

Facts rather than hype

AI is becoming indistinguishable from technology itself for IT firms

TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES (TCS) has done the Indian information technology (IT) industry a service by choosing clarity over rhetoric on artificial intelligence (AI). At its analyst day last week, the country's largest software exporter not only outlined an AI-first strategy but, crucially, put a number to it. The disclosure that TCS has reached an annualised \$1.5 billion run rate from AI-related services, growing more than 16% sequentially, is among the first serious attempts by a large Indian IT firm to separate signal from noise in a space increasingly prone to exaggeration.

The timing is significant. AI is no longer a discrete technology layer or a fashionable add-on; it is rapidly becoming synonymous with enterprise technology itself. That reality was underscored a day later when Accenture reported its quarterly results. The global consulting major said its advanced AI bookings had nearly doubled year-on-year to \$2.2 billion and AI revenues had climbed to \$1.1 billion, up 120%. Yet it also announced it would stop reporting AI as a separate line item, arguing that AI is now embedded across most projects—from data modernisation to core operations—making segregation increasingly meaningless.

Together, the two disclosures capture where the industry stands today. TCS's decision to spell out AI revenues reflects a phase where investors, clients, and employees still need visibility on how quickly AI is moving from pilots to monetisation. Investors want clarity on revenue run rates and margins, not anecdotal success stories. Clients want proof that AI deployments will deliver measurable outcomes, not just dashboards. Accenture's move points to the end state: AI as the default mode of delivery rather than a distinct revenue stream. Outside TCS, most large Indian IT firms continue to speak in generalities. Infosys tracks AI-linked revenue internally but does not disclose it. Wipro, HCLTech, LTI Mindtree, and Tech Mahindra emphasise platforms, deal wins or productivity gains, while avoiding a consolidated monetary figure for AI. The reluctance is understandable. AI revenues remain intertwined with cloud migration, digital engineering, and application modernisation, making clean attribution difficult. There is also the risk of setting expectations too early in a fast-evolving market. Yet, as TCS has shown, even a directional number—anchored in engagement scale and growth rates—helps ground the conversation in facts rather than hype.

The upcoming third-quarter earnings season offers the rest of the sector an opportunity to follow suit. Even limited, standardised disclosures would help investors distinguish between companies that are genuinely scaling AI and those still experimenting at the margins. More importantly, it would signal confidence in execution at a time when global clients are beginning to ask tougher questions about returns on AI spending. TCS's credibility is further strengthened by its moves beyond services into enabling infrastructure. Its plans to invest, directly and through partnerships, in AI-ready data-centre capacity in India reflect a longer-term view of where value will accrue. As data localisation, energy efficiency, and sovereign compute become strategic issues, the ability to pair infrastructure with services could differentiate Indian firms from global peers that rely heavily on hyperscalers. The broader message for the industry is clear: AI is no side bet. Indian IT companies still benefit from scale, talent depth, and client proximity that few geographies can match. But these advantages will erode if caution persists while global competitors normalise AI-led delivery. TCS has set a benchmark. In a market where AI is becoming indistinguishable from technology itself, silence is no longer a neutral stance.

TikTok question being swept under the rug

A TIKTOK DEAL has finally been reached. Almost. Pending agreement from Beijing, the app's owner, ByteDance Ltd., has agreed to a joint venture that will produce an American version of TikTok that is majority owned by US investors.

The deal has been described as bringing to an end a long-running saga over the app's future. In reality, it's merely sweeping it under the rug, conveniently taking it off the agenda now that the political will to tackle the issue has subsided.

That ByteDance will retain the maximum permitted 19.9% ownership is the merest of lip service to the law passed by Congress and affirmed by the Supreme Court. It does little to address the core concern and the reason any of this started in the first place, which was the worry over China's stewardship of a recommendation algorithm that influences more than 170 million American users.

The new arrangement, which closely resembles the proposed security measures that were met with scepticism by both Republicans and Democrats in 2023, will be accepted now thanks largely to President Donald Trump's change of heart: He believes he is popular on the platform and that it helped him win the election.

Perhaps the concerns were overblown. The TikTok "ban" certainly came in a hurry, shoehorned into a broader national security bill and motivated in part by the concern—not backed up with data—that the algorithm was intentionally pushing anti-Israeli or pro-Palestinian content after the October 7 terror attack.

Other critics of the ban argue that America's homegrown social media companies aren't much better. The past couple of years have shown a troubling regression in outsiders' abilities to monitor what's going on, such as Meta Platforms Inc. and X. But the difference is that when those companies do wrong, their bosses often find themselves in front of Congress to be held accountable (in theory). When wrongdoing is kept secret, American employees often turn to American media to blow the whistle.

By contrast, we know little about the inner workings of ByteDance—other than it makes an extraordinary amount of money and has huge ambition. For matters of TikTok, a middleman is dispatched to the West in the form of Shou Zi Chew, the app's Singaporean chief executive officer. "There's more work to be done" on the new ownership deal, Shou told his employees this week, Bloomberg reported. In other words, the real decision-makers at ByteDance are still figuring things out.

Giving up control of the algorithm was a red line that ByteDance and China were not willing to cross, even as it looked as though TikTok might be shut off from the US entirely. The new joint venture, as anticipated, will license the algorithm's use from ByteDance. There will be additional oversight, it is claimed, and the algorithm will be "retrained" on US data. All of this will be overseen by Larry Ellison's Oracle Corp., whose shares were up 7.5% by lunchtime on Friday.

What expertise Oracle offers in social media algorithms is not clear. It has been suggested that Oracle's involvement means it can monitor and detect manipulation, but doing this at great scale is notoriously difficult. For this reason, it is questionable whether the TikTok threat has been "materially altered" or "just managed," argues Professor Sarah Kreps, director of the Tech Policy Institute at Cornell University.

What will actually change if this arrangement goes ahead? From a product perspective, in the short term, likely not much. On a broader horizon, the more complicated ownership structure might slow progress on developing the US version of TikTok. TikTok US may not reap the benefits from ByteDance's investments in AI. Its new owners might not be so willing to plow money into getting TikTok Shop, its burgeoning new e-commerce platform, off the ground.

Content moderation, which will be in US hands after the deal, was clearly on the mind of the president when he discussed the deal in the Oval Office in January. The US could "police" the moderation on the platform, he suggested, "a little bit, or a lot." Not only does this proposed deal fail to answer the TikTok question on influence and manipulation, it introduces a wealth of new ones.

● FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

WITH PRECISION FARMING AND BALANCED NUTRIENT USE, THE SAME LAND CAN GENERATE FAR HIGHER OUTPUT

Reforming fertiliser subsidy

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potassium, undermining soil health and productivity.

The outcome is starkly visible in India's nutrient-use profile. The national nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) ratio has deteriorated to an alarming 10.9:4.4:1, far from the agronomically recommended 4:2:1. China offers a revealing counterpoint. With a smaller cropland base of 127.6 million hectares (mha) (arable land plus permanent crops), it generated agricultural gross value added (GVA) (including crops, livestock, forestry, and fishing) of about \$1.27 trillion in 2023 (World Bank), supported by fertiliser application of roughly 373 kg/ha and a far more balanced NPK ratio of 2.6:1.1:1. India, despite having a much larger cropland (168.3 mha), recorded an agri-GVA of only \$0.63 trillion—about half of China's—with fertiliser consumption of 182 kg/ha. The agronomic consequences of distorted nutrient application are clearly reflected in India's weaker productivity outcomes.

The agronomic fallout is visible across states. Punjab, often seen as India's breadbasket, applies about 61% more nitrogen than recommended while underusing potassium by nearly 89% and phosphorus by around 8% relative to the state's recommended doses. Excess nitrogen produces lush green fields, but without adequate phosphorus and potassium, yields plateau and grain quality suffers. The illusion of

abundance masks declining productivity and rising costs.

The divergence is rooted in policy design. In China, the government gives aggressive input subsidy on per unit of land basis directly to farmers and lets the fertiliser prices be market-determined. It results in innovative products—over 60% of fertiliser consumption is through complex fertilisers compared to just 17% in India. This underscores a failure of the

NBS scheme to steer farmers towards integrated nutrient management.

The efficiency costs are equally sobering. Nutrient use efficiency (NUE) is estimated at just 35–40%, implying that a majority of applied fertiliser never reaches the crop. Much of the lost nitrogen either escapes into the atmosphere as nitrous oxide, a

greenhouse gas nearly 278 times more potent than carbon dioxide, or seeps into groundwater as nitrate, making groundwater non-potable. Ironically, a subsidy meant to boost food production is now amplifying environmental damage and harming human health. Nationwide, fertiliser-to-grain response ratio has fallen from about 1:10 in the 1970s to barely 1:2.7 by 2015 in irrigated areas, alongside declining soil organic carbon. Adding to this is leakage: an estimated 20–25% of subsidised urea is diverted to non-agricultural uses or smuggled across borders.

What, then, is the way forward? The best reform is to gradually dismantle price

Reforming the fertiliser subsidy regime demands political courage, but the rewards could be substantial



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The buyback conundrum

Once your shares are bought back, you will no longer be entitled to future dividends, bonus issues, or other corporate benefits on those shares

ON NOVEMBER 14, two companies, GHCL and Infosys—both highly regarded entities—offered to buy back their shares from existing shareholders. While GHCL is attempting to buy back shares totalling ₹300 crores, Infosys proposed a significantly higher buyback aggregating ₹18,000 crore. To entice shareholders to offer their shares for repurchase, Infosys is offering a 16% premium of its current price while GHCL is offering a premium of 14%.

At first glance, many investors may be tempted to participate in the buyback to capture this immediate gain. However, before taking advantage of what appears to be a lucrative opportunity, it is essential to understand what a buyback actually entails.

What is a buyback? It is the repurchase of its own shares by the company that originally issued them. Once the company buys its shares back, it can either hold those as treasury shares and offer them to employees at the time stock options are given or cancel them to reduce its total outstanding issued share capital.

Companies seldom initiate buybacks because they have exhausted their authorised share capital. If a company already has sufficient shares available for employee stock options, why would it still choose to buy back its shares? The explanation lies in the strategic purposes that buybacks are designed to serve.

The company may argue that its shares are undervalued. But then how does that affect the company or impact the company? After all, the company is not trading in its own shares. Another common justification that is advanced is that a buyback would correct the market price. That does not often happen as would be seen in recent months. Bajaj Consumer Care repurchased its shares in September at ₹290 and these shares are now trading at ₹269. Similarly, Tanla Platform repurchased its shares at ₹875; the shares are now available at ₹618. The July repurchase of SIS was at ₹404 and these are now trading at ₹336. In short, after shares are repurchased, they rarely surface at a higher valuation or even rise. This begs the question, why would a company be concerned about whether the shares are not reflecting its market price? The only plausible explanation is that the promoters or majority shareholders want to reduce the floating stock, thereby increasing the control they have on the company.

A buyback also signals that the company has surplus cash—far more than it requires for its operations or expansion plans and is using the

repurchase as a way to deploy excess funds. When a company is seeking to repurchase its shares, it is important to ascertain what its borrowings are. If a company is burdened with costly debt, it would arguably be more prudent to reduce or eliminate those interest expenses and work towards becoming debt-free.

A buyback can also make the company appear more attractive to investors. By reducing the number of outstanding shares, the earnings per share automatically increase, creating an impression of improved performance.

Buybacks are engineered to make it look attractive to shareholders to tender their shares. If you hold an Infosys share purchased at ₹1,600 and are now able to sell it for ₹1,800, it may seem like

an obvious decision—especially since the stock is currently trading at around ₹1,545. However, under the tax rules introduced in October 2024, you will not be able to tell the tax authorities that you have made a capital gain of ₹200. Instead, the entire amount you receive from the buyback is treated as a dividend and taxed at 10%. As a result, although the offer price is ₹1,800, the post-tax amount you actu-

ally receive is ₹1,620. You are, however, allowed to record your original purchase cost as a loss, which can then be set off against future capital gains.

You may be wondering what happens to the cost of acquisition of the shares you tender for buyback. Can it be claimed as a deduction against the deemed dividend income? The answer is no—the cost of acquisition cannot be offset against the dividend income arising from a buyback. However, this cost can be carried forward as a deemed capital loss and used to offset capital gains from the sale of shares that you already hold. However, if you have no capital profits this gets carried forward ad infinitum.

If the shares tendered were bonus shares, the situation is different. Bonus shares have a cost of acquisition of zero, so one could argue that no deemed loss is available to be carried forward. Therefore, the entire proceeds you get from the bonus shares will be deemed as income and will be taxed.

Finally, once your shares are bought back, you will no longer be entitled to future dividends, bonus issues, or other corporate benefits on those shares which may work out to more than the money you would make on the buyback.

In my opinion, you should think carefully—and perhaps more than once—before offering your shares for a buyback.

roles are not ceremonial or honorary. Directors must ensure deep preparations, continuous learning, and sustained availability. Capacity-building with high technology adoption and dynamic assessment of the market could facilitate constructive strategy changes. Aptly rewarding governance could also boost directors' morale. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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OPINION

The
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{ OUR TAKE }

Dhaka’s dance with anarchy

New Delhi will need to be watchful of the security situation in Bangladesh

The most obvious takeaway from the current spate of violence in Bangladesh, following the killing of student leader Sharif Osman Hadi, is that the caretaker administration of Muhammad Yunus has little control over law and order. Yunus was foisted on Bangladesh after violent mass mobilisations forced the ouster of the Awami League government with the unwritten mandate to preside over the transition phase, during which electoral infirmities were to be removed, and hold elections. Instead, Yunus allowed the situation to drift, held off on the elections, and allowed virulent, anti-India sections within the polity to grow stronger. There is now a question mark over the polls, slated for February, with mobs targeting not just Awami League supporters, but also members of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and independent media organisations. A narrative that Sheikhha Hasina, the leader of Awami League, held office only because of backing from India has been allowed to gain ground in Dhaka, with student leaders such as Hadi holding New Delhi responsible for the political crisis in that country. This anti-India narrative, fanned by Islamists such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, threatens to undermine the secular origins of Bangladesh and deny India’s historic enabling role in its birth in the face of massive violence unleashed by the Pakistani army and its collaborators in East Pakistan in 1971.

So far, New Delhi has preferred to privilege the emotional spirit of 1971 and the long historic and cultural ties with the people over a purely transactional approach to bilateral ties with Dhaka. This approach may have to make way for pragmatism in the wake of the rising tide of anti-Indian sentiment in that country and a convergence of Pakistani and Chinese interests in Bangladesh — a trilateral meeting took place in Kunming, Yunnan, in June, amidst growing closeness between Islamabad and Dhaka. The rhetoric emanating from Dhaka signals a security challenge, with political leaders — from Yunus to heads of student groups — hinting at India’s geographical vulnerabilities in the Northeast: India shares a long and porous 4,000-km-plus border with Bangladesh, which is a site of smuggling, including of people, cattle and drugs. The present regime in Dhaka seems to harbour the belief that it could leverage these and exploit the current geo-political context to get aggressive with India. But it merits repetition that hostile bilateral ties will not be beneficial to Bangladesh.

New Delhi has rightly been cautious in its response to the provocative signals from Dhaka. It should be prepared to play the long game — wait out the current phase of political churn and engage with all the actors in Bangladesh politics. Elections — if held as scheduled — may clear the fog and rescue bilateral ties from the exigencies of local politics.

A message to Gill and Indian cricket

Cricket is a meritocracy. But very often, it can seem like it is a consumerist meritocracy. Board members need to be kept happy, broadcasters need to be kept happy, fans need to be kept happy, and the market needs to be kept happy. However, the decision to drop Shubman Gill from India’s squad for the 2026 T20 World Cup shows that, eventually, form must matter over reputation and everything else. Gill is the next big thing in Indian cricket, and this setback doesn’t change that. But this decision by the selection committee is what sport is really about — winning. Being dropped from the 2011 ODI World Cup team lit a fire in Rohit Sharma that propelled him to a great white-ball career; perhaps it will do the same for the 26-year-old Gill.

The pitches for the World Cup are expected to be on the slower side, and that makes a good start critical. At the top of the order, Sanju Samson, long given the short shrift by administrators, seems a better fit for the attacking direction that the team has chosen to take. If not him, Ishan Kishan, who will want to make the most of his second chance after performing in domestic cricket, will be hungrier than ever. The rest of the team is built around players who can be match-winners on their day, and that is exactly what the defending champions need. Captain Suryakumar Yadav, whose record as skipper is outstanding, hasn’t been in the best of form with the bat, but he has done enough over the years to earn the long rope. Jasprit Bumrah and Varun Chakaravarthy are the best bowlers in the world. In Abhishek Sharma, India has the most destructive opener. All that’s left now is to go out there and win it.

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



Delhi’s toxic air can’t be ignored any longer

India must act quickly on the issue. China’s experience with containing and clearing out Beijing’s pollution shows this is possible

Years ago, I saw Nelson Mandela’s dingy cell in South Africa’s Robben Island prison — an equivalent of India’s “Kalapaani”. It was a 7x9 square-ft, cage-like cell where the 6-ft tall Mandela spent 18 years of his life. In the dark cell that seemed to sap one’s energy, he worked out every day, trying to keep himself mentally and physically fit. He spent 27 years in various prisons, living the same life.

Meanwhile, the world saw innumerable ups and downs, but Mandela, in solitary confinement, kept the flame of his struggle alive and intact. Recently, he has been appearing more often in my thoughts. Not because of his sacrifices, struggles or ideals but for the cell where he carried out his prison sentence while trying to keep himself healthy and fit. The toxic air in the National Capital Region (NCR) has forced thousands of people like me to walk or work-out within the confines of our homes.

Last Sunday was the limit. I got up a bit late and was stunned by what I saw from the balcony. From my 17th floor home in Noida, I wasn’t able to see the ground below. Between me and the surface of the planet, lay a thick pall of grey smog. I have seen clouds descend from the sky, but the smog seemed as if it were rising from the ground up.

These days, toxic air dominates our conversation and is perhaps the only point of discussion in Delhi-NCR. The old are unable to breathe, the young are suffocating too. Pregnant women are shying away from stepping out and the newborns are struggling. Not everyone can afford an “air purifier”, and those who have installed it, can’t hide behind closed doors and windows for the entire duration of the winters. Mandela was jailed by an apartheid government, but we are condemned to suffer confinement in a democratic system.

Why am I saying this? Till now our country has shown a lot of concern for the environment in words, but a fraction of this has been visible in deeds. Even today, lakhs of people use coal and firewood to cook food and keep warm. Small industries use the same fuel. Foreign car manufacturers maintain a quiet tech divide; When it comes to carbon emission norms for engines, they produce one type for us and another for the West. Those farmers who burn farm stubble haven’t been offered any new options. A large number of trees

are being cut for infrastructure development. There are provisions to plant many more trees. But no one assumes responsibility to see it to fruition.

Do you think that our Parliament and legislature shows enough concern about this issue? This is the reason our leaders are now being booed by the public. In every meeting, the Delhi chief minister is regularly quizzed about it. But even Arvind Kejriwal should be asked the same question, shouldn’t he? He ruled Delhi for a decade, Rekha Gupta is a recent arrival.

I can say without any hesitation that all political parties are equally responsible for the mess that is Delhi’s air pollution.

I would like to quote China’s example. In 2008, I visited Beijing with the then Prime Minister. A year ago, the World Bank had designated the city as one of the most polluted in the world, claiming that every year 400,000 people were dying in the megapolis due to pollution. When we reached the city, it was busy in preparations for hosting the Olympics. Stadiums were being built, residential blocks were being beautified and the infrastructure was being refurbished. As a result, there was dust everywhere.

The media was speculating that such an atmosphere will have an adverse impact on the athletes as well as the spectators. They weren’t wrong. During the Olympics, on August 10, 2008, Bei-



Pollution control and management is a year-round operation. A strong regulator acts as a watchdog. SUNIL GHOSH/HINDUSTAN TIMES

jing’s air quality index (AQI) stood at 604, whereas the AQI in London and New York on the same date stood at 38 and 24, respectively.

In the five years after the Olympics, things deteriorated further. According to the data presented by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2013, an estimated 16 lakh people died due to pollution in China. During that time Beijing’s AQI crossed 750. This was the inflection point, and Chinese leaders swung into action. A five-year plan was drafted and massive government funding was allocated to tackle Beijing’s air pollution.

A ban was imposed on the direct purchase of petrol- and diesel-run cars. Those who wanted to buy such a car had to go through the limited lottery option. Those who wanted to buy a car were given easy options to buy electric vehicles and trucks were banned from entering densely populated areas. The use of coal-fired machines was steadily brought down. The city was saturated with metro, rapid rail and other transport options. A culture of cycling was reintroduced. The paper mills and other polluting factories were removed from the urban areas.

Governors and city mayors were given pollution targets, tightening the administration, making them more proactive.

Today, unlike India, China doesn’t just stop at measures like the Graded Response Action Plan (Grap), Pollution control and management is a year-round operation. A strong regulator acts as a watchdog. And the results are visible. Last Monday, my phone was showing Noida’s AQI at 460 while, at the same time, Beijing’s was 73. That same evening, the Chinese embassy spokesperson in New Delhi wrote on X, “India and China are struggling with air pollution amidst rapid urbanisation. Though the challenges are complex, in the last decade, China has registered great improvement.”

No doubt, there’s a world of difference between China and India in terms of governance and governance systems. But that can’t be used to excuse inaction. If we don’t take urgent steps to tackle the pollution right away, we will pay a heavy price for it in the near future.

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{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob



Why New Delhi needs to handle Dhaka with care

Eighteen months after Sheikh Hasina’s ouster from Bangladesh as the country’s Prime Minister, hopes for normalcy between India and Bangladesh remain elusive as the bilateral relationship plunges from one crisis to another. The ongoing protests in Dhaka and growing anti-India sentiments are only indications of that. While there is a hope in New Delhi that things could get better after the February elections in Bangladesh, there is little certainty of that. New Delhi must change its approach to Dhaka, shedding a politico-emotional framing to adopt a clinical and problem-solving national security framework.

For India, the rapidly deteriorating relationship with Bangladesh poses a threefold challenge: growing insecurity and infiltration along the 4,000-kilometer border; the rising threat of anti-India forces establishing cross-border bases; and the exploitation of the rift between Dhaka and New Delhi by Islamabad and Beijing at a time when Bangladesh actively pivots towards a Pakistan-China axis in the region.

Consider the rapidly shifting geopolitical context. In June this year, a trilateral meeting in China’s Kunming, involving the foreign secretaries of Bangladesh and Pakistan and Chinese vice-minister Sun Weidong, set a concerning tone for New Delhi. This was followed by the unprecedented visit of a Pakistani Naval ship to Bangladesh’s Chittagong port in late 2024, and Beijing is intensifying its engagement with the Muhammad Yunus government.

Whichever way one looks at it, the current state of bilateral relationship is deeply unhelpful to India. It harms the interests of Bangladesh and its people even more, but perhaps not the regime in Bangladesh for whom tensions with India help cover its domestic failures and incompetence, economic or otherwise. Therefore, our assumption that an unhealthy relationship with India is worse off for Dhaka could be a significant miscalculation.

Just as blaming India for harbouring the killers of the Bangladeshi youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi is unjustified, so too is the demand for New Delhi to hand over Hasina for execution (since she has already been sentenced to death) an impossible proposition. To blame New Delhi for not apprehending and handing over Hadi’s killers who have reportedly fled to the Indian side of the border, which witnesses a number of infiltration attempts almost every day, is irresponsible. Neither Hadi’s assassination nor the protection of his killers serves New Delhi’s interests; in fact, reality is quite to the contrary.

In dealing with today’s Dhaka, we must keep in mind five things. One, we must ideally separate noise from substance. But in today’s Bangladesh noise is the substance because the Yunus regime thrives more on the noise than on the substance. In that sense, neither an outreach to chief advisor Yunus nor to the country’s national security advisor may calm the anti-India tempers on the ground. In any case, the noise in Bangladesh is not in India’s control. Therefore, New Delhi’s strategy of minimal engagement with Dhaka is understandable. But if such minimal engagement is prem-

ised on the hope that things could change for the better after the February elections and when there is stable government in Dhaka, that prospect could be a long shot. Therefore, New Delhi must engage Dhaka at every level since not engaging will only deepen the trust deficit. New Delhi’s long-term interests demand engagement with Dhaka, not hopeful waiting for a better tomorrow in Dhaka.

Two, we must approach the question of the handover of exiled PM Hasina to the authorities in Bangladesh with more pragmatism. Though the Bangladesh government strategically exploits the Hasina issue for domestic political gain and to keep New Delhi on the defensive, it nevertheless remains a major obstacle to bilateral relations. It then follows that we must deal with the Hasina question more unemotionally. There is little doubt that New Delhi will not send Hasina back to Dhaka to be put to death, and rightly so. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that she must continue to be in New Delhi, complicating our relations with Dhaka. Why not consider negotiating asylum for her with friendly Gulf or European nations, who have no direct stake in Bangladesh as we do, a solution she deserves and one that could diffuse the current bilateral impasse?

Three, we should continue to insist that the Awami League should be allowed to participate in the February elections. But if an election without Awami League in it leads to a new government in Dhaka, which is a likely outcome, New Delhi must engage it, nevertheless. Should Bangladesh conduct a sham election, the onus would be on them, not on us. We need not take the responsibility for what Bangladesh does with its own democracy or its domestic politics: Our engagement must be guided by our national interests. While a genuinely democratic Bangladesh serves our interest, national security imperatives should always take precedence. Therefore, concerns over Bangladesh’s internal politics must not complicate the pursuit of our more vital national interests.

Four, the India-Bangladesh relationship has been over-politicised since Hasina’s ouster; perhaps the solution lies in depoliticising it and re-framing it purely within a sharply national security framework. In that sense, the November meeting between India’s NSA Ajit Doval and Bangladesh’s NSA Khairul Rehman in New Delhi on the sidelines of the Colombo Security Conclave is significant and is a useful road ahead.

Finally, our approach to Bangladesh must be framed within the larger regional geopolitical context, which unfortunately is unfavourable to India today. We should not allow our relationship with Dhaka to further poison this already adverse regional dynamic. Therefore, a patient hearing of Dhaka’s complaints is a small price to pay if it helps diffuse the strength of the China-Pakistan-Bangladesh axis on India’s doorstep.

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{ ANTHONY ALBANESE } PRIME MINISTER, AUSTRALIA



There are organised rallies seeking to sow division after the anti-Semitic terrorist attack ... they have no place in Australia

On calls for anti-immigration rallies in the country



Vande Mataram: A nod to culture, not theology

There are moments in a nation’s life when its identity is not merely argued or legislated into being but sung into presence. The creation of *Vande Mataram* was one such moment in India’s awakening, when *Anandamath* offered the country a divine feminine form through which to imagine itself. This must be read within a global moment when nationalism was being shaped and contested. Against this backdrop, India articulated a uniquely civilisational variant rooted in cultural memory rather than territorial assertion. Indian nationalism has always been plural and metaphorical, shaped as much by political movements as by lyrical, devotional utterances. *Vande Mataram* is a cultural gesture that condensed into two words the emotional grammar of a civilisation seeking freedom not only from colonial rule but from internal diminishment. Yet, a century and a half after Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay composed it, Independent India finds itself returning to debates that the freedom struggle had already settled.

When sections of today’s political class refuse to stand with the symbolism of *Vande Mataram*, framing their objection in doctrinal terms, they inadvertently echo the anxieties of pre-Independence communal politics. The irony is stark. Those who claim to defend pluralism repeat arguments once advanced by the colonial state and amplified by the Muslim League, presenting indigenous metaphors as divisive.

India’s nationalism is unlike the French model of State-forged citizenship or the ethnic nationalisms of Europe. Its animating impulse is civilisational memory with a recognition that people belonging to multiple religions, languages, and lifeworlds can be bound by a shared cultural sensibility. This capaciousness enabled Tagore’s universalism, Aurobindo’s mysticism, Gandhi’s ethical politics and Ambedkar’s constitutional imagination to coexist within one intellectual horizon.

In this milieu, *Vande Mataram* emerges as an invocation rather than a command. The mother it salutes is not a theological deity but a metaphor for land, nurture and belonging. Bankim’s imagery springs from the Shakta tradition but is equally shaped by Bengal’s syncretic cultural world, where Islamic, Vaishnava and Shakta sensibilities met with ease. Calling this “idolatry” imposes a rigid lens alien to Indic devotional logic. This is an error that Muslim revolutionaries such as Ashfaqullah Khan or Shafi Imam did not make. They heard in the song a call to a shared national purpose.

The Congress decision in 1937 to limit the song to two stanzas, later cast as secular sensitivity, was in reality a tactical accommodation



Shubhrajshtha

to the League in a fragile political moment. It marked the beginning of a mode of secularism defined by self-erasure rather than confident inclusiveness. Over time, this defensiveness hardened, leading to this strange moment where a party that once proudly sang *Vande Mataram* now hesitates to defend it.

What stands out in the present controversy is how certain opposition parties echo the League’s old logic that symbols embedded in Hindu cultural experience are inherently exclusionary. This view misconceives a civilisation where traditions have always flowed into one another. By reviving colonial categories that divided Indians into rigid theological compartments, such objections misread both history and the nation’s cultural terrain.

Vande Mataram’s divinity is metaphorical, maternal and ecological — the land as giver and witness. Such imagery permeates Sufi poetry, Bhakti traditions, and Sikh scripture. To read the song literally is to flatten a civilisation’s symbolic richness. India’s spiritual traditions have always blurred the boundary between sacred and civic. Freedom struggle drew strength from this porousness. Gandhi’s *Ramrajya* was ethical, not sectarian. Tagore’s *Bharat Tirtha* imagined a confluence of cultures. Nehru saw the Ganga as both river and idea. *Vande Mataram* fits naturally into this lineage of

belonging. This is why the current moment offers an opportunity for intellectual recovery, not triumphalism. Bringing the song’s 150-year legacy back into conversation is a reminder that national symbols should not be reduced to partisan markers. The opposition must recognise that reflexive contrarianism is not principle. In distancing itself from *Vande Mataram*, it distances itself from the very cultural inheritance that shaped India’s plural republic.

If India is to uphold a nationalism worthy of its civilisational heritage, it must acknowledge the spiritual and literary foundations of its freedom struggle, nurture symbols that weave community rather than fracture it, and trust the plural instincts of its people more than the insecurities of its politics. *Vande Mataram* need not be sung by all, but it deserves to be understood and respected as a vision of the motherland as ideal. Defending the song is not diminishing any community but defending the imagination that enabled India’s diverse peoples to dream together.

A mature republic must step beyond inherited shadows. Recovering the essence of *Vande Mataram* is remembering what we aspired to become.

Shubhrajshtha is co-author of *The Last Battle of Saraighat: The Story of the BJP’s Rise in the North-east*. The views expressed are personal

● POLICY

In push for drug data exclusivity, pharma industry sees a bitter pill

Anonna Dutt
New Delhi, December 21

THE INDIAN government appears to be considering implementing “data exclusivity” in the pharmaceutical drugs sector after rejecting demands for the provision during trade deal negotiations with the UK and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

The lack of a data exclusivity provision is what has given India’s pharmaceutical industry, which thrives on marketing cheaper generics, its edge in the global market.

In recent weeks, government officials have held a flurry of meetings with pharmaceutical industry stakeholders to discuss ways in which data exclusivity may be implemented. The government’s potential change in approach appears to be driven by the expectation that the provision could help bring in additional investment in the country.

How data exclusivity works

When a company develops a new drug, it must submit clinical trial data demonstrating safety and efficacy to regulators. The regulator may use this data to approve another company’s generic version on the basis of the much less resource-intensive bio-equivalence studies, which demonstrate that the generic version works just as well. The generic manufacturer can then start marketing its drugs on the date the original company’s patent ends.

Here’s where data exclusivity comes in. This provision grants innovator pharmaceutical companies exclusive rights over the clinical trial data, meaning a regulator can’t use it to approve subsequent generic versions during this period. So, generic drug companies have to either wait until the exclusivity expires or carry out expensive clinical trials themselves.

Data exclusivity, which protects trial data, works hand-in-hand with patents, which protect the invention itself, to protect the interests of an innovator company.

GLOBAL EDGE BUILT ON GENERIC DRUGS

- Govt officials and pharma industry stakeholders have recently held meetings about how to implement the data exclusivity provision.
- While data exclusivity will protect the interests of innovator companies, critics have raised questions about implications for generic drug manufacturers.
- India’s pharma industry is built on cheap, generic drugs that are marketed globally.

Commerce Ministry did not respond to a request for comment. The Health Ministry said in its response: “There is no such proposal to bring in data exclusivity from this ministry’s end.”

Pharma firms fear impact

“If implemented, data exclusivity provisions can delay the entry of generic versions of new drugs beyond their patent expiry — taking away the edge of the Indian generics industry in the global market and delaying access to cheaper medicines,” said an expert aware of the discussions.

Another industry expert said: “Almost 90% of Indian pharmaceutical companies manufacture generic drugs, they do not invest in developing new ones.”

“There is no international obligation to implement this. The EFTA deal does say there should be a discussion on data exclusivity after one year but it doesn’t require India to implement it,” said an expert who works on access to affordable medicines.

Countries usually have a data exclusivity period of six or ten years. And patent protections are granted for 20 years. But a concern is that off-patent drugs can be protected by data exclusivity. “In a scenario where the originator company starts marketing its product, say, in the seventh year of the patent, data exclusivity is fine because patent protection will last beyond that. But if a company starts marketing the product in the seventeenth year of patent, then data exclusivity ensures they are able to exclusively market the product for several years after the patent expiry as well,” the first expert quoted above said.

‘Level playing field’

Before the series of meetings, the country’s apex drug regulator, Central Drugs Standard Control Organization, issued a notice in October. It said that for approval of a new drug, one company conducts rigorous trials while others submit the results of bioequivalence trials and get approval. It called for initiating discussions to “ensure a level playing field”.

● ECONOMY

GDP is growing rapidly. Why isn’t private capex?



SIDDHARTH UPASANI

IN SEPTEMBER 2022, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman called on India Inc at an industry summit to put money into expanding their capacities, asking “what’s stopping you” from investing. That quarter, India’s real GDP growth rate more than halved to 6.3% — now revised to 6% — after the post-Covid favourable base effect continued to fade away.

Three years later, the GDP has grown by 8.2% in the same three-month period. And yet, a big question mark remains over the state of investments by the private sector. This is not a recent problem, according to Jahangir Aziz, JP Morgan’s Head of Emerging Markets Economic Research.

“Since 2011-12, private corporate investment has flatlined at around 12% of GDP. There are small quarterly variations, but it has not broken out of the 12% of GDP range. Over these 15 years, you’ve had numerous global and local shocks. The only thing that has remained constant is private investment in 12% of GDP range,” Aziz told *The Indian Express* earlier this month.

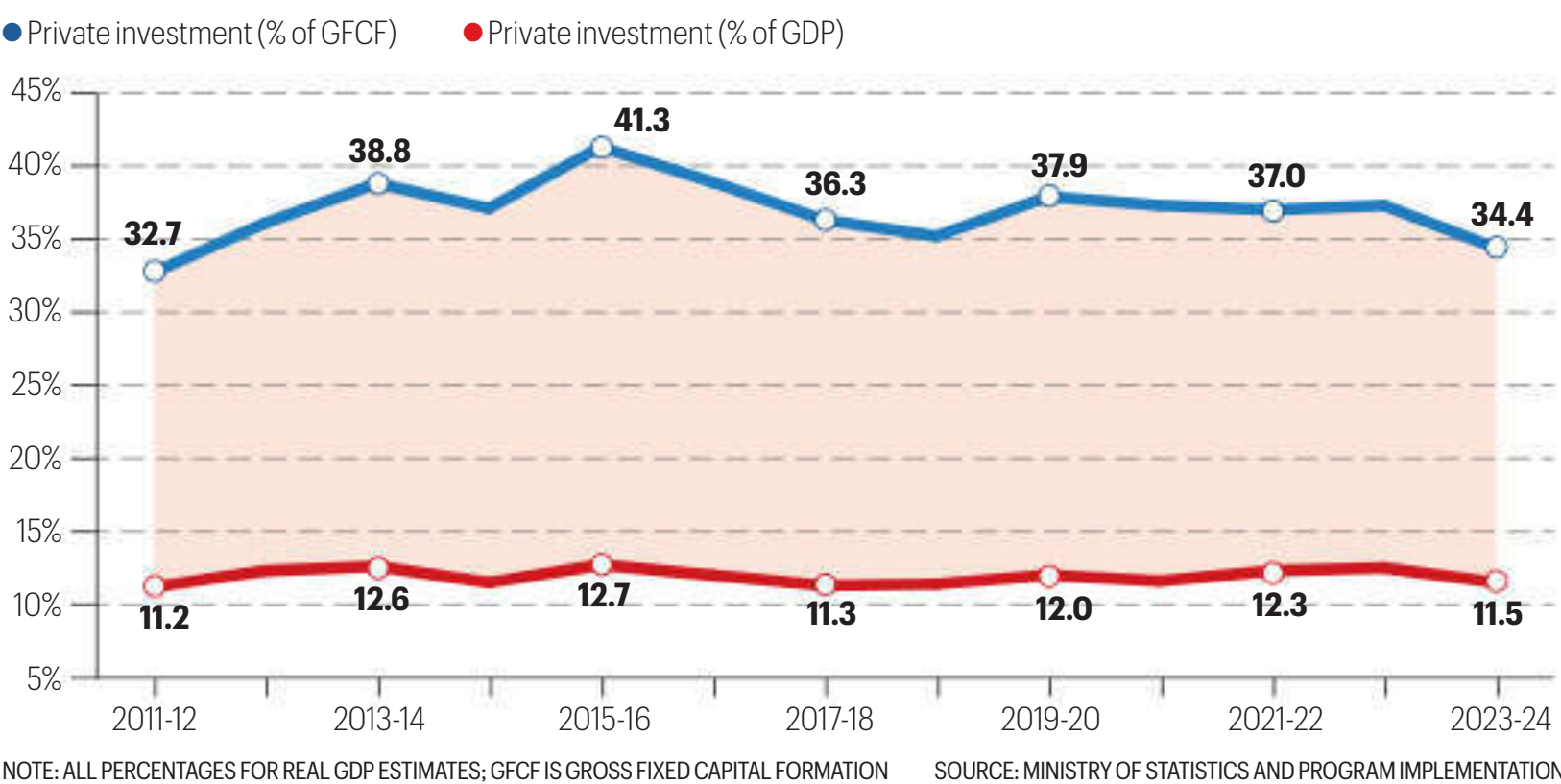
Mixed signals

It’s not just that private capital expenditure has been stuck at around 12% of GDP for more than a decade. Of the total investments in the country, or Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF), private capex’s share declined to 34.4% in 2023-24 — the lowest since 32.7% in 2011-12. As a percentage of GDP, while GFCF as a whole has risen from under 31% in 2016-17, at 33.7% in 2024-25 it was still lower than the 34%-plus figures seen at the start of the last decade.

Despite the stagnant picture painted by these numbers, why are green shoots constantly seen in private capex? The answer lies in the absence of an all-encompassing, irrefutable data.

According to CareEdge Ratings, the total capex of nearly 2,000 listed non-financial

● STAGNATING PRIVATE INVESTMENTS IN INDIA



companies rose 11% in 2024-25 to Rs 9.4 trillion, after adjusting for overseas investments and acquisitions. Meanwhile, Bank of Baroda economists say that balance sheets of more than 4,500 companies show that total gross fixed assets were up 8.5% year-on-year as at the end of September 2025.

At the same time, the Statistics Ministry’s new private capex survey shows investment intentions for 2025-26 amounted to Rs 4.89 lakh crore, down 26% from 2024-25. But the survey has too many caveats to be taken at face value. It covered only large enterprises, with 29% of those surveyed not reporting any capex intentions for this fiscal due to various reasons, including pending approvals.

Another frequently-used measure of private capex is project announcements. According to investment monitoring firm Projects Today, the private sector’s share in fresh projects in the first half of 2025-26 rose to 70.8% from 61.3% in the previous six months as their new investment plans rose 41% to Rs 24 lakh crore. But not all announcements result in actual investment.

Then there is the informal sector, for which capex data is even more difficult to pinpoint. But the Statistics Ministry’s Annual Survey of Unincorporated Enterprises

Private, limited

Private capital expenditure has been stuck at around 12% of GDP for more than a decade.

- For private sector, current facilities are more than enough to meet demand. They also face challenges such as high costs.

● WILDLIFE

Curbing elephant deaths on tracks needs blend of infra, tech

Arjun Sengupta
New Delhi, December 21

THE DELHI-BOUND Rajdhani Express collided with a herd of elephants in Assam’s Hojai district in the early hours of Saturday, killing seven of them.

Elephant deaths in train hits

In India, home to over half the 52,000-strong population of the endangered Asian elephant, collision with trains is a leading cause of elephant mortality.

Between 2010 and 2020, a whopping 1,160 elephants were killed in the country due to non-natural causes, according to data from the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), with train hits (186 deaths) the second largest killer after electrocution (741 deaths). Even electrocution is frequently caused by the high-voltage overhead line equipment used to power trains.

Apart from directly killing elephants, linear transport infrastructure (LTI) like railways, road networks, or human-made canals cutting through elephant habitat also exerts pressures on elephant populations. For instance, railway lines may trap a herd in a small section of the forest, limiting its access to food and water.

A 2017 study found that train-elephant



Track restoration work underway in Assam’s Hojai district on Saturday after a train mowed down seven elephants. ANI

collisions occurred more frequently at night, with males disproportionately affected since they were more likely to cross the tracks more often to embark on crop raiding during harvest season.

Crossings key

The ‘Handbook to Mitigate the Impacts of Roads and Railways on Asian Elephants’, published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN’s) Asian Elephant Transport Working Group in

Use of AI warnings

- The Railways has deployed AI-based early warning systems in multiple places, although these are yet to be adopted widely.
- In a pioneering initiative, the North-east Frontier Railway in 2023 began using AI-based warning systems to proactively observe wild elephants and safeguard them from train collisions.
- A similar system was introduced in the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border in 2024. The early results of these initiatives have been promising.

2023, provides a comprehensive set of guidelines to mitigate risks of LTI.

The handbook begins by saying that “avoidance”, that is consciously designing infrastructure so it does not pass through or near elephant habitats or migration pathways, is much more effective than any mitigation measure. But since avoiding habitats altogether is often unviable, development planners must take all mitigation measures available. The foremost is to construct well-designed and -conceptualised wildlife crossing structures.

“Wildlife crossing structures are typically the cornerstone of successful strategies to minimise the impact of roads and railways on wildlife... When used together with wildlife fencing, wildlife crossing structures dramatically reduce the incidence of wildlife mortality by as much as 98%,” the handbook states.

Crossing structures can either be underpasses, where wildlife travels underneath the LTI (under bridges, flyovers), or overpasses, where wildlife travels over the LTI (over natural or human-made tunnels). The preference for a particular kind of crossing depends on the terrain and behaviour of wildlife in the area. But the key is for crossing structures to prioritise openness so that elephants don’t feel confined and choose to not use the structure.

Where these structures are built (and how many) is equally important: the movement patterns of elephants must be studied thoroughly. Camera trapping and GPS telemetry are popular methods to study the movement of pachyderms today.

This data can also be used to construct fencing along critical areas. Fencing not only prevents animals from spilling onto train tracks but can also be used to shepherd them to crossings.

Harnessing technology

While avoidance and structural mitigation is key, recent technological developments have opened the door for other effective measures, specifically, early-warning systems for train operators.

Sensor-technology can be locomotive- or ground-based. The former usually comprises Forward Looking Infrared cameras, which can help detect obstructions on a track at ranges of up to 750 m, regardless of visibility. Ground-based systems, comprising cameras and acoustic or seismic sensors, can be installed at frequent crossing locations.

In the past, the constraints of such technology has been the amount of data these sensors and cameras generate, which need careful analysis. But with machine learning and artificial intelligence, the efficacy of such technologies increases manifold.

● CULTURE

Is DEI squeezing out young white men in US? A new article is latest lightning rod

Bhaskar Sarma
New Delhi, December 21

LAST WEEK, an article by Jacob Savage in Compact magazine reignited that quintessential American cultural debate over representation, framing it this time in the following terms — diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices, institutionalised in the US in 2014, have systematically excluded young-ish, white American men from academia and jobs.

The debate over the alienation of young men, not just in the US but worldwide, is not new. Savage’s ‘The Lost Generation’ cites a number of percentage figures, along with anecdotes, to underscore the argument of exclusion in the context of a few specific “prestige” sectors such as journalism, academia, and television and film.

But he goes beyond this to make his larger, central claim: “Abandoning meritocracy” has accelerated the “decline” of such industries.

In the aftermath of the publication, major figures on the American Right cited the article as a validation of the current ad-

ministration’s stance against DEI.

US Vice President J D Vance posted on X: “A lot of people think ‘DEI’ is lame diversity seminars or racial slogans at NFL games. In reality, it was a deliberate program of discrimination primarily against white men. This is an incredible piece that describes the evil of DEI and its consequences.”

Donald Trump Jr, the son of the US president, reposted this with emojis indicating his support for Vance’s sentiment.

Here’s a look at some of the key numbers the article cites for the industries it touches upon:

US newsrooms

Savage says major news outlets, including *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, became majority female by 2019. And, after 2020, he says, hiring practices continued to favour women and people of colour. Some examples he cites: The Atlantic’s staff went from 53% male and 89% white in 2013 to 36% male and 66% white in 2024; ProPublica hired 66% women and 58% people of colour in 2021; 78% of NPR’s

new hires in 2021 were people of colour.

Academia

Savage says academia pipelines have excluded white male millennials. He says that despite stable or only slightly declining PhD production, tenure-track hiring of white men fell sharply after 2014. At several elite universities, DEI statements were used as screening tools. One of the many examples he cites: White men fell from 39% of tenure-track positions in humanities at Harvard in 2014 to 18% in 2023.

Television

Savage cites data to show that white men made up around 60% of television writers in 2011. By 2024–25, he says, white men accounted for 12% of lower-level TV writers. He also cites some anecdotes of discouraged white men leaving the industry.

Tech

In Google, white men fell from nearly half the workforce in 2014 to less than a third by 2024. Amazon mid-level managers dropped from 55.8% white men in 2014 to



The article, ‘The Lost Generation’, says DEI statements were used as screening tools at many elite universities. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

33.8% in 2024, says the article.

Other sectors

“White men dropped from 31.2% of law school matriculants in 2016 to 25.7% in

2024. In 2014, white men were 31% of American medical students. By 2025, they were just 20.5%,” says the article.

Reigniting the debate

Savage says DEI practices have left old, white men at the top untouched while hurting young white men seeking entry-level positions. He insists that he does not blame women and people of colour who got opportunities, and that it is the old-white-male group which is responsible for the state of affairs.

This is not the first time Savage has written about the “vanishing” of a certain cohort. Two of his previous articles, one for Compact magazine and the other for Tablet magazine, argue that male white writers and Jewish people, respectively, are disappearing from public life.

Critics have raised questions over the data Savage cites, especially with regard to his focus areas of arts and media. An article by People’s Policy Project, a US-based think tank, uses census data to show that the percentage of white men employed in “arts, design, entertainment, sports and media”

was higher than other groups. It also said, citing census data, that overall employment of white men in their thirties is up during the 2014-2024 period. At both Amazon and Google, white men make up the biggest cohort in the overall workforce, according to their diversity reports from 2024.

Savage’s invocation of the term “discrimination” comes amid the backdrop of a history of slavery, segregation and discrimination against Black people, in a country where the white majority has long held the keys to power and racism continues to play out across society.

Savage’s central argument is that DEI “gutted” American “meritocracy” and has led to institutional declines — of trust in the media, quality in film and television, and respect for academia. The article comes at a time when US President Donald Trump has issued a series of executive orders targeting DEI programmes in the public and private sectors. ‘The Lost Generation’ has become the latest lightning rod for the fractious debate in the US over diversity, a debate that appears far from over.



GURMEET SINGH/FILE
Capacity utilisation in manufacturing sector has struggled to break past the 75% mark.

tells us that the fixed assets owned by each enterprise rose just 1.9% in the 12 months ending September 2024.

Capacity expansion

If the overall picture is somewhat muddled, the following should offer some clarity. A study published this month by R Kavita Rao and Suranjali Tandon of New Delhi-based think-tank National Institute of Public Finance and Policy said data suggests that while the corporate tax cut of September 2019 increased companies’ surplus, the money was not invested in plant, machinery and other physical assets.

“In the case of BSE 500 companies there is an increase in the share of financial (long term and short assets) investments in total assets over the last decade, more so after 2023. In fact, in 2025 a quarter of the assets were financial investments for these companies,” the study said.

Not only have companies chosen to sit on cash or invest financially, they have also sought to cut down their debt.

According to Bank of Baroda economists, the interest coverage ratio of more than 3,000 companies — excluding those from the financial sector — has more than

doubled to 5.97 in the first half of 2025-26 from 2.6 in the same period of 2020-21. The higher the interest coverage ratio, the better the financial health of a company.

So why isn’t the private sector investing in more production capacity? Because they don’t see the need to, as current facilities are more than sufficient to meet demand.

According to a RBI survey, capacity utilisation in manufacturing sector has struggled to break past 75% — widely seen as the level that must be crossed on a sustained basis for firms to invest. In the 53 quarters since the start of 2012-13, capacity utilisation has exceeded 75% on just 10 occasions.

In its most recent manufacturing survey for October-December 2024, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry noted several challenges to private sector investments. These included rising raw material costs, high interest rates, expectations of weak domestic and export demand, lengthy approval processes, non-tariff barriers, limited access to advanced machinery, high land prices and competitive pressures from countries benefiting from trade advantages. While interest rates have fallen over the course of 2025, other challenges remain.

Tearing hurry, no debate weaken new job bill

NEITHER PRIME Minister Narendra Modi nor the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, were present — both were abroad — when the VB-G RAM G Bill was passed last week in Parliament by voice vote. The Modi government didn't deem it necessary to send the Bill, which repeals and replaces the two-decade-old MGNREGA, to a standing committee for detailed scrutiny and for inviting public/expert opinions before its final passage. Why it did not, while referring two other bills (one to establish an apex regulatory body for higher education and the other to enact a unified Securities Market Code) to the concerned House committees, is inexplicable. Given that the MGNREGA provides wage employment to nearly 6 crore rural households for an average of 50 days a year, any law seeking to scrap or overhaul it is surely worthy of informed debate and deliberation. What was the tearing hurry to push through the Bill?

The MGNREGA was the flagship programme of the previous Congress-led UPA regime. But the Modi government can take credit for streamlining it to ensure that the money spent reached the intended beneficiaries, whether through seeding their Aadhaar-linked bank accounts with the NREGA Soft MIS platform or geo-tagging of the assets created. During the Covid years of 2020-21 and 2021-22, the MGNREGA generated 389.09 crore and 363.19 crore person-days of employment, with the total households working, too, reaching a record 755 crore and 725 crore respectively. The scheme, thus, delivered most when it mattered — and under the present government. Also, unlike, say, the farm laws, this is a programme that has lent itself to bipartisan support. Any proposed legislation to reform or improve it would have encountered little political rift. By steamrolling the VB-G RAM G Bill through both Houses, the Modi government has repeated its mistake vis-à-vis the farm bills — they were also not referred to the parliamentary standing committee.

The Bill that has been passed has provisions that constitute significant departures from the MGNREGA. The latter was demand-driven and could be availed by any household whose members sought to do manual work for up to 100 days a year, with the Centre footing the entire wage bill and three-fourths of the material cost. But now, the Centre will determine the “normative allocation” of funds for each state, making it a supply-from-above rather than a demand-from-below scheme. The Centre deciding how much each state gets also opens up the possibility of playing favourites based on political calculations. Further, the Centre will cover only 60 per cent of the scheme's cost, putting an additional burden on already fiscally constrained states. All these are serious issues that deserved more public consultation and greater legislative oversight.

Country No 1 on doping list must clean up

FOR THE third consecutive year, India has topped the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) global list of offenders. With 260 positive cases in 2024, India is the only nation to hit triple digits, surpassing countries with far more rigorous testing regimes like China, Germany and France. This is not just a statistical anomaly; it is a systemic failure that threatens to impact India's ambitious bid for the 2036 Olympics.

The root of the menace lies in a toxic mix — unscrupulous coaches looking for quick success, athletes taking shortcuts and lacunae in anti-doping education. In India, sports are often viewed as a ladder to escape poverty. A national or international medal can secure a coveted government job, often in the police or armed forces. This medal-at-all-costs mentality plays into the hands of those supplying performance-enhancing substances. Reports of athletes fleeing the field of play at the Khelo India University Games earlier this month to avoid testing is a damning indictment but increasingly a commonplace spectacle at junior and state meets. It suggests that doping is not limited to the elite; it has reached into the junior and collegiate levels. As the incidents rise, the integrity of the nation's sporting foundation is being called into question. This is disquieting, and more so given that track and field, weightlifting and wrestling — India's traditional strongholds — account for the bulk of the doping cases.

While the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) argues that higher numbers are a result of “intensified testing”, the maths tell a different story. India's positivity rate (3.6 per cent) is nearly 18 times that of China (0.2 per cent), which conducts three times as many tests. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has already flagged this disparity, telling Indian delegates to get their house in order before pitching for the 2036 Games. A country that cannot police its own athletes will struggle to convince the world it can host a clean global event. Testing alone isn't a remedy. India needs to proactively educate athletes about not just the sporting implications, but also the health consequences of doping. NADA has increased its awareness programmes and the impact of the twin steps — rigorous testing and wider outreach — is visible. The preliminary data for 2025 has shown a drop to a 1.5 per cent positivity rate (110 offenders out of 7,068 tests). It offers a glimmer of hope. However, sustained efforts will be needed for this to be a genuine turning point rather than a temporary dip.

FREEZE FRAME BY EP UNNY



The Editorial Page

We saw the IndiGo meltdown. Now let's see the aviation sector's restructuring

THE DIRECTORATE General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) first proposed the new FDTL (Flight Duty Time Limitations) in January 2024 to give adequate rest to pilots in the interest of passenger safety. IndiGo ignored the notification and, using political clout, took no action to recruit or train new pilots or even adjust the schedules to comply with the new safety requirements. Pilot complaints were ignored, allegations of monopoly abuse emerged. Pilots filed cases in courts. However, the regulator continued to relax regulations specifically for IndiGo. On December 5, over 1,000 IndiGo flights had to be cancelled. Thousands of passengers were stranded across India. After several postponements to favour IndiGo, under court orders, the DGCA finally decided to implement the new FDTL rules from July 1 and November 1, two years after they were first proposed.

Minister Ram Mohan Naidu said India would require about 30,000 new pilots over the next 15 years. On November 25, Adani Defence Systems and Prime Aero Services acquired a majority stake in the Flight Simulation Technique Centre (FSTC), giving the Adani Group significant control over India's pilot-training ecosystem. Five days later, on December 1, we witnessed the IndiGo meltdown. Is there a connection?

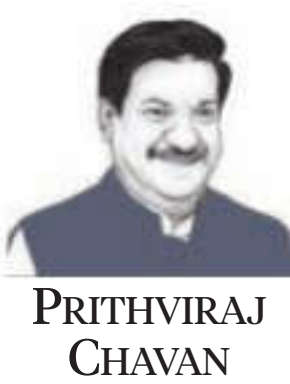
Today IndiGo controls 65 per cent of the Indian aviation market, while the Tatas (Air India) have less than 30 per cent market share. In 2004, there were 4 crore annual passengers and eight airlines. In 2025, passengers rose to 40 crore, with only two major airlines. This represents a classic case of regulatory capture where the regulator ensures private profit instead of public interest.

What is the experience in other developed markets? We do not have to look far.

The recent Southwest Airlines crisis in the US is a good case study. It began around December 21, 2022, when a severe winter storm hit large parts of western and central US. In the next few days, between December 26 to 28, over 5,500 Southwest flights were cancelled. In all, Southwest ended up cancelling over 16,000 flights, the largest such disruption in US aviation history. Nearly 2 million passengers were stranded. While the winter storm triggered the initial disruption, deeper structural and operational weaknesses made it into a full-blown meltdown.

Southwest used an old, inflexible system for rostering and managing flights. It could not handle cascading disruptions. Once the system got out of sync, the manual processes that took over could not cope. Internal warnings by the pilots' union had emphasised that the systems were “outdated” and vulnerable. But the warnings were ignored. The crisis triggered investigations by a Senate Committee. After a year of investigation, in December 2023, the US Department of Transportation (DOT) fined Southwest \$140 million, the largest consumer-protection penalty ever levied on a US airline. In addition to the fine, Southwest had to reimburse over \$600 million. The airline estimated total losses, both direct and indirect, to be nearly \$1 billion. Southwest re-evaluated its systems and committed to major resilience-focused upgrades. By early 2025, it had regained its strong on-time performance, and claimed a return to reliable service. The 2022 Southwest Airlines meltdown remains a classic example of how fragile operational systems turned an ordinary weather event into a nationwide catastrophe.

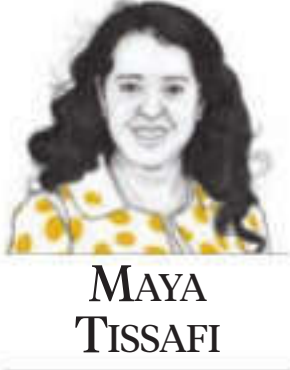
So what should be done about



PRITHVIRAJ CHAVAN

The 2022 Southwest Airlines meltdown remains a classic example of how fragile operational systems turned an ordinary weather event into a nationwide catastrophe

Delhi & Geneva are shaping an AI future based on trust



MAYA TISSAIFI

INDIA HAS emerged as one of the world's leading AI nations, combining technological capability with an inclusive vision of digital transformation. Its decision to host the AI Impact Summit 2026 places it at the centre of the conversation at a moment when leadership grounded in responsibility is urgently needed. As Switzerland's Ambassador to India, I have witnessed the remarkable convergence of our two countries' approaches to AI — not as a race for dominance, but as a shared responsibility to steward a powerful technology. Both recognise that AI's long-term success depends not only on innovation, but on trust.

Switzerland brings to this partnership a distinct set of strengths that are increasingly critical in the age of AI: World-class scientific research, a dense innovation ecosystem, a multilingual and multicultural society, and consensus-based governance. These assets make Switzerland not only a reliable partner, but a credible and forward-looking location for the development and governance of AI.

AI is reshaping economies, security architectures, public services, democratic processes and everyday life. It can accelerate development and expand opportunity — or deepen inequalities, erode trust and exacerbate geopolitical tensions. Global cooperation is, therefore, essential.

For AI to fulfil its promise, technological progress must go hand in hand with clear governance, transparency and public confidence. Performance alone cannot guarantee legitimacy. Trust emerges when governments, companies, researchers, civil society and affected communities shape decisions together. India has played a pioneering role in amplifying voices that are too often under-represented, ensuring that the AI revolution does not replicate historical patterns of exclusion. This inclusive approach is a cornerstone of India's global leadership.

Switzerland is honoured to support India's vision for the AI Impact Summit 2026. Our shared objective is clear: AI must be safe, innovative, open and inclusive. At the summit, Switzerland will co-chair the working group Inclusion for Social Empowerment, focusing on inclusive, multilingual and culturally grounded AI that empowers marginalised communities. Switzerland participates in this effort

Switzerland is honoured to support India's vision for the AI Impact Summit 2026. Our shared objective is clear: AI must be safe, innovative, open and inclusive

with commitment, resources and expertise. Institutions such as ETH Zurich and EPF Lausanne rank among the world's leading centres for AI research, closely connected to innovative companies active in machine learning, robotics, health technologies and language models. Switzerland consistently ranks at the top of global innovation indices, reflecting a system where research excellence, entrepreneurship and public trust reinforce one another.

The strength of Switzerland's AI ecosystem lies not in scale, but in coherence. Researchers, industry, regulators and international organisations operate closely together, allowing ideas to move efficiently from laboratory to application, and from innovation to governance. Switzerland's multilingual reality is an asset, reflected in pioneering initiatives such as Apertus, an open-source multilingual AI model trained on curated and verified data. Most importantly, Switzerland offers an environment where AI governance can evolve alongside innovation. As a global hub where diplomacy, humanitarian action, science, law and economics intersect, the “International Geneva” provides a unique space where complex technological questions can be translated into durable norms and practical rules. India and Switzerland are, therefore, natural partners. Both understand that responsible AI does not hinder innovation, but enables it.

At the heart of this partnership lies a shared conviction: Trust in AI is not built through technical specifications alone, but through transparent processes, meaningful accountability mechanisms and governance structures that reflect society's diversity.

Switzerland is committed to working alongside India and all partners to ensure AI serves human dignity, prosperity and social progress. As India prepares to lead the global AI conversation in 2026, the path beyond already begins to take shape. Switzerland is ready to help carry this momentum forward — by translating our shared values into standards, tools and partnerships that endure. This would be the next step in our joint efforts to shape an AI future worthy of our highest aspirations. Switzerland is proud to walk this path with India.

The writer is Ambassador of Switzerland to India and Bhutan



KAUSAR JAHAN

In West Asia, India's diplomacy has delivered dramatic gains

WHEN INDIA signed a landmark economic partnership agreement with Oman on December 18, it signalled how decisively India's Middle East policy has been transformed under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Offering zero-duty access on over 98 per cent of its tariff lines for Indian exports, Oman has entered its first bilateral trade agreement since 2006.

This shift is the result of sustained political entrepreneurship, strategic clarity, and diplomatic energy displayed by PM Modi since 2014. He connected the region to India's larger civilisational, economic, and strategic canvas. The “Think West” policy became a defining feature of India's foreign relations. Engagement expanded beyond the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to include Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and North African and African Muslim-majority countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Ethiopia. This outreach capitalised on a shifting Arab perception of India's economic strength and rising global stature.

India's share in GCC trade rose from 3 per cent in 1992 to 11 per cent by 2012, and has accelerated further over the past decade. By 2020, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were India's third- and fourth-largest trading partners. In 2023-24, India's trade with the GCC touched \$184 billion, while FDI from Gulf countries crossed \$20 billion. This economic deepening has gone hand in hand with strategic realism. The Modi government has been forthright about concerns over China's expanding naval and port footprint in the region. In response, India has positioned itself as a net security provider — deploying naval assets to protect sea lanes from piracy and missile threats, while conducting joint military exercises with partners such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

What distinguishes Modi's West Asia policy is the centrality of personal diplomacy. No Indian leader has invested as much time or political capital in the region. Modi has visited nine Middle Eastern states since 2014, more than his four predecessors combined. This goodwill has delivered tangible outcomes, whether in the de-hyphenation of India and Pakistan in Gulf diplomacy, the toning down of criticism over Kashmir, or the release of Indian naval veterans from Qatar through leader-level engagement. India's diaspora has also benefited. Their safety, dignity, and welfare have become integral to India's regional diplomacy, reinforcing the mutual dependence between India and the Arab world.

Perhaps the most striking change is political. Countries that once viewed India through the prism of Pakistan — such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE — now see New Delhi as a long-term strategic partner. Investments announced soon after India's 2019 Kashmir decision, and the UAE declaring that it viewed the matter as India's internal affair, reflected a shift in regional calculations.

India today is not neglected by any Persian Gulf state. It is courted, respected, and trusted. Few of India's external relationships have changed so dramatically in such a short time. That transformation bears the unmistakable imprint of PM Modi's leadership — and it has firmly placed India at the heart of West Asia's evolving strategic landscape.

Countries that once viewed India through the prism of Pakistan — such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE — now see New Delhi as a long-term strategic partner

The writer is chairperson of the Delhi State Hajj Committee and a member of the BJP

40 YEARS AGO

December 22, 1985



Mahanta likely to be CM

The president of the Asom Gana Parishad, Prafulla Mahanta, is almost certain to be elected leader of the party in the state assembly to head the government in Assam. The party, which commands an absolute majority in the 126-member assembly, has secured 64 seats. The AGP also won six of the 12 Lok Sabha seats declared so far.

Winnie Mandela detained

The police dragged Winnie Mandela, wife of the jailed African National Congress leader

Nelson Mandela, from her home in Soweto and drove her to a hotel outside Johannesburg. The police said her exile to the remote town of Brandfort was cancelled, but she was barred from Johannesburg.

VP Singh on tax raids

The Finance Minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, offered to consider changes in tax laws to remove difficulties in their implementation but was against any let-up in recent tax raids on denialists and businessmen. Singh denied that only industrialists and businessmen who were un-

friendly to the government were being proceeded against.

Sri Lanka massacre

Over 100 Tamils were feared killed in firing by Sri Lankan security forces from helicopters in several parts of northern Jaffna, according to the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front. It said the casualty figure was a “conservative estimate” as the security forces fired at the civilians from 15 helicopters and dropped bombs. The Jaffna hospital was overcrowded with many injured people admitted, it said.



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Reforming the fertiliser subsidy demands political courage, offers high rewards



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND
RITIKA JUNEJA



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi has initiated wide-ranging reforms. They involve income tax, GST, labour laws, insurance, and free trade agreements. Now, even the rural employment scheme is undergoing a churn. The idea is to sustain GDP growth above 7 per cent amid intensifying geopolitical risks, including US President Donald Trump’s tariff pressures. Yet, one crucial sector that has largely escaped reform is agriculture. Perhaps it is still constrained by the political aftershocks of the aborted farm laws. However, the exploding fertiliser subsidy, expected to touch Rs 2 lakh crore in a Union Budget of Rs 51 lakh crore in FY26, demands urgent attention. This is not a call to withdraw support, but to reorient it in a meaningful way.

The fertiliser subsidy is the second-largest item in the Union budget, next only to the food subsidy — its allocation is more than the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare allocation of Rs 1.37 lakh crore in FY26. Its rapid increase reflects rising fertiliser consumption and escalating input costs, amplified by India’s heavy import dependence — around 78 per cent for natural gas that goes into urea production, nearly 90 per cent for phosphatic fertilisers (raw materials or finished products), and total reliance on imports for potash. Given the volatility in energy prices and commodity markets, this makes the subsidy fiscally precarious and geopolitically vulnerable.

Urea sits at the heart of this distortion. Nearly two-thirds of the fertiliser subsidy goes to urea, sold at a fixed price of Rs 242 per

45-kg bag — among the cheapest globally. In contrast, DAP and MOP prices have been de-controlled, and a fixed subsidy is given, linked to nutrient content rather than fixed retail prices under the Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) regime since 2010. This sharp price asymmetry skews farmer behaviour towards excessive urea use and under-application of phosphorus and potassium, undermining soil health and productivity.

The outcome is apparent in India’s nutrient-use profile. The N:P:K ratio has deteriorated to an alarming 10.9:4.4:1, far from the agronomically recommended 4:2:1. China offers a revealing counterpoint. With a smaller cropland base of 127.6 million hectares (mha) (arable land plus permanent crops), its agricultural gross value added (GVA) (including crops, livestock, forestry and fishing) was about \$1.27 trillion in 2023 (World Bank), supported by fertiliser application of roughly 373 kg/ha and a far more balanced N:P:K ratio of 2.6:1.1:1. India, despite having a much larger cropland (168.3 mha), recorded agri-GVA of only \$0.63 trillion — about half of China’s — with fertiliser consumption of 182 kg/ha. The agronomic consequences of distorted nutrient application are clearly reflected in India’s weaker productivity outcomes.

The agronomic fallout is visible across states. Punjab, often seen as India’s breadbasket, applies about 61 per cent more nitrogen than recommended, while underusing potassium by nearly 89 per cent and phosphorus by around 8 per cent,

A deregulated fertiliser market would spur innovation, improve efficiency, and restore correct price signals for balanced use of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium

relative to the state’s recommended doses. Excess nitrogen produces lush green fields, but without adequate phosphorus and potassium, yields plateau and grain quality suffers. The illusion of abundance masks declining productivity and rising costs.

The divergence is rooted in policy design. In China, the government gives an aggregate input subsidy on a per unit of land (mu) basis directly to farmers and lets the fertiliser prices be market-determined. It results in innovative products — over 60 per cent of fertiliser consumption is through complex fertilisers compared to just 17 per cent in India. This underscores the failure of the NBS scheme to steer farmers towards integrated nutrient management.

The efficiency costs are equally sobering. Nutrient use efficiency (NUE) is estimated at just 35–40 per cent, implying that a majority of applied fertiliser never reaches the crop. Much of the lost nitrogen either escapes into the atmosphere as nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas nearly 278 times more potent than carbon dioxide, or seeps into groundwater

as nitrate, making groundwater non-potable. Ironically, a subsidy meant to boost food production is now amplifying environmental damage and harming human health. Nationwide, the fertiliser-to-grain response ratio has fallen from about 1:10 in the 1970s to barely 1:2.7 by 2015 in irrigated areas, alongside declining soil organic carbon. Adding to this is leakage: An estimated 20–25 per cent of subsidised urea is diverted to non-

agricultural uses or smuggled across borders.

What, then, is the way forward? The best reform is to gradually dismantle price controls while protecting farmers through equivalent direct income support. A deregulated fertiliser market would spur innovation, improve efficiency, and restore correct price signals for balanced use of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Promoting micronutrients and soluble fertilisers through fertigation and customised blends would further enhance productivity. However, the main constraint lies in identifying tenant farmers, many of whom remain outside formal land records. This can be addressed through triangulation of agricultural data, combining land records, PM-KISAN databases, fertiliser sales, crop sowing information, satellite imagery and procurement records. Advances in AI and machine learning can make such integration feasible.

A credible second-best option is to bring urea under the NBS regime, as was originally envisaged in 2010. Rationalising subsidies by reducing support for nitrogen while increasing it for phosphorus and potassium, without raising the overall subsidy bill, would correct price signals. Such recalibration would nudge farmers towards more balanced nutrient application, raising NUE and improving soil health.

Reforming the fertiliser subsidy regime demands political courage, but the rewards could be substantial. Our estimates show that annual savings of around Rs 40,000 crore are possible, which can be redirected towards agri-R&D, irrigation, and creating value chains in high-value agriculture. With precision farming and balanced nutrient use, the same land can generate far higher output, raise farm incomes, and stimulate rural demand for manufactured goods — setting off a virtuous cycle of growth.

Given the Goldilocks situation of high growth and low inflation, it is just the right time for the Prime Minister to bite this bullet and reform India’s fertiliser policy.

Gulati is distinguished professor at ICRIER and Juneja is research fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

India, too, faces a test in poll-bound Bangladesh



SYED MUNIR KHASRU

INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS remain among the most consequential in South Asia, anchored in geography, trade, connectivity, energy cooperation and shared security interests. Few bilateral relationships in the region are as dense or as strategically intertwined. That depth gives India, the bigger of the two in almost every sense, a unique ability to influence outcomes in Bangladesh. But it also imposes corresponding responsibilities. It is precisely because of this importance that Bangladesh’s forthcoming election on February 12, 2026, has sharpened scrutiny of India’s political posture in Dhaka.

Over the past one-and-a-half decades, India’s responses to Bangladeshi elections, particularly during periods of contested legitimacy, have left a lasting imprint on public opinion in Dhaka that New Delhi’s engagement has been tilted toward a single political force — the then-ruling Awami League led by the deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. That imprint now frames both expectations and apprehensions as Bangladesh approaches the next polls under a caretaker government headed by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus.

During Hasina’s tenure, a succession of national elections were widely criticised for being non-participative and rigged. India’s public posture toward these polls remains a defining reference point in Bangladeshi political debate. The perceived endorsement of these elections did not go well with people deprived of their political voice. A snapshot of India’s official

India’s responses to Bangladeshi elections, particularly during periods of contested legitimacy, have left a lasting imprint on public opinion in Dhaka that New Delhi’s engagement has been tilted toward a single political force — the then-ruling Awami League

stance on the three controversial elections: (i) January 5, 2014: “It is for the people of Bangladesh to decide their own future.” (ii) December 6, 2018: “We view the elections as an internal affair of Bangladesh.” (iii) January 5, 2024: “[The] Election is the domestic affair of Bangladesh.” Now, the MEA’s statement on December 14 — supporting “free, fair, inclusive and credible elections in Bangladesh” — does not have much buy-in in Dhaka, particularly for the generation that could not exercise their right to vote in the last three elections.

The perception was further reinforced by the blurring of lines between state-to-state relations and state-to-party bonhomie as India’s engagement became closely associated with the Awami League leadership. Following the Monsoon Revolution in 2024, that association turned into a liability. Public scepticism intensified after Hasina sought refuge in India following her resignation. The symbolism of the move reinforced the belief that Delhi had become too invested in a particular political arrangement to appreciate the domestic transition that was underway.

Narratives by a significant portion of the Indian media did not help. Political attacks were frequently reframed as communal violence. By contrast, during Durga Puja, Yunus and army chief General Waker-uz-Zaman visited Hindu temples and assured minorities of state protection — gestures of reassurance that many Bangladeshis believe have no clear parallel in India, in terms of the latter’s religious minority.

On the other hand, India’s caution toward the Awami League’s main rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has historical roots. During the BNP-led government from 2001 to 2006, bilateral relations reached their nadir. Delhi’s security concerns and political mistrust resulted from the BNP’s inept handling of bilateral relations. This strengthened India’s preference for the Awami League as a reliable partner. However, that approach no longer fits a Bangladesh where the political costs of putting all the eggs in one basket are clear.

As Bangladesh approaches its next election, India remains an indispensable partner in trade, connectivity, energy, and regional stability. At the same time, there is apprehension in Bangladesh about how India will conduct itself vis-à-vis the electoral process. For India, the way forward is avoiding either endorsement or disapproval, engaging across the political spectrum, and clearly signalling readiness to work with whichever government emerges from a credible vote. It also means recognising that legitimacy, once questioned, cannot be restored through economic cooperation alone.

India’s External Affairs Minister has stated that New Delhi seeks constructive relations with all political actors in Bangladesh. The principle is widely welcomed. Its credibility, however, will be determined by practice. Post elections, whoever comes to power in Bangladesh should reciprocate with the same openness.

The writer is senior director of the international think tank IPAG India, which has a presence also in Dhaka, Melbourne, Dubai, and Vienna

In Delhi, I am a citizen without a neighbourhood

our neighbourhood.

The Spanish word for neighbour, “*vecino*”, also means citizen. Belonging — both to a village/city and a state or country — is built on a community, where you find yourself and can also lose yourself if need be.

Therefore, I am probably still a citizen of Bhumkapura, a tiny hamlet in Madhya Pradesh. There, I could be both non-descript and someone significant, at will. The first few years of my life were spent on the street, as our tiny one-room kholi had nothing to offer except a meal or two and a chatai or mattress at night. The world outside was full of joy and adventure. A circle of about six Adivasi houses with a hand pump in the middle was my world. I probably had more meals at my neighbours’

houses than at my own.

As we moved into a bigger house, I continued to spend my afternoons and evenings outside. There was always someone to talk, play, explore and pass the time with. They watched me ride my first bicycle, break my voice, and grow the hints of a moustache.

And then education beckoned. I was packed off to a distant conservative qasba (small town), where the neighbours were not just strangers but also custodians of culture and decorum. Suddenly, my bedroom

became a sanctuary. Here, companionship shifted to school, while the neighbourhood turned into a barren refuge, the four walls of the house becoming a stark frontier, a border, if you will.

University life was a happy blur as the residential campus gave endless opportunities to make friends, engage in sociopolitical life and make outdoor and common spaces your own. However, the camaraderie and comfort slowly receded as the cacophony of a society and politics in flux invaded the campus.

Soon, I was in Lajpat Nagar, a faceless tenant who once latched his girlfriend inside the house accidentally in the rush to get to the office on time. It was not my neighbour but the sanitation worker, there to collect the garbage, who

came to our rescue. The most transactional neighbourhood relationship became the most helpful.

As I switch neighbourhoods, I have found a few neighbours who are polite, even friendly, but there is no hood. We seem to be conscious of the temporary nature of our familiarity, which inhibits us from opening up. As we become vulnerable citizens of the republic, one yearns for neighbours with whom one can share this vulnerability. After all, it is only in the hood that you can be your true self.

I have accepted it now. I am a *vecino* (citizen/neighbour) of Delhi, but without a *vecindad* (neighbourhood).

The writer teaches at Delhi Skill and Entrepreneurship University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Need for follow-up

THIS REFERS to the editorial, “Three countries, one new story”, (*IE*, December 20). PM Narendra Modi’s visit to Jordan, Ethiopia, and Oman is a bold step toward strengthening India’s global ties. However, diplomatic handshakes must lead to real progress on the ground. Without consistent engagement and visible outcomes, these efforts risk becoming symbolic. India’s growing role in the Global South is exciting, but we must ensure that ambition is matched by action. Let’s not lose momentum where it matters most.

Nilesh Dubey, Ahmedabad

MGNREGA weakened

THIS REFERS to the article, “This overhaul of MGNREGA disempowers workers, demotivates states” (*IE*, December 20). Weakening MGNREGA by renaming it, changing funding ratios, and making employment conditional shifts the responsibility from the Centre to financially weaker states. This undermines cooperative federalism. More importantly, turning a rights-based guarantee into a discretionary welfare program reduces labor security and accountability. Research consistently shows MGNREGA’s value in supporting rural livelihoods during downturns. Any reform should strengthen this social contract, not weaken it.

Shamil Nazer, Kozhikode

Protecting liberty

THIS REFERS to the editorial, “The right to love and live as you please” (*IE*, December 20). The Allahabad High Court’s recent verdict is welcome because it affirmed that live-in relationships aren’t illegal and the state must protect adults in them, upholding their constitutional rights to life and liberty, even as the government argued against them. It validates the right of adults to choose their partners and living situations without state interference and offers crucial protection to those, often women, who face harassment from families who disapprove of their choices.

S S Paul, Nadia



IQBAL ABHIMANYU

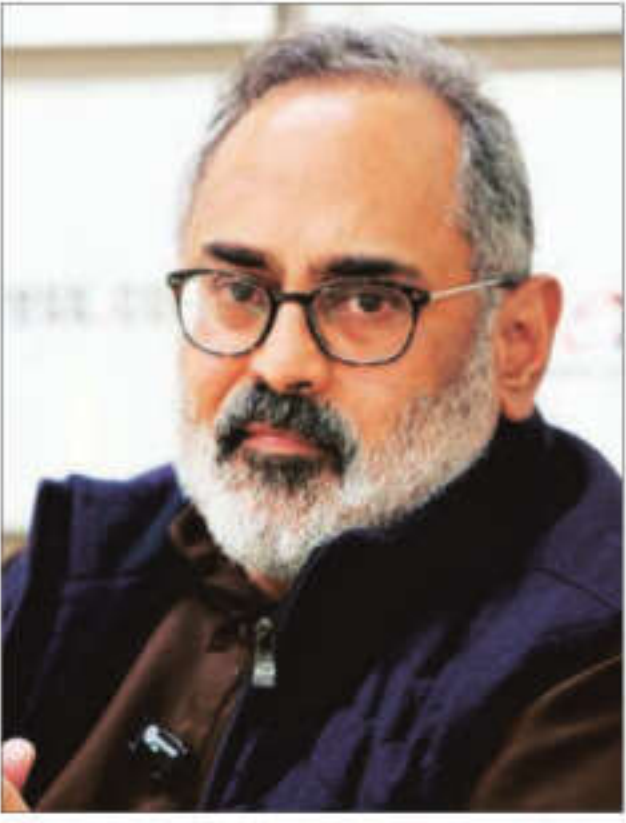
ONLY RECENTLY have I found a confident answer to the question “Where are you from?": Delhi. The usual postscript — “I am from MP originally” — has faded away. Even so, I am not sure how much of Delhi has seeped into me despite having spent 18 years here — more than half of my life, and the entirety of my adult life.

To a large extent, this is due to a lack of people in my life who I associate with the city. Most of those I met here were migrants themselves, trying to build their own corner in the city. We all carried our own hometowns in an invisible backpack,

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR

From being the tech and digital economy face of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, State President, BJP Kerala, has accomplished quite a feat in the ruling party's political history by winning the Thiruvananthapuram corporation local body election, which is considered to be the semi-final, ahead of the crucial assembly elections in Kerala. While expanding his party in a state where it has failed to make significant electoral gains so far, Chandrasekhar continues to be the voice of the BJP, especially in entrepreneurship and India's ambitions in critical areas such as AI and semiconductors



ON MANDATED INSTALLATION OF SANCHAR SAATHI

Governments will make mistakes. I think the app was unnecessary. There are much more nuanced, ways of doing that rather than using a hammer and saying, your phone shall have my app



ON KERALA ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN 2026

You will see a very different type of political debate and discourse in Kerala between the UDF and the NDA because the LDF has been rejected and people don't want to give them a third term

'When entrepreneurship is booming in southern states, in Kerala there is a flight of talent. Why then will investors come?'

Rajeev Chandrasekhar, State President, BJP Kerala, on the economic and political challenges in Kerala, how politics in the state is changing and how the party is making a difference at the ward level. The session was moderated by Liz Mathew, Deputy Editor, *The Indian Express*



Rajeev Chandrasekhar, State President, BJP Kerala, with Liz Mathew, Deputy Editor, *The Indian Express*. GAJENDRA YADAV

ought to have 'Vikasishta Keralam' as opposed to 'Viksit Bharat', if that's all you have as an issue to debate, then I consider the battle already won. We should get into deeper discussions about why MNREGA is being reformed, what happened in the last 10-20 years and why are we doing an improved version of it. This is an ongoing struggle. We are not prepared to make it easy, be it for the DMK, the CPM or the Congress, when they say, 'Oh, it is a Hindi word and therefore it is an assault on Malayalam or Tamil'. It is the laziest type of politics that we will not leave unchallenged.

Vikas Pathak: Last year too, there was controversy with the DMK saying that there is Hindi imposition. What is the need for that?

What is the alternative? That is just a choice that the government makes, you have two languages that are widely used all around the country, one is Hindi, one is English. Obviously, you can't name it in Tamil, you can't name it in Bhojpuri, you can't name it in Kashmiri. So, you pick either English or Hindi. This government chooses to name it in Hindi.

Jatin Anand: As the chief of the party's unit in Kerala, how are you taking forward organisational work in the state?

Kerala is a state where the youth is extremely frustrated. Nearly 30 per cent of our colleges are vacant. Children have to go outside now for not just jobs but also for studies. Today, people are saying, don't make long speeches. Tell me what you will do for my child, for my career. So, organisationally, we are moving away towards more digital first and micro-meetings. In the last six months, we have had about 100-200

new, young faces. If you see the candidates in our local body election, they are superb inspiring youngsters who have come away from jobs and wanted to get into this. So, all of that is part of what we are trying to do there, which is to make it more modern, more contemporary.

Shahid Pervaz: In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, you lost to Shashi Tharoor by a narrow margin of 8,000 votes. Now with Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation under the BJP's belt, do you think that if there is a rematch, then you can get the better of Tharoor?

Tharoor has campaigned for the Congress from Trivandrum for 16 years now and they still haven't won the Trivandrum Corporation. I was airdropped into Thiruvananthapuram, I had 35 days. If I had got 8,000 more votes, I would have won. But that is history, I can't change that. But after the recent victory, it is clear that the politics in Kerala is going through a deep tectonic change. And that all of these barriers that were thrown at us, that we are not secular but communal, the fixed match between the Left and the UDF, is surely crumbling.

Pooja Pillai: This year in March, there

was a controversy over the release of Empuraan and the makers went in for voluntary cuts. Issues were raised over the title of the movie JSK - Janaki Vv/s State of Kerala. There were some cuts demanded from the movie Haal. There appears to be a sense of siege due to this among the artistic community in Kerala that the creative space has shrunk. Can you address this concern?

First of all, there is a communist government there, they are shrinking the creative space, you should ask them. Article 19 gives freedom of expression and everybody is allowed to do whatever they want. If I don't like the movie, I won't go see it. Personally, I am a fanboy of Mohanlal. I congratulated him but I didn't particularly like the movie, so I didn't go see it. But the party didn't say or do anything against *Empuraan*. Our view is this: let it be, as long as it does not infringe on any law, does not violate 19 (2) or laws on defamation, everybody is free to do creative work. That's the right guaranteed under the Constitution. And at the same time everybody has the right to challenge a creative piece of work if they believe it infringes on their rights and that is exactly what is playing out.

Soumyarendra Barik: It has been two years since you've left the office at the IT Ministry. When you look back at the regulatory policy action across ministries, including the recent Department of Telecommunication directive for mandatory installation of their own app, are you hopeful or disappointed with the regulatory direction the government is taking?

I'm 100 per cent hopeful, I'm not disappointed at all. Every democracy is struggling to deal with these issues. It is an extremely challenging situation where information and misinformation is being weaponised. Governments will make mistakes. I think the Sanchar Saathi app — I will be the first one to admit it, even though I'm in government — is completely unnecessary. There are much more nuanced, sophisticated ways of doing that rather than using a hammer and saying, your phone shall have my app. But I'm hopeful that eventually, we will find some sort of a steady state between innovation and the right of people to enjoy the Internet and use applications in a safe manner.

Anil Sasi: How difficult is it to be a BJP politician in Kerala where you have to juggle a lot of issues like beef and Hinduism?

I've taken on many challenges in my life. This is certainly the most difficult one because of the traditional legacy barriers that have been built up, like the LDF and the UDF calling the BJP communal

Vineet Bhalla: What is your engagement strategy in Kerala for the Muslim and Christian populations considering that they form about 45 per cent of the population there and the fact that BJP continues to be seen as a Hindu nationalist party?

We have an outreach programme where we reach out to every household, to every citizen who is a voter and we communicate very clearly what we are about, what we intend to do if we are given an opportunity. For the Christian and the Muslim community, we have outreach teams and outreach leaders. We go out there and without being asked, address these myths, fallacies and falsehoods that have been built around us. We tell them that we are here for 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' ('Ellavarude Oppam El-lavarkkum'). And there is much evidence in these election results. We don't want any fancy, smart campaign. We will go to the two-and-a-half crore homes and tell people that this is what we are, this is what we intend to do if you give us an opportunity. We are doing this in Malappuram, which is a Muslim-dominated area. The rest is up to the people.

Unni Rajen Shanker: What are the big economic and governance challenges for whoever comes to power in 2026?

The biggest challenge is that Kerala today is a state with zero to negative development. The comparison between Kerala and Tamil Nadu is so important in the 2026 elections. Tamil Nadu today has 24 lakh industrial workers, Kerala has less than a lakh. These are the things that should be discussed politically. Instead they only want to talk about Karl Marx and secularism. The state today is exporting its only asset, the youth. Today, they are either going to another state or overseas.

This election is going to be about the economic future of Kerala. There is no such thing as the Kerala model, it is a CPM model or a Congress model. The Kerala model was when Kerala used to have food surplus and had lowest food inflation. Today, the highest food inflation in the country is in Kerala, highest unemployment is in Kerala. These are the things that need to be debated. Whoever wins or does not win in 2026, people will decide. But the politics of Kerala will certainly change in 2026 and we will leave this ideological peddling of imaginary fantasy issues and move to the real problems and real solutions.

There is a quote that I like using, that the Left does not deal with real problems or solve any real problems. That describes both the Left and the Congress in Kerala. They always end up creating imaginary problems that they become protectors of, because they are only protecting minorities; the minorities don't need any protection, there is a Constitution, there are laws.

Soumyarendra Barik: Among the southern states, Kerala seems to be the only state where none of the investments in manufacturing semiconductors or assembly seem to be going. Is that something that you are going to take up with the Central leadership?

When entrepreneurship is booming in all southern states, Kerala is the only state from where there is a flight of talent. Investments go to where the talent is and talent goes to where the opportunities are. If there are no opportunities in Kerala, talent will flee. Why then would investments come? This is the reality that we are living in. Unfortunately, Kerala is not aligned to that reality. Kerala is still force-feeding people Karl Marx and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Liz Mathew: So there will be a new team? What about the old leadership?

In comparative politics, I don't think age or how long you've been around matters, as much as what the challenges for the party are and who is best suited to address those challenges.

Manoj CG: There is a debate on the nomenclature of some of the Bills which were recently introduced including the VB-G RAM G Bill replacing MNREGA. The Opposition MPs from the south are calling it an imposition of Hindi. How do you counter it?

I think that's essentially what we are trying to defeat, that if the political discourse is going to be around whether the name

ling to deal with these issues. It is an extremely challenging situation where information and misinformation is being weaponised. Governments will make mistakes. I think the Sanchar Saathi app — I will be the first one to admit it, even though I'm in government — is completely unnecessary. There are much more nuanced, sophisticated ways of doing that rather than using a hammer and saying, your phone shall have my app. But I'm hopeful that eventually, we will find some sort of a steady state between innovation and the right of people to enjoy the Internet and use applications in a safe manner.

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OUR VIEW



Securities market code: Get its finer details right

The proposed law aims to unify India's legacy laws into a single code, as promised by the FM, and strengthen market regulation. But it shouldn't overlook Sebi's need to raise its own cadre

Last week, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman introduced the Securities Markets Code Bill of 2025 in Parliament, aimed at building a new legislative scaffolding for India's securities markets. The Bill, which has been sent to the parliamentary panel on finance for comments and inputs, proposes to merge and replace three laws: the Securities and Contracts (Regulation) Act of 1956 and those related to the market regulator, Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), and depositories. This was necessary to address multiple overlaps among those legacy acts of legislation. The move is a follow-up of Sitharaman's 2021-22 budget promise to consolidate various Acts into a single rationalized code. Broadly, the Bill is designed to strengthen investor protection, ease the compliance burden of sundry market operators and improve the overall governance framework for the market's regulation. The Bill proposes to achieve all this by increasing Sebi's powers, strengthening market-infra institutions (such as depositories) and also decriminalizing a host of minor, technical or procedural lapses.

At first sight, the Bill's tabling in the Lok Sabha may seem like rearguard action to bolster market confidence in the regulator and its regulatory capacity. Doubts about Sebi's oversight and investigative calibre were raised by perceptions in the wake of a US shortseller's allegations against an Indian conglomerate, an episode followed by belated revelations of a big New York-based derivatives trader having manipulated indices and indulged in coordinated trades to accrue vast but allegedly illegal market gains. However, the fact that the FM had announced her single-code intention way

back in February 2021 weighs against such a conclusion. While a few aspects of the Bill appear to close gaps bared by recent episodes of market concern, its core purpose is to end the jurisdictional overlaps of outdated laws that made regulation both cumbersome and suboptimal. For example, the code is designed to bring stock exchanges, custodians, clearing corporations and depositories under a common umbrella. Further, its ombudsman proposal will not only help shield investors better, but institute a structured mechanism for dispute resolution and grievance redressal, something India has lacked so far.

While there is no denying that such an omnibus code for India's securities markets was long overdue, it is also necessary to point out that the code has some critical gaps. One such lacuna relates to the regulator's human capacity deficit. It is true that the code makes an extraordinary effort at adding heft to Sebi's governance structure; it will expand its board size from the current nine to 15 members, with an allowance for a maximum of six independent directors with specialized knowledge of markets, law, finance and the economy. The code will also grant the government the authority to oust any board member upon the discovery of a conflict of interest or impropriety. Yet, it shies away from proposing human resource structures that could deepen Sebi's institutional and regulatory capacity. As a regulator, Sebi is relatively young. Like the Reserve Bank of India, it needs to raise an independent cadre of personnel equipped with the regulatory skills needed to oversee fast-evolving markets with ever more sophisticated strategies at play. Hopefully, the parliamentary committee that's looking at the Bill will give this issue some serious thought.

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Why poverty is worse today than it was in olden days

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. His latest book is 'Why the Poor Don't Kill Us.'

I am glad that *Homebound*'s shortlisting for an Oscar nomination gives me an opportunity to say something tangential. Modern poverty, even if it comes with a smartphone, is worse than ancient poverty.

The film, directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, and written by him with Shreedhar Dubey and Varun Grover, shows two young men trying to escape poverty through the processes that India tells its young will save them. They decide to apply for a police job; they see great hordes who want the same thing. Still, it is a path, and the two friends feel that if they follow the process, there would be a reward at the end of it. So they endure it all and complete the application. Then they wait. Nothing happens.

Their lives are so delicate that just about any small mishap can ruin them.

As you watch the film, you wonder if there was any other way they could have been that would have made their lives safer and happier. Maybe if they chose not to have an ambition or to love or have a family, would

they be happier? Is that even possible? What is this trap they are born into? How can poverty be so suffocating and miserable when for most of human existence we have lived in it?

Until recently, most people were poor. The history of the middle class is probably one of our shortest histories. The stories from the childhood of our parents would reveal a society that was poor or very close to it. In poverty is the heritage of us all.

So a question arises. Were people in olden times miserable, too? Because their lives were as deprived and fragile as the lives of the modern poor. I was reading *The Japanese Achievement* by Hugh Cortazzi and came across a statement that around 1910 in Japan, "Standards of living remained low, and the life of the Japanese peasant was a hard one." Usually, when someone quotes a line from a book, it is remarkable in some way. I am aware I have quoted something banal. But somehow, the line made me wonder. Did the Japanese peasant, too, consider his life hard? If that was the nature of life all around, was it 'hard' or was it just life? When does a human life begin to appear 'hard,' especially to the very people who are enduring it?

I feel that the special tragedy of modern-day poverty is that many of us are not poor. In olden times, when life was not expected

to improve for most people, and the system never claimed that anyone could become a king or an aristocrat by clearing an exam, there were no aspirations. People simply got by. The very meaning of joy was probably different then.

Modern-day poverty is worse because it looks like bad luck, and hardship feels like hardship because there are rungs above filled with ordinary people that have a better life. In a poor country, there is something vulgar about our simple good fortunes. I don't think all of vulgarity is bad; some of it is required, for that is what aspirations of the poor are made of. Still, it is not a pleasant thing.

In *Homebound*, the two young men follow a path that would take them to a slightly better life. The odds are against them, but they are sustained by hope. Hope is an odd thing. In retrospect, most of hope is a form of sorrow. But in the present, as it is experienced, hope is what helps people endure. Hope is also one of the obvious reasons why there is peace

between the classes in one of the most unequal regions on earth. The system generates hope to keep most people preoccupied and tame.

In the film, when one of the boys realizes that his dream of becoming a constable may not become a reality, he takes a shot at college education for a degree, which is another strand of mainstream Indian hope. Eventually, he realizes that the odds are too stacked against him in formal education. It is a space where people like us hold all the cards. He decides to quit college and work in a factory to save his family from immediate ruin. He is finally happy, sort of.

All this is not where the soul of the story is, though. It always tries to draw attention to the fact that one of the young men is a Muslim and the other a Dalit. So, they are not only somewhat poor, they are poor in the worst way possible in India. But, as an Indian, I could not be blind to an unlikely element that may not be evident to foreign viewers—the Dalit refuses to apply in the Scheduled

Caste category because he fears it will worsen a bias against him. Intuitively, I find it hard to believe that a desperate Indian, given the option of a quota, would choose to doom himself by ticking 'general category' for pride, an emotion that usually comes from a position of affluence, from where art cinema is made.

But mostly the film comes from a real place. As a result it inadvertently shows, without trying at all, that most of the problems that these two young men face are not from 'the elite,' whom they never even meet. There is almost nobody in the entire film who is from even the upper middle class. Most of their impediments come from their own, their own communities or just one rung above.

But the persistent omen in the film is hope, its falseness and how it sustains two young men until the very end. The devious thing about hope is that even though most of the time it does not yield its promise, it is never a complete dud.

As in a bleeding mediocre marriage where there is just about enough to keep it going, hope throws a crumb now and then, as though it is a living creature that has found ways to survive as long as possible in the human heart.

THEIR VIEW

India should transfer its subsidy for fertilizers directly to farmers

This reform will free up fiscal space, empower price signals and spell significant ecological gains



AMIT KAPOOR & PRADEEP PURI are, respectively, chair and fellow, Institute for Competitiveness.

Council of Agricultural Research, the 'fertilizer response ratio' dropped from about 13.4kg of grain per kg of nutrient in the 1970s to just 3.7kg by 2005, a sharp decline in efficiency. This is largely driven by rampant overuse of cheap urea. Skewed fertilizer use does not just degrade soil, it also seeps into our food and water, harming public health. Excess nitrogen and imbalanced nutrients have been linked to thyroid disorders, diabetes and micronutrient deficiencies, turning a farm-level distortion into a national nutrition crisis.

Our fertilizer policy thus needs a structural overhaul to combine DBTs to farmers with nutrient caps. Instead of routing subsidies through companies, cash should be transferred straight into the bank accounts of farmers as season-specific, per-hectare entitlements. This would grant them purchasing power and also enable fertilizer sales at market prices, which would empower price signals, discourage overuse and curb diversion. Agri Stack data can be leveraged to calculate entitlements, while e-Rupi vouchers can be issued with nutrient limits for nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), adjustable for soil health. Like phosphorus and potassium, urea must also be brought under the NBS regime to rectify India's chronic nitrogen overuse. Robust and transparent verification mechanisms should be used to make the DBT system tamper-proof and trustworthy. Such a policy would align farm incentives with our goals of sustainability and efficiency.

The fiscal case for reform is compelling. Using the actual 2024-25 spend of ₹1.83 trillion as a baseline, shifting to a farmer-focused DBT system that cuts leakage to say, 10%, could save nearly ₹57,000 crore if urea diversion falls from 41% to 10%, and about ₹1 trillion if overall fertilizer subsidy leakage drops from 65% to 10%. Even on the 2025-26 projection of ₹1.56 trillion, the potential savings range from ₹49,000 crore to ₹86,000 crore.

The benefits would go beyond fiscal

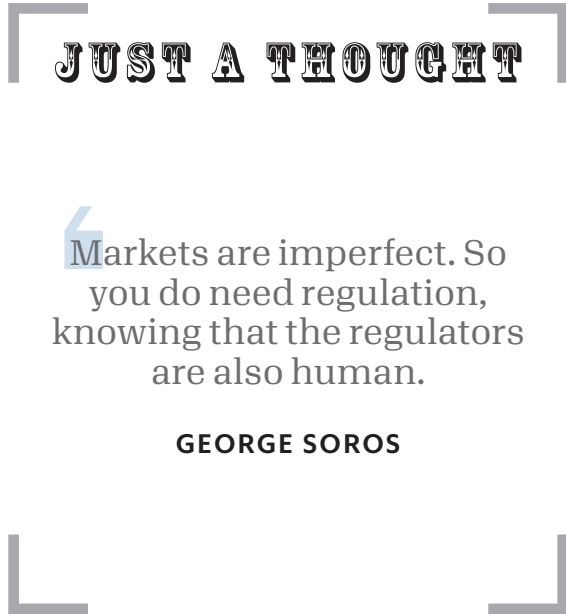
savings. While price rationalization, combined with nutrient caps, will help curb nitrogen overuse to restore soil fertility and reduce groundwater contamination as well as greenhouse gas emissions, better balanced application of NPK fertilizers could also strengthen farm yields and resilience as climate variability intensifies. Redirecting even half of the subsidy savings towards irrigation infrastructure, soil testing labs and farmer extension services could spark a transformation in productivity and sustainability. A rationalized subsidy regime would not just be a financial reform, but an ecological and agricultural reset that India urgently needs.

What about farmer resistance? It's possible farmers will turn around and say they prefer buying fertilizers at subsidized prices over cash transfers (in fear of higher upfront costs and transfer delays). The solution lies in smart design. Pre-season disbursement of e-Rupi vouchers, redeemable only for fertilizer purchases, could ease farmer concerns. Implementation should start small and scale smart. It could begin with pilot projects in diverse agro-climatic zones and then expand to states that have integrated India's Agri Stack with Soil Health Cards, before a nationwide rollout with public dashboards that track fiscal savings and soil metrics for an NPK balance.

Smarter subsidy delivery through DBTs to farmers could preserve fertilizer affordability, restore price signals, reduce diversion and fix incentives to keep farm soil healthy. Done right, it can save about ₹75,000 crore annually, which could be used to fund irrigation projects, cold chains and tech adoption.

This shift would anchor our policy in data, discipline and dignity for farmers. This is not just sound economics, it is good governance and a step towards an agricultural transformation. As the policy choices we make today will determine the future of Indian farming, we must act on this right away.

Ananya Khurana contributed to this article.



GEORGE SOROS

Not enough cover

FDI relaxations alone won't attract insurance players

As an attempt to simplify India's insurance laws and improve ease of doing business, the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Act passed by Parliament last week ticks all the right boxes. It moots changes on two fronts.



It integrates the Insurance Act 1938, LIC Act 1956 and Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Act 1999 into a single piece of legislation, establishing a level playing field between private and public sector insurers, Indian and foreign-owned insurers; it does away with special treatment to the Life Insurance Corporation. Recognising that policyholders get the short shrift, it expands the powers of Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority. IRDAI can now order searches, seizures and inspections of insurers, investigate intermediaries and order disgorgement of wrongful gains made by insurers or intermediaries, like SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) does. It can levy penalties of up to ₹10 crore on insurers and fix regulatory caps on commissions to agents. It can also supersede the Board of an insurer and appoint an Administrator to protect policyholder interests. While all this endows IRDAI with considerable regulatory muscle, it needs to be seen if the regulator flexes them.

The most-discussed aspect of the law though, is its relaxation of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) limits in insurance. Based on the premise that capital constraints are holding back industry growth and insurance penetration, the Act allows foreign players to own up to 100 per cent equity in Indian insurance ventures, from 74 per cent earlier. The earlier hike from 49 per cent to 74 per cent in March 2021 drew lukewarm response, with just four of the 74 licensed insurers seeing foreign partners hike their stakes. Now, the stipulation that foreign-owned insurers have majority Indian Board members and Indian top executives, which was seen as a deal breaker, has been done away with. Only the Chairperson/ MD/ CEO needs to be an Indian resident now, enabling foreign promoters to exercise greater management control.

However, it remains to be seen whether this move attracts more FDI. Despite events like Covid, life insurance in India remains a push product that is hard-sold rather than voluntarily bought. Globally, life covers are bought to protect dependents. In India however, the bulk of life insurance sales comprise traditional fixed-return plans with a fig-leaf of protection. In general insurance, insurers struggle to sustain profitable operations, thanks to regulated tariffs (in the motor business) and large underwriting losses in health and general insurance due to mispriced risk. Strangely, patchy industry profitability co-exists with sub-par policyholder experience on premiums and claims. Unless consumer perceptions and industry models change, it is doubtful if global players will be interested. To improve the profitability of general insurers, tariffs need to be left to market forces and robust data-based underwriting practices need to be instituted.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Palestine Action hunger strikers: govt ignoring the protest
The lives of the Palestine Action-affiliated remand prisoners now on hunger strike are at growing risk. On Friday, two reached day 48 without food. Twenty-year-old Qesser Zuhrah is being treated in hospital after she reportedly collapsed in Surrey. Amu Gib, 30, has also been treated. The prisoners are variously on remand for alleged criminal damage, aggravated burglary and violent disorder at a factory for Elbit Systems, an Israeli arms manufacturer, near Bristol, and in relation to an alleged break-in at RAF Brize Norton. All will have spent more than a year in prison before trial — much longer than the standard custody limit of six months. Some may not be tried until 2027. Demands include immediate bail, stopping restrictions on their communications and ending the ban on Palestine Action. (LONDON, DECEMBER 19)

GLOBAL TIMES

China's role in mediating Cambodia-Thailand conflict
Since December 7, a new round of border conflicts between Cambodia and Thailand has erupted, with firefights reported simultaneously in several Thai border provinces. Bringing the fighting to a halt as soon as possible serves the shared interests of both Cambodia and Thailand and is also the broader expectation of the region. Against this background, preventing further escalation and creating conditions for a political solution has become an urgent and practical task. China's shuttle diplomacy and mediation efforts are precisely focused on this practical need. Cambodia and Thailand have briefed China separately on developments on the ground and expressed their willingness to de-escalate and cease fire. (BEIJING, DECEMBER 19)

LINE & LENGTH.



TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

IndiGo pilots say they are overworked. They probably are. But that's nothing new. Ever since commercial aviation started in the mid-1930s, pilots have been asking for reduced duty time. There have been lots of strikes during this period. More often than not, airline owners and their managements have had to give in because the cost of a plane on the ground doing nothing for a long period is completely unaffordable. This being so, it is very surprising that the pilots of IndiGo have never struck work. They have at best gone on mass sick leave.

There are around 5,000 of them and even if 10 per cent threatened the management with a proper strike, they'd get what they wanted. IndiGo has over 400 aircraft and can't afford to have a quarter of them sitting on the ground.

But the IndiGo story is now old. Only my two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter is yet to express her views.

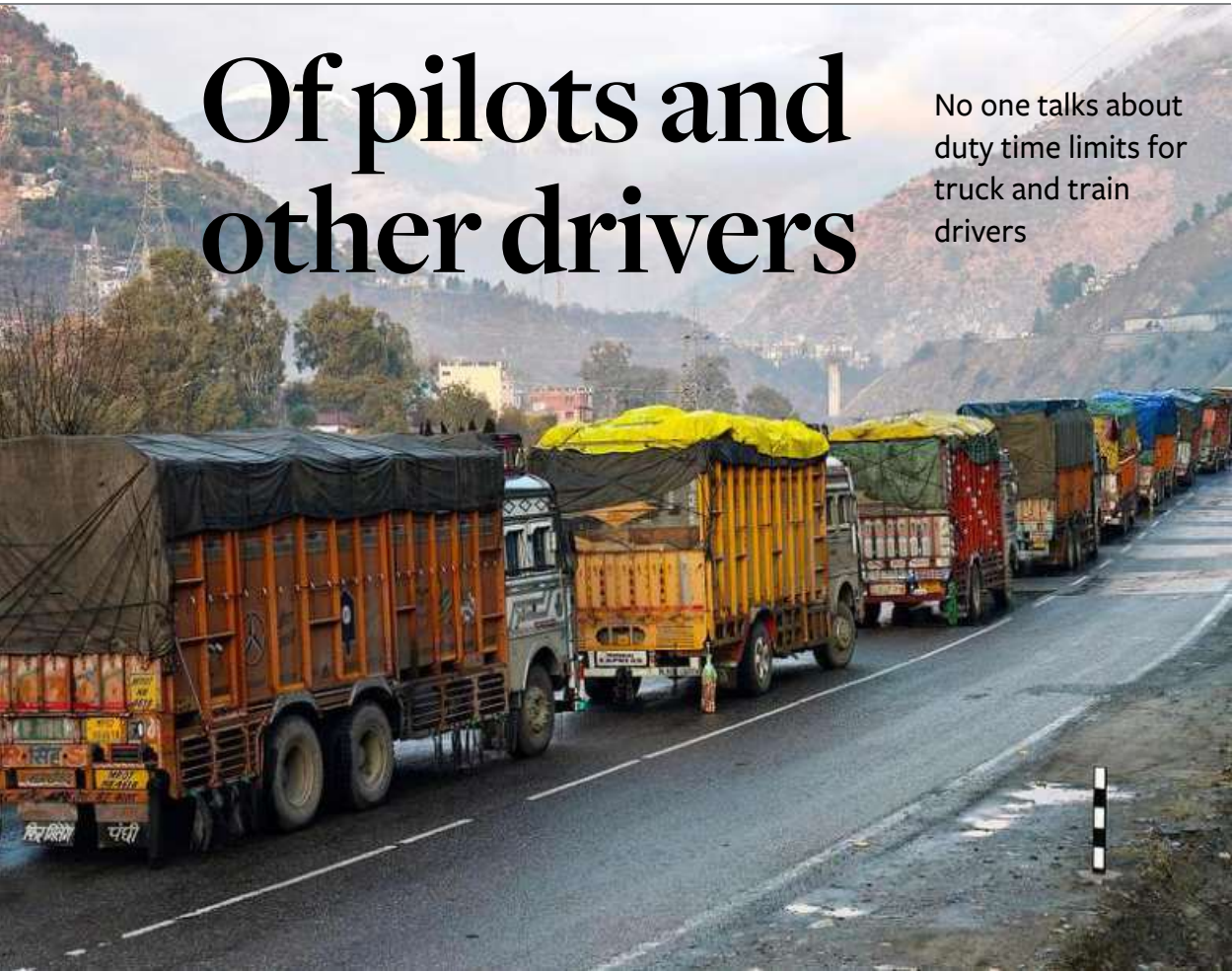
Like Gautam Gambhir being blamed for all the ills of Indian cricket, the management of IndiGo is now the target of public ire. But as in his case, some of it is the management's fault. But a lot isn't.

The term 'public' in the IndiGo case is misleading. It is minuscule but highly vocal and entitled upper middle class which doesn't have time for other dysfunctionalities and mismanagement like, say, of roads or in the railways. Both are still quite dangerous.

That's why this article is about truck and train drivers. I was a consultant for two decades at the Asian Institute of Transport Development. So I have some idea of the problems that they face.

The short point is this: that the drivers of trucks and locos are doubly and triply overworked compared to the pilots. But who gives a damn?

TRUCKERS AND TRAIN DRIVERS
Truck drivers can expect to earn ₹1 lakh annually when they start to about ₹5 lakh when they retire, usually around 45 years of age. Compare this to the pilots. They have 12-14 hour working days. Most of them are barely literate. They spend a lot of time waiting. They drive in terrible conditions. Their cabins are not air conditioned. The trucks mostly don't



have power steering. They have to cope with overloading by the owners and completely unruly traffic conditions. They have to deal with corrupt police and road transport officials. Their owners are usually small truck companies with 3-10 trucks and are very harsh on the people who work for them. There is, obviously, no job security. The fate of engine drivers isn't much better. It's nearly identical to truck drivers. They also suffer from a lot of physical and mental stress. Their cabins are hot and full of fumes. They tend to be very lonely and their resting facilities are

The Indian transport industry has perfect competition at one end (trucking) and a monopoly at the other (railways). Airlines lie in the middle with varying degrees of oligopoly

crude. They also suffer from exhaustion resulting from working for extra hours because of staff shortages. In other words, the lives of truck and train drivers are much worse than that of pilots. But who captures the attention of the government and the media?

THE ECONOMICS OF IT ALL
In the end it all boils down to economics on the one hand and commercial considerations on the other. The economics is that the transport industry has three types of market structure and the commercial bit is the degree of technology intensity. The Indian transport industry has perfect competition at one end (trucking) and a monopoly at the other (railways). Airlines lie in the middle with varying degrees of oligopoly. Perfect competition means that there are virtually no barriers to entry and exit. It also means each firm is a price taker. This makes a huge difference to operations. Monopoly means that there is only one producing firm. It can set its own

No one talks about duty time limits for truck and train drivers

prices by restricting output. Paradoxically, in India, it has been the other way around: Indian Railways keep prices low and expand output. We have to thank democracy for that. Oligopoly means there are a few firms that compete on volumes rather than margins. They also follow a revenue maximisation model rather than a profit maximising one. This is an example of Ramsey pricing. You can google it. So here's the problem: all these segments can achieve their goals if, and only if, they flog their labour by keeping the capital-labour ratio in the firm high. That is, the amount of labour per a given amount of capital is much less than what it should be. So regardless of whether it's trucking or railways or airlines there is always a shortage of those who operate the trucks, locomotives and planes. Exhausted drivers and pilots are inherent to transport. That is, high capital/labour ratios. It's simply the nature of the beast that those who drive will continue to be overworked and exhausted.

Why a recast of rural jobs scheme was needed

The Bill to replace MGNREGS simultaneously furthers the cause of asset creation and providing a strong safety net

Jyothis Sathyapalan
India's rural employment guarantee was conceived at a time when village economies were marked by chronic distress, limited non-farm opportunities and weak infrastructure. Two decades later, the macroeconomic context has shifted. Poverty has declined, rural connectivity has improved and financial inclusion has expanded. Yet demand for public employment persists, driven less by absolute deprivation and more by livelihood risk, climate volatility and uneven regional growth. This transition calls for reform, not retreat, from the employment guarantee framework. From a macroeconomic standpoint, wage-employment programmes have long played a stabilising role in the rural economy. They smooth consumption during downturns, reduce distress migration and support demand in regions where employment remains highly seasonal. Even as agriculture's share in GDP has fallen, it continues to absorb a large proportion of the workforce, while rural non-farm job creation has not expanded fast enough to offer stable alternatives. This structural imbalance explains why public employment remains relevant. The Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill, 2025 seeks to integrate rural employment within a broader macro-fiscal framework. Rather than treating it purely as welfare expenditure, the Bill links livelihood security with productivity, asset creation and coordination across schemes, in line with the long-term growth vision of

Viksit Bharat, 2047. Experience over nearly two decades shows that the need for rural wage employment has not disappeared. While chronic poverty has reduced, a large proportion of rural households remains exposed to climate shocks, health emergencies and market fluctuations. Rain-fed, tribal and drought-prone regions continue to show high demand for public employment. This reflects income volatility rather than persistent poverty. At the same time, implementation outcomes reveal a recurring gap between statutory entitlement and actual delivery.

SUBSTANTIVE INTERVENTION
Although the law guarantees 100 days of employment per household, the average number of days of work provided has remained well below this limit in most years. This weakens the role of public employment as an automatic stabiliser and reduces its ability to support rural demand during downturns. Against this backdrop, increasing the statutory guarantee from 100 to 125 days per household is a substantive macroeconomic intervention. It improves income predictability for vulnerable households and strengthens the counter-cyclical role of public spending. During periods of climate stress or agricultural slowdown, such an expansion can help sustain consumption and limit sharper contractions in local economies. A key fiscal lesson from past experience is that rural employment produces stronger results when linked to asset creation. Over time, a large share of employment has been generated through water conservation, land development and natural resource



KEY ROLE. Wage-employment programmes ARUN KULKARNI

management works. These investments have produced spillover benefits, including improved cropping intensity, more stable groundwater levels and reduced exposure to drought. The new framework places water security, core rural infrastructure, livelihood-related assets and climate-resilient works at the centre of employment planning. This marks a shift from viewing employment expenditure largely as revenue spending towards recognising it as decentralised public investment. From a fiscal perspective, this improves the output value of public spending and supports medium-term growth. Asset-focused employment also reduces future fiscal pressures by lowering repeated reliance on relief spending in vulnerable regions. In this sense, the Bill aligns short-term income support with longer-term productivity gains. Aggregating works into a unified rural infrastructure framework reduces duplication and improves the efficiency of public investment. This approach places rural employment within the wider development process rather than treating it as a parallel system. The provision allowing States to pause public works for up to 60 days during peak

sowing and harvesting seasons has clear labour-market implications. During these periods, demand for farm labour rises and market wages increase. Large public works running simultaneously can strain labour availability, raise input costs for farmers and affect output. A time-bound, locally determined pause helps prevent public employment from crowding out agricultural activity. Importantly, the higher annual employment guarantee offsets any seasonal reduction in workdays. With advance planning, employment can be spread across lean periods without reducing overall availability, supporting both farm productivity and wage incomes. The Bill introduces Normative Allocations to improve fiscal predictability. Rule-based allocations allow States to plan employment expenditure within medium-term fiscal frameworks, addressing problems such as delayed reimbursements and reactive budgeting. Shared fiscal responsibility also encourages better asset selection and maintenance. At the same time, equity concerns require transparent allocation criteria, timely fund flows and safeguards for fiscally weaker States. Emphasis on digital monitoring, public disclosure and strengthened social audits aims to improve expenditure discipline and restore confidence in delivery systems. Crucially, the Bill retains the rights-based core of the employment guarantee, including notified wage rates and unemployment allowance where work is not provided. What changes is the framework through which these rights are delivered.

The writer is Professor, NIRDP

● BELOW THE LINE



Surprising bonhomie
Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi left for Germany in the middle of the winter session of Parliament. This triggered the usual reaction from the BJP about hobnobbing with anti-India forces, and some weary sighs from some of his own colleagues

in the Congress. But this had an unexpected fallout too — it left Priyanka Gandhi to lead the Congress charge during the remainder of the session. And that she did with panache, conveying what she wanted to with humour and verve. She smilingly complained to Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari about not getting an appointment. Gadkari humoured her by saying that she "doesn't even need an appointment". But the real surprise came at the Speaker's customary tea party on the final day: an unexpectedly cosy tableau featuring Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and

Priyanka, all smiles over cups of tea. Unlike her brother, Priyanka appeared perfectly at ease, laughing and indulging in small talk with the PM. She even shared a tip about a Kerala herb she swears by to ward off winter allergies, and asked the PM about his recent visits to Ethiopia, Jordan and Oman. This was quite unlike the monsoon session, when the Opposition had boycotted the end-of-session tea. **The obesity challenge** Drawing an analogy, Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science & Technology and Earth Sciences, Jitendra Singh, was heard remarking that just as economics is

too serious a subject to be left to economists, obesity cannot be left to physicians or epidemiologists alone, as it has deep social, cultural, and environmental roots. He said this at the inaugural session of the two-day 'Asia Oceania Conference on Obesity' (AOCO). The minister, a diabetologist and professor of medicine, said that obesity was a complex and chronic disorder, and not merely a cosmetic or lifestyle concern. He called for a whole-of-society approach to effectively combat it. **Musical chairs** Last week, the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export

Development Authority (APEDA) called for applications to fill the post of senior consultant. A little bird says the advertisement is to help one of the Authority's favourites to fill the post. The favourite ended up on the wrong side after the Bharath International Rice Conference landed in a controversy, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi giving it a miss and government officials being asked to keep off. Meanwhile, a top Commerce Ministry official is pushing the case of a retired IAS official for the post of Basmati Export Development Foundation (BEDF) Director. BEDF has funds of over ₹200 crore. **Our Bureau**





Winter is behind

A less acrimonious session is an opportunity to build upon

The winter session of Parliament, which had 15 sittings, witnessed significant and controversial legislative business, along with political grandstanding by the government to mark the 150th anniversary of the national song, *Vande Mataram*. Ten Bills were introduced and eight were passed by both Houses. Notable Bills that won parliamentary approval include one repealing or amending dozens of outdated laws; another allowing 100% FDI in the insurance sector; one facilitating private sector investment in nuclear power by reducing the liability of suppliers, and, importantly, major changes to the rural employment guarantee scheme, a flagship welfare programme started by the UPA government in 2005. The titles of several Bills, which were in Hindi, caused consternation among Members of Parliament from non-Hindi regions. They pointed to constitutional provisions that require legislation to be drafted in English, with translations made available as required. The insurance Bill is titled Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha, while the rural employment guarantee Bill is called Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin), or VB-G RAM G, which became an Act on December 21 with the assent of the President. In the discussion on *Vande Mataram*, Members spent over 11 hours in the Lok Sabha, with 65 participants, and nearly 13 hours in the Rajya Sabha, with 81 participants. Parliament could instead have passed a unanimous resolution commemorating the song rather than using it as yet another occasion to question the patriotic credentials of political opponents.

A heated debate on electoral reforms went on for nearly 13 hours with 62 speakers in the Lok Sabha and for nearly 11 hours with 57 speakers in the Rajya Sabha. This too was a missed opportunity for an open-minded discussion beyond party lines to address the crisis of credibility in Indian elections. The closed-minded approaches of the BJP and the Congress towards questions of election integrity are not helping India's parliamentary democracy. The Opposition sought a discussion on air pollution in Delhi, a massive public health crisis, but the government did not allow it. Bills were rushed through, and the role of parliamentary committees in shaping legislation remains limited, though Question Hour and Zero Hour were more productive. This winter session was far less acrimonious than in the recent past, a fact acknowledged by Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge. As a result, Congress representatives accepted the customary invitation for tea by the Lok Sabha Speaker and the Rajya Sabha Chairman at the end of the session. These meetings also led to pleasant exchanges between the government and the Opposition. This practice is worth continuing and building upon.

Beyond the optics

India must push its vision for a shared global order across regions

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's three-nation tour to Jordan, Ethiopia and Oman, last week, had some common and connecting threads. The visit was primarily an attempt to draw closer bilateral ties with each country in a world that is turning increasingly transactional. Beyond that, however, all three countries belong to the Global South that India seeks leadership of and each is an important development partner in their respective regions. Mr. Modi's talks with Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq saw the signing of the Cooperation Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Oman-India trade has doubled to \$10 billion in recent years. CEPA is expected to smoothen the path for free trade agreement talks between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council. In Jordan, Mr. Modi met with King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein, with the two sides launching cooperation agreements on renewable energy and water management. Mr. Modi's visit to Addis Ababa saw the launch of a strategic partnership. In the meet with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, the talks were on strengthening trade and knowledge and technology exchanges. The discussions were also key in terms of scheduling the much-delayed Africa-India summit, to be held in India. Ethiopia is not just the headquarters of the African Union, it is a new member of BRICS, and with India taking over the Chairmanship in 2026, it will be an important partner in setting out development and economic relations within both groupings.

In Amman, India and Jordan had less significant bilateral agreements but the talks were understood to be important in terms of the West Asian conflict and the Gaza Peace proposal. The tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbours have now imperilled the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor which is meant to traverse through Jordan. The Joint Statement in Amman had no mention of the corridor. Mr. Modi's presence in Jordan and a reiteration of India's traditional support for the Palestinian cause at a time when External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar was in Israel to meet Netanyahu government leaders was possibly meant to reassure the Arab leadership and those in the Global South strongly opposed to Israel's actions, that India's principled stand has not changed. The joint statement with Oman underlined the need for a resolution in Gaza including the establishment of a "sovereign and independent Palestinian state". However, unless that message is reiterated with India's Israeli interlocutors, especially Prime Minister Netanyahu who is expected to visit India in the new year, the import of visits such as the one by Mr. Modi would fail to build on the optics of bonhomie for a shared vision of the global order.

The historic Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) became a reality on September 5, 2005, during the first tenure of Dr. Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. MGNREGA was a rights-based legislation inspired by Article 41 of the Constitution of India, which calls upon the Government to secure citizens' right to work. It was developed and given shape through an extensive process of public consultations that lasted for almost 13 months. Both Houses of Parliament passed the Bill. Both enthusiastically and unanimously.

Over the past few days, the Narendra Modi government worked to bulldoze MGNREGA's abolition without any discussion, consultation, or respect for parliamentary processes or Centre-State relations. The removal of the Mahatma's name was only the tip of the iceberg. The very structure of MGNREGA, so integral to its impact, has been annihilated. It must be recalled that it has been the world's largest social security initiative and one that has also been the most intensively studied and evaluated. All these studies have emphasised its transformative effects on the weakest sections of our society.

A demolition in stages

Right from its conception, MGNREGA was envisioned as more than a mere scheme - as guaranteed employment based on actual demand from rural families in distress. The Modi government has simply annihilated the very idea of a legal guarantee in its new law, which is nothing but a set of bureaucratic provisions.

MGNREGA enacted the right to work in all rural India. The Modi government's new Bill has restricted the ambit of the scheme to rural areas as notified by the Union at its discretion.

Whereas earlier, the central allocation was meant to be uncapped, there is now a pre-determined budgetary allocation that caps the days of employment provided in each State. The number of workdays provided are, therefore, left to the Union Government's priorities rather than the people's needs.

The all-year guarantee of employment has been finished off. State governments have been asked to identify 60 days during peak agricultural season where no work shall be undertaken. One of the greatest impacts of MGNREGA was to increase the bargaining power of the landless poor in rural India, which has elevated agricultural wages. This bargaining power will



Sonia Gandhi

is Chairperson, Congress Parliamentary Party

The annihilation of this powerful social security intervention will have catastrophic consequences for crores of people across rural India

The bulldozed demolition of MGNREGA

definitely be eroded under the new law. The Modi government is attempting to suppress wage growth and that too at a time when the proportion of employment in agriculture has risen for the first time since Independence, contrary to what should have been the case.

MGNREGA exempted State governments from most of the financial burden, since the cost-sharing ratio was 90:10, borne by the Union government. This incentivised the State government to implement the scheme in earnest, in response to demand rather than its own fiscal constraints. Now, the new cost-sharing ratio is 60:40. Worse, any expense incurred in excess of the Union government's pre-determined allocation will now have to be borne entirely by the States. Effectively, by transferring a significant portion of the expense onto the States, the Modi government is discouraging States from providing work under the scheme. The finances of States, already under severe stress and strain, will be further devastated.

Aside from demolishing the demand-based nature of the programme, the Modi government has ended the decentralised nature of the scheme. In accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, MGNREGA provided for the Gram Sabha to undertake the planning of works as well as be the principal implementation authority of the scheme. This constitutional vision of local self-governance will be replaced by a top-down PM Gatishakti National Master Plan (PMGS-NMP) which will inevitably reflect the Union government's priorities rather than local needs. This is centralisation with a vengeance.

The Modi government is resorting to fraudulent claims that it has enhanced the employment guarantee from 100 days (under MGNREGA) to 125 days. For all the reasons outlined above, that will certainly not be the case. Indeed, the real nature of the Modi government's intentions can be understood from its decade-long track record of throttling MGNREGA. It began with the Prime Minister's (in)famous mocking of the scheme on the floor of the House and proceeded apace through a 'death by a thousand cuts' strategy - through, for instance, stagnant budgets, the use of disenfranchising technology and delayed payments to workers.

The impact of its loss

For the last 20 years, MGNREGA has been the most powerful social security intervention at the disposal of the government. It has secured better

wages for crores of citizens, stemmed seasonal distress migration, and hugely empowered gram panchayats. The social audits conducted by the gram sabhas brought about a new culture of accountability and transparency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the whole economy was severely dislocated, MGNREGA was one of two avenues through which the government was able to reach the poor and most vulnerable sections of society - the other being the National Food Security Act, 2013. Outside of COVID-19, the ever-high demand for work under this scheme only proves its continued necessity for ensuring rural livelihoods. Its demolition will have catastrophic consequences for crores of people across rural India.

In cross hairs

The demolition of the right to work must not be seen in isolation but as part of the long assault by the ruling establishment on the Constitution and its right-based vision for the country. The most fundamental right to vote is under unprecedented assault. The Right to Information has been desecrated with legislative changes that weaken the autonomy of Information Commissioners, and by wholesale exemptions from the Act for ill-defined 'personal information' data. The Right to Education has been undermined by a National Education Policy 2020, which has legitimised the shut down of about one lakh primary schools around the country. The Forest Rights Act, 2006, was markedly weakened by the Forest (Conservation) Rules (2022) which removed the gram sabha from any role in permitting the diversion of forest land. The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 has been significantly diluted. The National Green Tribunal set up in October 2010 following the passage of the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 has been emasculated. Through the three black farm laws, the government attempted to deny farmers the right to a minimum support price. The National Food Security Act, 2013, may very well be next on the chopping block.

MGNREGA realised the Mahatma's vision of Sarvodaya ('welfare of all') and enacted the constitutional right to work. Its death is our collective moral failure - one that will have financial and human consequences for crores of India's working peoples for years to come. It is imperative, now more than ever, to unite and safeguard the rights that protect us all.

Unlocking the potential of India-Africa economic ties

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visits to Namibia and Ghana, as part of a five-nation tour (including Trinidad and Tobago, Argentina and Brazil) in July 2025, focused the spotlight again on India-Africa economic relations - just as his recent visit to Ethiopia (December 16-17, 2025) did. The recent decade has witnessed a fresh momentum in India's relations with various African countries. A testament to this is the entry of the African Union as a full-time member of the G-20 during India's presidency term in 2023. India and Africa share a long history of cultural affinity and political solidarity, but their relationship has increasingly been shaped by economics in recent decades.

Uncertainties in western markets

In FY24, India's exports to the United States and the European Union constituted around 40% of its total exports. Given the rising unpredictability of these markets and the threat of a potential slowdown, it is essential that India looks to other markets, particularly African economies.

India is Africa's fourth-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching nearly \$100 billion. In FY24, India exported goods worth \$38.17 billion to African countries - the key destinations included Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania. Petroleum products, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals, rice and textiles were some of the major goods exported. In 2024, Africa's imports from India were around 6% of its total imports. To put this in perspective, in addition to being one of the largest investors, China is also Africa's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding \$200 billion. Around 21% of imports to Africa in 2024 came from China. Interestingly around 33% of imports from China fell under the HSN 84 and 85 product categories, demonstrating China's industrial prowess. These product categories comprise machinery, boilers, electrical machinery, and semiconductor devices.

Recognising the need to catch up, India has already set a target of doubling its trade with



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India's engagement with the continent must move towards developing long-term and sustainable partnerships

Africa by 2030. Here is a five-point strategy that may enable India to fulfil its target.

The first strategic pillar should focus on removing trade barriers and engaging in negotiations for preferential trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnership agreements with regional economic communities and the major African economies.

The second pillar should aim to move from low-value commodity exports to two-way value-added and cross-border joint venture manufacturing. Currently, Indian firms lag in utilising the incentives offered by multiple African governments to enable firms to set up manufacturing units. For Indian enterprises, setting up manufacturing facilities across Africa presents a strategic dual advantage. It enables them to maintain preferential access to the U.S. market through favourable tariff regimes, while simultaneously capitalising on Africa's growing consumer base and industrial demand. Moving beyond petroleum and traditional exports is critical in transitioning to a new phase of India's ties with African economies. Deepening engagement with African regional groupings such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can open greater opportunities for Indian exporters.

An opportunity for MSMEs

The third pillar must prioritise the scaling-up of the Lines of Credit and improve accessibility to trade finance. The African market offers a great opportunity for the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) segment, unlike the European and American markets where MSMEs find it difficult to gain a foothold. There is a considerable lack of policy attention in enabling MSMEs to gain access to the African markets.

Ensuring easy access to trade finance is critical in achieving a sustainable trade relationship with the continent. Other measures may include adopting trade in local currencies, and forming a joint insurance pool to cover political and

commercial risks for medium-term projects which may reduce the perceived risk for small and medium enterprises and banks.

The fourth strategic pillar should focus on lowering freight and logistics costs by investing in port modernisation, hinterland connectivity and in developing India-Africa maritime corridors.

The final strategic pillar involves the scaling up of services, digital trade, and people-to-people links. It is essential that India leverages its strength in Information Technology, health care, professional services and skill development to boost services exports and stimulate goods trade. Services enable high-value exports and facilitate greater two-way trade. Current policy measures fall short in enabling services trade with African economies. There needs to be a considerable improvement in this regard.

A role for the Indian public sector

Strengthening investments by Indian firms in African manufacturing, agro-processing, infrastructure, renewable energy and critical and emerging technologies may lend further strength to India's relations with African economies. Currently, India's investments in Africa are inflated by investments in Mauritius which are often done with an intent to evade taxes. Multiple factors, including bureaucratic hurdles, political instability and financing costs act as barriers for Indian firms to invest in Africa. Indian firms, particularly the public sector units must take the lead in investing in the African continent, particularly in mining and mineral exploration.

Ultimately, India's engagement with Africa must go beyond transactional trade and move towards building long-term, sustainable partnerships. As global supply chains undergo restructuring and the world shifts towards a multipolar economic order, Africa will remain central to India's aspirations of becoming a global economic power. The time is ripe for India to recalibrate, innovate, and deepen its economic footprint across the African continent.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Citizens, toxic air

Politicians anywhere jettison the people once voted to office. But the fate of citizens in the capital city is the worst that it can be. During the AAP regime they spent months choked by toxic air. The BJP made merry, eroding its opponent's image while doing nothing constructive to ameliorate the plight of Delhi's populace. Political outfits are too busy to think of the people and smug in scoring political brownie points.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

Mowed down

The loss of a herd of elephants after the Mizoram-New Delhi Rajdhani Express hit the seven animals, including a calf that was a few days old (Front page, December 21), underscores how wildlife deaths continue to play out across several States. Such incidents point to the clash between development and the pressures on fragile wildlife habitats. Earlier accidents prompted ad hoc measures such as speed restrictions and patrols, yet enforcement remains uneven. A balanced

response must blend technology with local knowledge. There must be thermal sensors, underpasses at known transit points, and strict speed limits through sensitive zones. Above all, mapping of elephant paths and better coordination between rail authorities and wildlife experts would save the lives of precious wild animals.

A. Myilsami,
Coimbatore

The accident is a setback to the conservation of elephants. Though the

Indian Railways claim to have adopted safety measures, these accidents seem to continue. There are a number of devices that can be used to alert elephants. AI-generated ear piercing sounds can be played at elephant crossings with the active supervision of railway personnel and wildlife experts.

Dr. V. Purushothaman,
Chennai

Sreenivasan

The passing of Malayalam actor-director Sreenivasan brings to an end a glorious

chapter in Malayalam cinema. He brought the life of the common Malayali onto the screen - their daily struggles, small joys and tears, which every person could relate to. In self-deprecating roles he brought out the problems people have with bandhs, load shedding and unions. His stories and movies were contemporary then and are still relevant today. Some of the epic dialogues in Malayalam cinema will always be owned by him. Subash Balakrishnan,
Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

He was a vibrant actor, scenarist and director. As a storyteller, Sreenivasan addressed the issues of unemployment, power politics and corruption, and gave expression to the innermost human feelings. A master craftsman who knew the pulse of people, Sreenivasan will remain to be an inspiring force for cinema aspirants.

J. Radhakrishna Kurup,
Ettumanoor, Kottayam, Kerala

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

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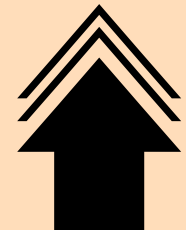
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What India can borrow
India need not emulate China's political system to achieve a turnaround, but it can draw on the principles that made China's progress possible. First, governance must shift from episodic responses to a long-term sustained, mission-oriented strategy and treat air pollution as a national public health emergency. Second, India must accelerate its transition to clean energy. Beijing's move away from coal drove major PM2.5 reductions; Delhi similarly needs to expand and adopt energy-efficient standards suitable for all sectors. Third, transport reforms must be enforced, not merely announced. BS-VI norms require credible PUC systems, modern testing centres, a robust vehicle-scrapage policy, and congestion management. Expanding EV charging infrastructure, incentivising electric mobility, and dramatically strengthening public transport are essential. Fourth, industrial policy must shift from relocation on paper to functional industrial zones with full utilities, transport access, and real-time emissions monitoring. Finally, air pollution must be governed as a regional problem. A Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei style airshed model should guide Delhi-NCR.

A yatra to gain a foothold in Andhra

portfolio — it cannot openly raise its voice against any failures of the State government to connect with the people, party leaders said.

The party's national leadership has reportedly made it clear that it must go hand in hand with the TDP, considering the support the latter is extending to the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre. With 16 Lok Sabha seats, the TDP is the second-largest party in the NDA. As the NDA has just 293 MPs, barely above the required 272 in the 543-member Lok Sabha, the BJP is heavily reliant on the TDP and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United), and does not want to take any step that could endanger the coalition.

The party has chalked out the Atal Modi Suparipalana Yatra, which will cover the entire State in two phases between December 11 and 25, during which statues of Atal Bihari Vajpayee are being unveiled at various places. The yatra, which began at Dharmavaram in Sri Sathya Sai district, will culminate in Amaravati, where a public meeting is planned with the participation of top leaders from the BJP, TDP, and JSP.

The Chief Ministers of BJP-ruled States, Union Ministers, and other leaders have been asked to participate in daily meetings, with a specific focus on the development achieved by the State during the Vajpayee and Modi governments. The TDP has also been made a partner in the programme, with its leaders and State Cabinet Ministers participating across districts.

BJP leaders maintained that involving the coalition partners in the yatra was aimed at strengthening ties with the TDP, as its support is crucial for the NDA government at the Centre.

Tamil Nadu SIR: Unusual patterns in deleted electors list

Shozhinganallur, Chengalpattu: 549 electors not residing.

2. N.S.N. Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Pallavaram, Chengalpattu: 505 electors not residing.
3. Government Higher Secondary School, Maduravoyal, Thiruvallur: 503 electors not residing.
4. Sunbeam Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Shozhinganallur, Chengalpattu: 478 electors not residing.
5. Government Higher Secondary School, Alandur, Kancheepuram: 450 electors not residing.

Polling stations with an unusually high number of women shifted

Pattern: These are the polling stations where the number of those deleted because they had permanently shifted is higher than average. Of these stations, in 172 women make up at least 75% of those deleted.

Select stations:

1. Walker Higher Secondary School, Nanguneri, Tirunelveli: 218 shifted electors, 172 are women (78.8%).
2. Union Primary School, Shozhinganallur, Chengalpattu: 192 shifted electors, 151 are women (78.6%).
3. Panchayat Union Primary School, Poimpuhar, Mayiladuthurai: 172 shifted electors, 131 are women (76.1%).
4. Chennai primary school, Thiruvotriyur, Thiruvallur: 132 shifted electors, 101 are women (76.5%).
5. Panchayat Middle School, Poonamallee, Thiruvallur: 125 shifted electors, 96 women (76.8%).

The PDFs of each polling station was downloaded from the TN Election Commission website and then translated to look at elector-level data.

For analysis this data was then aggregated and queried

Vienna, Dec. 21: A group of guerillas stormed the headquarters of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries here to-day, sprayed the building with machine-gun fire and seized 60 to 70 hostages – including senior Ministers from 9 or 10 OPEC member-nations.

Among those held were Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, influential Oil Minister of Saudi Arabia and Mr. Jamshid Amouzegar, Iranian Interior Minister.

Senior Indonesian officials, led by Dr. Elich Sanger, were known to be inside the offices.

Two Austrian detectives and another man were shot dead as the guerillas broke into the meeting of the OPEC Ministers.

The Police said the guerillas had demanded an aircraft to fly them and their hostages to an unknown destination. It was assumed they planned to take the OPEC Ministers with them.

Oil or other Ministers from Algeria, Ecuador, Gabon, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria and Venezuela were also known to be inside the building.

OPEC sources said it was unclear whether the Kuwait Oil Minister, Mr. Abdul Muttaleb al-Kazemi, was also being held.

According to the Police one of the gunmen – thought to be a South American – was shot in the stomach shortly after the raid started and was in hospital undergoing a serious operation.

The guerillas threatened to blow up the building if the man was not brought back to the OPEC offices – “dead or alive” – by 7 a.m. local time (06:00 GMT) to-morrow.)

The guerillas had planted explosives and hand grenades inside the offices and threatened to blow up the building unless their demands were met by to-morrow morning. They also threatened to detonate their explosives if they were approached by armed forces.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 22, 1925

Betting to be legalised?

Leafield (Oxford) Mid. Dec. 21: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will receive a deputation on betting tomorrow. The deputation will ask that betting be taxed and legalised.

“The Manchester Guardian” says there is reason to believe that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will give a negative, but sympathetic, refusal on the grounds of impracticability of collecting such taxation.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of new Jewish settlements to be set up in West Bank

19 Israel's Cabinet approved a proposal for 19 new settlements in the occupied West Bank, the far-right finance minister said. The approval increases the number of settlements in the West Bank by nearly 50% during the current government's tenure, from 141 in 2022 to 210. PTI

People displaced in Cambodia by Thai border clashes

5 In lakh. More than half a million people in Cambodia have been displaced from their homes by two weeks of border clashes with neighbouring Thailand, Phnom Penh's interior ministry said. The renewed fighting between the neighbours has killed at least 22 people in Thailand and 19 in Cambodia. AFP

Acres of illicit poppy cultivation destroyed in Manipur

600 Security forces destroyed over 600 acres of illicit poppy cultivation in the hill districts of Ukhrul and Kangpokpi in Manipur, the police said. Around 559 acres of poppy plantations were destroyed from December 16-20 in different locations of Ukhrul. PTI

The increase in India's exports to the U.S. in November

22.61 In per cent. Supply-chain realignments and inventory restocking ahead of the U.S. holiday season helped India's exports rebound in November, GTRI said. India's merchandise exports to the U.S. rose 22.61% to \$6.98 billion in November. PTI

Monitoring stations in Delhi that reported 'severe' air quality

16 The air quality in the national capital was recorded in the 'very poor' category on Sunday morning, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). 16 out of the 40 monitoring stations in the city reported air quality in the 'severe' category. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is the Aland voter fraud case?

When did the Election Commission file a complaint with respect to irregularities in Form 7s from the Aland assembly constituency in Kalaburagi? Why did the investigation hit a roadblock? What loopholes within the National Voters' Service Portal did the alleged fraudsters exploit?

EXPLAINER

K.V. Aditya Bharadwaj

The story so far:

The case of voter fraud in the Aland assembly constituency in Kalaburagi district in north Karnataka has emerged as one of the most well documented voter fraud cases, amidst a series of press conferences by Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi alleging widespread “vote chori” (vote fraud) in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Haryana.

Why is this case different?

Firstly, it was the Returning Officer (RO) of Aland constituency who lodged a complaint with the police in February 2023, alleging voter fraud, based on which an FIR was registered. The Election Commission (EC) itself alleged a malafide attempt to delete the names of 5,994 genuine voters from the electoral rolls, by providing false information.

Secondly, the investigation into the FIR by a Special Investigation Team (SIT) formed by the Government of Karnataka, has led to a chargesheet being filed against former Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MLA Subhash Guttedar from Aland and his son Harshananda Guttedar for allegedly hiring a private firm to target voters they suspected will vote for his rival and delete their names through forged Form 7s.

This is the first case where a clear link has been drawn to the BJP and “vote chori” allegations made by the Congress.

How was the fraud uncovered?

In 2018, veteran socialist and now Congress MLA from Aland, B. R. Patil, lost the seat to BJP's Subhash Guttedar by a narrow margin of 697 votes. Mr. Patil was again the candidate for the seat from the Congress in the 2023 assembly polls, which he eventually won by 10,348 votes.

In February 2023, a Booth Level Officer (BLO) got a Form 7 application, which, to her surprise, sought deletion of the name of her brother from the voter list saying he had “shifted out.” The application was made in the name of a woman from the same village. When they checked, the woman denied making any application. Subsequently, a review of Form 7s from that village found that 40 such forms were forged.

Any voter of a specific assembly constituency can fill out a Form 7 seeking the deletion of names of other voters from the same constituency, after their death or if they have shifted out. These applications are sent to BLOs for an on-ground verification, after which they are processed. However, in most cases, BLOs blindly accept these applications without verification. In this case, the BLO's brother, whose name was sought to be removed, tipped off Mr. Patil about the forged Form 7s in his village, saying all people whose names were sought to be deleted were Congress voters. This set off alarm bells, pushing Mr. Patil to complain to the EC and demand a thorough verification of all Form 7s.

How did the investigation proceed?

Mamata Kumari, Assistant Commissioner and the then RO of the Aland assembly constituency, tasked with the audit of Form 7s, in her eventual complaint to the Aland Police, said that there were 6,018 Form 7s in Aland assembly constituency between December 2022 and February 2023, of which only 24 were genuine while 5,994 forms were forged. She said that there was a conspiracy to



Inner workings: Police guard the residence of Subhash Guttedar, former MLA of Aland, in Kalaburagi during a raid by SIT officials on October 17. ARUN KULKARNI

disenfranchise genuine voters and sought a probe; an FIR was registered against unidentified individuals. The probe into the FIR was eventually transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of Karnataka.

The EC shared data for over 5,700 forged Form 7s to the police, including the mobile numbers used to create login IDs and passwords on EC portals such as the National Voters' Service Portal (NVSP) through which all forged Form 7s were submitted. It also provided IP logs. The CID got the Public Internet Protocol Detail Record (IPDR) from Telecom Service Providers (TSPs), which were in the IPV4 format and each IP address had over 200 users attached to it in the form of dynamic IP addresses. This meant probing over 8 lakh devices. To narrow down the search, the CID sought destination IPs and ports of the sessions through which these forged Form 7s were made. Despite at least 12 letters written by the CID to the EC seeking this data, the Commission did not respond, as reported by *The Hindu* on September 7.

Then, on September 18, 2025, Mr. Gandhi held a press conference in Delhi questioning the EC over the Aland vote fraud. Even though the Commission initially claimed that there was no wrongful deletion of voters in Aland, a day later, the Chief Electoral Officer of Karnataka conceded that there were “unsuccessful attempts” to delete voters and that the EC itself had lodged a complaint.

Following this, the government in Karnataka formed an SIT led by B. K. Singh, Additional Director General of Police (ADGP), Karnataka.

How was the case eventually solved?

As the EC did not share the destination ports and IPs, the SIT found another route. Sources said the SIT scrutinised some of the 24 genuine Form 7s made in Aland, identified their IP addresses and reverse engineered them to narrow down the search for the devices used to make the forged Form 7s.

The SIT found that many of the 5,994 forged Form 7s could be traced to a mobile internet connection of one Mohammed Ashfaq, based out of

Kalaburagi. Ashfaq reportedly confessed to having submitted forged Form 7s, but said he was only working for his relatives, Akram Pasha and Aslam Pasha, who ran a “call-centre-like” firm in Kalaburagi which had a contract to make Form 7s. They were allegedly paid ₹80 for every forged Form 7. The Pasha brothers were then detained, questioned and their premises raided. The SIT claimed that they recovered multiple digital devices through which the forged Form 7s were made, which now forms the key evidence in the chargesheet the SIT has filed recently.

The trio reportedly said that they had a contract to do so from the then incumbent BJP MLA Subhash Guttedar, a four-time MLA from Aland, and his son Harshananda Guttedar, a three-time Kalaburagi Zilla Panchayat member. The SIT further raided their residences and that of their Chartered Accountant in Kalaburagi, and recovered digital devices and evidence of a money trail between the Guttedars and Akram Pasha. It is alleged that the Guttedars marked out voters they thought would vote for their rival and handed it over to Akram Pasha.

Additionally, the Guttedars were caught destroying evidence, including several bundles of voter lists stored at their Aland residence. They have been charged for destruction of evidence as well.

What was revealed in the course of the investigation?

In 2023, the EC had shared with the investigators as many as 64 mobile numbers using which accounts were created on the NVSP. It was through these accounts that the 5,994 forged forms were submitted. When a person creates an account on NVSP, s/he will have to key in his mobile number, which will be the Login ID, and get an OTP. This will lead the portal to verify the user, following which a password needs to be set.

The probe started with these phone numbers. The investigators found that the owners of these mobile numbers were from over 15 States of the country. None of them had either created these accounts or given out OTPs they received on their phones.

This puzzle was resolved when the

Pasha brothers pointed the investigators towards ‘otpbazar.online’, a website which, for a price, sold credentials to carry out transactions online in such a way that it could not be traced back. Once one registers on the website paying a fee, it will give you a random mobile number, which could be used for any transaction online. Within minutes, the website will give you the OTP sent to that mobile number, sources said, using which the brothers reportedly opened the accounts on the NVSP.

Through the money trail between the Pasha brothers and the website, the SIT also tracked down Bapi Adya, the man running the website from the Nadia district in West Bengal, and arrested him. However, how he was able to give OTPs to random mobile numbers the website selected still remains a mystery. His website is just an Indian franchise of a U.S.-based website called ‘sms-activate.io’. The SIT has not been able to reach the servers of this website. However, they are taking steps to take down ‘otpbazar.online’, given its larger repercussions enabling cyber crime.

Is the voter portal compromised?

The chargesheet in the case lists six loopholes of the NVSP that the accused misused to make forged Form 7s, some of which have been fixed now.

Any mobile number and the OTP sent to it could be used to create an account and set the password.

Subsequent logins needed only the password and no OTP. Any number of applications could be made from these accounts. No alert was sent to either the person in whose name the application was being made or whose name was sought to be deleted from or added to the list. Moreover, there was no fixed session time on the portal.

Days after the press conference by Mr. Gandhi in September, 2025, the EC introduced a new e-sign feature, which mandates that those who make any applications online for addition, deletion or correction verify their identity through their Aadhar-linked mobile number.

While this will enhance security, there is no clarity whether all six loopholes flagged by the SIT have been fixed.

THE GIST

It was the Returning Officer (RO) of Aland constituency who lodged a complaint with the police in February 2023, alleging voter fraud, based on which an FIR was registered.

In 2023, the EC had shared with the investigators as many as 64 mobile numbers using which accounts were created on the NVSP. It was through these accounts that the 5,994 forged forms were submitted.

The chargesheet in the case lists six loopholes of the NVSP that the accused misused to make forged Form 7s, some of which have been fixed now.

CACHE



U.S. President Donald Trump and FBI Director Kash Patel in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, D.C., U.S. on December 12. REUTERS

How South Asians became targets of racist hate on Elon Musk’s X

As digital rights advocates track rising levels of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and racism on X after Elon Musk’s 2022 takeover of Twitter, many have noted a distinct spike in hateful rhetoric aimed at South Asians, targeting their race, skin colour, and religious beliefs

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:
“Imagine the smell,” tweeted Nik Pash, responding to a photo that showed several developers at a xAI hackathon. A large number of them appeared to be of South Asian ethnicity. Mr. Pash’s tweet drew outrage as the phrase was generally used to mock people perceived as being unhygienic. Plus, it came from someone who headed artificial intelligence at a coding startup. Mr. Pash was let go after many users criticised his post. The outrage grew as multiple other X users responded with shared negative comments about H1-B visas, Indians working in IT, deportations, bad smells, body odour, open defecation, and American population replacement. While many supported Mr. Pash’s removal from the company, others were outraged by what they felt was a harmless joke. This incident highlighted an issue plaguing X: racism against South Asians.

What is the nature of abuse on X?
As digital rights advocates track rising levels of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, and transphobia on X after Elon Musk’s 2022 takeover of Twitter, many have noted a distinct spike in hateful rhetoric aimed at South Asians this year, targeting their race, skin colour, religious beliefs, careers in America, and/or migration history.
Graphic commenters referred to several prominent X users as “street shi**rs”; insulted their religious identity; mischaracterised them as dirty; or called on them to be deported and stripped of their visa privileges. The hate was also layered, with women facing misogynistic abuse in addition to the racism while Muslim users were hit with Islamophobia and Hindu users faced anti-Hindu hate.
Free AI tools with poor guardrails,

including Grok’s own photo-to-video generator on X, made it easy for malicious users to generate racist deepfake photos and videos of individuals. Several verified X users engage in this type of harassment.

Which South Asians were abused?
U.S. conservative politician Vivek Ramaswamy, New York City mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, Senior White House Policy Advisor on AI Sriram Krishnan, FBI Director Kash Patel, and Former U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Chair Lina Khan might hold radically different political views, but all five were subjected to disturbing levels of racist hate on Elon Musk’s X. When Mr. Ramaswamy on November 1 posted a photo with his children to greet X followers for Halloween, commenters told him to go to India, and used the racial slur “pajeet” against the family. Furthermore, one user even turned the photo into a deepfake video to show Mr. Ramaswamy dumping brown liquid over his children.
Mr. Ramaswamy and Mr. Patel were also hit with graphic images and racist comments when they posted Diwali wishes on their X accounts last month, with both individuals being told to return to India.
Their Hindu gods were referred to as “demons”, and shown broken to pieces before a crucifix in an AI image.
Despite receiving U.S. President Donald Trump’s endorsement, Mr. Krishnan was slammed with racist abuse in late 2024 and doxxed by right-wing influencer Laura Loomer last year. Ms. Loomer later apologised and claimed it was an accident. X users also trolled Mr. Krishnan over his appearance and his Indian background.

How have racist comments against South Asians increased recently?
The Center for the Study of Organized Hate (CSOH), a non-profit, non-partisan

think tank in the U.S., reported a “visible uptick of anti-Indian hate” on X after Mr. Krishnan’s appointment to his U.S. White House role, and also after a post on X by Mr. Ramaswamy in December 2024, when H1-B visa debates were raging.
“Since then, anti-Indian racism on social media, including X, has shown no signs of abating,” observed the organisation.
After studying a dataset of 680 posts on X targeting Indians and Indian-origin communities that received over 281 million views between July 1 and September 7, CSOH reported that almost 70% of the posts focused on deportation, invasion, and job theft.
“Immigration and calls for deportation are thus the central pillars and main drivers of anti-Indian racism on X,” explained CSOH in the report, adding that “racist slurs and mockery, though less voluminous, also play a crucial role in normalising and reinforcing anti-Indian hate on X. The repeated use of racialised terms like “pajeet” or tropes of Indians as dirty or smelly provides the cultural scaffolding for more explicit exclusionary and hateful rhetoric.”
Mr. Mamdani and Ms. Khan faced both racism and Islamophobia on X, with the New York City mayor-elect frequently being linked to terrorism because he openly embraced his Muslim identity. One example was U.S. politician Andy Ongles, who on October 29 posted, “Think of how many future Zohran Mamdani’s we can stop by mass deportations. Let’s deport them now before they are naturalised. Subversive immigrants must NEVER get citizenship.”
Mr. Mamdani’s legal status was also questioned by U.S. President Donald Trump, triggering further abuse against the politician on X.
Though former FTC Chair Ms. Khan is not vocal about her religious beliefs, the London-born American antitrust scholar was nevertheless attacked online over her

surname, her appearance, and her parents’ Pakistani heritage. Ms. Khan recently became a target after she was named the co-chair of Mr. Mamdani’s transition team.
X user Paul Sperry, verified with a blue check mark and with over half a million followers, posted a photo of what he claimed was Ms. Khan’s “family home” on X, possibly doxxing her and her family members. He further claimed that she “hates capitalism and is pushing socialism on all New Yorkers.” In another post, he referred to the former regulator as a “TROJAN HORSE?”, called her “Ethnic-Pakistani Muslim” and said she would be able to “place fellow Muslims throughout the government”.
The normalisation of South Asian hate as well as mockery on X has also impacted everyday tech workers and social media users.

What events triggered such hate?
Apart from the souring relationship between the U.S. and India after Mr. Trump’s return to the White House, the President’s strong and repeated emphasis on the removal of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives has made more people view minority groups in a poor light.
Referring to them as “illegal and immoral discrimination programs,” his rhetoric unfairly showed South Asians as outsiders taking over American jobs.
Referring to the H-1B visa programme for workers, Mr. Trump said in a September 19 proclamation that the “large-scale replacement of American workers through systemic abuse of the program has undermined both our economic and national security”.
A U.S. government report published this year stated that out of the H-1B petitions approved in FY 2024, 71% were for beneficiaries whose country of birth was India.

THE DAILY QUIZ

With 2025 coming to an end, dictionaries and round-up articles have reviewed the year in words. A quiz on some words, phrases, and terms that became popular this year

K. Abhinaya

QUESTION 1
In a year that saw social media growing leaps and bounds and AI chatbots gaining prominence, this word encapsulates the one-sided emotional connections people form with media figures. It was declared the word of 2025 by Cambridge Dictionary. Identify the word.

QUESTION 2
This word refers to the vacant expression that members of this particular generation seem to have in a situation where a spoken response is usually expected. The word gained popularity on social media platforms prompting cultural and

psychological interest. What is the word?

QUESTION 3
U.S. President Donald Trump’s swearing-in ceremony was a broligarchy. What does the word broligarchy mean in this sentence?

QUESTION 4
If brain rot was one of the catchwords of 2024, Dictionary.com’s pick for 2025 encapsulates the word aptly. The origin of the modern use of the word is thought to be from a song. Identify the word.

QUESTION 5
A word that refers to the low quality content that is produced using AI. It was earlier associated with food waste. Identify the word.



Visual question:
One of the words on the shortlist for Oxford’s word of the year pertains to a growing fad related to one’s lifestyle. This person is one of the faces of this pursuit. Name the word and the person. GETTY IMAGES

Questions and Answers to the December 19 edition of the daily quiz:
1. Messi’s jersey number is this number. It was worn in football by legends such as X and Y. **Ans: Ten; Pele and Diego Maradona**
2. Last month, Messi visited this place and said he hoped to return there one day. **Ans: Barcelona**
3. This Uruguayan player provided the most assists for Messi for his Barcelona goals. **Ans: Luis Suarez**
4. This account apart from Cristiano Ronaldo’s has more followers on Instagram than Messi. **Ans: Instagram**
5. Messi has scored the most goals against this club. **Ans: Sevilla**
6. A 70-ft Messi statue been installed in this city. **Ans: Kolkata**
Visual: Name this Argentinian. **Ans: Pablo Aimar**
Early Birds: Sadhan Panda| Vibhuti Singh| Siddhartha Viswanathan| Ambarin Aslam



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

He was censured for his attitude

He has gotten too big for his boots ever since he won that spelling bee last year

S. Upendran

How is the word ‘censure’ pronounced? (G. Rajeevan)
There are several ways of pronouncing the word, and one of them is the following. The first syllable sounds like the ‘sen’ in ‘sent’, ‘sense’ and ‘sentence’, while the following ‘s’ is pronounced like the ‘sh’ in ‘ship’, ‘shape’ and ‘shine’. The final ‘ure’ sounds like the ‘a’ in ‘china’. One possible way of pronouncing this rather formal word, which can be used both as a noun and a verb, is ‘SEN-sher’, with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Latin ‘censura’ meaning ‘judgement’ or ‘opinion’. When it was first used in English, ‘censure’ had a neutral meaning; it basically meant to evaluate something. With the passage of time, however, it acquired a negative connotation. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to mean to criticise someone harshly – in other words, when someone ‘censures’ you, the individual expresses a strong disapproval of what you have done. This criticism usually comes from someone in authority – it could be your boss, a judge, a policeman, etc. When a member of your family or a good friend of yours makes similar negative comments about you, it is seen more as ‘criticism’ than ‘censure’.

The press and the public strongly criticised the players for their lack of application.
The Board censured the team for its sloppy fielding.
The team’s lack of discipline during the tour came under severe censure.

What is the meaning and origin of ‘get too big for one’s boots’? (D. Vibha, Pune)
The expression is mostly used in informal contexts in British English to mean ‘arrogant’ or ‘conceited’. When someone complains that you have become too big for your boots, what the individual is suggesting is that you think no end of yourself; you strongly believe that you are more important than all the others in the room. Everybody else pales in comparison to you.
Ever since Janani won the tournament, she’s gotten too big for her boots.
Since his promotion as Manager, Jaidev refuses to acknowledge his friends. He’s gotten too big for his boots.
Americans tend to say, ‘too big for one’s britches’ – sometimes spelt ‘breeches’. In the past, trousers or pants that covered an individual from his waist to his knees were called ‘britches’. It is possible to pronounce ‘britches’ and ‘breeches’ the same way. The words can be rhymed with ‘witches’ and ‘riches’.
Stay level-headed! Don’t get too big for your britches/breeches.
The idiom suggests that you have become so swollen with pride that your boots/trousers no longer fit.
upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Aerobic:
depending on free oxygen or air; enhancing respiratory and circulatory efficiency

Synonyms: aerophilic, aerophilous

Usage: Running is an aerobic activity while weightlifting is not.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/aerobicpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /əəˈjəʊ.bɪk/

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

Empowered but powerless

PRAVIN KAUSHAL

In 1993, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was hailed as the dawn of *Gram Swaraj* - village self-rule rooted in democratic decentralisation. The promise was clear: Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) would no longer be mere implementing arms of Delhi or state capitals, but genuine institutions of self-government. Three decades later, that promise is gasping for fiscal breath.

India has successfully elected millions of village representatives. What it has failed to do is give them the one thing that guarantees autonomy: control over money. A recent RBI report on the *Finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions* presents a stark picture. Own Source Revenue (OSR) remains negligible, with Panchayats depending on state and central transfers for nearly 95 per cent of their funds. Decentralisation, in practice, has remained administrative - not fiscal.

Yet this failure is not uniform. The Panchayats Devolution Index 2024 reveals that India's problem is not design, but political will.

The contrast across regions is striking. The Devolution Index - which measures the transfer of funds, functions, and functionalities - shows southern states decisively ahead. Karnataka tops the list with a score of 72.23, followed by Kerala (70.59) and Tamil Nadu (68.38). The national average languishes at 43.69, while areas such as Jammu & Kashmir (27.85) and Jharkhand (27.73) remain near the bottom.

Why does the South lead? The answer lies in clarity and commitment. States like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have issued unambiguous orders empowering Panchayats to levy and collect taxes. In Kerala, Panchayats are not merely civic bodies; they function as planning units with independent budgets, authority over property taxes, and

freedom to levy user charges without constant state approval. Decentralisation here is institutionalised, not rhetorical.

Elsewhere, Panchayats remain trapped in a structural bind. Property tax - the most reliable source of local revenue - accounts for nearly 40 per cent of OSR nationwide. Yet India's property tax-to-GDP ratio is just 0.2 per cent, among the lowest globally.

This is not because rural citizens refuse to pay. It is because, in many states, they are never properly asked. In Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, Gram Panchayats have either not been fully authorised to levy property tax or lack the operational ability to do so. Even where powers exist on paper, they are throttled by bureaucratic ambiguity - unclear definitions of "commercial property," outdated property registers, and disputes over valuation.

Compounding this is a deeper flaw: states often retain the power to assess property values while pushing the politically unpopular task of tax collection onto Panchayats. A village Sarpanch, without technical staff or surveyors, cannot realistically assess the value of a new warehouse or commercial complex.

Beyond structure lies a behavioural challenge - the proximity paradox. In villages, the tax collector and taxpayer are neighbours. A Sarpanch who enforces property tax or hikes water charges risks immediate social backlash and electoral consequences.

Successful states have addressed this by letting the state play the "bad cop." Maharashtra (Index score: 61.44) offers a useful model, where statutory minimum floor rates for local taxes are fixed by the state. This allows local leaders to tell residents, "The law requires this," shielding them from direct blame while ensuring revenue flows.

Another vast but neglected opportunity lies in common property resources - ponds, grazing lands, weekly markets, and minor forests.



Though legally meant for community benefit, control often lies with Forest or Revenue departments.

A Panchayat attempting to lease a pond for fisheries or a market shed for weekly haats frequently runs into inter-departmental red tape. Transferring Operations and Maintenance rights to PRIs would not only generate revenue but also improve local stewardship and conservation.

The solution is neither complex nor unknown. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's digital platform Samartha, aimed at end-to-end digitisation of OSR management, is a step forward. Digitisation reduces leakage, improves transparency, and creates reliable tax databases.

But technology cannot substitute political intent. State governments

must recognise that hoarding fiscal power at the capital is inefficient. Home Minister Amit Shah has rightly noted that Panchayati Raj cannot succeed without revenue autonomy. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has similarly called for "innovative practices" to boost Panchayat income.

These statements must now translate into policy. A three-pronged approach is essential:

- **Mandatory devolution:** States must be legally bound to devolve taxation powers - especially property tax - to Gram Panchayats.
- **Capacity building:** Scalable training programmes, such as those developed with IIM-Ahmedabad, must equip Panchayat officials with skills in valuation, accounting, and revenue management.

- **Incentivisation:** Finance Commission grants should be tightly linked to OSR performance. Panchayats that collect more should receive matching grants, creating a virtuous cycle.

The 73rd Amendment delivered democratic decentralisation. But democracy without financial autonomy is hollow. Until Panchayats can pay their electricity bills without waiting for a state grant, *Gram Swaraj* will remain unfinished business. The southern states have shown what is possible. The rest of India must now follow.

(The writer is Director - Strategic Partnerships, Mtrial (Data/AI Center) and a Young Alumni Member, Govt. Liaison Task Force, IIT-Kharagpur.)

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

When disagreement is disagreeable



Few things are more exasperating than, when you are saying something, somebody interrupts you midway and expresses a doubt or a contrary view. It is even more exasperating, as often happens, when the contrary view has less to do with what you were saying than who you are as a person.

Take the provocative subject of abortion. Everybody has a strong view on the right to abortion. Those views are not only contradictory but often directly contrary. It follows that both sides have a lot to learn from an exchange. But try such an exchange, and you are most likely to come away deeply frustrated. You will be interrupted, misunderstood, contradicted, even tainted with a label.

On politics, the subject on which a society most needs to have conversations, especially if there are divisive, partisan views, discussion is more difficult. Most exchanges end in frustration and disappointment, if not fury and name-calling. In many social groups, it is customary to declare political issues verboten, for fear that any discussion will create unpleasantness. That is a pity, for discussion alone is the key to reducing divisiveness.

Why must we avoid certain themes - even the themes most worth talking about? Why are some discussions potentially explosive? Why can't we talk about even

incendiary subjects calmly and meaningfully?

Social scientists are offering three simple answers to these questions. The first answer is one that our experience verifies daily: we are abysmally poor listeners. Any time we talk, we are likely to receive dishearteningly poor responses. They range from being quite misdirected to highly irrelevant. They often relate to the listener's past experience rather than to the speaker's current comments.

This is because most of us lack the discipline of suspending our past assumptions and current feelings to listen unencumbered to a speaker. We can listen well only when we listen objectively and impartially. This means that when you listen to me, you must resolutely avoid assessing what I am saying. You just listen, to fully absorb what is said. The business of evaluating what you have heard - whether it is right or wrong - must come later, after you have fully absorbed what I have said. This takes a disciplined effort, for our inclination is to listen and judge at the same time.

The Buddhists have a name for this: they call it listening with a beginner's mind. The beginner has an unsullied mind, uncluttered by prior learning, with no set tendency to accept or reject another view, no assumption to impede any new point of view. Such a mind is like a blank

slate, ready to absorb a new idea impartially and without bias. A person with such a mind is best able to participate in an open exchange.

Of course, it helps to have a clear, unbiased mind when discussing with another person. But the second answer goes further: it is not enough to listen well, it is important to understand what is intended by the speaker. Such understanding is not so simple as we may suppose. We have all experienced the awkward situation where we have said something innocuous, and it has caused unexpected hurt and misunderstanding.

Such misinterpretation occurs for a variety of reasons. We are all different people, and we speak vastly different languages. Even when we apparently speak the same language, we use words and phrases in a unique and therefore misleading way. Even listening earnestly to you, I can easily misread both the content and intent of your speech. That is why communication specialists suggest a simple tool: reflect back to the speaker, in your own words, what he or she said to you. By doing that, you both show the speaker that you have carefully heard what was said and you are trying to make sure that you have fully understood it. It also gives the speaker the chance to correct you if there is a transmission error.

The third answer is perhaps the most critical. No exchange can work



Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

if you are focusing less on the speaker's words than the speaker's person. For example, if I make a political statement, and you - instead of heeding my facts or reasons - focus on my personality, my past affiliations or my social and economic background, you are unlikely to be a fair listener and impartially absorb my message. You will attribute my views to some predilection, such as my job or party loyalty, and never fairly assess what I have said. You would think me a biased speaker, whereas, in fact, you are the biased listener. That is a guarantee of complete breakdown of reasonable communication. If you want to understand me, you must listen without prejudging my

background, focusing instead on the rationale I am offering.

It makes sense, instead of pushing all political and religious discussion under the rug and declaring all touchy subjects off-limit, to listen to your interlocutor with care, without assumptions or pre-judgment, and periodically check your own understanding. That is a good way to avoid an avoidable kerfuffle. Maybe you will learn something. Who knows, you may even build a valuable relationship.

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

Crossword | No. 293329

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ALUMNA SITTSBACK

EU P A R R L

HAUSFRAU NEWAY

N I I S P A S

PSYCHOPATH KISS

W R G T F I

ISOCLINE CHANCY

C A L S F

CHARGE FREETIME

O P N O A

MORE CARDREADER

L D H W N D X

TROTKA ANECDOTE

U E N R R E R

ANIMATED SERIAL

ACROSS

7 Close-fitting leotard I modelled (8)

9 American expelled from country for going without fare (6)

10 Player worries when start of test is delayed (4)

11 Unpalatable cases initially cause revulsion beyond belief (10)

12 Taste is pretty much wasted on writer (6)

14 Man pledged backing from French Resistance (8)

15 Improve state of disturbed heartless children (6)

17 This fish looks and sounds flat? (6)

20 Increase scope of criminal case and others under review (8)

22 Messenger from wedding cycled round front of church (6)

23 Ordered cadet that is controlling tank to turn off (10)

24 Send out introduction to elite university (4)

25 Reverse management's reshuffle after married man is dismissed (6)

26 Support Harry meeting the Queen in person (8)

DOWN

1 Soldier dies after dropping ecstasy in Heaven (8)

2 Corporation has invested large surplus (4)

3 Gangs said to go round looking for sex (6)

4 Free lunch lacking core ingredient turned out to be pleasant (8)

5 What reveals and, in a manner of speaking, inspires? (10)

6 Play with retracting pencil or felt-tip pens (6)

8 Half believed police department's tapped judge (6)

13 Official pitch inexperienced reporter typed up about waste (10)

16 What may have part to play in temperature falling in cold office? (8)

18 Managed to get reference suspect lied about (8)

19 Religious teaching is unable to deny earlier beliefs (6)

21 Comparatively unbalanced means of presenting items for consumption (6)

22 Wanted joint passed to the audience (6)

24 Freelancer has vigour and style (4)

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

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 22 December 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Lord Birkenhead would seem to have lost his temper or to be suffering from liver, judging from the extracts from a recent speech of his which the Englishman quotes. Or perhaps it is neither of these things, but a determined effort on his part to recover his youth, for it was in speeches of this acid flavour that the young F. E. Smith made the reputation that carried him to the Woolsack and the Secretaryship of State for India. Lord Birkenhead at least seems to have stirred the ordinarily phlegmatic Lord Haldane to the retort that like fin animal at the Zoo Lord Birkenhead "is obviously out of his natural element on the bench on which he sits." It may have been resentment of the decorous atmosphere about him that led Lord Birkenhead to break out on this occasion, and have his fling. We hope he feels better after the outbreak.

News Items

UNPARLIAMENTARY

KARACHI COUNCILLOR WHO FORGOT HIMSELF

(From Our Correspondent.)

Karachi, Dec.

Narandas Anandji, the Karachi Municipal Councillor, who called out "Damn you" to another councillor at a previous Municipal meeting, has written to the President expressing regret at the occurrence and the matter has been allowed to drop.

HOCKEY AT DELHI

AJMERE AND ALIGARH IN THE FINAL

(From Our Correspondent.)

Delhi, Dec.

The semi-final between the Devons "A" and the Loco Sports Club, Ajmere was played this evening and Ajmere won by 4 to nil. The final comes off on Sunday between Ajmere and Aligarh. The distribution of prizes will take place just after the final match.

CHRISTMAS RECESS

WORK BEFORE COMMONS NEXT SESSION

(British Official Wireless.)

Leafield (Oxford), Dec.

The final stages of a large number of Bills will be dealt with at to-day's meetings of both Houses of Parliament, and to-morrow morning the first session of the present Parliament will be brought to a close with the formal prorogation. As Easter falls unusually early next year, the prorogation will be short, and Parliament will therefore reassemble on February 2. A heavy programme of domestic business is in prospect for next year, and it is already clear that Parliament will be kept hard at work until August. The position in the mining industry, at present the subject of investigation by a Special Commission, promises to occupy considerable time, and is one of the most interesting subjects to be dealt with during the session. But the national economy proposals will also be awaited eagerly, and will invest the next Budget with special interest.

RUSSIA AND LOCARNO

M. BRIAND AND VALUE OF AGREEMENT

Paris, Dec.

M. Briand explained the consequences of the Locarno agreement to the Foreign Affairs and Army Commissions of the Chamber. He emphasized his conviction that a similar pact in 1914 would have prevented war. Replying to the Communists, he said that the Locarno agreement was in no way directed against Russia, and added he would endeavour to reserve for Soviet Russia a position in the League of Nations equivalent to that of other powers.—Reuter.



Editor's
TAKE

Bangladesh on the brink

If the Bangladesh government fails to handle the unrest following Hadi's killing, it risks another round of chaos while straining relations with India

As they say, history repeats itself, and no place better than Bangladesh confirms it. Political assassinations have a long history in Bangladesh, and those assassinations have been turning points in the country's politics. The recent assassination of youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi has once again shown how fragile peace is in Bangladesh. News of his assassination ignited the streets of Dhaka, and within hours chaos reigned on the streets. However, what began as outrage over a brutal killing quickly turned into a challenge to state authority, with protesters breaching Parliament premises. Hadi's murder carries all the hallmarks of Bangladesh's violent political past, where assassinations are rarely isolated crimes and often signal a larger power struggle. His death galvanised youth groups and opposition factions, and anti-India sentiment prevailed across the country.

Ironically, the protests that followed Hadi's funeral were as much about anger over his demise as they were about the lack of governance and the multitude of grievances people have regarding the non-actions of the government.

Ironically, the participation of various student groups and the National Citizen Party indicates an organised political opposition to the present government, built on anti-India sentiment. The government has either failed, or deliberately chosen not, to curb the violence and attacks on properties linked to the former ruling Awami League, and attempts to march towards Indian diplomatic facilities point to a deliberate effort to widen the conflict. Anti-India slogans and unsubstantiated claims that Hadi's killers fled across the border appear to show a deliberate attempt to point fingers at India and inflame nationalist sentiment.

Who killed Hadi – and why – remains the central unanswered question. Possibilities range from intra-party rivalries and factional score-settling to attempts by extremist or destabilising forces to provoke chaos during a sensitive political phase. The interim government's challenge is to deliver justice swiftly while preventing the tragedy from becoming a pretext for sustained disorder and further spoiling relations with India.

For India, Bangladesh is not just a neighbour but a strategic partner in trade, connectivity and regional security. The targeting of Indian diplomatic sites, even symbolically, is not good news for India. New Delhi must tread carefully – reaffirming respect for Bangladesh's sovereignty, securing its personnel, and quietly encouraging de-escalation without becoming a scapegoat. India must take the initiative to douse the flames and calm public sentiment in Bangladesh.

Whether Hadi's killing becomes another chapter in unrest or a moment that forces institutional course correction will depend on how the present government handles this crisis. It is a difficult time for Bangladesh, and any further fanning of the flames could engulf the entire country; if that happens, India would certainly feel the heat.

Operation Sindoor: India's Dharam Yudha

From strict discrimination between combatants and civilians to calibrated escalation and restraint, Operation Sindoor reflected the Gita and the Ramayana's timeless insistence that force, when unavoidable, must remain ethical, anchored in justice rather than hatred or ambition.



R K PACHNANDA

While inaugurating the 10th International Gita Conference, the Defence Minister of India stated that during Operation Sindoor, India's action was guided by the message which Lord Krishna gave to the Pandavas: that war should not be fought for revenge or ambition, but to uphold righteousness. Operation Sindoor was that dharma-based ethical action which India adopted. Lord Krishna emphasises that ethical war is an unavoidable duty (svadharma), without personal attachment to the fruits of action.

On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Lord Krishna reminds Arjuna of his kshatriya dharma – "Looking to your own duty you should never waver, for there is nothing higher for a kshatriya than a righteous war." Dharma must be protected by wielding righteous force when needed. Adharma should be vanquished by dharma, or else it would be a sin. However, Krishna qualifies the act of war with a rider. The war must be dharmika, that is, fought according to established rules. The Mahabharata elsewhere details these rules. Some of these include not attacking a warrior who has laid down his arms, no killing of non-combatants, and no use of celestial weapons on ordinary soldiers, etc. The main tenet of Lord Krishna's preaching is that the warrior must act without desire for fame or personal gain, or else the act becomes tainted.

The doctrine of nishkama karma is the Gita's core principle for the ethics of war. Lord Krishna further insists on equanimity. Ethical war is fought without hatred towards the enemy and without triumph in victory. This vision teaches that one should not harbour hatred. The Pandavas fought not out of personal enmity but because adharma had reached such a point where only force could restore balance.

A war fought without moral anchoring degenerates into mere power play. Hence, we see that Operation Sindoor was launched on these principles – it had a just cause of dharma over adharma. It followed rules that avoided the killing of civilians, and there was no personal hatred, ego, greed or desire, except that it was just and fair, with the aim of dharma over adharma.

The Bhagavad Gita is a profound Indian text on the ethics of waging war. It speaks eloquently on the tragic necessity of war, especially when adharma threatens the social and moral universe. The Pahalgam attack, targeting tourists specifically for their religious identity, represented a direct assault on India's constitutional principle of equal respect for all religions and demanded a dharmic response.

Principles of Proportionality

The Bhagavad Gita is a synthesis of various strands of Indian religious thought, including the Vedic concept of dharma (duty, rightful action).



THE TEACHINGS OF THE RAMAYANA AND THE BHAGAVAD GITA ARE AS PERTINENT TODAY AS THEY WERE IN THE PAST. DHARMA PRIORITISES JUSTICE OVER VICTORY, PROTECTION OVER DOMINATION. THIS IS WHAT CONSTITUTES TRUE STRENGTH

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It forms the didactic portion of the Mahabharata. Operation Sindoor, with its carefully calibrated objectives, exemplified this principle. Its objective was to uphold national sovereignty and protect civilian lives without precipitating a broader military conflagration.

Operation Sindoor's methodology was in keeping with the dharmic principle of ahimsa (non-violence) in its discriminatory application. India held that it was a measured response to the blatant attack on Indian tourists and was aimed at seeking justice against terrorists. It had no intent to attack the Pakistani military. It carefully discriminated between combatants and non-combatants, between the guilty establishment and innocent populations, and thus echoes the Ramayana's treatment of warfare, where Rama consistently distinguishes between Ravana's forces and innocent citizens of Lanka.

The Ramayana's Model

Rama was a true maryada purushottam who, throughout the epic, repeatedly acted with restraint: he gave Ravana multiple chances to return Sita peacefully and insisted on fair combat. He initiated diplomatic solutions through Hanuman's embassy to Ravana. In past instances of friction between India and Pakistan, India had repeatedly offered cooperation in joint investigative teams despite Pakistan's uncooperative response to the Mumbai 2008, Pathankot 2016 and other probes. When diplomacy failed, India's military response was both decisive and restrained – targeting military objectives while sparing civilians. It focused on dismantling terrorist infrastructure and reflects the dharmic obligation to protect innocents on both sides of the conflict. India's no-first-use policy for nuclear weapons, the fact that Pakistan was the first to hit military targets, and that India's strikes were targeted at terrorist infrastructure with no attempt to capture territory, all demonstrate adherence to the Gita's teaching that dharmic

action must consider the welfare of all beings.

Doctrine of Proportional Escalation

Both the Gita and the Ramayana believe in the maxim that violence must be bounded. Force which is unrestrained destroys the moral authority of the warrior and delegitimises the cause itself. Rama consistently applies proportionate force, using the least amount necessary to achieve legitimate objectives. Operation Sindoor not only acted with restraint but was also a graduated response to adharmic aggression. Operation Sindoor was also guided by the principle of "equal intensity in the same domain".

Relevance of Ancient Wisdom

Time and again, it has been proved that contemporary conflict resolution can only be achieved within the framework of dharma. The teachings of the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita are as pertinent today as they were in the past. Dharma prioritises justice over victory, protection over domination. This is what constitutes true strength.

War as Tragic Necessity

Neither the Ramayana nor the Bhagavad Gita romanticise war. The Gita does not celebrate war but accepts sombrely the duty fulfilled at great human cost. Leadership requires humility, accountability and a willingness to bear moral burdens. Operation Sindoor vindicates the timeless relevance of dharma-yuddha principles. India's integrated military action was within the framework of righteous duty, proportional force and the protection of non-combatants. The operation was successful in achieving tactical objectives while securing international support and avoiding full-scale conflict. It confirmed the enduring wisdom that true national security is rooted not in the mere capacity for destruction, but in the disciplined, righteous and proportional application of force, guided by dharmic principles.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The quiet weight Of years that do not resolve



DEEBA
SALIM IRFAN

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

As December arrives, a familiar pressure settles in. The year must be assessed, accounted for, and neatly packaged. We are expected to look back with clarity, extract lessons, declare growth, and step into the new year lighter and wiser. There is comfort in this ritual. It gives shape to time, reassures us that life moves in discernible arcs, that effort leads somewhere visible. But not every year cooperates.

Some years resist summarising. They refuse to be reduced to achievements or failures, highs or lows. They leave behind loose threads – conversations unfinished, emotions unnamed, decisions postponed. For many, the past year has felt less like a story with a beginning and an end, and more like a prolonged stretch of endurance.

This insistence on resolution is not accidental. We live

in a culture that prizes outcomes. Productivity, clarity, forward momentum – these are the currencies of progress. Even reflection has become performative. Year-end lists, public gratitude, carefully worded declarations of resilience create the impression that everyone has arrived somewhere definitive. Yet beneath that surface, a quieter truth persists. Many people are carrying fatigue they have not had time to examine. Grief that never announced itself dramatically. Disappointments absorbed rather than expressed. Relationships that shifted not through conflict, but through distance, silence, or emotional depletion.

The language of resolution implies finality – that something has been completed, understood, and filed away. But emotional life does not obey deadlines. Healing does not respect calendars. Understanding arrives when it is ready, not when the year demands it.

For some, the year has been marked by ongoing uncertainty – about work, health, relationships, or identity. For others, it has been a period of quiet recalibration, a slow letting go of expectations that once felt essential. From the outside, this may not look like progress. Internally, it often is. There is also a moral pressure embedded in year-end reflection: not only to acknowledge difficulty, but to redeem it. To find gratitude in hardship, to frame pain as instruction. While comforting in hindsight, this impulse can be

premature. Ending a year without clear answers is often mistaken for stagnation. In reality, it can signal honesty – a refusal to pretend that everything has settled. This is not failure. It is an accurate reading of one's inner life.

The pressure to resolve spills into relationships as well.

We are encouraged to move on cleanly, to mend or to end things decisively before the calendar turns. But human connections rarely comply. Some fade without confrontation. Others linger in ambiguity. In a world of constant acceleration, this discomfort with incompleteness has only intensified. We move quickly from one phase to the next, documenting rather than absorbing. The year ends not because it has been processed, but because time insists on moving forward. The exhaustion many feel is not just physical or professional. It is emotional – the weight of carrying too much without space to understand it. Life does not begin again on January 1. It continues, shaped unevenly by what came before. As the year closes, perhaps the most honest response is not to rush towards meaning, but to pause with what remains unsettled. Not everything needs to be resolved. Some things need time. Some need to be carried forward until they are ready to change. The year will end regardless. The question is whether we allow ourselves to end it truthfully.

The writer is an Indian author and poet based in Dubai

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

CELEBRATING SRINIVASA RAMANUJAN'S ENDURING MATHEMATICAL LEGACY

National Mathematics Day is observed annually on 22 December to honour the Indian mathematical genius Srinivasa Ramanujan, whose ideas reshaped modern mathematics and continue to inspire scholars worldwide. The day celebrates his legacy, promotes mathematical curiosity, and underscores the role of mathematics in everyday life. It was officially declared in 2012 by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to mark Ramanujan's 125th birth anniversary.

Ramanujan's work made lasting contributions to number theory, infinite series, elliptic functions, continued fractions, partition theory, and the celebrated Ramanujan number 1729. His birth anniversary encourages greater interest in mathematics among students, teachers, and researchers. The

National Mathematics Day 2025 theme, "Mathematics, Art and Creativity", highlights the close links between mathematical thinking, innovation, and imagination, reflecting Ramanujan's intuitive approach to problem-solving.

Born on 22 December 1887 in Erode, Tamil Nadu, Srinivasa Ramanujan was largely self-taught and showed exceptional ability from an early age. Despite limited formal education, he mastered advanced mathematics and produced original results. His talent attracted G. H. Hardy, leading to his work at Trinity College, Cambridge. Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1918, he remains one of its youngest members. Though his life was short, his influence on global mathematics endures.

B M REDDY | KARIMNAGAR

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sreenivasan and cinema's moral compass

With the passing of veteran Malayalam actor, writer and director Sreenivasan, Indian cinema has lost a rare creative conscience whose work consistently reflected society with humour, empathy and quiet courage. His films never relied on spectacle alone; instead, they drew strength from observation, irony and a deep understanding of ordinary lives. Born in the small village of Pattiam in Kannur district, his journey into cinema was shaped by struggle, persistence and an unwavering belief in storytelling.

Sreenivasan's writing redefined Malayalam cinema by making satire a mirror rather than a weapon. Films such as Sandesam, Vadakkunokkiyanthram, Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala, Gandhi Nagar Second Street and Nadodikaatu remain relevant because they confront social pretence, moral confusion and political hypocrisy with intelligence and restraint.

As an actor, his characters were unadorned yet unforgettable, rooted in vulnerability and contradiction. A multiple State Film Award winner, Sreenivasan leaves behind more than celebrated films. He leaves a grammar of honesty, reminding future generations that cinema can entertain while still thinking deeply and ethically about the world it portrays.

M PRADYU | KANNUR

Preventing tragedies on elephant corridors

The recent deaths of elephants in a train accident are a painful reminder that repeated warnings about wildlife safety along railway corridors have not been adequately addressed. Over the past decade, similar incidents in Assam, West Bengal and Mysuru have exposed a persistent conflict between infrastructure expansion and ecological responsibility. Elephant movement follows ancient corridors, often during dawn and dusk, precisely when visibility is low and train speeds remain dangerously high.

While measures such as signage, speed restrictions and experimental deterrents have been introduced in some regions, their implementation has been inconsistent and poorly monitored. What is urgently required is a coordinated, science-based approach that treats these corridors as critical habitats rather than peripheral concerns. Real-time detection systems, clearly marked underpasses and uncompromising speed enforcement in vulnerable stretches must become standard practice, not exceptions.

Sustained coordination between railway and forest authorities is vital to update movement data and align train schedules. Preventing such tragedies is both an ethical duty and a practical necessity.

A MYILSAMI | COIMBATORE

A volatile neighbourhood demands vigilance

The growing instability across India's immediate neighbourhood is a matter of serious concern and deserves sustained public and policy attention. Political upheaval, economic fragility and democratic erosion in several neighbouring countries have created a volatile regional environment with direct implications for India's security.

Nations such as Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives are facing internal stress that risks spilling across borders through refugee movements, economic disruption and security challenges. A significant factor complicating this landscape is the expanding influence of China, which has strategically leveraged infrastructure investments to deepen its political and military footprint. These projects, often framed as development assistance, carry long-term strategic consequences that alter regional power balances. In Pakistan, the increasing role of the military under General Asim Munir adds another layer of uncertainty, particularly given historical patterns of confrontation and internal instability.

A stable neighbourhood is essential to safeguarding India's long-term security, economic resilience and strategic interests

CK SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

Delhi smogged: Yet another winter of toxic denial

As industrial emissions, vehicular exhaust, construction dust, and biomass burning accumulate under stagnant winter conditions, air quality in the NCR routinely deteriorates to levels that are dangerous even for the healthy. Yet governance responds not with sustained prevention but with cosmetic fixes



RAJEEV KUMAR

Every winter after Diwali, the National Capital Region (NCR) slips into a silent public health emergency. Pollution spikes begin with the bursting of firecrackers—whether officially permitted “green” crackers or illegal ones, where “green” is often only a label—and are followed by stubble burning in neighbouring states. Public discourse then predictably shifts into a blame game, frequently singling out resource-poor farmers.

As temperatures fall, winter meteorological conditions characterised by low wind speeds, high moisture, and overcast skies-trap pollutants near the ground and intensify exposure. Sluggish winds and rising moisture form dense smog; the denser the smog, the worse the Air Quality Index (AQI). Under these stagnant conditions, industrial and vehicular emissions blanket the air with toxic pollutants, further aggravated by construction dust, biomass burning, and other sources, leaving the NCR struggling to breathe.

Governance responds each year with a burst of emergency measures, such as smog towers, chemical water sprinkling, and episodic controls, including GRAP, many of which are cosmetic or gimmick-driven. These interventions operate on a minimal scale and cannot meaningfully improve air quality across a region of tens of millions. Pollution monitoring is at times compromised, further eroding public trust. Judicial interventions follow, directives are issued, and committees are formed to recycle well-known recommendations, often announced just as winter recedes and natural atmospheric dispersion sets in. Pollution levels dip marginally but remain unsafe for most of the year, improving only during rainfall; the same cycle repeats, winter after winter.

It is not that solutions are unknown. The core principle—simply put, not to pollute—is well understood, including by governance. However, translating this into action requires strict measures, initial inconvenience for all, and substantial investments in building pollution-control infrastructure. To avoid accountability and difficult choices,



NCR NEEDS STRICT EMISSION CONTROL, CLEAN MOBILITY, AND BEIJING-STYLE EXECUTION — NOT SEASONAL GIMMICKS

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governance often defaults to populist measures, gimmicks, and temporary fixes. Predominantly Toxic Pollutants

A December 2025 assessment by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) confirms that air pollution in the Delhi-NCR region is becoming increasingly toxic, particularly in the early winter months. Pollution levels remain high from October to November, with air quality deteriorating across the region, including smaller towns, and recent gains at risk of reversal. CSE highlights the daily synchronised rise of PM2.5 with toxic gases such as nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and carbon monoxide (CO), mainly from vehicular and combustion sources, forming a dangerous mix that has received inadequate policy attention. Long-term trends indicate a plateau rather than improvement, suggesting a structural failure and underscoring CSE’s warning that only sustained, long-term measures—not seasonal fixes—can reverse the decline.

Last week, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) informed the Supreme Court that vehicular emissions are the largest contributor to Delhi-NCR’s air pollution (41%), followed by construction dust (21%), industry (19%), power plants (5%), residential sources (3%), and others (11%). While stubble burning is

seasonal, most major sources persist year-round, together generating consistently high levels of toxic air.

A Silent Health Epidemic: Officially Denied

Severe air pollution in the NCR during winter has become a slow-moving medical epidemic. AQI, PM2.5, and other pollutants often reach hazardous levels. When the AQI exceeds 400, even healthy individuals are affected. Infants, children, the elderly, and those with chronic lung diseases such as COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) suffer the gravest and often lasting harm.

The scale of this crisis is highlighted by the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, prepared with the World Health Organization (WHO), which estimates that 1.7 million deaths in India in 2022 were attributable to PM2.5 exposure, with fossil fuel combustion accounting for the largest share—a finding also echoed by CAQM.

Despite this evidence, a July 2024 Lok Sabha reply by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change stated that no deaths were reported due to air pollution, citing the absence of conclusive data linking deaths exclusively to it, and noting that health outcomes are influenced by multiple factors such as diet,

occupation, socio-economic conditions, medical history, immunity, heredity, and the environment.

More troublingly, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued an identical, word-for-word response in the Rajya Sabha in early December 2025, despite a gap of nearly 17 months. This verbatim repetition by two lead ministries reflects a troubling lack of seriousness and an evasion of accountability, underscoring the persistent apathy of governance towards a deadly menace that warrants recognition as a public health epidemic.

Air pollution in the NCR is not a rhetorical or seasonal inconvenience; it is a slow, deadly epidemic, particularly for infants, the elderly, and those with chronic respiratory diseases. Nonetheless, due to the growing outcry, CAQM has recently formed a committee to promote “evidence-based policy action for improving air quality and safeguarding public health in Delhi-NCR.” The 15-member committee, chaired by an electrical engineer specialising in electric vehicles, is expected to submit its report in two months.

As happens every year, by the time winter recedes, atmospheric conditions improve, and pollution levels fall. The crisis then appears resolved, attention drifts, familiar recommendations resurface, and the annual cycle resumes with the reas-

surance that “all is well”.

When the committee releases its recommendations, it is unlikely that they will contain anything new. They will reiterate familiar points already known to all. In short, it will be business as usual—no fundamental innovation, and none expected or feasible.

Learning from Beijing’s Experiences

India does not need to reinvent solutions; they are already well known. As a pointed reminder, a Chinese Embassy official in India recently tweeted how Beijing—until not long ago facing a similar crisis—successfully curbed air pollution through decisive and sustained action. What India now needs is the holistic implementation of that proven approach.

Beijing demonstrated that decisive, evidence-based policies backed by firm enforcement can rapidly reduce urban air pollution. Its multi-pronged strategy focused on cutting emissions at the source, particularly from vehicles and industry, through ultra-stringent emission norms, phasing out older high-emission vehicles, curbing unchecked private car growth, expanding clean mobility via metros, buses, rail, and electric vehicles, and relocating polluting industries away from dense urban centres. These hard choices delivered measurable and sustained improvements in air quality.

Real improvement in India similarly depends on preventing pollution at its source: strict control of vehicular and industrial emissions, cleaner construction practices, sustained investment in clean energy and public transport, a planned transition to electric mobility across all segments, and decongestion of the NCR through decentralised economic planning.

Conclusion

The lesson is clear. Governance must move beyond appointing routine committees to restate known solutions and instead establish task-oriented bodies to assess feasibility, estimate costs, define timelines, and move swiftly towards execution. What is urgently required is implementation on a war footing—not another cycle of reports and delays.

Breathable air can be achieved only through genuine prevention, cleaner mobility, strict emission control, and accountable governance. It will not come from rhetoric, gimmicks, optics, or committees that delay action. Addressing air pollution is neither ideological nor political; it is a scientific necessity and an urgent public health imperative.

Labour laws: The future of labour codes depends on the rules we write today



RAJIV KUMAR



ANKEETA MAHESHWARI

It is good to see the Government of India gather the required political will to notify the labour codes on November 21, 2025 that were passed in 2019 and 2020. India thus stands on the threshold of a major shift in labour governance. The four new labour codes now duly notified promise to simplify compliance, widen social security coverage, reduce the compliance burden and modernise labour relations.

However, these promises will only be realised if the rules to be framed by the Union and state governments are clear, practical and geared towards effective implementation of these codes. Without thoughtfully designed rules, even the most well-intentioned legislation can falter. The ‘first best’ solution would, of course, be if the same set of rules were to be applicable across all the states. That alone will ensure a seamless national labour market, which will greatly facilitate labour mobility and facilitate skill availability wherever these are needed. However, the first best is not always possible in our federal democracy, in which states have to respond to their own particular political circumstances. The second best can be efficiently designed if the finalisation of the rules by the Central Government, expected by March 2026, is preceded by a sustained and cohesive round of consultations between the Central and state governments. This may ensure that subsequent notification of rules by the states is designed within a common framework.

The new codes replace 29 existing labour laws. Once they come into force, the real work begins: drafting and finalising rules that translate the broad provisions of the codes into actionable procedures for employers and benefits for workers.

Rules are where policy meets daily practice. They determine how returns are to be filed, how inspections will be carried out, what records employers must maintain and how disputes will be resolved. They shape whether workers can access social security benefits without bureaucratic hurdles and whether small enterprises can comply without being overwhelmed. In short, the success or failure of the labour codes depends not merely on the legislation but on the administrative architecture built through the rules.



The challenge is substantial. India has more than 63 million enterprises, most of which are micro or small units that lack administrative capacity for complex compliance. For them, compliance must be simple, digital and predictable. If rules introduce ambiguity or complex layers of reporting, they will impose costs that could drive firms back into informality. Clear thresholds, simple procedures and user-friendly digital systems are crucial if the codes are to reduce the compliance burden rather than add to it.

At the same time, India has a vast informal workforce that remains outside the ambit of formal social protection. The Code on Social Security has the potential to change this, but only if rules enable seamless registration, portable benefits and low-friction access. If workers are required to navigate complicated paperwork, travel to offices or depend on intermediaries, the promise of universal social security will remain unfulfilled. The rules must, therefore, be designed around the lived experiences of workers, not the convenience of administration.

Another key area where rules will be decisive is dispute resolution. The Industrial Relations Code introduces new mechanisms, including negotiations with unions, and redefines thresholds for layoffs and retrenchment. However, unless the rules set clear timelines, transparent procedures and fair mechanisms for both parties, industrial disputes may only become more drawn out. Predictability is essential for both workers and employers: workers must have confidence that their grievances will be heard, and employers must know that compliance will protect them from arbitrary proceedings.

For safety and working conditions too, the rules must recognise the realities of India’s diverse sectors. The needs of a construction site, a textile factory and a technology start-up are very different. One-size-fits-all compliance

requirements will either dilute safety or over-regulate. The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code provides a broad framework, but it is the rules that will decide whether workplaces become genuinely safer or whether compliance becomes a mere procedural formality.

Digital implementation is another area where rules must provide clarity. The vision of a unified labour compliance system can only be realised if the rules mandate interoperability, shared databases and minimisation of duplicate filings. Workers’ data must be portable across states and employers. Employers must not be required to upload the same information multiple times for different departments. The rules should explicitly mandate integration rather than leaving it to future administrative orders.

Equally important is ensuring that the rules are framed through a transparent and consultative process. When the draft rules for the codes were released, stakeholders raised concerns about ambiguities, impractical requirements and incomplete procedures. These inputs must not be treated as mere formalities. The government must hold inclusive consultations with trade unions, industry bodies, labour experts and civil society organisations. A rule book drafted without ground-level understanding risks creating more problems than it solves.

Ultimately, labour reform is not an event but a process. Legislation sets direction, but rules determine impact. If the rules strike the right balance between flexibility and protection, India can create a labour market that is more formal, more productive and more equitable. If the rules are rushed, unclear or overly complex, implementation will falter and trust in the reforms will erode.

The new labour codes present an opportunity to reshape the world of work for the next generation. India’s workforce is young, energetic and aspirational. They deserve a light-touch regulatory framework that effectively protects their rights, supports their growth and encourages investment and innovation. The rules we write today will determine whether this opportunity is realised or lost.

As the government moves towards final notification, it must remember: good laws matter, but good rules matter even more. Effective implementation will be the real test of India’s labour reforms, and that test will be won or lost in the fine print.

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SINCE 1865

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ARADHITA SINGH

Large parts of central India — most particularly Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and swathes of Maharashtra — lived a strange dual reality for decades. The Indian state existed on paper, but on the ground, every aspect of life was governed by Maoist diktat and dominance. Roads, schools, and health centres simply ended where the security-risk zones began; officials were afraid to venture into villages just a few kilometres away from district headquarters. In these pockets, the absence of the state had created a vacuum which the Naxals filled with their own parallel structures of taxation, justice, and surveillance. The landscape dramatically changed in 2025, with the Government of India setting a clear target to eradicate the Naxal movement by March 2026.

But when the state finally begins to return — through improved security presence, administrative outreach, or targeted development — the change is not merely institutional, but social, psychological, and deeply political. Whole geographies are pulled from fear-driven survival to a tentative yet hardening sense of citizenship. Grasping what occurs in such moments of state re-entry is essential for framing long-term counter-insurgency and governance policy. In many districts of Bastar, Gadchiroli, and parts of Jharkhand and Odisha, the establishment of forward security camps, road connectivity under schemes like the RCPLWEA, and coordinated civil administration have altered the lived reality of villagers who had known only coercion and invisibility. Police stations that once existed only on paper are now functional; block officials and health workers are able to visit interior villages regularly for the first time in decades. This re-entry of the state is not merely institutional — it is social, psychological, and deeply political. Entire geographies begin shifting from fear-driven survival to a tentative but strengthening sense of citizenship. Understanding what unfolds during this phase of state reassertion is critical, because it determines whether counter-insurgency remains a short-term security exercise or evolves into a durable governance outcome. It is within this fragile transition phase that the Maoists’ long-standing parallel authority starts to erode.

The Naxals had been an unwritten, de facto authority for decades — collectors of taxes, dispensers of justice, and police of movement. Now, as the state recaptures space in erstwhile Naxal-dominated territories, the Jan Adalat system has

weakened considerably. Villagers are reclaiming access to formal institutions, and restrictions on trade, mobility, and daily life that were once ruthlessly implemented by the Maoists are gradually dissolving. Compliance born out of fear is now being replaced with hope and optimism.

Permanent security camps are often the first sign of meaningful ‘state entry’ into Maoist operational regions. Their presence restores mobility, and roads that were once patrolled or blocked by Naxal squads become safe to travel. As movement opens up, festivals, weekly haats, and community gatherings start reappearing one after another. A local leadership that had long remained silent in fear finds its voice returning. With freedom of movement, public confidence, and administrative presence returning, it is an ideal time for a strong counter-narrative to take root.

Typical changes include the construction of roads, bridges, mobile towers, and electricity networks — basic infrastructure that had long been absent in Naxal-dominated regions. *Anganwadis*, health sub-centres, and schools begin functioning again, often for the first time in years. Public Distribution System services and welfare delivery finally become possible, breaking the cycle of deprivation that insurgents had exploited. New schemes — such as Chhattisgarh’s Niyad Nellanar initiative, PMGKY, PMAY, and various skill-training programmes — reach previously cut-off villages and visibly improve daily life. These developmental moves reshape public opinion far more rapidly than security operations alone ever could.

As state authority returns, local markets start to boom. *Weekly haats* are thriving once more. Traders enter villages without fear, something they had not done in many years. Tribal collection of forest produce becomes organised and remunerated, enabling them to earn proper prices instead of handing over goods to Maoist extortion. Younger people who once saw dalam squads as the only option now look towards jobs in cities, vocational training, or recruitment into security forces. New infrastructure brings small businesses: mechanic shops, mobile repair centres, transport services, and local vendors. A region previously resigned to subsistence finally begins to think in terms of growth.

In most Maoist-affected regions, tribals had long viewed the state as something that was either distant, punitive, or even predatory. State re-entry provides an opportunity to reset that relationship.

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CONTRAPUNTO

Be like a duck. Calm on the surface, but always paddling like the dickens underneath

- MICHAEL CAINE

Wild Rights

Gruesome killing of an elephant herd, underlines how myopically & insensitively India's looking at animal corridors

On Saturday, a high-speed passenger train struck a wild elephant herd in Sangjurai village, Assam, killing 7, including 4 calves and a pregnant female. This was the fourth such tragedy in the country this year alone. And it brings the toll of such fatalities since 2019-20 to 94. Villagers say that repeated pleas to have Sangjurai declared an elephant crossing area were ignored. Otherwise, the Rajdhani Express wouldn't have been speeding through the village at 2am. Detaining the train drivers afterwards is only a smokescreen. The real issue is that colonialists heartlessly cut through important animal migration routes and habitats, and eight decades on, their mindset endures.

Including India, there are only 17 megadiverse countries in the world, recognised for hosting a majority of the world's species. But without functional corridors, wild populations become isolated in small pockets of inbreeding. Corridors alone can ensure viable populations in the long term. This ensures revenue and jobs from wildlife tourism. Healthy ecosystems also mean water security, soil quality, and climate resilience, all critical for agriculture and human wellbeing. To underline, apart from saving animals, corridor conservation has excellent economic logic.

That govt doesn't realise this is evident in how deaf it is to citizens trying to speak for wild animals. A columnist on this page has recounted the exercise to map a dense network of 192 tiger corridors across 10 states,

representing tiger movement across 30 tiger reserves and around 150 protected areas. But policymakers continue to go by a delusive assessment, of only 27 corridors, even though it defies logic that there would be just 27 corridors across 30 tiger reserves. It can further be said that gruesome events like Saturday's are part of the design. If railway network is expanded through animals' migration zones as if these didn't exist, their deaths are consciously written off. What is truly inexcusable in the Assam case is the underuse of an AI-powered, real-time alert system that triggers speed restrictions, and averts collisions. Remember, what elephants are trying to cross are ancestral routes, of which they have a magical, spatial memory. If we can't get out of their way, at least let's slow down.

Maha Hint For Mumbai?

The state's local body polls show BJP getting politically stronger. That gives it a headstart in BMC poll campaign

The truly high-stakes BMC elections are scheduled for next month. Maharashtra local body polls, held after almost a decade, are significant in that context, as much as on their own. Right from the start of the poll campaign for municipal councils and nagar panchayats, the chief contest seemed to be between BJP and the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, who fought separately in most places. Maha Vikas Aghadi trailed in putting up an aggressive fight. BJP's lead in more than 100 of the 288 local bodies, and Shiv Sena's number two position, reveal that early perceptions were correct.

Poll results also show that BJP has struck deep roots in rural parts of the state, besides cementing its dominance in the urban belt. It even succeeded in shaking Eknath Shinde in his home turf of Thane district, by wresting the council president's posts in the twin urban centres of Badlapur and Ambernath. Here, the state-level allies fought a bitter political battle against each other, with Shinde's party maintaining its lead in terms of overall member seats in both councils. So, despite a little setback, he has very much held his own in these first local elections since the splits in both Sena and NCP. Ajit Pawar has similarly delivered a good performance in most councils and nagar panchayats, and held on to his turf.

In all, governing Mahayuti has dominated more than 200 of 288 local bodies. Maha Vikas Aghadi, therefore, is looking at a huge question mark as the state heads into the second and bigger phase of the polls. Going for elections in mid-Jan will be 29 municipal corporations, including India's richest civic body. BJP and Mahayuti are expected to carry forward their current energy and momentum. But MVA faces a big challenge in even staying together for the Jan 2026 fight, let alone unsettling the in-form alliance. Congress is struggling to revive itself. Sharad Pawar-led NCP and the Thackeray cousins lagged far behind in these elections. They will all have to put in extra efforts to really take on the BJP-Mahayuti juggernaut in Mumbai and the other big corporations in the new year.

Messy visit

Kolkata ko gussa kyun aata hai

Arnab Ray



Stop blaming the city of joy for what happened at the Messi event. Kolkata, as we all know, has had two religions: communism and football. While communism may have no gods (ostensibly), football does, and who is a greater Zeus than Lionel Messi himself?

And as we all know, to see God you need to pay the priest. So the Kolkatans did, buying tickets for thousands of rupees, only to find that God is capricious, doing a brief photo-op with VIPs before leaving. Angry, the assembled crowd then peacefully destroyed stadium infra, as we Kolkatans are wont to do when things do not go our way, like that game in the 1996 World Cup, when Azharuddin won the toss and chose to field.

That was just the start. The anger spread on social media, its edge directed at those who chose the wrong day to rub their privilege in the faces of those not so well-connected, by posting their pictures with Messi. So, when Messi escaped, faster than industry from Bengal, to similarly meaningless events in Hyderabad and Mumbai, he had left behind burned political careers, resignations, and a TRP surge on local TV.

This is, of course, not the first time Kolkatans have been let down by their football gods. Decades ago, Pelé came to similar scenes of uncontrolled crowd frenzy and left to uniform disappointment, leading people to speculate whether it was Pelé who showed up or a local Kolkata cosplayer, one who played Lenin and Stalin in yatra (theatre), masquerading as the great man (Lenin and Stalin being two other gods in the Bengali firmament).

So, if not Kolkatans, who is to blame? Messi. If he can spend time with the super-rich in other cities, go to temples, and interact with animals without feeling the need to escape, why would he not do the same in Kolkata? Did he think Bengalis would bite him? If he did, that's rich coming from someone who has Suárez as his India trip buddy.

Our one fault as Bengalis is that we are not rich enough to be interesting to the super-rich. The other fault is that we worship the person more than the game. Another fault is that we are rowdy people who think destruction of public property is innocent 'bawaali'. Put these together, and there is a good reason why things like this keep happening in Kolkata, this, the most cultured of cities.

Dan Cassino



Professor of Govt & Politics

A new US law, Epstein Files Transparency Act, got a 427-1 vote in the House of Representatives last month. And as justice department began releasing thousands of photos, police reports and other material on Friday, what it's really underlined is how and why Trump administration has been losing its grasp on power.

Some of this is structural, the slow decline that all second-term presidents face. But it's coming for Trump early, as efforts to defend his self-esteem at all costs lead the White House to increasingly poor decisions. That's tied to how the Epstein story has developed.

Yes, when financier and convicted child sex abuser Jeffrey Epstein died – apparently by suicide – in his jail cell in 2019, it seemed like his story's end. But after his death, federal prosecutors kept enormous amounts of evidence from his digital files and personal effects. This included a great deal of info about the girls and young women he victimised, but also info about the many powerful and influential men who flew down to Epstein's private island to participate in the abuse, or at least might have been aware of it.

Initially, much of the pressure to release the files – with victim info redacted – came from Republicans, with Trump promising to release the files when he was elected. As recently as Feb, Attorney General Pam Bondi told the press that Epstein's "client list" was on her desk, and that she would soon release it to the public.

A few weeks later, the White House issued a statement saying that there was no Epstein client list, they would not be releasing any additional info, and Bondi's previous statements had been misunderstood. Trump administration was hoping this would put the issue to rest. After all, he had promised lots of things during the campaign that he hadn't delivered on, and his base wasn't concerned about those.

It might have ended there, except Democrats in Congress saw a potential wedge issue. They found allies in Republicans who had previously pushed to have the files made public. Facing opposition from the leader of the House of Representatives, this coalition of Democrats and Republicans used a rare parliamentary manoeuvre, the discharge petition, to force a vote.

Speaker Johnson was able to delay the inevitable for a few weeks. But eventually the bill passed, even as the White House frantically tried to get Republicans to oppose it. After it unexpectedly passed the Senate without a debate, Trump signed the bill, forcing him to do something – release all the Epstein files – that he could have done at any time on his own.

That the administration was unable to get House Republicans – who have given Trump anything he wanted for the past year – on his side was a bad sign. Things got worse.

The issue led former allies to start publicly airing criticisms of Trump in a way that would have been unthinkable a few months earlier. With that criticism come lower approval ratings, and a greater willingness of Republicans to speak out against Trump. And even do the unthinkable: start to talk about how the party will move forward without him.

The challenge facing second-term presidents is inevitable. But the damage to Trump administration is also self-inflicted. The law gave the administration a month to release all the files, with limited redactions.



Chad Crowe (USA)

Prisoner Of Data: The Numbers Don't Tell The Story

Prison statistics must add layers to the macro data collected – like how many undertrials stay on in jail even after bail. Existing data doesn't tell us much about real conditions or gaps in accountability

Valay Singh and Vijay Raghavan



For years, local and foreign fugitives have stalled extradition requests to India in courts of countries like UK, Netherlands and Australia. Overcrowding, lack of medical facilities and other deficits in Indian prisons are cited in foreign courts, leading to extradition requests being denied. Better reporting of prisons and prisoners can lead to a systemic improvement that will benefit all prisoners, and the justice system at large.

The annual Prison Statistics India (PSI) report on prisons and prisoners is overwhelmingly quantitative and self-reported. There were 5.3L prisoners across central, district, and sub-jails at the end of 2023, compared to 5.7L in 2022; average national prison occupancy thus came down from the all-time high of 131.4% to 120%. Multiple factors are responsible – notably, a marginal (1%) increase in prison capacity, and a campaign by state legal services authorities in 2023 to identify undertrials who could be released per NALSA guidelines. This resulted in over 21,000 prisoners released between Sept and Nov 2023. Prodded by Supreme Court, jurisdictional courts may also have released more undertrials on bail.

However, PSI data doesn't allow deeper analysis. For example, there's no data on number of undertrials in prison for longer than 24 hours despite their bail by jurisdictional courts. Such information is difficult to access, despite SC directing electronic copies of bail orders be sent to prison authorities.

SC also mandated district-level Undertrial Review Committees (UTRCs) meet once a quarter – but data shows trial courts release only 50% cases recommended by UTRCs. Our experience in Maharashtra has shown that the presence of trained social workers in prisons can improve the process of identification and release of such prisoners.

Social workers are crucial bridges between prisoners, their families and various authorities till they are released. In states like UP, Bihar, Jharkhand and Punjab, which have the largest prison populations, at least one in four undertrials has been languishing in prison between six months and two years.

Data is crucial to ensure prisons become correctional spaces. The PSI report provides limited information on what prison and legal aid authorities are doing to reduce crowding in prisons. Investing in professional social work intervention, counselling services, effective education, library and vocational training facilities,

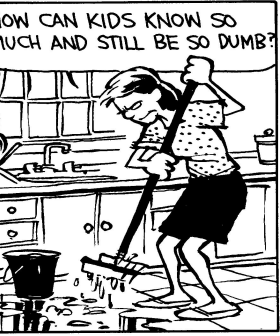
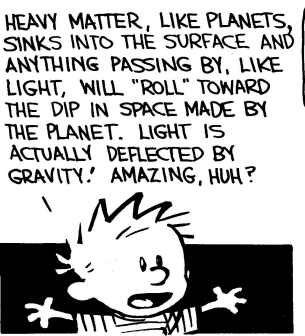
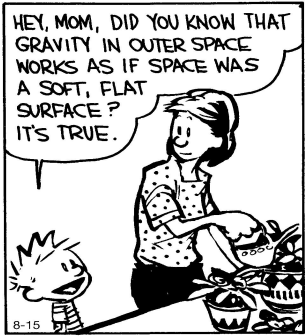


and health and mental healthcare could help address the issue of 'prison warehousing'.

We use the word investing advisedly as more than 50% of our undertrials are in the age group of 18-30 years. Further, over 60% undertrials are educated below Class 10 or illiterate.

In 2023, of the roughly ₹2k cr spent on inmates, a mere 0.5% was spent on vocational and educational training, while more than half (54.6%) was spent on food for inmates. Despite paucity of financial resources, several prison departments have been working with reputed civil society organisations to deliver on educational and vocational training, but these are just exceptions.

Calvin & Hobbes



A Buddhist Reflection On Teachings Of Jesus

The XIV Dalai Lama

Throughout my life, I have held deep respect for all major religious traditions. Among them, Christianity occupies a special place – not because it is similar to Buddhism in doctrine, but because of radiant love that shines through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. When I read gospels or encounter sincere Christian practitioners, I recognise the same compassion that lies at the very heart of Buddhism.

I do not write as a Christian scholar, but as a simple Buddhist monk, moved by the goodness I see in others. When I reflect upon Jesus' teachings, I am reminded of what I call the 'good heart' – a sincere wish for the happiness and well-being of others. This quality transcends religion, culture, and nationality. It is, I believe, the essence of our shared humanity.

Jesus embodied this good heart not only through his words, but in how he lived. His love reached out to the poor, sick, outcast – even to those who persecuted

him. In Buddhism, we speak of *bodhicitta* – the awakened mind that seeks enlightenment for the sake of all beings. In Jesus, I see that same selfless impulse: a boundless compassion not limited by tribe or belief.

At the heart of gospels lies compassion. When Jesus says, "Love your neighbour as yourself," it echoes the Buddhist practice of cherishing others more than oneself. The words may differ, but the spirit is remarkably similar.

What moves me most is not the language, but the integrity behind it. Jesus taught with what I would describe as fierce tenderness. He confronted injustice yet never abandoned love. He healed, forgave, and transformed through compassion – not through fear or punishment. This is the good heart in action.

In interfaith dialogue, we often become entangled in theological

differences about God, soul, or afterlife. These are important within each tradition, but they need not become obstacles. In fact, such differences can enrich our understanding of the essential human questions: How should we live? How can we reduce suffering? What does it mean to love?

Religion should serve as a guide, not a cause of division. All great spiritual traditions aim to make us better human beings, more kind, wise, and compassionate. When someone truly embodies humility, forgiveness, and love – regardless of their faith, they honour the highest potential of any religion.

In today's world, where material progress often outpaces moral growth, teachings of Jesus remain deeply relevant. His emphasis on serving the poor, turning the other cheek, and placing love above law offers a powerful counterbalance to our culture of self-interest. As a Buddhist, I draw

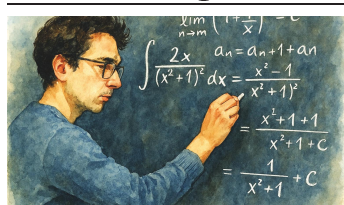
deep inspiration from these ideals.

Some may ask how a Buddhist can revere Jesus. The answer is simple: I see him as a great spiritual master, a *bodhisattva*, one who dedicates his life to others. Our doctrines may differ, but the fruits of his life – acts of love and service – are universally admirable.

This does not mean we should blur the lines between religions. Diversity of faith is like a garden of many flowers – each with its own colour and fragrance. The goal is not to make them the same, but to appreciate each for what it offers. For me, reading Jesus' teachings is like walking a different garden path that leads towards the same mountain peak of spiritual awakening.

I often advise people not to change religions lightly. It is usually wiser to deepen one's understanding of the tradition one was born into. But we must also learn from others. Interfaith dialogue reduces fear, fosters respect, and builds bridges of shared humanity... (As told to Rajiv Mehrotra)

Sacred space



An equation means nothing to me unless it expresses a thought of God.

Srinivasa Ramanujan

Ease of investing

Sebi's intervention will bring transparency

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) at its board meeting last week set easier guidelines for mutual-fund investment and companies aiming for an initial public offering (IPO). Compliance on raising listed debt has also been eased with a change of thresholds for high-value debt listed entities (HVDLE), where stricter norms will now kick in at an outstanding debt worth ₹5,000 crore, instead of ₹1,000 crore. Mutual-fund investing may become cheaper and more transparent as new Mutual Fund Regulations replace the Mutual Fund Regulations, 1996. One key change is the treatment of the expense ratio with a new concept, the base expense ratio (BER), replacing the earlier total expense ratio. Costs like securities transaction tax, goods and services tax, stamp duty, and exchange fees will not be included in the BER, which will consist only of core fees charged by the fund.

Other pass-through costs, such as those mentioned above, will be mentioned separately. Hence, the cost structure becomes more transparent, with the BER, brokerage, regulatory levies, and statutory levies shown separately. Sebi has also lowered the limits on the (BER) across categories, which will reduce costs slightly for investors. The new stockbroker regulations, Sebi (Stock Brokers) Regulations, 2025, have been introduced, replacing the Stock Brokers Regulations, 1992. These are organised into 11 simplified chapters, with a focus on easing compliance. The new framework was introduced to meet the needs of digital trading. It establishes a formal definition of algorithmic trading, clearer norms for proprietary trading, and a regulatory framework for execution-only platforms, which facilitate direct transactions in mutual funds. Changes in the reporting system mean that the bourses will now act as first-line regulators for stockbrokers. New brokerage limits apply to brokerage fees, reducing them from 8.59 basis points (bps) to 6 bps in the spot market and from 3.89 bps to 2 bps in derivatives.

Easier IPO guidelines — with amendments to the Issue of Capital and Disclosure Requirements norms — mean that shares held by non-promoter individuals will be locked in for six months before the IPO. The higher threshold for HVDLE will make life easier for issuances in the bond market. Credit-rating agencies will also be allowed to rate instruments that fall under the umbrella of other regulators, such as the Reserve Bank of India. This expands the scope of ratings for unlisted debt instruments. A clear distinction will be mandatory in rating reports and the marketing of products regulated by Sebi versus those under other regulators.

Share transfer and related processes have been made faster and simpler with much less paperwork for investors. For example, investors are no longer required to get hold of a separate confirmation letter from the company for a host of equity-related activities, and shares will be credited directly to the investor's demat account once verification is done. Shares held physically will also be easier to transfer now under a one-time window. Investors will be able to transfer the shares to their own name in digital form using the window. This will be a limited-period opportunity and will only apply to shares purchased before April 1, 2019. Overall, these changes will bring greater transparency to the market, reduce friction for investors, and ease compliance for stakeholders.

Western approaches

PM's three-nation tour created useful momentum

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tour to Jordan, Ethiopia, and Oman represented small but significant steps to reinforce India's historically cordial trade and security relations with West Asia and Africa at a time of grave America-led geopolitical uncertainty both in the region and in global trade. The import of these visits lies as much in its external messaging — underlined by the unexpected gestures of the Ethiopian Prime Minister and Jordanian crown prince in personally chauffeuring Mr Modi — as the deals that were concluded. Of these, the free-trade agreement (FTA) signed between Oman and India, celebrating 70 years of diplomatic ties, marked an important step forward.

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (Cepa) is the second FTA signed between India and a West Asian nation — the first being with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2022. This one, however, goes beyond the UAE FTA by allowing India near universal duty-free access to the Omani market (98.08 per cent of tariff lines), with immediate tariff elimination for 97.96 per cent. India, meanwhile, has reciprocated by liberalising nearly 95 per cent of India's imports from Oman by value. Though Oman is by no means one of India's largest trade partners in the region — at \$10 billion, it looks small before the \$100 billion with the UAE and the \$42 billion with Saudi Arabia — it signals major potential for economic engagement and expansion. A provision for 100 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) by Indian companies in major services sectors offers opportunities for building on India's traditional strengths in services in West Asia and Africa as does a liberalised mobility framework for Indian professionals. The fact that Muscat has agreed to lift its ban on the export of rough marble blocks to India, enabling the country to gradually replace its dependence on Türkiye, must also be seen as a key geostrategic gain. India's relations with Türkiye have soured following Ankara's support to Pakistan and its criticism of the Indian policy on Jammu & Kashmir.

In Jordan, which marked the first leg of the trip and the Prime Minister's first full bilateral visit, a raft of cooperation agreements cemented a long-standing friendship rooted in mutual economic interests. India is Jordan's third-largest trade partner, and has long played an important role as a fertiliser supplier to India. In Ethiopia, mutually reinforcing bilateralism sought to enhance investment opportunities in this strategic country on the horn of Africa. Some 675 Indian companies are registered in Ethiopia and have invested \$6.5 billion, mainly in textiles and pharmaceuticals. But as with the rest of Africa, India is a minnow compared to China. Though India is the third-largest source of FDI in Ethiopia, China and Türkiye have far more extensive trade, security, and military agreements with Addis Ababa, highlighting India's need to deepen the scope and tenor of its cooperation. Doing so is becoming critical to Mr Modi's ambitions for India to gain leadership of the Global South. India had played a role in Ethiopia's membership of the BRICS grouping in January last year. Addis Ababa is also headquarters to the African Union (AU), with which discussions are on for an early scheduling of the India-Africa Forum summit, which has been in limbo for a decade. In both style and substance the three-nation tour marks a constructive continuum of India's traditional ties with the region. The real test is how far New Delhi can capitalise on this momentum.

Prices in the electricity system

Only the price system can solve the complexity of modern electricity

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY



The electricity sector was once a domain of stability. For decades, the technology of thermal generation remained static. This technological stagnation allowed for a specific institutional design: Central planning. Officials in state capitals determined capacity, location, and dispatch. The grid buffered the difference between supply and demand, shielding consumers from the physics of the network.

The involvement of private capital in generation was termed “private-sector participation”, but it lacked the features of a market economy. These were arrangements where returns on equity were guaranteed for 25 years. In a functioning capitalism, it is unusual to have a 25-year return locked in by state fiat. The centrally planned electricity system was guaranteed to perform poorly when faced with dynamism. This system is now being hit by three simultaneous shocks.

The first is the imperative of climate change. The scientific consensus on global warming is clear: Carbon-dioxide emission must cease. This is no longer just a moral constraint but an economic one, enforced by mechanisms like carbon pricing, the European Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which comes into force on January 1, 2026, and the clarity in the financial sector that fossil-fuel generation will stop at some point, therefore new projects are now unbankable. We see this in the paper by Borah, Jaitly, Sane 2025, which was unveiled at the recent Emerging Markets Conference (<https://bit.ly/4sfKwCH>).

The second shock is technological. We have witnessed mind-blowing gains in solar photovoltaic (SPV) and lithium-ion batteries. These came out of first world basic research funding, and then Wright's Law: Costs plummet as cumulative production doubles. These are not incremental improvements but order-of-magnitude shifts in capital efficiency. With wind generation and other storage technologies also, the gains are substantial even if less dramatic. Options like pumped hydroelectric storage, particularly relevant for geographies like the Indian Western Ghats, are now top of the mind.

The third shock is on the demand side. First came cryptocurrency mining, and now the computational

demands of artificial intelligence (AI). These technologies require vast quantities of power. They produce a rapid increase in demand, of the kind that the central planning system struggles to keep pace with.

These three changes have led to a global breakdown in centrally planned electricity systems. The grid, designed for a static world, cannot accommodate new renewable-energy (RE) generators or the demands of modern consumers. We are in a “fractured transition”. The replacement technologies are mature and deployable. However, the institutional framework — the price system that must be the resource-allocator — is absent. The hardware is ready; the software of the market economy is missing.

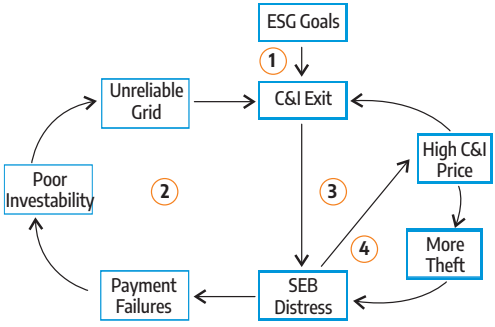
The story of the electricity system in Pakistan is a precursor to what could happen in India. There is an uncomfortable resemblance between the fiscal and operational realities of several Indian states with conditions in Pakistan.

The breakdown emerged from a set of feedback loops [see diagram, from Jaitly, Sane & Shah 2025 (<https://bit.ly/4pppoOB>)]. As grid electricity becomes unreliable and expensive due to cross-subsidisation and inefficiencies, consumers with capital exit the system. They install decentralised solar generation. This reduces the revenue pool for discoms, worsening their financial health. To recover costs, discoms raise tariffs on the remaining customers, primarily commercial and industrial users. This increases the incentive for those users to also leave the grid. This cycle destroys the public utility. The forces dismantling the grid in Pakistan are at work in India. What Pakistan faces today, Indian states may face tomorrow.

The rigidities of the 25-year power purchase agreements (PPAs) exacerbate this. These contracts were written for a world of constant marginal costs. In a world of renewable energy, which has zero marginal cost, they become liabilities. The central planner cannot optimise a system where supply is stochastic (solar and wind) and demand is increasingly volatile (AI and electric-vehicle charging).

The story of the AI demand shock in advanced economies is another precursor to what could happen in India. The stability of the grid is threatened not just by

What ails electricity



Source: Electricity reforms in the economic strategy of Tamil Nadu, Akshay Jaitly, Renuka Sane, Ajay Shah, XKDR Forum Working Paper 38, February 2025. <https://bit.ly/4pppoOB>

supply fluctuation but by the sheer scale of new consumption. Attempting to manage this through administrative controls will result in shortages, rationing, and the acceleration of the death spiral described above. What advanced economies face today, Indian states could face tomorrow if latency considerations demand that inference chips be close to customers.

The way out lies in the price system. The “lowest hanging fruit” in the climate transition is the reform of the electricity market based on the price system, as detailed in Jaitly & Shah 2021 (<https://bit.ly/4p4kZQA>).

In a functional market, price is the signal that coordinates private decisions. When the sun shines and the wind blows, electricity prices should drop to near zero. This signals consumers to run energy-intensive processes — pumping water, charging vehicles, batch computing. Cheap daytime prices for a vast array of Indian consumers is the political bargain which would go with expensive evening electricity and the removal of subsidies. When generation is low, prices should rise, signalling storage providers (eg electric vehicles) to discharge and consumers to curtail usage.

A recent talk by Smeet Poladia (<https://bit.ly/4a03bwk>) showed how the price system has been harnessed by the Ercot system in Texas. This fares well in handling extreme variability and high renewable penetration. It shows that reliability does not require central planning; it requires price discovery and risk-taking private firms who build capacity based on the possibility of future profit.

The “Pakistan outcome” should concern us: Financially ruined state utilities, a grid abandoned by the affluent and productive, and a breakdown of energy security. This path is paved with good intentions, subsidies, and an adherence to the central planning model of the 20th century.

The price system is the only mechanism capable of coordinating the complexity of the new energy landscape. It involves moving to a market system where supply and demand clear in real-time for all components of the electricity system. It means the grid as a community marketplace rather than government infrastructure.

The author is a researcher at the XKDR Forum

Shrimp exports can beat the tariff challenge

India's export-oriented shrimp industry seems set to convert the challenge from the punitive tariffs imposed by the United States (US), the largest importer, into an opportunity. This is by diversifying its export destinations and increasing shipment to non-US markets. Appreciable headway has, in fact, already been made in this direction. Exporters anticipate that the losses suffered due to a sharp decline in supplies to the US, as a result of the cancellation of orders after the tariff increase in August, are likely to be recompensed to a large extent by higher exports to countries like China, Vietnam, Belgium, Russia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (UK). Besides, the supplies of shrimp (also called prawns) to traditional markets, such as the European Union, Japan, and West Asia, are expected to hold steady.

According to industry sources, exports this financial year to non-US markets witnessed around a 30 per cent surge in value. This has helped India maintain its flagship position in the international shrimp bazaar. Export prospects remain upbeat, thanks to firm global demand, the competitiveness of Indian prawns in terms of both quality and pricing, and strong government backing. The continuous upgrade of indigenous technology for shrimp farming has also played a significant role in sustaining India's predominance in the global shrimp sector.

India has, for long, been the world's leading producer and exporter of shrimps, accounting for nearly one-sixth of global output and over one-fifth of international trade. However, Ecuador has caught up with it in recent years, and is now giving it a tough competition in export. But experts on fisheries are confident that India would manage to regain top position, notwithstanding stagnation in marine catches, because

of robust growth in shrimp aquaculture and greater emphasis on the value-addition of export-bound products. Shrimps now comprise close to 70 per cent of the country's export in seafood.

Though commercial-scale shrimp farming began in India in the late 1980s, when demand for this premium fish species began to look up in the international market, it got a fillip in 2009 because of two factors. First, domestic production in major shrimp-producing and -consuming countries then — like China, Thailand, and Vietnam — sharply plummeted due to the outbreak of the early mortality syndrome disease in their black tiger shrimp farms. And second, the Indian government allowed the introduction of a “new” variety of shrimps called Vannamei (whiteleg tiger shrimp), which enjoyed several advantages over the traditionally cultivated blackleg tiger shrimp. The most significant among these included relatively high immunity against diseases and a lower feed requirement, which meant substantially lower production costs and larger profits. Vannamei also fetched premium prices in the export market. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Vannamei farming spread rapidly, and this became the main cultivated species across the shrimp-producing regions in just a decade. It now accounts for nearly two-thirds of the country's shrimp output, and the bulk of the shrimp exports.

The technological support provided to shrimp farmers, processors, and exporters by fisheries research centres has played a significant role in bringing about the shrimp revolution. The conventional methods of shrimp farming have been replaced by novel, high-tech, cost-effective, and sustainable shrimp-growing systems. These new techniques

facilitated a higher yield of marketable produce from less space, and with a lower cost, to enhance the net profitability of shrimp cultivation.

The innovative “super-intensive precision shrimp farming system”, evolved by the Chennai-based Central Institute of Brackishwater Aquaculture, can be a case in point. It involves culturing prawns in circular tanks lined with polythene sheets, using digital tools like larval feeding and waste management based on internet of things and artificial intelligence (AI). It has the potential to yield as much as 100 to 120 tonnes of shrimp per hectare of water. It also uses AI to monitor and control diseases, thereby minimising the risk of drug residues in prawns, and boosting their export worthiness. Notably, the shrimps produced with this technique have been found to have a relatively good texture, colour, and taste. Besides, this method allows farmers to plan their production in accordance with the projected demand in local and export markets.

The Centre and the governments of coastal states have launched schemes to promote scientific shrimp farming. Liberal financial and other kinds of incentives are being offered to shrimp farmers for adopting advanced technology under the Centre's umbrella fisheries development programme called the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana. Besides, government agencies like the Marine Products Export Development Authority and the Coastal Aquaculture Authority are helping in prospecting, and gainfully tapping, new export markets, and looking after regulatory matters. However, the bigger issues concerning trade barriers, such as the US tariffs, arbitrarily fixed quality standards, and consistent rejections on frivolous grounds by importers like the European Union, need to be addressed by the government to let the shrimp sector withstand escalating rivalries in international trade.

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The evolution of Deepi



NIVEDITA MOOKERJI

Stories about startup founders are made of stuff that invariably inspire and impress. That includes stories narrated or shared by entrepreneurs. Deepinder Goyal, CEO of Zomato (Eternal), the online food delivery startup with huge focus on quick commerce through its arm Blinkit, recently posted one such story on X (earlier Twitter). This is about someone who had worked as a delivery agent at Blinkit for a few months to fund his education and was now set to join Zomato's design team. Goyal's post, sharing the transformational journey,

caught widespread attention, while also triggering a debate on opportunities created by startups, especially food tech companies such as Zomato, which listed in 2021 — just three years after turning a unicorn (valuation of \$1 billion or more).

Unseen, The Untold Story of Deepinder Goyal and the Making of Zomato, not only tells of many such awe-inspiring moments in the life of a startup, it also captures the unpredictability, risk and adventure through it all. The writer, Megha Vishwanath, is a senior executive at Zomato, enabling her to access relevant information about the company. That Vishwanath, a former journalist, is a company insider can also raise questions about objectivity — a critical aspect in a biography. However, the author's note at the start tells us about the “arrangement” reached between Goyal and Vishwanath in the making of this book.

The writer had already left journalism and was working with a tech start-

up. “I knew that to tell this story with real depth, I couldn't rely solely on scheduled interviews or second-hand accounts. I needed to shadow him, closely and consistently, slipping in and out of his personal and professional worlds, watching decisions take shape in real time...” And, Goyal suggested she become a part of the team working to build Zomato. The book is an outcome of some 300 interviews with family, friends and colleagues, along with three years of closely tracking the Zomato founder's journey.

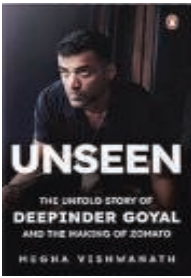
Unseen... opens, as part of a preface, on a bullish note with Zomato's much-awaited listing. As India's first tech unicorn went public on July 23, 2021, the author describes how people in the Gurugram office clapped, laughed and clicked photographs. Against this infectious setting, *Unseen...* brings out the vulnerability of the man that the world was watching. After the noise had died down, “Deepinder sat alone in a corner of the office...” He asked himself why the IPO moment didn't feel like enough.

The story of Deepinder Goyal takes off from here, going back in time to trace

his parents' life in Punjab, especially during the turbulent 1980s. Deepinder and his elder brother Geetinder “grew up in different worlds,” we are told. According to this account, Deepinder, or Deepi as he's called, was shielded from the harsh realities of the world outside, unlike his older brother. But then, there was pain with which the young Deepinder struggled.

Deepi's formative years — his sense of falling short when compared with his brother who was academically bright, his stammering, his attempt to outshine others in class through various means and finally finding success — have been documented sensitively, lending credibility to the narration.

The book reveals that he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a condition on the autism spectrum, when he was well into adulthood. “It explained why social interactions often felt like an intricate dance, one where everyone else



Unseen: The Untold Story of Deepinder Goyal and the Making of Zomato
by Megha Vishwanath
Published by Penguin Business
289 pages ₹799

rebranded to Blinkit and was acquired by Zomato) and courtship of Kanchan Joshi (whom he went on to marry later) on the IIT Delhi campus — are endearing. Kanchan was Deepi's senior, pursuing an MSc in Mathematics while Deepi and Albinder were studying engineering.

Besides friendship, romance and studies, the campus became the starting point of Deepi's entrepreneurial journey. For that, Prayank Swaroop — another senior from IIT Delhi who's now partner at Accel — worked with Deepi on several projects. And then there was a turning point. In 2005, a year after Prayank graduated, Deepinder who was now in his fifth (final) year at IIT, approached him with the idea of setting up Foodlet.com, the seed of an idea which would eventually become Zomato. Prayank declined as he had accepted a job offer in Singapore by now.

And the rest, as they say, is history. A startup built from scratch became a giant. Also, the insecure boy growing up in Punjab is now on top of the Hurun Rich List 2025 in the category of self-made entrepreneurs. While much of the book is about the adventure, thrill and also the hurdles of the startup world including the ups and downs of fundraising, the bumpy road to profitability and staying relevant, that story is not unknown. *Unseen...* stands out more for the portrayal of Deepi as a young boy, more than him as a businessman.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Aravalli row

Onus on the Centre to bridge trust deficit

THE Supreme Court’s recent acceptance of an elevation-based definition of the Aravalli hills has triggered protests in Haryana and Rajasthan. The definition, recommended by a panel under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, reveals a schism between regulatory precision and ecological reality. At the heart of the controversy lies the question: can a mountain range as ancient and complex as the Aravalli be protected through a uniform threshold of “100 metres above local relief”? For many environmental activists, scientists and local communities, the answer is in the negative. They argue that the new parameters exclude nearly 90 per cent of the Aravalli landscape in Rajasthan, where hills often rise only 30-80 metres but still have critical ecological importance. These lower hillocks and slopes are the very zones where groundwater is recharged, vegetation stabilises soil and biodiversity thrives. Protesters claim that confining protection to the height criterion opens the doors to intensified mining, construction and commercial activity in these areas.

Various studies and court-appointed committees’ reports have documented extensive damage from mining, legal or otherwise; entire hills have been flattened in districts such as Rajasthan’s Alwar. Environmentalists warn that further fragmentation could alter rainfall patterns, weaken the Aravallis’ role as a climatic barrier against the Thar desert and worsen air pollution in the Delhi-NCR.

The Union government insists that these claims are alarmist. As per the Centre, the new definition is more scientific and conservation-centric — it protects entire hill landforms, their slopes and clustered ranges, freezes new mining leases and mandates a sustainable mining plan. Yet the protests continue as the Aravallis are not just a collection of measurable landforms but a living ecological system shaped over nearly two billion years. Whether the government can bridge the trust deficit will determine not only the fate of the fragile Aravallis but also the environmental security of North India.

A bitter pill

Stronger drug oversight needed in Himachal

HIMACHAL Pradesh’s image as India’s pharmaceutical hub has been jolted once again. In the latest quality audit by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation and state regulators, 205 drug samples were declared ‘not of standard quality’ and nearly one-fourth of these were manufactured in the state. The failed medicines include drugs used to treat fever, diabetes and even cardiac conditions. For patients, especially those dependent on affordable generics, this is not merely a regulatory lapse, it is a matter of life and death. Himachal’s pharma boom was built on tax incentives and ease-of-land availability. While this helped the state emerge as a major supplier of medicines to the domestic market and public health programmes, regulatory oversight has not kept pace with industrial expansion. Rather, it has caused avoidable ailments, even deaths, of patients who became victims of spurious medicines.

Repeated inspections revealing substandard production, misuse of inactive units and firms operating despite stop orders point to systemic weaknesses rather than isolated violations. Drug recalls, while necessary, are reactive measures. Once a faulty medicine has entered the supply chain, the damage is often already done, especially in a country where vigilance is weak and patients rarely report adverse drug reactions. The burden of regulatory failure is borne silently by consumers, many of whom have little choice but to trust what is prescribed or dispensed.

This moment demands more than episodic crackdowns. State drug controllers must be strengthened with manpower, testing infrastructure and autonomy from political and commercial pressures. Coordination between Central and state regulators needs tightening. Public disclosure of offending firms and repeat violations is essential. India’s reputation as the “pharmacy of the world” cannot rest on volume alone. If Himachal’s warning signs are ignored, the cost will be counted in compromised health and lost lives.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1925

The convocation address

WE congratulate Nawab Hyder Nawaz Jung Bahadur, Finance Member, Hyderabad, on the interesting address he delivered at the University of Punjab convocation on Saturday. The address dealt, in a fairly comprehensive spirit, with some of the most urgent problems affecting the system of education and its products, not only in this province but in the country generally. The first and most important of these problems, of course, is that connected with the large and ever-increasing volume of unemployment among the educated classes. The problem has formed the theme of more than one convocation address before now, and particularly of two consecutive addresses delivered by that distinguished scholar and educationist, the late Dr Ewing. But Jung’s treatment of the subject is not without a novelty of its own. Starting with a somewhat humdrum but perfectly sound proposition that “the education system would serve its purpose better if it were more closely adapted to the country’s present needs,” he laid great emphasis on the necessity of producing “men to fill the employments which are necessary to the country’s life, men not only as highly educated as possible, but educated especially for the work which they will have to do — agriculturists, businessmen, engineers, doctors, manufacturers, artists, blacksmiths, weavers, potters — almost everything except clerks,” whose number is already greatly in excess of the country’s demand. In order to enable the educational system to fulfil this purpose, it is necessary, says Jung, that it should be thoroughly reconstructed.

Anti-defection law needs teeth to bite

Changing sides mid-term must carry a cost heavy enough to make the transaction unviable



SY QURAISHI
FORMER CHIEF ELECTION
COMMISSIONER OF INDIA

EARLIER this month, Congress MP Manish Tewari introduced a Private Member’s Bill to amend the Tenth Schedule — his third attempt after 2011 and 2020. The proposal is simple and attractive; legislators should be free to vote independently on most business, with the party whip carrying anti-defection consequences only on votes that directly affect a government’s survival — confidence/no-confidence motions, adjournment motions, money Bills and core budgetary matters. The motive is democratic: revive free debate and stop turning MPs and MLAs into headcount.

But any reform to “relax the whip” risks missing India’s deeper crisis. In our ecosystem, defections are rarely about principled dissent. They are often engineered through inducements, intimidation, timing and arithmetic, so that the voter’s mandate can be converted into a different government after the election.

The phenomenon is not new. India coined “Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram” after Haryana MLA Gaya Lal changed his party three times in a single day in 1967. What began as a scandal became a technique; what was once exceptional is now routine.

Parliament responded in 1985 by inserting the anti-defection law through the 52nd Amendment. It disqualifies MPs/MLAs who voluntarily give up party membership or vote/abstain contrary to a party direction without permission and timely condonation. Independents cannot join a party after elections, and nominated members face consequences depending on when they join. The constitutional promise was straightforward: stability and integrity.

Yet the law carried a design flaw that has only grown sharper: it placed decisive power in the hands



PLAY: When defections become a routine, elections are only the first step in government formation. ANI

of the Speaker. The original scheme also sought to insulate the Speaker’s decision from judicial review. The Supreme Court corrected that in the Kihoto Hollohan case verdict, holding that when the Speaker decides disqualification, he acts as a tribunal and the decision is subject to judicial review. That safeguard matters because Speakers — regrettably — have increasingly behaved as political actors rather than neutral constitutional authorities, their fortunes often tied to the ruling side.

This is why the anti-defection regime fails India in two distinct ways. First, conceptually: broad whip enforcement reduces legislators to numbers and hollows out deliberation. Tewari’s Bill responds to this real concern by narrowing whip consequences to survival votes. Second, practically: the law has proved weak against the betrayal it was meant to prevent. It has generated escape routes that legitimise mandate theft.

Three routes dominate the abuse. The first is the “two-thirds merger” shield: engineer the arithmetic so a mass switch is presented as a protected merger. The second is the resignation workaround: instead of “defecting” and risking disqualification, legislators resign in a bloc, reduce the House’s effective strength, bring down a government and then contest again under a new banner. The third is process manipulation: disqualification petitions are delayed or selectively expedited to suit the

Manish Tewari’s Private Member’s Bill tries to separate two issues India has wrongly fused: party stability and free legislative debate.

ruling side’s interests.

The events of 2019 — widely reported and litigated — captured the template we still live with. In Goa, two of the three MLAs of the Maharashtra Gomantak Party moved to the BJP after the polls, invoking the two-thirds route. In Karnataka, 17 MLAs resigned and two independents withdrew support, shifting the arithmetic and enabling a new government to win a trust vote. In Sikkim, legislators switched in bulk, making a regional Opposition collapse overnight. In 2022, Maharashtra witnessed similar engineering when the Shiv Sena split triggered prolonged litigation over legitimacy and party symbols. These are not aberrations; they are the new norm.

Since then, the pattern has become systemic. Deep pockets and incumbent advantage determine outcomes. Money is the magnet; office is the price. Legislators are moved across states, kept in hotels, negotiated through

intermediaries and rewarded with ministerships, chairmanships, tickets or protection. Not every allegation can be proven beyond reasonable doubt, but democracies run on trust, not merely on convictions. When defections become routine, politics turns into an MLA market, and elections become only the first step in government formation.

So, where does that leave Tewari’s Bill? It is right to challenge whip-driven tyranny. But in today’s India, relaxing the whip without simultaneously creating deterrence risks spreading horse-trading into ordinary legislation. In a system where inducement is endemic, appeals to ‘conscience’ become a cover for transactional voting.

The Bill’s strength is that it tries to separate two questions India has wrongly fused: party stability and free legislative debate. If the whip is confined to survival votes, MPs/MLAs may finally speak and vote on ordinary Bills without fear of losing their seats. The Bill’s weakness is that it does not touch the two engines of contemporary defections: the two-thirds merger loophole and the resignation route. Nor does it solve the Speaker problem. Without independent adjudication and strict timelines, the presiding officer can still decide when a petition is heard and when it is buried.

Reform must therefore do three things at once. First, confront the Speaker’s conflict of interest: defection adjudication should move to an independent tribunal

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We will be making a mockery of democracy if we fail to plug loopholes in the anti-defection law. — M Venkaiah Naidu

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Address MGNREGA’s ills

Apropos of ‘G-RAM-G vs MGNREGA’ (*The Great Game*); the real issue lies not in renaming or restructuring but in addressing the long-standing irregularities that have plagued MGNREGA. In previous years, the scheme was widely misused at multiple levels — ghost beneficiaries, delayed wages, inflated muster rolls and corruption in implementation — that diluted its original promise of dignity through work. If change is indeed the objective, it must correct these systemic flaws and restore public confidence. Any reform should fulfil the basic needs of common people and ensure transparency, timely payments and meaningful employment. Reform should empower, not merely repackage.

ASHOK SINGH GULERIA, HAMIRPUR

Co-sharing will curb profligacy

With reference to ‘G-RAM-G vs MGNREGA’: the new funding model of MGNREGA, based on co-sharing with states, will encourage fiscal discipline and help check profligacy. The economically constrained states must be dealt with separately. The new rule can help in curtailing wasteful expenditure on doles and freebies and increase utilisation of funds in improving other parameters like education and infrastructure. However, the BJP may be following its saffronisation agenda in the renaming of the scheme.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Pak footprint in B’desh turmoil

Refer to ‘Bangladesh must pull itself back from the brink’; without backing their claim with evidence, some sections in Dhaka are trying to put the blame on India for fomenting trouble in their country. The perpetrators of this widespread violence want to skew Bangladesh’s 2026 general election in their favour. With Sheikh Hasina present in New Delhi, India has become a convenient target to whip up passions in Dhaka. There is a risk of Bangladesh slipping into an Islamist fundamentalist state. Pakistan’s footprint has grown in Bangladesh since Hasina’s ouster.

PS HANSPAUL, BY MAIL

Policy inertia hurts farmers

Refer to ‘Debt-driven farming’; farmer distress in Haryana is not episodic, but structural. The editorial rightly identifies the wheat-paddy monoculture as a core problem, apart from the eroding soil health and groundwater, and farm viability. Similar debt data being reported after a gap of few months in the consecutive Assembly sessions suggests policy inertia. What is missing is a credible transition strategy: assured markets for diversified crops, investment in agro-processing and stronger farmer-owned collectives to improve bargaining power. Without income stability and risk protection, credit will remain a trap rather than a tool.

SURAJ KATHURIA, JIND

N-energy safer in public sector

The government is already operating nuclear power plants through public sector entities. Why are we introducing private and foreign players to this critical and inherently hazardous sector? The private sector’s aim is to maximise shareholder returns and we cannot expect charity from them when it comes to safety, waste management or emergency preparedness. The SHANTI Bill dilutes accountability by removing supplier liability and capping operator liability, effectively shifting the ultimate financial and human cost of any accident onto taxpayers and victims. The government should retain nuclear power and strengthen independent regulation.

ATUL KUMAR GUPTA, BY MAIL

Manmohan Singh was a class apart

With reference to ‘Manmohan Singh, the authentic gentleman’; the former PM was a multidimensional personality — dedicated teacher, quintessential academic, suave bureaucrat, great economist, seasoned politician, astute statesman and an inspiring visionary. His initiatives such as economic liberalisation, MGNREGA, Right to Education Act, Right to Information Act and National Food Security Act ensured India’s inclusive and sustainable development.

DS KANG, HOSHIARPUR

The unbroken arc : Punjab @ 60



LT GEN SS MEHTA (RETD)
EX-WESTERN ARMY COMMANDER
& FOUNDER TRUSTEE, PUNE
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

STRENGTH is never accidental; it is a lineage. Every civilisation tests its character on a frontier, and for the soul of India, that frontier has always been Punjab. From Guru Nanak's quiet universality to Bhagat Singh's molten defiance, Punjab did not merely guard a boundary; it shaped the conscience of the Republic. Few regions carry such sorrow in memory, such service in muscle and such instinctive light.

Sixty years after its reorganisation, Punjab stands again on history's hinge. The Partition cleaved families, fields and faith, yet Punjab did not collapse. It rebuilt its soil from scorched earth and fed a hungry nation. When new lines were drawn in 1966, Punjab absorbed them with the calm of a people who know geography may shift, but character does not. When insurgency darkened the 1980s, the farmer coaxed life from tired land while the soldier held the line. Punjab endured not noisily, but faithfully.

These memories form the keel, the deep, unseen beam that has kept the Republic steady through repeated

storms. A society that turns hardship into humour and sacrifice into pride carries a resilience no crisis can extinguish. Punjab's instinct has never been to withdraw when tested, but to steady itself first and, in doing so, steady the nation.

The quiet cost of endurance
Yet endurance carries its own quiet cost. To stand repeatedly at the frontier is to absorb strain long before it becomes visible elsewhere. Fatigue does not announce itself as failure; it appears, instead, as thinning margins, deferred renewal and the silent assumption that resilience will replenish itself indefinitely.

Punjab has borne this cost without complaint, through depleted soils, constrained choices and a generation increasingly pulled outward. This is not a matter of sympathy, but of realism. Renewal becomes imperative not when collapse is imminent, but when endurance has been stretched too far.

From rhetoric to reform
Optimism without discipline becomes illusion. Punjab cannot ascend on sentiment alone. Renewal must be structural, not episodic, and grounded in responsibility, not grievance.

Punjab's renewal unfolds under constraints shaped by the Partition. It is an agrarian economy without coastal access. Its soils carry the weight of decades of national food security. Its sentinel duties are rising, now complicated by narcotics, drones and cross-border criminal networks. These are not fail-



PUNJAB'S RENEWAL IMPERATIVE: The Republic's sentinel must rise. FILE PHOTO

ures of will, but facts of geography and obligation.

No region should be structurally disadvantaged for having stood where history placed it. Support that offsets national service must strengthen renewal, not subsidise drift. A sentinel state is sustained not by spectacle, but by stewardship.

Punjab's history offers another quiet lesson. It has rarely had the luxury of choosing its moment; history has chosen it. Each generation has inherited not a blank slate, but a ledger of obligations, some visible, others absorbed without record. What appears as resilience is often continuity: fields tended because they must be, borders held because someone must stand there, institutions carried forward because abandonment would cost more than repair. This inheritance has shaped a temperament that values steadiness over spectacle and renewal over rupture. The task now



A society that turns hardship into humour and sacrifice into pride carries a resilience no crisis can extinguish.

is not to reinvent Punjab, but to ensure that what has been carried across generations is not depleted by neglect. Continuity, after all, is not secured by memory alone; it is sustained by timely renewal.

Five pillars of internal renewal

1. The ecological truce: Punjab's agricultural success was once a national rescue. Today, renewal demands a new compact with the land. The future lies not in extraction without replenishment, but in balance, restoring soil, conserving water and treating ecology as inheritance rather than input. The Brown Revolution is an ecological truce: a commitment to treat the soil not as a factory floor, but as a living inheritance. By restoring the carbon and the character of our land, we can ensure that Punjab's fields remain fertile long after the tubewells fall silent.

2. From exodus to aspiration: No society thrives when its ambition departs each

morning. Punjab must become a place where aspiration finds roots rather than wings, where staying is not seen as settling, but as choosing dignity, purpose and opportunity at home. Education, skills and enterprise must converge locally, so the future is built where identity is strongest, not pursued where belonging is thinnest.

3. Industry as stabiliser, not substitute: Punjab does not seek industry as an escape from agriculture, but as its reinforcement. Value-adding enterprise — agro-processing, farm-linked manufacturing, logistics and materials — anchored close to land and skills, retains youth, confidence and capability.

In a sentinel state, industry is not merely about output; when home, hearth and enterprise co-locate, families strengthen, society benefits and security consolidates without spectacle.

4. The veterans' dividend: Veteran-led start-ups across logistics, agri-processing, Brown Revolution drone services, cybersecurity, teaching, sports preparation for the Commonwealth and Olympics and emergency response translate military competence into civilian value. Capital follows confidence, not subsidy, making veterans a decisive multiplier in a sentinel economy.

5. The global Punjabi: The diaspora is not dispersed; it is embedded across the world's markets and institutions. Engaged with dignity, it can amplify Punjab's renewal, not as remittance, but as shared purpose, rooted in Punjabi-iat. Cultural and civic platforms — from Punjabi diaspora games to literature festivals

— can anchor this engagement in confidence rather than nostalgia. Punjab's instinct must not be to seek the light, but to become it.

Sixth pillar: Consideration for sentinel states

Frontier regions bear burdens that routine policy often overlooks. When land, markets and vigilance are committed in national interest, the cost is enduring. Consideration for sentinel states is therefore not concession, but design, a matter of balance and fairness.

Where geography assigns permanent national duty, permanent national cost follows. When such equity is embedded in institutional design, endurance is sustained with confidence rather than exhaustion. A Republic that recognises its sentinels secures its own stability.

The arc remains unbroken

Endurance, even when rooted in character, is not inexhaustible. Regions that hold the line longest do so by drawing on reserves — ecological, social and moral — that must eventually be renewed.

Punjab has never measured its duty by reward, nor its belonging by acknowledgment. It stands where it does because history placed it there and because character kept it there. Punjab is sentinel India, not by slogan, but by instinct. It does not merely participate in the Republic; it provides its rhythm.

The soil can be healed, the youth anchored and the sentinel allowed to rise. Punjab will steady itself first and, in doing so, embellish the Republic.

Bangladesh at a crossroads as unrest deepens



PRANAY SHARMA
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST,
KOLKATA

THE ongoing political unrest in Bangladesh is likely to intensify with Bangladesh Nationalist Party acting chairman Tarique Rahman's planned arrival in Dhaka on December 25. Khaleda Zia's son will end his 18-year-old exile if he, indeed, shows up, with some reports claiming that the violence in Dhaka in recent days could compromise his safety.

In any case, the chaos has already cast a shadow on the February parliamentary election. If elections are postponed, it could push Bangladesh into a long spell of political darkness and instability.

Bangladesh has a long history of political assassinations. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, widely regarded as the founding father of the country — although some would say that in the new Bangladesh, Mujib's title is contested — was killed along with most of his family members by a group of

disgruntled army majors on August 15, 1975.

Zia-ur-Rahman, Tarique Rahman's father, a retired army general who succeeded Mujib, was also killed in an army-led coup in 1979. There have been a number of murderous attacks on Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina — notably the 2004 grenade attack in which several Awami League people were killed and Hasina barely escaped. A case was filed against BNP leaders, including Tarique Rahman, for their involvement in the attack. This September, the Bangladesh Supreme Court quashed the case.

Tarique Zia's scheduled arrival coincides with the killing of youth leader Shafi Osman Hadi, a prominent member of last year's student protest in Dhaka which overthrew Hasina. In the violence that followed a few days ago, Dhaka's largest English daily, *The Daily Star*, and its sister Bengali publication, *Prothom Alo*, were targeted — it's not clear why because both newspapers have been critical of Hasina and they supported last year's July uprising. The attack showed the protesters enjoyed political backing as there was no intervention from the government during the mayhem.

Hasina has been accused of Hadi's attack even before investigations began; the assassins are now reported to



UNCERTAINTY: A postponed election could push Bangladesh into a spell of political instability. PTI

have fled to India. At a rally in Dhaka on Saturday, organised after Hadi's funeral, Islamist leaders took the mic to highlight Hasina's involvement and criticised India for being her main backer. The anti-India campaign had begun over the week with belligerent demonstrations outside the Indian High Commission soon after Hadi was shot.

India has in recent weeks told Bangladesh officials that it supports the democratic process in the country and wants a peaceful, free and inclusive election. This was widely interpreted by the interim government in Dhaka and its Islamist backers as Delhi's attempt to get Hasina's Awami League to participate in the parliamentary election. It is widely believed that last

The Jamaat, which had during Hasina's reign often supported the BNP from the sidelines, is now seeking a more ambitious role.

week's violent protests and unrest were organised by the Jamaat-e-Islami and its Islamist affiliates. The Jamaat, the most prominent among the 70-odd Islamist groups in Bangladesh, was pushed to the margins during Hasina's rule. However, despite her autocratic methods, Hasina has also been praised by secular sections in the country and elsewhere for keeping the Islamists under a tight rein.

After her departure from Bangladesh's political theatre, the Jamaat has significantly expanded its influence. It has also tried to bring other Islamist groups under one banner to establish an Islamic Caliphate. But to do that, the Jamaat needs more time.

What is even more interesting today is that the Jamaat,

which had during Hasina's reign often supported the BNP from the sidelines, is now seeking a far more ambitious role. It is clearly in a contest with the BNP to emerge as the most powerful party in Bangladesh. A postponed election suits its agenda best.

The attack on the two newspapers, *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*, by Islamist-backed protesters, has been puzzling for many observers. Besides supporting last year's student protest, both newspapers had subsequently published several investigative pieces on atrocities committed by Hasina.

But both papers have also been critical of attempts to erase the critical role of *mukti-joddhas*, or freedom fighters, in Bangladesh's liberation struggle. The massacres and rapes of Bengali nationalists by the Pakistani army and their affiliates in the run up to the creation of the independent nation in 1971, are there for all to see. Both newspapers have been very critical of Hasina, but they draw a line at the 1971 war of liberation.

Clearly, the Jamaat-e-Islami wants to turn that page in Bangladesh's history. Some Bangladeshi observers say that the attack is a signal to warn the rest of the media to refrain from praising the 1971 freedom fighters and remind people of Pakistan's negative role.

This argument looks plausi-

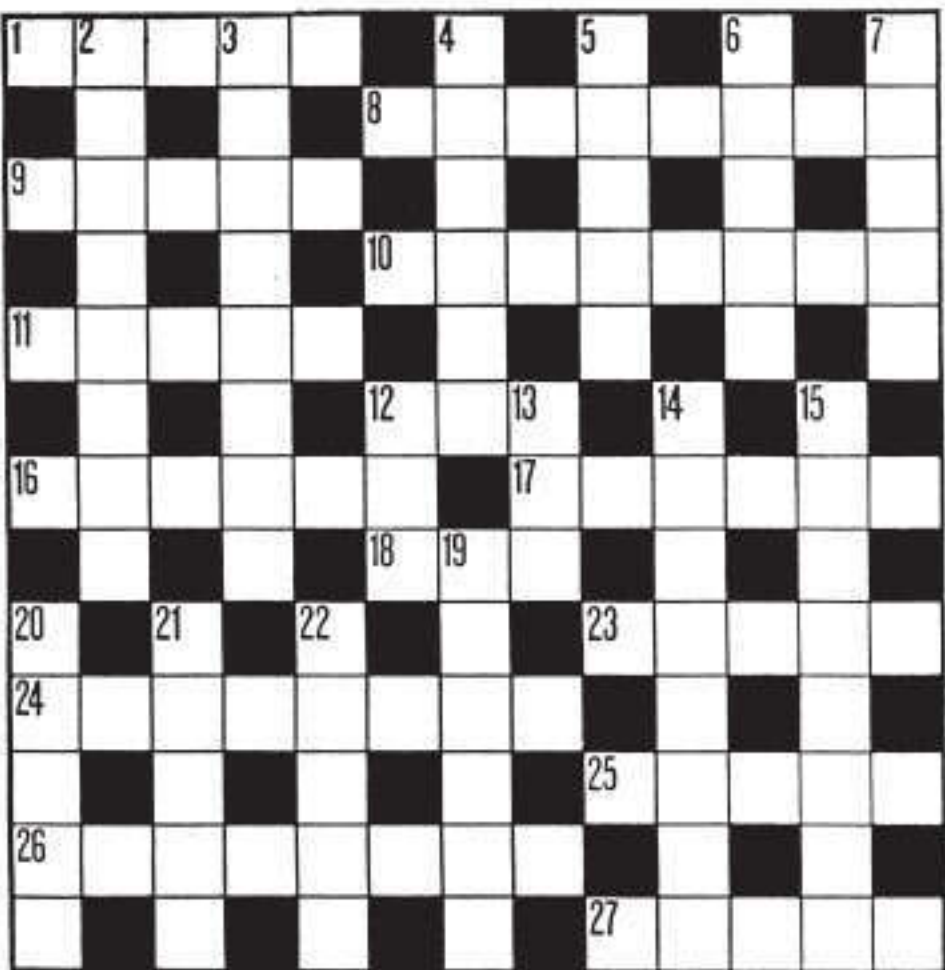
ble as in recent months, the Muhammed Yunus government has deepened relations with Pakistan. For the first time since 1971, both defence and security establishments have embarked upon a planned engagement. Pakistan's ISI has made frequent visits to Bangladesh for enhancing cooperation with its counterpart agency.

There are also reports that some key countries in the West have been in touch with the Jamaat and have shared in close circles that they don't mind the Islamist outfit playing a bigger role in Bangladeshi politics. Unless handled properly, this could be a serious problem for India.

India had serious difficulties in the past with a BNP government in Dhaka. Today, though, it seems its best hope. If the Awami League is allowed to participate in the elections, it could win enough seats and become the main opposition party. This would ensure that both Bangladesh and India do not jeopardise each other's core strategic interests.

Tarique Rahman could still arrive in Dhaka on December 25, defying the odds, to insist parliamentary elections are not called off. The BNP knows that any more delay could unravel the party. It remains to be seen which strategy, that of the BNP or the Jamaat, finally prevails.

QUICK CROSSWORD



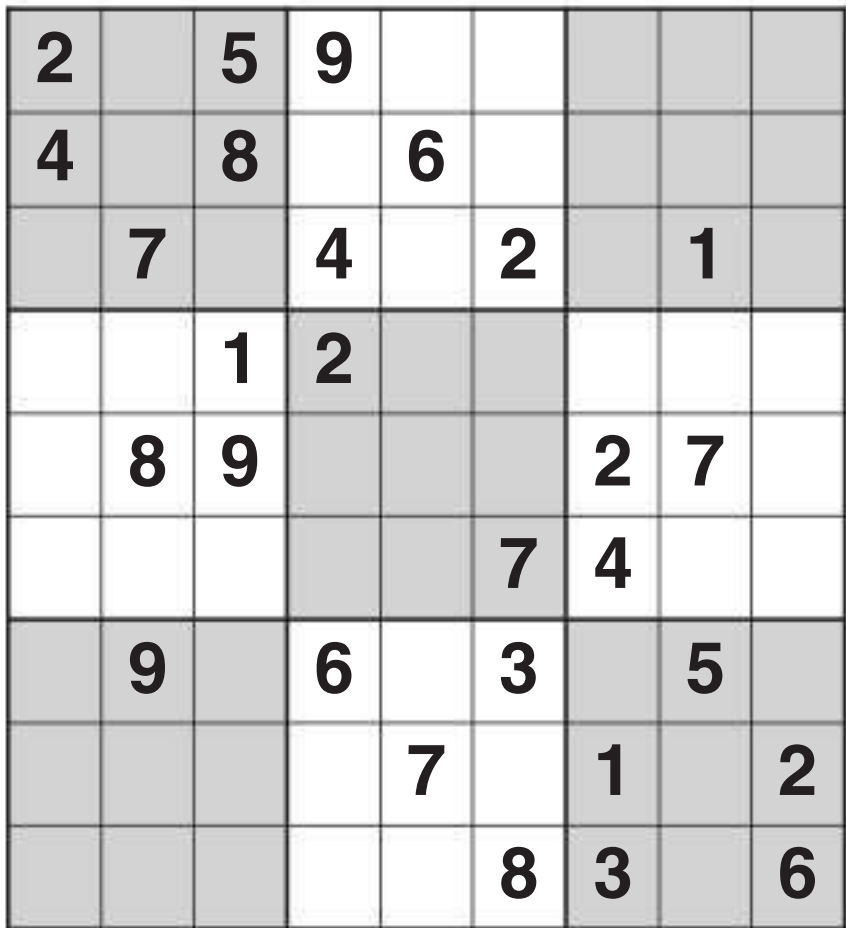
- ACROSS**
- Disgrace (5)
 - Be humiliated (4,4)
 - Particular bias (5)
 - Essentially basic (2-6)
 - Snow-block dwelling (5)
 - Unsubtle actor (3)
 - Comfort in sorrow (6)
 - Obstreperous (6)
 - Facetious person (3)
 - East African country (5)
 - Drawn from actual events (4-4)
 - Ethical (5)
 - Stop what one is doing (4,2,2)
 - Nervous excitement (5)

Saturday's Solution

Across: 1 Lip service, 6 Echo, 10 Flair, 11 Uppermost, 12 Pathetic, 13 Sense, 15 Amassed, 17 Tarnish, 19 Fatuous, 21 Overall, 22 Equal, 24 Estrange, 27 Extremism, 28 Gorge, 29 Tier, 30 Well-heeled.

Down: 1 Lift, 2 Play a part, 3 Earth, 4 Vaunted, 5 Copycat, 7 Crown, 8 On the shelf, 9 Preserve, 14 Bafflement, 16 Shoulder, 18 Inaugural, 20 Sterile, 21 Optimal, 23 Untie, 25 Angle, 26 Deed.

SU DO KU



SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 22, 2025, MONDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1947
■ Posh Shaka	1
■ Posh Parvishite	8
■ Hijari	1447
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 2, up to 10:52 am	
■ Dhruva Yoga up to 4:41 pm	
■ Utrashadha Nakshatra up to 5:32 am	
■ Moon enters Capricorn sign 10:07 am	

FORECAST

SUNSET: SUNRISE:	MONDAY TUESDAY	17:28 HRS 07:15 HRS	MAX	MIN
CITY				
Chandigarh	21		11	
New Delhi	21		09	
Amritsar	20		11	
Bathinda	24		12	
Jalandhar	20		11	
Ludhiana	19		09	
Bhiwani	22		08	
Hisar	22		10	
Sirsa	19		10	
Dharamsala	18		06	
Manali	14		02	
Shimla	16		07	
Srinagar	09		04	
Jammu	17		11	
Kargil	04		-06	
Leh	04		-06	
Dehradun	20		07	
Mussoorie	24		11	

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◆ Indian Newspaper

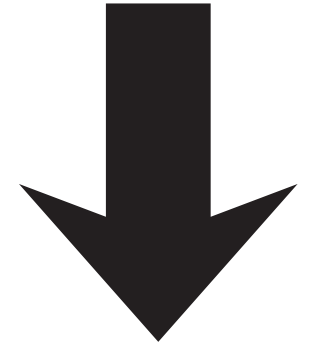
- 1) Times of India
 - 2) The Hindu
 - 3) Business line
 - 4) The Indian Express
 - 5) Economic Times
- And more Newspapers

◆ International Newspapers channel

[European, American, Gulf & Asia]

◆ Magazine Channel

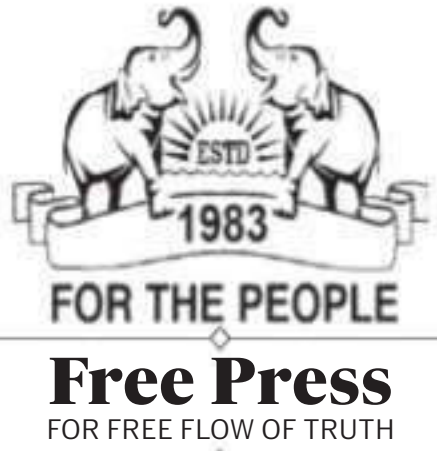
National & International
[General & Exam related]



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Why Oman is important

Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to Oman was viewed with keen interest by observers both in Delhi and Muscat. The visit, which was the Prime Minister's second visit to Oman, saw the signing of two key documents between India and Oman—the joint vision maritime document and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Long sought by both Delhi and Muscat, negotiations for the CEPA began in November 2023, and it was formalised on December 17 this year. Under the trade agreement, more Indian companies are likely to set up shop in Oman, and given that Muscat has an open border with other Gulf nations, India will be able to strengthen its economic footprint in West Asia. On the defence side, attention needs to be paid to the joint vision maritime document, the first such document signed by India with a West Asian country. While both India and Oman have a naval history, the presence of the British, who did not wish to relinquish control over defence and security in Oman, and New Delhi's own reluctance to explore a naval partnership meant that this aspect of the relationship was not expanded upon till recently.

Today, the situation is vastly different. The great power conflict within the Indian Ocean means that increased maritime cooperation with Oman is crucial to India's interests. Oman's strategic location on the Strait of Hormuz and its long coastline in the western part of the Indian Ocean make it imperative for New Delhi to have a naval presence there. The joint naval doctrine will enable New Delhi to have an increased presence in the region, ensure existing Sea Lanes of Communication are maintained and strengthen India's blue economy.

PM Modi is not the first Indian leader to recognise the significance of Oman. India has civilisational ties that go back 5,000 years, and Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the former ruler of Oman, had sought for New Delhi to play a strategic role there in the 1990s. Though that has not materialised to this date, Oman can play a significant role for India. Unlike the high-profile role adopted by the UAE and Qatar, the country is valuable as it has good relations with the Gulf nations, Iran, and even the Houthis. India would note this with great interest with regard to Iran. Though New Delhi has good relations with Iran, secondary sanctions imposed by the Trump administration and the revocation of the sanctions exemption on the Chabahar Port mean there is an element of caution in engaging Tehran today. It is here that the Gulf nation can play a role in conveying messages and holding talks that would not attract as much public attention as they would if held in Tehran or New Delhi. Oman is key to India's West Asia strategy, and New Delhi must make use of it.

An elephantine problem

The death of at least seven wild Asiatic elephants and injury to a calf in a rail accident near Guwahati, Assam, has brought the focus back to the human-elephant conflict. The Rajdhani Express from Sairang in Mizoram to New Delhi was rolling at full speed when the loco driver apparently spotted the herd of 100 elephants and hit the emergency brakes, but the train still hit and killed some. The accident site, it must be pointed out, is not a designated elephant corridor or among India's nearly 150 wildlife corridors that pass through animal habitats where loco drivers have been instructed to reduce speed to prevent collisions. Yet, the tragedy is no less significant.

Most elephant deaths occur due to electrocutions, and a total of 528 pachyderms have been killed between 2019 and 2024, according to government data. Assam is home to an estimated 6,000 pachyderms, and human-elephant conflict is frequent. In the past five years alone, nearly a dozen have been killed in the state in train collisions, while the all-India average ranges between 15 and 20 elephants every year. Train accidents may not be the primary cause of elephant deaths, but the fact remains that it has not been sufficiently addressed. The flip side of the human-elephant conflict is unsettling too—an average of 561 persons have been killed by elephants every year since 2020-21, with the highest tally of 621 recorded in 2023-24, and Odisha, West Bengal, and Jharkhand being the top three hazardous states for elephant attacks.

The electrocutions and accidents of elephants, as well as elephant attacks on people, all point to the contested issue of territorial supremacy. Although not a designated elephant corridor, the site of the latest accident, being a forested area about 125 kilometres from Guwahati, renews the debate between infrastructure development and forests or natural areas. In Assam, for years, infrastructure projects have been planned and executed in natural areas without a comprehensive assessment of their impact. Railway authorities, for instance, laid the Guwahati-Jogighopa railway track through the Deepar Beel lake, shrinking the size of the waterbody and fragmenting animal corridors. The track was considered more important despite local protesters pointing out otherwise; the wetland has since seen a railway shed, an airport staff housing complex, brick kilns, and small-scale industries.

India has the National Wildlife Action Plan in which one of the action points states that the "Ministry of Surface Transport and Ministry of Railways must plan roads in such a manner that all national parks and sanctuaries are bypassed and integrity of the protected area is maintained. Wildlife corridors also need to be avoided, or mitigative measures (such as restricting night traffic) need to be employed." The authorities must not disregard the protected natural areas—or other natural areas—in their haste and determination to execute infrastructure like road and railway lines.



Spectrum

MADAN SABNAVIS

The year 2025 started off on a shocking note with the economic war being evoked by the US President in the form of tariffs. It is this theme which has cast a shadow on the world economy, warring nations, central banks and governments, as all policies have paid obeisance to this major disruption. This disruption was as potent as Covid and was a once-in-a-lifetime shock, administered by the most powerful nation in the world.

The president delivered on what he had threatened as higher tariffs were announced in April, which set a base of 10% that was much higher than the average of 3-4% average tariff that was prevalent all this time. This had led to several analyses of how things would pan out at the global as well as domestic levels. The tariffs were invoked from August onwards, and almost 5 months have passed, which makes a reality check relevant.

First, at a purely theoretical level, one nation imposing tariffs on the rest of the world should have logically led to countervailing tariffs being imposed by the other countries. In classic game theory,

such policies are pursued so that there is collaboration subsequently and an optimal solution is reached. However, this was not evident in most cases. Almost all countries went back to the table to strike deals with the USA. This involved lower tariffs for US imports as well as a promise to invest more in America. Hence, Canada, the European Union, England, South Korea, and Japan, among others, had deals. This was a victory for the USA, as it got most trading partners to lower their tariffs on imports. This is not something the WTO was able to do.

Two countries stood out. The first is India, which has stood its position notwithstanding the additional 25% tariff being imposed. Clearly, we would like to deal with the USA on terms which are not inimical to domestic constituencies like farmers.

China, on the other hand, had the muscle to impose countervailing tariffs. They were able to do it because American exporters do rely on China as a major market for their goods.

Second was the impact of tariffs in the USA. Logically, higher tariffs, which were to average above 10% relative to 3-4% earlier, should have meant higher inflation in the

USA. This was the reason why it was largely believed that the Fed would not be cutting rates, notwithstanding the pressure put on by the president. However, the Fed has cut the rates, and there could be another 2 in the offing in the next two years. The supporting factor has been inflation, which is at around 2.9%. This means that the absorption power of the system has been much better than was first imagined. This is one reason why the Fed has been able to cut the rates. This has also led to the dollar weakening instead of strengthening, which was expected when the tariffs were imposed.

The third fear was recession in the USA. This sentiment was based on two factors. The first is that with the inflation going up, the real purchasing power would be constrained, leading to lower production. Therefore, the fear of higher unemployment was palpable. The second was that with the work visa restrictions being placed by the government, there was a feeling that there would be a paucity of labour, leading to a slowdown in the economy. However, growth is projected to be 1.9% as per the Fed and will only improve in the coming years. There-

fore, a slowdown that was expected has not materialised, and the economy is doing reasonably well. The unemployment rate is below the target rate of 4.6%, and, hence, there is no real worry here.

Fourth, India's exports were expected to slow down on account of the US market contracting. The US is the largest export market for India, with around 16-18% being directed here. Higher tariffs were to be a negative factor for exporters, as competition from countries like Vietnam, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Thailand would be able to enter the US at a lower price. However, performance of exports in the first 8 months has been marginally higher than last year at 2.7%. But interestingly, in the last 3 months, since the 50% tariff was invoked, export growth has been positive. This could mean that our exporters have done well to counter this wave of tariffs. Either they have negotiated with the customers in the USA or rerouted their goods through a third country.

Fifth, with exports being impacted, the effect on the GDP was also to be there, though not very significant. The impact of a 10% drop in exports to the USA would

have led to a fall in the export growth by 0.4% or so. However, data on growth in the first two quarters has been impressive, which has also called for a revision in forecasts for the year to upwards of 7%. The RBI has an estimate of 7.3%, while that of the Bank of Baroda is 7.4-7.6%. Clearly the strength of the domestic economy has contributed to the growth in the economy, supported by major affirmative action from the side of the government in the form of GST reforms.

In fact, all forecasts that started off in the range of 6-6.5%, when the tariffs were announced, have been revised to 7% plus by December, which does indicate the confidence in the growth story.

Therefore, it does appear that the world has steered through this new shock quite well, and while there are still talks of some slowdown in 2026, it would probably not be at the global level. It does look like that while countries have lowered their tariff rates, the overall path of growth is still on the path, and this major shock has been more or less absorbed.

The author is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda and author of 'Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun'. Views are personal.

It is better to be wrong than safe for failure educates us

History and record-keeping are, unfortunately, kinder to those who hesitated than to those nameless and faceless humans who acted



Brand Banter

SANJEEV KOTNALA

There is a question I keep asking people in boardrooms, living rooms, and occasionally over bad conference coffee. The answers are many, but none are satisfactory enough to close the discussion.

Is it better to have tried something bold and failed or to have played safe and slept peacefully? Because everything is calm until hindsight wakes you up, screaming about how wrong you were.

It is an old philosophical hand-me-down question, of course. Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved. A line that has survived centuries, several poets. But replace "loved" with "approved that risky idea" and "lost" with "ended up in a marketing blunders list", and suddenly the romance disappears. The courage sits whining on the edge till the time to decide arrives.

Every year, we read post-mortems of marketing disasters with forensic delight. Campaigns that were experimental. Brands that were adventurous. Leaders who said yes when others said, "Let's

sleep on it." And now, safely seated on the sofa of hindsight, we tut-tut. What were they thinking? Who approved this? Didn't they test it?

What we forget is that at the moment of decision these were not "blunders"; they were bets. Thought through, debated, and often passionately defended. And Time, the one that is cruel, lazy, and never present in meetings, decided to unveil its wrong side.

This is where the philosophy of 'Better Wrong Than Safe' becomes uncomfortable, especially in corporate India, where caution has become a virtue. It has now equally affected the private and public setups and entered the chaotic personal life. Playing it safe is applauded. Playing bold is tolerated only when it works.

The tragedy is not that some decisions fail. The tragedy is how quickly we pretend we would never have taken them.

Most path-breaking ideas look foolish before they look visionary. Every innovation has spent its early days being described as "too much", "too soon", or "not our brand". When it succeeds, we call

it foresight, and even the naysayers can post-rationalise their stance in pushing for more caution. When it fails, we call it irresponsibility. Same meeting. Same data. Different outcome.

This is why 'Better Wrong Than Safe' is not a slogan for recklessness. It is a philosophy for people who understand that decision-making at the edge is not about guarantees; it is about intent, courage, and accountability. A safe decision rarely teaches you anything. It only teaches you how to survive the next review meeting.

A wrong decision, on the other hand, teaches you scale, speed, people, process, and politics—sometimes all of it together. It teaches you what data does not capture. It teaches you how consumers actually behave when they are not filling out surveys. It teaches you humility. And sometimes, if you are lucky, it teaches you what not to repeat ever again.

Failures educate. Success reassures. The ratio, inconveniently, is never 50:50. It is skewed. Brutally. Anyone who promises otherwise is selling a book or running a work-

shop. Yet, organisations are increasingly populated by people whose most outstanding professional achievement is a clean slate claim. They have never been wrong. Their secret? They never decided anything that mattered. They deferred. They diluted. They added footnotes. They waited for "more clarity", which is corporate for "someone else should go first".

The problem with being safe is not immediate regret; it is delayed dissatisfaction. Years later, when a competitor does what you discussed and shelved, you feel a peculiar ache. Not failure. Not loss. Something worse. Irrelevance.

This is why I lean instinctively towards 'Better Wrong Than Safe'. I would rather defend a decision that failed than explain a caution that prevented learning. I would rather say, "We tried, and it didn't work," than mumble, "We thought about it but..."

Because here is the inconvenient truth: most people do not regret wrong decisions. They regret indecision. They regret listening to the loudest sceptic in the room. They regret mistaking consensus for

wisdom. And no, this is not a celebration of chaos; it is a reminder that progress has always been powered by people who were comfortable being temporarily wrong. Every meaningful shift in the creative, cultural, professional, and personal spheres comes from someone placing a bet when spreadsheets or the situation advised restraint.

History and record-keeping are, unfortunately, kinder to those who hesitated than to those nameless and faceless humans who acted.

So the next time a campaign, a product, or an idea ends up on a "what went wrong" list, pause before judging. Ask a better question. Did it come from laziness or courage? From ego or intent? From boredom or belief?

If the answer is belief, then the failure is not the story. The story is that someone chose 'Better Wrong Than Safe' in a world that rewards neither in real time.

And that, even when it fails, is a decision worth making.

Sanjeev Kotnala is a brand and marketing consultant, writer, coach and mentor.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Faulty Snicko

Though the operator of Snicko technology, being used in the Ashes series, has admitted an error that led to a reprieve for the Australian wicket-keeper-batsman, Alex Carey, this is not the first such error. Earlier, players like Gary Sobers, Viswanath, etc., would never wait for the umpire's verdict if they had nicked the ball. Now the players don't walk even after the third umpire's verdict. Under these circumstances, it is all the more necessary for the technology to be 100% foolproof to give the benefit of the doubt in favour of the bowlers.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

Issue-based ties

To me, India's current approach to the world feels less like confusion and more like conscious maturity. In a fractured global order, where alliances are fluid and trust is transactional, rigid loyalties are a liability. India choosing issue-based partnerships reflects realism, not indecision. As an Indian, I see this as a refusal to be boxed into someone else's binary democracy versus autocracy, East versus West, friend versus foe.

Our interests are diverse, our challenges complex, and our aspirations global. Expecting India to follow a single power or bloc ignores both history and the hard lessons of dependence.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

SHANTI Bill

The SHANTI Bill marks a significant shift in India's nuclear power strategy by opening the door to licensed participation by non-government entities while retaining state control over sensitive fuel-cycle activities. Given that nuclear energy still accounts for only about 3% of India's electricity generation, the Bill's intent to mobilise domestic private capital is both timely and pragmatic. However, the Bill raises legitimate concerns. The Rs 3,000-crore cap on operator liability appears modest when weighed against potential environmental damage and victim compensation.

Vandana, Chandigarh

Do T's norms

The Department of Telecom's move to tighten SIM-binding norms addresses a growing weakness in India's digital

ecosystem, where telecom-enabled fraud has thrived on loose links between identity, device, and communication channels. By mandating that messaging apps remain tied to an active, KYC-verified SIM and a specific device, the policy aims to restore accountability and curb anonymous misuse. For most users, the impact will be minimal, while the potential gains in fraud prevention are substantial. Still, tighter traceability inevitably raises concerns about privacy and overreach.

A. Myilsami, Tamil Nadu

Necessary Act

Congrats to the Karnataka state Assembly, the 1st in India, for passing a law banning anti-hate speech. We request all states (of India and the world) to do the same. Let's, all humans, live a civilised life of "good words, deeds and implementation", "live and let live attitude", and "peace, prosperity, progress, and excellent health for all".

Sreelekha P.S., Telangana

Best MP

AAP leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh has been adjudged the

'Best MP'. He certainly deserves it. Be it in Parliament or on the streets, his fluent, powerful voice and outspokenness touche the hearts and minds everywhere. Most of his subjects are related to the interests of the general public and the country. Also, he does not hesitate in accepting his own mistakes. Other MLAs and MPs should learn from him.

Hema H. Upadhyay, Ujjain

Doctor strike

The renewed strike by NHS doctors amid a winter flu surge exposes a healthcare system under severe strain. Years of pay erosion, staff shortages, and policy drift have left hospitals overburdened, where resilience is demanded but support is rationed. Doctors are not protesting privilege; they are protesting neglect. Overflowing wards and endless waiting lists show goodwill alone cannot sustain public health. Healthcare is not a discretionary expense to be deferred without consequence. Can a system survive when those entrusted with saving lives feel unheard and undervalued?

Hasnain, Patna



Stormy end to Parliament Winter Session

The stormy end to the Parliament Winter Session, marked by overnight opposition dharnas and abrupt adjournments, reflects deep divisions over key legislation like the VB-G RAM G Bill. While productivity suffered, it highlights the need for greater consensus-building. Future sessions must prioritise constructive debate to uphold democratic traditions.

T.S. Karthik, Chennai

India cannot stay quiet to jihadist takeover of Dhaka

By burying Inquilab Mancha leader Sharif Osman Hadi, a fellow traveller of jihadists and a rabidly anti-India leader, next to the great revolutionary Bangla poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Muhammad Yunus administration has proved for the nth time that it has no regard for anything that is noble and virtuous in Bangladesh. The elevation of Hadi, who was assassinated last week, with Kazi Islam is an affront to Bangla patriotism, and the millions of people who died for independence from Pakistan in 1971, and, of course, literature. "Kazi Nazrul Islam was a symbol of tolerance and secularism. Osman Hadi represented extremism and identity-based hatred. Burying Hadi beside Nazrul is therefore a politically

motivated decision," said Awami League supporter Mostofa Amin on X. Hadi's group reportedly provided muscle power and filled multiple voluntary organisations that gave life to the anti-Sheikh Hasina movement. He wanted Jamaat-e-Islami, a major fundamentalist force, to have a greater say in the state of affairs in the country. An Islamist, Hadi was among the leaders who violently overthrew the democratically elected government of Sheikh Hasina last year, indulged in violence and arson specifically targeting Hindus and other religious communities, and did everything to make Bangladesh a full-fledged Islamic state ruled by the Shariat.

He was assassinated on Thursday night, following which huge crowds,

including many Islamists, unleashed mayhem on the streets of Dhaka. From attacks on cultural centres to vandalism of the remnants of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and targeting Indian diplomatic missions in many cities, Hadi's followers carried out many violent acts. Media organisations like The Daily Star and Prothom Alo also suffered attacks. One of the victims was a Hindu youth, Dipu Chandra Das, who was lynched after a false accusation of blasphemy was slapped against him. A mob murdered him after a Muslim co-worker at his factory in Mymensingh district falsely accused Das of blasphemy. The Bangladesh government, however, has little regard for the safety and security of Hindus. This is not surprising as Yu-

nus, himself an Islamist, showered fulsome praise on Hadi after his assassination.

In fact, he almost elevated him to the level of, say, the great Martin Luther King Jr. "O dear Osman Hadi, we have not come here to bid you farewell. You are within our hearts, and as long as Bangladesh exists, you will remain in the hearts of all Bangladeshis," he said. For too long, the Indian government has allowed Yunus to run a government despite clear evidence of jihadist infiltration, anti-India hostility, and minority persecution. It is time New Delhi acted against his nefarious designs and actions. It needs to be emphasised that Bangladesh's stability, pluralism, and secular character are not just internal matters; they are inte-

gral to regional security; and, therefore, India must be an active player, not a mute spectator, in the region. An Islamist-dominated Bangladesh emboldens radical networks, destabilises borders, and undermines decades of hard-won bilateral cooperation. The time has come for Delhi to reassess its approach. Diplomatic indulgence in the face of ideological subversion only strengthens those determined to erase Bangladesh's secular soul. Standing up for the country's founding values, its minorities, and its cultural icons like Kazi Nazrul is not interference—it is a defence of history, humanity, and regional peace. Our policy makers must seriously consider formulating and implementing some kind of Monroe Doctrine.

LETTERS

Ode to mathematical genius Ramanujan

The National Mathematics Day, observed every December 22 in honour of the mathematical genius Srinivasa Ramanujan, is a celebration of his monumental legacy that has influenced mathematicians worldwide. National Mathematics Day was first observed on December 22, 2012, to commemorate the great man's 125th birth anniversary. His contributions that have enriched mathematics all over, include the number theory, infinite series, elliptical functions, Ramanujan number (1729), Gama theory, partition series, and continued fractions. The theme for this year's celebration is aptly titled "Mathematics, Art and Creativity", which emphasises how mathematical principles underpin advancements in science, technology, innovation and his approach to problem-solving. Elected as a member of the prestigious London Mathematical Society in 1917 and a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1918, the Erode-born Ramanujan returned to India in 1919, where his health deteriorated and passed away on April 26, 1920, at the very young age of 32 years. However, his achievements in the field of maths are still highly regarded across the globe.

Dr B Madhusudhan Reddy, Karimnagar

Don't segregate AP and TG artists

It hurts every sensible Telugu, including from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, to note that a section of people made a hue and cry over the installation of a statue of SP Balasubrahmanyam (SPB) in Ravindra Bharathi. They argued that SPB did not sing a song in favour of separate Telangana. I visited a few places like Adilabad and Karimnagar, among others before the bifurcation and noticed that there was abject poverty in rural Telangana and folklore highlighting the 'inequality' to Telangana region. Of course, as a separate State, Telangana has made marked progress but one cannot ignore the fact that only Hyderabad was developed as an iconic city. Meanwhile, there is a need to stop the animosity among those from the two States. Great poets like Dasaradhi and C Narayana Reddy were never treated as ones belonging to Telangana. Actors like Dr Prabhakar Reddy and Kantha Rao were owned by us equally. Ghantasala remains a priceless gem for all of us. If Andhras disown the great poet Pothana as he was from Telangana it puts a slur on the bonanza of literature. The versatile SPB should be owned by all Telugus. Vande mataram Srinivas hails from a place near Khammam and yet we acclaim his talent in Andhra Pradesh. Let one forges. Ravindra Bharathi traces its name to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

Dr T Ramadas, Visakhapatnam

Revanth right in mooting anti-hate speech law

It is commendable that Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy has resolved to bring in a stringent anti-hate speech law, like the one in Karnataka. This will be a progressive move politically too as this will deter political parties from playing the 'religion' card to polarize voters. On their part, the voters need to exercise their franchise for development and get influenced or carried away by caste or religion rhetoric.

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad.

Cong should appreciate VB-G RAM G

This refers to news of Congress Rajya Sabha member Sonia Gandhi, criticising VB-G RAM G, the new name for MGNREGA, with new and innovative revision in the Bill. In fact, the proposal to extend employment days from the present 100 days to 125 should have been appreciated by the Congress. This is more as the Union Government cited various anomalies in MGNREGA funds that were diverted and misused by several states. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's take on this issue is ludicrous and laughable. The 'ready to brave bullets' remarks can ignite public unrest and create chaos in the country.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Parents must monitor kids' social media use

Australia has banned the use of social media for children under the age of 16 years, while Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Tik Tok, X and Reddit remain banned. This decision has raised several eyebrows even as reports are that many countries, including India, are trying to follow suit. There is no denying that social media usage is taking a toll on teens' mental health and reducing their attention spans. While Canberra's decision is a welcome one, the million-dollar question is whether the ban will. Banning SM platforms, and sparing dating sites and gaming platforms, may not be the solution. The answer lies in stricter parental control and monitoring. Children must be educated about digital literacy, the pros and cons of overuse of social media, exposure to violent and obscene content, cyberbullying and online gaming. I personally feel that access to social media should be made a paid channel. This way when teens want to open social media accounts, they would need permission from their respective parents, who can understand their children's intent. A blanket ban may not be the right answer. The onus is on parental control.

Parimala G Tadas, Hyderabad-50

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BENGALURU ONLINE

'No differences with Congress leaders, CM and I are working like brothers'

BENGALURU: Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Sunday dismissed speculation about differences within the Congress leadership, asserting that there was complete unity in the party and that he and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah were working together like brothers. "There are no differences between me and any Congress leader. Aren't the Chief Minister and I working together like brothers?" Shivakumar said while speaking to reporters near his residence in Sadashivanagar. Responding to queries about his meetings with leaders perceived to be close to the Chief Minister, Shivakumar said, "Who are the CM's close aides? They are close to me as well."

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



RAVULAPATI SEETARAMARAO

Some people glorify a nation's history, while others denigrate it. A nation endures when its history becomes a source of pride. India and Pakistan gained independence at the same time, following partition. But within India's democratic framework, people elect their representatives every five years, and whether at the Centre or in states, despite mistakes and crises, the country has continued to be governed by popularly elected governments.

In contrast, after gaining independence Pakistan has not truly embraced popular rule. Even if officials say it is a democracy in name, international analysts and media organisations see Pakistan as essentially unstable and dominated by military rule and authoritarian tendencies. Any internal problem in India tends to be used by Pakistan as an excuse to provoke trouble—raising the Kashmir issue has become almost a reflex. Taking advantage of timely support from other countries, it has repeatedly tried to lower India's standing. But it seems

like time is not on its side.

In border clashes with India, it has failed to gain the upper hand. After the recent Pahalgam incident and India's subsequent Operation Sindoor, Pakistan suffered a humiliating setback. No matter how much China helps, without its own capability Pakistan has been unable to prove itself equal to India.

China is supplying weapons and newly manufactured combat aircraft to Pakistan and conducting trial runs to test their pilots' skills, but it is unable to help Pakistan achieve full superiority. Noting Pakistan's weakness, Beijing is gradually trying to rebuild the friendship it lost with India.

As usual, the U.S. is politically displaying double standards, reassuring Pakistan of support—especially under a potential second Trump term—while claiming to aid stability. The two countries might start a nuclear war and that its diplomacy is preventing that and preserving world peace, attempting to persuade other nations with those empty claims.

Against this backdrop, Pakistan—knowingly or unknowingly—is putting governance entirely into the hands of the army. In effect, the country's politicians and parties are unable to establish a democratic system by conducting elections the way India has. Elections have become nominal. Prime ministers are being turned into puppets of the army chiefs.



The recent power grab, which is effectively trying to make Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir Ahmed Shah an almost absolute ruler and cement his authority through law, is shocking democracies around the world. With its 27th amendment to Pakistan's constitution on November 13, the judiciary and military command were reorganized and the army chief was made practically 'supreme'

The recent power grab, which is effectively trying to make Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir Ahmed Shah an almost absolute ruler and cement his authority through law, is shocking democracies around the world. With its 27th amendment to Pakistan's constitution on November 13, the judiciary and military command were reorganized, and the army

chief was made practically "supreme". Under the guise of democracy, the military has been operating behind the scenes and, after the small-scale conflict with India in May, promoted General Munir to Field Marshal while reducing the Shehbaz Sharif government to a nominal role.

By amending Article 243 to create the "Chief of De-

fence Forces" poste, and establishing single authority over the army, navy, and air force, the military has consolidated total control. Bringing the National Strategic Command under this new office has elevated General Munir to a position from which he can exert influence both domestically and internationally. The amendment also grants General Munir and the president lifetime immunity from criminal proceedings.

The world cannot ignore his emergence as an unsailable leader in Pakistan. He has even risen to the point of dining alongside the US president as an equal—a level of recognition like how Donald Trump famously sidelined a prime minister and accorded equal protocol to an army chief—which can be seen as indicative of declining civilian politics.

Under Article 47, a five-star general is entitled to wear his uniform for life; removing such a status would require an impeachment-like process, which is presently unimaginable in Pakistan.

What it has done by proposing so many amendments to its constitution is in handing over complete authority to General Munir!

Moreover, with these new amendments the Supreme Court has lost the power to interpret the constitution. Instead, that authority will go to a newly created Constitutional Court, whose judges will be appointed by the government. Many judges resigned in protest over

this amendment. It is notable that Imran Khan alone has vocally opposed these changes as a popular leader—and he has been in jail for two years. By sidelining the elected government, keeping the opposition leader imprisoned, and elevating General Munir as an unsailable leader backed by the strengthened constitution, the country is being steered like a pawn.

Historically, however, those who have seized power in this way in Pakistan have not remained for long. With rebellions steadily growing in the tribal areas of Balochistan, Pakistan is floundering and facing a crisis. People are depressed and demoralised across the country. Whether a nation progresses or collapses depends on its leaders. Only when people organize and prepare to overturn that situation can they truly act as citizens in any country.

Relations with India and Afghanistan remain merely functional. Imran Khan's party, PTI, continues to challenge this misrule. The economic situation has plunged into dire straits. General Munir can topple the standing government with that power.

But history shows that no matter whether control is imposed by the army or by rulers, people eventually rise and reclaim the lost internal freedom. That is the lesson history teaches.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

Indigo's December crisis makes for a wake-up call

B V SURYA BHAGAVANULU

India is witnessing exponential growth in aviation, thanks to which it now occupies the third position in the aviation market.

As per ICRA estimates, domestic air passenger traffic is expected to grow by 7-10 per cent in FY2026 on YoY basis, reaching 175-181 million passengers, following a 7.6 per cent increase on YoY basis in FY2025 to 165.4 million passengers.

However, the massive flight cancellations by Indigo, the country's largest operator, raises doubts about the reliability of air travel in the minds of the travelling public.

It is time to revisit the existing policies and make them proactive to realise the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 by overcoming the shortcomings on a war-footing. Here are some thoughts in this direction:

DGCA:

Give Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) true autonomy with total responsibility to regulate the civil aviation sector, as envisaged in the Civil Aviation Authority (CCA) Bill, 2013. This Bill provides for appointment of a chairman, members, and an aviation expert as a Director General for fixed tenure by a high-level committee, with total functional and fi-



Encourage establishment of more FTOs. Make land allotment at tier 2 and tier 3 airports easier, make exclusive slots for flying training at these airports. Give tax concessions and subsidies. Encourage collaborations and PPP investments in establishment of world-class training facilities, with simulators of modern aircraft

nancial autonomy.

CAA would have powers for creation of posts and recruitment of its own personnel, apart from administering the Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak, and all other legislations governing the sector. The CAA would not be an attached department of MOCA, but an autonomous statutory body created by an Act of Parliament, and the MOCA would need to follow certain procedures under the Act to give directions to the CAA.

Measures to mitigate pilots, and crew shortage:

According to estimates, there is a need for around

30,000 pilots within the next 10-15 years in India. However, presently, there are only about 13,500 pilots employed by various airlines. About 8,000 CPL holders are unemployed because they don't possess the required flying hours and "type ratings" on aircrafts, leading to a situation where many technically qualified are unemployed.

This shortage of rated pilots on specific aircraft types, driven by fleet expansion and new plane induction, necessitates Indian airlines to employ expat pilots via FATA (Foreign Air Crew Temporary Authorisation). Similarly, rapid expansion

of Indian aviation necessitates more skilled AMEs to support safety and efficiency of the fleet. It is expected to require at least 14,000 more AMEs in the next 8-10 years.

To overcome these shortages:

Encourage establishment of more FTOs. Make land allotment at tier 2 and tier 3 airports easier, make exclusive slots for flying training at these airports. Give tax concessions and subsidies.

Encourage collaborations and PPP investments in establishment of world-class training facilities, with simulators of modern aircraft.

Promote pilot, AME, and other flight crew training as a career option among youth at par with other professions.

Mitigate high costs of pilot training to middle class/lower middle class and subsidise the cost of training to such classes. Encourage financial institutions and banks to lend for flight crew training.

Make a transition programme for armed forces pilots to become civilian pilots and instructors up on their retirement.

ATF:

Bring ATF under the GST ambit so that airlines can divert the savings on training and better remuneration to the flight crew. It is not impossible for the Central Government to bring all States on board in this direction. They must convince States to see their own development prospects vis-à-vis civil aviation growth.

Safety and compliance ratings to airlines:

Rate the airlines on their compliance of safety regulations and periodically publish the ratings so that all carriers are compelled to comply with the safety regulations.

New investments in the sector:

Revisit the existing policy

and make them investment friendly as regards establishment of new airlines. Promote regional airlines by offering tax incentives, subsidies in airport charges and cost of ATF and viability gap funding, among others.

The civil aviation sector is no less vital than any other strategic sector and is very complex though it looks glamorous. It needs to be carefully nurtured with statesmanship, foresight, vision and the right direction. The sector cannot be seen with commercial and business propositions when the market forces do not meet the objectives of ensuring safe, reliable, cost-effective, widely networked, environment friendly air travel across the country. When we have world class organisations working under the Union Government in strategic sectors, why not effective organisations in the civil aviation sector?

At this juncture, the government should also closely monitor the monopolistic and duo-polistic tendencies among airport operators as well. There should be a well laid-out policy framework for government interference when the market forces fail the nation.

(The writer is a retired Joint General Manager of Airports Authority of India)

THE ASIAN AGE

22 DECEMBER 2025

PM signalling SIR bid for NRC by backdoor?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set the tone for the BJP's election campaign focusing on the question of infiltration and championing the special intensive revision now underway in the state along with several other states and Union territories at the behest of the Election Commission. Mr Modi also trained his guns on the governance there, hoping that a repeat of the Bihar election campaign theme of "jungle raj" pays rich dividends in West Bengal as well.

It's not that Mr Modi is expressing his concerns on the infiltration issue and its impact on the local demography for the first time. His single most important campaign theme in Jharkhand earlier this year was also the threat posed to the local demography by the presence of infiltrators. Though the plan did not work electorally and the border state predominantly inhabited by tribal people did not respond enthusiastically to his description of an impending danger, the indefatigable Prime Minister will now carry the theme to the next destination.

The BJP has placed the state high on the party's agenda and has been making some inroads there as well. As the party has not been able to sustain its gains there which do not tally with the party's performance in the other states, it follows that it will play every game in the book to win the state which also sends 16 members to the Rajya Sabha.

The Prime Minister would interpret the Trinamul Congress' objections to SIR as its complicity in facilitating infiltration and harbouring them to make electoral gains. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been steadfast in her objections to the SIR exercise saying it is aimed at disenfranchising a large number of people, especially the minorities and the poor. The first list of deleted names from the state indicates that a large number of people from the Matua community are impacted by the process. It has been pointed out that several of them are unable to trace their names or those of their parents to the SIR conducted in 2002.

Infiltration is in fact an issue that's largely handled by the Union government as its agencies man the border. None would have a case that infiltrators should have voting rights. But it is unconstitutional to use SIR as a tool to identify "non-citizens" and disenfranchise them. The Prime Minister talking incessantly about its potential to clean up the voter list of infiltrators may persuade a section of people to see the SIR as a means to introduce the National Register of Citizens by other means, triggering panic and more suicides. More alarmingly, it may encourage overzealous officials to come down harder on minorities. The government must make a clean breast of its intentions; pointing to infiltration hardly is a substitute for transparency.

The reference to *jungle raj* in Bengal by Mr Modi, too, is disputable. The theme of poor law and order indeed had takers in Bihar but whether it will get the same welcome in West Bengal is a question. Oddly enough, the Trinamul Congress, too, has been harping on the same theme alleging that the Left Front rule in the state had dismantled the very idea of rule of law. It remains to be seen as to whose allegation convinces the voter on D-Day.

Tragedy of train-tusker conflict

Winter can be a cruel season in parts of India in which it brings extreme cold, but unkind weather is not the only discomfort it brings. The low temperatures and high humidity are perfect ingredients for fog, which can reduce visibility to near zero. The prevalence of such conditions led to a tragedy for a herd of pachyderms that came too close to the railway track on which a fast Rajdhani Express ran over some of them, killing at least seven in Sangurai in Hojai district, Assam.

The incident cannot be put down as just another man-made tragedy as the low visibility of winter was a major contributory cause. For a nation sentimental about its animals, especially the mammoth mammals that are also revered, this will go down as a terrible event. Truth to tell, the railways could have foreseen the possibility of elephant crossings in this specific sector. In fact, there had been warnings about the movement of this herd.

In the same mid-winter week, cars were running into each other on the Yamuna Expressway and vehicles were slamming into stray cattle which represent a particular problem in Tamil Nadu. Such conditions that create a cauldron of prospective calamities exacerbate the problems in a country that is not known to take safety too seriously. For instance, the known corridor of elephant movement did not have the AI-powered intrusion detection system, nor were thermal vision cameras carried and used by the crew of the fast train.

The Indian Railways says 77 stretches covering nearly 2,000 km have been prioritised for mitigation efforts to prevent such "train-animal" conflict. Four accidents involving pachyderms have occurred this year. Since the movement of such large wild animals in herds is mapped for safety by forest officials, such incidents should not recur, provided, of course, that the railways ensure specific safety protocols are strictly adhered to.

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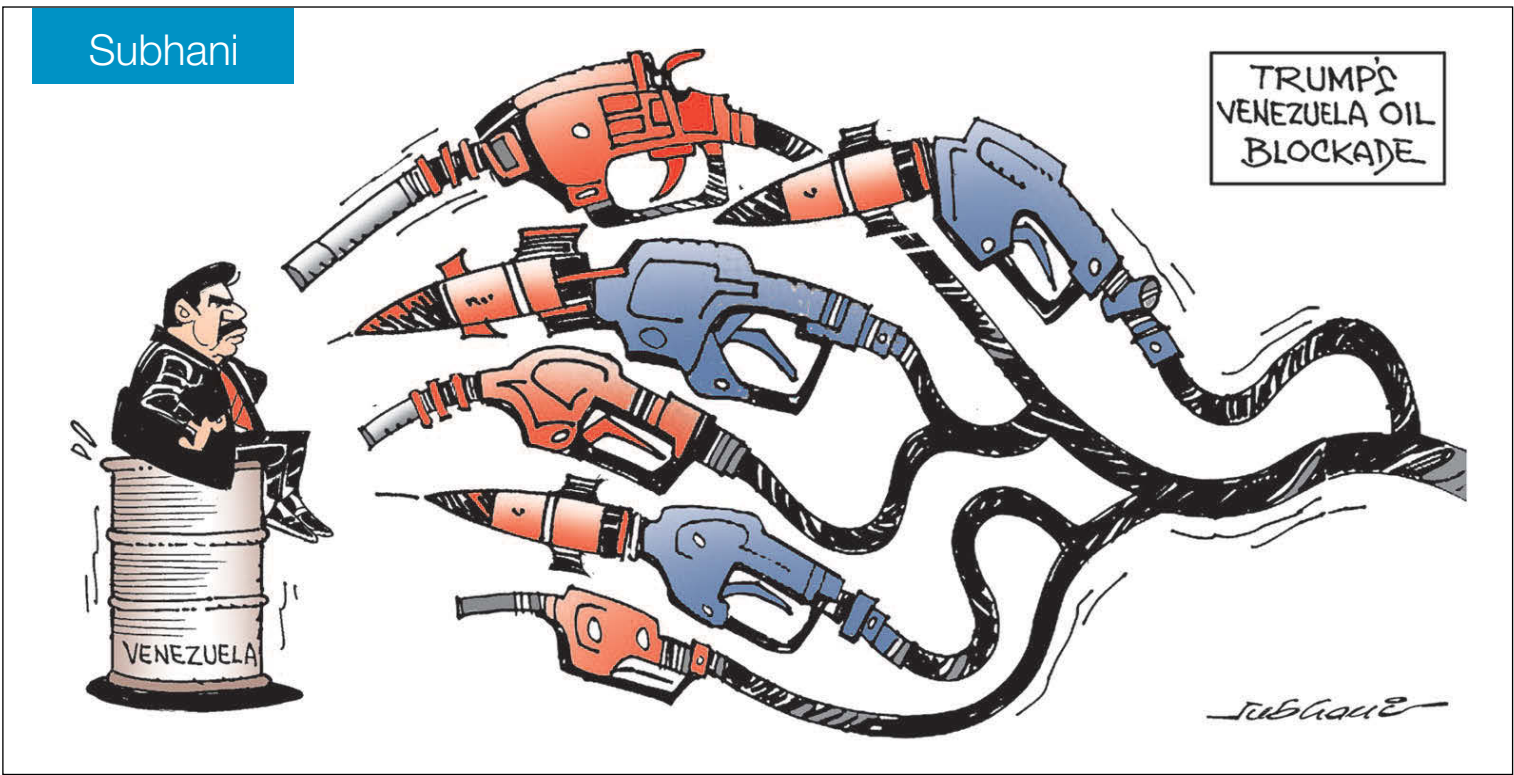
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Subhani



Cartels, customers, cronies in the captive India market



Sanjaya Baru

Sanjayovacha

This column is a tribute to my friend and columnist, the late Bibek Debroy. Bibek was chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council when he passed away last November. A quarter century ago he was a columnist in a newspaper of which I was the editor. On one occasion when I was off on a vacation with my family, I requested Bibek to take charge of the newspaper's daily editorial.

Bibek was at the time actively researching the damage that out-dated laws, rules, regulations and institutions were inflicting on the economy. He wrote an editorial questioning the functioning and relevance of one such institution — the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Commission (MRTPC). A product of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's "leftist" phase, the MRTPC was set up in 1969 in response to studies that showed the growing power of monopolies, oligopolies and cartelisation in the Indian economy.

After the industrial policy liberalisation of 1991, the government's commitment to battling these tendencies had weakened to enable Indian companies to scale up and become more globally competitive. By the turn of the century, the MRTPC had gone soft and was no longer very active in going after monopolistic and restrictive trade practices. Why not wind it up, asked Bibek. He did not stop with that question.

He went on to ask why the government should be spending so much money on a virtually defunct institution headed by a retired judge for whom, he alleged, the office was just a sinecure. The said judge promptly issued a suo moto notice of contempt of

court, for the MRTPC had a legal status. Summon the editor, said the judge.

When I returned from vacation, I was informed that as editor I was required to appear in court and either defend Bibek's editorial comment and face the consequences or extend an abject apology. The judge was a tough-minded gent who not only demanded an apology, that the newspaper's lawyers advised I extend, but also imposed a fine. Within a year after this incident the MRTPC was wound up.

In 2002 the MRTPC was replaced by the Competition Commission of India. The CCI began on a hopeful note and was active for a while, especially after 2004 when the government of the day was serious about promoting a competitive business environment.

However, over the years even the CCI has lost its bite. Under-staffed and often ignored, the CCI has been unable to prevent the rapid growth of monopolistic and oligopolistic practices and the spread of cartelisation.

The merger of Air India and Vistara was a fit case for the CCI. It reduced the number of private airlines, and when the IndiGo crisis erupted it was noticed that while IndiGo had cornered 60 per cent of the civil aviation market, the merged entity of Air India and Vistara had 35 per cent of the market and the two airlines were carving up the domestic market, adopting restrictive trade practices. The IndiGo crisis opened the can of worms of cartelisation and cronyism in the civil aviation sector. It also raised questions about regulatory oversight, political interference, cronyism and gross mismanagement on the part of IndiGo.

Across several product markets, it has since been

When Air India was privatised the CCI should have examined the move and stepped in to prevent the emergence of an oligopoly. The CCI could have tried to prevent the merger with Vistara.

reported in the media. duopolies have come to exist. If IndiGo and Air India dominate the civil aviation market, we have Jio and Airtel dominating telecom, Asian Paints and Berger in paints, Tata and JSW in steel, Reliance, Adani, Tata and NTPC in power, UltraTech and Adani in cement, Google and Meta in online ads, Apollo, MRF and JK in tyres, and so on. Two, three or at most four firms dominate most goods and services markets.

Even when there are a few more firms as in private health care, with three to five corporate hospitals dominating a given geographical space, there is price fixing and cartelisation. The fact is that post-1991 economic liberalisation has allowed firms to grow but has also contributed to the dominance of a few in each product or services space.

In the past decade we have witnessed something more insidious — first, the use of government agencies by big corporates to increase the latter's market power; second, the emergence of oligopolies in the media that enables corporates to curtail media scrutiny. There is rarely any serious scrutiny of the operation of cartels, price fixing, market sharing and so on in different markets across the country in the national and business media.

In the face of oligopolistic practices, the CCI has been a toothless tiger, like the MRTPC in its final days. What is worse, today the government is being accused of enabling cartelisation. Consider the case of civil aviation. The board of the Tata Sons was reportedly not in favour of

buying Air India when the Union government put it up for sale. The Narendra Modi government was keen on establishing its credentials as a business-friendly government and was keen on privatising Air India. However, no corporate was willing to step forward and buy Air India. It was at this moment that the late Ratan Tata stepped in and persuaded the Tata Sons board to take over Air India. Board insiders say that Ratan Tata made an emotional appeal reminding the members that it would be a homecoming for Air India. The government had taken over Air India from J.R.D. Tata and it was only fair that the airline be returned to the Tatas.

When Air India was privatised the CCI should have examined the move and stepped in to prevent the emergence of an oligopoly. The CCI could have tried to prevent the merger with Vistara. If two separate boards running two separate firms, even if under the same Tata umbrella, some element of competition would have still been preserved.

The merger of Vistara with Air India and the ease with which a politically well-connected IndiGo was allowed to expand services created the duopoly that an embattled government is now trying to discipline. Rather than promote competitive markets, government policy in recent years has been to facilitate cartelisation.

Where is the CCI? What is it doing? Is it merely just another sinecure for retired officials? That was Bibek's question about MRTPC a quarter century ago. To be fair, the record shows that CCI has been active and has been hearing and disposing off scores of cases. Yet, we find cartelisation on the increase. Is it the case that the CCI is going after the small fish while turning a blind eye to big fish?

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and economist. His most recent book is Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India.

LETTERS

NATURE OF FAITH

The recent public debate in New Delhi between lyricist Javed Akhtar and Islamic scholar Mufti Shamail Nadvi on the existence of god has revived an age-old question: Can faith coexist with reason without undermining the spirit of inquiry? Mr Akhtar's central contention that faith demands acceptance without proof raises a crucial concern. In an era shaped by science and democratic values, the freedom to question remains fundamental. Akhtar's challenge to the idea of divine justice further complicates the discussion. He argues that morality does not exist in nature but is a human construct designed to organise society. Mufti's rebuttal, however, cautions against reducing morality to social consensus.

Afazuddin Kazi Qasmi
Assam University

KOLKATA SAFEST

EVEN THE WORST enemy of Mamata Banerjee will not describe West Bengal a *maha jungle raj* as PM Narendra Modi has said about an elected government. The state may be reeling under diverse crises and some of them are due to continued neglect of the Centre, but no one can say that the state has been taken over by criminals or hooligans. Kolkata is still the safest city in India. The PM must look at the law and order in BJP-ruled states. The relentless efforts of Ms Banerjee to upgrade the socio-economic conditions of Bengal are receiving the best attention of the public and they will under no circumstances endorse the views expressed by Mr Modi.

Arun Gupta
Kolkata

MEGHALAYA LESSON

THE DECISION of the Meghalaya government to make Khasi and Garo mandatory up to Class I deserves appreciation. The use of mother tongue at the foundational stage brings about a sense of cultural identity and history. The CM's focus on preserving indigenous languages is both timely and significant. Introducing new textbooks as optional in the first year reflects administrative foresight. This policy has the potential to enhance early education and preserve regional heritage, while also setting a positive example for other states.

Kyamudin Ansari
Mumbai

₹500 for the best letter of the week goes to Bal Govind (Dec. 19). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

Pradeep C. Nair



The significance and implications as key elections loom in Myanmar

Elections in Myanmar are due to be held soon, with the first phase being held on December 28, 2025, and the subsequent phases in January 2026. Many in the Western media have written off these elections as yet another farce by the military junta and an attempt to not just ward off the large-scale condemnation that the regime faces, but also to give a fig leaf of democratic intent by the junta. In the six-decade domination by the military, the December-January elections may turn out to be a defining moment, not just for Myanmar, but also for India, China and all other stakeholders in the region.

The elections will see 57 parties with a total of 4,963 candidates in the fray. Six "union-level" (nationwide) parties would contest across the country, while 51 parties would contest only within one state or region. Besides, some Independents are also likely to participate. The six nationwide parties include the Union Solidarity and Development Party (military backed), with 1,018 candidates, followed by the National Unity Party (NUP), with 694, the People's Pioneer Party (PPP), with 672, the Myanmar Farmers Development Party, with 428, the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (White Tiger Party), with 584, and the People's Party, with 512 candidates respectively. The largest and historically the most popular party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), which won massive landslide victories in 2015 and 2020, has been dissolved by the junta for refusing to re-register under a new elec-

toral law. Moreover, voting will occur only in 274 out of 330 townships. Many Opposition and pro-democracy actors — including the ousted leadership of the NLD, the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) and multiple ethnic-armed and resistance groups — have rejected the election as a sham and are calling for a boycott.

The junta sees itself as the only unifying force in the country, with the 135 different ethnic groups of the country pulling in different directions for greater autonomy, and many, even for secession. This has been the unfortunate truth in Myanmar ever since it gained its independence in 1948. The last five years have seen thousands killed and displaced in an orgy of violence that has swept across the country. Amidst large-scale condemnation and sanctions, these elections are a last-ditch effort to not just gain a shred of legitimacy but also to bring down the violence levels and restore normalcy.

There are three likely scenarios in these elections. In the first, the violence could be minimal, with a smooth transition to democracy, in which the junta would relax certain restrictions and ensure partial inclusivity after due consultations with a few Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). In the second scenario, we could expect large-scale violence and disruption by the EAOs and the Peoples' Democratic Force, resulting in reduced participation and punitive operations by the "Tatmadav" (the armed forces). In the third, we could expect the junta carrying out elections under its own terms, which would see

intermittent conflict that leads to a government with very little credibility. The first option is the most desirable, the second the most dangerous, and the third the most likely. In all the three options, the power would be retained by the junta, after the elections, yet showing some form of legitimate democracy. Given the lifting of sanctions by the Donald Trump administration (imposed earlier by the Biden administration) on several allies of Myanmar's ruling generals in July this year, it may well be a sign of the US now wanting to engage more proactively and positively with Myanmar. President Trump's presence at the Asean summit in Malaysia in October this year further shows the increasing US interest in the region. This US interest is also visible in the recently released US Security Strategy of 2025, where the US is looking forward to step up defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

For India, these elections in Myanmar are very important. With four bordering states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram sharing 1,643 km of border, the possibility of restoration of near normalcy (no matter how thin the chances may seem) is extremely important. These border states have witnessed large-scale influx of refugees, trans-border movement of insurgents, weapons, ammunition and contraband (largely drugs). The border guarding force, Assam Rifles, has confiscated drugs worth ₹2,396 crores till November 2025. In 2024, it was ₹1,949 crores; in 2023 it was ₹1,725 crores. India's Act East Policy largely hinges on normal-

cy in Myanmar. Towards that end, the Kaladan Multi Modal Trade and Transit Project, as well as the Trilateral Highway; our two flagship projects, can become operational only when the elections restore a sense of normalcy in Myanmar.

To assuage the multiple EAOs that have been in a state of conflict with the Myanmar military over the decades, it is reported that the junta is also seriously considering greater federalism between Naypyidaw (the country's capital) and the states and regions after the elections.

Some positive changes in the Myanmar Constitution of 2008 may well be expected. Towards that end, many Western democracies and Constitutions are being studied by the junta.

India must impress upon Myanmar that it is the Indian Constitution and form of federalism that would serve Myanmar's interests best, given the similarities in culture and diversity of people. India must do everything it can to help Myanmar in its baby steps towards democracy, the first step for which is the impending elections. China, whose engagements are not liked in Myanmar, officially supports the elections, viewing them as a practical opportunity to secure its interests, rather than a move toward genuine democracy.

The writer is a retired lieutenant-general who is a former director-general of the Assam Rifles. He is currently vice-chancellor of St. Mary's Rehabilitation University, Hyderabad.

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

— Ramnath Goenka

CHAOS ROILS DHAKA AHEAD OF ELECTIONS: INDIA IS CONCERNED

BDANGLADESH is approaching its February 12 parliamentary elections amid growing instability, highlighting the fragility of the interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. This has raised significant concerns in New Delhi regarding security, extremism and regional stability. An expected stabilising transition following the ouster of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 has instead resulted in recurring violence, political paralysis and rising anti-India sentiment. Once projected as a regional success story, the country is now experiencing its most volatile period since last year's student-led uprising.

The immediate cause of the unrest was the death of Sharif Osman Hadi, a prominent youth leader of the July movement and a candidate in the upcoming elections. Violent protests in Dhaka and other cities followed his death, with attacks on media outlets, public infrastructure and Indian diplomatic premises. The interim government declared a day of mourning and urged citizens to resist 'mob violence by fringe elements', but that has not reassured the public about its ability to maintain order. The crisis has exposed the limitations of Yunus's administration, which has struggled to manage rival political groups, Islamist hardliners and street mobilisation. The Awami League, excluded from the elections, has threatened to continue its protests, raising concerns that the electoral process may be disrupted.

For India, the implications are immediate and significant. Protesters attacked the Indian Assistant High Commission in Chattogram, and visa centres in Rajshahi and Khulna were closed. Anti-India slogans and graffiti are now more frequent. Since Hasina's departure to New Delhi, India has become a political target, with some protest groups framing the unrest as resistance to 'Indian hegemony'.

New Delhi is increasingly concerned about the rising extremist narratives and deteriorating security for religious minorities. Recent communal violence has direct implications for India's border security. Strategically, India faces heightened competition from China and Pakistan. Beijing has increased engagement with all segments of Bangladesh's political landscape, including Islamist groups. India, meanwhile, maintains formal relations with the interim government and has reiterated its support for a 'democratic, stable, peaceful and inclusive Bangladesh'. Efforts to advance connectivity and energy cooperation, such as power transmission from Nepal through India, continue. However, people-to-people relations are weakening, and goodwill is declining. The unresolved issue of Sheikh Hasina's stay in India adds further diplomatic complexity. The outcome of the February elections will have lasting effects on India's security and regional interests.

A BETTER SESSION, BUT LAW MAKING RUSHED

THE just-ended session of Parliament was reasonably productive and suggested a measure of maturity among elected representatives, especially after the near washout of the previous monsoon sitting. While tempers ran high on both sides, there was a noticeable willingness from the Chair and the treasury benches to accommodate differing views—a quality conspicuously absent earlier. Last session, the Opposition's demand for a debate on the Election Commission's special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar had been flatly rejected, triggering repeated disruptions. This time, however, the government agreed to recast the issue as a wider discussion on electoral reforms. That semantic adjustment created space to raise concerns over SIR and alleged vote manipulation. The government, for its part, held firm on sequencing—insisting first on a debate marking 150 years of *Vande Mataram* before turning to electoral issues. The Opposition gave way, resulting in a mutually acceptable compromise.

A closer look, however, reveals that over 40 per cent of the already brief session—just 19 days with 15 sittings—was devoted to non-legislative discussions. Even so, the passage of eight Bills, several of them significant, was no small feat. These included legislation to replace the two-decade-old MGNREGA framework, open the civil nuclear sector to private participation, and permit 100 per cent FDI in insurance. Yet many of these Bills were pushed through within a couple of days of being introduced, some amid protests and high drama, with repeated demands for committee scrutiny brushed aside. This has prompted observers to question whether legislative efficiency is more desirable than the depth and quality of debate. The handling of the VB-G Ram G Bill illustrates the concern: the Rajya Sabha took it up just hours after the Lok Sabha passed it on the penultimate day, denying the Opposition additional time for examination.

Overall, the Opposition appeared to recognise a shift in tone by attending the Speaker's customary post-session tea—a gesture it had shunned since the 2024 monsoon session, citing lack of opportunity to speak. That said, a proposed debate on pollution was dropped, with the ruling side citing the Congress's conduct in the Lok Sabha. And on a different note, is it unreasonable to expect senior political leaders to remain in the country—and present in Parliament—while the House is in session?

QUICK TAKE

MYTH OF DISORDER

HUMANITARIAN leaders like Jan Egeland call today's conflicts a "new world disorder", saying global rules have broken down and violence against civilians is becoming normal. Some agree, pointing to the ongoing Sudan war. But what's called a "new world disorder" is really old patterns becoming more visible. Powerful countries always bent the rules. They always enforced the rules system unevenly. The difference is that it's harder to ignore the unfairness today. The system hasn't collapsed; we see its weaknesses more clearly. Sudan is not tomorrow's future. It is the latest example of what happens when problems are consistently ignored. Disorder seems new because our expectations are changing, not because rules have vanished.

THE spat between the White House and Fed Reserve Chairperson Jerome Powell, an appointee of US President Donald Trump, is hardly unusual. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon bullied the central bank into lowering interest rates.

Central banks function as the government's banker, issue currency, maintain the payment system, and manage the nation's currency reserves. They safeguard financial stability, acting as a lender of last resort to banks, although separate bodies sometimes regulate the financial system. The contentious part of their mandate is controlling the money supply and setting interest rates.

Central bank independence is recent. In 1990, New Zealand legislated inflation targeting, which other nations adopted. The concept was that an independent institution would determine monetary policy and maintain price stability, minimising opportunities for politicians to use interest rates to boost economic activity, especially around elections. The context was the high inflation era of the 1970s and 1980s. It was convenient to transfer painful choices to central bankers, allowing governments to blame others or claim credit depending on the outcomes.

The case for independence is unclear. The objectives, such as relative price stability, growth and employment, are frequently contradictory. It is unclear which of the multiple measures of price levels should be prioritised. The 2-3 percent inflation objective is arbitrary. Empirical studies suggest that fear of deflation may be unwarranted. There are differences in what constitutes full employment. Data, rarely timely, has methodological problems. The representativeness of items used to measure inflation is contested. Unpaid work, zero-hour agreements, and contracting complicate labour statistics. Resource scarcity or sustainability is ignored.

Central banks have limited tools—interest rates, regulating the money supply through open-market operations, quantitative easing (buying government debt) and forward guidance (open-mouth operations or jawboning). Budgets, the currency, international capital flows, and geopolitics (sanctions, trade restrictions) are outside its control.

The underlying economic models focus on NAIRU (non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment) or the Phillips Curve, a simplistic trade-off between unemployment and inflation. In practice, these relationships are unreliable. Cause and effect are difficult to differentiate. There is no agreement on a neutral

Presidents have long pressured central banks. Independence is recent. Low growth & high debt weaken monetary power. Inequality feeds populism, and unelected bankers now face sustained political attack

CENTRAL BANKS, INFLATION AND POLITICAL CONTROL

SATYAJIT DAS

Former banker and author



SOURAV ROY

(not contractionary or expansionary) interest rate. Central bankers constantly validate Laurence J Peter's judgment: "An economist is an expert who will know tomorrow why the things he predicted yesterday didn't happen today."

The problems are compounded by training and backgrounds that foster groupthink. Central bankers are economists, usually trained at the same universities, who spend their working lives within institutions, government, or academe, with limited commercial experience. Central banks are run by economists providing employment for their tribe. Independent members rarely second-guess staff recommendations, even if they have the expertise and information.

Originally reticent, central banks, following the lead of former Fed Chairperson Alan 'Maestro' Greenspan, have embraced celebrity. Inscrutable invisibility has given way to volatility, X handles,

and Delphic oratory. They play to financial markets with an excessive focus on asset prices, which do not uniformly benefit all citizens. Politicians, never happy to share the limelight, increasingly resent the power and public profile of these unelected technocrats. They begrudge having to seek approbation for their policies. American presidents found themselves forced to kowtow to the all-powerful Greenspan. They are wary of the threat that central banks may pose to their position and re-election.

Central banks' records are unconvincing. The Great Moderation of the 1990s and early 2000s, for which central bankers unashamedly claimed credit, was driven by lower rates, the result of Paul A Volcker using punitive rates with high human cost to bring down inflation, as well as the entry of China, India, and Russia into the global trading system and the growth of information technology.

CAROLS ACROSS FAITH

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE



Regarding this, let me tell you a little story about a Christmas party in Chennai. It was at the home of the Hindu friends with whom I usually stay when in town. He is from North India, and she is from the South. They are a sweet, open-minded couple who celebrate both Diwali and Christmas, as many Hindus do across India. As I said, what's not to love about Jesus, who preached 'God is Love'? For one, it resonates with '*Anbe Sivam*', which means 'Love is God' in Tamil.



AFP

As a Hindu, Biblical verses reinforced my own attachment to Sanatana Dharma. I used the Bible to light my path to my own home as a Hindu, realising that Hindus didn't have one holy book; they have a library. This, excitingly, also made Christmas carols and hymns a part of my unforgotten personal storehouse of songs

Anyhow, not only do my friends unfailingly put up a Christmas tree at home, but they also invite a close circle of friends to a Christmas party, with all the traditional treats that mark the festival, especially plum cake. That year, their friends included several Christians, some nice, open-minded Muslims and me. The host couple and I chanced to be the only Hindus.

One of the Christian guests had brought printouts of carols so that everyone could sing together. We all had liberal, urban upbringings, and those

who were unfamiliar with carols could at least look at the words. Then, we came to the great old carol '*We three kings of Orient are*'. But a verse was missing from the printout. Guess which two people knew that verse by heart and sang it while the others, even the Christians, fell silent because they didn't know? My Hindu hostess and I, that's who. In fact, we were the only two singing every carol from memory without glancing even once at the printouts. This is not to imply that we were extra clever. It's just that for both of us, carols and hymns were part of our unforgotten personal storehouse of songs.

I should probably also share what my father did in New York in the nineties while visiting my sister. My mother's *shraadh* date occurred then. My father, though a *naastik* for the most part, observed her death anniversary with the traditional puja. But he didn't like to trouble my deracinated sister to find a pujari in a foreign land.

Instead, he went to St Patrick's Church, knelt in a back pew, and murmured from the beautiful Twenty-third Psalm, which begins, 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. When he told me about it, I thought he'd done well, for a personal prayer is a genuine thing. I loved St Patrick's myself, and made a beeline for the shrine of St Jude, the patron saint of lost or desperate causes. He symbolised hope and perseverance through difficult times, and I liked what he stood for: My prayer as I lit a candle and knelt to him was the universal wish, '*Sarve jana sukhino bhavantu, ma kaschid dukh bhag bhavet*', meaning, 'May everyone be well, may no one suffer.'

In that spirit, I would like to share these encouraging thoughts from the Bible. From Hebrews 11.1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And from Philipians 4:13, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me", meaning faith can steady us through every storm.

(Views are personal) (shebaba09@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Renaming history

Ref: *Nehru vs Modi: Ghost or glory?* (Dec 21). The renaming exercise does not put forward the right precedence. The future generations to come would be greeted with a highly distorted and politicised history. It seems like a balancing act for the Centre's moral bankruptcy. **A Sreeramarao, Vishakhapatnam**

India's roots

Ref: *The Republic, carefully edited* (Dec 21). The excellent column jingled my ninety-year-old memories of those who laid the foundations of the Republic and nurtured it to the extent that the whole democratic world was once envious of our Constitution and the values enumerated in it. I feel sorry for the generations that followed in the later years of independent India and grew into the 'banana republic' we encounter today. **Rajan Ugra, Bengaluru**

Eroding democracy

The vast majority of Indians, including the youth, seem no longer conscious of how the Republic is being carefully trimmed to suit narratives. While it's easy to blame those in power, rulers everywhere tend to follow similar patterns when citizens remain blind and deaf to democratic erosion. **Jagan Nadham, Vizianagaram**

Boost exports

Ref: *Pressure on rupee to continue* (Dec 20). There should be no further delay in securing a trade deal with the US and foreign institutional investors' withdrawal. The editorial is spot on about higher import demand for the dollar amid the tariff fiasco. An export boost is needed more than ever. **VKS Krishnan, Thanjavur**

Eternal laughs

Ref: *Malayalam actor, screenwriter and filmmaker Sreenivasan dies at 69* (Dec 21). It is an irreparable loss to Malayalam cinema. Over four decades of acting, he had exemplified that the only thing worth having an existence is with a sense of humour. May his humour endure and waft! **Kelath Gopakumar Menon, Thrissur**

Bumrah's role

Ref: *The chosen ones* (Dec 21). The squad appears to be very strong and balanced. The omission of Shubman Gill, though surprising, seems imperative. There was a well-deserved spot for Yashasvi Jaiswal in the team, given his starry performance in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy 2025. Jasprit Bumrah, however, would have made a better captain choice. **A V Var Prasad, email**

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ESTABLISHED 1961

The British state is failing its Jewish population

Jewish children are calling police forces to ask if armed officers can accompany them to Hanukkah parties. Celebrations are taking place behind fencing and there are security guards and bag checks. Concerned parents write in the letters pages that they fear to display candles in their windows, their children now train in “invacuation drills” and the volunteers at their synagogues wear anti-stab vests.

In the wake of the October 7 massacre, a wave of hostility has been directed at Jews living in Britain. The Yom Kippur attack on the Heaton Park Synagogue; the blocking of Israeli fans from attending a football match by a police force worried about the “high-risk” nature of their presence in a British city; academics and students living in an atmosphere of intimidation on campuses that turn a blind eye to blatant anti-Semitism that masquerades as commentary on international affairs.

If Britain’s tiny Jewish community feels as if it is under siege, it is largely because it is. For two years, regular protests have seen police forces turning a blind eye to chants calling for the destruction of Israel or the glorification of Hamas terrorists. And with the state apparently unwilling or unable to provide the protection necessary for Jews to feel safe in this country, it is entirely unsurprising that many are now considering their future here.

Research by the Campaign Against Antisemitism has found that more than half of British Jews no longer feel as if they have a long-term future in the United Kingdom, and that almost two-thirds have considered leaving in the past two years, with the rise in anti-Semitism in the wake of October 7 a driving factor for many.

Also likely to have played a role is the apparent lack of interest or ability of Britain’s institutions to combat anti-

Semitism. Respondents overwhelmingly said that the Government, police and criminal justice system do not do enough to protect Jews; a large majority would not show “visible signs” of Judaism in public because of anti-Semitism.

It is beyond shameful that this situation has been allowed to go on for as long as it has. If the anti-Semitism on display in Britain’s streets had come from a source that the institutions of the British state were comfortable tackling, then perhaps it might have been addressed. But the nature of the threat posed to British Jews has changed as the country has changed, and is now predominantly perceived as coming from the far Left and the Islamist strands of British politics.

It is unsurprising that a British state uncomfortable with levelling the full force of its condemnation at targets outside a narrowly confined ideological range might struggle with this new evolution of the oldest hatred. It is no less shameful for being predictable, and no less horrific in its consequences.

Prince among SAS men

The Prince of Wales has agreed to become the patron of the charity for the Special Air Service, providing the elite unit of the Army with a much-needed boost to morale at a particularly difficult time in its history.

A series of legal witch hunts directed at past and present members of the regiment with the support of the British state has led to soldiers quitting the SAS, and other special forces units, in droves, fearing that they will face the slow grind of the legal system for decisions taken under fire and during the heat of battle. As a letter signed by nine former military chiefs lays out, every British soldier must now

consider “not only the enemy in front of them, but also the lawyer behind them”.

These soldiers, and the units in which they serve, have done a great deal to secure the freedom and prosperity which too many in Britain take for granted. As the Prince says, the SAS “has long stood as a symbol of courage, resilience and unwavering dedication to duty and the service of this country”.

It is a history of which he is deeply aware. In 2009, the Prince was the first member of the Royal family to be seconded to the SAS, and last year he attended a memorial service for the last of the wartime SAS “originals”.

Just as Britain’s veterans and soldiers have taken up arms on our behalf, it is our duty to stand by them in their times of need. It is good to see the Prince taking the lead on this issue.

Compliments of the season

December 21st – St Thomas’s Feast Day – traditionally marked the first night of Christmas on the Isle of Man. All work was halted, and would not resume until January 5.

The festivities were accordingly exaggerated, with the weather probably contributing to the general desire to stay indoors: the event was known as “Black Thomas’s Feast” owing to the predictably rainy weather during that period, while another saying noted that it would be the first day of the frost, which “never thawed” until February.

Readers will no doubt be pleased to hear that *The Sunday Telegraph* will not be downing tools in a similar manner. This is, however, the last edition to be printed before Christmastide begins. We wish you, and your loved ones, a merry Christmas – and we will be back next week.

LETTERS to the EDITOR

Welcome realism from the Conservatives over the Zero Emission Vehicle mandate

SIR – It is great that at least one political leader has finally “discovered” the absurdity of trying to ban petrol engines by 2030 (Leading Article, December 14). The majority of those outside Westminster have understood that the whole net zero crusade to a fixed timetable is expensive, economic suicide and security madness.

Now Kemi Badenoch needs to repeal the 2008 Climate Change Act, as she has previously said she will. To do this she needs to win the next general election, and then to find enough genuinely Conservative MPs, who will back her to the hilt. She might be able to achieve the first, but I’m sceptical about the second.

Mike Metcalfe
Buttle, Somerset

SIR – Your report on Kemi Badenoch’s intention to scrap the Zero Emission Vehicle mandate gave the impression of a groundbreaking new policy, aimed at countering Labour’s damaging net zero approach. However, it was the last Conservative administration that introduced the legislation, an administration that included Mrs Badenoch. It was also Theresa May’s amendment to the 2008 Climate Change Act that laid the groundwork for many of the economically damaging net zero policies.

As for groundbreaking, Reform UK announced in its 2024 policy document the intent to cancel the whole net zero debacle. This Tory plan is simply following other European countries (“EU abandons petrol car ban”, report, December 17).

Richard Scott
Kirkbride, Cumbria

SIR – In her Budget, Rachel Reeves announced that she is introducing a pay-per-mile tax for electric vehicles, which will be expensive, difficult to administer and will potentially deter EV adoption (report, December 5).

This has left the door wide open for Kemi Badenoch, whose plan to scrap the abolition of internal combustion engine vehicles I wholeheartedly

support. I hope she’ll follow this with a commitment to abolish fuel duty and replace it with a “road fund levy”, which taxes all private cars and motor cycles on the basis of their annual mileage. The necessary data is already collected by the annual MOT tests for older cars. It shouldn’t be too complicated to include newer cars in this established process.

Commercial and public vehicles can be taxed at different levels, to ensure that necessary services are not overburdened. However, all should contribute to the repair and maintenance of our public highways.

Digby Harper
Benson, Oxfordshire

Frustrated surgeons

SIR – You have recently published several articles mentioning that almost half of NHS surgeons are operating just once a week, and the majority only twice, including a piece by Tim Mitchell, president of the Royal College of Surgeons of England (“Surgeons are ready, but too many operating theatres are not”, December 14). He wrote that doctors were coming in prepared to operate, only to find that a lack of space, too few beds or a dearth of support teams such as anaesthetists and nurses meant that they were unable to. He said: “This isn’t because they lack skill or commitment. It’s because the system they work in is under immense strain.”

Bed availability has been an issue for several years now, but this is compounded by the need to appoint more consultants to cover on-call rotas. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, one-in-four nights on call was standard. Today, these shifts are considered to be too taxing.

Unsurprisingly, I am retired from my consultant post as a vascular and renal transplant surgeon in 2011, three new posts were created to replace me, and my subspecialist areas were also split up. Unfortunately, my two all-day operating lists also had to be shared between my replacements.

Today, I continue to do consultant appraisals, and I have found that many surgeons do not have enough time allocated to them to practise their craft. This is an immensely sad state of affairs.

Paul Lear FRCS
Henstridge, Somerset

SIR – It is frustrating to read that NHS surgeons are doing so few operations due to a lack of adequately equipped operating theatres. In the commercial world, if access to specially equipped areas was a key business constraint, everything would be done to ensure that they were prioritised.

However, this is not a new situation – almost 20 years ago, the business executive Gerry Robinson highlighted issues of poor management in the

health service, and a reliance on ever more government money, in his BBC television series *Can Gerry Robinson Fix the NHS?*

In the meantime, expensive operating theatres stand empty too much of the time, and patients stay on waiting lists. One wonders how many NHS managers have ever worked in a commercial enterprise, where they might have learnt how to run expensive assets efficiently.

Mark Williams
Commugny, Vaud, Switzerland

Mansion tax folly

SIR – The new mansion tax (report, December 18) is controversial for a number of reasons. For instance, valuation is highly speculative in a market where affordability, interest rates and location are major factors. Two of these are beyond the control of the homeowner, and the third – location – is a value placed on the property by a prospective purchaser. Valuation is thus guessed at, and based solely on the recent performance of similar properties.

This leaves room for wide margins of error, so there will inevitably be many appeals to surveyors’ assessments, which will cost a good deal of time and money to resolve.

Burdens on future owners will deter transactions and reduce the price of all properties, so when estates are valued for inheritance tax there will be a significant loss to HMRC2.

This is going to cause an awful lot of trouble and inconvenience. Why is it being introduced at all?

Peter Gray
Tunbridge Wells, Kent

Government debt

SIR – Eddie Dempsey, general secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (Letters, December 14), fails to appreciate that if one is seriously in hock to lenders – as the United Kingdom is – considerations of democracy, independence and sovereignty are irrelevant.

The UK already pays a “moron premium” (the extra yield that investors demand when lending to a government perceived to be fiscally irresponsible), and there is justifiable doubt about this Government’s ability to pay its £2.9tn debt. The sums could perhaps begin to add up if the next government tackles immigration, welfare and the Blob – that mass of civil servants and bureaucrats who steer British policy.

The only hope is that some combination of the Tories and Reform UK could succeed in the next general election, and give Britain a future the rest of the world might envy.

Peter Milne
Old Catton, Norfolk

SIR – The RMT’s general secretary says that “confidence can also be built by competent public institutions”. A good place to start would be to have a train service that runs on time and doesn’t indulge in strikes that are designed to cause maximum inconvenience. The public interest is best served when society does not tolerate groups abusing their power, or holding it to ransom in their narrow self-interest.

Jeremy Harrison
Swanmore, Hampshire

Trump’s America

SIR – Janet Daley (“Donald Trump has just proved that he is un-American”, Comment, December 14) ignores the people who were already living in what is now America when she says it was a “a something-out-of-nothing”. As for the first immigrants having “no shared historical memory”, they were all western Europeans who came from Judaeo-Christian cultures.

The “self-evident” truth “that all men are created equal” brushes aside the slavery that had existed for more than a century before the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, many of the Founding Fathers were slave owners.

Donald Trump is simply following in the footsteps of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison by deciding who counts as “men”, and who of the “huddled masses” deserves “to breathe free”.

F Poth
West Parley, Dorset

Charitable donations

SIR – Clive Hadfield (Letters, December 14) was right to refuse to give his personal details when trying to donate to the Air Ambulance. Had he done so, he would almost certainly have been contacted to make further donations.

The form to donate to Cancer Research UK, for example, includes on the back, in small print, the sentence: “To make our fundraising efforts targeted and effective, and understand how much you may be able to give, we may research you using publicly available sources, for example public registers, corporate websites, the news or social media.”

The British Heart Foundation has a similar page, but also says: “We may use additional information such as geographical information for measures of affluence where available.” This should not be allowed.

Charles Duncan
St Maues, Cornwall

SIR – I too was asked to donate to the Air Ambulance by buying a raffle ticket, something that I was more than happy to do.

However, I was then asked for my debit-card details, so that I could make



Caffeine shot: a 1922 advertisement for Victoria Arduino espresso machines

Coffee chains’ soaring prices leave a bitter taste

SIR – Gerry Ford, the American founder and managing director of Caffè Nero, says prices are unlikely to fall even if bean costs drop (“Coffee drinkers should get used to high prices, Caffè Nero boss warns”, report, December 15).

Who is he trying to fool? The *raison d’être* of Caffè Nero, along with the likes of Costa and Starbucks, is to sell coffee at

exorbitant prices. It’s bad enough that they are all too expensive, but the quality is appalling. The coffee at the burger chain McDonald’s is, in my opinion, far superior and much cheaper, and this is a business that sells the drink as a sideline.

Mr Ford is relying on convenience and the gravy train rolling on.

Peter Baylis
Llandrindod Wells, Radnorshire

a recurring monthly ticket purchase. I didn’t give them.

Ruth Bennett
Marchwood, Hampshire

A yeasty treat

SIR – The only yeast spread (Letters, December 14) that is a staple in our pantry is Vegemite, which my wife first encountered when working in Australia 45 years ago. However, here at Royal Cinque Ports Golf Club, Bovril is very popular with members and visitors, especially in the winter months. It is drunk mixed with sherry and is known as “shovril”.

Tim Oldfield
Wye, Kent

SIR – I have resolved my dilemma

about yeast-based spreads. I now have

Marmite on toast for breakfast, a cup of Bovril with a dash of dry sherry for elevenses and buttered crumpets with Vegemite for tea. I then ponder supper choices over Twiglets and a sundowner.

John May
Holme-next-the-Sea, Norfolk



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GIDEON FALTER

This country has
appeased radical
Islam for too long



Rampant
extremism
and the
cowardice
of Britain's
institutions
mean a
majority of
Jews now no
longer see a
future here

Jews famously like to debate. “Two Jews, three opinions”, goes the saying. But that is not the case anymore when the subject is extremism and enforcement. Polling for the Campaign Against Antisemitism shows that British Jews are increasingly unanimous: two successive governments have abjectly failed us, our police forces are not protecting us, and British institutions are rotten with cowardice. The result is rampant radicalism. But that is not all.

For the first time, our polling has found that a majority of British Jews no longer see a future in this country, and 61 per cent have considered leaving in the past two years. A clear majority of British Jews are hiding their identity in public. Ninety-six per cent feel less safe since October 7. They name the twin problems: extremism and appeasement. When asked which forms of extremism they fear, 96 per cent say Islamism, and 92 per cent also identify far-Left extremism. But a markedly reduced 64 per cent fear the old *bête noire* of the Jewish community: the far Right.

Society has always had to confront extremists, but never in modern Britain on the current scale, amid such inertia from the authorities. It is no wonder British Jews are almost as unanimous in the criticism of the Government and criminal justice system. Sir Keir Starmer vowed upon succeeding Jeremy Corbyn that he would “tear anti-Semitism out by its roots”, but only 6 per cent of British Jews say that his Government has been doing enough to protect us; 93 per cent say it has not. Similarly, for all of the promises about “cohesion” from our police chiefs, 83 per cent of Jews say that they are not doing enough to protect us.

This polling reflects a reality: sit at practically any Shabbat dinner table and people will bring up the latest act of hatred and question their future here. In the words of one Jewish grandfather who did not relish learning Hebrew: “Where should we move to? It’s no better anywhere else in the West.” Indeed, the bullets on Bondi Beach could just as easily have been fired here. Police in London have recently charged two men with membership of Hezbollah. Both are accused of attending terrorist training in Lebanon, while one is also charged with preparing an act of terrorism.

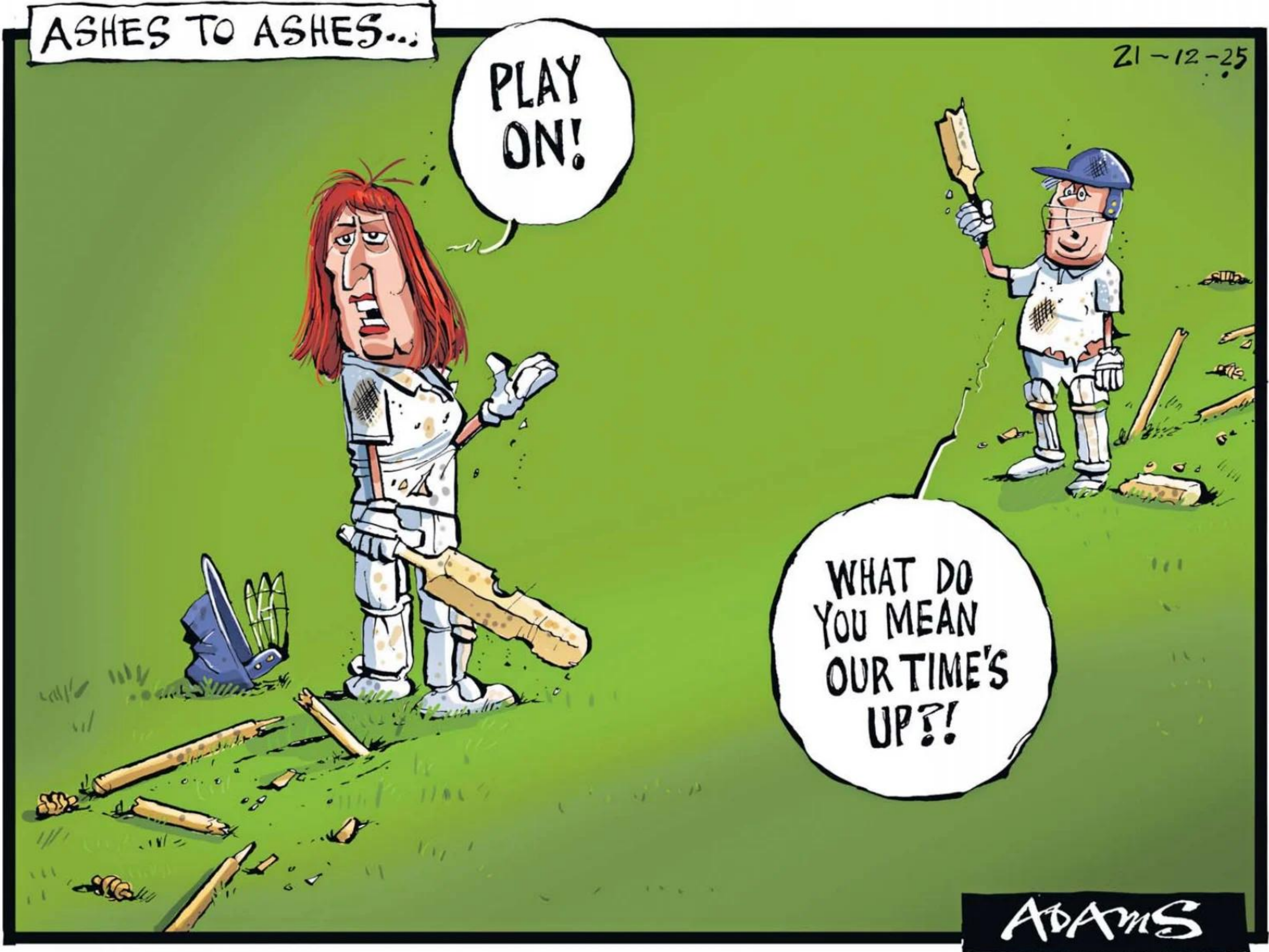
What confronts the Jewish community confronts us all, and politicians and police chiefs can no longer look the other way. The enemy is at the gate. Appeasement always reaps the same bitter harvest, and history tells us that often the Jews are the first to notice because we are a tiny community – easy pickings for the extremists. But the cowardice of this country’s institutions does not threaten us alone.

Banning chants of “globalise the intifada” is not the bold action that the moment demands. Indeed, it is tragic. The law has not changed – police chiefs could have taken action at any time in the past two years. Thanks to their inaction, from Manchester to Sydney, the intifada is very much globalised.

Just as they could have banned the chants on October 8, they could also have banned the hate marches, using the same power that police recently used to ban a march through Tower Hamlets. They could sentence Islamists with the same fervour they mustered after Southport. At the stroke of a pen, our tough-talking Home Secretary could proscribe the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

These remedies require resolve, but are mostly obvious. As our polling shows, it is also obvious who is to blame for the current state of affairs. Politicians and police chiefs need to act now. Soon, solutions that would work today will themselves be too little, too late.

Gideon Falter is the chief executive of Campaign Against Antisemitism



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JANET DALEY

In our post-Soviet world, we have
lost sight of the new enemy within



Since the
end of the
Cold War,
everything
from
medicine
to the arts
has been
politicised

There was a time when we knew who the enemy was. The people who were responsible for running the country and providing its essential industries had to be aware of the ever-present threat of organised infiltration by Communism and its fellow travellers.

The methods could be overt, as they were with openly communist trade unionists or party members who could be confronted. But the systemic subversion practised by covert agents and Soviet assets, as well as the many fissionary far-Left grouplets, required a trained eye to spot. The instructions that all of these agents had been given were focused and disciplined.

I speak from personal experience. You were instructed to join what might seem like any socially desirable movement – a community organisation, a local protest action, an apolitical social agency – and then to “bore from within”. That is, through persuasion and persistent argument, convince the membership that the real sources of their discontent were capitalism and the “liberal democratic” order, and that the latter, which seemed to be offering them a genuine platform for dissent, was actually a tool of repression.

That formula for undermining the West was hugely successful in its day. It mobilised scores of people, from industrial workers to academics to intelligence double agents, who engaged actively in destabilising the Western system of government.

Then, with astonishing suddenness, Soviet Communism collapsed. There was to be no more contest between two competing (and basically coherent) ideologies for domination of the modern world. But the instruction book

was left behind for future generations. The techniques for infiltrating and turning an existing organisation into an organ of a political campaign were there to be adopted by whatever cause wanted to make use of them. Like a virus that escapes from a laboratory, organised infiltration was set free to infect the world.

So here we are – in a world in which all manner of things have become politicised: where politics has, in fact, become the *raison d'être* of everything from public events to intimate personal relationships. Gradually, the awareness is dawning that there has been a takeover of our entire discourse and understanding of the established purposes of national life.

Political activism does not need to be hidden or insidious any longer – because it is no longer in the service of an official enemy. The transformation of institutions and attitudes into overtly politicised forces is now so widely accepted as to be almost imperceptible. To the extent that it is perceived, those who are critical of it are seen as putting themselves on the wrong side of history.

But there are signs of a hopeful awakening. In one field after another, the whistle is being blown. Baroness Hodge published a resoundingly critical report on Arts Council England’s “Let’s Create” strategy last week, making it clear that the organisation – which determines the fate of the publicly supported artistic activity of the country – had been consumed by political intentions. The notion that art should be judged on the basis of excellence or aesthetic criteria rather than on its social-engineering goals had been almost entirely abandoned.

Of course, the arts are an obvious

target for political manipulation. Judgments about their purpose and quality have always been open to manipulation by authoritarian rulers. Stalin promoted Soviet Realist painting over what he saw as “decadent” abstraction because it was thought more relevant to the lives of workers. Hitler condemned abstract painting as “degenerate” – for largely the same reasons.

Perhaps it was inevitable that once government subsidy became a dominant force in the arts, political priorities would dominate the scene.

But what about health? How could medical treatment itself – as opposed to the funding of it – have become politicised? Surely illness and how best to treat it are empirical matters which cannot be subject to ideological dispute. But there is a whole branch of healthcare now which has explicitly dedicated itself to the furtherance of a very contentious political idea: that it is possible for people to be born in the “wrong bodies” and thus require medical intervention to correct that mistake.

This field of what is now legitimate, officially sanctioned, medicine emerged because of an organised campaign by an activist lobby. Politics is now dictating not just the way medical care is financed and distributed, but what constitutes the subject matter of medicine itself.

Then we come to the ultimate example of political activism in contemporary life: pathological Islamist aggression. There is nothing new about religious war: the hostility between Muslim and Christian nations is as old as the Crusades. But there is something quite anomalous about this latest manifestation. Most of the Arab nations

of the Middle East seem determined to achieve respectability and influence in the Western world. They are eager to buy up American and European cultural outlets, to stage Hollywood-style film festivals, and to create viable tourist industries which will attract Western custom.

So determined are they to be seen as modern players with social attitudes that will be acceptable in today’s world that they make special allowances for visitors to break what would normally be national taboos on alcohol, relations between the sexes, and public codes of dress.

They have clearly gathered that their own younger generations do not wish to go on living in the Middle Ages, and that the life that is lived in the West, with all its personal freedoms, has too much to offer to be resisted forever. In their determination to join the modern age, they are having to produce a difficult and contradictory accommodation with their religious doctrine.

To that end, they will not permit the anarchic forces of Islamist terrorism to flourish within their borders. The Muslim Brotherhood is a banned organisation in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but not in the UK or France.

So, ironically, this is where activism can flourish: in the mosques of European countries. They can become centres of violent sectarianism of a kind which most modern Muslim countries would not permit. Their ambitious leaders detest the hostility and fear which Islamism has fostered in the West – and they may be, in the end, the only ones who can put a stop to it.

ZOE STRIMPEL

The UK needs a Churchill to tackle its problems. Instead, it has Starmer



The Prime
Minister's
strategy for
combatting
misogyny
illustrates
how
divorced
from reality
he is

Less than a century ago, on May 13 1940, Winston Churchill made his first address to the House of Commons as prime minister in one of the greatest speeches of all time.

“We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.”

Every word is balm to a Starmered soul. As were the speeches and actions of Mrs Thatcher 40 years ago, especially when she was fighting for the survival of the Falklands and

shaking down Arthur Scargill and his whole parasitical crew.

In a speech to the 1922 Committee, on July 19 1984, Thatcher read from some handwritten notes. “We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands,” she said. “We always have to be aware of the enemy within, which is much more difficult to fight

Who ever decided not
to rape or abuse a girl or
woman because a teacher
told them not to?

and more dangerous to liberty.” Too right, Mrs T – as ever.

Flash-forward to the present. We are a nation whose rulers think the way to tackle our gravest social problems is by sending people on courses. The latest example is sexism.

No more sexism! Teachers will now be given “training” to spot and tackle misogyny in the classroom, while “high-risk” pupils are to be sent on behavioural courses, not because this

is likely to work whatsoever (who in the history of sexual violence ever decided not to rape or abuse a girl or woman because a teacher told them not to?) but because it’s yet another government goal to halve VAWG in the next decade.

VAWG is the extremely unfortunate acronym for “violence against women and girls”. Orwell would be delighted with this. As for actual WGs, it is highly unlikely this weird scheme is going to do much.

Far better, and I mean this earnestly, would be to train girls in how to respond to bullies: by getting tough and teaching them some martial arts. No amount of training of boys will help girls who are chronically short of confidence and self-worth.

Correcting the latter is easy. The former, however, is caused by factors far more complex than anything some new government scheme is capable of tackling – especially this one. Tellingly, the goal of this “strategy” seems to be to cut “extremism” in general at the root.

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The play is clear. This is a Diverse Britain scheme concocted, as Kemi Badenoch correctly noted, by people who have spent all summer stewing over Netflix’s *Adolescence*.

God forbid that the extremist tendencies of one culture over and above another – especially where the objectification and oppression of women is concerned – come in for special review. But who can be surprised at the ever-stupider way in which complex issues are broached? Just look at how our PM thinks.

After the massacre at Bondi Beach, just the latest mass murder carried out by Islamists given shelter and a blind eye in the Anglosphere, Starmer had this to say: “We’ve got to defeat all ideologies of hatred against Jews, and that includes Islamist ideologies of hatred towards Jews – a political ideology distinct from Islam and abhorrent to the vast majority of Muslims. But we have to address that ideology.”

Where Churchill’s policy was “to wage war” on the enemy, and Thatcher identified it as “within”,

Starmer’s is to “end the passive acceptance of poisonous words”.

How we are to do that is anybody’s guess. In contemporary Britain, it really doesn’t seem to matter: the key is to condemn, to send prayers and hearts and solidarity, and to do nothing real at all.

Or, in the case of halving “VAWG”, to send teachers on training courses to learn to spot misogyny.

The degradation in the calibre of leaders and the governing reflexes of those in power cannot be overstated. It has been embarrassing and a bit perplexing, given that there are still, one assumes, some decent brains in Whitehall and Westminster.

But those brains have been directed towards knavery. Problems are not to be anticipated, nor their root causes considered, or pragmatic solutions sought for them.

They are to be dealt with by training checklists, behavioural courses, tick-boxes and impact assessments. I’m glad neither Churchill nor Thatcher are around to see it.