingshotted by another body's gravity.

To determine if a celestial body is interstellar, scientists compute its trajectory. All planets, asteroids, and comets within the Solar System move in closed elliptical orbits. When they come closest to the Sun (a point called perihelion), they travel the fastest, trying to move away from the Sun, but are slowed down by solar gravitational pull. When these celestial bodies are farthest from the Sun (a point called

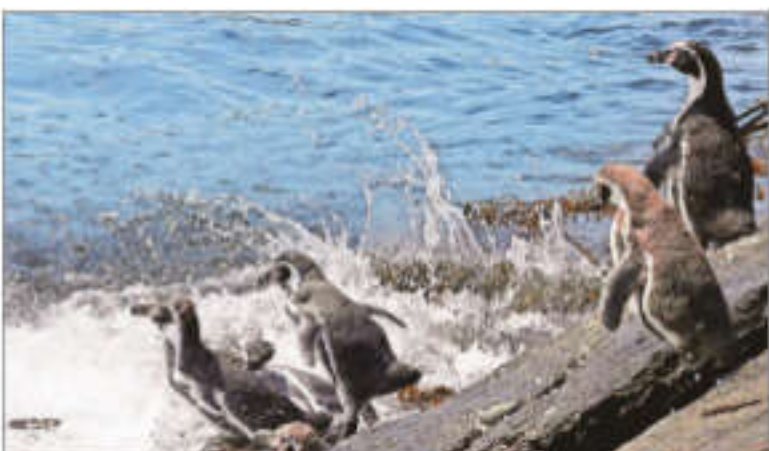


3I/ATLAS observed by the ESA/NASA SOHO mission. NASA

aphelion), they are brought back close to the Sun by solar gravitational pull. But interstellar objects move in an open-ended hyperbolic orbit; they move at such speeds that the Sun's gravitational pull is not able to slow them down enough during their outbound leg, allowing them to escape our Solar System.

As Chile sounds alarm, why population of Humboldt Penguin continues to shrink

AFTER OFFICIALS declared the species endangered, Chilean scientists have warned of further risks to the world's shrinking population of Humboldt penguins. Chile's Pacific coast is home to 80% of the world's remaining Humboldt penguins. Scientists at the Universidad de Concepcion estimate that their numbers have



Humboldt penguins on Cachagua Island in Zapallar, Chile, in 2021. REUTERS

dwindled to fewer than 20,000 from around 45,000 in the late 1990s. Last month, Chile's Environment Ministry classified the bird as "endangered".

Competition for food from commercial fishing, as well as habitat loss, pollution, bird flu and the worsening impacts of climate change have contributed to declining numbers. "If these threats persist over time, it is very likely this species will go from endangered to critically endangered, and from there it is a very short step to the species disappearing for good," Guillermo Cubillos, a Chilean marine biologist, told Reuters.

Paulina Arce, a veterinary expert on the Humboldt penguin, said the species is threatened by deaths in fishing nets as well as competition for marine resources, and the classification calls for stricter legislation for sustainable fishing, both on the industrial and small-scale fronts.

THE ASIAN AGE

22 NOVEMBER 2025

Will Nitish’s tenth term start new era for Bihar?

Nitish Kumar being sworn in for the tenth time as the chief minister of Bihar was a logical culmination of a resurgent performance by JD(U) that inspired the NDA to a popular victory with over 50 percent of the popular vote giving them 83 per cent of the seats. More than a mere political survivor, Nitish is a phenomenal reader of social arithmetic and engineering with wide appeal that goes beyond caste as a record turnout of female supporters and youth demonstrated. His schemes for women empowerment with cash benefits adding to the state’s adherence to prohibition endearing him to them in the first place were the game changer in this poll.

In sticking to one side of the political spectrum since January 2024 when he took oath or the ninth time and making the 2025 victory possible with his appeal to all sections of the social coalition he has stitched together and which helped drown anti-incumbency that could build easily in a state with so much migration in search of jobs, Nitish had displayed shrewd judgment.

It is remarkable that irrespective of whether he is making or breaking alliances and despite his party always being the junior partner in terms of seats, Nitish has been CM for 20 years now. With Narendra Modi backing him all the way this time, the double-engine drive may have attained stability for a prospective full term provided, of course, that Nitish’s health sees him last the course as an active driver of the administration.

One of the major talking points of the poll was the direct benefit transfer to at least one crore women on the eve of the elections. At a time when no party is chary of offering targeted benefits and jobs for youth, the legality of DBT cannot be questioned. But what it signifies is people have taken a great liking to welfare schemes and freebies and a majority of those who were eligible under the revised poll rolls demonstrated this.

Sustaining the welfare schemes that have become de rigueur in a country which spends the most in the world now on positive social action could be the least of the new government’s worries. Bihar’s debt as a state will also climb along with many other major states which, however, boast of better performances when measured against socioeconomic parameters but still depend on populist channels to attract voters.

As a state that has not industrialised at a hectic pace which others are attaining by being ultra-competitive to attract private sector investment, Bihar has a long way to go. Without new industry, it will be a grave challenge to create the one crore jobs in 10 years the NDA has promised since all of it cannot come from an already bloated government machinery. And jobs for youth wishing to stay in their home state from which thousands migrate each year are a challenge that must be tackled on a war footing.

While infrastructure building will grow under double engine traction, Bihar may have to do much more to satisfy the people of a state looking to leave dank days behind. This would entail investing more in the education and public health sectors while also trying to modernise the agriculture sector in tune with states that produce so much more. The state must move on under the patriarchal rule of its stalwart CM. An overwhelming vote of support for him and the NDA was just the hopeful start of a new era.

US-India defence ties endure

The US state department has approved the sale of Javelin anti-tank missile systems and Excalibur-guided artillery munitions worth \$93-million to India. Earlier this month, India signed a deal to purchase 113 fighter-jet engines from US firm General Electric for its indigenous Tejas Mk-1A aircraft. Both the deals reaffirm a mature bilateral defence relationship between the world’s largest democracy and the world’s most powerful democracy.

Though the US and India relations have been rocky especially in matters of trade and commerce after Donald Trump took over reins in Washington in 2025, the defence representatives from both the countries continued to engage each other. Soon after Mr Trump took charge of the Oval Office for the second time, India and the US issued a joint statement in February 2025, agreeing to expand defence sales, co-production and interoperability efforts.

In October 2025, defence minister Rajnath Singh and US secretary of war Pete Hegseth signed a “Framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership” for the next 10 years, giving a policy-direction to the whole spectrum of defence relations. It emphasised co-development and co-production of advanced defence systems, technology transfer and increasing India’s defence industrial base under initiatives such as “Make in India”.

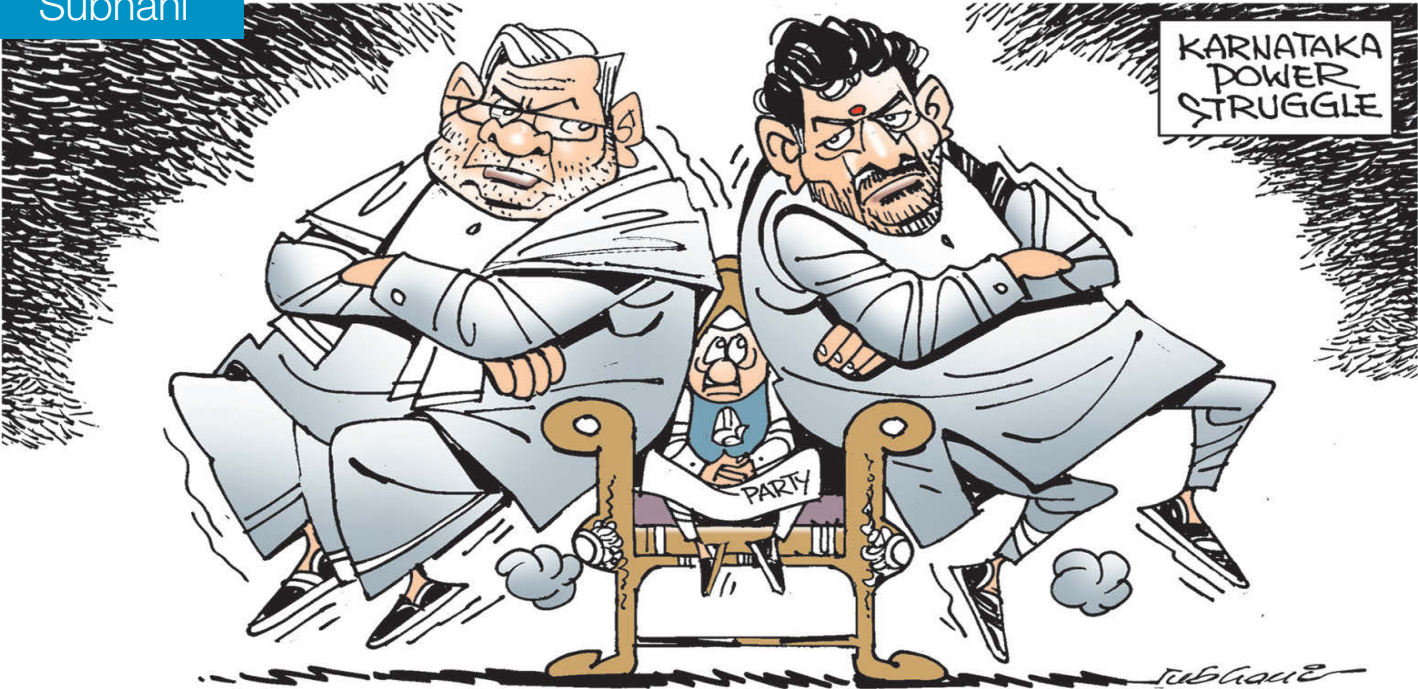
Similarly, both India and the United States have been participating in bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the Quad format, indicating the American establishment’s preference for Indian defence partnership in Asia, where China has become too dominant.

Irrespective of Mr Trump’s attempts to promote the G-2 format, America cannot overlook China’s rise. If the US agrees to leave Asia under the sphere of China’s influence, it would be the beginning of America’s rapid decline. If there is one country that could stand up to — if not match — China in terms of population, military strength, culture and economy, it is India. The India-US defence deals just attests to this fact.

THE ASIAN AGE

KAUSHIK MITTER Editor THE ASIAN AGE office is located at: New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: (011) 23211124. Published and Printed on behalf of and for: Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited, Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110 002 at BFL Infotech Ltd., C-9, Sector-III, Noida -201301. London: Quickmarsh Ltd, 8th Floor, Block 2, Elizabeth House, 39 York Road, London, SE1 7NQ. RNI Registration number: 57290/94 K. SUDHAKAR Printer & Publisher

Subhani



‘Parasocials’ rock... Let’s ask Rahul, Rajni, Shashi



Shobhaa’s Take

As this dramatic year slides into the last month of 2025, it kinda makes most people feel a bit stupid. We scratch our heads, roll our eyes, look heavenwards and wonder — “Where the hell did 12 months go?” Ummmm... Errrr... Those months went where they were meant to go. But where did we go?? The actual question cowards (like me!) dread asking is to themselves — where were we when 2025 was happening? In an emotional/intellectual coma? Deadened by global events that brought the world to the brink of annihilation? Frustrated by what’s going on in our backyard (think Bihar)? To avoid plunging back into a black hole of depression, we got busy. But busy with what? Thinking what? The world was spinning away at its usual dizzy speed. While we watched, too numb to react to all the horrors around us.

The year 2025 is already a blur. In fact, such a huge blur, that it’s best to forget the months gone by and simply look ahead. For, if we dare to look back, it will only be in anger (thank you, John Osborne).

At the moment I am fascinated by the just announced “Word of 2025”. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, that word is “Parasocial”, which beat “delulu”, “slop” and “skibidi” (among other entries), to win the “honour”. My personal favourite is “vibey”, which refers to a place that has a good vibe (Alibaght). I also like “Breathwork”, which is a fancy word for “Pranayam” and describes a technique that involves conscious control of breathing. “Tradwife” is a bit too sexist and borderline offensive, since it alludes to a married

woman who stays at home, cooks, cleans, looks after the kids and shares this lifestyle on social media. Sounds like a lot of wonderful ladies one knows and loves. But isn’t it time for “Tradhubby”? I know quite a few — darlings, all! The roles are not just getting reversed, but redefined in a non-combative, non-judgmental way. A meme of Lalu Prasad Yadav’s unsolicited advice to Rahul Gandhi had me in splits. “Get married... how long will you manage with the election symbol?” The Congress’ symbol is a male hand. No further explanation is needed!

Aaah... the power of words! “Parasocial” is defined as “involving or relating to a connection that someone feels between themselves and a famous person they do not know”. Let’s call it the Rajnikanth phenomenon. Last week, the superstar, often saluted as “*Thal-aivar*”, was paid the ultimate tribute by a national newspaper when the publication transformed its front page into “*Rajinikanth Times*” — the first time in the paper’s century long history that a front page has been dedicated to a single individual.

Fifty years of Rajini in cinema is indeed a landmark. Here’s where “parasocial” comes in — during the five decades of Rajini domination, an avalanche of “parasocial” relationships were spawned across generations — millions of Rajni fans who felt so intensely connected to their idol that they imagined they were an intrinsic part of the superstar’s life. “Parasocial” is not a new word. It was coined in 1956 when two Chicago sociologists noticed television viewers developing parasocial relationships with TV personalities, who they treated like close

With every appearance of his, Shashi Tharoor’s army of dedicated ‘parasocials’ just grows and grows. If only some other political party would shrewdly hijack Shashi and capitalise on his star power!

friends or a part of their family.

In India, our heroes are often treated like gods and publicly worshipped. Some movie stars have temples dedicated to them. Are these fans that “delulu”? Go figure. Meanwhile, beware of the intrusive power of ChatGPT. There are countless folks out there who have developed a serious “parasocial” relationship with the AI monster, treating the beast as a friend, counsellor, confidant, even romantic partner. Call it a reflection of the current zeitgeist — by any name, it is an extremely troubling development.

Meanwhile, I am in the throes of lit fest mania, and have thoroughly enjoyed the ones I have participated in so far. Every *nukkad* has a lit fest these days, as authors promoting our latest title, we charge across the length and breadth of our vast country, peddling our latest book. And no — even after my 28th offering, I am not done with the circus. Nor am I jaded, faded or cynical. Never mind that the eager school kids in uniform who occupy many rows at crowded venues are there under duress and may never have read a book in their lives.

The rest of the audience is made up of retired, genteel people, often high-ranking *faujis*, leading sedentary, uneventful lives in salubrious climes. A lit fest in town, with free entry, sees senior citizens out in full force, happy to fling on shawls, cardigans, caps and socks while earnest historians provide insights into important chapters of India’s turbulent past. Confession: I

have signed up for sixteen!

The Author’s Lounge, designed to provide a much-needed respite between intense sessions, sees its own pecking order at play. God help lesser beings if Shashi Tharoor rolls in, followed by a panting entourage of easy-on-the-eye female volunteers in their best saris. Mighty self-styled intellectual egos get instantly crushed as The Tharoor effortlessly commands the space, proceeds to be annoyingly charming towards all and sundry, while obliging any and every selfie-seeker with a broad smile and a characteristic toss of the hair. With every appearance of his, Shashi Tharoor’s army of dedicated “parasocials” just grows and grows. If only some other political party would shrewdly hijack Shashi and capitalise on his star power! But would that “other” party make him CM of Kerala? Or PM of India??? Ambition *ka sawaal hai*, boss!

The collective vocabulary of *desis* is at stake! As overawed organisers of the Mumbai Lit Fest mentioned, the besotted Tharoorites were seen running behind his car as it sped away from the venue. This, in a city that’s pretty blasé and nonchalant about political celebrities breezing into town. It’s great that someone like Shashi Tharoor draws capacity crowds at literature festivals, which have seen a depressing decline in sponsorships. Without big ticket brands to back them, it’s very challenging to keep the show on the road. Despite the shrinkage of funds, it’s amazing how many established lit fests still manage to bring in a roster of Nobel laureates and award-winning international writers.

Mercifully, the bar rarely runs dry! Liquor companies have sweetly invited her to nothing fuels great debates and combative conversations at lit fests than a timely drink or two or three or even ten! That’s the spirit!

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

BEYOND ENCOUNTERS

This refers to your editorial on the decline of Maoist insurgency. While eliminating top commanders and showcasing surrenders may signal progress, we must remember the original cry of *jal, jangal aur jameen*. Most cadre had no chappals on their feet, yet guns in their hands — a stark reminder that the roots of extremism lie in dispossession, not ideology alone. Glorified encouters and choreographed “camera surrenders” cannot be the last word. These must be followed by relentless welfare delivery, protection of tribal rights and strict non-encroachment on forest and community land. People die and surrender. Ideas don’t. Unless justice, dignity and development reach the last village, the space vacated by the gun may one day be filled again by grief and grievance.

Harsh Pawaria Rohtak

DEBATE GOV REMIT

THE SUPREME COURT’S response to the presidential reference brings overdue clarity to one major concern by affirming that governors cannot stall bills indefinitely and must return any withheld legislation to the Assembly. This is an important defence of federalism after years of governors sitting on bills while offering no justification. Yet the Court leaves unresolved the very circumstances that prompted debate on deemed assent and offers no substitute beyond the vague expectation of action within a reasonable time. By refusing to articulate a practical safeguard against deliberate delay, the Court restores the principle of separation of powers but not the confidence of states facing obstruction. Its advisory opinion should be treated as a starting point for a broader conversation.

K. Chidanand Kumar Bengaluru

HAITI INSPIRES ALL

THE BRILLIANT SUCCESS of Haiti in qualifying for the first World Cup since 1974 calls for praise. The footballers have achieved it working within a system plagued by lawlessness, violence, hunger and homelessness, and infested by kidnappings and killings. And their achievement has inspired the entire world. Hope their unconquerable spirit brings them more success and helps reopen a new chapter in the country’s sporting history. Haiti will capture hearts through courage and perseverance in this World Cup irrespective of the result.

Kajal Chatterjee Kolkata

Farrukh Dhondy Cabbages & Kings



“No, nothing can bring back the hour No apologies, retractions or tears The seasons rot the brightest flaming flower Obliterate even wonderful past years The splendour in the grass will fade And every glorious petal fall The happy times that you degrade Denying all you can recall.”

— From *The Divine Tragedy*, by Bachchoo

UK is trying new ways to halt rise in immigration, asylum-seekers

The world is what it is... and today it’s almost everywhere in a sorry state. Wars and persecution have driven millions from their homes and native lands to seek peace, safety, freedom from starvation or persecution and even a decent, if barely substantial, standard of living.

This has become an age of mass migrations of populations fleeing war-torn countries or cruel regimes — Afghanistan, Sudan... the list overwhelms the word count of this column.

In Britain, undoubtedly fuelled by right-wing bigotry and racist ideology, the largest looming political controversy is about “immigration”. The propaganda and opportunism around it have caused nationwide controversies. In the words of the UK’s home secretary for the last 80 days, Shabana Mahmood, these “are tearing the UK apart”!

Her governing Labour Party faces a real challenge from the newly formed Reform Party under the lead-

ership of veteran Brexiteer Nigel Farage, an outfit that can justifiably be described as neo-fascist. The public that, according to every popular poll, supports Reform does so because of its extremist stance on “immigration”.

I put quote marks around the word, because it means so many different things.

The foremost in the public eye is the growing number of “asylum seekers” who arrive on the shores of Britain, mainly from France, by crossing the English Channel in overcrowded rubber dinghies and are then picked up and given shelter in various forms of accommodation till their claims to remain in the country are laboriously processed.

Thousands of these asylum-seekers, most of them fleeing from death and disaster and some of them manifestly here to get away from abject poverty and live in a relatively prosperous environment, are of course housed and fed at the British taxpayers’ expense. Ms Mahmood, who was promoted to her ministerial position as an answer to Reform’s anti-immigration perspective and programme, is already talking tough on the issue. She says she’ll stop asylum seekers being housed in hotels.

She will hasten the vetting process and those who are refused permission to remain will be packed off to their countries of origin. If these countries refuse to accept their returned citizens, then Britain will not grant entry visas to any of their citizens.

All those whose application to stay is approved will

not get permanent residence but their status will be reviewed every thirty months, and if their country of origin is deemed to be “safe” once again, they will be offered financial incentives to leave, and if they refuse, they will be forcibly deported.

This policy of refusing visas to citizens of countries that won’t accept its repatriated citizens already applies to Angola, the Congo and Namibia.

Ms Mahmood also quoted a list of countries, including India, which are deemed “safe” to send illegal immigrants back to.

She has also specified that permanent residence will not be granted to immigrants allowed to remain after the present “temporary” period of five years. This period of assimilation and granting of permanent residence will be extended to twenty years.

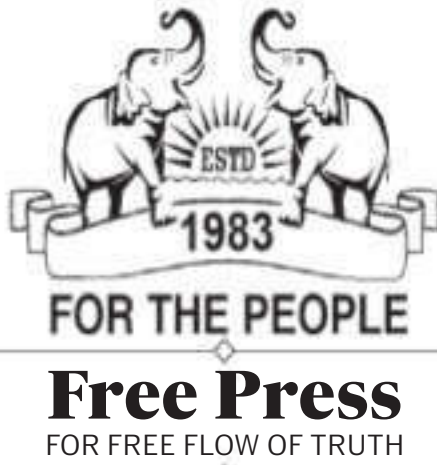
Ms Mahmood has also proposed that in discussion with other signatories to the European Court of Human Rights, she will attempt to modify the rules governing the right of immigrants to bring their relatives as residents when they are granted leave to remain. She has said that if specific and humane modifications are made to this right, it will deter illegal immigrants from bringing their children across on the hazardous Channel boats.

This year 36,000 people crossed the Channel illegally, a larger number than in 2024, but 900 fewer than in 2022 under Hedgie Sunak’s Tory government.

Ms Mahmood’s legislative plans, designed to undermine Reform’s appeal to voters and to bring

about unity in what she says is a deeply divided country, are not popular with all Labour MPs. Several have expressed deep misgivings, and some have accused her of adopting inhumane Tory policies. Danny Kruger, a Tory MP who defected to Reform, publicly says he welcomes her plans and invites her to follow him and join Reform. Kemi Badenoch, the Tory Leader of the Opposition, says she supports the plans and will get her party to see the measures are passed by Parliament.

The anti-asylum-seeker lobby slides into and is regularly confounded with a general unthinking racism. Robert Jenrick, a Tory MP who fancies himself, and is widely tipped as the MP who will oust Kemi Badenoch from the leadership of the Tories, made a strange announcement after a visit to Handsworth, a district of Birmingham. He said he was walking its streets and didn’t see even one white face. What did he mean? Of course, black and Asian people all over the country have congregated together and formed communities for diverse reasons: some for that distinct feeling of belonging to a communal neighbourhood, some because the housing stock is within range for low-income earners, some because the shopping and entertainment are part of their culture... If Mr Jenrick ventures to Stamford Hill in north London, he will certainly see some white faces, but most with orthodox Jewish uniforms and men with locks and women with wigs? Would he be appalled?



Governors need code of conduct

The Supreme Court's Constitution Bench has now given the President and governors a significant reprieve by ruling that no court can compel them to grant assent to a bill within a fixed time. In effect, the court has said that the Constitution's silence on timelines cannot be filled by judicial innovation. The ruling overturns the earlier two-judge decision in the Tamil Nadu case, which had held that prolonged inaction by a governor amounted to "deemed assent". This clarification was sought by President Droupadi Murmu herself, after the smaller bench's decision triggered an intense national debate. Her queries were straightforward: the Constitution does not prescribe a timeline under Articles 200 and 201, raising the issue of whether the courts have the authority to impose one, and the scope of judicial scrutiny over the constitutional discretion exercised by the President or governor needed to be clarified.

The five-judge bench headed by Chief Justice BR Gavai has now responded with unmistakable clarity: timelines cannot be imposed; deemed assent has no constitutional basis; and the President and governors cannot be answerable to courts for how they exercise their office, thanks to Article 361. To judicially prescribe a deadline, the bench said, would be "strictly contrary" to the constitutional design and would amount to the judiciary encroaching upon the executive terrain.

Yet, the ruling comes with a caveat. While courts cannot question the merits of a governor's actions, prolonged, unexplained and indefinite inaction will invite limited judicial scrutiny. This is the court's way of reminding constitutional authorities that the elasticity built into Articles 200 and 201 cannot become a cover for sabotage. The very need for presidential reference arose because some governors, especially in Opposition-ruled states, have used this elasticity as a political weapon. The Tamil Nadu governor, for instance, kept 11 bills pending—some for years—without offering reasons. Governors in Kerala, Punjab and Telangana have also held back bills on thin pretexts.

In a parliamentary democracy, the legislature represents the sovereign will of the people. To allow a nominee of the Union government to bottle up that will indefinitely is to distort the federal balance. The irony is that such problems never arise in states ruled by the party at the Centre. Nor does the President, who handles Parliament's bills, ever sit on them. This asymmetry reveals the political, not constitutional, nature of the delay. By ruling out timelines, the SC has respected the text of the Constitution. But the net effect is troubling: Governors may continue to obstruct Opposition-led legislatures with impunity, shrinking the operational space of federalism. The court has left the onus on "constitutional morality", but recent experience shows that morality is a weak defence against partisanship. If anything, the verdict reinforces the urgent need for a political consensus on codifying gubernatorial conduct.

Juvenile justice faces roadblock

Nearly a decade after the Juvenile Justice Act came into force, more than 50,000 children in conflict with the law in India are stuck in limbo, as the system has failed them spectacularly. The India Justice report published recently reveals that there is a huge backlog of cases in India's 362 juvenile justice boards, with pendency ranging from 83% in Odisha to 35% in Karnataka. The aim to decentralise the juvenile justice system has backfired, as children continue to languish in captivity like under-trial prisoners in the adult justice system. Ninety-two per cent of India's 765 districts have constituted JJBs, but one in four boards operated without a full bench. A full bench comprises a special magistrate and two social worker members. On an average, a JJB has a backlog of 154 cases. While highlighting the lack of transparency, Maja Daruwala, Chief Editor of the India Justice Report, said the findings of the study were a warning sign.

The report highlights that 30% of JJBs do not have an attached legal services clinic, leaving children without vital support. Alarming, only 11 districts in the country meet the basic minimum standards required to deliver justice in a child's best interest. Residential infrastructure for children is also sorely lacking, with 14 states, including large ones like Gujarat and Maharashtra, not able to provide a single 'place of safety' for juveniles aged between 16 and 18, a mandatory requirement under the Act. There are only 40 homes exclusively for girls all over the country, giving rise to the possibility of their sexual exploitation. Absence of proper facilities forces children to be moved far from their homes, making access to legal representation difficult. Also, there is the very real threat of unsafe mixing of age groups and offence categories, which is what the Act was meant to eliminate. What the study also highlighted was the absence of credible national-level data on juvenile justice. The IJR report had to file more than 250 RTI applications to garner some information. However, of over 500 replies received from 28 states and two Union Territories, 11% were rejected, 24% received no response, 29% were merely transferred, and only 36% provided usable information. In the past decade, the juvenile justice system has been suffering from the same infirmities that plague the adult criminal justice machinery—delays, obfuscation, and bureaucratic indifference. Children unfortunate enough to be trapped in the juvenile justice system may have to languish for months and years on end before they are heard. It is indeed a cruel irony that the most vulnerable section of society is subjected to the vagaries of a system that was meant to shield them from danger and uncertainty.



South By Southeast

PATRALEKHA CHATTERJEE

While the India-ASEAN trade review chugs along, and negotiators circle the text, the terrain is shifting. Buddhism is now not only integral to the Modi government's cultural diplomacy with the ASEAN, but Indian states are stepping up with quiet, practical initiatives. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are writing their own ASEAN chapters—one charter flight, one festival, and one chanting ceremony at a time.

From December 2 to 13, 2025, Bodhi Gaya in Bihar, where the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, will host more than 20,000 monks, nuns, and lay devotees from Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and beyond for the International Tipitaka Chanting Ceremony. The Tipitaka refers to the core Buddhist scriptures (Three Baskets). In a recent post on X, the Bihar Foundation's Bangkok Chapter announced it had hosted the Food & Spirituality Show, 2025, to deepen cultural and tourism ties with Thailand, and launched a familiarisation trip for leading Thai travel operators to Bodhi Gaya, Vaishali, and Rajgir, while showcasing Chhath Puja and Bihar School of Yoga. A new charter flight will soon link Phnom Penh with Bodhi Gaya.

These are small, practical connections, but they matter.

India, the land of Buddha's life and teachings, holds Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir, Nalanda, and the UNESCO-listed Mahabodhi Temple. Recent efforts—the touring of Buddhist sacred relics to Thailand, Kushinagar's new airport, the Buddhist Circuit Train, and Nalanda's revival—signal intent. Yet, the paradox endures: arrivals from Buddhist-majority nations remain negligible, just 0.005% of global adherents, notes the NITI Aayog—a startling figure for the land of the Buddha. The NITI Aayog report titled Promoting Spiritual Tourism in the Land of Buddha (2022) explains why the infrastructure is inadequate; tourist facilities are thin; multilingual guides are scarce; online marketing is weak; museums display relics but offer little interpretation; authentic arts and crafts shops are hard to find; tourist information centres are poorly managed; and road and rail connectivity is arduous, time-consuming, and sometimes unsafe.

The report also points out that India's neighbours, including China, have taken several steps to promote Buddhist tourism in the recent past. Today, there may be a slight uptick in the number of visitors, but Southeast Asia, backed by solid infrastructure and temples

woven into life, still draws the crowds.

In much of Asia, devotion thrives when paired with infrastructure, interpretation, and enjoyment. International tourists, especially Buddhists from Southeast Asia, view spiritual tourism as a mix of faith, culture, and recreation. India, typically, treats pilgrims, including the Buddhist traveller, as solemn ascetics. Traditional Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India have historically focused more on austerity and spiritual ambience.

Refreshingly, there is a glimmer of recognition that pleasure is as critical as piety in promoting the Buddhist circuit. A KPMG Report (2024)—Sacred Journeys: Pilgrimage and Spiritual Tourism in India—suggests integrating spiritual tourism with adventure and wellness tourism to attract a broader audience and support the holistic development of destinations.

It boils down to basic differences. In places like Thailand or Cambodia, Buddhist temples are often integrated into bustling urban tourist districts; the boundary between sacred and secular is less rigid. Bangkok's Wat Pho (Temple of the Reclining Buddha) is near the Grand Palace and Chao Phraya River, a short walk from Khao San Road, famous for its backpacker vibes and nightlife.

The city's famous Wat Arun has its own elaborately shaped ice cream with coconut milk and butterfly pea flower, inspired by the temple's blue ceramic tiles and flower patterns of the pagoda. A tour guide to Chiang Rai's Wat Rong Seur Ten, popularly known as the Blue Temple, insisted that I do not miss the temple's colourful coconut ice cream with butterfly pea juice. It was all blue, like the temple!

In India, temples and pilgrimage sites are expected to maintain a zone of sanctity, free from nightlife and overtly commercial entertainment. This fundamental difference partly explains why India struggles to convert its Buddhist heritage into mass tourism appeal—the experience is profound but not always "fun" in the way Southeast Asian destinations market it.

Is there a middle path for India—keeping reverence intact while adding the gentle "fun factor"? Southeast Asian visitors expect? Museums must narrate, not merely display, with immersive interpretation and professional guides who can animate history in multiple languages. On the ground, small upgrades matter: signages at important monuments, edicts, and places of worship (in the Buddhist Circuit) in Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Thai, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Korean; clean amenities; ATMs; borrowed sarongs at

temple gates; and cafés just outside sacred precincts, serving local and international cuisines. Bodhi Gaya offers some of these. But not all Buddhist sites. Luxury trains with night halts, extensions to yoga retreats, and Ayurvedic spas will attract more Southeast Asians. The NITI Aayog report suggests linking Bodhgaya to Tagore's Shantiniketan and Kolkata with their cultural and community connections.

At the end of the day, trade agreements smooth the highways of commerce, but tourism and people-to-people ties fill them with traffic. This year's International Tipitaka Chanting will once again proclaim India as the Motherland of Buddha Dhamma. The new charters, the familiarisation trips, and the quiet state-level initiatives signal something hopeful.

India's Look East and Act East policies set the compass. Buddhist diplomacy provides direction on the ground. If India can bridge the "missing middle"—connectivity, interpretation, and ease—future dialogues may flow more smoothly. To draw more ASEAN visitors, India's Buddhist diplomacy must blend reverence with joy.

Patralekha Chatterjee is a writer and columnist who spends her time in South and Southeast Asia and looks at modern-day connects between the two adjacent regions. X: @Patralekha2011



HerStory

DEEPA GAHLOT

Anybody with a passing acquaintance with Christian or Jewish religious texts would know the story of Adam and Eve: how she was tempted by a serpent to taste the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and how she coaxed Adam to eat it too, which resulted in their expulsion from Eden. But not many know about Lilith.

She was, according to mythology, Adam's first wife. The most popular Jewish legend, notably from the mediaeval text Alphabet of Ben Sira, is that Lilith was created by God from the same Adamah (earth) as him. She considered herself his equal and, for her refusal to be subservient to him, was thrown out of home.

Shinie Antony's slim book, Eden Abandoned, has just won the Laadli Award for Gender Sensitivity for fiction. It is a retelling of the story of Lilith in her fierce, unrepentant, sarcastic voice.

There have, of course, been many books—both classical and modern literature—and scholarly

texts about this enigmatic woman; artists have interpreted her beauty (her long hair and alabaster skin) and allure. Antony's book is like a reminder of this "pioneering feminist", which could set off the curious reader into a search for the many faces of Lilith.

In Antony's book, what drives Lilith's rage is the question, "Why must I lie beneath you?" Even with a population of two humans, the personal takes on the tone of power politics. As Antony puts it, Lilith's "manufacturing defect" is simply the inability to nod and obey without question.

When Adam seeks another partner to assuage his loneliness, God creates Eve out of his rib. She is the docile partner he wants, instead of the one who demands equality. Eve does her duty of serving him and bearing his children without a word of complaint. She is placid and malleable—the traits most men still seek in their wives.

"Women are born in survival mode. Their job, they are told, is to love. But what is this love they neither know nor see—this illiquid, no-return-on-investment,

invisible land they must buy with all their soul money?" says Lilith in the book.

She sneers, "Eve loved Adam. Love was the answer to all female questions. Love a man, and vroom through the highway of life without brakes. Love was the myrrh oil that cured everything from syphilis to leprosy. Love, love, love. I can almost hear Eve hawk it in a basket."

There is punishment for Lilith's independence and sexual liberation. The 100 children she bears in her womb are killed by a cruel God. In grief and rage, she becomes a rampaging succubus and killer of children. Mothers' lullabies and talismans were prayed to keep Lilith away from the cradles of their infants.

A woman like her would scare a patriarchal society and be easily erased from scriptures and folklore. In a brief, tautly structured narrative, Antony packs in a lot of social commentary on the way men have controlled women and on how women have collaborated in their own oppression.

She reimagines Lilith as a figure

of nonconformity, empowerment and autonomy—"a historic villainess and a modern-day heroine". Eve is portrayed as compliant and dull.

Lilith marries the demon Samael, who gives her respect and does not curb her freedom. In Samael's other wives, she finds a supportive sisterhood.

Over time, Lilith acquired shape-shifting powers and took up residence on the Tree of Knowledge, in the body of a snake. She befriended a lonely Eve and became her confidante. Most versions of this legend portray the serpent as a forked-tongued Satan, but a jealous and hurt wife trying to punish her rival makes sense too.

Once Eve was convinced to eat an apple from the tree, she set off the chain of events that led to the expulsion of her and Adam from Eden.

Knowledge gave them the concept of shame, of sin and guilt. Innocence was truly lost.

At the time when the women's movement was taking shape, Lilith's story was a powerful lens

through which to view the modern woman's gender struggles. She was released from obscurity and given her due as the original rebel, the woman who broke the shackles of domesticity and chose to fly.

In a modern context, Lilith represents the fight for equality and consent in relationships, and the refusal to accept a subordinate role in society.

Lilith's story challenged the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of early religion and society; the idea that a woman could demand equality was deemed disruptive, so Lilith was demonised, and Eve's role as Adam's companion and helpmate was held up as an ideal for women.

In a way, Lilith freed Eve too, by making her choose knowledge over blissful ignorance. Antony has also edited a book of stories, titled Hell Hath No Fury, about women who find unusual ways to punish men who betrayed them. But that's a tale for another day.

Deepa Gahlot is a Mumbai-based columnist, critic and author.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Organised BJP Machinery

The NDA's strategy in Bihar showcased disciplined organisation, booth-level mobilisation and a cohesive message. Welfare schemes shaped outcomes, especially among women and low-income groups. In contrast, the opposition scattered its energies. The shrinking space for opposition voices in Indian democracy should concern us.

R. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Decisive Bihar Verdict

The NDA's sweeping victory is a strong endorsement of the leadership of Modi and Nitish Kumar. The fragmented opposition failed to connect with evolving voter aspirations. With trust renewed, governance must now translate into meaningful development and empowerment across Bihar.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Voters Showing Maturity

Bihar voters rejected divisive narratives and exercised their power wisely.

Allegations of fraud and emotional appeals did not sway them. This election underlines political awareness and democratic maturity.

Lalit Dube, Ratlam

Alliance Strategy Failure

The INDIA bloc's unclear leadership projection and delayed decisions hurt their campaign. Meanwhile, the NDA executed strategy efficiently. However, concerns remain regarding the Election Commission's decisions, especially voter roll deletions and cash transfers before polling.

Tharcus S. Fernando, Chennai

Opposition Must Rethink

The Bihar result reflects a leadership crisis in the opposition. Instead of learning from voter sentiment, the Congress continues blame-driven responses. The party needs introspection, renewal and meaningful connection with the electorate before relevance fades further.

S. Padmanabhan, Kochi



World Happiness Report

The World Happiness Report 2025 has placed Finland as the No. 1 happiest country in the world for the eighth year in a row, while India languishes at 118, which is nine ranks lower than Pakistan! Pakistan's higher ranking than India, despite its economic and political struggles, clearly indicates that economic strength alone does not guarantee happiness. We must look beyond traditional metrics of progress and pay attention to well-being and happiness as policy goals.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai

Forgotten Prime Minister Nehru

On Children's Day, it was disheartening to see leaders and media ignore Jawaharlal Nehru's contribution to the nation. Selective memory and

fear-shaped silence reflect shrinking democratic courage.

Anil Bagarka, Mumbai

Protect Child Rights

Children's Day reminds us

of our responsibility to safeguard children's education, health and safety. Their rights are investments in the nation's future. Beyond celebration, commitment must follow.

Kuhoo Dhandoriya, Ujjain

Women Vote Decisively

Despite criticism and anti-incumbency, Nitish Kumar's strong appeal among women voters ensured victory. Schemes reaching households built trust. The challenge now is delivering big promises—including jobs and industrial growth.

Bal Govind, Noida

Strong Democratic Message

The NDA's victory reflects voters' confidence in stability and governance priorities. High turnout and a clear mandate signal democratic clarity. The opposition's reaction must shift from denial to reflection.

Vishal Mayur, Tumakuru

Congress Must Reform

The Congress continues misreading public senti-

ment and falling back on accusations rather than reform. Leadership confusion and outdated messaging widen its disconnect with voters. A fresh approach and strong organisational revival are necessary.

M. Srikanth, Chennai

End Of Penny

The discontinuation of the U.S. penny marks the end of a historic currency era dating back to 1792. Though still valid, it will no longer be minted. For many Americans, it is a nostalgic symbol now transitioning into history.

Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur

Modern Terror Threat

The Red Fort blast investigation reveals a sophisticated, multi-layered terror network involving educated individuals and coordinated logistics across states. The near-miss of multiple planned attacks shows how fragile public safety can be.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

After Bihar debacle, Bengaluru brouhaha resurfaces for GOP

SUPERFICIALLY, the comparison fits very well. The ongoing power struggle between the top two of Karnataka Congress unit – Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his deputy D K Shivakumar – as the government touches the half-way mark of its tenure, reminds one about similar power politics played out in distant Jaipur between the then CM Ashok Gehlot and his young, impatient understudy Sachin Pilot. There too, it was clear that the high command kept interchanging favourites till the eleventh hour whereupon one of the warring chief-

tains decided to throw in the towel and 'settle' down to continue in his existing role. The bad press, the warped optics and the incessant gossip which surrounded the Gehlot government till it fell two years ago in November 2023 throws up ominous comparisons too with the presently uncertain condition in Bengaluru. While it was the 'November Revolution' chatter that kept various stakeholders interested in the non-stop battle for the CM post in Bengaluru, this very month two years ago brought in a new CM in Jaipur. Will it happen in Bengaluru too

is the obvious question, as for the nth time both the camps have begun their Delhi 'teerth yatra' to plead their case and seek the benign support of the high command.

As things stand, Siddaramaiah still has his nose ahead in the race as he seems to have the support of the party machinery and a set of ministers and MLAs who have stood by him and openly criticized the Shivakumar group for forcing the party to cut a sorry figure in public perception. Of course, this has not stopped DKS, as he is known locally, from keeping his channel active

and sending his emissaries to pitch for his case. With Delhi leaders and state unit in-charges from the capital making their customary visits and 'threatening' the errant MLAs to behave or face action, a sense of ennui prevails in the Garden City. The principal opposition party, the BJP is obviously pleased that what they have been predicting has come true. It has taken up a fresh line of attack against the top bosses of GOP, especially Rahul Gandhi, daring him to declare whether the existing CM will complete his tenure. Known to be aggressive and fiercely loy-

al to Delhi, Shivakumar's approach seems multi-fold even as an opinion gains ground that he is still not considered good enough to replace Siddaramaiah.

His family and friends have parroted the line that the decision of the high command is final, which has been always the case. Presently, Bengaluru is the perfect case study of Congress party's eternal groupism and dissidence. Alternating between its endeavours of projecting itself as the only Silicon Valley city of India and toning down the political pulls and pressures that show no signs of abate-

ment, the city's netas have enjoyed more visibility in the national media in comparison to their neighbours for both the right and wrong reasons. Under pressure from the people for poor road conditions, living standards and increasing crime and lawlessness, the mood seems overwhelmingly in for a real change.

Whether it will happen with a replacement of the CM or invite the rivals to launch their own 'Operation Kamala' (a euphemism for poaching and breaking opposition parties) will be known, sooner than later.

LETTERS

Amit Shah's naxal-free drive taking positive shape

THIS refers to the editorial 'Killing Hidma, a big feat of Andhra Pradesh'. The country's resolve as announced by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah that the nation would be free of Naxal and Maoist menace by March 31, 2026, is gradually translating into a vibrant reality. This is quite contrary to what was witnessed during the UPA days when Dr Manmohan Singh was the Prime Minister. The anti-Naxal operation then was at best a half-hearted move. The fact that 'urban naxals' are playing a passive role in their support of the jungle cadres cannot be undermined. Such pseudo-seculars and intellectuals in the society must be identified before they attempt to torpedo ongoing efforts. Meanwhile, those who have surrendered must be meaningfully rehabilitated with a strict watch on their activities lest they become anti-nationals, all over again.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

Surrender or perish, a clear message to Maoists

THIS has reference to your editorial 'Killing Hidma a big feat of Andhra Pradesh'. The country is witnessing a steady elimination of top Naxal and Maoist leaders in police encounters. The big fish was Madvi Hidma, carrying Rs 1.8 crore on his head. Many top leaders have been eliminated over the past few months. This is sending a clear and unequivocal message to the anti-nationals that an armed struggle against a democratically elected government cannot be tolerated. Many have already surrendered, and this is a clear message to those still in the jungle to follow suit as the "situation is not conducive for an armed struggle". The Cobra battalion of AP, which was in the forefront of the combing operations, is credited with countless successful eliminations.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

Major breakthrough against Maoists

THE killing of Maoist commander Madvi Hidma who had a hand in almost every deadly ambush on security forces and politicians over the past two decades is not only a breakthrough but also a big blow to Maoism. Since, the ideology and programme revolve around violence, they have been losing relevance with the cadre. Today, the situation has left no room for armed resistance. The surrendered Maoist Venugopal's call to the existing cadre to give up arms and surrender is a timely call. It also reinforces the fact that various strategies drawn up by the Union Home Ministry to contain the menace and restore in the naxal-hit areas are steadily gaining credence.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad-3

Prosecute KTR and set a new precedent

THE Formula E-race hosted in Hyderabad was mired in controversy since its beginning. It was alleged that K T Rama Rao (KTR) had ignored 'objections' at every step of the deal finalization and mode of payments. That the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had imposed a fine of Rs. 8 crore on the then BRS government for 'irregularities', speaks volumes about the arbitrary manner with which KTR had finalized the entire deal and 'forced' the officials to make payments to the tune of Rs.54.88 crore without approvals from the state cabinet or the finance department. No wonder that an FIR was filed in this case against KTR and other officials, who were involved in the scam. This is a clear case of financial mismanagement, and all the accused deserve to be prosecuted and punished without fear or favour. The latest nod by the Governor to prosecute KTR should ultimately take the case to its logical conclusion. Failing which, this case too would be prolonged towards a stalemate leading to nowhere, a customary game plan of all parties in our country. Between 2014 and 2023, the KCR government did not punish even a single Congress leader on charges of alleged corrupt practices and scams. It is a shame that barring a few, all corrupt politicians escape punishment.

Govardhana Myneddu, Vijayawada

Jagan must appear as an ordinary litigant

THE former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy appeared in the CBI court Hyderabad with a massive show of strength. Many Chief Ministers have appeared in court as ordinary litigants, which is why Jagan's show of strength has raised questions about court decorum. He has been on bail for the last 13 years and was appearing before the court after a six-year gap. His convoy managed to reach the court after police controlled the crowds, which created traffic disruptions from Begumpet to Nampally. Hopefully, when he next appears in the court on November 28, Jagan will come as a normal person and present any sort of traffic chaos.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

BJP dares Rahul Gandhi to confirm Siddaramaiah's five-year term as CM

BENGALURU: The BJP on Friday mocked the Congress-led government in Karnataka over the alleged leadership crisis in the state and dared Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, to confirm that Siddaramaiah will continue as the state Chief Minister for the full term.

Addressing a press conference at the party office, Leader of the Opposition in the Karnataka Assembly, R. Ashoka, released a poster on the completion of 2.5 years of the Siddaramaiah government, criticising it for the "price hike" of essential commodities.

The poster was titled 'Two-and-a-Half Years: A Heavy Burden on Kannadigas – Exposing the Congress Government's Misdeeds'. He accused the government of being a "burden" on the people and a "disaster" for the farmers. The BJP leader claimed that "Siddaramaiah has threatened to remove the Congress MLAs who went to Delhi. Reports in the media also say he has threatened not to release MLA development funds to those legislators." "On one side, D.K. Shivakumar is going to Delhi and making statements. On the other side, Siddaramaiah questions why others went to Delhi.

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

Celebrating those who slam India is Oppn's new brand of politics



THE decision of the Congress Party to bestow the Indira Gandhi Peace Award upon former Chilean president and ex-UN Human Rights chief Michelle Bachelet has stirred a hornet's nest—deservedly so. Critics argue that Bachelet is not merely a critic of India but someone whose comments repeatedly targeted the nation's sovereignty and internal decision-making, turning legitimate criticism into what many perceive as hostility towards India itself.

Her frequent attacks on the abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), and other matters of purely internal governance have long been seen by large sections of the Indian public as intrusive, biased and politically motivated.

There is, of course, a fundamental difference between criticism and hatred. Civilisation is built on debate, on the exchange of ideas, and on constructive disagreement. One may passionately disagree with a theatre critic's interpretation of Macbeth, but hating the critic for that interpretation would be absurd.

Likewise, Bachelet certainly has the right to criticise policies of sovereign nations, including that of India. But critics insist that she crossed that line when she used her UN platform to prescribe what India should

WHERE VISION ENDS, VENDETTA BEGINS

or should not do, and to repeatedly portray the world's largest democracy in a negative, accusatory light on the global stage.

When the Congress party chooses to honour such a figure with a peace award, it inevitably raises a disturbing question: What message is the party sending to the people of India? Is this a celebration of dialogue and peace—or an endorsement of those who publicly shame the nation in international forums?

Bachelet's tenure at the UNHRC was marked by repeated condemnations of Indian policies. She described herself as "deeply concerned" after the constitutional restructuring of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 and demanded access to the Line of Control. She criticised the Indian government's internet restrictions and preventive detentions without acknowledging decades of terrorism in the region or the thousands of civilians and security personnel killed.

On the CAA—legislation designed to protect persecuted minorities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh—she described it as discriminatory and threatened to challenge India at the UN. She called the FCRA a tool to "punish NGOs" even though the Act exists precisely to regulate foreign funds and protect national security.

The BJP publicly accused her of adopting a "distinctly anti-India, pro-Islamist narrative" during her tenure. Whether one agrees or not, the criticism revolves around sovereignty: should a foreign figure, sitting in



The Congress party's decision to award the Indira Gandhi Peace Prize to former Chilean president and ex-UN Human Rights chief Michelle Bachelet has ignited fierce controversy. Critics argue that Bachelet repeatedly interfered in India's internal matters—attacking the abrogation of Article 370, CAA and FCRA, and portraying the country negatively across global platforms. Her honouring raises a disturbing question: is the opposition party celebrating peace or endorsing anti-India rhetoric?

Geneva, declare India guilty without context or balance? Should domestic policies shaped by democratic mandate be second-guessed by UN bureaucrats?

When Congress chooses such a person for a peace award, it is not seen as an academic decision—it becomes a political signal. It dilutes the legitimacy of the award and turns it into a tool of ideological messaging rather than honouring genuine peace, disarmament and development efforts.

The Congress is fully entitled to oppose Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It can criticise his policies, challenge him electorally, question governance decisions, and present alternatives. That is the essence of democracy. But critics say Congress has crossed a dangerous line—opposition to Modi has mutated into bitterness towards In-

dia itself. The party refuses to acknowledge national achievements, undermines constitutional institutions, encourages narratives of pessimism and collapse, and supports those who speak against India abroad.

Instead of returning to the drawing board, reassessing strategy, listening to its grassroots and rebuilding political credibility, Congress continues to invest in failed slogans such as 'vote chori', personal attacks on the Prime Minister and even his family, and divisive identity politics. It ignores what truly wins elections—ground-level mobilisation, disciplined cadre, organisational planning and leaders who understand realities instead of living in echo chambers.

It is tragic that a party that once led the national movement is now abandoned even by regional al-

lies like the Samajwadi Party and TMC. AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi recently slammed the INDIA alliance, saying Muslims are being treated like a qawwali troupe—summoned when needed and discarded thereafter. "Muslims are not plastic cups," he said, warning that the politics of tokenism will no longer work. He also ridiculed the Congress claim of 'vote chori' in Bihar, arguing that his own party successfully restored 900 voter names and asking why the Congress could not do the same.

Rahul Gandhi continues to behave not like a serious politician but a political performer. Yatras, gym videos, pool jumps and symbolic spectacles may win applause on social media—but they do not fetch votes or win elections. Politicians must be thick-skinned; the danger arises when they become thick-minded.

The Indira Gandhi Peace Prize ceremony was further tainted by the presence of Jagdish Tytler, a name synonymous with the horrors of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots—three days of planned mayhem that scarred the nation forever. Those like me, who witnessed the carnage, know that mobs armed with sticks and petrol bombs dragged Sikh men from their houses and lynched in broad daylight. Shops were burnt while the police looked the other way for three days.

The alleged architects of the massacre—Sajjan Kumar, HKL Bhagat and Tytler himself—were protected for decades by the Congress.

Inviting Tytler to a peace award ceremony was not oversight; it was an insult. It reopened wounds that never healed and betrayed the Sikh community's trust.

Congress today clings to assassinations as moral shields. Yes, the killing of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi was tragic and condemnable. But martyrdom cannot be used to justify institutional abuse, political violence or hereditary entitlement. The party still seems to believe that India is duty-bound to honour the dynasty forever.

Meanwhile, 272 eminent Indian citizens—retired judges, diplomats, generals and civil servants—recently wrote to Rahul Gandhi warning against the party's attempts to undermine institutions such as the Election Commission. Congress responded by mocking them as "BJP employment exchange applicants". Such arrogance is not leadership; it is political suicide.

In a democracy, citizens deserve a strong, intelligent and responsible opposition. Instead, the Congress seems determined to destroy itself. The obsession with hating Modi rather than understanding India has already cost it 95 elections since 2014, and it appears poised to complete a century of defeats by 2026. It alienates Hindus through anti-Sanatana rhetoric, insults soldiers, undermines democracy abroad, and now honours a controversial international figure who repeatedly attacked India.

The country is moving forward while Congress is moving backwards, clinging to bitterness, dynasty and self-delusion. If the party wishes to survive, it must abandon entitlement, listen to voters, rebuild organisation from the ground up, and above all—put India first.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

Cinema cartel – The economic assault on moviegoers

LAKSHMAN KOYA

Cinema is not just entertainment for the people; to the South Indians, especially Telugus, it is a festival, an obsession, and an emotional euphoria. Yet, today, this silver screen spectacle has been tragically transformed into a luxury commodity, accessible predominantly to the affluent class. With the tacit support of successive governments, the unbridled exploitation carried out by certain powerful sections of the film industry is emptying the pockets of the common man, the regular movie-goer.

Every time a 'big film' is released, ticket prices are raised indiscriminately under the guise of special government orders (GOs) and regulatory exceptions, which is a deplorable and relentless trend. For an average middle-class family watching a film is like shelling down more than their monthly budget on essential commodities. This is effectively a 'financial cartel' game being played by these film factions for their economic gain, systematically

pushing entertainment out of reach for the masses.

This exploitation does not stop at the ticket counter. The prices of food and beverages sold inside the theatre point to an anarchic and monopolistic business practice.

Popcorn, which costs barely ₹50 outside, is sold for ₹200 to ₹300 inside the cinema hall. The exorbitant pricing of soft drinks and samosas imposes a greater burden than the cost of the film ticket. The sole objective behind these inflated prices is to squeeze the maximum possible profit from the audience's pocket, shamelessly exploiting their captive need for enjoyment.

This practice, which alienates the common man from cinema, serves as a stark example of widening economic inequality in society. Unable to afford the exorbitant prices, time and again, the people naturally look for alternative sources of entertainment.

This has led to the emergence of piracy platforms like iBomma. While the act of individuals like Immadi Ravi in choosing an illegal



Unable to afford the exorbitant prices, time and again, the people naturally look for alternative sources of entertainment. This has led to the emergence of piracy platforms like iBomma. While the act of individuals like Immadi Ravi in choosing an illegal path is regrettable, the underlying reason points to a fundamental flaw in the cinema system itself. His attempt to make "cinema accessible" to the common man, who couldn't afford the high-ticket prices, is a visceral reflection of the deep-seated anger prevalent among the public against the exploitative system

path is regrettable, the underlying reason points to a fundamental flaw in the cinema system itself. His attempt to make "cinema accessible" to the common man, who couldn't afford the high-ticket prices, is a visceral reflection of the

deep-seated anger prevalent among the public against the exploitative system.

The frenzy shown by the film industry and the way the iBomma founder was arrested, treating him almost like a 'terrorist', is bizarre, to say the least. The primary

cause for the surge in prices is squarely in the unreasonable remunerations taken by the leading heroes and directors, who claim a lion's share of the massive budgets.

When a star takes a fee between ₹70 crore and ₹100 crore per film, they should ideally share the burden by reducing their remuneration, rather than pushing the entire cost onto the audience through relentless ticket hikes.

These 'heroes' refusal to lower their massive paychecks and criticism of piracy smack of a hypocritical stance, akin to "the thief calling out the thief."

Here lies another systemic failure: The system is proving ineffective in apprehending and prosecuting notorious economic offenders like Vijay Mallya and Nirav Modi, who looted thousands of crores from the country and fled abroad. For a system that cannot effectively prosecute major economic criminals, resorting to such an intense crackdown on an individual who merely tried to provide 'illegal' entertainment to the common man

who cannot afford the ticket prices, is a testament to the double standards of the government and the cinema cartel.

While Immadi Ravi's action was illegal, his move represents a severe form of protest by the common populace seeking equality in entertainment access.

To eradicate piracy completely, legal action alone is not sufficient; systemic reforms are the need of the hour. Governments must impose strict and rational controls on ticket price hikes; there must be genuine rationality in the remunerations taken by heroes and top directors; and control must be enforced over food prices in theatres.

Only by reducing the economic burden of entertainment on the common man and making legitimate forms of entertainment affordable will the appeal of illegal platforms like iBomma diminish.

Otherwise, this entrenched system of inequality will continue to create new 'piracy heroes', and the curb on exploitation will remain unattainable.

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

— Ramnath Goenka

STATES STUCK WITH GUV DELAYS AS SC REAFFIRMS SEPARATION OF POWERS

THE Supreme Court's advisory opinion on the 16th Presidential Reference refrained from charting a definitive path for states grappling with legislative paralysis caused by gubernatorial delay. The five-judge Constitution Bench affirmed that courts cannot usurp the functions of the President or governors by allowing 'deemed assent' to bills passed by the legislature if any court-mandated deadline lapses. Such judicial overreach would not only contravene the spirit of the Constitution but also the hallowed doctrine of separation of powers, the top court held. It answered the President's reference to the court in May, which was prompted by a two-judge Bench's ruling on the Tamil Nadu governor's delay in giving assent to bills.

Under Article 200 of the Constitution, a governor has three options: to accord assent to a bill, to reserve it for presidential consideration, or to return the bill to the legislature with comments, provided it is not a money bill. The Constitution Bench agreed with the smaller Bench's opinion delivered this April that withholding assent strikes at the root of federalism and constitutes a diminution of the legislative authority vested in elected assemblies. Equally, it held it impermissible for courts to adjudicate on a bill's contents in any manner before it becomes law.

The question would not have come before the top court had governors of several states, not just Tamil Nadu, not indulged in protracted procrastination, with some bills hanging fire for years. The advisory opinion addressed the 14 constitutional questions the President asked of the top court, not the Tamil Nadu verdict that triggered the reference. So the opinion's words forbidding "prolonged and evasive inaction" do not amount to clarity on the recourse Tamil Nadu or other states have if they face the same predicament again.

Parties like the DMK intend to make political fodder out of the opinion. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin, reaffirming his commitment to federal principles and state autonomy, has vowed to continue the fight until the Constitution is amended to enshrine a binding timeline for governors. That was, in effect, the suggestion of the Supreme Court when it reaffirmed the line between judicial and legislative powers. If politicians are truly convinced of the need for deadlines, they have to practise their principal art—persuasion, on each other in parliament, or on voters at the next hustings.

CLOUDY GLOBAL HORIZON, ROBUST MACRO GROUND

YEAR 2025 has been volatile for the Indian stock markets. It began with a period of correction and remained under pressure owing to the tariff war, while overvaluations and weak corporate earnings weighed on sentiment. Around this time last year, India was among the three best-performing markets, with one-year gains placing it ahead of Japan, Hong Kong, China, the UK, and South Korea. But with a mere 5 percent rise this year, it's the worst-performing major global market. All three broad categories—the large, mid, and small caps, which saw strong one-year returns last November—are either flat or in the red. If Nifty 100, Nifty Midcap 150, and Nifty Smallcap 250 delivered 31, 42, and 45 percent returns, respectively, till November 2024, this year the first two segments turned in a marginal gain of 3 percent, while the latter declined 5 percent. The benchmark Sensex, too, has gained only 9 percent so far this year, as against robust growth in 2024. All of this begs the question: can Sensex scale the projected 90,000 level by December 2025?

Analysts believe so, citing a revival in personal consumption and private investments to uplift domestic growth, while improved corporate earnings and easing inflation are set to boost the outlook for 2026. After five quarters of depressed earnings, the coming quarters may see a turnaround, with MSCI India estimating robust earnings growth. Morgan Stanley has set a bull-case Sensex target of 1,07,000 by December 2026. But these projections are based on the premise that oil prices will stay low, global trade shifts will be favourable, and global growth will look up. Importantly, pro-growth policies such as GST rate rationalisation, interest rate cuts, and external sector measures offer key macro support. In other words, there are significant structural positives for the Indian markets.

That said, if 2025 is about staying the course, it's uncertain if 2026 will get any better as the global markets navigate geopolitical and other risks including recession, the return of inflation, and trade tariffs, all of which may trigger bouts of volatility. A recent Natixis survey found that US institutional investors see a 49 percent probability of a market correction in 2026 owing to fears of an AI-driven tech bubble and concerns over China's rare-earth dominance. In short, the outlook for 2026 remains clouded. Investors must tread with caution.

QUICK TAKE

HUNGRY EARTH

FIRST came the indictment, then the damnation. A few weeks ago, the Global Hunger Index showed that progress on combating starvation has largely stalled since 2016. India ranked 102nd out of 123 countries, with about an eighth of the population estimated as undernourished. This week, the World Food Programme made a stunning calculation: ending hunger by 2030 would cost \$93 billion a year—less than 1 percent of the \$21.9 trillion spent on military budgets over the past decade. As many as 32 crore people will face acute hunger; most of them around 17 conflict hotspots. The abiding irony is that it falls on humanitarianian agencies—many of them funded by nations mired in arms races—to redouble their efforts at fighting the most basic human misery.

IT would be puerile to believe that the death sentence passed by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) on Sheikh Hasina was fair. The trial was riddled with faults on various judicial counts.

Hasina was found guilty of mass murder by the ICT, which itself was set by the Hasina government in 2009 to try those accused of war crimes during the 1971 War of Liberation. A majority of the war criminals were from the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), the largest pro-Pakistan organisation that had collaborated with the Pakistani Army in committing genocide. Some JeI leaders were hanged, and others jailed for life after conviction.

The proceedings against Hasina were vitiated from the very beginning after Muhammad Yunus, a sworn enemy of Hasina nursing political ambitions, was foisted on Dhaka as the head of an interim government (IG). This interim arrangement is widely considered unconstitutional when parliament and the Constitution are both suspended. The JeI and other Islamist outfits, all deeply connected to Pakistan, are now the backbone of the IG and are calling the shots.

The ICT's mandate was changed by adopting unconstitutional methods that were rubber-stamped by the partisan judiciary. The chief prosecutor in Hasina's case is a JeI lawyer who had defended the war criminals. Hasina was not permitted to choose her defence team. All these factors have raised serious questions about the validity of the judgement.

The IG's ire against Hasina and the Awami League (AL) is well known. They are weaponising a compromised judiciary to attack opponents while the media remains bludgeoned into submission. Judges have been forced out and new ones affiliated to JeI appointed *en masse*.

The IG has systematically conducted a campaign of revenge, allowing mobs to kill Awami workers and destroy their properties. Thousands have lost their lives and many have fled the country. Scores of journalists and civil society activists have been jailed with false murder charges and been denied bail. Minority communities have also been attacked all over the country, with Yunus dismissing it as 'political violence' or Indian propaganda. Such violence has caused trans-border tremors in India.

Hasina's opponents, from Yunus downwards, are elated at the verdict and hail that she has been held accountable for her crimes. Ironically, Yunus himself dodged accountability in legal cases in which he was accused of tax

Hasina's unconstitutional sentencing is an irritant New Delhi can keep aside to mend ties if the next Dhaka govt is fairly elected. The growing clout of Pak-friendly outfits poses new worries

THE BANGLADESH DILEMMA BEYOND L'AFFAIRE HASINA

PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, and former High Commissioner to Bangladesh



SOURAV ROY

evasion and money laundering by promptly annulling these cases when he took over as head of the IG.

The recent visit by Bangladesh's National Security Advisor for a multilateral meeting in Delhi came on the heels of the Hasina verdict. It is likely that the demand for handing over Hasina would have been made. Will India comply and allow Hasina to be taken to the gallows? It seems very far-fetched that India will comply after an unfair trial with a pre-arranged verdict. The bilateral extradition treaty between the neighbouring countries explicitly exempts extradition for 'an offence of a political character' (Article 6).

In truth, Bangladesh was the victim of a regime-change operation. Such operations are conducted by hegemonic powers to pursue their geopolitical interests. When the leader of a country

refuses to accept certain demands, they are overthrown by the traditional gunboat diplomacy and direct operations by intelligence agencies that attempt to oust the incumbent leader, as we are witnessing against Venezuela.

The other option is the more subtle one—influence operations via non-governmental organisations and/or social media platforms to exploit an agitation on domestic issues. Bangladesh was a victim of this kind of operation. American NGOs like the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute are well known for such activities under the radar of 'promoting democracy' and 'human rights'. They are known to work in tandem with the American deep state. On a visit to the US, Yunus acknowledged that the regime change was "meticulously" planned.

LEX HAS ALWAYS BEEN A FLEX

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

REVERSE SWING

how the world has changed, and with it, attitudes and perspectives. One of my favourite subjects is sociolinguistics, the study of language in relation to social factors such as gender, dialect, class, and region. We may add to that the increasingly important generation factor.



X.COM

Newer generations often borrow from the past to devise their own lexicons. The opening line of Freddie Mercury's 'Bohemian Rhapsody'—Is this real life?—could be about a generation that's delulu, a Gen Alpha derivation from delusional. New coinages are like codes used as a flex or boast

Take Tradwife, which was recently listed on both Dictionary.com and the Cambridge lexicon. It's short for traditional wife—a woman who embraces traditional gender roles in marriage. What was common in the not-so-distant past, is still practised in most parts of the world, thanks to patriarchy. The word of choice used to be housewife. Sociolinguistically, that became a contested term as economies evolved: some would refer to a woman as 'only a housewife'—as if she did nothing. For others, the term usually referred to an unpaid, homebound person who played many roles: cook, caregiver, relationship manager, psychotherapist, seamstress, and much else.

The journey from 'housewife' to 'homemaker' to 'stay-at-home mom' to the latest 'tradwife' reflects a social arc in which relationships are fluid and

People become friends because of differences. We find in others what we lack within ourselves

Jasimuddin

Hasina's death sentence portends further political volatility in Bangladesh unless the IG moves quickly to conduct a free, fair, and inclusive election. Continued doubts about the elections scheduled in February 2026 are testing public patience. The current ban on the Awami League is another factor in rising uncertainty about the political process. The League is Bangladesh's largest grassroots party and cannot be wished away. Hasina may not be able to participate in elections, but her party should be allowed, to ensure inclusivity and fair representation.

The Hasina factor will remain an irritant in bilateral ties. The unpredictability of Bangladesh's future trajectory is an overhang that will define India's strategic options. India is currently exercising strategic patience. Trade, energy and supply of essential commodities continue unhindered.

India will endeavour to restore the status quo in bilateral ties leaving the Hasina episode aside. This effort will be facilitated if an elected government is in place in Dhaka through a free, fair and inclusive election next year. How to deal with political flux, rise of radical religious and anti-India groups in the political space, who seek to reorient Bangladesh ideologically, will pose a strategic dilemma.

Bangladesh's geography constricts the Siliguri Corridor or 'Chicken's Neck', which connects the northeastern states of India to the rest of the country. Hence, this remains a strategic concern if Bangladesh provides opportunities to powers hostile to India. For instance, if Bangladesh provides military facilities to China along the Bay of Bengal, it will pose a dilemma and trigger options to counter these moves.

Periodic challenges to India's Neighbourhood First policy are bound to arise owing to domestic political upheavals and security threats that may spill over into India. The IG in Dhaka has increasingly aligned with Islamabad. This will be watched closely because of the potential of Pakistan organising terrorist attacks from Bangladesh. Frequent visits by Pakistani generals, and by representatives of internationally designated terrorist organisations Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad, have been reported.

These aspects will be under India's scanner. Any security threat from Bangladesh's soil will invite Indian retaliation. Bangladesh should be conscious of not overplaying the Pakistan card. The recent bomb blasts in Delhi have thrown up links with Pakistan and with Bangladesh, too. India has, so far, exercised considerable restraint.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Rights rhetoric

Ref: *Data protection rules a work in progress* (Nov 21). Trust won't come from legislation alone. Vulnerable groups need accessible systems and accountability. Without public awareness and statutory clarity, rights risk becoming rhetoric. A nationwide campaign on data rights, backed by local language outreach, could bridge this critical gap. **SM Jeeva, Chennai**

Mining hazards

Ref: *Mining chaos persists* (Nov 21). It's alarming that the country still lacks a centralised supervisory authority to monitor and ensure safety at such hazardous industrial sites. There is no further time to delay. India must enforce a stringent and comprehensive regulatory framework. **Anfas P, Wayanad**

Packaging warning

Ref: *A problem wrapped in plastic* (Nov 21). Updated dietary guidelines may help yet consumer restraint alone cannot fix a system built around unhealthy products and plastic waste. Stronger taxation signals and clear uniform packaging warnings are overdue if we truly aim to protect public health. **Babu Krishna, Bengaluru**

CJI's courage

Ref: *In fine balance* (Nov 21). Justice B R Gavai's tenure reflects a careful calibration between constitutional fidelity and pragmatic restraint. Yet, the missed nuance in the tribunal reforms verdict signals a need for deeper engagement with institutional design. Judicial independence thrives not just on precedent, but on clarity and courage. **Avinashiappan Mylisami, Coimbatore**

Upskill India

Ref: *Linking India's two-speed economy* (Nov 21). The skill development departments should provide training to the abled demographic at a rapid pace. This would increase their employability quotient, eventually creating income. Infrastructural growth can be absorbed by all. Only sustained growth is the way to go. **VR Ganesan, Chennai**

Cold feet

Ref: *No timeline for assent to bill* (Nov 21). The article echoed: 'Operation successful, patient died.' Ironically, the judgement, by not prescribing a time limit for gubernatorial positions to grant assent to bills, missed the issue's fundamental significance. The bench realised the issue correctly, yet provided no conclusive solution. **A Sreeram Rao, Visakhapatnam**

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

No timelines for Bills

Apex court strikes delicate balance

Rolling back the timelines it had earlier set for the President and Governors to grant assent to Bills, the Supreme Court has sought to strike a delicate balance within the framework of separation of powers. The judiciary cannot fetter the President or the Governors to a one-size-fits-all time table to dispose of Bills or usurp their functions through 'deemed consent' at the expiry of a time frame, the Constitution Bench has said. It's a valid argument. In April, when a two-judge Bench set timelines, the underlying message was hard to miss. It seemed to address concerns over Raj Bhavans playing an obstructionist and adversarial role in Opposition-ruled states by delaying Bills passed by state legislatures. The ruling by the five-judge Bench suggests it has found a viable alternative without overstepping its mandate by meddling in legislative procedures through timelines. Has it?

The apex court, in answering the 16th Presidential Reference, has said the President and Governors cannot resort to 'prolonged and evasive inaction' by sitting endlessly on state Bills awaiting their approval. According to it, states have a right to approach the court when there is a delay. There will be 'limited judicial scrutiny' for 'prolonged, unexplained and indefinite' delay in granting assent to Bills. The effectiveness of the checks and balances doctrine will be on test, now more than ever. An ideal outcome would be a more nuanced discharge of constitutional duties, and working towards avoiding an impasse rather than encouraging it.

The reference to the spirit of the Constitution in the 'opinion of the court' is also a call for a more responsible governance model, resulting in a discourse between the institutions. As it aptly stated, dialogue, reconciliation and balance, and not obstructionism, is the essence of constitutionalism in the Indian Republic.

3 states, 3 tragedies

Schools are failing children

The suicides of a 16-year-old boy in Delhi and a nine-year-old girl in Jaipur lay bare a disturbing reality: India's schools, meant to nurture and protect, are increasingly turning into spaces where cruelty, neglect and unchecked authority can destroy young lives. These tragedies are not aberrations; they are symptoms of a failing system.

In Delhi, the teenager who leapt from a Metro station left behind a heart-breaking note describing humiliation at the hands of his teachers. His parents allege sustained harassment — scolding for trivial issues, threats of expulsion and mocking in front of peers. The FIR outlines how even after he confided suicidal thoughts to a counsellor, the school neither informed his parents nor intervened. When a child signals distress, indifference becomes a form of violence. In Jaipur, the CBSE's probe into the death of the nine-year-old schoolgirl is an indictment of institutional apathy. For 18 months she endured bullying. On the day she died, she approached her class teacher five times in 45 minutes, visibly distressed by obscene content written by classmates. The teacher dismissed her pleas, shouted at her and offered no support. Hours later, the child walked to the fourth floor and ended her life. The school even allegedly washed the death spot, compromising forensic analysis. These are not lapses; these are violations of duty of care. And then comes the horror from Vasai in Maharashtra. A 13-year-old girl was forced to perform 100 sit-ups with her schoolbag for arriving late, despite reportedly being anaemic. She collapsed soon after and died. The teacher has been arrested for culpable homicide.

Three children. Three states. One broken system. Enforceable school-safety laws, mandatory reporting of emotional distress, trained counsellors, anti-bullying systems and real penalties for both emotional and physical abuse are urgently needed. No child should face such tragic ends.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1925

Lord Sinha on himself

THE remarkable article by Lord Sinha which we reproduce elsewhere in this issue from the Bengalee, even more than his now famous interview with the Indian Daily Mail, shows that his Lordship is once more himself and has recovered fully from his prolonged illness. One may or may not agree with him as regards much of what he says, but every part of the article bears unmistakable evidence of that cleanness of thinking and that power of arguing a case which had always distinguished this eminent legal luminary before the long illness practically removed him from public life. The article easily divides itself into two parts. In the first he tells us what he did not mean in his Presidential address and more recently in the interview with the Daily Mail when he said that the country was not yet fit for Swaraj or responsible government. He did not mean that the British bureaucracy could not be replaced by an Indian bureaucracy. "If India can supply 700 civilians," he writes, "she can well supply the whole 1400—the full cadre." Nor did he mean that India could not have self-government if that term is used only in the sense of government by indigenous rulers, as distinguished from foreigners. "Self-government!" he writes. "Why, the wildest tribes in the very centre of Africa have it, and who is there to question that they are fit?" It was not in this sense of the word Swaraj, then, that Lord Sinha ever thought or said that India was not fit for it. The explanation is very welcome, and disposes of much of the ignorant criticism to which both the Presidential speech and the interview have been subjected.



THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA

Operation Sindoor is still underway, with none other than Defence Minister Rajnath Singh only a week ago in Delhi applauding the "high state of operational readiness" being displayed at the tri-service 'Trishul' exercise in the northern Arabian Sea and western front with Pakistan. Singh added that intelligence agencies will soon get to the bottom of the suicide bombing at the Red Fort, in which 14 people were killed — six people have since been arrested.

According to *The Indian Express*, the shadowy long arm of the Islamic State from places like Syria and Turkey may be connecting terrorists inside India with terror-training modules. It is also believed that Dr Shaheen Saeed, one of the six terror accused, heads the women's wing in India of the Jaish-e-Mohammed terror group that is headquartered in Pakistan.

Think about it, dear Reader. Operation Sindoor is ongoing, which means that the enemy outside, Pakistan, continues to be on the watchful radar of India's security agencies.

But what of the radicalisation within? Why are young men and women, many of them highly educated, so angry that they are ready to kill themselves and spread mayhem in the country, especially when the economy is growing at a comfortable clip?

Let's look at the international context first. India's enemy, Pakistan, is just not being feted by powerful countries in the West — Trump calls Asim Munir



INDOCTRINATED: One of the Delhi blast accused, Dr Shaheen Saeed, heads the women's wing of the Jaish-e-Mohammed. PTI

"my favourite Field Marshal", all the while continuing to insist that he not only brokered the truce at Op Sindoor, but that PM Modi called him and told him that "we're not going to war" with Pakistan — it is also reviving its relationship with Bangladesh, that had been almost non-existent since 1971.

Now we all know that Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League kept the ISI out of Bangladesh as long as she was around — no mean feat. Which is why India held its nose all these years even when the former Bangladesh PM turned her country into a security zone, misjudged the strength of the democratic students protest and totally stifled the opposition parties — but that's another story, to be discussed at another time. The fact of the matter is that, today, the ISI is not just back in Bangladesh, it is flaunting its presence there and has access to the top leadership. Moreover, a Pakistani warship docked in the Chittagong port earlier this month, for the first time in 54 years.

This means that India has to be watchful both on its western as well as its eastern flank.

As if this wasn't challenge enough to the Indian state from

What is the extraordinary problem that these Indian Muslims face that Indians of other faiths don't seem to comprehend?

without, the question of why young Indians are being radicalised within must fill us with even more concern. A short, pop quiz may reveal some answers. What's common, for example, between Muzammil Shakeel Ganai, Adeel Ahmed Rather, Shaheen Saeed, Irfan Ahmad Wagay, Amir Rashid Ali and Jasir Bilal Wani, all of whom are accused of conspiring to overthrow the state in the Red Fort blast?

Second, what's common between Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam, Meeran Haider, Gulfisha Fatima, Shifa ur-Rahman, Mohammad Salim Khan, all of whom are accused of conspiring to overthrow the state via the 2020 Delhi riots?

Third, what's common between Mohammad Akhlaq, Mazlum Ansari, Intiaz Khan, Pehlu Khan, Alimuddin Ansari, Rakbar Khan, Qasim, Mohammad Zahiruddin, Lukman Ansari and Afan Abdul Ansari, all of whom were lynched over rumours that they were transporting beef?

The short answer is that all these people are Muslim. Think about it. Those involved in the Red Fort blast, those picked up by the police and thrown in jail under UAPA in the Delhi riots case as well as those lynched over beef-carrying rumours by cow vigilantes — the common denominator between these widely varying groups of Muslims is their faith.

Muzammil Shakeel is a doctor, Irfan Ahmad is a *mufti*, Umar Khalid did his M.Phil from JNU, Gulfisha Fatima studied at Delhi University and Akhlaq and the rest are transporters from UP and Jharkhand and Rajasthan. These men and women straddle

the socio-economic strata in India — they are as different as chalk from cheese. The problem is that we are painting them all with the same brush.

Shakeel and Irfan and Umer un-Nabi, the Red Fort suicide bomber, must surely be given the harshest punishment — they attempted to undermine the state from within. But Umar Khalid, Sharjeel, Gulfisha and others who have been in jail for five years without bail — their case is finally being heard in the Supreme Court these days — have right from the start pleaded their innocence. As for Akhlaq & Co, they never got even a chance, death got to them first.

Now it seems that Yogi Adityanath's government in Uttar Pradesh is withdrawing the case against all those accused of lynching Akhlaq 10 years ago in Dadri. No one knows why, under what circumstances and whether that can happen. If it does, it's not clear what it does to the rule of law.

But back to the original question. Why are Indian Muslims plotting terror acts and blowing themselves up at Red Fort? Why did Umer un-Nabi blow himself up — like LTTE terrorists used to do in an earlier era or jihadis continue to do in parts of Afghanistan-Pakistan — and not let off his anger by protesting within the safety net of the democratic state?

What is the extraordinary problem that these Indian Muslims face that Indian Hindus or Indian Sikhs or Christians or others from other faiths don't seem to comprehend?

The point of this column is to try and understand the grave predicament that India is passing through at this moment in its existence — an insecurity without, with the country's foreign policy in a state of uncertainty and flux, as fast friends wither and wane, and an insecurity within.

But how does one understand it?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The Muslim is as much an Indian as I am and of the same blood. — Mahatma Gandhi

A life lesson in mentorship

SY QURAISHI

THE year was 1972, and I was sulking. Badly. As an Assistant Commissioner (under training) in Karnal district, I had just learned about my assignment for the Haryana elections. While my three fellow IAS trainees got supervisory roles overseeing multiple polling stations, I was posted as the presiding officer of a single booth — a job typically reserved for schoolteachers and junior officials.

My well-meaning colleagues decided to 'comfort' me by narrating a tale about a presiding officer who had forgotten his official stamp at the booth. Terrified of disciplinary action, the poor man had literally run 12 km to retrieve it!

My trainer, Deputy Commissioner HV Goswami, noticed my barely concealed disappointment. But before I could speak, he sat me down. "This is an experience you will remember for a very long time," he said. He explained that an IAS officer, after training, becomes a 'big' officer for life. The training period is the only time when one can do every job hands-on, understand the intricacies from the ground up. Once you move up, you never experience grassroots reality again.

I didn't fully appreciate his wisdom then. But he was remarkably prophetic. I manned that single polling booth in 1972, stamping papers, verifying voter lists, understanding the weight of every procedural detail. I saw democracy not from a command centre but from its foundation.

Fast-forward 34 years: I had been appointed Election Commissioner of India, overseeing around one million polling stations across the world's largest democracy. From one booth to one million — it was quite a leap.

Before settling into my new role, I sought out Mr Goswami. He was living a retired life in New Delhi, and when I called, I could hear the surprise in his voice. I thanked him for that assignment that had once bruised my ego, for giving me an experience none of my peers had received. I had checked with fellow Election Commissioners and IAS officers — not one had worked as a presiding officer. What a difference it made!

Later, sitting in the chair as Chief Election Commissioner, making decisions affecting nearly a million polling stations and a billion voters, I could visualise exactly what was happening on the ground. I knew the challenges, the pressures, the protocols.

That booth in Karnal became my window into understanding the enormous machinery of Indian democracy. Every policy directive, every innovation we introduced was informed by that fundamental experience of being the last link in the democratic chain.

Mr Goswami's lesson was simple but profound: true understanding comes from doing, not just directing. That bottom rung — that single polling booth — gave me a foundation no amount of supervision could have provided.

Yes, Mr Goswami, you were absolutely right. I did remember that experience. It became the most valuable lesson of my career.

Sometimes, the smallest assignments teach the biggest lessons. And sometimes, sulking is just a prelude to wisdom.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Promote rational thinking

Apropos of "Terrorism rooted in rancour, distrust"; the challenge of radicalisation cannot be met by policing alone. Schools, colleges and professional institutions must strengthen value education, critical thinking and scientific temper so that young people learn to question dangerous ideas instead of absorbing them silently. Families and colleagues should take note of sudden behavioural changes and offer timely intervention. If society promotes rational thinking and discourages all forms of blind ideology, this rising threat can be contained before it damages the nation further.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

PU needs good governance

Refer to 'Punjab must defend its stake in PU'; governing a university is not a matter of political indulgence. The sole objective should be to strengthen the quality of higher education and research. A modern university requires governance systems that are transparent, responsive and academically driven. Revisiting the size, composition and functioning of the Senate is essential for improving academic standards and meeting global benchmarks. The Punjab University has a rich legacy. Ensuring excellence in governance will help the institution serve students, faculty and society better.

HARJINDER SINGH THANDI, MOHALI

SC chooses constitutional elasticity

With reference to 'Can't fix timelines for grant of assent to Bills by Gov, Prez: SC'; the verdict is a harmonious restoration of the separation of powers. By declining to fix rigid timelines for the Governor's assent, the apex court has chosen constitutional elasticity over judicial overreach. The rejection of "deemed assent" rightfully prevents the judiciary from usurping executive roles. The judgment strikes the right chord of federalism: Governors cannot use silence as a weapon. The court clarified that discretion is not a licence for perpetuity. By mandating that withheld Bills must be returned to the House, the SC ensured that the legislative voice isn't stifled by gubernatorial veto power. This verdict walks a tightrope with grace — respecting the dignity of high office while reminding its occupants that in a democracy, constitutional duty cannot be ignored forever.

GAGANPREET SINGH, MOHALI

SC reversing own judgment

With reference to 'SC's U-turn'; prior environmental clearance is mandatory before any project or industrial activity is started. Courts have repeatedly ruled that allowing projects to start without approval and regularising them later defeats the very purpose of environmental assessment. However, the Ministry of Environment provided a leeway for retrospective approvals but all notifications were struck down by the apex court in its May 2025 Vanashakti judgment. Now, a SC Bench has reversed its own judgment opening a way for ex post facto approvals. In a way, it is like rewarding violators at the cost of law abiders. The relaxation should be given only to public welfare projects like hospitals and educational institutes. Industrial, mining or other polluting units that cause irreparable harm to the environment need not be shown any mercy.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

Exceptions in environment rules

Refer to 'SC's U-turn'; the reversal of the Vanashakti verdict is detrimental for ecology. A clean environment is one of the most important essentials of human life. In an earlier ruling, the SC had said that 'the grant of an environmental clearance cannot be taken for granted and as a mechanical exercise'. Developments in the past decades have underscored the need to carve out exceptions to environmental norms, e.g. in projects involving national security, or when an underserved area requires a healthcare facility or when a highway becomes a necessity to improve connectivity to remote areas.

MONA SINGH, AMRITSAR

No job creation in two decades

Apropos of 'Nitish's new innings'; Bihar voters have once again expressed faith in Nitish Kumar's leadership. Unemployment and migration did not reduce during his around two decades of rule. With hardly any sign of improvement in employment and increase in per capita income, people have still elected the same government to power. Time only will reveal the reason. The blame of 'vote chori' to elect double engine government by the opposition parties may get proved right in the due course of time.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

Hasina has lost in the court of people



MAHFUZ ANAM
EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR

LET legal experts discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) trial and verdict. Our focus will be on the fact that Sheikh Hasina's political demise had already occurred, and the "guilty verdict" was pronounced by the people, especially the younger generation, much earlier, during the tumultuous days of July-August 2024.

The future is always unpredictable, but as of now, her reputation lies in ruins and her political career buried under a mountain of debris of self-righteous arrogance, misgovernance and impunity. Whatever may be the Awami League (AL)'s narrative about the national or international conspiracy behind Hasina's fall, the fact is that the 'death sentence' by the ICT was brought on by her cruel suppression of political dissent, abuse of the law, corruption, partisan administration and bank looting.

Other factors included money laundering, repression of independent media houses and, finally, the

killing of 1,400 citizens, including children, to stay in power during the last few weeks of her rule.

Over the years, enforced disappearance and extra-judicial killings became the hallmark of her regime. Yes, there were some vital infrastructural developments, increase in per capita income, and growth in many social indicators, but the credit for them was swept aside by her destruction of democracy and overwhelming dictatorial rule.

It is to Sheikh Hasina's credit that she was able to revive, reorganise, rejuvenate and re-inspire Awami League to win elections in 1996 after 21 years out of power. Her first stint in office, especially the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord (which she herself did not implement) and the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, marked a new beginning for AL.

But over the years, she effectively demolished her own party as she destroyed the police, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, etc — transforming it from a political powerhouse into an apparatus of extortion, corruption and violence.

She did not take well either of her electoral defeats in 1991 and 2001. Her view that AL could never be defeated in a free and fair election, but only through rigged ones, partly made her reject these results, inventing the term "subtle-rigging."



BRUTAL: She became entrapped in the mindset of never admitting mistakes, resulting in arrogance. REUTERS

This marked the beginning of the arrogance and myopia that led her towards ignoring the truth and making massive blunders. A miraculous escape from a near-fatal attempt on her life in August 2004, in which 24 AL workers and leaders were killed, with no credible attempt by the then BNP government to investigate the grenade attack and punish the perpetrators, probably convinced Hasina that she would always be vulnerable as an opposition politician. So, she may have decided never to give up power if and when she regained it. This, in our view, killed the prospect of democracy in Bangladesh.

Hasina regained power in a free and fair election in 2008, abolished the caretaker system

ICT's death sentence was brought on by her own cruel suppression of political dissent, abuse of the law, corruption, among many other things.

in 2011, and then manipulated the three consecutive elections held in 2014, 2018 and 2024.

As her manipulations succeeded, she grew over-confident and felt that all her political allies were her pawns, all opponents could be manipulated and all dissenting voices easily suppressed.

She became entrapped in the mindset of never admitting any mistakes, which resulted in her becoming supremely arrogant. During a meeting with editors in 2013, I heard her say: "In spite of so many attempts on my life, Allah has kept me alive for the purpose of carrying out His will. So, you all may write anything you like. I don't care."

She felt she was divinely guided and, as such, had nothing to worry about.

Thus, she plunged deeper into isolation on the one hand and became further intolerant on the other, both of which distanced her from the people and her party.

The ostentatious observance of the birth centenary of her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, lovingly called Bangabandhu, during which hundreds of statues were built — a culture previously almost non-existent in Bangladesh — greatly damaged Bangabandhu's reputation instead of increasing authentic learning about him.

This was followed by the 50th anniversary celebration of Bangladesh's liberation in 2021. Hasina celebrated this crucial occasion as a continuation of Bangabandhu's birth centenary.

Freedom fighters were horrified to see how little tribute was paid to them and how their stories of sacrifice, bravery and patriotism remained untold. The crucial role of declaring independence played by Major Ziaur Rahman was not even remotely mentioned, as was the role of Col M.A.G. Osmani (the chief of the Liberation War army) and other sector commanders. Once again, everything converged on one man. Freedom fighters still alive, and the family members of those killed during the war, felt insulted.

By 2022, Hasina had reached the height of arrogance. "I know everything"; "Every critic is an enemy"; "Whatever I do is best for

Bangladesh" and similar statements dominated the political discourse.

Hasina and her government's handling of the students' stance against the government quota system for jobs clearly showed the dysfunctionality to which her party and her government had descended.

In July 2024, things turned violent, and from July 16 onwards, killings on the streets in large numbers began. The *Daily Star's* reporters counted bodies in government and private hospitals. By August 1, 2024, they tallied 201 dead bodies and spoke to hundreds of families who lost their loved ones. We headlined death counts every day that we could verify.

Hasina denies that she gave orders to fire lethal weapons on demonstrators — despite a plethora of proof — but then why did she not stop it once it began occurring? Each day's newspapers showed how many were killed the day before. If she is speaking the truth about not giving orders to kill, then why didn't she issue an instant order to stop the carnage? There is no way one can believe that firing on the streets would occur day after day for several weeks, and the PM would not know. She knew, and she had given the order. As the head of government, Sheikh Hasina is guilty of crimes against her own people.

Courtesy: The Daily Star, Bangladesh

Gaganyaan: Long haul before crewed flight takes charge



TV VENKATESWARAN
VISITING PROF, IISER-MOHALI

THE recent announcement by ISRO chairperson V Narayanan regarding the Gaganyaan mission has once again followed a familiar script: ambitious goals tempered by pragmatic delays.

Speaking on the sidelines of the Emerging Science, Technology and Innovation Conclave (ESTIC-2025), Narayanan stated that while nearly ninety per cent of sub-system progress is complete, the mission now enters a critical phase of integrated testing to verify that every component can withstand the thunderous launch, the hostile space environment, and the infernal heat of reentry.

The ambitious Gaganyaan project, initiated in 2018, aims to send Indian astronauts to space and bring them back safely using an entirely indigenous spacecraft and launch vehicle. Once successful, India will be the fourth country to do so, after the Soviet Union/Russia, the US and China.

The original schedule, which envisioned the launch

coinciding with India's 75th anniversary of Independence in 2022, has been significantly altered. The initial setbacks were primarily due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the recent hurdles include extensive technical preparations, the rigorous process of human-rating systems and delays in hardware realisation.

Compounding these technical challenges, as the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science and Technology has adversely observed, has been the issue of erratic fund flows from the Union government. Significant budget reductions in the past few years have hampered consistent progress. When these factors are combined, a crewed Gaganyaan mission now seems a realistic prospect, not before 2027 or even 2028.

Despite the recent conduct of an important test on Main Parachutes for the Gaganyaan Crew Module, in a notable shift from the earlier plan, Narayanan revealed that the first fully uncrewed orbital flight, designated Gaganyaan 1 or G1, is now scheduled for December 2025.

This mission had previously come tantalisingly close, with its launch campaign initiated in December 2024 for an expected launch in early 2025. The further delay until the end of 2025 highlights the complexities involved. More intriguing, however, is the



TESTING IS KEY: The path to Gaganyaan is not a simple sprint, but a meticulous marathon. @ISRO_X/ANI

revised sequence of tests. The G1 mission will now take place even before the second test vehicle abort mission, TV-D2, which is designed to validate the Crew Escape System (CES) under more challenging conditions than the first successful test, TV-D1, conducted in October 2023.

A crewed mission demands a human-rated launch vehicle, with a robust crew emergency escape system and a reliable spacecraft. The Crew Escape System is a critical pillar of this safety architecture. It is an emergency evacuation mechanism designed to instantly separate the crew module from a malfunctioning launch vehicle during liftoff or ascent, swiftly transporting the astronauts to safety.

ISRO has developed a tower-based CES that sits atop the human-rated ver-

The reshuffled order of tests and the scaled-down nature of the initial flights are an enigma.

sion of its LVM3 rocket, called the HLV-M3. In an emergency, powerful rockets on this tower can detach the crew module and carry it to a safe distance.

Perfecting this system has been methodical. A Pad Abort Test in 2018 demonstrated the system's ability to pull the crew capsule away from the launch pad. The first in-flight test, TV-D1, successfully validated the CES while the launch vehicle was travelling at 1.2 times the speed of sound.

The upcoming TV-D2 mission is intended to test this escape under greater duress, at speeds exceeding 1.4 times the speed of sound, followed by further tests in even more complex abort scenarios. Similarly, the recent Integrated Air Drop Test validated the parachute system's per-

formance, a crucial factor for a safe splashdown.

The process of human-rating a rocket is painstaking and time-consuming. For example, a special facility, the Hypervelocity Expansion Tunnel Test Facility, that can simulate the hypersonic conditions encountered during spacecraft atmospheric reentry, has been established at IIT Kanpur.

It also involves subjecting every component, down to the cryogenic engines, to extreme wear and tear to ensure unparalleled reliability. It is the difference between the safety standards of a passenger bus and a goods lorry.

This requires not only extensive ground qualification tests but also test-flying some human-rated components on previous LVM3 launches to rate their actual performance in flight. Every system must be tested individually and then again as an integrated whole.

The heart of the crewed mission is the spacecraft itself, which houses the astronauts. The crew cabin provides a livable environment by managing the oxygen supply, removing carbon dioxide, and regulating temperature, humidity and air pressure through a complex Environmental Control and Life Support System (ECLSS).

Initially, ISRO explored procuring key elements of the ECLSS from Russia, but when that did not work out,

the organisation embarked on developing every aspect indigenously, adding another layer of complexity and time to the programme.

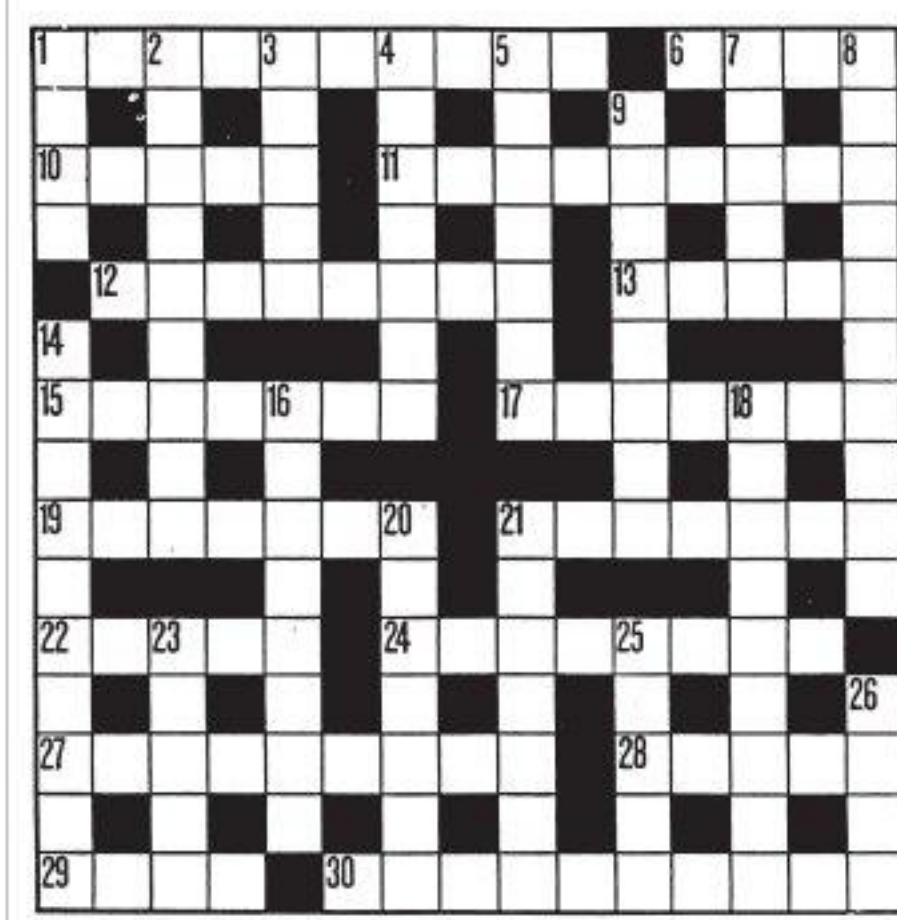
The road to the crewed mission is long and necessarily sequential. Before astronauts board, three uncrewed missions — G1 to G3 — are planned to ensure safety and reliability. Each will carry the robotic humanoid Vyommitra to monitor the environment that the crew will eventually experience.

However, with several critical tests like TV-D2 and Integrated Air Drop Tests delayed, the decision to proceed with the G1 mission ahead of some of them is glaring. It is also learnt that this first uncrewed flight will carry only a limited integrated vehicle health monitoring system, a scaled ECLSS demonstrator and an unsurprised crew module, meaning it will not fully mimic an actual crewed flight.

While the announcement of the G1 mission brings India a step closer to its goal, the reshuffled order of tests and the scaled-down nature of the initial flights are an enigma. The delays, while disappointing to the public, reflect the immense technical challenges and the non-negotiable priority of astronaut safety.

The path to Gaganyaan is not a simple sprint but a meticulous marathon, where every step, however slow, must be firm and sure.

QUICK CROSSWORD



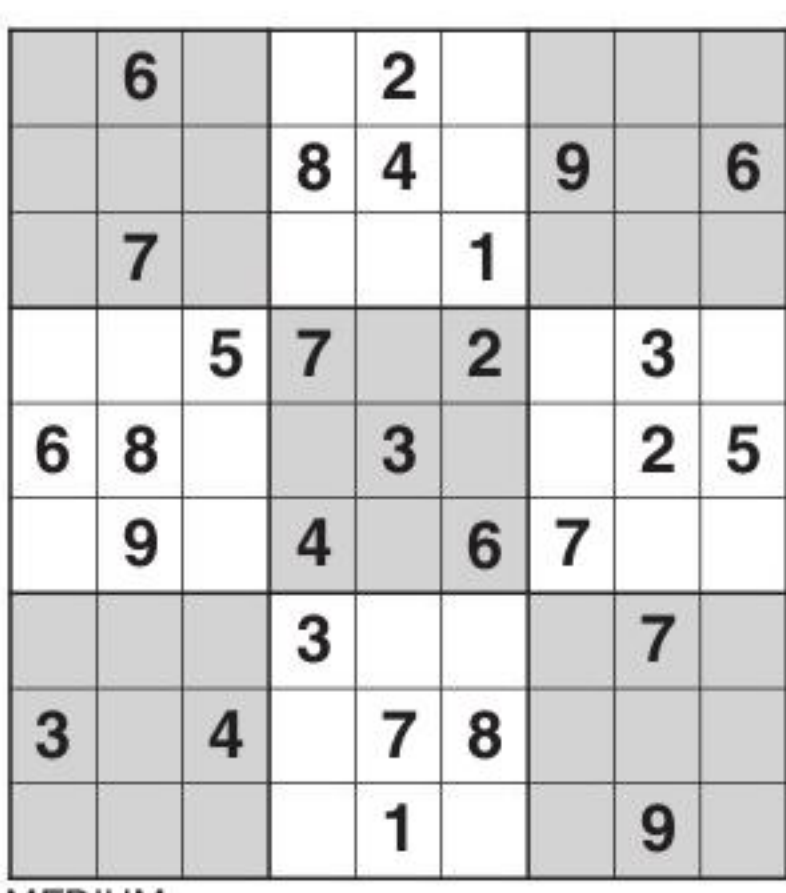
- ACROSS**
- 1 Achieve desired result (2,3,5)
 - 6 Clever (4)
 - 10 Recurrent round (5)
 - 11 Assist in an action (4,1,4)
 - 12 Begin (8)
 - 13 Explode (2,3)
 - 15 Lay down as an imperative (7)
 - 17 Range of hearing (7)
 - 19 Purify (7)
 - 21 Bespoke (2,5)
 - 22 A male relative (5)
 - 24 Of earliest times (8)
 - 27 Socially unacceptable (2,3,4)
 - 28 Author of The Inspector-General (5)
 - 29 Invalid (4)
 - 30 Prepared for action (2,3,5)
- DOWN**
- 1 Accused's enclosure in court (4)
 - 2 Skilled procedure (9)
 - 3 Choose (5)
 - 4 Set free (7)
 - 5 Surrender (7)
 - 7 Shout expressing approval (5)
 - 8 There is nothing more to say (3,2,5)
 - 9 Large Australian marsupial (8)
 - 14 Prudent foresight (10)
 - 16 Oblique disparaging allusion (8)
 - 18 Large-flowered shrub (9)
 - 20 Daring feat (7)
 - 21 A great success (7)
 - 23 Secret intrigue (5)
 - 25 English composer 1857-1934 (5)
 - 26 A stratagem (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Pass off, 5 Still, 8 Attrition, 9 Nab, 10 Hail, 12 Flounder, 14 Costly, 15 Unruly, 17 Official, 18 Step, 21 Par, 22 Irascible, 24 Rusty, 25 Damages.

Down: 1 Peach, 2 Set, 3 Omit, 4 Foible, 5 Sanguine, 6 In no doubt, 7 Liberty, 11 In so far as, 13 Alacrity, 14 Cropper, 16 Canard, 19 Press, 20 Scam, 23 Bog.

SU DO KU



MEDIUM

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	1224 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	06:54 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	25	11
New Delhi	26	11
Amritsar	24	11
Bathinda	27	10
Jalandhar	24	11
Ludhiana	25	09
Bhiwani	25	12
Hisar	26	10
Sirsa	27	10
Dharamsala	22	08
Manali	17	02
Shimla	18	08
Srinagar	16	-01
Jammu	25	11
Kargil	10	-06
Leh	08	-06
Dehradun	24	09
Mussoorie	16	07

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Begin to be now what you will be hereafter
William James