

A line drawn in blood

SANTHOSH MATHEW

The 2,640-km-long Durand Line is more than just a frontier. It is a century-old scar on the map of South Asia - a scar that has bled into three Anglo-Afghan wars, the Cold War, the Taliban's rise, and today's great power rivalries. For the Afghan Pashtun, this line is not history. It is daily life.

It was in 1893 that Mortimer Durand forced Abdur Rahman Khan to accept a division of his territory. This act tore apart the Pashtun tribal belt, splitting families and communities. Though the agreement was meant to define zones of influence, the British treated it as a permanent international border. When Pakistan inherited this border in 1947, Afghanistan rejected it. Kabul had urged Britain to relinquish the agreement before leaving India. When the British refused, Afghanistan became the only country to oppose Pakistan's entry into the UN. This single boundary line would go on to shape, and destabilize, the geopolitics of the entire region.

The Durand Line was drawn in imperial ink, but its story is soaked in the blood of empires. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Afghanistan became the pivot of the "Great Game" between the British and the Russians. Three brutal Anglo-Afghan Wars were fought. Afghanistan emerged battered but unconquered. Unlike India, it was never a classical colony. Yet it was trapped in the vice grip of great power rivalries - an early victim of what would later be called neo-imperialism.

The Cold War transformed this strategic frontier into a furnace. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to prop up a pro-Soviet

government in Kabul. This was not merely ideological expansion; Afghanistan sat at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia - a natural strategic prize, rich in rare earth metals and a vital link in future energy corridors. The American response was swift and secretive. Through Pakistan, Washington armed and funded Afghan Mujahideen fighters to bleed the Soviets. The Durand Line became a military lifeline - a porous border over which guns, dollars, and ideology flowed. Covert aid transformed tribal fighters into holy warriors.

When the Soviet Union finally withdrew in 1989, the West celebrated. But Afghanistan was left in ruins. The Mujahideen, once hailed as "freedom fighters," splintered into factions. Out of this chaos rose the Taliban. And from the Mujahideen networks, with training camps and ideologies sharpened in war, emerged Al-Qaeda and later the embers that would inspire the Islamic State. The same forces that were once backed by the U.S. became part of the so-called "axis of evil." The seeds were sown on the Durand Line - where geopolitical expediency overtook long-term vision.

In those years, the world also saw the emergence of a new kind of war coverage. The U.S.-led intervention post-9/11 introduced "embedded journalism" - reporters attached to military units, giving controlled windows into war. It created narratives shaped not just by facts but by strategies. Afghanistan became the testing ground for this modern information warfare, where what was shown mattered as much as what was hidden. But the Afghan people were not just witnesses. They were the ones who paid the price, repeatedly.

During the brief window after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan experienced a fragile democratic revival. Women entered politics, classrooms reopened, universities flourished, and Afghanistan once had one of the highest numbers of women parliamentarians in Asia. Today, under Taliban rule again, that number has fallen to zero. Parliament no longer exists in its old form. Afghanistan has gone from a story of fragile hope to a grim cautionary tale.

India has had a quiet but significant role in Afghanistan's modern history. Unlike the U.S. or Pakistan, India's presence has been constructive rather than interventionist. New Delhi invested in schools, hospitals, roads, the Afghan Parliament Building, and crucial infrastructure projects like the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, connecting landlocked Afghanistan to the sea. Its approach was rooted in people-to-people ties rather than proxy wars.

Today, as the Taliban rule again, they are moving closer to India, seeking economic engagement and diplomatic legitimacy. For Pakistan, this is unsettling. For India, it is a strategic opening. For the Afghan people, it is one more twist in a century-old geopolitical chessboard. But the Durand Line remains the elephant in the room. The Taliban - themselves Pashtun - have refused to accept it as an international border. Clashes have already occurred along the line with Pakistani forces. Pakistan, for its part, is desperate to impose control over a border drawn by colonial hands but never accepted by Afghan hearts.

China too is now watching the region closely. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing seeks to secure its investments in Pakistan



and tap into Afghanistan's mineral wealth. It views stability at the Durand Line as essential for its broader ambitions in Central and South Asia. This makes Afghanistan not just a local conflict zone, but a node in global strategic competition. The border that once defined British spheres of influence has now become a frontline for Chinese economic ambition, American strategic retreat, Russian nostalgia, and Pakistani insecurity.

It is where India's strategic calculus meets the Taliban's political ambitions. For more than a century, Afghanistan has been at the centre of great power games but never in control of its own destiny. Its tragedy is unique. No empire colonized it formally, but every empire tried to control it. From the Anglo-Afghan wars to the Soviet invasion, from the CIA's covert Mujahideen operations to the U.S. withdrawal, Afghanistan has been the theatre of wars it never started.

The Durand Line was born in ink, became a Cold War trench, and now stands as the powder keg of modern geopolitics. It is a border where history has not ended - it keeps replaying. As the Taliban consolidate their power, as India recalibrates its engagement and as China and Pakistan coordinate their strategies, the forgotten Pashtuns remain trapped in a story written by others. The Durand Line may look like a straight line on a map, but in reality, it is a jagged scar cutting through families, politics, and centuries. Until it is confronted, this border will continue to produce not just wars - but also the ghosts of wars past. It will remain the line that birthed the "axis of evil," tested global alliances, and turned a proud nation into the battlefield of empires. A border drawn in 1893 still dictates the future of South Asia in 2025. And that is the true tragedy of Afghanistan.

(The writer is Professor, Centre For South Asian Studies, Pondicherry Central University.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 23 October 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

IT is quite like old times to read of a threatened war in the Balkans pro-voked by troops firing at each other across the border. Greece has presented an ultimatum to Bulgaria demanding apologies and a large indemnity. The Bulgaria of to-day, of course, is not the pre-War Bulgaria. Shorn of her richest districts, deprived of half her population, and not quite certain whether she desires a monarchy or a republic, she is no longer the assertive, truculent power she was in the days of the Balkan League. Her armies have ceased to interest the experts. Under the Treaty of Neuilly, her military forces must not exceed 20,000 men, as against the half million she was able to throw into the field when she was foolish enough to engage in the great European struggle. But Bulgars are born soldiers, and there can be little doubt that if a Greek army crossed the frontier it would be opposed presently by many more than 20,000 men. No real disarmament has been forced upon the country, and there is probably a rifle or two concealed in every house and hut. However, the Greeks have not yet proceeded to extremities, and the news that the Greek Foreign Minister has resigned points to dissension in the Cabinet.

News Items

SHOOTING SCENES IN BRITISH LINER

CAPTAIN & OFFICERS WOUNDED

ANTWERP, OCT. 21.

THE first officer of the Canadian Pacific liner Melita, named Towers, is alleged to have shot the captain through the head in the cabin at 2-30 in the morning, and then to have gone to the cabin of the first engineer and shot him in the nose.

The second engineer then appeared, attracted by the noise, and was shot twice in the lungs.

Other members of the crew hurried to the scene and are reported to have disarmed Towers. The condition of the wounded men is considered to be very grave.

The police opened an inquiry, but as Towers is a British subject, and the shooting occurred in a British ship, they were only able to take formal evidence.

Towers, who was handed over to the police, was returned to the ship, which is proceeding to London, where he will be handed over to the English authorities.—Reuter.

“FULL OF FIGHT”

ABDEL KRIM PREPARING FOR WINTER CAMPAIGN

(“TIMES” SPECIAL SERVICE)
LONDON, OCT.

THE Riffs are still full of fight, judging from the reports of the Times Tangier correspondent who states that the severe fighting at Bibane has entailed losses for the French troops.

Simultaneously, General Boichut's column, operating farther east, was strongly attacked by tribes whose submission had been prematurely accepted.

Natives arriving from El Riff declare that Abdel Krim retains the confidence of the tribes, and is preparing for a winter campaign against both France and Spain.

MEN AND MONEY

WHAT MOROCCO IS COSTING FRANCE

PARIS, OCT.

ACCORDING to a summary of the French losses in the present war-like operations, reported to have been given by M. Painleve before the Finance Committee of the Chamber, 1,235 men had been killed up to July 31 in Morocco, inclusive of eight French officers and 300 French soldiers.

The wounded totalled 5,306, of whom 160 were French officers and 1,350 French soldiers.

From August 1 to October 15, the period of the greatest activity, 391 were killed, of whom 31 were French officers and 293 French soldiers. Members of the Foreign Legion are counted as Frenchmen.

The wounded in the same period totalled 2,991 men.

The Moroccan operations have cost 950,000,000 francs.—Reuter.

Is Japan going the American way?

SATOSHI OGAWA

It is said that things that happen in the United States will happen in Japan about 10 years later. Former economic security minister Sanae Takaichi's unexpected election to the presidency of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party showed that the Japanese political scene has already become polarized. Following the pattern of the political turmoil in the United States since the 2016 presidential election, political divisions are sure to severely shake the decades-old stability of Japan's politics.

Takaichi's most striking speech in the recent LDP presidential election was the one she gave when each of the candidates spoke at LDP headquarters on the first day of official campaigning. She complained about foreign tourists having kicked deer in Nara Park in her home prefecture of Nara and spent more than six of her allotted 15 minutes elaborating on the issue of troublemaking foreigners and illegal immigrants. If elected, she pledged, "I will lay my life on the line to protect our ancient traditions." Of course, she was already known as a firmly conservative politician, and harsh criticism ensued from both traditional media and social media. Pundits predicted she would fail because her stance was seen as too extreme for moderate conservative LDP members.

But this was not an accurate forecast. Even though Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister

Shinjiro Koizumi was the leading candidate in almost all polls of LDP supporters conducted by news media before and during the campaign, Takaichi gained the highest number of votes among party members with about 40 per cent of their votes. Koizumi trailed her by a margin of more than 10 percentage points. Takaichi's come-from-behind-victory convinced party representatives who hadn't made up their minds to vote for her in the final ballot, thus making her the first female LDP president.

Takaichi's deer speech reminds me of Donald Trump's first speech to announce his presidential bid at Trump Tower in New York on 16 June 2015. He addressed the matter of immigration, saying, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best." He further said: "They're sending people that have lots of problems ... they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists." When this happened, most pundits thought a man with such extremely xenophobic ideas must not be left behind in the race. Nevertheless, he won the Republican Party primaries the following year - and then the presidential election.

I covered the primaries and the presidential election as chief of The Yomiuri Shimbun's Washington Bureau at that time and was shocked by the polarization of the American people, especially the Republican Party's shift to the far right. In fact, I wrote that "the Republican Party has turned into the party of Trump."

Former President Barack Obama analysed the shift, saying: "It did not start with Donald Trump. He is a symptom, not the cause."

He was right, but some U.S. experts pointed out that Obama's own political stance, seen as overemphasizing diversity, was partly to blame. Trump took advantage of conservatives' frustration. For example, Trump criticized Obama for not using "Merry Christmas" for the annual White House holiday card. And social media accelerated the polarization.

By the way, when my son learned the Christmas carol "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" in an American elementary school in 2017, the school changed some of the lyrics in order to take religious diversity into consideration, and the fifth verse was "We wish you a happy Ramadan."

Getting back to the LDP presidential election, we can see that the LDP has shifted from moderate to nationalistic. Like U.S. conservatives who were frustrated during the Obama era, LDP members were dissatisfied with LDP leaders who hadn't taken conservatives' concerns seriously. This was especially true after the administration of former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida supported a law for the promotion of the understanding of LGBT sexual minorities in 2023 and Koizumi pledged during the 2024 LDP presidential election that if elected he would enact within one year an optional system for married couples to keep their separate surnames.



We've already seen Sanseito, a party known for xenophobic claims, win 7,425,053 votes in the proportional representation segment of the House of Councillors election this summer, the third highest total for any party. Although LDP members have had a reputation for moderation and balance, the fact is that not only Sanseito supporters but also LDP members have become more nationalistic and populist. Needless to say, social media has accelerated the shift.

This rightward shift by the LDP caused a great conflict within the LDP-Komeito coalition. In fact, Komeito withdrew from the coalition after a meeting of the two parties' leaders on October 10.

Komeito's leaders complained that Takaichi refused their proposal to revise the Political Funds Control Law to limit the entities eligible to

receive donations from corporations and organizations to the party headquarters and prefectural-level organizations. Although they said that this was the reason for the dissolution, pundits believed the main reason was that Komeito concluded Takaichi was too nationalistic to work with. From her side, she wouldn't be able to compromise with Komeito on matters she made pledges about in the LDP presidential election.

At this juncture we don't know who will be inaugurated as the next prime minister or which parties will coalesce into the new administration. All that is certain is that politics in Japan will face a difficult time of polarization, like the United States has experienced for a decade.

The Japan News-Yomiuri Shimbun/ANN.

Crossword | No. 293271

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

WELL KNIGHT CLAMPUIS
E A U T L L A T
S I M I L A R L Y L A S E R
S I L O C O T I
E R N E O N T H E W A Y U P
X A C D E A
A T T E A S E E N N O B L E
N O P
A I R L I N E S W E D E N
M I T N H S T S
E A S I T A N G L I A T H A T
L C L E N F O E
E M O J I L U D W I G V A I N
S R S S T R E E N
S L E U T H E G O M A N T I A

ACROSS

9 Robber one up holding atomic weapon the wrong way (3-6)
10 Be patronising towards women denied start (5)
11 Agent on vacation was resting back in Crimean resort (5)
12 Mature mother cradling son in Michelangelo's work? (3,6)
13 Find some supermarket chickens so yellow? (7)
14 Regular classes taken by inexperienced driver (7)
16 Dog trained for keeping at home? Not this one (5)
18/19 Blouses with underwear included for 14s? (3,5)
20 Possibly wise move to drop very sorrowful expression (3,2,2)
21 Attendant checks returning dread in two ways (7)
23 Torment tiresome sort outside electronic plant (9)
25 Brontë heroine reserves island home for birds (5)
27 See! That catches animal! (5)
28 Went through stop light rounding car on late trip? (9)

DOWN

1 This cart carries heavy load three feet up (4)
2 Charm a Greek character hired out (6)
3 Gaunt old American beneath fellow in saloon (10)
4 Repulsive party overturned fiscal promises (6)
5 Call for rapid movement over Brexit problem? (5,3)
6 Star not complete convert to compassionate eating? (4)
7 Six American spies surrounding rocky hill station (4)
8 As equipment in theatre idle sister wrecked (10)
13 Degenerate duke's command after first part of march? (2,8)
15 Men to label explosive element resistant to corrosion (5,5)
17 Excessive to provoke fascist troops (8)
18 See 22
21 Set eyes on article in stew (6)
22/18D A mongrel had to be ordered to cover king in blanket (6-3-5)
24 Horseless champion succeeded in love (4)
26 Works from Sturluson in numbered days (4)

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











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Editor's
TAKE

Japan’s gets first woman PM, India a friend

In Ms Takaichi’s ascent, Japan has broken a historic ceiling. In her collaboration with India, the region might well find a renewed sense of purpose

Despite being one of the most advanced economies in the world, Japan continues to be a traditional Asian society where men have ruled and women have often shied away from public life. However, with Takaichi taking over as the first woman Prime Minister of the country, the country is poised to chart a new course and take some radical steps that were long overdue. The election of Sanae Takaichi as Japan’s first female Prime Minister is loaded both with symbolism and substance. Takaichi’s elevation to the highest post in Japan is indeed a good news for India as she is known to be tough on China and has shown inclination in the past to befriend other Asian nations including India so as to strengthen her country’s strategic stance and take on the bullies in the region.

For India, her appointment opens a new chapter in a partnership as economic cooperation, and Indo-Pacific stability are already the factors that bind the two countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s congratulatory message reaffirmed his commitment to strengthening the Special Strategic and Global Partnership with Japan that both nations have carefully nurtured over the past decade.

The expected meeting of two prime ministers on the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia Summits this weekend will set the tone for the next phase of bilateral engagement and take cooperation in security, technology, and economic resilience to the next level.

Takaichi, a protégé of Shinzo Abe, inherits a legacy of Indo-Japanese friendship that Abe had carefully nurtured. Abe’s vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” had found resonance in New Delhi, shaping the contours of the Quad alliance that now serves as a cornerstone of regional strategy. Takaichi is expected to build upon Abe’s Indo-Pacific framework, potentially taking a more proactive role in the Quad and reinforcing Japan’s role as a stabilising and responsible power in Asia. For India, this presents both an opportunity and a responsibility. The two nations have already moved beyond traditional economic ties into strategic sectors – from the Economic Security Partnership Agreement signed in August to joint ventures in critical minerals, technology, and supply chain diversification.

The momentum is unmistakable. Yet, under Takaichi’s leadership, the partnership may become even more proactive. However, the road ahead is not without caution.

Takaichi’s headline stance on immigration and social conservatism could strain people-to-people initiatives such as the recently signed India-Japan Human Resource Exchange Plan, which envisioned the movement of half a million skilled workers between the two countries.

Domestically, the exit of the moderate Komeito Party from the ruling coalition may further affect Japan’s foreign policy initiatives. Nevertheless, Japan’s first woman Prime Minister stands at the confluence of continuity and change. Her leadership will be closely watched for how she balances assertive diplomacy with inclusivity and innovation.

The refusal syndrome in Indian judiciary

The series of recusals has sparked widespread debate within legal circles, bringing to light serious concerns about judicial transparency, institutional accountability, and the delicate balance between upholding impartiality and avoiding responsibility



VK
BAHUGUNA

In a rare case in Indian jurisprudence, almost 16 judges — right from the Supreme Court, High Courts, Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT), and District Courts — have recused themselves from hearing the case of Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer of the Uttarakhand cadre, Mr Sanjiv Chaturvedi. Mr Chaturvedi is known for exposing malfunctioning and misuse of authority and alleged corruption in governance at AIIMS, Haryana, and the Uttarakhand forest departments where he served.

His legal battles on service matters, central deputations, appraisal reports, and contempt proceedings against CAT members have triggered this series of withdrawals without assigning any reasons, until the Chief Justice of Uttarakhand High Court salvaged the situation (after Uttarakhand High Court Justice Alok Verma stepped aside from a contempt petition, marking the 16th instance) by directing the registry to put up the case before the bench headed by him.

This series of recusals is not only unprecedented but surprising and has become a talk of the town among civil servants and in the media. In the past, several judges have recused themselves from hearing cases where they have previously stood as advocates or in cases where some linkage existed in any manner with the case.

Common sense demands that this issue must be debated in the public interest because the judiciary is the last resort to get justice against the high-handedness experienced by individuals in the bureaucracy or at the hands of the political executive. For the last few decades, the Indian judiciary has taken proactive steps through judicial interventions to correct derailed executive functions, with quite a strong will and boldness. In the case of this officer, there appears to be no reason for bias for the judges to recuse because most of the matters relate to service matters and harassment.

This is a piquant situation for the Indian judiciary, and it must be debated and decided by the Apex Court under what circumstances a judge can recuse himself; otherwise, it should be tantamount to abandonment of the bounden duty to provide natural justice. Notwithstanding, however, the recusal is backed by the Constitution as part of ensuring natural justice as enshrined in Article 14 (Right to Equality) and Article 16 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty); only if hearing by the particular judge can infringe upon Articles 14 and 16, so as to ensure fair trials under the maxim nemo iudex in causa sua (“no one should be a judge in their own cause”). The recusal prevents actual or apparent bias, encompassing personal, pecuniary, or professional conflicts. Therefore, the Honourable Supreme Court, in landmark rulings



THE INDIAN JUDICIARY HAS TIME AND AGAIN OPTED FOR SELF-CORRECTION AND THE PRESENT CHIEF JUSTICE OF INDIA, JUSTICE GAVAI HAS NOTED IN 2020 “TRANSPARENCY FORTIFIES DEMOCRACY”

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like Ranjit Thakur v. Union of India (1987), asserted that recusal safeguards public confidence in the judiciary. Further, State of West Bengal v. Association for Democratic Reforms (2021) clarified that judges must recuse if there is a reasonable apprehension of bias, but they retain discretion in deciding so, without needing to disclose detailed reasons to avoid compromising independence.

Under the Code of Civil Procedure and Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (Section 479), parties can seek transfer of cases if bias is alleged, but judges initiate recusal suo motu. In administrative tribunals like CAT, governed by the Administrative Tribunals Act, 1985, similar principles apply, with members recusing under service rules.

This case has thrown a challenge to the legal system if it is accepted as a precedent to conveniently sidestep deciding cases against Government functionaries or whenever a judge decides to escape the burden of hearing any case. Most of the recusals in Chaturvedi’s cases, including by Supreme Court Justices Ranjan Gogoi (2013) and UU Lalit (2016), or CAT members like Harvinder Upal and B. Anand (2025), cite no reasons, fuelling speculation of external pressures or “forum shopping” by adversaries.

This pattern violates the spirit of Manaklal v. Dr Prem Chand (1957), where the Apex Court held that even a “probability” of bias vitiates proceedings. For a dogged fighter like Mr Chaturvedi, who is akin to acting as a whistleblower and is protected under the Whistleblowers Protection Act, 2014, such recusals erode Article 32’s right to constitutional remedies, potentially amounting to denial of speedy justice. Legally, while individual recusals are unassailable, their cumulative effect could invite scrutiny for systemic bias, possibly triggering in the near future public inter-

est litigation (PIL) on judicial accountability. The case of Mr Sanjiv Chaturvedi also signifies how the system once helped him through Presidential intervention and, at the same time, bureaucracy tried to crush him for raising issues of maladministration and corruption. There are several cases where administrative members of the Central Administrative Tribunals (CATs) act as extension wings of the Government and natural justice becomes a victim. Many Secretaries do a different kind of “forum shopping” by contacting the members to thwart justice. CATs also need big reforms. There is a need for reform, and the Uttarakhand High Court Chief Justice has set the trend by issuing an administrative order to put up the case before his bench.

However, the Supreme Court needs to go for broader reforms to ensure transparency. For this, it is essential to amend judicial codes to list out non-prejudicial reasons for recusals, as recommended by the Justice JS Verma Committee (2018) on higher judiciary accountability.

The recusing judge should give a speaking order explaining why he or she is recusing and in what way hearing the case could derail natural justice. The Law Commission of India, in its 275th Report (2018), urged digitised recusal logs to track patterns, preventing abuse. The civil society, on its part, should amplify this via PILs before the Supreme Court, seeking guidelines on recusal thresholds and penalties for frivolous withdrawals. Bar associations could advocate for ethics training on bias perceptions.

The Indian judiciary has time and again opted for self-correction, and the present Chief Justice of India, Justice Gavai, had noted in 2020 that “transparency fortifies democracy” in Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India while hearing the case on the communication blackout. Let us hope judicial self-correction is imminent.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Creating a generation that can’t express itself



SAKSHI
SETHI

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

A ten-year-old today can write flawless Python code but struggles to pen a simple thank-you note without Grammarly. That single sentence captures the irony of modern education — we are raising a generation that can communicate with machines but not with fellow humans. In our eagerness to make children “future-ready,” we risk creating tech-savvy illiterates.

Walk into any classroom and the digital takeover is evident. Tablets have replaced notebooks, typing has replaced thinking, and coding classes begin before handwriting lessons end. Teachers proudly announce “AI-integrated learning,” while cursive writing quietly disappears

from timetables. In some Delhi schools, students use chatbots to draft essays they barely understand. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rightly promotes coding and digital skills, but in practice, it risks producing students who can design apps yet struggle to write coherent paragraphs or express complex thoughts. Handwriting — once seen as a mark of focus and discipline — is now treated as a relic. Yet neuroscience paints a different picture. Writing by hand strengthens memory, comprehension, and neural coordination. Finland, one of the most technologically advanced nations, reintroduced cursive writing after noticing falling literacy and attention spans among digitally trained children. India, in contrast, seems to be replacing penmanship with PowerPoint.

Digital literacy is essential, but in prioritising keyboards over key ideas, we are losing depth. Students scroll endlessly but rarely read; they post frequently but write poorly. Their language has shrunk to emojis and acronyms — “LOL” has replaced laughter, and “AI” has replaced imagination. Technology is not the problem — imbalance is. Coding can foster creativity and problem-solving, but when it eclipses language, empathy, and art, it creates intellectual asymmetry. Coding teaches us to talk to computers; cursive teaches us to talk to ourselves. The effects extend beyond schools. Employers increasingly report that while graduates are technically skilled, they are emotionally and linguistically limited — unable to articulate ideas or communicate with empathy.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The same youth who can design software often struggle to write emails or hold thoughtful conversations. True literacy — expression, persuasion, and reflection — is being sacrificed for digital convenience.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened this divide as classrooms went online. Copy-paste replaced comprehension; handwriting vanished altogether. Even today, many students prefer typing to thinking. Yet history reminds us: Steve Jobs found inspiration in calligraphy, and Einstein wrote letters, not tweets. Clarity of thought begins with clarity of expression — born first on paper, then on screens. It’s time to restore balance.

Let children code, but also let them craft sentences. Let schools teach Python — but not before prose. The world needs not just programmers, but human communicators. Coding may build the future, but cursive — and the consciousness it cultivates — will ensure that future remains human.

The author is an educator and a counsellor

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Decades of charisma, comedy, and dignity

Comedy was rarely taken seriously in Hindi cinema. Many actors resorted to exaggerated expressions and loud dialogues, but few portrayed humour with subtlety and dignity.

Among them, Asrani stood tall, carrying forward the legacy of Mehmood and Johnny Walker with his refined, intelligent comedy. His timing, restraint, and natural charm made every role memorable. Who can forget his iconic performance as the eccentric jailer in Sholay — a character still quoted by today’s generation for its unforgettable line, “Angrezon ke zamane ke jailor”? Since his debut in 1967, Asrani acted in over 300 films, creating magic even in brief appearances.

His performances in Abhimaan, Namak Haraam, Chupke Chupke, Bawarchi, and Parichay reflected his versatility and sincerity. He displayed emotional depth in serious roles like *Mere Apne* and *Koshish*, proving his range extended far beyond comedy.

Directors like Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Gulzar recognised and utilised his immense talent. Asrani, who entertained audiences for nearly six decades, remains a symbol of wholesome humour and heartfelt performance. A true artist, his work will continue to bring smiles for generations.

SUNIL OKHADE | INDORE

Fix accountability for bad roads

The right to good roads is inseparable from the right to life. The Bombay High Court has rightly ruled that this fundamental right is protected under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Yet, deaths caused by poor road conditions have become routine, with authorities showing little accountability. After every tragedy, officials make promises that fade with time, while contractors and engineers escape responsibility.

Rules meant to ensure road safety are routinely flouted, and corruption thrives as funds vanish without trace. Cities such as Bengaluru and Mumbai struggle with potholes that turn into death traps. Footpaths remain encroached upon, forcing pedestrians to risk their lives walking on busy roads, while politicians conveniently shield encroachers for electoral gains. It is high time helmets were made compulsory for both riders and pillion passengers.

The judiciary should not be forced to intervene in basic governance matters, yet administrative neglect continues to endanger lives. The Government must act decisively to ensure roads are built, maintained, and monitored responsibly — because every citizen deserves safety, not excuses, on India’s roads.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Relief for Indian H-1B holders

In a major relief for Indian professionals and students in the United States, the US administration has withdrawn the proposed \$100,000 H-1B visa application fee.

The decision comes as a welcome reprieve for thousands of Indian tech experts and students on F-1 visas, who feared the steep fee would severely limit opportunities abroad. The controversial proposal had faced strong opposition from both US businesses and global industry leaders, who warned it would discourage skilled talent, slow innovation, and weaken America’s competitive edge.

By retracting the fee, Washington has balanced political protectionism with economic realism, recognising the indispensable role of skilled immigrants in sustaining its technological growth. Legal challenges and industry advocacy were instrumental in achieving this outcome.

The move also reaffirms India’s importance in America’s technology ecosystem and signals a more collaborative phase in Indo-US relations.

For countless professionals aspiring to contribute to research and innovation, this decision restores faith in opportunity, fairness, and global partnership. This decision not only safeguards opportunities for skilled Indian professionals but also strengthens Indo-US collaboration in technology and education.

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU

DELHI CHOKES AMID LAX POLLUTION CONTROL MEASURES

Diwali fireworks, in clear violation of the Supreme Court’s “green cracker” guidelines, choked Delhi as the city experienced its worst post-Diwali air pollution in five years.

According to IQAir data, Delhi ranked as the most polluted major city in the world on Tuesday morning, with PM2.5 levels about fifteen times higher than the limit prescribed by the World Health Organization. While firecracker violations and stagnant wind conditions worsened the crisis, overemphasis on seasonal issues such as stubble-burning and festive pollution often diverts attention from more consistent culprits like vehicular emissions. The neglect of the transport sector is apparent in the failure to adopt expert recommendations such as higher

vehicle taxes and parking charges for private cars. Inadequate enforcement of the Graded Response Action Plan has further deepened the problem. Alarming, 68 per cent of funds allocated under the National Clean Air Programme in Delhi remain unutilised. With nearly two-thirds of the city’s PM2.5 pollution originating from external sources, effective inter-state coordination is vital. Strengthening the Commission for Air Quality Management with sufficient resources, rather than resorting to token measures like cloud seeding, is the only sustainable way forward. Permanent, systemic solutions — not seasonal outrage — will determine whether Delhi ever breathes clean air again.

PRASUN K DUTTA | WEST BENGAL

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

India’s economic journey from socialism to self-reliance

Every facet of India’s growth contributes to its dynamic momentum, from manufacturing and services to agriculture, energy, and infrastructure. It’s no surprise that global giants like Goldman Sachs see India as a stable economy and a powerful force poised to influence the global economic landscape for years to come

FIRST
Column



BALBIR
PUNJ

Over the past month, India has radiated confidence and vitality in a festive mood. This isn't just a celebration of cultural heritage, but a clear testament to India's robust economic health. The bustling markets demonstrate that, despite claims by Rahul Gandhi and Donald Trump, the Indian economy is far from "dead." It is, in fact, more vigorous, resilient, and self-assured than ever before. Truly, India's enduring traditions and its drive towards modernity are now advancing hand in hand.

Launching the innovative 'next-gen GST reforms' on the first day of Sharadiya Navratri has breathed new life into India's economy. Imagine when India was entangled in the web of socialist policies during the 1970s and 1980s — citizens waiting in long queues for essentials like milk and sugar, years-long waits for cement, scooters, or telephones, sky-high income tax rates reaching up to 97 per cent.

Today, India has undergone a remarkable transformation. Despite global uncertainties and disruptions in supply chains caused by ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, along with Trump's unpredictable policies, India's economy is resilient. It's moving forward with steady confidence and vibrant energy, leaving behind a turbulent past like a distant bad dream, full of hope and optimism.

India's sterling performance must be seen against the backdrop of difficulties the Trump administration has created for most of the world, including India. The USA has imposed a 50 per cent tariff on Indian exports. India exported goods worth \$87 billion to the US in 2024-25.

The Finance Ministry has estimated that the US tariffs would affect 55 per cent of these exports. According to a Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) report, shipments to the US fell 37.5 per cent over four months, from USD 8.8 billion in May 2025 to USD 5.5 billion in September 2025, marking the sharpest and most sustained decline of the year.

Trump defended his controversial decision by accusing India of "aiding" Russia in the Ukraine conflict — a claim that even drew criticism from within his own borders. Yet, India remains unwavering in its approach, prioritising its national interests above all. It continues to purchase Russian oil, emphasising



THIS DHANTERAS MARKED A REMARKABLE MILESTONE FOR INDIA'S ECONOMY, WITH A STAGGERING 100,000 FOUR-WHEELERS SOLD IN JUST 24 HOURS

The writer is a columnist and author of 'Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India' and 'Narrative ka Mayajaal'

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The Pioneer

that just as the US has the right to choose its allies and opponents based on its strategic goals, India too is fully entitled to make independent choices aligned with its long-term priorities.

The entire episode — from the US's relentless push to sway India to its firm refusal — highlights a seismic shift: India is no longer a pushover. Russia, along with its Soviet predecessor, has long been a trusted partner and ally. The message is unmistakable: like any proud and confident nation, India will decide how it interacts with its friends and foes alike.

India's economy is on a robust growth trajectory, as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) affirmed. Both institutions have upgraded their projections for India's growth, now estimating it at an impressive 6.5 per cent and 6.6 per cent, respectively. India's GDP demonstrated remarkable momentum earlier, with a 7.4 per cent increase in the January-March 2025 quarter and a surprising 7.8 per cent rise in April-June, underscoring the strength and resilience

of its economic momentum.

It's interesting to recall that when Trump won the US presidency in November 2024 and later announced higher tariffs on all trade partners, the World Bank and IMF slashed growth estimates for the world and for India. Several Indian economists even predicted an imminent slowdown.

Contrary to these apprehensions, India's economy accelerated, driven by robust exports, strong domestic demand, private consumption, and increased public spending. Well-known columnist Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar admitted in his recent column, "The current situation is far more stable and sustainable. Credit growth has been reasonable. We do not have an overheated economy, as we did in the 2000s. The current account deficit is virtually zero, a fine achievement at a time when our neighbours queued up at the IMF for rescues."

According to data released by the Commerce Ministry last week, the cumulative exports (merchandise and services)

during April-September 2025 firmly stand at US \$413.30 billion, demonstrating a robust growth of 4.45 per cent compared to US \$395.71 billion in April-September 2024. Additionally, private consumption's share in GDP has increased to 61.4 per cent in FY2025 from 60.2 per cent in FY2024, marking the highest level in two decades and unequivocally signalling strong economic vitality and increased purchasing power.

This Dhanteras marked a remarkable milestone for India's economy, with a staggering 100,000 four-wheelers sold in just 24 hours. Maruti Suzuki led the charge, delivering an impressive 51,000 vehicles, closely followed by Tata Motors with 25,000, and Hyundai with 14,000. This record-breaking surge showcases the vibrant momentum of India's automotive market.

In September alone, 375,000 vehicles found new homes — a 4.4 per cent jump from the previous year. In the 1970s, the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers reported that just 32,000 vehicles (cars and utility vehicles) were sold in an entire year.

Meanwhile, India's skies are buzzing more than ever, with air travellers soaring from about 11 crore in 2014 to nearly 25 crore in 2025 — a testament to growing social mobility and rising prosperity across the nation. India's remarkable economic rise isn't just a fleeting illusion or isolated sector success; it's a robust, all-encompassing transformation. Every facet of India's growth contributes to its dynamic momentum, from manufacturing and services to agriculture, energy, and infrastructure. It's no surprise that global giants like Goldman Sachs see India as a stable economy and a powerful force poised to influence the global economic landscape for years to come.

This transformation didn't happen overnight. It grew from the rise of a new leadership — one unshackled from the colonial Marx-Macaulay mindset that long influenced India's policy after 1947. This outdated outlook suppressed private enterprise, romanticised poverty, and turned scarcity into a political weapon.

In 1978, the leftist economist Prof. Raj Krishna coined the provocative term 'Hindu rate of growth', blaming India's sluggish economy on its deep-rooted civilisational beliefs like rebirth and karma. Subsequent research by esteemed economists such as Paul Bairoch and Angus Maddison painted a different picture — one where India's ancient civilisation was a vibrant centre of economic stability and social harmony. This shift in perspective invites us to reconsider long-held assumptions about India's financial history. In 1991, the government of P.V. Narasimha Rao sparked a financial revolution by launching economic liberalisation, unleashing India's long-held entrepreneurial spirit. Later, under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's leadership from 1998 to 2004, this momentum was strategically pushed, strengthening institutions and shaping the country's economic future.

The decade following 2004-14, dominated by the Sonia Gandhi-Manmohan Singh duo, was marked by serious challenges: rampant corruption, policy paralysis, and sluggish economic growth.

However, a new chapter began with Narendra Modi's leadership, ushering in an era of transparent governance and corruption-free welfare initiatives. His inclusive approach of 'Atmanirbharata' (self-reliance) and 'Make in India' has ignited the economy with renewed vitality, fostering a sense of optimism and forward momentum.

Retirement reinvented: Seniors as entrepreneurs, mentors and learners



DINESH
SOOD

Retirement in India has long been synonymous with rest — a time to step back after decades of dedicated service. However, the landscape is changing. In an era defined by longevity, automation, and the digital economy, the notion of "retirement" is being redefined. A growing number of older Indians are taking control of their post-retirement years, viewing them not as an end but as an exciting new chapter focused on reskilling, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning. Consider Gajendra Chauhan, a 62-year-old retired bank manager from Delhi, who recognised that rest was not enough after his years of managing loans and ledgers. He took decisive action by enrolling in a short-term online certification programme in beauty and wellness management from a reputable edtech platform. There, he mastered salon operations, digital marketing, and client engagement. Within just a year, he launched Grace & Groom, a thriving wellness studio employing six young beauticians.

Similarly, Sushma Arora, a 58-year-old school teacher from Chandigarh, retired during the pandemic but saw it as an opportunity rather than an ending. Determined to stay engaged, she enrolled in a six-month coding bootcamp for non-tech professionals. With her daughter's support, she began teaching "coding for beginners" workshops for children and homemakers. Today, her YouTube channel has over 50,000 subscribers, and she actively consults for a local NGO dedicated to promoting digital literacy among women. These stories exemplify a powerful trend: retirees are harnessing their wealth of experience and using learning as a catalyst for reinvention. They demonstrate the immense potential of accessible and affordable learning opportunities for seniors, proving that retirement is merely the beginning of new adventures.

Engagement of Longevity Dividend

India's demographic story is shifting faster than most realise. With better healthcare and longer life expectancy — now averaging 71 years — millions are entering an active "third age", physically fit and mentally agile. Yet, only a fraction remain economically or socially engaged after retirement.

The traditional model — study in youth, work through middle age, retire in the 60s — no longer fits a century-long life. The challenge is clear: as people live longer, they also need to continue learning for longer periods. The World Economic



Forum calls this "the 100-Year Life Economy", where continuous reskilling is essential not just for employment, but for purpose and mental well-being.

Global Lesson

Countries like South Korea and Japan have already recognised this demographic opportunity. South Korea's "Senior Colleges" and Japan's "Silver Jinzai Centres" offer low-cost reskilling in fields ranging from digital marketing to caregiving and social entrepreneurship. In Seoul, the Seodaemun Silver Learning Centre trains more than 10,000 retirees annually, enabling many to re-enter the workforce or start community ventures. These models show that investing in senior learning infrastructure is not charity — it's smart economics. A 2023 OECD report found that countries with higher senior labour participation also report lower healthcare costs and higher social cohesion.

A Missed Opportunity

In India, the potential is vast but largely untapped. According to NITI Aayog, nearly 4.5 crore Indians are currently above 60 and economically capable of participating in meaningful work. Yet, very few avenues exist for structured reskilling post-retirement.

While edtech firms like UpGrad, Coursera, and Unacademy have begun offering lifelong learning courses, their marketing largely targets young professionals. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) and National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) focus primarily on youth employability, not on senior inclusion. However, some early experiments are promising. The Tata STRIVE initiative, in partnership with community colleges, has piloted "encore career" programmes for retired professionals in urban centres. Similarly, Kerala's Kudumbashree Mission has begun engaging retired government employees as mentors for women entrepreneurs.

Reskilling Matters

Beyond economic logic, lifelong learning offers profound psychological and social benefits. Studies by the Harvard School of Public Health

link active engagement in later life with 30 per cent lower risk of depression and cognitive decline. Learning new skills also fosters intergenerational connection — where seniors mentor younger workers or collaborate on digital platforms. Moreover, as India grapples with youth unemployment, retirees with reskilled expertise can fill vital mentoring and advisory roles in small businesses, start-ups, and social enterprises — amplifying both productivity and purpose.

Building a Lifelong Learning Ecosystem

India needs to mainstream senior reskilling into national policy. Three steps can make this vision real: First, Community Learning Hubs — Public libraries, post offices, and panchayat bhavans can be converted into Senior Learning Centres equipped with digital access and partnerships with edtech firms. Second, Incentivised Edtech Inclusion — The government could offer tax rebates or CSR credits to private institutions designing senior-friendly learning modules — covering entrepreneurship, digital literacy, or beauty-wellness and health tech.

Third, Public-Private Mentorship Networks — Retired professionals could be linked with youth start-ups through national mentorship platforms — bridging experience with innovation.

From Dependents to Contributors

The new retirement story is not about dependence but contribution. India's retirees are not a burden — they are an untapped reservoir of wisdom, skill, and resilience. With the right ecosystem, they can become active players in the economy's next phase — teachers, trainers, entrepreneurs, and social innovators.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." In the age of longevity, that spirit of lifelong learning may be India's most sustainable form of wealth.

The writer is Co-Founder and MD of Orane International and Network Member of India International Skill Centres (IISCs), an initiative of Gol

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Reimagining road safety and saving India’s riders



SWAPNA
MAJUMDAR

Approximately 27,000 people died due to road accidents on national highways in the first six months of 2025, according to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. Two wheeler riders account for the highest number of fatalities in road accidents. Data shows that nearly half of all deaths in road accidents are of people on two-wheelers. In 2024, of the 1.80 lakh people dying in road accidents, over 45 per cent were riders of two-wheelers. Police statistics show that young men are more impacted by road accidents than anyone else. A young man today is over three times more likely to die in a road accident than a young woman is to die during childbirth, found a 2024 road safety study by the Transport Research and Injury Prevention Centre (TRIP), IIT Delhi. This is a reversal from the 1990s when a young woman was more than twice as likely to die during childbirth as a young man in a road collision.

Additionally, road accidents account for more than twice as many deaths among young men between 15-29 years as cardiovascular disease, and more than six times as many deaths as cancer, according to an analysis by Data For India. These worrying statistics underscore the criticality of road safety. Motorcyclists, in particular, are at a very high risk across the country, says the TRIP report.

Narayan Subramaniam, CEO and co-founder of Ultraviolet Automotive, an electric two-wheeler start-up, knows he is lucky he didn't add to the road fatalities statistics when he was riding his motorcycle some years ago and the car in front suddenly stopped without any warning. Subramaniam's motorcycle wobbled as he slammed his brakes to avoid a collision. Fortunately, he was able to stop in time and not only save himself from crashing into the car but also from falling off the motorbike onto the busy road and getting run over. This close shave was to teach Subramaniam, a mechanical engineer by training, an unforgettable lesson — that rider safety was of paramount importance. This harrowing experience would also become the driving force behind designing innovative safety measures for all Ultraviolet's electric two-wheelers.

While many big, established two-wheeler companies are focusing on safety, few have shown the patience to spend years in safety

technology research or provide robust safety features in their entire range of vehicles to bring down costs. But Subramaniam had learnt his lesson well. This translated into the willingness of Ultraviolet (UV) to invest time (even up to six years for one product), and most importantly, its unwillingness to compromise on safety for the sake of design, say Subramaniam and his co-founder partner, Niraj Rajmohan, UV's Chief Technology Officer. This is the reason why it refused to launch its first electric motorcycle without ensuring it had a dual anti-lock braking system (ABS), even if it meant waiting for as long as it took to be incorporated. Its persistence paid off when the pioneering start-up became the first to do so in the EV two-wheeler industry.

However, UV didn't end its safety journey there. Last month, it became the first in the world to develop radar technology integrated into a motorcycle by applying principles of aircraft engineering to further ramp up rider safety.

Now, motorcyclists can negotiate the country's chaotic traffic, its diverse weather, and varying and unpredictable road conditions, both in urban and rural areas, with pinpoint accuracy. Since radar technology uses electromagnetic wave reflection, it allows greater visibility in inclement and risky conditions like blinding heavy rain, dense fog, and darkness. With the introduction of the advanced rider assistance system, the radar technology provides not just peripheral vision usually blocked by the rider's helmet but can detect objects or other vehicles up to several hundred metres away. By using

this cutting-edge technology, risks associated with blind spots, lane changes, overtaking on the wrong side, and rear-end collisions by speeding vehicles — the four major reasons for road accidents and deaths — have been significantly reduced. India loses 3.14 per cent of its annual GDP due to road crashes, according to government data. As a Brasilia Declaration (2015) signatory to reduce road traffic deaths and injuries by 50 per cent by 2030, the government has collaborated with the International Road Federation (IRF) to draw up a road safety plan to improve not just the engineering of roads, but also the engineering of vehicles, among others, according to K K Kapila, Founder President, IRF Indian Chapter.

Ultraviolet's innovative engineering use of radar technology for electric two-wheelers has shown that it is a game changer for road safety.

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The Pioneer

OUR VIEW



Rare earth recycling: A tech game we must ace

Amid a global scramble for rare earths, India needs to invest in extracting these from used contraptions. A subsidy scheme aimed at R&D for the tech enablers we'll require could help

The electronics and information technology ministry's proposal to include the recycling of rare earth materials in the government's production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for rare-earth permanent magnets (REPMs), as reported, makes sense. However, the ministry of heavy industries that is crafting the REPM scheme is reportedly reluctant, since raw material supplies are the concern of the mining ministry and it would eat into the outlay for the 6,000 tonnes of REPMs it wants made in India. Globally, these special magnets have a seller's market right now, given China's grip on these as well as the mining, refining and supply of rare earths; Beijing has begun using its heft as a trade weapon in the form of export clamps. Since all this makes local recycling of rare earths a business opportunity, it may seem that no subsidy is required. What's beyond doubt is that we need a surge in the recycling of vital inputs that go into batteries and other electric vehicle (EV) components. Technologies for this are evolving rapidly and we must make the most of these developments. Rare Earth Recycling for Europe, a four-year project that the EU started in 2015, came up with various techniques for the recovery of rare earth elements from used stuff. While these are yet to be widely licensed on a commercial basis, even better technology might have emerged since. Redwood Materials, a company set up by Tesla co-founder J.B. Straubel, recycles just about everything that's valuable in EVs, starting with battery chemicals. Its know-how includes calibrated pyrolysis, by which materials are heated carefully to vaporize and recover some materials, leaving a molten residue for further separation, and the selective precipitation of

desired materials by dissolving composites in acid and then changing the temperature and acidity level to get them. Redwood even got Stanford University to certify that its recovery and recycling deliver 70-80% lower emissions than the same quantities produced from fresh mining. There is no loss of quality either. The only hitch is that extracting rare earths from junked contraptions instead of the ground is an R&D-intensive activity and R&D has not been the forte of Indian industry, especially beyond the circle of a few startups. It would take powerful incentives to persuade companies to venture into a field where success is not assured. Recycling electronic waste is not just a way of reducing supply uncertainty by recovering valuable minerals at lower ecological and financial costs than fresh mining, but also a way to reduce the harm caused by e-waste being dumped into landfills, which lets toxic chemicals leach into the soil and groundwater sources. The UN's Global E-waste Monitor 2024 estimates that the output of e-waste grew 82% from its 2010 level to reach 62 million tonnes in 2022 and will grow to 82 million tonnes by 2030. India churns out the world's third largest tonnage of e-waste. If we get our act together on recycling, we would get access to relatively cheap inputs by recovering rare earths and other minerals. Neodymium, a rare earth used for making very strong permanent magnets, is found in everything from motors, generators, cordless power tools and loud speakers to headphones and hard disks. When these exhaust their service life and are discarded, they represent a lode outside China's control, albeit scattered and merged with other things. The right mix of incentives can bring them together and yield the rare-earth security we need and seek.

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS

How investors can best pursue wealth in Vikram Samvat 2082

A corporate earnings revival urges us to stay invested in stocks and not be tempted by other dazzlers



DEVINA MEHRA is founder of First Global and author of 'Money, Myths and Mantras: The Ultimate Investment Guide'. Her X handle is @devinamehra

In the 14 months I have been writing this column, I felt compelled to address current market conditions only once before. In 'Stay put or exit? What should investors do in this market slump,' (27 February 2025), I wrote, "In short, currently it is time to remain invested. All the data on compounding you see happens only if you remain invested" The Nifty closed February at a little above 22,100. It is up over 17% since then. The new Samvat is as good a time as any to address the question of what to do now. First off, how is the market poised in terms of earnings and valuation fundamentals? Consumption has been accelerating. Growth in private consumption across the Indian economy had reached a 21-year-low in 2023-24, when I was among the few pointing it out, because the stock market was still zooming. It's only when the market started falling in September 2024 that talking heads on TV suddenly discovered a consumption slowdown. By this time, it had already begun to go up. Consumption has picked up both in urban and rural India, which is good news for most corporate earnings. Another key factor has been the fall in consumer price inflation to historic lows. Not only has inflation dropped, the actual prices of some items have fallen too, especially in the food basket.

A year or two ago, high food prices were crowding out even everyday products like shampoo and soap from household budgets. Now there is significantly more room for spending, which is good news for corporate revenues. Another positive development which can provide a margin boost is the fall in crude oil prices and consequent price fall in downstream petrochemicals that are inputs for many industries. So, on aggregate, there was a positive outlook for both revenues and margins even before the GST rate cuts. It was my call then that you'd see significant improvement in earnings in the second quarter (July-September) of 2025-26. However, while GST reduction is positive for consumption and corporate earnings, the reset meant uncertainty, which made consumers delay purchases. Plus, even after the tax cuts were announced, it took some time for companies to sort out pricing issues for pipeline inventory with distributors, dealers and retailers. This resulted in some loss of sales in the second quarter, to be made up in the third. An earnings acceleration is thus likely in the October-December quarter that's underway. Now for valuation ratios, including the much used and abused price-earnings (PE) ratio. It doesn't make sense to look at the index PE, as that is skewed by just a few companies. Also the composition of indices has changed vastly over the years, even in terms of the sectors represented, so a historical comparison could be an apples and oranges one. To give only two examples: banks and financials had zero weightage in the main indices 20-25 years ago, but they now have the heaviest. In the late 90s, the Sensex and Nifty had huge weights for public sector units (PSUs) and then there came a time when people forgot that PSUs could even be invested in. Nevertheless, the current Nifty PE of 22x is lower than last decade's average of 24x and is at around the same level as its 25-year average. That too in spite of distortions introduced by the high PE of

stocks like Eternal, some financial services, Trent and Titan, with PE multiples in the range of 93-400x. Most sectoral indexes are also trading well below their long-term averages. These include IT, infra, metals, banks, and FMCGs, most of which have corrected in the past year. The two industries where our portfolios are overweight, autos and pharma, are also below their historical PE averages. Even taking a longer-term picture, sector-wise PEs are mostly not at extreme ends for most industries right now. The PE ratio itself is a crude valuation measure, as several underlying factors determine the 'right' PE even for a single company—including the firm's earnings growth, cost of capital, equity risk premium and return on capital employed. For those who want to understand this in detail, there's a chapter in my book *Money Myths and Mantras* that explains these drivers. The other point is that today's relatively reasonable PE ratios are being calculated on decidedly sluggish earnings. As explained above, the earnings themselves are poised to expand from the October-December quarter, which means that the calculated PEs would begin to look more reasonable. In terms of action points: Stay invested to the extent of your India equity allocation. Do not chase a category or asset class that has done well of late; this includes gold. I have written a column earlier on gold explaining how it has been more volatile than equities and has seen bigger draw-downs. The 1980 high of gold in dollar terms was not crossed again for the next 27 years. As for global investing, go beyond the US market. Also, go with fund managers who have a proven track record. But once the asset allocation has been decided, don't tinker around with it every so often. This may sound like boring advice that I repeat often. But doing these boring things right is how you respect Lakshmi Ma, the goddess of wealth.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

If you aren't willing to own a stock for 10 years, don't even think about owning it for 10 minutes.

WARREN BUFFETT

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

French fumbles reflect the failure of Europe's centrists

RAHUL JACOB



is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent

Even by the dysfunctional standards of France's recent political trajectory, it has been an eventful month in Paris. A prime minister resigned after failing to push through fiscal reforms but then was reappointed by President Emmanuel Macron to try again. The theft of jewellery worn by 19th century French royalty from the Louvre as the museum's doors opened on 19 October seemed like a metaphor for the country's problems. A country that is a byword for high-end luxury has an economy dominated by companies such as LVMH and Hermes and an over-extended state. (A request for additional funding to better protect the Louvre had been pending for some time.) The trouble is the very wealthy in France use their clout to fight off higher taxes, despite effectively paying only half the average rate of income tax by shielding their wealth in holding companies. An economist's proposal for a wealth tax on people worth more than €100 million has been derided by LVMH owner Bernard Arnault as a reckless

attempt to "destroy the French economy." Since the snap parliamentary election in 2024 that weakened the government's position instead of strengthening it, the Macron administration has had to rely on support from leftist parties to pass legislation. At that end of the political spectrum, melodramatic overreactions to reasonable reforms are hardly unusual. The left has blocked attempts to reduce the generous holidays France is renowned for, even preventing the cancellation of two bank holidays. A government move to increase the retirement age to 64 from 62, aimed at reducing pension costs and the fiscal deficit, had to be postponed. That deficit is now near 6% of GDP and well above the Eurozone average, beating Italy and Greece. Its widening is a function of large-scale state spending in the wake of the pandemic (and then of the energy crisis after Russia attacked Ukraine) and Macron's tax cuts in 2018. Gross public debt as a percentage of GDP is about 113%, well above the Eurozone average. If this sounds like a dispatch from a fantastically elegant foreign country falling on hard times, think again. Macron's tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy are not dissimilar to India's cut in its corporate tax rate to 22% in 2019. Since India's tax cut has little to

show for it in terms of boosting corporate investment, it ought to be labelled charity for the rich. An inheritance tax, even in unequal India, is rarely discussed. At the other end of the spectrum, what are routinely headlined as handouts increase with every state election. This week in *Frontline*, economist Ashoka Mody, author of *India is Broken*, reminds us that it was the new working class in western Europe's industrializing societies that helped build support for their welfare states, which focused on delivering health and education in a more equitable manner. By contrast, the growth of private sector employment in India is chiefly in the gig economy. 'Delivery executives' with almost no job benefits manoeuvre through our clogged cities to somehow deliver at Olympian speeds promised by overhyped e-commerce companies valued in the billions. Against this modern-day Dickensian backdrop, Mody argues, "India has replaced genuine welfare—education, health, justice

and environmental care—with short-term handouts that buy loyalty but stunt progress. They siphon resources from public goods and keep the weak afloat yet vulnerable. (This) is dependency by design." France is characterized by similar cynicism as it faces the challenges of its dysfunctional political economy. Political instability has only increased since last year's snap election that Macron hoped would undermine the far-right led by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National. Now headed by the young Jordan Bardella, this party leads opinion polls in France. The wealthy, meanwhile, have voted with their trust funds and are moving cash to tax havens like Luxembourg. They are responding—or overreacting, arguably—to a new French levy on 10,000 holding companies, whose dividends are often diverted to avoid paying taxes, that is likely to raise €1 billion. An additional tax on France's 20,000 highest earners was expected to raise €1.5 billion. Another tax on corporate revenues of large

companies has also been mooted. Finance minister Roland Lescure has his work cut out. In ducking higher taxes needed to reduce gaping deficits, the very wealthy turn nomadic. This week, a tax lawyer in Luxembourg told the *Financial Times* that since the 2024 election, "brokers barely have to do any marketing work to get clients." Another expert said "crazy" amounts of money from rich sports people and entrepreneurs were flowing into Switzerland from France. This is akin to the outflow from the UK after its Labour government made changes to tax laws aimed at making those who classify themselves as non-domiciled in the UK pay a larger share of taxes. France's predicament mirrors the UK's. Just as former prime minister David Cameron opted for the disastrous Brexit referendum of 2016 to call the bluff of Nigel Farage's Reform Party, Macron and his allies have been obsessed with curbing the popularity of the far right. But unseemly policy roll-backs and their short-term political tactics since the 2024 election have had the opposite effect. As the UK's far right—helped by hysteria on immigration—basks in the same sort of popularity enjoyed by their counterparts in France, Europe's centrist parties are floundering.

Weak tactics to contain the rise of the far right may have led Paris to the sorry pass it has reached



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

From burden
to advantage

Bihar must make better use of its demographic dividend and underemployed labour force

Bihar is India’s poorest large-sized state as well as the country’s youngest state in terms of population composition. A data journalism series published in these pages on the quantity, educational quality and caste inequality of Bihar’s labour force — the share of population either working or looking for a job — offers crucial insights on the labour market challenges facing Bihar. While the state is a laggard in terms of share of overall working-age population (15-64 year-old), it has the highest share of what can be described as young workers in the 15-29 age-group. Almost all of the anecdotal evidence suggests that an overwhelming share of the younger part of this labour force either wants a government job or migrates outside the state for mostly better-paying blue-collar work.

Migration and the endless wait for an elusive government job has robbed Bihar of its most important comparative advantage — an abundance of cheap unskilled workers. If employed well — this would take a concerted intervention from both the State and markets — Bihar could do much better in improving income generation in not just things such as manufacturing but also agricultural production. Doing this, however, would require a recalibration of educational priorities in the state. Bihar’s labour force is poorly educated compared with the national average. It should make a stronger pivot towards vocational education (without compromising on higher education facilities) so that students do not limit their options to the elusive government job. This could hold more promise if implemented well for women, given the huge unutilised potential in labour intensive manufacturing sectors such as garments manufacturing.

For a state that was the epicentre for Mandal politics and is known for a fusion of caste mobilisation on the promise of representation for almost four decades now, it is revealing that almost all social groups are over-represented in agricultural employment and under-represented in manufacturing and private services. Primacy of politics around reservations, even if well-intentioned or even radical in a state with a history of entrenched feudal oppression, has failed to unlock upward economic mobility for the so-called subaltern. Bihar, given its demographic dividend, is crucial for India’s future growth. Exploiting this potential will require an honest alignment of politics to the labour market realities, not mere poll promises.

Beyond H-1B visas,
attracting talent

The guidelines regarding H-1B visas issued Monday should come as a relief to the large Indian student community in the US. The government has clarified that foreign students already in the US (under F-1 student visas) can transition to H-1B work visas without paying the recently introduced \$100,000 (H-1B visa) fee.

However, the fee, introduced against the backdrop of rising anti-immigrant sentiment across the US, has triggered fear and uncertainty over education and employment opportunities in the US. Fewer Indian students now seek admission in US universities. Our government and universities must see an opportunity in this crisis. The outflow of young, bright students to US universities is both a loss of talent and money. Most stay on in the US to work in that country, including in academia. New Delhi should work on reversing this by exploring *aatmanirbharta* (self-reliance) in education.

India should build the capacity to attract students who may want to study in the US and those who may want to leave the US and explore opportunities elsewhere. For sure, this is not going to be easy. Bright students opt for American universities because of their brand value and the learning ecosystem they provide. Not all of it can be replicated immediately: The US universities are beneficiaries of legacy investments, including philanthropy, in learning and research, and they have mostly been welcoming of talent and independent inquiry. Top education facilities in India, such as the IITs and central universities, have the infrastructure to attract talent — both students and faculty. Also, US universities could be cajoled to take a cue from the tech firms, which are building capacities in countries such as India to firewall their business from the Trump Administration, to set up campuses here. A message should also go out that Indian campuses are welcoming of research and knowledge production, and that red tape or ideology will not be allowed to stymie such pursuits.

The ‘self’ pivot in
Indian diplomacy

Self-reliance, self-protection, and self-confidence seem to outline New Delhi’s approach to contemporary world politics

In a world (dis)order marked by narrow nationalism, protectionism, exaction and aggression, how can a rising power ensure its continued upward mobility? This is a fundamental grand strategy question facing India’s policymakers as they reckon with an uncertain, mean-spirited and risky international environment where sudden and unexpected pressures and twists are the new normal. Given the limits of any single country in reversing or correcting the course of the current global trend towards self-help and self-centred behaviour, it is logical for India to focus on what lies in its own hands, i.e. building indigenous capabilities that can shield it from the vicissitudes of adverse international headwinds.

External affairs minister S Jaishankar has spelt out three concepts guiding India’s approach to the contemporary world, viz. self-reliance (*aatmanirbharta*), self-protection (*aatmaraksha*) and self-confidence (*aatmanivishwas*). The same three principles were reiterated by commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal, who cited the context of a “new geopolitical and geo-economic order” and stressed the need

to bank on oneself during “difficult times”. While the three “self” ideas are not freshly minted, they are being articulated as a troika due to multi-dimensional international risks which have been piling up. The Narendra Modi government made self-reliant India a primary policy objective in 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic unleashed selfish worldwide export controls and trade restrictions on essential commodities. The Aatmanirbhar Bharat motto got another fillip in 2022 when western economic sanctions over the Russia-Ukraine war triggered global food, fertiliser and energy shortages.

The latest boost to India’s self-reliance drive came from the harsh and unreasonable trade tariffs slapped by the US administration, which confirmed that the liberal international order based on interdependence had collapsed. Additional developments like the US policy pivot on H-1B visas, US sanctions on India’s Chabahar port project in Iran, and China’s imposition of export restrictions on rare-earth minerals and magnets have caused defensive ripples in India, where over-reliance on a few external sources for raw materials, markets and profits is being seen as unwise and unsafe.

Goyal’s assertion that “we are building value-chains which can give us end-to-end assurance that we will not be subject to any weaponisation of trade” is a response to American and Chinese blackmail tactics. Initiatives like the

National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM), the National Mission for Artificial Intelligence (IndiaAI Mission), and the India Semiconductor Mission (ISM) derive from the stark reality that no rising power can afford to be dependent on fickle foreign magnanimity in core industrial and technological fields amidst what Jaishankar terms as “the weaponisation of everything” and the need to “de-risk our exposures and engagements”. Even in the energy sector, which has been India’s Achilles heel owing to decades-long dependence on foreign suppliers of fossil fuels, a push is being made under the National Deep Water Exploration Mission (*Samudra*

Manthan) to scout for oil and gas in pivotal sites like the Andaman Sea.

If these mission-mode operations fructify, India will give itself a chance for leapfrogging economic growth that is not hostage to volatile international crosscurrents. These national missions can also propel India to become a more capable provider of regional and international public goods and a bigger exporter of goods and services to the rest of the world, a notion captured in Modi’s approach that “vocal for local” should lead to “local for global”.

Although economic considerations are foremost for India as it grapples with the breakdown of globalisation and the resurgence of neo-mercantilism, non-economic factors are also salient due to the present-day conflict-ridden and insecure geopolitical circum-



Sreeram Chaulia



A push is being made under the National Deep Water Exploration Mission to scout for oil and gas in pivotal sites like the Andaman Sea. SHUTTERSTOCK

stances. Jaishankar’s call for self-protection and “securing oneself” through “zero-tolerance for terrorism, robust defence of our borders, and assisting our community abroad” suggests India is determined not to outsource its national security functions.

In the wake of facile claims that the US brokered a ceasefire between India and Pakistan during their military confrontation in May 2025, India is readying for a future where it pushes back against the twin menaces of terrorism and territorial expansionism without being buffeted by the whims of capricious foreign partners. The relative success of indigenous weapon systems during Operation Sindoor has infused optimism that self-protection is feasible. India is, of course, miles away from fulfilling its long-elusive goal of fully indigenising defence manufacturing in many critical domains. A National Indigenous Defence Modernisation Mission with measurable timelines, which harnesses the private sector and eliminates bureaucratic obstacles, could do wonders.

Lastly, India is pledging to act with greater self-confidence in its foreign policy. Jaishankar has argued that as a civilisational State and a rapidly growing

economy, “we are confident about who we are, and what we will be” and that India “will always maintain its freedom of choice” in world affairs. This is a pointed rebuttal of expectations and demands from great powers that India should bend to their will during international crises. Although strategic autonomy is an age-old maxim in India’s play-book, practising it is becoming more common and natural today due to the self-assured and assertive stance of the Modi government.

All in all, the three “self” doctrine does not mean India is returning to the pre-1991 era of inward-looking socialist autarky or that it will no longer forge foreign partnerships. For example, Google’s mammoth \$15 billion investment to build an AI hub in Visakhapatnam dovetails with and advances the national IndiaAI Mission. India intends to remain engaged with likeminded global nodes of finance and technology, but in ways that would strategically endow and equip it with homegrown capabilities and attitudes to survive and thrive in a nasty and brutish world.

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Private sector can help
address urban flooding

The torrential rains across India this monsoon once again exposed the deep vulnerabilities of its cities. Similar scenes of rain-wrought havoc played out across many cities, including metropolitan Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. Urban centres that power India’s economy are now routinely drowning under their own weight — victims of poor planning and climate complacency. With climate-crisis-induced extreme rainfall events projected to surge by 43% by 2030, urban flooding is no longer an aberration — it’s a chronic crisis demanding urgent and systemic action. According to a 2025 World Bank report, India suffers average annual flood-related losses of nearly \$4 billion, a figure expected to rise sharply as climate risks escalate and cities expand without adequate planning.

It is, therefore, urgent for the government to devise a robust multi-pronged strategy that can strengthen stormwater management systems, restore natural drainage channels, and build climate-resilient infrastructure across urban India.

Such a strategy must harness the role of key stakeholders in addressing urban flooding. The private sector, through its technical expertise, sector-specific knowledge and ability to design cutting-edge innovations, can devise effective long-term solutions to two of the major challenges governments are faced with — lack of cost-effective technological interventions and large-scale monitoring of vulnerabilities.

A recurring challenge for municipalities is the management of stormwater and solid waste, which often clog city drains and aggravate flooding. India generates 62 million tonnes of municipal solid waste annually, of which less than 60% is collected and around 15% processed. Inadequate collection and processing of debris block drainage channels in cities.

Businesses can complement government efforts by creating promising market-based solutions for waste management and water resilience. For instance, ITC’s “Wellbeing Out of Waste” initiative (WOW) has demonstrated scalable models of waste segregation, collection, and recycling in multiple cities, reducing the load on municipal systems by collecting thousands of tonnes of dry waste, estimating up to 63,700 MT in 2024. This initiative covered over 25 million citizens across India in 6.4 million households. Similarly, startups like Recyclac are leveraging digital platforms to connect waste generators with recyclers, ensuring that plastic and construction debris are monetised rather than dumped into storm drains. Scaling up such impact ventures, with policy support and municipal contracts, can directly reduce the severity of urban flooding events.

The challenge of managing excess stormwater also demands innovative engineering and financial solutions. Post-monsoon relief packages sought by state governments are now running into thousands of crores. In September 2025 alone, Telangana reported losses of nearly ₹5,018.72 crore as torrential rains inundated residential areas, energy networks, commercial centres, and agricultural fields. For businesses, investing in flood resilience is not just corporate responsibility but economic necessity.

Companies such as Infosys and Wipro have already taken significant steps in this direction. Under its ESG Vision 2030, Infosys has developed an extensive Rainwater Harvesting and Groundwater Recharge programme, constructing more than 370 deep-injection wells and 35 lakes and ponds across its campuses — together

capable of recharging over 18 million tonnes of groundwater. Wipro, in partnership with Biome Environmental Trust, ACWADAM and MapUnity, has launched an Integrated Water Management Programme in Sarjapur. This initiative combines internal water efficiency measures with externally focused Participatory Aquifer Mapping (PAQM), supporting the installation of recharge wells, revival of defunct open wells, and promoting community-led aquifer governance in Bengaluru. Scaling up such private-sector-led interventions across industrial clusters, commercial hubs, and residential complexes can substantially ease the pressure on over-stretched municipal drainage systems.

However, effective implementation of such technological solutions depends on accurate and granular monitoring of rainfall patterns, drainage flows, and ground saturation levels to assess the precise scale of intervention required. India’s existing hydromet network is inadequate for this purpose — with less than one rain gauge for every 500 sq km, the country has significant ground to cover in developing reliable urban flood monitoring systems.

As of July 2025, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) operates approximately 1,008 Automatic Weather Stations (AWS), 1,382 Automatic Rain Gauges (ARGs), and 200 Agro-AWS across the country. The

existing network is woefully inadequate for hyperlocal forecasting, especially in urban areas prone to flooding. For instance, Delhi, with a population exceeding 20 million, currently has just 18 AWS in operation. Indian cities would require significant upgrades to additional AWS and ARGs to effectively track hyperlocal rainfall, drainage capacity, and groundwater recharge rates.

The private sector can help meet this gap by investing in big data analytics, AI-driven hydrological modelling, and low-cost IoT sensor networks that can continuously monitor stormwater levels in real time. Startups like ClimaCell (Tomorrow.io) are using satellite data, machine learning, and crowd-sourced inputs from mobile devices to deliver street-level weather forecasts. Similarly, companies such as SatSure are working with Indian states to integrate high-resolution satellite imagery with on-ground flood risk assessments. Private sector-designed flood sensors — akin to Siemens Mobility and EarthSense’s Zephyr air quality sensors — could allow local authorities to monitor rainfall intensity, waterlogging, and drainage blockages at the neighbourhood scale, enabling timely interventions before floods spiral out of control.

Finally, as businesses themselves are often directly implicated — with construction, real estate, and industrial projects encroaching on wetlands and floodplains — they must align practices with the climate-resilient urban agenda, by adhering to stricter environmental standards, integrating nature-based solutions such as urban wetlands and permeable pavements, and ensuring supply chains are designed with resilience at their core.

India’s urgency to address urban flooding, the private sector’s role has never been more critical. By building scalable innovations, financing resilience, and aligning their own growth with climate-compatible practices, they can transform Indian cities from climate-vulnerable hotspots to resilient urban ecosystems.



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{ ZABIHULLAH MUJAHID }

TALIBAN SPOKESPERSON, AFGHANISTAN

We support good relations with all countries, including the US, and our relations should rely on two channels: diplomatic and trade

Rohingya case points to
legal vacuum on refugees

True character is revealed not in comfort, but in crisis. And India has passed that test before. Our tradition of sheltering the persecuted is neither recent nor accidental. In 1959, when the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans fled Chinese persecution, India didn’t just open its borders, we helped build a community in exile that thrives to this day. That moment — and others such as the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, and the civil conflicts in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan — cemented India’s global image as a democracy with a moral compass.

The current Rohingya crisis must be seen in the light of this legacy. With the Supreme Court now hearing critical petitions, this moment may well determine whether India upholds or departs from that legacy. The Rohingyas are a persecuted Muslim minority from Myanmar’s Rakhine State, many of whom fled to neighbouring countries following violence and military crackdowns, especially in 2017. The United Nations has described their plight as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. As per government estimates, there are currently 40,000 Rohingya Muslims living in various parts of India. They live in overcrowded camps with little access to education, health care, or sanitation. And their presence here has sparked complex legal and constitutional debates.

India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, nor does it have a dedicated domestic refugee law. This legal vacuum lies at the heart of the debate. Although many Rohingya persons hold UNHCR-issued identity cards, they face significant legal challenges due to this absence of a formal protection framework. As a result, many are treated as illegal immigrants, subject to detention and deportation.

The crux of this legal battle now lies in a case before the Supreme Court: *Mohammad Salimullah & Anr. v. Union of India*. A petition filed by two Rohingya individuals challenging India’s sweeping categorisation of Rohingyas as illegal immigrants without regard to individual circumstances of persecution. The case also contests the government’s reported plan to deport 40,000 Rohingyas to Myanmar, arguing that deportation violates the principle of non-refoulement, which is binding under customary international law.

And so, the Supreme Court must now examine questions that go beyond deportation. Is the principle of non-refoulement (which prohibits returning refugees to a country where they face persecution), even if not codified in Indian law, binding? Are Rohingya refugees entitled to protection under Articles 14 (Equality) and 21 (Life

and Liberty) of the Indian Constitution? And, importantly, do fundamental rights in India’s Constitution apply to non-citizens?

The government stance centres on national security concerns: It is alleged that some Rohingyas may have links to militant groups such as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and ISIS. But lack of concrete evidence has led civil society and legal experts to demand greater transparency and accountability. These concerns also arise against a backdrop of public debate over alleged discriminatory treatment of Muslims in India, with critics arguing that the Rohingya face harsher crackdowns than other refugees on account of their religious identity.

India’s international reputation too faces a long shadow as allegations of mistreatment and extrajudicial deportation continue to attract global scrutiny. According to some reports published earlier this year, around 40 Rohingyas individuals were transported to the Andaman Islands blindfolded, shackled, and subsequently forced into the sea. Some survivors, according to these reports, swam ashore. Several international media outlets published survivor testimonies, though some reports have challenged the story. India, however, did not comment on these accounts. Meanwhile, the Court has declined to grant interim relief citing insufficient evidence. During oral observations, it referred to the account as a “beautifully crafted story”. On October 8, the Court also criticised UNHCR for issuing refugee cards too freely, remarking, “They’ve opened a showroom here.”

So, what does this crisis mean for India? While India is not legally bound by the Refugee Convention and lacks formal domestic refugee laws, the principle of non-refoulement is widely recognised as customary international law, carrying considerable moral and legal heft. More importantly, beyond international treaties, we are ultimately bound by something deeper — our constitutional values and the promise of equality, dignity, and liberty for all persons. Not just citizens. And so, the Rohingya crisis brings us to a crossroads. The world has long looked to our nation as a democracy that balances sovereignty with humanitarian values. It is in our interest that they continue to do so. Because India’s greatness has never come from its might, but from its moral clarity. That is our true heritage.



Insiyah Vahanvaty



Ashish Bharadwaj

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Free world

India should be more welcoming of foreign scholars and experts

The free movement of people and ideas is integral to a globalised world. But India continues to send out conflicting signals on this count. On the one hand it wants to welcome technology, capital and know-how from all corners of the world but on the other, it is also trying to insulate itself, feeling insecure about an alleged global conspiracy against it. The deportation of Francesca Orsini, a scholar of Hindi and South Asian literature and professor emerita at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London, from Delhi airport on October 20 has to be seen in this context. She held a valid five-year e-tourist visa but was blacklisted in March 2025 for violation of visa conditions. Ms. Orsini had allegedly engaged in academic activities during a visit in October 2024, which were, technically, a violation of the terms of her tourist visa. Her influential work, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, has significantly contributed to the understanding of Indian literary and cultural history. She is one among the many foreign scholars who have devoted their lives to researching and writing on various aspects of India. The argument about violations may well be true, but also evident is the arbitrariness in deportation decisions. Foreign business leaders visiting India routinely make political statements praising the government, which can be termed a violation of visa conditions.

Those who see themselves as guardians of India's national security will have to think hard on the cost and benefits of restricting the entry of international scholars into the country. Many people associated with the ideological ecosystem of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party believe that there is an international conspiracy to influence the thinking of Indians. This thought is reflected in policy actions that restrict non-governmental organisations and scholars. There are various forces globally at play at any given point, some favouring India, and some not. While the country must have a strategy to harness the forces that help it and counter those that do not, it cannot do this by fencing itself in. In Ms. Orsini's case, there is nothing beyond the claim that she violated visa conditions. To begin with, visa conditions should be more welcoming of scholars, scientists and experts. It is also relevant in this context that there are several global leaders in many fields who are of Indian origin but are citizens of another country. A country that feels threatened by authors, scientists and thinkers will have little chance of realising its full potential. Open societies have their vulnerabilities; but trying to fix them by turning into a closed society will stunt progress without necessarily enhancing security.

Tapping the shine

India must step in as a supplier of solar power to sustain its industry

Among the successes that India can take reasonable credit for is cultivating a domestic solar power industry. Somewhere in 2017, the per unit cost of solar power fell below that of coal power, spurring new interest among businesses investing in ground-mounted solar projects. In 2024-25, the International Renewable Energy Agency reported that India generated 1,08,494 Gwh (gigawatt-hour) of solar energy, surpassing Japan's 96,459 Gwh, and making it the third largest producer of solar power behind only China and the United States. India's capacity to manufacture solar module panels rose from 2 GW (gigawatt) in 2014 to 100 GW in 2025, according to the Ministry of Renewable Energy. This is significant considering that India's domestically installed solar capacity is about 117 GW as of September. However, the actual manufacturing capacity is an optimistic projection and the effective production capacity currently is about 85 GW.

India has stated that as part of its climate commitments, it will source half of its power requirements in 2030 from non-fossil fuel sources. That is about 500 GW of which 250 GW-280 GW is expected to come from solar power. This means that India needs to add about 30 GW annually until 2030. However, India has effectively been able to add only about 17 GW-23 GW annually in the recent past. While in theory, internal production should be sufficient internally, modules made in India are anywhere from 1.5 to 2 times more expensive than those from China, simply because of its much larger capacity, control of the necessary raw material and far superior production lines. India, in its best performance, managed about 4 GW of export of solar modules to the U.S. in 2024 and that too, due to America's temporary restrictions. Compare that with China's annual export of around 236 GW in 2024. Therefore, the large manufacturing capacity that will come online in India in the next few years will likely struggle without new markets. In this context, India's overtures to be a 'solar supplier' to Africa, leveraging the flagship of the International Solar Alliance, is a good move. While India's PM Kusum scheme (solar power to rural India) and PM Surya Ghar scheme (rooftop solar in urban India) are yet to make substantial gains in terms of domestic adoption, they can serve as models to be pitched in Africa which, due to the lack of sufficient rural power, is able to tap only 4% of its arable land through irrigation, creating an opportunity for solar-powered India pumpsets. Though China still remains the dominant solar supplier in Africa too, India must be able to step in as a credible second player for a shot at the sustainability of its own industry.

The Supreme Court of India's observations, recently, on the state of affairs in Himachal Pradesh, and a writ petition thereafter, have resonated with environmentalists in the State.

A notification about an addition of a green belt in the "Development Plan for Shimla Planning Area" was being contested in SLP(C) No.19426/2025 (*M/s Pristine Hotels and Resorts Pvt. Ltd. vs State of Himachal Pradesh and Anr.*) in the Court when Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan voiced concern over the ecological disaster in the State.

"We want to impress upon the State Government and Union of India respectively that earning revenue is not everything. Revenue cannot be earned at the cost of environment and ecology. If things proceeds, the way they are as on date, then the day is not far when the entire State of HP [Himachal Pradesh] may vanish in thin air from the map of the Country..."

The judges directed the Court registry to register a writ petition in public interest *vide* order dated July 28, 2025. The Court said that it had felt compelled to make the observations in the larger interest of the State and its inhabitants regarding severe ecological imbalances and other environmental conditions that have led to natural calamities over a period of years. The Court went on to hold the people of the State also responsible for the disastrous state of affairs.

This action by the Court fills us with hope as it is an intervention that could be the harbinger of a new era of development in the State. There is a need for course correction by both the State and its people.

Policy, but only on paper

It is ironic that there is a robust mandate in both the federal and State regulatory system for sustainable development; for development which is risk-informed, and risk averse. The problem is with the perfunctory, box-ticking manner in which these mandates are executed.

The Court needs to ensure that the State implements the collective mandate for environmental governance in the State, spread across a plethora of eloquent laws, policies, rules, regulations, strategies and vision documents. Honest and sincere actions are needed on the ground.

It would be appropriate if the Court gets in to, for example, the adequacy of the cumulative impact assessments of the basins as they need to be done in the right spirit so that hydropower development in a given basin can be regulated to minimise the overall impact of development on the ecosystems in the basin. For instance, 'does



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The State needs to follow risk-informed and risk-averse development

river mean only its water' is a question that needs serious consideration. Do run of the river hydropower projects also not fragment a river's ecosystem? Do they not alter nutrient and sediment transportation and the composition of aquatic flora and fauna of the river? Do all of these not have an impact on the socio-economic life of people around the river? Projects of up to 2MW are permitted even in eco-sensitive zones. Do they have no impact?

The building of highways

Justice would be done if the Court fixes accountability in the fiasco related to the National Highway project (Bilaspur-Manali-Leh) for which the detailed project report was purportedly made sitting in a drawing room. Constructing roads in what are geologically fragile and seismically susceptible mountainous areas is tricky business. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways knew about the dangers of laying mountain roads and had issued a circular on March 23, 2018, which had restricted the width of hill roads to 5.5 metres keeping in mind the ecological issues.

Nothing seems to be done in a scientific manner on any National Highway being constructed in the State be it the alignment of highways, the cutting of the slopes, slope management, and debris deposit. The Environmental Impact Assessment has gaps as it is done in a 'box-ticking approach'; mostly, projects are broken up into smaller parts to escape the EIA altogether. Roads that have strategic importance should come under more stringent standards to make them all-weather, resilient and dependable roads rather than laying them as superhighways which either sink or get washed away every monsoon season. Deforestation, excavation and tunnelling of the mountains using explosives and then dumping the waste into rivers are a sure recipe for disaster in these fragile mountain ecosystems.

Did the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) do anything to mitigate landslides as advised collectively by the Central Road Research Institute, the Geological Survey of India and the National Disaster Management Authority when constructing any national highway in the State? Only the NHAI can tell the public if it consulted the 'Landslide Hazard, Vulnerability & Risk Atlas' for the state of Himachal Pradesh'.

It is important to establish that 'Hazard, Vulnerabilities, Risk and Capabilities Assessment' studies (HVRCA), climate vulnerabilities and other such studies in the State have been done with requisite scientific rigour on the basis of credible granular data, both historic and current, which could be of help for short-, medium- and

The tailwinds from lower global oil prices

If asked about the most consequential current foreign trend for India, the replies may range from Gaza to Ukraine and even United States President Donald Trump's tariff war. But we are also approaching an even more impactful battle: for the global oil market. It is being waged between the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)-Plus and the remaining oil exporters, with consumers playing an increasingly decisive part. Depending on who prevails, the gains for India, the world's third-largest importer, could vary from tangible to substantive.

Crude is the world's most valued commodity, with over 100 million barrels per day (mbpd) produced, nearly half of which is traded globally. Depending upon the prevailing unit price, the daily global crude trade currently tops \$3 billion. Thus, crude is not only a vital input for transport and petrochemicals; it is also a financial lubricant.

Consumption trends

Over the past two decades, technology and economics have had a profound and largely bearish impact on the oil market. From the supply side, new technological disruptions such as shale, horizontal drilling, and ultra-deep continental shelf drilling have greatly enhanced production.

On the other hand, global demand seems to be approaching a peak. While relatively robust growth in crude consumption continues in the Global South from a low base, the consumption of fossil fuels has been stagnant in the industrialised countries due to factors such as an anaemic post-COVID-19 economic recovery, climatic concerns and the growing popularity of electric vehicles (EVs). Thus, for example, in 2025, the global crude demand is expected to grow by 1.3 mbpd or 1.2%, with only a tenth of that coming from the 38 countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with 46% of the world's GDP. Crucially, the consumption in China, the



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But relief may be short-lived for India, given the cyclical nature of the oil market

world's largest importer, has been curbed largely by an economic slowdown and by the growth of EVs, which now account for half of the vehicles sold.

On the other hand, production of crude has surged by 5.6 mbpd last month over last year, with 3.1 mbpd coming from the OPEC+ (as it unwound COVID-19-era production cuts) and the rest mainly from higher production from (in order of their growth) the U.S., Canada, Brazil, Guyana and Argentina.

The resulting supply overhang is beginning to be felt. The Brent oil prices, currently at \$61 a barrel, have declined by 16% since the beginning of the year, with nearly half of that fall coming over the last month. The drop would have been even steeper but for the consumers leveraging the low prices to replenish their strategic petroleum reserves, and the producers hoarding over 100 million barrels of unsold crude on tankers on high seas.

Global events as disruptor

The decline is despite geopolitical disruptions such as the China-U.S. tariff war and concerted Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian hydrocarbon infrastructure. The looming supply glut has affected the inner dynamics of the OPEC+ group of producers: while Saudi Arabia, the leading exporter, wants to quickly unwind the remaining production cuts to regain its market share and reverse the revenue shortfall, Russia, under severe crude exports sanctions, favours a more gradual course.

There are several imponderables, however. First, although it is normal for producers and consumers to see the crude market differently, there is an unusually poignant dispute in the analyses this time. OPEC and the International Energy Agency (IEA), in their respective monthly reports in mid-October, reached diametrically opposite conclusions.

While OPEC sees the global supplies in 2026 being some 50,000 bpd short of the demand, the IEA projects an unprecedented overhang of 4

long-term policy and governance actions.

The world has seen tremendous loss of life and property in the State following natural disasters, especially in 2023 and in 2025. It would be interesting to know if the construction around rivers, streams and *nullahs* has been regulated in the State. Has the State carried out flood plain zoning of its river systems? Have policymakers forgotten that the State is home to five mighty river systems – the Beas, Ravi, Sutlej, Yamuna and Chenab (Chandra and Bhaga)?

The State had relentless rainfall between August and September 2025, but can all these incidents be labelled as instances of cloud bursts especially when the India Meteorological Department has defined a cloud burst as an extreme weather event involving 100 mm (10 cm) or more of rainfall within one hour over an area of approximately 20 square kilometres to 30 sq. km?

The end result is this

Everything looks impressive when one looks at the interim report filed by the State. All the boxes have been ticked when it comes to formulating laws, policies, vision documents, plans and undertaking studies. The claim is that Himachal Pradesh was the first in the country to have banned the use of plastic, has a policy of buying back non-recyclable single-use plastic (SUP) waste, the first State to have environmental or e-flows in rivers, a hydro power policy, a payment for ecosystem services policy, a sustainable tourism development policy, an integrated master plan for sustainable tourism, and stringent building regulations. What purpose do all of these serve if the results are not visible on the ground?

In 2011, the Aryabhata Geo-Informatics & Space Application Centre (AGISAC) was set up in the State as, among other things, as a repository for all data on the State's environment, its natural and man-made resources, and data related to the impact of climate change to help government departments make evidence-based development decisions. Was this being followed?

Catastrophes that were once considered to be 'once-in-a-century events' are now regular occurrences and exacerbated by a faulty developmental model. In meeting the developmental aspirations of Himachal Pradesh, the only way forward is to pursue development that takes into account the projected impact of climate change and integrates disaster risk reduction in the planning stage.

The mandate of the law must be implemented in letter and spirit, with accountability in the system of governance.

mbpd. The majority of other think-tanks largely agree with the IEA projection and predict an oversupplied market next year, with Brent prices declining to the low fifties per barrel, a further 10% to 20% fall from their current level.

Technical apart, the proverbially slippery oil market can also be affected by several geopolitical developments, including the end of sanctions on Russia, Iran and Venezuela, resumed West Asian tensions and the de-escalation of the Trumpian tariff wars.

Further, the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook (WEO) released on October 16, describes the global economy as "in Flux, Prospects Remain Dim", predicting a marginal slowdown of the global economic growth rates to 3.2% in 2025 and 3.1% in 2026, with risks to the downside. Further, it sees world trade growth come down to 2.9% in 2025-26, significantly slower than the 3.5% in 2024. Most of these factors tilt towards downside risk to the oil prices.

The outlook for India

The simultaneous decline in both oil price and the U.S. dollar it is priced in is likely to have a net positive impact on India. India's oil imports in 2024-25 were \$137 billion, and a dollar's decline in oil prices improves its current account deficit by \$1.6 billion.

It also reduces the subsidy burden and inflation. With the government keeping most of the gains from lower prices, the fiscal balance improves, boosting capital expenditure and giving a tailwind to growth.

The oil glut may also reduce the reliance on discounted Russian crude, thus removing the underlying cause for the tariff frictions with the U.S. On the flip side, the remittances, exports and investments may stagnate as the West Asian economies attenuate.

However, given the highly cyclical nature of the global oil market, any relief may be short-lived. India would be well advised to keep its consumption mitigation strategies on course.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Buying oil, U.S. response

The buying of Russian oil, or for that matter from anywhere, cannot be questioned by the United States President as it is solely at the discretion of those running the country after considering various factors. But the response from the Indian government spokesperson on Mr. Trump's assertions on Russian oil purchase is anything but strong. The

response should come from the political leadership and not from a 'lowly government spokesperson' — if the denial is to have any positive impact on the U.S. President. Why is the political leadership so reluctant to take on Mr. Trump?

V. Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

The domestic worker There is little official data

available on the actual numbers and other parameters of domestic workers in India, such as their work conditions and average pay. The lack of data leaves them out of any formal policy that governs India's informal workers (Opinion page, "We need a law to protect domestic workers", October 22). Domestic work in India remains one of the most undervalued and least

regulated forms of employment. Due to a very unbalanced employer-employee relation, domestic workers

experience exploitation, poor recognition and a high degree of exposure to isolation and violence. There are no laws to deal

Corrections & Clarifications

The heading and text of a Front Page report (October 22, 2025) should have said, "Deepavali fireworks send Delhi air quality inching to a five-year high", and not "five-year low".

Giriraj Singh is Union Textiles Minister, and not Union Home Minister as mentioned in a panel note, "Giriraj Singh stirs fresh row in Bihar" (Inside pages, "Bihar Assembly Election" page, October 20, 2025).

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28576347/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

with the specific problems that arise in this sphere of work. A dedicated law, therefore, is much needed to ensure minimum entitlements, recognise domestic work as legitimate work, and provide mechanisms for grievance redress.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

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

Immigration and the politics of fear

At the UN General Assembly last month, U.S. President Donald Trump harangued European leaders saying, “It’s time to end the failed experiment of open borders... Your countries are going to hell.” It was an explicit export of his anti-immigrant ideas to the continent that his Scottish mother had departed as an immigrant to the U.S.

Shift in focus
Immigration has long been a fraught subject in the U.K., with waves of anti-immigrant sentiment fanned by the far right, be it Enoch Powell’s incendiary ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech of 1968, the National Front’s activism of the 1970s, or the ‘Take Back Control’ rhetoric of the Brexit debates of the mid 2010s. However, Mr. Trump’s speech marks a turning point: conversations about immigration have gone from decrying illegal or irregular immigration to denouncing legal migration. The focus has shifted from a state’s ability to absorb immigrants to nativist concerns about culture and heritage, dressed up as ‘integration’.

In case those in Britain harboured any illusions to the contrary, three events in quick succession last month dispelled false hopes. First, former English Defence League founder Tommy Robinson led a 1,50,000-strong rally called ‘Unite the Kingdom’ in what was billed as a festival of free speech but was, in reality, an anti-immigration protest. (The far-right French politician, Eric Zemmour, spoke to the crowd of the “great replacement of our European people by peoples coming from the south and of Muslim culture.”) Then, Nigel Farage’s upstart Reform UK party (with just 4 MPs) announced that should they come to power, they would scrap Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), which qualifies migrants for permanent settlement after five years, and replace it with a five-year visa with significantly higher income and



Priyanjali Malik
writes on politics and international relations

Conversations about immigration have gone from decrying illegal or irregular immigration to denouncing legal migration

language proficiency thresholds. The policy would apply to current ILR holders, throwing in doubt the futures of not just those who have moved to work, but also those families with some members resident via ILR. It also raises questions about whether older residents whose income might drop on retiring would find their visa requests rejected. The policy is patently unworkable, but that is besides the point. Reform UK has become a political force to be reckoned with by running on an avowedly anti-immigrant, nativist platform, hewing closely to Mr. Trump’s MAGA politics.

It took the Labour government a few days to call Reform UK’s ILR policy racist, but the new Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, then laid down new requirements for permanent settlement: the qualifying period for ILR will now be 10 years; applicants have to demonstrate a “high” standard of English proficiency; possess a spotless criminal record; show that they are in employment and have not received benefits; and prove that they have contributed to society by volunteering. In short, those applying for residency will be held to a higher standard of behaviour and a nebulous higher bar of moral worth than their British neighbours. This creates two tiers of residents: British citizens who can live their lives as usual, and legal migrants who will have to live a life of precarious conditionality.

Keen to prove themselves tougher on immigration than Reform UK (Mr. Farage is far ahead of Prime Minister Keir Starmer in opinion polls), Labour has changed the goal posts for settlement. The Conservative Party is not far behind: former Conservative Justice Secretary, Robert Jenrick, complained about “not seeing another white face” in a 90-minute visit to a Birmingham neighbourhood and framed his concern as an issue of integration. This is now no longer about migrants or settlement; it is about race. The debate is turning toxic.

Today, it is settlement, tomorrow it could be citizenship. If the goalposts are changed on citizenship, there is the danger that the U.K. will move towards classes of citizenship: white British and others. And the others will need to constantly prove themselves worthy. The U.S. has already shown that this proposition is not improbable; it has tried to strip constitutionally mandated birthright citizenship from the children of migrants resident temporarily or illegally. Earlier this year, the Trump administration sent back illegal Indian immigrants in shackles in military aircraft. The dehumanising spectacle painted them as a threat to the wellbeing of “legitimate” Americans. But once some members of a community are painted as a threat to the fabric of a country, the rest of that community, whatever their immigration status, are fair game as targets of this toxic nativism. The othering of those migrants paved the way for subsequent attacks on legal migrants and the changes to the HIB regime.

What is a nation?
Within India too, there has been a steady drumbeat on the purported threat from ‘infiltrators.’ People move across regions and borders for a variety of reasons. Painting them as infiltrators or “termites” is simply performative cruelty for populist gains. In 1882, the academic Ernest Renan gave a lecture titled, ‘What is a nation?’ He argued that a nation does not depend on dynasty, race, language, religion or geography. It is “a soul, a spiritual principle,” based on a shared understanding of “a legacy of memories” (some of which have edited out the violence that created the nation); and “present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received”. Today, the conversations on immigration are chipping away at “present consent” in ways that diminish us all.

Rules versus RSS

Why the Karnataka government’s order alone may not impede the Sangh’s march

STATE OF PLAY

Bageshree S.
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Days after the RSS held 100 *patha sanchalana* (route marches) and events across Bengaluru on October 11, to mark its centenary, the Karnataka government issued an order to regulate the use of state-owned properties by private organisations.

On October 4, IT/BT and Rural Development Minister Priyank Kharge wrote to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah seeking a ban on the activities of the Sangh on the premises of government-run institutions as they are “contrary to India’s unity and the spirit of the Constitution.” The government order on October 18 did not directly mention the RSS. It sought to put riders on a broad spectrum of “private organisations/societies/trusts/clubs or any other entity registered/unregistered” using public spaces. In essence, it reiterated and consolidated existing rules. Mr. Siddaramaiah has been at pains to explain that the rules do not singularly target the RSS and that similar rules had been put in place during the BJP regime in 2013. However, the timing and sequence of events have made it difficult to delink the order from the Sangh.

October 18 was also marked by tension in Chittapur, Mr. Kharge’s constituency, as the Kalaburagi district administration denied permission for an RSS *patha sanchalana* the next day, citing law and order issues. The Bhim Army and the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers too had sought permission for marches along the same route the same day. Over the previous two days, Dalit groups

had held protests in support of Mr. Kharge, who had been receiving abusive calls and threats from self-proclaimed “*sanatanis*” over his letter to the Chief Minister. The RSS has now rescheduled its march to November 2 and approached the High Court.

Amid the cacophony that included the suspension of two government employees for taking part in the RSS marches, one detail has gone under the radar – Mr. Siddaramaiah’s instruction to the Karnataka Chief Secretary to study the measures taken by the Tamil Nadu government to restrict the RSS’s activities.

There are, in fact, no specific “rules” in place in Tamil Nadu to curb RSS activities; rather, the Dravidian, anti-Brahmin movement has historically made it hard for the RSS to penetrate that region. This, in turn, has made it easier for the government to impose restrictions, despite a constant push back.

On the other hand, Karnataka has been fertile ground for the RSS ideology for a long time. In independent India, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh got vote shares of 2-5% in the elections as early as the 1950s, unlike Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, or Kerala, where Dravidian and communist currents held greater sway over society. It was only logical that the BJP formed its first government in south India in Karnataka. Though shrewd negotia-

tions and realpolitik manoeuvres by B.S. Yediyurappa made this happen, it could not have occurred in an ideological vacuum. While the Sangh Parivar has ideologically captured coastal Karnataka for some time now, and has historically had a stronger base in the Mumbai-Karnataka region too, it is now gaining ground in Old Mysore districts such as Mandya, made easier by the BJP’s alliance with the JD(S), a regional party with a strong base in the region.

On the cultural front, a major current of Kannada sub-nationalism, which ran parallel to the freedom movement, was strongly influenced by Hindutva ideology, articulated by reinvigorating the Vijayanagar empire as a “Hindu kingdom.” Recently, International Booker Prize awardee Banu Mushtaq’s statement – that linking Kannada identity so closely with Hindu religious iconography is “exclusionary” – kicked up a storm. The RSS in Karnataka enjoys far greater cultural acceptance for its “discipline”, “selfless work”, and other such virtues attributed to its cadre, making its penetration into educational institutions go unchallenged.

What has fuelled this is also the ideological ambivalence or the non-confrontationist attitude of most Congress leaders to the RSS ideology. While a handful, including Mr. Siddaramaiah and Mr. Kharge, remain its bitter critics, others fall in a spectrum – from those who half-heartedly oppose it, to those who keep off it entirely, to those who can sound close to the RSS in their approach to religion

So, whether the government’s rules will hamper the RSS’s march will hinge less on the rules and more on the extent to which the Congress is willing to stand its ground.

Chennai stood out for its severe pollution surge during Deepavali

Unlike some other cities that have recorded high pollution levels throughout the year, Chennai’s PM10 concentrations spiked only around Deepavali

DATA POINT

Janavi Visagan
Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Many Indian cities, including Chennai, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad, recorded their highest PM10 levels of the year around Deepavali, but Chennai stood out for two reasons. First, unlike some other cities that experience consistently high pollution levels, Chennai’s PM10 concentrations spiked only around Deepavali. Second, the city’s peak PM10 level around Deepavali was the second highest in the country.

Chart 1 shows hourly PM10 levels recorded between January 1 and October 22, 2025, across select cities. Both the darker red shades and larger circles represent higher PM10 levels. Hourly PM10 levels crossed the 900-mark in Chennai and Ahmedabad around Deepavali, closely followed by 830 in Noida, 790 in Hyderabad, and 846 in Delhi. Only one measuring station in a prime residential area in each city was considered. While Ahmedabad recorded the highest levels of pollution this year around Deepavali, it has experienced high levels of pollution throughout the year unlike Chennai. Hyderabad also saw a sharp Deepavali spike, though its peak levels remained lower than Chennai’s.

Chart 2 shows hourly levels of NH₃, NO, NO₂, SO₂, and PM10 and PM_{2.5}. recorded in Velachery, Chennai. All these pollutants showed sharp spikes during Deepavali hours. NO_x (NO + NO₂) and SO₂ levels reached their annual peaks, while both PM10 and PM_{2.5} also recorded their highest levels of the year. In the graph, red dots indicate Deepavali days in 2025.

Such sharp spikes in air pollutants were seen this Deepavali mainly in Chennai and Hyderabad. However, due to persistent rain, pollution in Chennai dropped sharply soon after peaking.

A toxic haze

The data for the charts were sourced from the ‘Central Control Room for Air Quality Management’ dashboard maintained by the Central Pollution Control Board. Only one measuring station in a prime residential area in each city was considered for the analysis. Year-round data availability was also a major criterion in choosing a station. The stations are: Delhi - ITO, Ahmedabad - Gyaspur, Hyderabad - New Malakpet, Mumbai - Colaba, Noida - Sector 125, Bengaluru - Jayanagar 5th block, Chennai - Velachery, Amaravati - Secretariat, Trivandrum - Plammoodu

Janavi Visagan is interning with the Hindu Data Team

Chart 1: Hourly PM₁₀ levels recorded between January 1 and October 22, 2025, across select cities. The chart visualises only those hours in which hourly PM₁₀ concentrations crossed 100 µg/m³ mark. Both the darker red shades and larger circles represent higher PM₁₀ levels. Chennai and Hyderabad recorded only a few days of high pollution before Deepavali

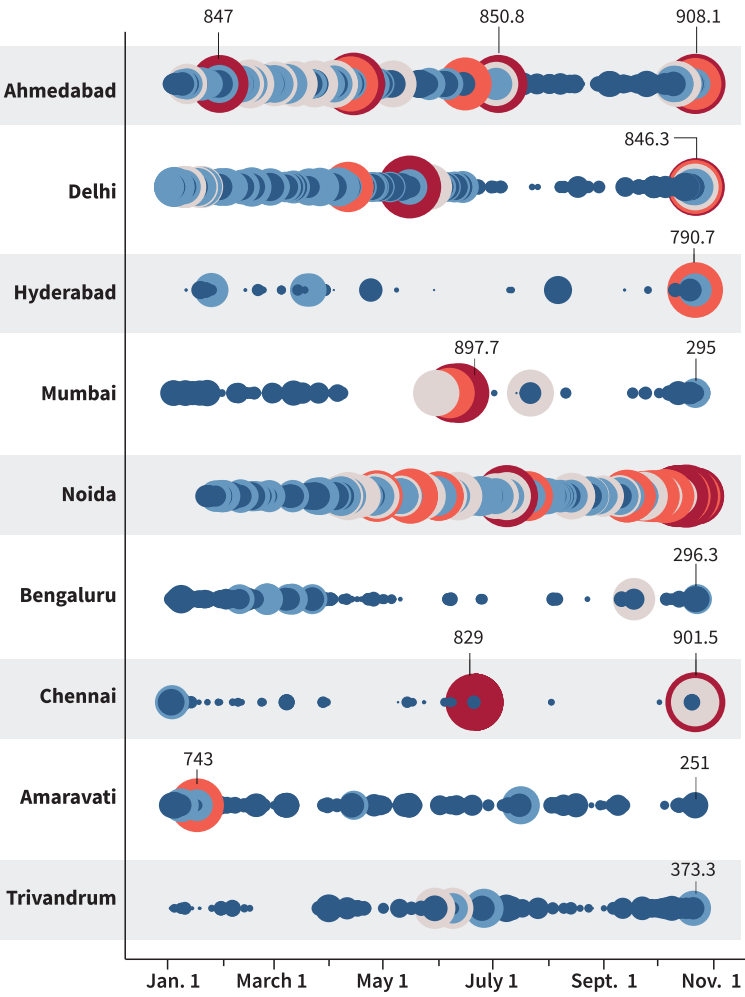
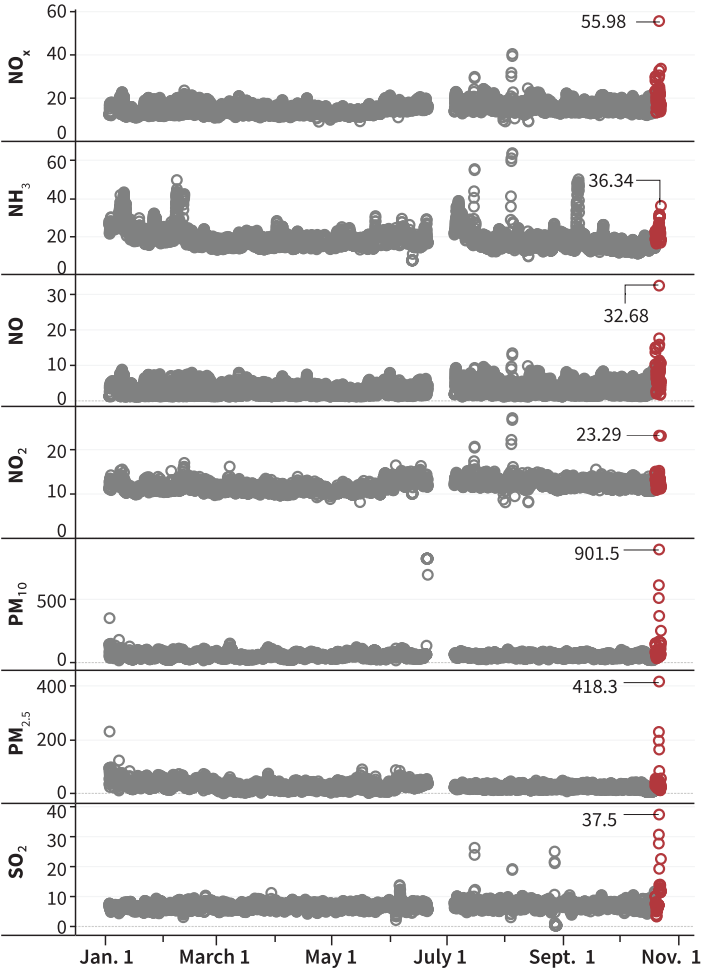


PHOTO: B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Chart 2: Hourly levels of atmospheric ammonia (NH₃), nitrous oxide (NO), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), sulphur dioxide (SO₂), and particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) recorded in Velachery station, Chennai. NO₂ exposure affects lung function. According to the WHO, hospital admissions for cardiac disease and mortality increase on days with higher SO₂ levels. (NO_x = NO + NO₂). In the graph, red dots indicate Deepavali days in 2025



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 23, 1975

Mountbatten blames Jinnah for Partition of India

London, Oct. 22: Lord Mountbatten claimed here that he was keen on getting a united India at the time of its attainment of independence from British rule, but one man who prevented it was Mohammed Ali Jinnah.

Lord Mountbatten who was reminiscing on his role in last days of the empire in BBC’s Current Affairs programme “to-night” on October 20 said the Leader of the Muslim League was from the beginning saying “no” to united India and there was nothing “I could do to change his mind.”

Lord Mountbatten said Mahatma Gandhi knew he was keen on getting a united India. Gandhiji, he claimed, was satisfied that he had made it over to the Indians to decide on this matter.

Asked about the wisdom of his strategy of speed in transferring power to India, Lord Mountbatten said it was not a question of wisdom of strategy. There was no alternative. The whole Government was breaking down and “we could not hold on. There was absolutely nothing I can do,” he said. He added, if it was possible at that time to get British rule continued for another year he would have done differently but there was “no chance of soldiering on.”

Lord Mountbatten also claimed he had predicted that East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) separated by a long distance from the West would not last more than a generation. He had told Rajaji it would last 25 years and he agreed. At the time of the birth of Bangladesh, Rajaji told a press conference that he and Mountbatten had agreed East Pakistan would last 25 years and it had actually lasted 24 and a half years.

– PTI

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 23, 1925

Bombay mills crisis Exodus of labourers continues

Bombay, Oct. 22: Mill workers, numbering nearly 10,000, were paid off at the reduced scale to-day at several mills.

Prospects of reopening are still very remote, as not only are the men not returning from their villages in any huge numbers, but those men in the city, who are receiving wages, are also leaving for their villages.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of people arrested at a waste plant protest in Kerala

321 Residents set fire to the plant in Ambayathodu village near Thamarassery, managed by Freshcut, alleging that waste was being dumped into a nearby river. Thamarassery police said six cases have been registered in connection with the incident based on different complaints. PTI

Number of farm fires in Punjab between Sept. 21 and Oct. 21

415 Data shows that the figure is down from 1,510 incidents during the same period last year. The drop comes amid delayed paddy harvest as rains lashed the State until the first week of October. Damage caused by the floods also delayed crop harvest at some places. PTI

The minimum temperature in Delhi on Wednesday

21.8 in degree Celsius. Delhi on Wednesday recorded a minimum temperature of 21.8° Celsius, 3.4 notches above normal, as per the India Meteorological Department (IMD). Relative humidity was 91% at 8.30 am. The IMD has forecast mist haze in morning hours. PTI

Number of bodies Israel returned to Gaza under ceasefire deal

30 This takes the total number of bodies handed over under the ceasefire deal to 195, the health ministry in Gaza said. Under the deal brokered by U.S. President Donald Trump, Israel was to turn over the bodies of 15 Palestinians for every deceased Israeli returned. AFP

Rise in management course applications despite volatility

7 In per cent. Notably, major graduate management education (GME) hubs such as Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. experienced application contractions as their tighter visa policies and labour market uncertainty discouraged international applicants. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The challenges posed by the TTP to Pakistan

Pakistan's struggle with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has escalated amid worsening relations with Afghanistan. As the Pakistan government faces pressure to address the TTP's demands for autonomy in the region, the rise in violence exposes a deeper failure in governance and strategy

WORLD INSIGHT

D. Suba Chandran

During the last two weeks, Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan worsened with border clashes. Though the two have reached an agreement in Doha, Pakistan believes that the primary problem between the two countries is the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), with the Afghan Taliban giving safe haven to the group.

Extent of the conflict

Pakistan's primary challenge with respect to the TTP is the high level of violence and terrorism in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. According to media reports referring to data sourced from think tanks and Pakistan's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), 2024 had the worst violence in the last decade. More than 1,600 people were killed last year; around 680 of them security personnel. There were more than 59,770 military operations in 2024, during which around 900 militants were killed. While the two provinces – KP and Balochistan – together witnessed 94% of the casualties in 2024, the former, where the TTP has a significant presence accounted for 63%. Thus, there has been a steady increase in violence since 2021, especially in KP, after a decline during 2016-20. Data published by Pakistan's Centre for Research and Security Studies and the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies runs contrary to the once-held general Pakistani belief, that once the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, militancy will decline. Taliban's return to Kabul has not brought peace to Pakistan's tribal regions.

Then there are the demands of the TTP. The Pakistan Taliban wants the demerger of tribal regions from the rest of the KP province; removal of security forces; and the imposition of Shariah law. The TTP seeks to rule the tribal areas – the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that the British created. In 2018, the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N) government, through the 25th constitutional amendment, removed FATA's special status and merged it with KP, thereby providing representation of the FATA in the provincial Assembly and allowing the jurisdiction of the courts in the region. The TTP wants to undo the above and impose its writ.

Provincial issues

There are complex issues plaguing the KP region. First is its colonial legacy and the federal writ in the tribal regions. The British found it useful to create a buffer region between its India empire and Afghanistan, and thus created the FATA and used the Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR) to administer the seven tribal areas separately. Independent Pakistan followed this British policy for the next seven decades, and never imposed its writ. It was directly administered by Islamabad and Rawalpindi (mainly by the latter); and democratic institutions and administrations were not allowed in these seven tribal regions, as it suited Pakistan's myopic approach of controlling Kabul.

Second is the civil-military imbalance in Pakistan, and the country's search for strategic depth in Afghanistan. During the two external invasions of Afghanistan (by the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the U.S. in 2000s and 2010s) and internal Afghan instability (during the 1990s), the Establishment (Pakistan military) saw the tribal region as a strategic board to pursue its interests in Kabul. With such an aim in



Internal war: A car is seen underneath debris from a mosque that was attacked by a TTP bomber, in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 2023. REUTERS

mind, the presence of political parties, local administration, provincial elections and representation in the KP (then the North-West Frontier Province) provincial assembly, and access to courts by the FATA were seen as a liability for Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth. However, the above vacuum provided space for the TTP's emergence. While political and military establishments see the TTP as a post-2001 development, it ignores the inherent reasons which allowed the TTP to thrive. That is, while Pakistan's primary accusation that the Afghan Taliban has a TTP connection is a valid point, what Pakistan ignores is how such a connection came about.

Third is the rise of the Afghan Taliban and the U.S.-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan. The TTP came into existence in the tribal regions, especially in two areas – the Mehsud and Wazir led North and South Waziristan – when the Afghan Taliban along with the al-Qaeda moved into the tribal region when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan. Both wanted safe havens and local support to fight against the U.S.-led forces across the Durand Line. The TTP came into existence to provide that support. Pakistan's political and military establishments were aware of the link, and even tried to make multiple deals with the TTP and its different factions between 2005 and 2015.

The Afghan Taliban found an ally in the TTP, and some TTP factions even fought along with the Afghan Taliban. The Establishment in Pakistan was aware of this linkage and wanted to believe that they would remain focused west of the Durand Line. There was even a naïve belief, that once the U.S. leaves, the Afghan Taliban would sever its links with the TTP. However, that was not the case as data proves. After the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, the Afghan Taliban did not give up on the TTP, and there has been a multi-fold increase in violence within Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban, despite global pressure, did not give up the relationship with al-Qaeda either. Expecting it to give up the TTP now is a tough call. Besides, Afghan Taliban sees the Daesh (ISIS) as the primary threat inside Afghanistan. There have been

reports of TTP splinter groups joining the Daesh; for Kabul that would be a bigger internal threat.

Fourth is the lack of a consistent approach towards the TTP by Pakistan. The first serious TTP debate in Pakistan came only in December 2014, after the attack on the Army Public School (APS) at Peshawar, that killed more than 150, mostly students. Before this, the TTP's attacks were primarily concentrated in the tribal region, which the Establishment dealt with through a series of military operations and peace deals. However, after the APS attack in December 2014, Pakistan announced a “National Action Plan” that included a policy shift in addressing the militant threat. It included political, military and institutional measures such as reforming religious seminaries, creating institutions and military course to deal with terrorism and extremism. But within a few years, there was again a U-turn, from the military resolve to crush the TTP to engaging with it. During 2020-22, there were dialogues, ceasefires and extensions. It was during this phase that Pakistan expected the Taliban to force the TTP to disarm.

While the Establishment blamed the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) for talking to the TTP, the initial response of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) during 2022, led by the PML-N and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) also focused on the same. Moreover, the PPP-PML government would not have negotiated with the TTP without the Establishment's approval.

The fifth issue is the missing social/political players in the tribal regions, where the TTP has a presence. Pakistan has failed to encourage alternative political players in the tribal areas that could collect and express the local sentiments, especially the youth. In fact, the state has suppressed all alternate options. The existing religious political parties in the region are the two factions of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) which have monopolised the political space. However, both represent only the old guard, while the tribal youth are looking for new narratives. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) could have become a

primary social and political party representing the new generation, especially in Waziristan, where the TTP has its base. PTM leaders such as Manzoor Pashteen, Ali Wazir, and Mohsin Dawar are from Waziristan; and some of them were elected to Parliament. Instead of promoting the PTM, Pakistan decided to ban it.

Sixth, blaming the TTP threat on Afghanistan and India. There is a national consensus in Pakistan that the TTP problem persists because of external support from the Taliban and India. Creating a new term – Fitna-al-Khwarij – for the TTP highlights this new narrative that Pakistan wants to build. Calling the TTP as outsiders, and referring to them as being supported by external actors (India and the Afghan Taliban) is to shift the blame for its internal failures.

Internal fault

Pakistan has a serious problem especially in the tribal regions that are undergoing a social and demographic transformation. Pursuing the tribal region with strategies of the 1980s would not yield the desired results. As the support to the PTM would reveal, the tribal region is looking for new players. The old religious political parties are becoming irrelevant. Political parties and organisations like the PTI and the PTM can occupy that space; unfortunately, both are out of favour with the Establishment.

Blaming the Afghan Taliban for the TTP and carrying out attacks inside Afghanistan would be counterproductive. Pakistan should know more about the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan nation. Unilateral military actions from the east of the Durand Line since the British days, have never yielded the desired political results.

Pushing the Afghan refugees back; unilateral closer of border points; and blaming Afghanistan for the TTP problem would only alienate the Afghan nation. For Pakistan, that would be a bigger threat, than what the TTP is today.

D. Suba Chandran is professor and dean at the school of conflict and security studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS).

THE GIST

▼ Pakistan's primary challenge with respect to the TTP is the high level of violence and terrorism in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province.

▼ The TTP came into existence in the tribal regions, especially in two areas – the Mehsud and Wazir led North and South Waziristan – when the Afghan Taliban along with the al-Qaeda moved into the tribal region when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan.

▼ Pakistan has a serious problem especially in the tribal regions that are undergoing a social and demographic transformation. Pursuing the tribal region with strategies of the 1980s would not yield the desired results.

Not a bright idea

Gold, silver on NPS menu fraught with macro risks

After a breathless run since Covid, stock markets have delivered almost no returns this year. Precious metals have however been on a tear with gold and silver gaining over 50 and 80 per cent, respectively. This is perhaps why there's a clamour for the National Pension System (NPS) to include precious metals in its asset choices along with stocks, bonds and alternative assets. The Chairperson of the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority of India (PFRDA) has said that its internal committees are 'cautiously' evaluating the inclusion of gold and silver after requests from regulators and investors.



'Cautious' should be the operative word here, because allowing NPS subscribers to allocate to gold and silver without limits, can prove risky to the economy at large. Gold and silver do play a useful role as diversifiers in investor portfolios. With their low correlation to financial assets, they perform well when stock or bond markets don't. Gold also acts as a good portfolio hedge because it rises during economic downturns, geopolitical crises and financial turmoil. Gold and silver returns are also propped up by the rupee's slide against the dollar. But allowing NPS subscribers to allocate to gold or silver without limits is hazardous on several counts. With an estimated 34,000 tonnes of bullion stashed away, Indian households are already over-allocated to precious metals. Ironically, vehicles such as the NPS were meant to divert such savings into financial instruments, which can put them to work in productive enterprise. Also of concern is the import demand for gold and silver that could be unleashed by any big spike in allocation to the NPS menu. Today, with its assets at just ₹15 lakh crore, the NPS may not look like it can move the needle on bullion demand. If NPS assets rise to, say, ₹50 lakh crore and its subscribers opt for a 20 per cent bullion allocation, India may end up importing ₹10 lakh crore worth of gold and silver to meet these needs. This can add to the country's import bill and widen its trade deficit.

Gold and silver may be good portfolio hedges. But they are not compounding assets that should take up big weights in an individual's long-term portfolio. When added to retirement portfolios, stocks compound on the strength of underlying earnings of the companies they represent. Bonds compound by accruing interest. However, gold and silver do not generate any cash flows and rely only on price appreciation for gains. A 20-year rolling return analysis shows that for Indian investors, gold and silver have generated high returns in short bursts but have a patchy long-term record. Gold and silver earned less than a 6 per cent return 23 and 36 per cent of the times, respectively, over five-year holding periods, in the last two decades. Overall, if the NPS is keen to induct gold and silver into its menu, this should be purely as a portfolio hedge, with allocations capped at, say, 10 per cent of the investor's annual contribution.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



Why India must not toe the US' line on stablecoins

Stablecoins pose systemic risks and cannot be a substitute for an official CBDC

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

POINT BLANK.



LOKESHWARRI SK

Among the many irrational actions of the Trump administration, his actions on cryptos have been particularly disruptive. Even as global policy makers were coming to terms with crypto assets, stablecoins, central bank digital currencies et al, and were on the verge of forging a global consensus on regulating cryptos, the Trump administration upset all these plans.

It issued a Presidential order in January which made some pretty whacky suggestions. The first was to create a reserve made from crypto assets such as bitcoins, seized through law enforcement actions. The second, to prohibit central bank digital currencies. Third, to promote the development and growth of US dollar backed stablecoins globally. Fourth, to stop all the ongoing work on creating a global regulatory framework for cryptos.

These changes were projected as a break from the stifling rules that throttle innovation. But the freedom being given through these rules take crypto regulations back by 10 years, when millions of dollars were lost by investors in unregulated crypto exchanges and these assets were the preferred conduit for cross-border money transfer for illicit activities.

The US government has since then begun public consultations on setting up the strategic crypto asset reserve, issued the draft the CLARITY Act to frame regulations for crypto assets and GENIUS Act for promoting stablecoins.

All countries are watching the US actions closely. Some are wondering if they should scrap their CBDC projects

and begin focusing on issuing stablecoins like the US. That will, however, be a bad idea. CBDCs are the future of fiat currency.

Private stablecoins, the kind that Trump is proposing, can have limited use in India. But on the other hand, they will create multiple problems for regulators. They carry all the risks which privately owned crypto assets such as bitcoins carry – default risk, money laundering risk, systemic liquidity risk and capital controls risk.

CBDCS VERSUS STABLECOINS

For those not familiar with this jargon, CBDC is a digital form of the country's fiat currency. It is issued by the central bank and has sovereign guarantee, like physical notes. This makes it ideal as legal tender, that is, for use in buying or selling goods and services. Since it is maintained by the central bank, it does not threaten system liquidity, is under adequate surveillance and does not pose a problem to the currency value.

Stablecoins are privately issued digital assets, with a stable asset such as the US dollar as the underlying. Stablecoins are better than other cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin because they are backed by assets, which can be liquidated to repay the user in case of default by the issuer. But they are no match for CBDCs in credibility or integrity.

It is moot if stablecoins can become popular as legal tender. But the main challenge is that their use in

Stablecoins are better since they are backed by assets. But they carry multiple risks including default, money laundering, liquidity management and capital controls risk

cross-border payments can be misused for nefarious activities such as money laundering, terror financing, drug trafficking etc since they are not under any official supervision. With the central bank not having control on the issuance of stablecoins, they can create imbalance in system liquidity and impair the external account.

The GENIUS Act of the Trump administration is proposing that US dollar backed stablecoins should be issued by entities permitted by the government such as a subsidiary of an insured depository institution, a federal-qualified non-bank payment stablecoin issuer, or a state-qualified payment stablecoin issuer. Even if the issuance is limited to a few entities, they still carry higher default risk. The GENIUS Act is proposing that the stablecoin issuers will come under anti money-laundering Act and will be subject to regular audits. But monitoring the end use of these assets will continue to be a challenge.

Also, the central bank is unlikely to dictate the quantum of stablecoin issuances, which can cause liquidity management problems. Unbridled issuances of stablecoins can also weaken the currency.

WHY IS US PROMOTING STABLECOINS

The GENIUS Act appears to be Trump's brainchild. As he has claimed on social media, "Nobody will do it better, it is pure GENIUS! Digital Assets are the future, and our Nation is going to own it. We are talking about MASSIVE Investment, and Big Innovation. The House will hopefully move LIGHTNING FAST and pass a 'clean' GENIUS Act... This is American Brilliance at its best, and we are going to show the World how to WIN with Digital Assets like never before!"

Trump is ostentatiously hoping that both US and foreign companies will

issue stablecoins, thus increasing demand for dollars. But besides this, some personal interest also appears to be at stake behind Trump's push for stablecoins.

A recent report from *Financial Times* pointed out that Trump and his family have earned profit of more than \$1 billion in their crypto ventures. World Liberty Financial, promoted by Trump's sons, Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump operates USD1 stablecoin, which has a market capitalisation of about \$2.6 billion. This is the sixth biggest stablecoin globally.

SHOULD INDIA FOLLOW THE US?

Given these complex motives, there is no reason why India should follow in US' footsteps to launch rupee backed stablecoins. The vibrant UPI backed domestic payment system is thriving in the country, making both stablecoins and CBDCs redundant for domestic payments, for now.

The Trump administration appears to be hopeful that all other countries will drop their CBDC projects and embrace dollar backed stablecoins for international payments in the future. But given the ongoing push-back against the dollar this appears highly unlikely.

According to Atlantic Council's CBDC tracker, projects for evaluating the use of CBDCs in global trade settlement have more than doubled in recent times.

Once other trade partners of India are ready with their CBDCs, India could begin settling bilateral trade in local currencies. With the global South, led by BRICS attempting to reduce reliance on the dollar and dollar-backed settlement systems, use of dollar stablecoins is unlikely to see any traction in global trade settlements. India must therefore ignore the noise over stablecoins and GENIUS Act for now and concentrate on developing the CBDC, especially for international payments.

What underlies global innovation index rankings

India's rise in the GII is praiseworthy. But the constantly changing weights and priorities of the index need to be understood

Shivani Singh
Priyanka Garodia

In the Global Innovation Index (GII), India has climbed from Rank 48 in 2020 to Rank 38 in 2025. But is India genuinely becoming more innovative, or is the very method of measuring innovation changing?

Though GII has seven pillars — split between innovation inputs and outputs — indicators are added, removed, or redefined depending on data availability or shifting priorities.

Between 2020 and 2025, the Index altered how it treated venture capital intensity, digital access, patent attribution, regulatory performance, environmental sustainability, and online participation. Earlier editions counted fixed telephone lines as a proxy for connectivity. Later editions switched to mobile penetration, broadband access, and now 5G coverage.

Venture capital statistics that were once spread across different sources have been consolidated under PitchBook. Patent ownership is no longer linked to corporate headquarters but to the residence of inventors.

These are not minor technical edits, but have a significant impact on what constitutes innovation. The 2023 GII leaned towards digital economy

indicators. The 2024 edition prioritised green transition metrics. The 2025 report refined the weight of knowledge diffusion and creative exports. A country may rise one year because of its ICT exports, only to fall the next when infrastructure or regulatory capacity receives greater weight. In effect, the ladder is rebuilt while we are still climbing it.

Some countries benefit from this fluidity. Small, high-income states such as Switzerland, Singapore, and the Nordic nations invariably top the rankings.

Larger and more diverse countries such as India, China, or Brazil suffer from statistical dilution. Bengaluru's strength is averaged with rural underdevelopment. Millions of patents or research outputs from metropolitan hubs lose force when spread across vast populations.

This is not an error. It is a structural bias created by methodological choices. These often end up favouring cohesion over complexity.

India's rise from Rank 48 to Rank 38 is real. But it is also helped by the Index increasingly valuing ICT services, start-up activity, and creative goods, all areas where India performs well. Meanwhile, education, infrastructure, and institutional quality, which remain India's weak points, are softened



INNOVATION. Complex web GETTY IMAGES

through aggregation. China, despite its rapid strides in innovation, suffers from a similar problem.

Some states have cracked the GII-code. They can climb the innovation ladder with their apt predictions on how the ladder is built. Israel is a case in point — it has ranked in the top 15 consistently because the GII began to favour venture capital and start-up intensity post-2020 — a domain that it leads in.

The GII does not discriminate through intention but through measurement.

GI bias influences policy and perception. A rank can shape funding decisions, investment narratives, or diplomatic reputation. Even when the methodology is explained in the

appendices, few policymakers read the fine print.

INDIA'S CHOICES

India should treat the GII not as a trophy table but as a moving target. Instead of reacting to rankings, India should anticipate what will be measured next. If future editions increase the weight of artificial intelligence readiness, climate technology, or responsible data governance, India must prepare in advance rather than scramble afterwards.

Innovation no longer remains a linear function of inputs but is greatly shaped by power and the geopolitical currents of the world. It is a product of efficiency, ecosystems, governance and politics.

India deserves credit for its rise. But real confidence comes not from climbing the ladder more quickly, but from recognising that the ladder itself is shifting.

The smartest players are the ones who learn how the ladder is built. The 21st century race for innovation cannot be won by those who spend the most but by those who are agile, quick to adapt and are able to govern innovation more efficiently.

Singh is Program Coordinator for Law & Critical Emerging Technologies and Garodia is Geopolitical Research Analyst — South Asia at SGT University

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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Kashmir's walnut woes

This is with reference to the report 'Poor infra rising imports crack opens Kashmir's walnut industry' (October 22). The government should improve infrastructure including the transport system and roads to transport Kashmiri walnuts to various parts of India. The farmers should be given whole-hearted support to sell their produce. The farmers should be taught various hi-tech methods of marketing. Since walnut production is a

labour-intensive activity, a fall in output hits the workers.

Veena Shenoy
Thane

Ethically indefensible

This refers to the report 'Anti-graft body's opulent taste sparks outrage' (October 22). Even if the move to replace the present fleet of the Lokpal with high-end foreign cars is technically not illegal, it is politically wrong and ethically indefensible. Can the watchdog agency be expected to howl loudly at those in power if they feed it such luxuries?

People had great expectations from the supposedly autonomous and impartial investigative agency. Rather than focussing on investigating high-level corruption, the institution's track record shows it has only mastered the art of finding technical holes to reject corruption complaints. The way it was formed and the top functionaries were appointed (or not appointed) betray all signs of it being another government-controlled entity.

Kamal Laddha
Bengaluru

Boost e-rupee use

This refers to the Editorial 'CBDC matters' (October 22). Despite the retail CBDC entering the payment and settlement ecosystem over the last two years, its familiarity is still at a nascent stage due to the growing and extensive dominance of the unique UPI system. The ease and safety that UPI provides have made it almost an indispensable tool to settle payments. At a time when countries are planning to curtail the predominance of the dollar for

settling their international trade, it is necessary to expand the usage of CBDC. Though RBI introduced both wholesale and retail CBDC, the wholesale e-rupee has still not picked up. e-rupee must be used for remittance, payment and settlement among banks to reduce the various costs associated with the paper currency settlement. The government and RBI should do more to boost the usage of retail and wholesale e-rupee.
VSK Pillai
Changanacherry

Haryana’s labour thrust

Contractualisation of govt jobs raises questions

KR Shyam Sundar

In the post-Independence era, a clutch of regulatory and labour welfare legislation such as the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, Minimum Wages, 1948, Contract Labour (Regulation) Act, 1970 (CLRAA) were enacted to ensure industrial discipline, provide job security and decent conditions of employment.

Now, the Central government has ceased to be a model job creator. It creates largely flexible jobs. Only a few essential jobs have been created as permanent vacancies. In the private sector, there are three categories of employment — regular full-time employment, non-regular employment (flexible) and jobs created through some schemes. The non-regular employment categories include probationary, temporary, part-time casual, contract, statutory apprentices, non-statutory apprentices, temporary trainees, long-term trainees, and fixed-term employees (FTE). Employees are recruited under government schemes like ‘On Job Trainees (OJT)’, ‘Learn While You Earn’, ‘Junior Executives, National Employability Enhancement Mission (NEEM, since 2013), etc. Many of the categories of flexible employees, including scheme jobs, reportedly perform perennial functions.

INFORMAL JOBS RISE

Over the years, the share of regular employment has declined and informal jobs have increased. Of the latter, contract labour is a primary category of recruitment. Even in this case, some are employed for a short-term while others are employed for longer terms, even as contractors change. The share of contract labour in total factory sector employment increased from 13 per cent in 1993-94 to 41.59 per cent in 2023-24 (ASI Data, 2023-24).

Even though CLRAA is still in vogue, the Haryana government enacted the Haryana Contractual Employees (Security of Service) Act, 2025. The Act stipulates that the eligible contract workers are those who have been employed on contract by the State government and earn less than ₹50,000 per month, and should have completed five years of service. More importantly, the eligible contract employees will continue to work till their superannuation. So, there is job security, though after five years of probation. Ironically, we need to consider



WAGE GROWTH. Likely to be meagre for contract employees

this as a welcome measure considering that many State governments employ workers/employees on casual/contract basis and the Supreme Court had to intervene.

The benefits of the eligible contractual employee include a consolidated monthly remuneration equal to the entry pay in the pay level of the corresponding post, along with stipulated additional remuneration based on the year of service. The consolidated pay will increase twice in a year corresponding to the DA. The Government may notify the annual increment. They shall receive health care benefits under the PMJAY Chiraryu Extension Scheme, death-cum retirement gratuity, and maternity benefit as per Social Security Code, 2020.

The wages, though given on parity with comparable regular jobs, do not bring several non-wage benefits that the regular State government employees enjoy, as it is a consolidated pay. The parity is only at the entry level. The government should align the terms of employment of contractual employees with those in regular government employment. More crucially, except for gratuity and maternity benefit, the Act does not provide for other forms of social security like EPF and the health benefits are less compared to those available under the Employees’ State Insurance Act, 1948. However with this law, contractual employees may in the medium term replace regular vacancies.

The law does not provide for a grievance procedure akin to what regular government employees enjoy. The contract employees will not be covered by pay commissions and hence their wage growth is likely to be meagre. This model of employment sends a wrong signal to the private sector.

The writer is Professor of Practice, MDI, Gurgaon



SARBANANDA SONOWAL

A quiet revolution is gathering momentum across the world’s oceans. The shipping industry once dismissed as a laggard in the energy transition, is now confronting a point of inflexion. Heeding to the call for climate action, global momentum to tighten emissions standards have gathered speed, while financiers are also redirecting capital towards zero-carbon vessels and fuels, and technology is advancing faster. In this swirl of change, India stands at a rare confluence of opportunity and capability.

The Modi government has worked towards building a solid base for renewable energy which has in turn positioned India with one of lowest renewable energy costs globally. A growing and resilient industrial base with ‘Make in India’ impetus, and efforts to modernise, mechanise and digitise ports along the busy east-west trade route have provided the country with unique advantage — moving from a position of whether our maritime sector can join the global green maritime transition meaningfully, to whether we can lead it decisively.

The government’s recent approval of ₹69,725 crore (\$8 billion) package to reimagine, revive and rejuvenate India’s shipbuilding and maritime ecosystem is not a routine budget line, but a signal of ambition. By investing at scale, the Modi government has sent a message that India shall take meaningful role in the global shift to low-carbon shipping.

This historic decision sets the stage for a maritime renaissance a return to the spirit of seafaring enterprise that once defined Bharat’s trading heritage.

THE GLOBAL TIDE IS TURNING

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has set a clear course towards net-zero emissions by 2050. Europe has already moved from words to enforcement, its carbon market now charges ships for emissions, and FuelEU Maritime progressively tightens fuel standards each year.

Alternative fuels such as green ammonia and methanol are shifting from pilot projects to purchase orders. This is the moment when policy becomes market, and market becomes momentum. India’s structural advantages, low renewable energy costs, engineering expertise, and skilled seafarers, can convert that momentum into meaningful market share.

India’s renewable power tariffs,

India can lead the global shift to green shipping

TIDAL WAVE. A green maritime ecosystem will bring both commercial and strategic gains



THE HINDU

discovered by the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI), are among the lowest globally around ₹2 per kiloWatt hour. That translates into competitively priced green fuels. Recent bids for green ammonia have settled near ₹52 per kg, placing Indian production costs below \$650/tonne, cheaper than many established export hubs.

This price advantage is not theoretical. Asian shipping lines and European buyers are already negotiating long-term contracts in the \$550-1,000 per tonne range. India is ready to deliver at scale.

Equally critical is our industrial ecosystem. Our country’s heavy-engineering backbone that served the oil and petrochemical sectors is now retooling for the green transition fabricating bunkering skids, dual-fuel engines, and storage systems for clean fuels. Our geography amplifies these

The government’s \$8 billion package to reimagine, revive and rejuvenate India’s shipbuilding and maritime ecosystem is not a routine budget line, but a signal of ambition

strengths: ports on both coasts sit astride major global trade lanes, and our seafarers can be rapidly up-skilled to handle cryogenic and digital systems for new fuels. Simply put, India can produce, handle, and export the next generation of marine fuels faster and more affordably than most.

But ambition alone doesn’t unlock capital; bankable projects do.

A joint study by the Indian Ports Association (IPA) and RMI, Gateway to Green, identifies Deendayal, VO Chidambaranar (VOC), and Paradip ports as early candidates for green-fuel hubs. They already have the land, draft, and pipeline potential. With targeted investments in storage, grid upgrades, and multi-fuel terminals, these ports can become “green ready.”

BANKABLE DEMAND

The next step is to ensure demand. Domestic green shipping corridors, such as Kandla to VOC and international routes linking India with Singapore and Rotterdam, can aggregate fuel needs and create predictable throughput. When supply meets structured demand, finance follows.

Shipowners can plan fleet conversions, cargo owners can lock in long-term charters, and lenders can assess risk with confidence. This is how India intends to position as an indispensable node in the global

low-carbon maritime economy.

Our ministry’s immediate priority is credibility. Early milestones pilot corridors, port retrofits, and operational benchmarks will prove that green shipping is not an experiment but an economic upgrade. Visible success will build investor confidence, inform future regulation, and serve as templates for replication across lighthouse ports.

The macroeconomic case is equally strong. Aligning with emerging IMO and EU standards preserves export market access and shields Indian industries from future carbon penalties. Domestic manufacturing of engines, storage tanks, and digital systems will generate skilled employment and retain value onshore. A full-fledged green maritime ecosystem will create recurring service revenue for ports, while cutting freight emissions a strategic advantage in a carbon-constrained global economy.

Every global transition presents a narrow window where leadership is won or lost. As carbon prices rise and compliance rules tighten, vessels will choose ports that offer clean fuels and efficient services. Those who delay will pay higher costs to catch up.

India’s \$8-billion commitment signals that we intend not just to adapt to a changing world but to shape it.

The writer is Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW)

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

October 23, 2005

Karat: Ready to discuss opening up FDI in retail

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has said that it is open to the idea of having discussions with the Government on the controversial issue of opening up foreign direct investment (FDI) in retail trade. We think FDI in retail trade will displace employment. We are also prepared to discuss the international experiences,” Mr Prakash Karat, CPI (M) General Secretary, said at a meeting.

RBI plans system to report suspicious transactions

The Reserve Bank of India is in the process of prescribing a system for banks to regularly report cash transactions above ₹10 lakh or any other suspicious transactions to the Financial Intelligence Unit of India.

RBI against gold imports as personal baggage

Consensus may be evolving among official circles on a fresh round of liberalisation of the gold import policy, but as a personal baggage it appears to be too heavy for the Reserve Bank of India to handle. According to official sources, the RBI has expressed fears that permitting free imports of gold in the form of ‘personal baggage’ by inbound travellers could open up a fresh avenue for money laundering by unscrupulous elements.

US soybean imports will harm our farmers

Sridhar Radhakrishnan

It is astonishing and disturbing that an Indian National Congress functionary should advocate a trading model that so clearly puts India’s farmers at risk and undermines our hard-won agricultural sovereignty. In his article ‘From Soybeans to Strategic Alliances: A US-India Opportunity’ (*businessline*, October 17, 2025), Anurodh Lalit Jain, Vice-Chairman of the AICC Minority Department, presents what appears to be a pragmatic idea: that India and the US can strike a soybean deal that could benefit both nations — America finding markets for its surplus soybeans, and India reducing its edible-oil deficit.

Beneath this narrative lies a series of dangerous assumptions that could hurt India’s farming sector, ruin smallholder livelihoods, and give foreign agribusiness companies control over our seeds.

Jain’s argument begins with the premise that India’s edible-oil import dependence — almost 60 per cent of its consumption — can be turned into a

strategic opportunity through trade with the US. He calls it ‘win-win’ because American soybean farmers get customers, India gets cheaper oil, and both governments score political points.

It sounds pragmatic — but it is profoundly misguided. The US is not seeking “partnership”; it is seeking markets for its GM soybeans that China and other countries no longer want. Its soy supply chain is controlled by transnational corporations, which do not prioritise India’s food security or farmer welfare.

WILL HIT FARM INCOMES

On the other hand, India’s 40 lakh soybean farmers already face volatile prices, erratic monsoons, and rising input costs.

Even limited import quotas, as the article suggests, would push domestic prices down and crush farm incomes. To pretend otherwise is to turn a blind eye to ground realities. Right now, soybean farmers in India are getting ₹1,250 to ₹2,000 lesser than MSP per quintal.



SOYBEAN IMPORTS. GM dangers cannot be dismissed REUTERS

The writer seems to treat India’s caution towards genetically modified (GM) crops as a policy weakness. India’s resistance to GM food crops has been a carefully considered position, shaped by public rejection, scientific evidence, and bitter experience. Jain’s suggestion that India could allow “conditional access” to advanced GM or genome-edited soybean technology under public supervision is a slippery slope. Once GM material gets into India’s fields, contamination is inevitable. “Conditional access” is

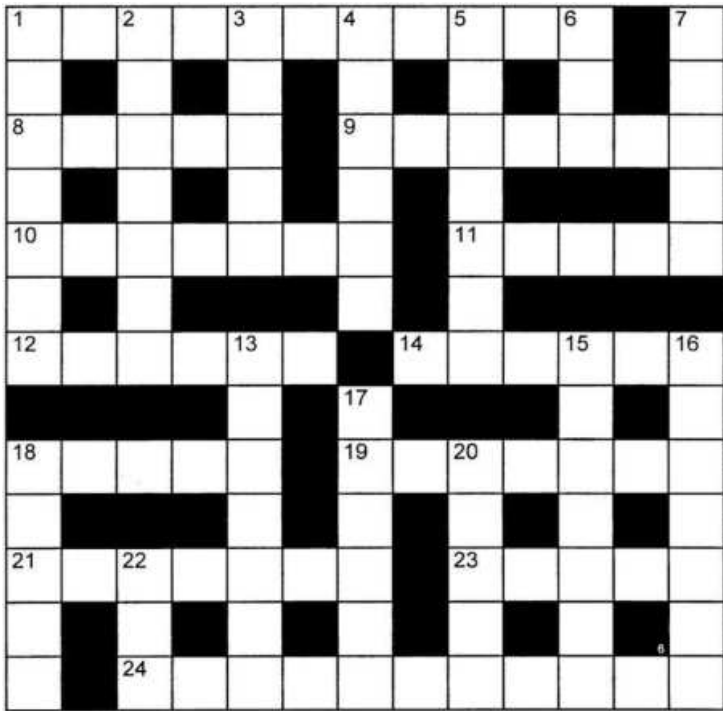
simply total and irreversible access, a biosafety breach by another name. It opens the door for US biotech companies to get into our food and seed systems, and undermine our biosafety regime and regulatory independence.

Jain’s sequencing formula — “oil today, beans tomorrow, technology later” is a path to dependency. India already imports refined soybean oil (which contains no living DNA). But once we start importing raw GM soybeans for crushing, the pressure will immediately mount to permit domestic cultivation. That’s how the Bt cotton got approved — first as trials, then as a *fait accompli* in the face of large scale illegal cultivation.

The push for soybean imports masks an American agri-business agenda: to open India’s seed sector to patented GM or genome-edited soybeans. That would be a betrayal of our farmers, and of our constitutional commitment to safeguard biodiversity and livelihoods.

The writer is with the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA-Kisan Swara)

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2808



EASY

ACROSS

- Waving, flourishing (weapon) (11)
- Drive back (5)
- Arch of the spectrum (7)
- Malady (7)
- To drive one (5)
- Forces money from (6)
- To gratify (6)
- Not drunk (5)
- Ceased (7)
- Ascertain dimension (7)
- Plant prickly (5)
- Pancreas, thymus as food (11)

DOWN

- Curtain of shellfire (7)
- A pilgrim’s bottle (7)
- Make deep research (5)
- Support-rods (6)
- First letter of name (7)
- To chatter, prate (3)
- Rod, pin for fastening things together (5)
- Anguish, severe pain (7)
- Greek two-handled jar (7)
- Concluding sections (7)
- Agreement (6)
- ‘Simple’ boy (5)
- River-dwelling mammal (5)
- Fool (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Trade-name for his gin cocktail depicted waving a sword (11)
- How to deal with boarders – not like a landlady! (5)
- One of the arches that may support the vault of the sky (7)
- Something wrong with one – mental confusion (7)
- It may force one redcap to join the Spanish (5)
- Makes one pay for former music-hall turns (6)
- Would you kindly allow it to elapse? (6)
- It may be judge-like to tear one’s robes. (5)
- Was staying, but didn’t go one doing so (7)
- It may be an enactment one can judge the size of (7)
- Though short, the Navy has its point (5)
- Curran loaves and the like one gets from the butcher’s? (11)

DOWN

- Drinking-place will sound furious at this shower of shots (7)
- It may be all up with Ma, seeing the pilgrim’s flask (7)
- Model very inclined to show one how to dig in (5)
- Is walking cockily with the supporters (6)
- The first character one can put a name to, in short (7)
- It’s the gift of the loquacious to turn valise over (3)
- Rod one would do well to leave unfinished (5)
- Nothing in the turret can be turned by the rack (7)
- Harm a PO suffered being in jug in Greece (7)
- The dénouements one is posting, the first last (7)
- Agreement reached the way it is posted (6)
- Child I’m taken in by is a saint (5)
- It’s more ‘eaten than a fish-eating mammal (5)
- Half-rate for an idiotic person (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2807

ACROSS 1. Scrap 4. Striped 8. Interlocutors 10. Since 11. Ease 12. Pyre 16. Ankle 17. Embellishment 19. Strings 20. Rabid

DOWN 1. Shiftlessness 2. Rat 3. Peruse 4. Spoons 5. Routed 6. Prototype 7. Disinterested 9. Dismember 13. Fallen 14. Skeins 15. Tether 18. Ebb

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EDITORIAL

Climate summit, an annual ritual

One cannot be faulted for being sceptical, even pessimistic, about the outcome of the upcoming global climate summit — the Conference of the Parties (COP30) — to be held in Belém, Brazil. The reasons for despair are not far to seek: the climate crisis is worsening by the day, with atmospheric carbon dioxide levels reaching new highs and global temperatures surpassing the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold. Despite lofty announcements, nations have failed to mitigate the crisis and save people from the brunt of extreme weather events. Since the Paris Agreement was signed a decade ago, the global carbon dioxide emissions have actually increased from about 39.6 billion tonnes to about 41.6 billion tonnes.

In a wake-up call for the world, the year 2024 saw global temperatures breach the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold — a key marker in the Paris Agreement aimed at limiting global warming. When average temperatures exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, it spells danger for the planet. The signs are there for all to see. Extreme weather events have been wreaking havoc across the world. Sea surface temperatures have hit record highs, while the melting of sea ice in both the Arctic and Antarctic has added to the alarming trends. Climate initiatives brook no delay.

COP30 must make significant progress because climate action is already lagging far behind the promises made by member countries. For India, the upcoming deliberations provide yet another opportunity to voice the concerns of developing countries.

India cites its low per capita emissions to counter any international demand to cap its overall emissions, arguing that it needs to lift its people to similar standards comparable to those in developed countries. The days of mere rhetoric are over. Global leaders must now deliver on the pledges made over the past decade. Nations cannot afford to remain complacent about targets for transitioning to renewable energy and phasing out fossil fuels.

While the path forward is undoubtedly challenging, it is also an opportunity to build a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable world. Developed nations, in particular, bear a historical responsibility to lead the charge, both through their own transitions and by supporting vulnerable countries in adapting to climate impacts. Critically, the private sector also has a pivotal role to play. Industries must invest in green technologies, and financial institutions must align their portfolios with sustainable practices.

By acting collectively and with urgency, we can mitigate the worst impacts of climate change. During the COP29, held in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, last year, the developed countries' offer of USD 300 billion in annual climate aid for developing countries by 2035 was too little and too late. The window to secure a safe future is rapidly closing. The choices we make today will decide the fate of the planet tomorrow.

Los Angeles City Hall illuminated for first time to celebrate Diwali

On the auspicious occasion of Diwali, the Los Angeles City Hall City Council hosted a special celebration on October 21, in collaboration with the Consulate General of India, Los Angeles. First-ever Indian American City Councilmember Nithya Raman organised the event, highlighting the growing recognition of the Indian diaspora in the region.

The celebration featured the lighting of traditional lamps, cultural performances of Indian music and dance, and the presentation of a Diwali Proclamation by City Council members Nithya Raman, John Lee, and Tim McOsker. During the event, the council members also welcomed the new Consul General, K J Srinivasa, reflecting the strengthening ties between local authorities and the Indian diplomatic mission.

The event was attended by Eric Garcetti, the former Mayor of Los Angeles and current US Ambassador to India, along with Indian diaspora leaders and members from across the region. This marked a historic moment as the Los Angeles City Hall was illuminated for the first time ever to celebrate Diwali, symbolising light, hope, and unity between the Indian and American communities.

The Indian Consulate expressed gratitude to the City of Los Angeles for the



gesture of friendship and for recognising the Indo-American community's vital role in enriching the city's multicultural fabric. Members of the public also witnessed the illumination, celebrating the Festival of Lights in a collective spirit of togetherness.

Meanwhile, Diwali celebrations extended to Washington, where US President Donald Trump participated in festivities at the White House on Tuesday (local time), connecting the

national recognition of the festival to broader US-India relations. He extended his warmest greetings to the people of India and Indian Americans on the occasion.

During his remarks, President Trump praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi, calling him a "great person" and a "great friend," while highlighting US-India ties in trade and regional peace. He noted, "Let me extend our warmest wishes to the people of India. I just spoke to your Prime Minister

today. Had a great conversation. We talked about trade... Although we did talk a little while ago about let's have no wars with Pakistan. The fact that trade was involved, I was able to talk about that. And we have no war with Pakistan and India. That was a very, very good thing." He added, "He's a great person, and he's become a great friend of mine over the years." Highlighting the symbolic importance of Diwali, President Trump said,

"In a few moments, we'll light the diya as a symbol of faith in the victory of light over darkness... It's knowledge over ignorance and good over evil. During Diwali, the revellers recall ancient stories of enemies defeated, obstacles removed, and captives freed." He further added that the diya's flame reminds everyone "to seek the path of wisdom and to work with diligence and to always give thanks for our many blessings."

Following his remarks,

Trump lit the diyas to celebrate the festival at the White House. The event was attended by senior officials from the Trump Administration, including FBI Director Kash Patel, ODNI Director Tulsi Gabbard, White House Deputy Press Secretary Kush Desai, Ambassador of India to the US Vinay Mohan Kwatra, and Ambassador of the US to India Sergio Gor. A delegation of prominent Indian-American business leaders also attended the ceremony.

India donates 81 school buses to strengthen education across Nepal



In a gesture underscoring the deep-rooted and enduring partnership between India and Nepal, the Government of India has donated 81 school buses to various educational institutions across 48 districts of Nepal. The Embassy of India in Kathmandu highlighted the initiative as part of India's ongoing development cooperation with Nepal.

"The Government of India donated 81 school buses to various educational institutions located in 48 districts, including flood-affected Ilam, Jhapa, and Udayapur districts of Koshi Province, as well as far-off districts such as Humla, Mustang,

Sankhuwasabha, Darchula, Baitadi, and Achham, across all seven provinces of Nepal, in keeping with the long-standing development partnership and friendship between India and Nepal," the embassy said in a post on X.

This latest contribution further builds on India's sustained support to the education sector in Nepal. "Over the past three decades, 381 school buses have been provided by India to institutions in Nepal," the embassy noted, underscoring India's ongoing commitment to enhancing mobility and educational access across the country. Such development support

also reflects India's broader role as a close neighbour, particularly during times of crisis. Following the recent heavy rains in Nepal that caused significant loss of life and property, Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended his condolences on October 5 and reaffirmed India's readiness to assist Nepal, highlighting the enduring partnership and solidarity between the two nations. In a post on X, PM Modi wrote, "The loss of lives and damage caused by heavy rains in Nepal is distressing. We stand with the people and Government of Nepal in this difficult time."

AI startups captured over 50% of venture funding in 2025: Report



Artificial intelligence (AI) startups are on track to capture more than half of total annual venture capital funding for the first time in 2025, according to a report by CB Insights. The report highlighted that AI companies raised 51 per cent of the total funding in 2025 so far, signaling a historic shift in investor focus toward the sector.

The report stated, "AI companies captured 51 per cent of total venture funding in 2025 so far -- putting 2025 on pace for the first year ever where AI startups claim most of the funding." The report data showed that the United States continues to lead

global AI growth, accounting for 85 per cent of all AI funding and 53 per cent of the total number of deals this year. Of the seven largest AI funding rounds, four were secured by U.S.-based companies. This dominance highlights the growing strength of the US in AI innovation and its ability to attract large-scale investments from global venture capitalists. Overall, as per the report, venture funding across industries exceeded USD 90 billion for the fourth consecutive quarter, reaching USD 95.6 billion in the third quarter (Q3) of 2025.

Total annual funding climbed to USD 310 billion through Q3,

marking the highest yearly figure since 2022. However, despite the rise in funding value, deal volume has dropped to its lowest level since the fourth quarter of 2016. This reflects increasing investor selectivity, with investors writing bigger checks to fewer companies.

The median deal size has also expanded, showing a clear trend toward more concentrated investments in promising sectors such as AI. Within the AI ecosystem, the humanoid robot segment stood out as one of the most active markets. Industrial humanoid robots recorded 17 deals in Q3'25, more than any other market segment. Additionally, healthcare humanoid robots secured seven deals, placing just outside the top 10 most active markets. With two new humanoid unicorns emerging in the third quarter, the total number of humanoid robot unicorns has now reached four. The surge in AI investment marks a defining moment for the global venture capital landscape, with 2025.

POEMS

How Beautiful

A personal lens: glass bending rays
That gave one that day's news
Saying each and every day,

Just remember you are standing
On a planet that's evolving.

How beautiful, she thought, what distance
does

For water, the view from above or afar.

In last night's dream, they were back
again

At the beginning. She was a child

And he was a child.

A plane lit down and left her there.

Cold whitening the white sky whiter.

Then a scalpel cut her open for
all the world To be a sea.

By Mary Jo Bang

Corporate growth in India to be driven by supply chain strength, cost efficiency and innovation: RBI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), in its latest Bulletin, highlighted that corporate growth in India will be shaped by strengthening supply chains, improving cost efficiencies, and fostering technological innovations. The central bank noted that these factors will play a key role in maintaining competitiveness and shaping overall corporate performance in the years ahead.

It stated, "Strengthening supply chains, improving cost efficiencies, and fostering technological innovations will play a key role in maintaining competitiveness and shaping overall corporate performance." According to the RBI, sustaining corporate growth will largely depend on a

combination of macroeconomic conditions, domestic demand, supportive policy measures, and global market dynamics. These factors, together with continuous efforts to enhance productivity and innovation, will determine how effectively Indian companies adapt to evolving global and domestic challenges. The Bulletin observed that India's private corporate sector has demonstrated significant resilience and adaptability amid a series of economic disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The period of 2019-20 witnessed weak domestic activity and sluggish private consumption, which further worsened during the pandemic, leading to a sharp contraction in sales and profitability.



However, the corporate sector rebounded strongly thereafter, supported by a mix of fiscal and monetary policies, pandemic-led pent-up demand, and effective cost management. Sales growth peaked at 32.5 per cent in 2021-22 before normalising to 7.2 per cent in 2024-25, indicating a transition from a rapid recovery phase to a more stable growth path. The analysis further showed that corporates continued to deleverage their balance sheets, which will help them undertake new investment activities.

Medium and small firms, too, improved their debt servicing capacity, contributing to overall financial stability. The study noted

that the corporate sector's ability to navigate crises and emerge stronger, reinforcing its position as a major driver of India's economic growth. Operating profit margins of companies also remained resilient, with large firms consistently outperforming medium and small enterprises.

The study also highlighted the corporate sector's ability to navigate crises and emerge stronger, reinforcing its position as a major driver of India's economic growth. With a robust financial foundation, improved efficiency, and adaptive strategies, the Indian corporate sector remains well-positioned to capitalise on future opportunities and contribute to sustained economic expansion.



The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

ROOTS FOR STEM

Push to attract academics from abroad is welcome. It must be backed by ecosystem that also nourishes homegrown talent

WHEN IT COMES to global soft power, ideas travel farther than capital. And for decades, some of India's sharpest minds have boarded outbound flights, drawn not just by better pay or prestige, but by the promise of institutions that value inquiry and reward rigour. Now, with the Donald Trump administration's crackdown on US varities, the Centre's initiative to attract top-tier Indian-origin "star faculty" from abroad, as reported by this newspaper, is a welcome, and in many ways, well-timed move. The proposal to reverse the brain drain — by offering substantial grants, operational flexibility, and lab infrastructure to returning scholars — could help elevate Indian research in STEM disciplines. India already has a fertile history of collaboration with industries led by Indian-origin business leaders — Google's recent investment of \$15 billion to build an AI data hub in Andhra Pradesh is one example. But if the aim is to build a globally competitive knowledge economy, repatriation efforts alone won't suffice. India must strengthen the academic ecosystem at home to ensure it is not only attractive to returnees but also empowers those who have stayed and contributed to its institutions.

This strengthening begins with recognising that India already has a solid foundation in institutions such as the IITs, IISc, ISI, TIFR, and newer centres like the IISERs and CMI, which have produced outstanding work, often despite limited resources. For any reintegration scheme to succeed, these institutions must be bolstered with sustained investment, transparent governance, and genuine academic autonomy. The example of China's Thousand Talents programme is instructive. Launched in 2008 as part of a broader push to transform China into a knowledge-driven economy, it was accompanied by a systemic overhaul of universities, creating cutting-edge facilities that supported both returning scholars and domestic talent. The result is evident: China now has five universities in the QS World University Rankings' top 100, and 72 overall, ranking third globally, after the US and the UK. In contrast, India, though at number four globally with 54 institutions on the list, is yet to break into the top 100. IIT Delhi, at 123, is the country's highest-ranked institution.

India's ambition must also be broader than strategic STEM nationalism. Higher education cannot be reduced to a pipeline for industry, its imagination must overcome the narrowly instrumental. True innovation flourishes in interdisciplinary, and often inconvenient spaces — where social scientists question the ethics of AI, or historians challenge majoritarian narratives. The government's emphasis on AI, quantum computing and biotech must sit alongside robust support for the humanities and social sciences, both to inform technological development and to anchor it in social context. It must also address a broader question of openness. Episodes such as the deportation of scholars like SOAS's Francesca Orsini send a dispiriting message about how India treats academic inquiry that doesn't align with official narratives. If it wants its diaspora to return — not for a few years, but to build — India must offer them not just lab space or grants, but the freedom to ask difficult questions. Repatriating brilliance is only a beginning. Building a home for it to thrive in is the real test.

STATE OF DENIAL

SC order on equal opportunity committee for transgender persons is welcome. It is needed because of executive's failure

OVER 10 YEARS after the landmark NALSA judgment — it recognised a "third gender", affirmed trans persons' fundamental rights and the right to self-determination of gender identity — and five years after the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020 came into effect, trans persons in India continue to face discrimination. On October 17, the Supreme Court pulled up the Centre and state governments for "brutishly" reducing the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and its corresponding rules to "dead letters" and exhibiting "a grossly apathetic attitude towards the transgender community". Jane Kaushik, a transgender woman, petitioned the Court after allegedly facing discrimination and the forceful termination of her employment at two private schools in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat in the span of a year. The SC bench hearing the matter constituted an advisory committee to assess the implementation of the Trans Act and recommend a "viable equal opportunity policy... to be introduced by the Union and state governments" within three months of the draft's submission. For establishments lacking their own policies, the Centre's policy will be enforceable.

The creation of a panel to operationalise protections guaranteed in law is a welcome step. But it speaks of a larger failure — the lack of political will to ensure that transgender citizens can live a life of dignity and equality as guaranteed by the Constitution and affirmed by the SC. The NALSA judgment and the Trans Rules mandate protections against discrimination in employment, medical care and education for transgender persons. Yet, implementation has been abysmal. For example, the Rules require governments to build separate washrooms and wards in hospitals. Over three years past the deadline, however, this remains a pipe dream. The Rules also mandated the constitution of transgender welfare boards, which only 19 states and Union Territories had done as of 2024; fewer still are reportedly functional. Across states, transgender persons have had to move high courts and the SC after being denied access to medical care, employment opportunities, and documents such as passports and graduation certificates due to bureaucratic apathy and/or insensitivity.

The fact that courts have had to step in repeatedly to ensure that the rights of a vulnerable section of the citizenry are not violated, reflects poorly on the executive. It is up to the state now to ensure the implementation of the Rules and the committee's policy recommendations.

WHEN THE SMALL GUY WINS

In UP, a poor Diwali bonus led to a unique workers' protest that made a point

ALL TOO OFTEN, in this age of disconnection and scattered focus, employee dissatisfaction is expressed in symbolic gestures — individual acts of defiance that amount to "lying down" on the job (*tang ping* as practised by China's youth, for example) or doing the bare minimum (as seen in the post-pandemic wave of "quiet quitting"). Creating ripples that quietly and quickly dissipate, there is little about these actions that inspires change or provokes a reaction. Before the great, well-oiled machinery of capital and industry, they are the most minor of irritants, abstractions that are easy to brush aside or roll over.

Which is what makes the protest launched last Saturday by workers at a toll plaza on the Agra-Lucknow highway remarkable. Unhappy over the paltry Diwali bonus they received, 21 staffers raised the barriers and walked off the job, thus allowing over 5,000 vehicles to breeze through without paying the hefty toll: An elegant execution of the hit-em-where-it-hurts school of attack usually reserved for the boxing or wrestling ring. As an act of protest against an employer trying to economise at the expense of workers, it doesn't get more impactful than this. Not surprisingly, the company operating the toll booth agreed that very night to hike the striking staffers' pay.

Beyond being a Diwali miracle of sorts, the episode is an affirmation of why the underdog story continues to matter. It's easy enough to throw up one's hands, allow the big and small indignities of the everyday to erode the will to fight and replace what could be a rallying cry with a sigh of defeat. The protest in that one toll plaza in Uttar Pradesh comes, then, as a reminder that the small guy, too, can win — all it takes is collective will and knowing where to hit.



KANTI BAJPAI

IN DEALING WITH Pakistan, India must understand why our neighbour matters to a range of powers including China, Russia, the US, various European countries and Saudi Arabia. Over time, we complacently persuaded ourselves that India's much greater power had diminished Pakistan's attractiveness to others. In fact, US President Donald Trump's recent outreach, Russia's deepening ties, and China's steady support to Islamabad underline that the major powers are very much engaged with our troublesome neighbour.

Pakistan is attractive to many countries for at least three enduring reasons: Location, disruptive capabilities, and power.

First, Pakistan's location matters. The country abuts Afghanistan, Iran, and China (and India). It is proximate to the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Through Afghanistan, it is connected to Central Asia. From Pakistani naval bases and air bases, distant powers can project force in a wide arc. In addition, foreign ground forces can operate from Pakistan against Afghanistan and Iran. It may seem fanciful today, but Pakistan could even be a staging post for Chinese attacks against India.

Second, and less positively, Pakistan matters because it is a potential disrupter and danger. Indian diplomats portray Pakistan as a state that supports terrorists. They are right, but it is precisely because Islamabad has that capability that it is feared, engaged, and even propitiated. China, Russia, and the US as well as others must worry about Pakistan's support of Islamic militancy and terrorism as also its subtle forms of blackmail via its control over violent-minded groups.

A lesson for us in India is that the more we castigate Pakistan, the more we play into Islamabad's hands. This is because Pakistani leaders are not overly embarrassed by their dark reputation. Indeed, they use their image as an international "poison pill" to reinforce global concerns over the country's possible disruptive role.

Third, contrary to our belief that Pakistan is a puny entity, our neighbour has five assets that make it both feared and attractive — its military, demographic, Islamic,

Islamabad's leverage: Its location and its power to disrupt

diasporic, and alliance power.

Above all, Pakistan is a formidable military power. With half a million men in uniform, its armed forces are among the biggest in the world. In addition, it is a nuclear power. With roughly 200 nuclear weapons, it is India's peer. In fact, there is evidence that it may have more warheads than India. Plus, as our recent fracas with Pakistan showed us and the world, its military is competent. Backed by Chinese weapons systems and real-information feeds, it garners attention and respect.

Pakistani military power could also be harnessed for other countries' fights. Are we sure that Islamabad's current conflict with Afghanistan is simply about the Durand Line, Afghan-backed militancy and separatism in Pakistan, and a broader protracted rivalry between two neighbours? Is it not also possible that foreign powers are using Islamabad against the Afghan Taliban?

Pakistani power is not simply military. This is a country of around 260 million people, making it the fifth-most populous globally. By 2050, some estimates put its population at between 340 and 380 million, which would make it the third largest in the world, behind only India and China. Like India, it will have a huge population of young, potentially productive people. If it gets its economic act together, it could also be a large market in which to sell and invest. Will any major power give up on Pakistan given its demography?

Another component of Pakistani power comes from its position in the global Muslim community. Pakistan is the second-largest Muslim country in the world in population terms. While it is poorer than many other Muslim countries, it is influential in global Islam by sheer size of numbers. Its demographic size is amplified by its military and diplomatic power.

Whatever we may think in India, Pakistan's military, including its "Islamic" bomb, is a source of envy, pride, and comfort to Muslims elsewhere. Beyond this, its diplomats are suave and effective, not just in the West and China where much of their attention is focused. Pakistani diplomacy is also a force in the Muslim world including in the

apex Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), China, Russia, and the US and others, who have stakes in the stability of the Islamic world, cannot ignore Islamabad's influence.

We in India consider our diaspora a source of power. The Pakistani diaspora is not as large or influential as India's, but it cannot be dismissed. Between 1995 and 2020, the UN World Migration Report estimates 6.14 million Pakistanis emigrated, placing it in sixth position (India had 17.79 million emigrants). The total size of its diaspora is uncertain but could be between 10 and 11 million (Pakistan's own estimate), less than one-third of India's. The diaspora is largely in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the Anglosphere. Like other diasporic communities, Pakistanis abroad wield political, lobbying, and economic power, and host governments must reckon with their influence.

Finally, Pakistan has alliance power. It was a formal ally of the US in SEATO and CENTO in the 1950s and 1960s. It has been a quasi-ally of China since 1963 and was a quasi-ally of both China and the US against the Soviet Union in the 1980s (in supporting the Afghan mujahideen). It was also forced to be a quasi-ally of the US in Afghanistan after the events of September 11, 2001. For years, it has partnered with Saudi Arabia militarily, including intermittently stationing troops on Saudi soil. And it has just signed an alliance pact with Riyadh, which apparently includes nuclear protection. Its willingness to enter alliance-like relationships makes it attractive to these powers even now.

In sum, galling as it is, we must recognise that Pakistan cannot be dismissed in strategic terms. Powerful others will continue to engage with it, despite their strong ties to India. This is the reality. Our diplomacy must be cool-headed in thinking about Pakistan's place in the world and our policies towards it. Irritation and condescension are not enough.

The writer is visiting professor of International Relations, Ashoka University, and emeritus professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

NUTRITION NEEDS NUANCE

A better understanding of markets, farming, consumption patterns is needed



SANGEETA KHANNA

THE INDIAN DIET is highly skewed in favour of carbohydrates and the main culprit is our obsession with rice, roti and other grain-based foods that form the core of our thali. This is the message implicit in the recent editorial based on the new study by ICMR in collaboration with the Madras Diabetes Research Foundation ("Ways of eating", *IE*, October 6). It is appalling to see the staples of the country being villainised in one swoop and the real culprits left untouched. Clubbing all sources of carbohydrates together — including whole grains, cereals, refined flours and other refined products like semolina and vermicelli along with cane sugars — to calculate that carbs make up 62 per cent of the total calorie intake of Indians is a grossly faulty method of looking at the average Indian's daily diet. Note that the study doesn't even account for consumption of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) from soft drinks — whose market is expanding steadily in the country — citing lack of data regarding the same.

A more nuanced insight into consumption patterns can help identify the food groups responsible for the rise of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in India, especially when food is only half the story. Lifestyle factors like stress, outdoor activities (for better circadian rhythm alignment) and inclusion of biodiverse foods for better gut health are yet to become part of mainstream conversations about immunity and metabolic disorders. It is noteworthy that 61 per cent of the survey participants were sedentary, with an overall 83 per cent reporting at least one metabolic risk factor, defined as the presence of either newly di-

DEAR EDITOR, I DISAGREE

A column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of 'The Indian Express'

Making generalised and misleading conclusions from insufficient research could impact farmers and ecologies in a significant way apart from leading to health hazards. Fuelling the demand for processed plant-based proteins while neglecting the nature-based ways of achieving protein sufficiency would be disastrous.

agnosed Type-2 diabetes, prediabetes, dyslipidaemia, general obesity, abdominal obesity or hypertension.

Per capita consumption of cereal in India has been showing a gradual decline over the last few decades and per capita sugar consumption has been on a steady rise. Per capita monthly cereal consumption has declined significantly from 13.4 kg in rural areas and 10.6 kg in urban areas in 1993-94 to 9.4 kg and 8 kg, respectively, in 2023-24. The annual per capita sugar consumption has increased from 23.7 kg in 2015 to 25.5 kg in 2025. At the same time, a press note by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) indicates that in the last two years, total calorie consumption per person per day has increased from 2,233 Kcal to 2,383 Kcal in rural areas and from 2,250 Kcal to 2,472 in urban India.

The problem, it is clear, is overall high caloric intake dominated by sugars and refined carbs, which is meddling with the human metabolism.

Additionally, linking low percentage of protein intake with metabolic diseases in India is a reductionist approach that undermines the importance of the quality of proteins coming from diverse sources. As the ICMR study indicates, a 5 per cent isocaloric replacement of carbohydrates with proteins (plant-based, dairy, poultry and fish) showed 6-10 per cent reduction of newly diagnosed T2D and prediabetes. This reduction in carbs should be by removal of sugars and HFCS and not whole grain-based foods like rice and roti.

Making generalised and misleading con-

clusions from insufficient research could impact farmers and ecologies in a significant way apart from leading to health hazards. Fuelling the demand for processed plant-based proteins while neglecting the nature-based ways of achieving protein sufficiency would be disastrous. A diet already high in ultra-processed sugars and carbs will start being loaded with ultra-processed poor-quality proteins, leading to more metabolic health problems. Imagine grains not making rotis but HFCS for the soft drinks while their germ and protein residue end up in other ultra-processed foods. Oil from the germ in packaged chips and isolated protein hydrolysates in a protein supplement may work better for profiteering, not human health. The soil and water systems will be decimated while human health is jeopardised for generations to come.

We need a better understanding of the markets, industries, farming and the entire food system to get clarity on how increasing prosperity is impacting consumption patterns and how industries are pushing for cheaper ingredients that make their way to hyper-processed foods. Increased buying capacity enables people to purchase convenience as that's the only clear achievable goal right now. Nutritional information is so contradictory that it will keep the consumption patterns faulty for a few decades, if not generations, if awareness and appropriate policies are not in place.

The writer is a nutrition and culinary consultant and a permaculturist working in alignment with ecology

OCTOBER 23, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

UN AT 40

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, arrived in New York for the United Nations' 40th anniversary, bringing with him India's promise to help strengthen its hand in working for a better world. He will meet with presidents Ronald Reagan and Ziaul Haq and PM Premadasa and Zhao Ziyang. Reagan's aides say that the US leader's separate talks with Gandhi and Zia will be his only meetings with leaders, save for those with leaders of some major industrialised democracies.

RAJIV-CASTRO TALKS

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, had

wide-ranging talks with the President of Cuba, Fidel Castro, on matters relating to the Non-Aligned Movement and bilateral issues. Gandhi met with the Cuban leader over lunch and later had official talks. Gandhi, who arrived in Havana from the Bahamas, apprised Castro of the decisions taken at the Commonwealth Summit in South Africa.

ARMS RACE

THE COMMONWEALTH LEADERS urged President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev to achieve their declared objective of preventing an arms race in space and terminating it on Earth. The leaders wel-

comed the superpowers' summit in Geneva scheduled for next month and stressed the importance of a "constructive and positive outcome".

GURDWARA BLAST

AMYSTERIOUS EXPLOSION, which occurred near a gurdwara at the Vivekananda Housing Colony on the outskirts of Ghaziabad town, has left the district police wondering what the possible motive of the miscreants could be. No one was injured in the explosion, which shattered the window panes of the gurdwara and caused the walls of the nearest houses to develop cracks.



9 THE IDEAS PAGE

Multilateralism isn't dead

As 80th UNGA unfolds, stakes are clear — future of global cooperation depends not only on reforming institutions but on rebuilding legitimacy. It must speak to concerns of ordinary citizens, not just diplomats



THAROOR THINK

BY SHASHI THAROOR

AS THE UNITED Nations marks its 80th anniversary tomorrow (October 24), reports suggest that the mood at the General Assembly in New York is anything but celebratory. The hall that once echoed with the optimism of post-war reconstruction, decolonisation and peacekeeping, now reverberates with uncertainty, frustration, and quiet alarm. The institution that symbolised the triumph of diplomacy over destruction finds itself confronting a world increasingly sceptical of its relevance — and a founding member, the United States, seemingly intent on retreat.

The signs are stark. The US has withdrawn from key global bodies, including the Human Rights Council and UNESCO, and has frozen or slashed funding to others, including an estimated 80 per cent reduction in its contributions to UN programmes. It has vetoed Security Council resolutions on Gaza, revoked visas of Palestinian officials, and President Donald Trump's extraordinary rant on the opening day of the session questioned the very premises of multilateral engagement. As Susan Rice, former US ambassador to the UN, recently observed, "We are not playing on the fields we have traditionally played on as a global superpower."

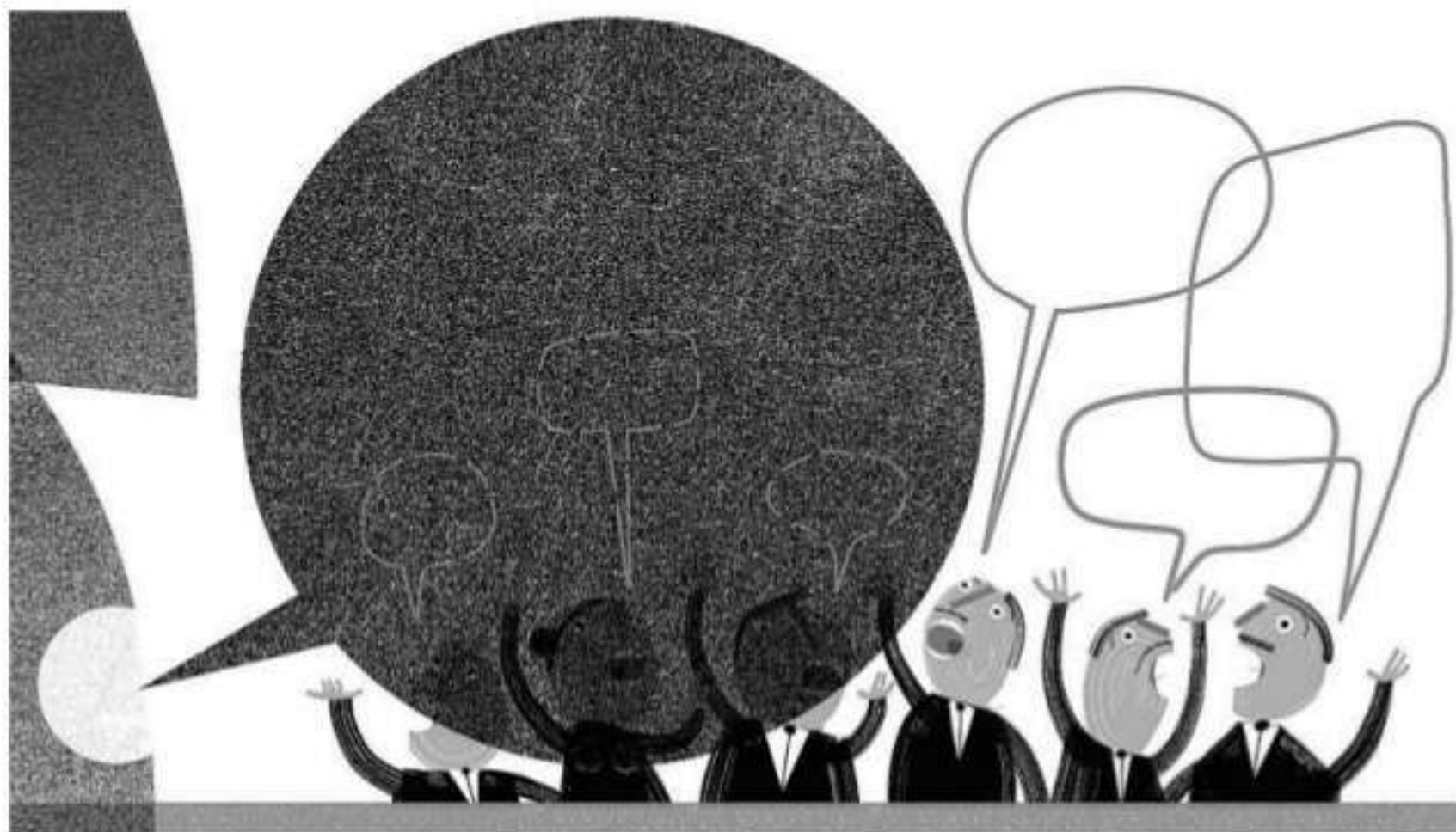
This erosion of multilateralism comes at a time when the world is in desperate need of coordinated action. Conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, and elsewhere rage with little hope of resolution. Trump orchestrated a peace in Gaza, but outside the UN framework. Climate change accelerates, inequality deepens, and technological disruption outpaces governance. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called it a "global crisis", warning that "geopolitical divides do not allow us to effectively address them".

So, is multilateralism on the verge of collapse? And can the UN survive the growing diagnoses of its irrelevance?

To answer this, we must first understand what multilateralism has meant — and what it has become. At its core, multilateralism is the belief that global problems (what the late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called "problems without passports") require global solutions, negotiated through institutions that give voice to all nations, regardless of size or power. It is a system built on sovereign equality, mutual respect, and the rule of law. The UN General Assembly, where each of the 193 member states casts one vote, remains the most visible embodiment of this ideal.

Yet the ideal has always been tempered by reality. The UN's structure — particularly the Security Council's veto power — enshrines inequality. Its resolutions are often non-binding, its enforcement mechanisms weak. The General Assembly, for all its symbolism, is frequently dismissed as a forum for posturing rather than problem-solving. And the Council itself is seen as reflecting the geopolitical realities of 1945, not 2025.

Still, the UN has achieved much. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the



C R Sasikumar

Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Climate Agreement — all emerged from multilateral processes. The UN has coordinated humanitarian relief, led successful peacekeeping missions, helped conclude dozens of international treaties, and promoted global health responses. It has provided a platform for smaller nations to speak, and for larger ones to listen — however perfunctorily.

But today, the system is fraying. The decline of US commitment, the rise of regional blocs, and the fragmentation of diplomatic norms have all weakened the multilateral fabric. The US-China rivalry casts a long shadow, with both powers increasingly pursuing bilateral or "mini-lateral" arrangements with like-minded partners. Russia's defiance of international norms in Ukraine and Israel's intransigence in Gaza further undermine the credibility of global institutions. Even within Europe, once a bastion of multilateralism, nationalist currents challenge the consensus.

In this context, the UN risks becoming a relic — an institution with noble intentions but limited influence. Yet collapse is not inevitable. Multilateralism may be wounded, but it is not dead. The very fact that world leaders continue to gather in New York, to speak, negotiate, and deliberate, suggests that the need for global dialogue remains. The UN80 initiative, launched this year, aims to streamline mandates, cut costs, and restore public trust. Institutional reform is on the agenda — not as a luxury, but as a necessity.

Moreover, the crisis of multilateralism is not just institutional — it is philosophical. It reflects a deeper tension between global interdependence and national sovereignty, between (in David Goodhart's formulation) the "anywheres" who thrive in a borderless world and the "somewheres" who feel left behind. Goodhart's thesis resonates here: The "somewheres," rooted in place, religion and tradition, are increasingly sceptical of global elites and distant institutions. Their political ascendancy — from Brexit to Trumpism — has reshaped the landscape in which multilateralism must operate.

In this sense, the future of multilateralism depends not only on reforming institutions but on rebuilding legitimacy. It must

The UN may be imperfect; but as the legendary Dag Hammarskjöld put it, the UN was 'not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell'. It may have been unable to do so on occasion, but it remains the only forum where all nations can come together to address the world's problems. To abandon it would be to abandon the very idea of our common humanity.

speak to the concerns of ordinary citizens, not just diplomats. It must demonstrate that global cooperation can deliver tangible benefits — jobs, security, dignity — not just abstract norms. It must become less technocratic and more empathetic.

Interestingly, countries historically resistant to immigration and global entanglements — such as Japan and Hungary — may find themselves better insulated from the backlash, Japan's cautious diplomacy and cultural homogeneity have shielded it from some of the populist pressures facing Western democracies. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán, has embraced a nationalist posture that rejects multilateral constraints. These models may offer short-term stability, but they also risk long-term isolation.

The challenge, then, is to find a middle path: A multilateralism that is principled yet pragmatic, inclusive yet effective. This requires leadership — not just from the United States and China, but from emerging powers, regional coalitions, and civil society. India, for instance, has an opportunity to champion a more equitable global order, rooted in the values of sovereignty, solidarity, and sustainable development. We can contribute our expertise and leadership to global discussions on issues ranging from cyberspace to outer space.

As the 80th UN General Assembly unfolds, the stakes are clear. The world is not short of crises — it is short of cooperation. The UN may be imperfect; but as the legendary Dag Hammarskjöld put it, the UN was "not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell". It may have been unable to do so on occasion, but it remains the only forum where all nations can come together to address the world's problems. To abandon it would be to abandon the very idea of our common humanity.

Multilateralism may be fraying, but it is also evolving. Its survival depends not on nostalgia, but on renewal. And that renewal begins with the recognition that in an interconnected world, no nation is truly sovereign unless all are.

The writer, a former UN Under-Secretary-General and former Minister of State for External Affairs, chairs the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The Palestinians have no police of their own to protect them; they are dependent on the IDF. Consequently, the army must enforce the law against Israelis who attack Palestinians, detain them and bring them to justice, and enable the Palestinian landowners free access to their orchards." —HAARETZ, ISRAEL

Fortress India can't be Vishwaguru

The principal loser as a result of Professor Francesca Orsini's deportation is India and scholarship on India



SUPRIYA CHAUDHURI

I WOKE UP today to the appalling news that Francesca Orsini, preeminent global scholar of Hindi and the early modern literary world of North India, had been barred from entering India and deported to Hong Kong. On the night of October 20, when she reached Delhi after a conference in China, she was stopped and her passport was impounded, with no reason given. She has lived and worked in London for many decades now, having taught at the University of Cambridge and at SOAS, where she is now professor emerita and was professor of Hindi and chair of the Centre for Cultural Studies. She is a Fellow of the British Academy, has held visiting appointments at leading universities around the world, and her many books have made an unsurpassed impact, placing Hindi and the North Indian vernaculars within the landscape of "world literature."

In particular, we should mention *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (2002); *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (2009); and most recently, *East of Delhi: Multilingual Literary Culture and World Literature* (2023). She has edited volumes like *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* (2010) and *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India* (2014), and made major contributions to the scholarship on print history and world literature on behalf of Hindi and Urdu. She is a co-editor of the *Cambridge Studies in World Literature and Cultures* series.

In fact, such is the measure of Orsini's scholarship and love for the languages and cultures of North India that one would expect her to be officially honoured by the Government of India, not deported in disgrace. Trained at the University of Venice, then in Delhi on a Government of India scholarship, and finally at SOAS, she has been visiting India for many decades, and has formed deep and enduring relationships with writers and scholars here. She has many dear friends in this country, and had planned to visit them.

Orsini has often spoken of regarding India, especially Prayagraj, as her second home, a land whose bewildering variety of languages, peoples and cultures offers the ideal perspective from which to understand the conceptual model of world literature. What I have found most inspiring about her work is the combination of textual rigour and infectious enthusiasm, her capacity to make reading and understanding a journey of pleasure rather than a dry, soulless accumulation of knowledge.

While Orsini was given no reason for her deportation — adding to her bewilderment and trauma — it is now learnt that she had been blacklisted in March 2025 for violating visa conditions. An unnamed home ministry official said that she had carried out research while on a tourist visa. The same visa violations were adduced in the case of the deportation from Thiruvananthapuram in March

2022 of Professor Filippo Osella, a senior anthropologist at the University of Sussex, who had spent more than three decades researching in Kerala. In fact, Osella did have a research visa when he was deported, and he has strongly contested the ministry's unspecified and unproven charges of "misuse" of earlier visas.

For Orsini, too, the charge of visa violations remains vague and unspecified, since the research of a senior academic, especially in the field of literature, may not be a matter of a certified project, but simply a period spent reading, thinking and talking to peers. As a quick look at India's incredibly complicated visa categories shows, the actual research visa involves time-bound institutional affiliation. This may be irrelevant when the long-term study that lies behind a book has been ongoing for 10 years and more — as it has been, for example, in the case of Orsini's work on the literary cultures of Awadh, published in *East of Delhi*. That home ministry officials would take the trouble to track senior academics in order to place them on a blacklist does not sound like routine housekeeping, but more like deliberate hounding of prominent targets by a government that is "insecure, paranoid and even stupid", to quote Ramachandra Guha.

The larger question is, who or what is harmed by the ministry's blacklisting of senior, well-respected academics whose work has contributed to scholarship on India and to global knowledge generally? The scholar in question is deterred from visiting India again, and she and others like her are discouraged from choosing India and Indian subjects as research fields. What does this do for India's global standing? One aim of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is to regain for India the lost status of *Vishwaguru*, or world mentor. Can this be done by driving away those who genuinely wish to learn, write, and teach about India, and cutting off the international collaborations and contacts that are crucial to the intellectual growth of Indian scholars?

It is ironic, as commentators have noted, that Orsini's major scholarship is devoted to Hindi, a language our central government is otherwise anxious to force down the throats of all citizens. Meanwhile, our education ministry is almost pathetically insistent on improving the global rankings of Indian universities, a process that involves internationalisation, intellectual cooperation, and improvement in the global perception of Indian institutions. Getting rid of our few remaining friends in the international academy is hardly the way to go about this.

Let me say unequivocally that the principal loser as a result of Orsini's deportation is India and scholarship on India. Worldwide, we are witnessing a return of the "fortress" mentality that seeks to protect intellectual resources by making them more difficult to access, and a resurgence of the kind of crude nationalism that is wedded to the same protectionist ideology. Unfortunately, as Tagore knew, reason and knowledge do not flourish if they are dammed up or placed behind walls. Orsini has not simply helped us to understand our own cultural heritage, she has helped the world to see it. The Indian government should apologise to her and invite her back as an honoured guest.

The writer is professor (emerita), Department of English, Jadavpur University

The best of us, the verse of us

In an age of metrics and algorithms, why we need more poetry in our lives



PARTHA SINHA

WE LIVE IN a civilisation that confuses data for wisdom and visibility for truth. Every thought is tagged, every desire tracked, every silence filled by an algorithm eager to sell. In this economy of attention, poetry is not an indulgence. It is defiance. It is the last surviving language of the unmeasured, the one place where meaning can still breathe free of metrics.

Our age speaks fluently in code but stammers in metaphor. We have built generations that can debug a system but cannot decode a sigh. We understand syntax, not silence. The symbols that once carried mystery — the flame, the river, the monsoon — now live as flattened icons and emojis. Semiotics, the study of meaning, has been quietly outsourced to machines. The tragedy is not that artificial intelligence has learned language, but that human intelligence has forgotten how to read and interpret it.

Poetry stands against this flattening. It resists the reduction of life into data. Poetry restores mystery to meaning, silence to speech, and interpretation to experience. It teaches us that words are not tools but tremors. That a pause can be as eloquent as a phrase. That language, when stripped of ambiguity, loses its soul.

T S Eliot once wrote, "For I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." In that single image lies the quiet horror of quantification. A life reduced to teaspoons, predictable portions

of habit and convenience. A century later, Eliot's line reads like prophecy. Every step, calorie, and heartbeat is measured. The poet's lament has become the user's dashboard. The question is no longer poetic. It is practical. Are we living, or are we being measured?

Poetry refuses such measurement. It is gloriously inefficient. It demands attention without reward, immersion without outcome. It slows us down in a culture that worships acceleration. It reminds us that not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that moves us can be monetised.

Mary Oliver offered another kind of reminder when she asked, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" That line is not a prompt for productivity. It is an invitation to presence. It stands against a world that rewards predictability and punishes pause. It asks us to reclaim the private interior, the part of ourselves that cannot be optimised, summarised, or shared. In a society obsessed with efficiency, wonder itself becomes an act of rebellion.

Modern life has reduced meaning to management. We manage our time, our emotions, even our identities. We brand our individuality, filter our realities, and trade authenticity for visibility. In this marketplace of signs, poetry becomes a subversive form of reading. It insists that signs still have shadows, that symbols cannot be owned by corporations, that a

word can still astonish.

Neuroscience tells us that poetry lights up the brain's reward and empathy circuits. Society tells us something deeper. Poetry keeps the social fabric from fraying. It rebuilds the shared imagination. It helps us feel without having to perform feeling. It reminds us that empathy is not a metric and that presence has no algorithm.

And yet, the age of automation wants to mimic even the sacred. Machines now generate verse, craft rhyme, simulate sentiment. But what they lack is intent. The trembling human awareness that gives meaning to words. Algorithms can reproduce rhythm, but not remorse. They can mimic longing, but not feel it. They can record a heartbeat, but never break one.

Poetry endures because it refuses perfection. It carries within it the human crack, the breath that falters, the moment that slips between sense and sound. In its imperfections, it mirrors us. Roland Barthes once said that reading is an act of resurrection. Poetry resurrects the reader from the deadness of routine. It teaches us to see again, not just to look. To interpret again, not merely to process. To feel without converting that feeling into content. The poet, in that sense, is not a romantic figure lost in abstraction. She is a semiotic insurgent, decoding a world desperate to appear simple.

Imagine a culture where people read not

for information but for transformation. Where the pause between two lines matters more than the scroll between two screens. Where the mind learns again to live with uncertainty, to embrace contradiction, to savour metaphor. Such a culture would be harder to manipulate, because it would know how to read between lines. And every empire, corporate or political, fears a citizen who can interpret.

Poetry is, finally, a way of seeing. It reminds us that the visible world is not the real one. That every skyline is not just architecture but aspiration, inequality and dream. That the body is not just biology but biography. That even a wound can have meaning if we dare to name it. Poetry re-enchants the world in a time that has mistaken information for understanding. So let us return to verse. Let Eliot's spoons remind us of what we refuse to become. Let Oliver's question echo inside us like conscience. Let us choose metaphor over metric, meaning over measurement, mystery over management. Because poetry is not escape. It is return. Return to self, to silence, to everything that cannot be quantified.

And when the networks track every heartbeat and the algorithms predict every move, remember this. They can measure your time, but they cannot live your moments. That, in the end, is what makes us free.

The writer is an advisory professional

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEEDED: LEADERS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Now you see him' (IE, October 22). US President Donald Trump's fluctuating stance on the war in Ukraine, from supporting Kyiv to seemingly favouring Moscow, has only deepened uncertainty. Such inconsistency weakens the confidence of the West and emboldens Russia. The shifting tone of US engagement risks leaving Ukraine isolated and vulnerable, while Europe remains unprepared to fill the leadership vacuum. At a time when stability is crucial, world powers must prioritise firm, united action over politics.

Angel Gupta, Rajpura

NEW AMBITION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Rise of the new peacemakers' (IE, October 22). There is a very curious paradox associated with the new breed of peacemaking nations. Unlike the earlier players, almost all of them are autocracies. While democracies must always be sensitive to domestic reactions to their international ventures, autocracies do not face this handicap. Nonetheless, this new appetite on the part of kings and dictators to be responsible players in the international arena is a welcome development.

Shubhada H, via email

SEASONAL OUTRAGE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Light, not heat' (IE, October 22). Every year, Delhi's air quality dips drastically during Diwali, but blaming fireworks alone oversimplifies a deeper issue. Pollution in Delhi-NCR is a year-round crisis worsened by vehicular emissions, construction dust, and crop residue burning. Authorities must focus on sustainable solutions like better waste management, cleaner fuels, improved public transport, and stricter urban planning. Citizens, too, must take responsibility through behavioural change and awareness. True progress lies in consistent effort, not seasonal outrage.

Charu Sharma, Hoshiarpur

GENDER INEQUALITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Verses of the silenced' (IE, October, 22). It captures the courage of women through the centuries, and their resilience in bringing forth change. Even now, however, women are fighting for peaceful co-existence and autonomy. Women in contemporary India face the same set of challenges with respect to security, laws, and reproductive choices among others. It's a matter of great shame that women are still allotted a secondary role in every aspect.

Nupur Sharma, Ghaziabad



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

Japan's first woman PM: Socially conservative, China hawk

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 22

SANAE TAKAICHI, a hardline conservative who idolises former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, was elected as Japan's first woman prime minister on Tuesday.

Context of election

Takaichi, 64, replaces incumbent Shigeru Ishiba less than a year after he entered office. Ishiba had announced his intent to resign in September after the incumbent Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost its majority in both houses of the Diet, Japan's parliament. In an internal party vote earlier this month, Takaichi emerged as the choice to lead the party; now, after a vote in the Diet, she has secured the majority needed to be PM.

Her win represents a victory for the right wing of the LDP. For a party in crisis, this is being seen as a needed pivot. Unlike the moderate Ishiba and the centrist Fumio Kishida before her, Takaichi has a distinct political vision which she inherits from her political mentor, former PM Shinzo Abe.

Unabashed ultranationalist

Pacifism defined postwar politics and state policy in Japan. Article 9 of the Constitution explicitly rejects Japan's right to wage war. "...[The] Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation... land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained..." the article states.

But in the last two decades, amid economic stagnation and a population crisis, there has been a steady rise of ultranationalist currents in Japan's politics. Abe, who was PM from 2012 to 2020, was the foremost figure in this regard; Takaichi takes his legacy forward.

Among other things, she shares Abe's revisionist view of Japanese history and its crimes during World War II. Rather than decrying the actions of Imperial Japan, she actively glorifies the country's past militarism. She is a frequent visitor to the Yasukuni shrine, which honours Japan's war dead — including executed war criminals. She has also notably said that Japan need not apologise for its war crimes.

Takaichi is also a member of the Nippon Kaigi, Japan's largest ultranationalist lobby-

ing group which aims to "change the post-war national consciousness" and to revise Japan's current Constitution, specifically Article 9.

Like Abe, who gave impetus to Japan's military rebuilding, Takaichi seeks to bolster the country's military capacities to take on China, who she considers to be a primary rival. She is likely to seek and build on strategic partnerships across the Indo-Pacific with the view of containing the China threat.

Not a feminist

Socially, Takaichi is an ultra-conservative who fails two key gender-related litmus tests for politicians in Japan.

One, she opposes allowing married couples to use separate surnames — a move that has long been popular with voters but one she claims will "undermine traditional family values". Two, she is against allowing members of the imperial family's maternal line to ascend the throne. She also opposes same-sex marriage.

This is why many women do not view Takaichi's elevation as progress.

"She is the very first woman to take this step," Momoko Nojo, founder of No Youth No Japan, a youth advocacy group, told *The New York Times*. "But she came to this position by discouraging gender equality in society. I don't think she will make much progress."

"Takaichi has made no reference at all to the hardships women face or to gender disparities during the leadership contest," Yayo Okano, a professor at Doshisha University in Kyoto who specialises in feminism and political theory told *The Washington Post*. "In that sense, I fear this signals a very harsh situation for women, because it effectively rules out any prospect of real improvement in Japan's gender inequality going forward."

That said, some analysts argue that it is unfair to expect Takaichi to single-handedly usher in progress for women. This is more so because women leaders in the LDP, a conservative party, have historically had to tack right to progress through the ranks.

As Kiyomi Tsujimoto, a lawmaker with the rival Constitutional Democratic Party, told *The NYT*, "From now on, she will be

tested on what she can do as an independent politician".

Takaichi is also staunchly anti-immigration. In a speech last month, she complained about tourists kicking sacred deer that roam Nara Park, pledging a crackdown on "badly behaved" foreigners — an issue that was lightning rod for some voters during the internal LDP election amid record rises in migrants and tourists.

Fiscally aggressive

Fiscally, Takaichi again borrows from Abe's playbook, advocating for aggressive public spending and cheap borrowing to stimulate Japan's stagnant economy. She has repeatedly criticised the Bank of Japan's rate hikes. Once in power, she is likely to want to stimulate growth, regardless of its fallout — a sharp break with the entrenched LDP caution over deficits.

One of her most pressing tasks is to deal with US President Donald Trump, who will be arriving in Tokyo for trade and security talks next week. Takaichi is expected to offer several perks to Trump, including a purchase package for US-made pickup trucks,

soybeans and gas, *Reuters* reported, in return for lower tariffs.

Notably, she has announced that the trade agreement that Trump and Ishiba agreed to in September may be up for renegotiation. "If, during the course of implementation, elements that harm Japan's national interest are found, then renegotiation is a possibility," Takaichi had said during a *Fuji TV* debate last month.

While Takaichi's politics are likely to help strengthen the LDP and bring back some of the conservative vote that had drifted from the party since Abe's assassination in 2022, her economic prescriptions could push Japan further into crisis.

"During the leadership race, Takaichi toned down her more radical proposals, including withdrawing her earlier suggestion to cut the consumption tax. However, if she were to revive such proposals in response to demands from major opposition parties, it could lead to higher interest rates, a weaker yen, and accelerated inflation — developments that may not help restore public trust," Kazutaka Maeda, an economist at Tokyo's Meiji Yasuda Research Institute, told *Reuters*.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

WHY THE LOUVRE IS PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO THIEVES



A black curtain hides the window through which thieves entered the Louvre on Wednesday, AP

THE LOUVRE started as a medieval military fortress, then became a palace, before being converted to a museum after the French Revolution. It is an incoherent structure that sits on 25 different levels and stretches for half a mile, exhibiting over 30,000 of its 500,000 artworks in more than 400 rooms. And it is this convoluted history and identity that make the Louvre so difficult to monitor, oversee and protect.

Lingering concerns

The brazen and seemingly effortless robbery Sunday morning of eight pieces from the collection of crown jewels at the museum has wounded its leadership and put a spotlight on the Louvre's security protocols, which have been tested over the years by break-ins and thefts.

A confidential draft report by the Cour des Comptes, France's highest-level auditing institution, faults the Louvre for an inadequate video surveillance system in all three of its wings, huge reductions and delays in spending for security in recent years, and a flawed sense of overall priorities. The document indicates that spending on security in 2024 was far lower than it was 20 years ago.

In the Richelieu wing, which holds paintings by Poussin, Dürer and Vermeer, as well as the ancient Persian and Mesopotamian collections, only 25% of 182 rooms are covered by surveillance cameras, according to the report.

The report blames the museum's leadership for focusing on new projects rather than "indispensable work" needed at the museum. The Louvre "has abundant resources of its own that it should use as a priority for urgent work," the report says.

Guards underpaid

The Louvre is protected by a double

layer of human security: a staff of guards (almost 1,200 in 2024, according to the Louvre) and a permanent 52-member force of firefighters, who are part of the French military.

The security guards have long complained about their working conditions, and even senior Louvre officials admit the workers' status and training could be improved.

"Civil servants aren't very well paid in France," said Denis Fousse in an interview in 2022, before he retired as the Louvre's director of visitor services and security. "You take the exam and then we train you. We are not a profession where there is a security guard school."

The firefighters, on the other hand, are well-drilled and are the first line of defense against fire and floods, and the ones designated to remove artworks in an emergency.

Not first heist

The break-in on Sunday was similar to one that happened in December 1976 when three masked burglars broke into the museum at dawn. They climbed a cleaning crew's scaffolding, smashed unbarred windows, clubbed two guards, broke a glass showcase, and grabbed a diamond-studded sword that had belonged to King Charles X, who ruled in the early 19th century, during a period when the monarchy was restored. The sword has never been recovered.

In 1998, a thief removed "The Path of Sévres", a small landscape painting by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, from its frame in broad daylight. It hung in a room without a surveillance camera.

The thief escaped; the painting, valued at an estimated \$1.3 million, was never recovered.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

AANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 22

AS THE Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) moves to make it easier for workers to withdraw money from their corpus, a closer look at the numbers reflects a disconcerting trend — about half the members have less than Rs 20,000 in PF at the time of final settlement, while around 75% have less than Rs 50,000.

A high frequency of withdrawals during employees' work tenure depletes what is meant to be their post-retirement money. This is one of the reasons cited by the EPFO for the changes it recently proposed, where it streamlined the process for withdrawals, but made a 25% minimum balance mandatory, while also increasing the minimum unemployment period for premature settlement from two months to 12 months.

Employment profile

The numbers give a peek into the employment profile of a member of the retirement fund body — over 65% of the EPFO members are making PF and pension contributions at a monthly wage equal to or less than Rs 15,000, the wage ceiling for 'mandatory' EPF contributions. A ballpark 35% is making EPF contributions 'voluntarily' for wages above Rs 15,000, a senior official told *The Indian Express*.

This indicates the dominance of formal workers drawing wages at the lower band in the EPFO's membership profile, which includes more than 30 crore accounts with over 7 crore active contributing members and a corpus of over Rs 26 lakh crore, the official added.

Withdrawals draining funds

A majority of the withdrawal claims are made soon after a job loss, even as official data shows that nearly half of these members are then seen "rejoining" the EPFO.

The agenda for the recently held EPFO board meeting stated: "Moreover, it has been noticed that in many cases the EPF members take their final settlements after the employer marks them as having exited employment even though in reality they continue with the same employment. Subsequently, they are shown as re-joiners after a gap of a few months to enable them to take their final settlements. This constitutes a break in

CLAIMS FOR ESSENTIAL NEEDS				
Financial Year	Illness		Marriages / post matriculation education	
	Total settled	Total amount*	Total settled	Total amount*
2017-18	3,12,515	1,154.56	1,31,485	1,063.02
2018-19	22,77,017	57,99.75	1,21,242	971.50
2019-20	56,41,247	12,706.34	1,51,651	1,052.34
2020-21	77,81,569	14,727.50	1,82,811	1,079.20
2021-22	1,14,93,222	19,204.29	2,30,481	1,307.98
2022-23	1,64,81,041	25,265.21	3,15,003	1,720.36
2023-24	2,09,78,763	33,696.54	3,36,888	1,916.70
2024-25	3,24,97,933	52,633.92	4,54,103	2,447.51

FINAL SETTLEMENTS							
Financial Year	Retrenchment / retirement / migration				Premature settlement for unemployment		
	Total claims	% of Total	Total Amount*	% of Total	Total claims	% of Total	Total Amount*
2022-23	252544	5.33	13,197.66	33.64	4312593	94.47	26,029.79
2023-24	264530	5.67	16,643.63	34.95	4402134	94.33	30,971.61
2024-25	277492	5.24	19,040.73	33.74	5017804	94.76	37,389.62

*(in Rs crore) Source: EPFO data

their EPF membership which is detrimental to the members' interest in the long run and also potentially deprives him of his pension entitlements if final settlement is taken from EPS (Employees' Pension Scheme) as well."

Premature final settlements, which are separate from partial withdrawals under categories such as illness, housing or education, are clocking a high run rate. For instance, of the total 52.95 lakh final settlement claims in 2024-25 — including claims for retirement, retrenchment or migration — around 95% were premature settlements by members after just two months of unemployment, as per the EPFO data reviewed by *The Indian Express*.

Para 69(2) of the EPF Scheme, 1952 allows full withdrawal or settlement after unemployment for a continuous period of not less than two months.

The EPFO was designed to be a retirement fund for organised sector workers in a country where there are barely any other social security nets. Any kind of break in the form

of premature final settlement results in ineligibility for family pension in case of the employee's death, and also lowers the amount of pension at the time of retirement.

Reasons behind trend

Partial withdrawals picked up pace especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Another enabling factor was the scrapping of the requirement to submit documentary proofs while claiming partial withdrawals in 2017, and the easing of norms for advances and auto-processing of certain types of claims during the pandemic. This resulted in a higher frequency of withdrawals for categories such as illness.

About 3.25 crore claims worth Rs 52,633.92 crore were settled for illness in 2024-25, a 55% jump over the 2.10 crore claims worth Rs 33,696.54 crore in 2023-24.

Illness claims stood at 3.13 lakh (Rs 1,154.56 crore) in 2017-18, followed by 22.77 lakh claims (Rs 5,799.75 crore) in 2018-19

and 56.41 lakh claims (Rs 12,706.34 crore) in 2019-20. During the Covid years of 2020-21 and 2021-22, illness claims rose to 77.82 lakh worth Rs 14,727.50 crore and 1.15 crore claims worth Rs 19,204.29 crore, respectively.

Due to lack of restrictions on the number of times the illness advance could be withdrawn, even as there was an amount cap of six months of basic wages and dearness allowance, around 58% of the members availed the illness advance more than once in 2017-2025, while around 25% availed it four times.

Partial withdrawal claims for housing also increased over the last few years. Some 15.52 lakh claims worth Rs 23,712.46 crore were settled for purchase of a dwelling/house/flat or construction site in 2024-25, up from 11.95 lakh claims worth Rs 18,765.32 crore in 2023-24. This category of claims stood at 4.91 lakh (Rs 8,437.33 crore) in 2017-18, 8.12 lakh claims (Rs 13,625.20 crore) in 2018-19, and 9.28 lakh claims (Rs 14,961.70 crore) in 2019-20.

Recent changes & criticism

The EPFO earlier this month announced streamlining the withdrawal categories from 13 to three — essential needs (illness, education, marriage); housing needs; and special circumstances — along with an introduction of a minimum balance of 25%.

Withdrawal limits for education or illness have been made more flexible: partial withdrawals can now be made 10 times for education and five times for marriage, as against the existing limit of three for marriage and education combined. Under illness and 'special circumstances' categories, withdrawals will be allowed three times and two times every financial year respectively.

The decisions, however, came under fire from several quarters. Opposition leaders and EPF members raised concerns about the increase in the minimum period for availing premature final settlement during unemployment to 12 months.

"Is the money EPFO's or the member's?... Hardworking citizens who are being deprived of their own savings..." AIMIM party chief and MP Asaduddin Owaisi said in a post on X on October 15.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment clarified that 75% of a member's amount can be withdrawn immediately after leaving the job; the time criterion is only for full withdrawal.

LONGER VERSION ON
indianexpress.com/explained

Match-fixing is not a crime in India. BCCI has approached SC to change that

VINEET BHALLA
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 22

THE BOARD of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has approached the Supreme Court seeking an intervention in a case that could decide whether match-fixing can be prosecuted as a criminal offence of cheating under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

India, despite being a cricketing powerhouse, does not have a specific law that criminalises match-fixing. The BCCI's intervention aims to plug this gap by calling for a wider interpretation of the criminal offence of cheating.

The case

The case, *State of Karnataka & Anr v Sri Abrar Kazi & Ors*, stems from allegations of match-fixing and spot-fixing in the Karnataka Premier League (KPL) in 2018 and 2019. The Bengaluru police filed a chargesheet against multiple cricket players, a KPL team owner, a Karnataka state

cricket administrator and a bookie, booking them for cheating under Section 420 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and for criminal conspiracy under Section 120B of the IPC.

The accused approached the Karnataka High Court, arguing that the allegations, even if true, did not constitute the criminal offence of cheating.

On January 10, 2022, the High Court agreed with them and quashed the criminal proceedings against them.

This prompted the State of Karnataka to file a special leave petition in the Supreme Court, challenging the High Court's decision. It is in this pending appeal that the BCCI has now filed an application to intervene and present its arguments.

Karnataka HC's reasoning

The High Court's decision hinged on the precise ingredients of the offence of cheating under Section 420 of the IPC. To prove cheating, the prosecution must establish a "dishonest inducement to deliver any property".

The police argued that the spectators were cheated because they were induced to buy tickets believing they were watching a fair contest. The High Court rejected this argument, ruling that spectators "may have a feeling that they are going to witness a fair game being played, but they buy the tickets voluntarily. So, the question of inducement to buy a ticket can be ruled out."

It concluded that while match-fixing is a grave act of indiscipline and mental corruption, it amounts to a breach of the BCCI's internal codes of conduct. The court stated that the BCCI is the appropriate authority to initiate disciplinary action but match-fixing does not, by itself, give rise to a criminal offence under the IPC.

BCCI's stand

In its intervention application, the BCCI has strongly argued against the High Court's reasoning, contending that the conduct of match-fixing squarely falls within the def-

inition of cheating.

The board's primary argument is that there exists an "express or implied promise" to the paying public and sponsors that a cricket match will be played fairly and honestly. When players fix a match, they break this promise, thereby deceiving the public.

This deception, the BCCI argues, dishonestly induces the public to part with its money to purchase tickets and for sponsors to invest in teams, leagues and broadcasts — which satisfies the key ingredient of cheating under Section 420 of the IPC, according to the board.

The BCCI also highlighted that the prevalence of corrupt practices like match-fixing has an adverse impact on the game and undermines the integrity of the sport. It has framed its own anti-corruption code for cricketers but stated that criminal prosecution is also necessary.

Through its intervention application, the BCCI is siding with the Karnataka govern-

ment and demanding that the Supreme Court overturn the High Court's order. A favourable ruling would empower law enforcement agencies to prosecute match-fixing cases under the existing cheating laws.

Current legal position

As things stand, there is no specific central law that defines and criminalises match-fixing or sports fraud. Law enforcement agencies have historically relied on the IPC sections for cheating (420) and criminal conspiracy (120B) but, as the Karnataka High Court judgment shows, this approach is legally vulnerable.

This legal vacuum has been recognised for years. The Law Commission of India, in its 276th report titled 'Legal Framework: Gambling and Sports Betting including in Cricket in India' published in July 2018, had noted that the existing legal framework was inadequate to deal with corruption in sports.

"Match-fixing and sports fraud should be specifically made criminal offences with severe punishments," the report said.

Parliament has enacted no such law.

Other major cricketing nations, however, do have specific laws to tackle match-fixing in sports.

UK: The UK's Gambling Act 2005 makes the "actual or attempted deception or interference in connection with... a real or virtual game, race or other event or process" on the outcome of which a bet has been placed, a criminal offence. This definition is wide enough to cover match-fixing.

AUSTRALIA: Several Australian states have specific criminal offences for engaging in conduct that corrupts a sports betting outcome. A federal agency called Sport Integrity Australia works with different stakeholders and law enforcement agencies to coordinate and respond to betting-related corruption.

SOUTH AFRICA: The Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act, 2004 — the primary anti-corruption legislation in the country — makes it an offence to engage in "corrupt activities relating to sporting events".

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
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A thought for today

It is not so much our friends’ help that helps us,
as the confidence of their help

EPICURUS

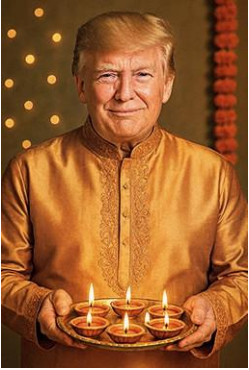
Happy Diwali?

Modi-Trump call indicates both are keen to work together.
Trump can flip. But a trade deal looks less unlikely

The post-Op Sindoor chill between Modi and Trump seems to be yielding to their old warmth. Given Trump’s mercurial nature, it would be a mistake to read too much into one-odd message or remark, but a clear intent to normalise ties between the “natural partner” nations has become discernible since early Sept when Trump wrote on Truth Social: “I look forward to speaking with my very good friend, Prime Minister Modi, in the upcoming weeks.” This was after he had declared at a presser: “I’ll always be friends with Prime Minister Modi... India and the United States have a special relationship. There’s nothing to worry about. We just have moments on occasion.” And Modi, who had reportedly dodged four of Trump’s calls in July-Aug, responded: “We will work together to secure a brighter, more prosperous future for both our people.”

Their Diwali bonhomie fits into the pattern that has emerged since. On Tuesday, Trump called up Modi to convey Diwali wishes, and in his telling they discussed trade – “working on some great deals” – among other things. The problem with Trump’s telling is that he often claims things without basis, such as his oft-repeated boast about negotiating the India-Pak ceasefire in May. After his Diwali call, Trump has claimed Modi is “not gonna buy much oil from Russia”. The Indian side has, meanwhile, expressed “heartfelt appreciation” for his call, and Modi on his X handle has wished that India and US will “continue to illuminate the world with hope and stand united against terrorism in all its forms”, which is a not-so-subtle hint at Trump’s new friends in Pakistan.

Before this, Trump called to wish Modi on his birthday, and later posted on Truth Social: “Narendra: Thank you for your support on ending the War between Russia and Ukraine!”, and Modi, while thanking him, mentioned: “Like you, I am also fully committed to taking the India-US Comprehensive and Global Partnership to new heights.” What’s clear, then, is that Modi and Trump have made up their minds to work together, with different goals. Trump craves glory – Russia, Gaza – and Modi is intent on a trade deal and low tariffs, which are necessary to maintain exports to India’s biggest market. The original timeline for the deal was fall of this year; and if it happens now, it will be on time, and timely, because exports and manufacturing can do with a lift.



Different Old Story

India’s growing numbers of elderly need a supply of
rules-bound professional caregivers. That’s not happening

The import of a Bombay HC verdict, in a case on proper care arrangement for an elderly person, will resonate in homes across the country. HC made two daughters of a 75-year-old man legal guardians as he is incapable of making informed decisions concerning himself or his treatment, given multiple chronic medical and psychiatric conditions. He was uncooperative when it came to psychological testing. Ageing is difficult. In several chronic conditions, especially neurological, and punishing disorders like schizophrenia, and as a side-effect of certain essential medicines, patients suffer perceived persecution by family. Care-giving in such situations can be challenging, affecting a family’s mental well-being too.

Per a UNFPA study, population of people aged 80+ years will grow at a rate of around 279% between 2022 and 2050. Incidence of Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s etc is rapidly increasing. Millions of elderly may suffer from dementia well before 2050. Are we prepared? No, but not for want of programmes for elderly on paper – almost 30 central schemes alone across ministries. Implementation is poor; as is awareness among elderly. And trained support staff, as well as legal and commercial rules for this work, is almost totally missing. Elder care treatment can be prohibitively costly; demand for trained care as per patient’s and household’s needs far outstrips supply. Risk of geriatric psychiatric disorders rapidly increases with age. Coupled with trends in longevity, this means more senior citizens will suffer longer years of declining quality of life. It is a terrifying reality.

Almost a quarter of the elderly population, 23%, according to UNFPA, suffer two or more chronic conditions. Keep in mind 40-42% of people aged 45+ live with undiagnosed diabetes. A Niti Aayog paper last year noted 78% of elderly live without any pension, one in three senior citizens reported depressive symptoms, 32% had low life satisfaction. UNFPA found almost 19% have no income. There’s no dearth of data/reports on what needs done. The problem is in doing it.



Motorcycle Diaries?

Nah, now it’s more motorcycle diarrhea

Bachi Karkaria



Mobikes to left of us,
Mobikes to right of us,
Mobikes massed in
front of us
Volley and thunder.
Charge out like bats

from hell
Boldly they ride in a swell,
Into the jaws of pothole Death
Ride the three million.

– Charge of the Blight Brigade
(Sorry, Tennyson)

This Dhanteras, Mumbai registered a scant 7% more cars than last year – but 63% more two-wheelers. This spiral was aided and abetted by last month’s 10% cut in GST. God Save Traffic. And us.

Forget urban naxals, I want to crush two-wheeler and urban axles. Terror grips me when, each festival, I read about their risen number. Because they all seem to be vrooming on my daily routes, and dense forests of them are rooted on my once-road-now-lane.

True, several other encroachments narrow every stretch beyond pampered SoBo’s *cordon sanitaire*. But, in an Archimedesian subversion, the mass of bikes much reduces the carriageway, thus increasing the volume of traffic jams and

pedestrians displaced.

The official reason for slashing GST from 28% to 18% was to increase ‘youth mobility’. But what about the rest of us roadies?

Elitist? Me? Nevver! Mother-swear I’m all for aspiration and uplifting the downtrodden. *Nakkich*, you must throw *chai-samosa* party for getting own bike and freeing yourself from brutal public transport. But getting private vehicle means road becomes your private property, or not? *Bhaiya*, you must obey rules, no?

No! Listen, Hi-fly Madam-ji, stop your griping. Instead of griping, grip your seat and admire our daredevil feats. Marvel at the way we zig-zag through peak-hour traffic, not caring for lanes, gravity, or life and limb. Gape at our ability to *squeeeeee* through the narrowest space to your left. *Arrey*, what’s a ripped-off rear-view mirror compared to our awesome expertise of zooming past your right?

You should applaud two-wheelers for having breached the three-million mark even before this spike. Mumbai’s critical traffic and lung congestion? What’s that?

Alec Smart said: “The most valuable rare earth is Earth.”



erratica

Ruchir Sharma



A strange twist is playing out in global markets. Gold is partying like it’s 1979, and stocks are partying like it’s 1999. But those two eras could not have been more different, the first marked by rampant inflation and geopolitical turmoil, the second by the dotcom mania and relative calm.

Most analysts think gold is booming amid a new stock boom because investors want to hedge against rising policy uncertainty, particularly in US. This theory implies, however, that global investors have an extraordinary tolerance for cognitive dissonance, in fully embracing AI-driven optimism for US stocks and the caution associated with gold. It also just seems a bizarre choice – why hedge with gold at a time when more direct forms of protection (such as buying put options on stocks) are cheap by comparison?

I think there is another explanation for the gold-stock duet: massive liquidity. Govts and central banks rolled out trillions of dollars in stimulus during and after the pandemic. Much of that money is still sloshing around the system and continues to drive the momentum trade across many assets, including stocks and gold. On the back of all that stimulus, the sum Americans hold in money market mutual funds surged after the pandemic and now totals \$7.5tn, or more than \$1.5tn above the long-term trend.

While Fed says its policy is ‘mildly restrictive’, following the interest rate increases in 2022-23 and a modest reduction of its bloated balance sheet, the fact is that nominal interest rates are still below the rate of nominal GDP growth, which keeps financial conditions loose. Govts are doing their part, led by US, with the highest deficit in the developed world. The flip side of a huge deficit is a huge private sector surplus (as the Kalecki-Levy equation shows).

Liquidity is also a function of people’s risk appetite. The more confident they feel about the upside in financial assets, the more money they are willing to pour into financial markets. US households have ramped up their exposure to stocks and other risk assets in

recent years, emboldened by the existence of a united govt-central bank front to protect markets, regardless.

Investors have been conditioned to expect a state rescue at the slightest hint of trouble. Witness how Fed cut rates amid the market wobbles last Sept. Or now, how Fed is inclined to keep cutting rates even though odds of a recession are at a five-year low, citing as justification some weakness in the labour market. By sharply



Image: AI

lowering the risk premium, state support effectively opens the liquidity floodgates. Why would investors, whether creditors or borrowers, worry when the downside feels so protected and the upside uncapped?

At the same time, hyper-financialisation is boosting liquidity flows. The rapid proliferation of new trading apps and exotic, largely commission-free investment vehicles makes it much easier for anyone to buy financial assets, funneling liquidity into multiple corners of the market.

What A Court Win Says About India’s Generics Case

Explainer on the Risdiplam battle: GOI and Indian pharma must make the most of legitimate TRIPS flexibilities when multinational companies extend patents on life-saving drugs by suspect means

Rema.Nagarajan@timesofindia.com



Risdiplam is the life-saving drug for a rare disease, Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). Costing ₹6L per bottle, it will now be available for less than ₹16,000 per bottle. Because the Supreme Court has refused to intervene in a high court judgment, which upheld Indian generic manufacturer Natco’s challenge to the validity of the Risdiplam patent, held by the multinational pharma company Roche.

What’s the significance of the Natco vs Roche case? | Roche went to Delhi HC against Natco for infringement of its patent on Risdiplam. The Indian patent for Risdiplam is valid from May 2015 to May 2035. Roche wanted Natco to be stopped from selling the generic version of Risdiplam immediately. A single judge hearing the case refused to stop Natco from making the generic and upheld its challenge to the validity of the patent.

Natco argued that the Risdiplam patent lacked both novelty and inventive step (being an obvious modification of prior disclosed compounds). This is because in March 2017, Roche was granted a broad US patent for a group of chemical compounds, which also covered Risdiplam. The patent was set to tentatively expire in 2033. In India, Roche later filed for a separate patent specifically for Risdiplam, which is valid until 2035. The inventors listed for both the patents were the same persons.

Roche filed an appeal against the order of the single judge before a division bench (two judges) of Delhi HC, which upheld the single judge’s order. What has been hailed by medicine activists is the division bench’s observation on the need to prevent companies from devising minor changes to increase their patent exclusivity period.

How will it help patients in India? | The country could have about one lakh patients living with SMA, with an estimated 3,200 infants born with the disease every year. However, Risdiplam costs ₹6L per bottle and a

patient with a body weight of over 20kg requires 2.5 to 3 bottles per month, or 30-36 bottles per year. At Roche’s price it would be unaffordable for most patients.

Under the National Policy for Treatment of Rare Diseases (NPTRD), SMA patients get one-time assistance of ₹50L from govt. At the price set by Roche, ₹50L would only cover treatment for 6-8 months at best, even with Roche giving two bottles for free with every bottle you buy. The price announced by Natco is ₹15,900 per bottle, a reduction of 97%. This could bring down the cost to less than ₹5L per year.

According to public health activists, centralised procurement under NPTRD could bring the price down to less than ₹10,000 per bottle, reducing the cost of annual treatment to about ₹3L. At ₹3L, the financial assistance of ₹50L could cover a patient’s treatment for 16 years, buying patients precious time, during which the price could fall even further.

Could Natco’s generic retail price have been capped at a lower level? | No. Govt fixes the price only of essential medicines, and even in that case the price fixed is not linked to the cost of production. Maximum price for an essential drug is based on the simple average of the retail price of top-selling brands of a particular drug.

Govt does not fix the initial launch price of an introductory drug that is not on the national list of essential medicines. This is to encourage pharma companies to bring new products into the market.

But subsequent price increases are regulated. Drug pricing experts have pegged the cost of production of Risdiplam at ₹3,000 for the amount required for a year’s treatment. When considering production cost, even Natco’s bulk buying price would work out to be about ₹3L per year, or 100 times the

estimated production cost.

If govt had invoked the govt-use provision under the patent law and then got a generic manufacturer to make it, it could have negotiated a lower price. However, without such a govt initiative, a move to cap the price could discourage generic pharma companies from taking the risk of producing a generic by challenging Roche’s patent.

Even if govt were to issue compulsory licensing, it has become increasingly difficult to find willing generic



Art: Niran

companies, as many now have contracts or licensing agreements with multinational pharma companies, which they are not willing to risk. If Natco steps back, it would be disastrous for Indian SMA patients, as most would not be able to afford Roche’s Risdiplam.

Does India have an anti-patent environment hurting its larger interests? | No. WTO agreement on TRIPS allows several flexibilities, especially to let member nations address public health needs and promote access to affordable medicines. Flexibilities include

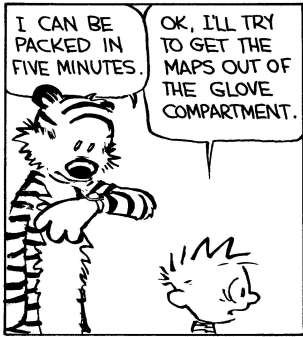
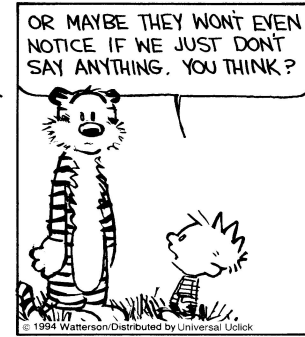
applying rigorous standards of patentability and compulsory licensing to correct market distortions.

India’s patent law has incorporated many of these flexibilities, including provisions to prevent evergreening. Multinational pharma companies unhappy with these flexibilities are constantly lobbying Western govts to pressurise India to go beyond TRIPS provisions, by labelling India as being anti-patent. Their pressure has made India hesitant about using legitimate flexibilities such as the use of compulsory licences and has even led to dilution of many public safeguards, which were once available in the patent law.

Calvin & Hobbes



SHOULD WE ACT SURPRISED, LIKE THE CAR JUST ROLLED HERE BY ITSELF? MAYBE MOM AND DAD WOULD FALL FOR THAT.



Preparing The World For Peace And Justice

A K Merchant

What makes us human, and why is there a systemic breakdown at all levels of present-day society? Multiple narratives provide plausible answers, but none appear to be satisfactory, given the health of our planet. The Golden Rule states that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Perhaps the question ‘who am i?’ can be better understood by rephrasing it as ‘What kind of human being am i?’ along with two related questions: What is my purpose in life? Why am i here? When confronted with frightening circumstances or thoughts, a tiny part of our brain called the amygdala goes into overdrive. Called the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response, all it takes is one singular situation or thought, and our whole world can turn upside down.

Bahá’u’lláh, founder of Bahá’í Faith, whose birth anniversary is being

celebrated throughout the world, enjoins humanity to think more of others: “Beware lest ye prefer yourselves above your neighbours.” Whether or not a person loves his neighbour may seem unimportant or trivial in relation to bigger concepts such as world peace. The reality of man is his thought, not his material body. “When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed by a more powerful thought of love.” Bahá’í writings emphasise the power of positive thoughts to counteract negative ones, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships.

Bahá’is believe that very few people consciously and deliberately do a wrong act. They usually have a justification for what they are doing. People cannot help acting the way they do. They are the product of their background and

environment. If we remember this, we will not get angry or despise them. Rather, we would think of their background and circumstances and how they were raised and try to help.

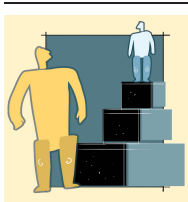
Humanity yearns to live by the Rig Ved dictum: “Common be your prayer; Common be your end; Common be your purpose; Common be your deliberation; Common be your desires; Unified be your hearts; Unified be your intentions; Perfect be the union among you.” And yet individuals easily succumb to baser instincts.

Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius said, “The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts. The soul becomes dyed with colours of its thoughts.” The Buddha said, “Nothing can harm you as much as your own thoughts unguarded.” On any given day, thousands of thoughts flood our brains, and many



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacredspace



Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the

experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.

Douglas Adams

negative ones are simply untrue. Challenging destructive thoughts about ourselves or others and being compassionate throughout difficult situations can keep negativity and its resulting ill effects in check. How one reacts to people could make all the difference. People treat you as they are, not as you are.

We should associate with kind souls whenever possible. In his book *The Hidden Words*, Bahá’u’lláh wrote: “Company of the ungodly increaseth sorrow, whilst fellowship with the righteous cleanseth rust from off the heart.” Bahá’i believe that upheavals and convulsions are preparing the world for the promised era of peace and justice, and that the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh has set in motion forces that would eventually hasten Golden Age for human race.

Today is 208th birth anniversary of Bahá’u’lláh

The writer is secretary, Bahá’í Spiritual Assembly of Delhi



Burning questions on climate

Rising carbon emission signals Western indifference

The United Nations Conference of Parties (COP30), scheduled for November 10 to 21 in Belem, Brazil, will start on the bleakest note in a decade, with the latest data from the World Meteorological Organization showing that the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere last year showed a record increase. The global average grew 3.5 parts per million (ppm) to 424 ppm in 2024 over 2023, the highest increase since modern measurements started in 1957. Among the key contributory factors for this surge is the accelerated burning of fossil fuels, including in India, though countries had pledged in 2023 to transition away from oil, coal, and gas. Global heating has created a vicious cycle of creating hotter and drier conditions, which caused historic levels of wildfire emissions in the Americas last year. In a nutshell, the world is suffering the consequences of the developed world abdicating its responsibility for global warming, a principle enshrined in the adoption of Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR) at the Rio de Janeiro UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) way back in 1992.

The key problem has been the consistent lack of leadership by the United States (US), the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases per capita, which has rendered moot emission-reduction targets in subsequent UNFCCC protocols. Some US administrations did address emission levels but the CBDR principle had been made largely redundant by the 2015 Paris Agreement. The US abandonment of even this diminished agreement, under both Donald Trump presidencies, has further weakened the scaffolding on which the agreement stood. One index has been that developed countries exceeded the climate-finance pledge target of \$100 billion per year, taken at the COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009, in only one year — 2022 — that too two years after the original target of 2020. Now, with US President Donald Trump declaring climate change a “hoax”, finance from the industrialised West, including private sources, have waned. For instance, days before Mr Trump's second inauguration, major investors such as BlackRock withdrew from the Net Zero Asset Manager's Initiative, one of the largest climate-finance groups, under pressure from Republican lawmakers. Giants such as Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, Wells Fargo, Morgan Stanley, Bank of America, and J P Morgan Chase exited the Net Zero Banking Alliance under similar pressures. This exodus has made a mockery of the COP29 pledge in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November last year to treble annual financial support for developing countries to \$300 billion by 2035 from private and public sources.

As a result of virtually unfettered greenhouse-gas emission — exacerbated by wars in Ukraine-Russia and Gaza-Israel — the world's traditional carbon sinks, on which India has set great store, are proving less effective. With oceans growing warmer, and the landmass turning hotter and drier, the absorptive capacities of nature's cleaning agents are failing. It is ironic, in fact, that COP30 is being held in Belem, the city is considered a gateway to the Amazon, where devastation caused by sustained deforestation has turned the world's largest tropical forest into a carbon source in some parts. Carbon trading could well be a solution but workable global trading mechanisms have proved elusive. In short, negotiators at COP30 have their work cut out.

Workforce in transition

New draft policy will improve labour-market conditions

The Ministry of Labour and Employment's draft national labour policy, Shram Shakti Niti, has the right intentions. It aims to build a fair, inclusive, and future-ready system where every worker — formal, informal, or gig — has access to dignity, protection, and opportunity. The ministry's role is redefined as an “employment facilitator”, using digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) to connect workers, employers, and training institutions seamlessly. It recognises that India's labour market is experiencing structural shifts, driven by digitisation, green transitions, and new employment forms such as gig work and platform work, and in this direction, the plan to expand the National Career Service (NCS) into a Digital Public Infrastructure for Employment shows a shift toward a data-driven, worker-centred approach to bridge the gap of information asymmetry.

In terms of shifts in the labour market, the “South Asia Development Update” (October 2025), released by the World Bank, painted a complex picture of how AI is reshaping India's labour landscape. While fears of job losses from automation dominate public debate, the report argues that AI's impact will be uneven, bringing both opportunities for productivity growth and challenges for inclusion. Only about 7 per cent of jobs in South Asia are highly exposed to automation. However, around 15 per cent are “AI-human complementary”, meaning they could become more productive when paired with technology. AI-related jobs command nearly a 30 per cent wage premium over other white-collar positions. Indian firms are moving from business process outsourcing to knowledge process outsourcing, creating higher-skill opportunities but narrowing entry-level openings.

To harness this shift, the Shram Shakti Niti draft outlines a series of interventions to bridge the divide between skill and opportunity. It calls for targeted skilling and reskilling programmes, especially in semiurban and rural areas, aligning the training of supply with industry demand. Additionally, the draft also promotes AI-enabled job matching, digital credentialing, and entrepreneurship support for the youth and women. In this regard, as reported by this newspaper earlier this month, the Central Board of Secondary Education plans to introduce AI in the school curriculum from Class III onwards. Simultaneously, efforts are being made to integrate AI and data science into undergraduate programmes across disciplines to build an AI-ready workforce.

The draft report also proposed universal and portable social security, simplified compliance for micro, small, and medium enterprises, and support for green and technology-led transitions. Together, these measures form a forward-looking framework. However, there are challenges. First, the dominance of informality complicates social-security implementation and compliance monitoring. Second, gender disparities persist where women's labour force participation remains low. Third, coordination between the Centre, states, and districts, which is often not very smooth, will determine how quickly reforms translate into results. If implemented well, the Shram Shakti Niti could help in improving labour-market conditions. Nevertheless, the broader challenge for the Indian economy remains creating gainful employment for its large and growing workforce, while maintaining a balance between protecting workers' rights and ensuring flexibility for businesses.

‘China Shock’ hitting poor countries hardest

If China truly aspires to global leadership, it must vacate the low-skill manufacturing space in favour of developing countries

China's rising trade surplus is once again causing unease in the United States and Europe. But the real casualties from this new “China Shock” will not be in the West. They will be in the developing world, where hundreds of millions of people still depend on manufacturing for jobs and upward mobility. China's trade dominance not only threatens growth across the Global South, it also undermines China's own claim to global leadership.

Influential work by David Autor and his co-authors documented how the first China Shock, from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, wiped out manufacturing jobs and communities across the United States. Yet much of that adjustment reflected deeper, long-term forces: Technological progress and the steady reallocation of workers from factories to services — a shift that predated the China Shock, but was accelerated by it. As a result, advanced economies have largely vacated the low-skill sectors that China continues to dominate.

Today, China's manufacturing trade surplus stands at roughly \$2 trillion, about \$1.4 trillion of which comes from low-skill goods. For the West, then, the new China Shock is narrower, concentrated in a few sectors such as electric vehicles and renewables, and in specific technologies where Chinese imports still account for about 1.5 per cent of the West's gross domestic product (GDP).

The story is far more alarming for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), which face a threat to the sectors where their comparative advantage lies — namely, low-skill manufacturing industries, which remain crucial for job creation and economic development. Accounting for almost 4 per cent of LMICs' combined GDP, the import shock

from China represents a larger (and growing) share of their economies than imports of high-skill goods do in developed countries.

How serious is this threat? One benchmark is to compare China's share of low-skill exports among LMICs to its share of the global workforce. China still accounts for more than half of global low-skill exports (see chart), and though its market share has declined slightly since peaking in 2015, the trend line should have been far steeper, given its shrinking labour force. The wedge between China's export share and its labour-force share — roughly 28 percentage points — suggests that China continues to occupy “excess” export space that could otherwise support tens of millions of manufacturing jobs in poorer economies.

What makes this persistence even more striking is that China's manufacturing wages are now far higher than those in LMICs — and still increasing. For example, in apparel, the canonical labour-intensive sector, the annual wage in China averages around \$10,000, which is roughly five times higher than in Bangladesh and four times higher than in India.

Even with such wage differentials, China's export strength might be less troubling if it stemmed purely from productivity gains and automation. In that case, one would still have to question China's hegemonic legitimacy, because true hegemony accommodate rather than crowd out others, but it would not necessarily be unfair. Mounting evidence suggests that this is not the case, though. Instead, China shows signs of significant policy distortions. Industrial subsidies, undervalued exchange rates, and persistent excess capacity are all tilting the playing field in its favour. China's con-



SHOUMITRO CHATTERJEE & ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

India's urban governance crisis

Urban infrastructure nationwide is under increasing strain. Cities, once viewed as drivers of productivity and as a promise of a better quality of life, now grapple with waterlogging, long traffic jams, and pollution, jeopardising both residents' quality of life and overall productivity. These inherent failures point to a lack of urban planning, placing the blame on the local bodies that govern our cities. Urban local bodies (ULBs), also referred to as urban local self governments, are the primary governing institutions, directly responsible for translating policy into on-ground implementation, failure of which can lead to deteriorating public amenities for the urban population.

A recent audit of ULBs conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) raises a more fundamental question: Do these bodies possess the power to plan effectively in the first place?

ULBs were granted constitutional status under the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) of 1992. Through the amendment's 12th schedule, the Constitution devolved a total of 18 functions to these bodies, ranging from urban planning and land use regulation to the maintenance of social and infrastructure services, such as sanitation, solid waste management, slum improvement, and poverty alleviation. Even though the amendment was introduced more than 30 years ago, the performance audit by CAG in 2024, conducted across ULBs in 18 states, reveals a glaring truth: The provisions under the 74th amendment remain largely unimplemented.

According to the audit, on average, only 4 out of the 18 powers under the 12th schedule are fully under the autonomous control of ULBs, with most functions being performed with regular interference from the state government or parastatals, often without any representation from local bodies.

In addition, ULBs are being deprived of making

their own recruitment decisions, as the staff assessments are conducted by the state government, leading to frequent underestimation of personnel requirements. For instance, the Shimla Municipal Corporation, which required 720 personnel, was sanctioned only 20 new posts by the state government. This lack of autonomy has not only resulted in fewer sanctioned positions but has also left one out of three posts vacant across the 18 states, depriving ULBs of the human resources necessary to carry out their functions properly.

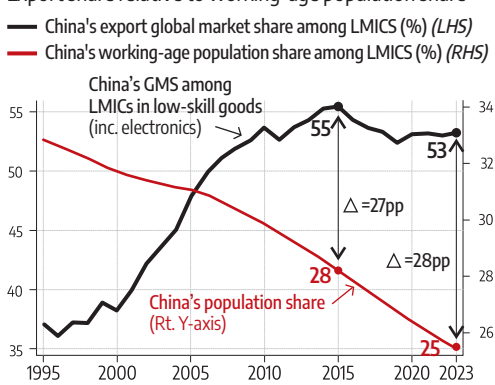
The 74th CAA provides for the constitution of new institutional designs, such as State Election Commissions (SECs) to ensure regular municipal elections, and district planning committees (DPCs) and metropolitan planning committees (MPCs) to facilitate integrated and coordinated regional planning. However, the CAG audit reveals a complete neglect of these provisions. According to the report, 61 per cent, or 1,600 of the 2,625 ULBs in 17 states assessed, didn't have an elected council, with only five states appointing a mayor through a direct election.

A significant reason for this shortcoming is that the power of ward delimitation rests with the state government, which often delays the conduct of regular municipal elections. In the absence of an elected council, the public is unable to hold ULBs accountable. The lack of strategic planning further weakens these urban bodies. Only 10 states covered in the audit were found to have constituted DPCs, and just three had prepared annual district plans. The MPCs exhibit a similar trend. Of the nine states mandated to form MPCs, only three had done so, resulting in a total of seven metropolitan ULBs, and only three had developed plans.

On the financial side, a considerable delay in both the constitution of State Finance Commissions (SFCs) (responsible for coordinating fiscal transfers between state government and ULBs) and the imple-

China's ‘excess’ exports, 1995-2023

Export share relative to working-age population share



Source: CEPII-BACI trade data and World Bank's Development Indicators

tinued dominance reflects not just efficiency, but deliberate policy choices that prevent poorer countries from climbing the development ladder.

History underscores how unfair China's strategy is. Charles Kindleberger famously argued that hegemony provide global public goods, such as financing during crises, resources for long-term development, and support for open markets. When the US was the world's economic hegemon after World War II, it created manufacturing and export space for others — first Japan, then the Asian Tigers, and eventually China itself. Its willingness to absorb imports and allow others to grow was an essential part of its global leadership. Yet today, as the Trump administration retreats from that role, China's actions will determine whether it can credibly replace the US as a responsible provider of that critical global public good.

The pressure on LMICs is already evident in their growing trade actions against China. The recent unrest in Indonesia — a by-product of de-industrialisation and exposure to Chinese competition — underscores what is at stake. To its credit, China has taken symbolic steps toward offering real leadership, including by voluntarily relinquishing its developing-country status at the World Trade Organization and granting duty-free access to poorer countries.

But these gestures will ring hollow unless China genuinely vacates the global manufacturing space. If China truly aspires to global leadership, it must internalise a simple truth: Hegemony gain legitimacy not by dominating others, especially the poor, but by enabling their rise. The new China Shock is not just about economic consequences. It is also a test of whether China can serve as a fair steward of global prosperity, or remain a formidable practitioner of beggar-thy-neighbour mercantilism.

The authors are, respectively, assistant professor of International Economics at Johns Hopkins University, and former chief economic adviser to the Indian government and senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

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The UN's unsung peacemaker



SHYAM SARAN

If one had to find a compelling example of historical revisionism and erasure, one will find it in Thant Myint U's extraordinarily well-researched biography of his grandfather, U Thant, the only Asian to grace the office of Secretary General of the United Nations (UNSG) from 1961 to 1971. In the two chapters — Missile Crisis and Havana — the author provides a blow-by-blow account of how U Thant's extraordinary diplomatic skills and credibility enabled him to resolve a crisis that threatened a nuclear Armageddon. His

successful mediation between the two superpowers — the United States and the then Soviet Union — brought the world back from the brink of all-out war. It is this saga of statesmanship that has been mostly erased from subsequent history written by the self-declared and triumphant victors of the Cold War.

The decade in which U Thant served as the UNSG was easily the best years of the world body, enjoying both prestige and agency, which it had neither enjoyed before since its inception in 1945 nor has regained subsequently. It would be no exaggeration to say that it was U Thant's leadership that gave the world body the ability to navigate the complex and shifting geopolitics of the Cold War years. He was sought after by American presidents, Soviet and European leaders. He was seen as a genuine champion of the constituency of developing countries, now coalescing in the Non-Aligned Movement

set up in 1961. He had easy access to leaders across the world and enjoyed the company of leading lights of the Western world, including well known intellectuals, diplomats, politicians, writers, artists and business leaders. He harnessed their prestige and influence to his role as the first diplomat of the world.

It is surprising how someone from a traditional Burmese family of modest means, who was mostly self-taught and had served as a headmaster of a school in an obscure village, adapted so effortlessly to the arcane world of international diplomacy. He chose his aides well. They included C V Narasimhan, an Indian Civil Service officer who was one of the original international civil servants at the UN.

There was Ralph Bunche, a former American State Department officer, who became the chief political advisor to U Thant. They were intensely loyal to him and played a critical role in his transformation from a

modest self-effacing diplomat into a most highly respected head of a world body already threatened by irrelevance in the power play among its most influential members.

The book chronicles both the triumphs and setbacks experienced by U Thant as UNSG during the decade of the 1960s. His role in promoting a ceasefire between India and Pakistan after the 1965 war harks back to a time when acceptance of mediation was not seen as an admission of weakness. It comes as a surprise that it was U Thant who had suggested an India-Pakistan peace summit at Tashkent, then part of the Soviet Union.

The book details how U Thant expended a huge amount of political capital in trying to bring the Vietnam War to an end but failed because of hubris on the part of the United States. In 1965, when the US was despatching several



Peacemaker: U Thant, the United Nations and the Untold Story of the 1960s
by Thant Myint-U
Published by Juggernaut
368 pages ₹999

more thousand troops to Vietnam, U Thant was prescient in warning an eventual American defeat: “The longer the war goes on, the end result will be a South Vietnam completely in the hands of the Communists.” This made him unpopular in Washington and by the time Richard Nixon took over the presidency in 1969, both the UN and U Thant were sidelined.

The chapters on Gaza and the Sinai and on the Six Day War are of special interest as the latest destructive and genocidal war has ravaged the Gaza Strip and all the ancient racial and religious animosities

have been reignited in all their ferocity. It is no surprise that U Thant's efforts to prevent hostilities in 1967 were unsuccessful and he became the scapegoat blamed by both sides for mis-steps which could not be laid at his door. Both the Israelis and the Egyptians were guilty of deceit and it was

the UN which again had to play peacemaker in the aftermath of the war.

At the end of his second term in 1971, the world had changed dramatically. Richard Nixon had made his historic opening to China and a US-China alliance backed Pakistan in its brutal suppression of its own citizens and co-religionists in its eastern wing. U Thant mobilised what resources he could to provide aid for the several million refugees from East Pakistan streaming into India but in the last months of his tenure he knew he was unable to take on the US, which would not be deflected from a blanket support to Islamabad.

U Thant was bid farewell by many admirers and friends. He left an indelible mark on the UN and was a defining figure in the decade of the 1960s. He died in 1974 but descended into rapid obscurity in the tumultuous years that followed. It is fitting that his grandson has salvaged his extraordinary legacy and set the record straight in an engaging biography.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Pre-poll splurge

Fiscal recklessness a recipe for disaster

RULING parties of different hues have thrown state coffers wide open in a desperate bid to retain power. State governments have disbursed a whopping Rs 67,928 crore for populist welfare schemes in the run-up to eight major Assembly elections during the past two years. Maharashtra and Bihar, both ruled by the BJP-led NDA, are the top offenders. The Mahayuti government in Maharashtra spent Rs 23,300 crore under schemes like the women-centric Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana ahead of the November 2024 polls. The ploy worked, with female voters in particular tilting the scales in the Mahayuti's favour.

The ruling alliance is hoping for a similar outcome in Bihar, where the government led by Nitish Kumar has distributed Rs 19,333 crore. This figure is as high as one-third of the poverty-ridden state's own tax revenue. Nitish, who is going all out to counter anti-incumbency after having been at the helm for two decades, seems to have no qualms about making the exchequer bleed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, once a bitter critic of *revdi* culture, himself launched Bihar's Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana worth Rs 7,500 crore — days before the Model Code of Conduct came into force.

The poll-eve largesse gives an unfair advantage to the parties in power as they have government funds at their disposal. The absence of a level playing field runs counter to the democratic principle of free and fair elections. The post-poll impact of fiscal recklessness is highlighted by the bumpy progress of the Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana. In reply to an RTI plea, the Maharashtra government has revealed that over 12,000 men were granted benefits under this flagship scheme for women. The political compulsion to keep it running despite financial constraints and fraud is taking a toll on governance. This is a bitter lesson for governments in other states which are spending today as if there is no tomorrow. The Election Commission should not overlook these blatant attempts to bribe voters.

Moga drug theft

A wake-up call for hospital security

THE theft of buprenorphine injections worth about Rs 7 lakh from Moga Civil Hospital reveals institutional slack that endangers patients, subverts deaddiction programmes and risks expanding the supply of powerful opioids into local illicit markets. Buprenorphine, a controlled opioid used both for pain management and deaddiction therapy, is not an ordinary drug. In the wrong hands, it can fuel the very addiction it is meant to cure and intensify the state's already fragile battle against substance abuse. The missing stock was discovered when the staff opened the store; preliminary reports say locks were broken and CCTV or guards were not active, raising questions about security and possible insider complicity. The immediate harm is to patients who may be deprived of legitimate treatment; the longer-term harm is the leakage of clinically important opioids into streets where they can substitute for heroin and fuel addiction cycles — something that the state is desperately trying to combat for decades.

This is not an isolated event; similar thefts were reported from Barnala last year, and the state's deaddiction supply chain has long shown gaps. Such patterns suggest systemic negligence rather than a one-off break-in. The Punjab Health Department must secure drug stores with 24-hour CCTV coverage, biometric access and strict inventory audits. Accountability must extend to the hospital administration, not just the unidentified culprits. The state government should also digitise narcotic-drug tracking and introduce random inspections at all district hospitals. At the same time, police and health authorities should investigate the possibility of insider involvement swiftly and transparently.

The Moga incident should serve as a turning point to reinforce the credibility of the healthcare system. Failure to act will mean compromised treatment and avoidable addiction harm. Timely reforms, not routine inquiries, are the corrective that the system now urgently needs.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23, 1925

A word to Sarojini Naidu

ONE good turn deserves another, and Sarojini Naidu's eloquent speech at the Gujranwala Conference, reported in these columns yesterday, calls for a word in reply. So far as the speech was a stirring appeal for Hindu-Muslim unity, there is not a true-hearted man or woman in the rest of India who will not warmly sympathise with it, and in whom it will not find a responsive echo. Our only complaint in regard to it is that it was couched in too general terms and bore no evidence of the speaker's readiness to face the real, concrete issue. So far as that issue was concerned, she brushed it aside almost as unceremoniously as the President had done in his address. Replying to those who said that if they could settle the question of communal representation, there would be peace in the land, she said that was not so, that they should not treat the leaves or the branches of the diseased tree, but should remove the canker from the root itself, that they should lay the axe at the root of mutual distrust, suspicion, jealousy and fanaticism. But what is the root? Where is the axe to be laid? Just as it is no use crying peace when there is no peace, so you do not eradicate an evil merely by mentioning it. It is perfectly true that if we could remove mutual distrust, suspicion, jealousy and fanaticism, we should be rid of the whole trouble. But the root of the distrust is not the distrust itself, but something else. What is this something else? Is it not that spirit of communalism, as distinguished from the spirit of nationality, of which the demand for communal representation is the one tangible expression so far as the educated sections of the affected communities are concerned?

Sink or swim, the onus is on Punjab

The political leadership should ensure people's participation in inclusive & sustainable development



LAKHWINDER SINGH
VISITING PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS,
INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

PUNJAB's economy has been facing myriad challenges since the mid-1980s. The floods during a prolonged monsoon this year not only caused a heavy loss of life and property but also flagged an urgent problem — dealing with the fast-changing climate conditions in the region.

The impact of the interlinked challenges is reflected in the slow economic progress of Punjab, which is lagging behind several other progressive states. This regression is a matter of concern for policy-makers, the intelligentsia and the masses of Punjab.

Successive state governments have made claims about bringing more investment to Punjab to rejuvenate its economy, but evidence paints a grim picture. The gross fixed capital formation (an indicator of the capacity to produce output) continues to stagnate at 15.44 per cent of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). Low capital investment is caused by the burgeoning debt-GSDP ratio (around 47 per cent, the highest among major Indian states). Punjab is neck deep in debt, and each incumbent government promises to reduce the burden. However, it only ends up adding to the ever-growing debt.

Both production and employment are hampered by low-value-added and low-wage economic activities. This phenomenon forces job aspirants to seek opportunities



CHALLENGE: Punjab must be proactive in dealing with the impact of climate change. TRIBUNE PHOTO

overseas, where they expect their aspirations and dreams of upward mobility to be fulfilled. A state of despair is pushing the most productive young human capital to migrate.

Despite attempts at diversification, the agriculture sector has failed to escape the vicious wheat-paddy cycle, even as the depletion of scarce natural resources has reached alarming proportions.

Punjab is a bulk producer of agricultural commodities and biomass. Farmers suffer losses whenever crop prices crash due to a glut in markets. Burning of agricultural waste is a perennial problem without a long-lasting solution. The manufacturing sector is small in scale and devoid of innovation.

The institutional framework comes under stress when corruption goes unchecked. This gridlock prompts investors to opt for other states.

A dysfunctional fiscal policy is weighing Punjab down. Ideally, the role of fiscal policy is to spur innovation and incentive economic activities for growth in the long run. Instead, unjust and unfair sub-

Punjab needs to realise that adaptive and resilient institutions are essential for fair and sustained economic progress.

sidies (for example, free electricity to households) are being doled out through monetisation of land and other assets and borrowings for the sake of vote-bank politics. The famed entrepreneurial spirit of Punjab is getting stifled. Consequently, Punjab's economy is facing underdevelopment, even though the fourth Industrial Revolution and digital technologies have ample opportunities to offer.

How can Punjab reinvent

itself to return to the path of sustainable development and regain its pride of place among the states? Considering its financial health and governance model, Punjab alone may not be able to create conditions to turn the tide. A geopolitically strategic state that provides food security to the nation has a legitimate claim to expect hand-holding by the Centre.

However, Punjab's economic crisis has worsened in recent decades. The 13th Finance Commission (2010-15) had proposed a package for three debt-stressed states — Punjab, Kerala and West Bengal. However, the package did not see the light of day largely due to an absence of Centre-state coordination.

An alternative that has emerged during disasters is philanthropy. Punjabis living in India and abroad have made collective efforts to provide timely relief and rehabilitation services to flood-hit people. The community has succeeded where the government failed.

In the process, the credibility of the political leadership to govern and enjoy the trust of the people is at stake. The state

government has borrowed a city-state model of governance and development, which is distortionary, unsustainable and not suitable for the geographical conditions of Punjab. It is high time the government abandoned this model and explored an alternative that should follow a holistic and inclusive approach in sync with the realities of Punjab.

There is a need to take a cue from 2024 Nobel laureates (economic sciences) Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James A Robinson, who have reminded us that inclusive, adaptive and resilient institutions are essential for fair and sustained economic progress.

This year's Nobel Prize winners (Joel Mokyr, Phillip Aghion and Peter Howitt) have laid stress on innovation to replace older technologies with new ones, calling it 'creative destruction' that facilitates economic development; the bottom line is that economic growth cannot be taken for granted as the risk of falling back into stagnation looms large. Punjab is suffering both in terms of institutions as well as innovation.

There are two policy options suggested by experts. First, a one-time switching cost for a big-bang change in public policy to put Punjab's economy on the fast track of long-term growth. This kind of change needs huge financial resources that are available with the Union government. Second, the state government should make short-, medium- and long-term plans. This requires a review of socially unjust subsidies that are burdening the state's exchequer.

The Punjabi community is ready for change and willing to bear the cost of this change. Only a trustworthy political leadership can harness the resources available while ensuring people's participation in inclusive and sustainable development.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Economic growth must be combined with equity, and wealth must reach the common man. — Manmohan Singh

A throwback to Radio Jhootistan

VIJAY SABHARWAL

EVER since Operation Sindoor was abruptly halted, there have been conflicting narratives about losses on both sides of the border. Pakistan claims to have shot down several Indian fighter jets, while India asserts that key terror camps were destroyed and many terrorists were killed. Politicians and military officers of both nations continue to make contradictory statements — each boasting of shooting down aircraft and destroying targets, with the figures changing almost every week. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed that he was instrumental in pushing both sides to agree to a ceasefire; Pakistan accepts it as the truth but India emphatically doesn't.

The air remains thick with confusion, and citizens are wondering what to believe and what not. This lack of clarity takes me back to the India-Pakistan war of 1965. During those turbulent days, Radio Pakistan broadcast exaggerated claims of battlefield victories and the capture of Indian territories. To counter these tall tales, All India Radio launched a humorous and popular programme called *Radio Jhootistan* (land of lies).

The name itself carried a touch of satire, and the witty commentary left audiences amused. The show's narrator would begin by relating the day's wildest claims from Radio Pakistan and then ridicule these contentions. His voice, rich and confident, became familiar across North India. Families would gather around their radios each evening to listen, young and old alike, sharing laughter even in those tense times.

The Indian authorities did attempt to block Radio Pakistan's transmissions during the war, but its signal often reached far into Indian territory. *Radio Jhootistan* thus served both as a morale-booster as well as a sharp lesson in critical thinking. Once, Radio Pakistan announced that the country's forces were advancing toward Amritsar; in reality, Indian troops had reached the Ichhogil Canal, barely a few kilometres from Lahore. The stark contrast between fact and fiction was almost comical.

After the ceasefire, friends and relatives who had taken part in military operations shared their experiences and displayed small items picked up from abandoned houses across the border as mementoes of courage and sacrifice.

Op Sindoor reminded me that little has changed in the politics of information. In fact, the speed of misinformation has grown, thanks to 24x7 news coverage on television and the Internet. Both sides want to control the narrative, never mind the truth of the matter. Sometimes it appeared that more effort was expended on peddling lies during this short war than on sharing factual reports of the skirmishes. The difference is that while in 1965 at least one side laughed off state propaganda, both sides are now equally keen to push their claims on TV and social media. Technology has evolved, but the motive remains consistent: to control what the masses should know and think.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Balanced approach in BRICS

This refers to 'Why BRICS makes Trump see red'; India's reaffirmation that a common currency is not on its economic agenda reflects a prudent and balanced approach in keeping with India's long-term strategic and economic interests. At a time when some BRICS members advocate reducing dependence on the dollar, India's caution is justified. In the wake of the country's growing trade, technology and defence ties with the US, it is inadvisable to align with moves that might weaken the dollar-based global system. India's position demonstrates strategic autonomy: avoiding bloc politics while safeguarding its economic stability. The pragmatic policy of encouraging limited local-currency trade without undermining the global dollar framework strikes the right balance between realism and national interest.

HARJINDER SINGH THANDI, MOHALI

India can take the lead

Apropos of 'Why BRICS makes Trump see red'; though replacing the US dollar with an alternate currency is currently in the realm of fantasy, India should use its presidency to speed up groundwork on devising an alternative to the West-dominated SWIFT system of international settlements to reduce dependence on the US dollar for international transactions. The idea of setting up a BRICS Bank has long been proposed and India can initiate groundwork in that direction. The group is not anti-American but it should take steps to protect its interests against potential weaponisation of the dollar. Getting fence-sitters like Saudi Arabia and other non-member Gulf states like Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain to join as strategic partners would help to counter Pakistan's growing diplomatic influence in West Asia.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

No output of Lokpals

Apropos of 'Anti-graft watchdog to ride in style, floats tender for 7 snazzy BMWs'; it seems the watchdog cannot nail corrupt officials and politicians without having the feel of power and luxury. The Lokpals have done nothing till now to control or punish corrupt officials or politicians. The constitutional post has been created and filled to

befool citizens. The past incumbents have been loyalists of the appointing authorities. It is better to keep the post vacant instead of spending crores on it.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RET), MOHALI

Indulgence in govt luxuries

The Lokpal of India's decision to procure seven luxury BMWs, each worth around Rs 70 lakh for its seven office-bearers, raises troubling questions about the institution's priorities. Created to embody integrity, transparency and austerity in public life, the Lokpal was envisioned as a moral compass against corruption. Yet, this move projects the opposite image — one of indulgence and misplaced symbolism. The Lokpal's strength lies in moral authority, not material display.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

Dispel myths about organ donation

With reference to 'A life-saving call'; there are many myths about organ donation due to which people do not come forward for the noble cause. Public awareness in this regard is almost nil because hospitals do not have adequate facilities. It is important to educate the public that organs can be harvested after a patient is declared brain dead and within a particular timespan. However, ignorance, fear, beliefs, sentiments and religious practices often deter donors. The need is to educate the people about how far organ donation can go to save lives. Cumulative efforts of the government, the public, NGOs, health workers, religious organisations and educational institutions are required to spread awareness on organ donation.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

Government must help farmers

Following unprecedented heavy rains, the farmers of Punjab suffered huge losses on a ripe paddy crop ready to be harvested. Due to excess moisture in the grains, the quality of the produce was badly affected which reduced the sale price. The grains got discoloured and affected their quality. The farmer deserves a better deal and help from the government. Quality norms should be relaxed. Lifting of grain stock must be accelerated. All the crops must be procured at the MSP or at a higher price to minimise farmers' losses.

KARNAIL SINGH, KHARAR

Blame game over Delhi's air must stop



NAVREET KAUR
PROFESSOR, PUBLIC ADMN
DEPT, PANJAB UNIVERSITY

INDIA ranks second among 252 countries for poor air quality on the global pollution scale. The AQLI (2025) report by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago estimates that the residents of Delhi NCR may lose 8.2 years of life expectancy if the current PM2.5 levels — which are eight times higher than the World Health Organisation's safe-air standard — persist.

Rather than confronting the challenge, successive governments in Delhi have largely failed to tackle what has become a chronic public health emergency. Furthermore, the judicial intervention allowing green crackers on Diwali has aggravated the smog crisis.

Each year, as toxic smog engulfs the city, corporate-controlled media outlets, social media echo chambers and sections of the governance machinery spring into action — not to seek accountability, but to shift the blame. The narrative is conveniently

reduced to the vilification of Punjab and Haryana farmers over stubble burning even as the deeper, year-round causes of pollution within Delhi NCR itself are ignored.

Air pollution in Delhi NCR is not a seasonal anomaly but a multi-sectoral governance failure. The narrative that it is a seasonal, agriculture-created crisis and the blame game overshadow the scientific evidence pointing to far greater contributors — industrial emissions, transport, construction dust and power plants.

What is urgently needed is not selective outrage, but a data-driven assessment of pollution sources and the systemic neglect by governments that have repeatedly failed to act on their own policy commitments.

Stubble burning undeniably contributes to air pollution. It increases the air pollution for three to four weeks to a large extent and farmers engaging in this practice must be held accountable. But the silence on all other polluting sectors is a calculated attempt to oversimplify a complex environmental crisis and obscures the accountability of other significant pollution sources.

A series of scientific studies, including by TERI (The Energy and Resources Institute), IIT Kanpur, SAFAR (System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research) and data provided



SMOG: Air pollution is not a seasonal anomaly but a multi-sectoral governance failure. REUTERS

by the government in the Lok Sabha, provides a detailed breakdown of the major pollution sources.

According to a source apportionment study by TERI, the principal sources of PM2.5 in winter are industry (30%), transport (28%), dust (17%), residential (10%) and agriculture burning (4% in winter and 7% in summer) and others (11%). The others category includes generator sets, refuse burning, crematoria, airports, restaurants, incinerators and landfills.

The transport sector remains a dominant source of particulate emissions. A 2014 study found that on-road transportation accounts for over 97% of the transport-related emissions in India, highlighting the overwhelming contribution of motor vehicles compared

The fixation on farmers hides the larger truth — industries, power plants and transport remain the biggest polluters.

to rail, air or waterways.

Road dust and construction activity are silent but substantial sources of air pollution. Road dust constitutes 38% of PM2.5 and 56% of PM10 concentrations. Activities like crushing and grinding for infrastructure and real estate development generate massive amounts of coarse dust.

Industrial emissions also account for pollution. The Central Pollution Control Board has classified 17 categories of polluting industries. Metal processing, chemicals, brick kilns and stone-crushing remain significant contributors to Delhi's particulate and gaseous emissions. The industrial sector contributes 30% of PM2.5 in winter and 22% of PM2.5 in summer and 27% of PM10 concentrations.

Power plants remain one of the most persistent and under-addressed sources of industrial emissions in Delhi NCR. The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) reveals that "thermal power plants in the NCR contribute a staggering 16 times more air pollution than the much-discussed issues of stubble burning and vehicular emissions."

These facts and statistics, however, have not led the government to address the problem. Pushing aside the issue of its harmful effect on our health, as per a report in *Down to Earth*, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has issued a notification "extending the deadline for thermal power plants (TPPs) to meet sulphur dioxide emission standards. The ministry has prolonged the timeframe for the installation of flue gas desulfurisation (FGD) systems in TPPs."

All this despite the National Green Tribunal issuing notices and the Supreme Court expressing its dissatisfaction with the government's inaction.

Scientific evidence based on research indicates that Delhi NCR's air pollution is chronic, with industry, transport, dust and power generation accounting for the bulk of PM2.5 and PM 10 loads.

The hard reality is that deliberations and discussions in mainstream media

remain narrowly fixated on farmers, while a silent and passive approach is followed towards unregulated industry, construction, and waste management. These issues remain largely unaddressed.

This selective outrage not only deepens public misinformation but also weakens the urgency for systemic reform. This pattern of political leadership and bureaucratic complacency underscores that the health of citizens is not a priority for both the elected representatives and the governance machinery.

Urgent interventions are required for effective crop-residue management. Preventing stubble burning is crucial not only for reducing air pollution but also for preserving soil health, protecting ecosystems and ensuring agricultural sustainability.

The blame game will not solve the problem, forcing Delhi NCR residents to continue to breathe the toxic air. Until governments confront the year-round emitters of pollution with the same zeal that is used to penalise farmers for a few weeks of burning through satellite-monitoring and directing officials to register FIRs, the citizens will be deprived of cleaner air.

The accountability fixation needs to go beyond the fields. The industries, power plants, transport that pollute the air every day should also be held equally answerable for the persistent problem.

Is Modi bypassing the 8th Central Pay Commission



SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG
FORMER FINANCE SECRETARY

THE recommendations of the still-to-be-set-up Eighth Central Pay Commission (8th CPC) are due for implementation from January 1, 2026. So, why has the government still not constituted the commission?

A cryptic announcement was made by Ashwini Vaishnaw, Minister for Information and Broadcasting, in January 2025, a few days before the Delhi elections. He said the Union Cabinet was discussing the matter. There was no follow-up. Surprisingly, the government replied to a Lok Sabha unstarred question, in August 2025, that there was no proposal to set up the 8th CPC. What is going on? Will the Modi government try some unconventional method this time?

The 7th Central Pay Commission (7th CPC) was constituted by the Manmohan Singh government on February 28, 2014. A pay commission (PC) usually takes about 18-24 months to complete its work. The government takes about 6-12 months to implement its recommendations.

The PCs have an enormous amount of work to do, captured in their terms of reference (TORs). The 7th CPC was required to make recommendations regarding the emoluments of employees of the Central government, All-India Services (AIS), union territories, the Supreme Court and the Indian Audit and Accounts Department as well as members of regulatory bodies. In addition, it was asked to make recommendations for the defence forces personnel.

The 7th CPC was to examine, review, evolve and recommend changes regarding the principles that should govern the emoluments structure, including pay, allowances and other facilities/benefits, in cash or kind, having regard to rationalisation and simplification therein as well as the specialised needs of various departments, agencies and services. It was also to examine the existing schemes of payment of bonus and recommend an appropriate incentive scheme to reward excellence in productivity, performance and integrity.

The 7th CPC comprised Justice Ashok Kumar Mathur as chairman and Vivek Rae, Rathin Roy and Meena Agarwal as members. On August 26, 2015, the Modi government extended its term by four months, till December 31. The 7th CPC submitted its report on November 19, 2015 and its recommendations on pay and pensions were imple-



SANDEEP JOSHI

mented on June 29, 2016, effective from January 1, 2016.

In an unusual manner, the Press Information Bureau published on January 16, 2025 a tweet, along with a video of I&B Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw. "Prime Minister @narendramodi approves setup of the 8th Central Pay Commission for all employees of the Central Government. Since 1947, seven Pay Commissions have been constituted, with the last one implemented in 2016.

As the 7th Pay Commission's term concludes in 2026, initiating the process in 2025 ensures sufficient time to receive and review recommendations before its completion. Union Minister

In the Modi regime, a technocratic exercise can be easily discarded in the battle for perception and votes

"Ashwini Vaishnaw." This press release displayed a clumsy understanding of the PC's process and was intended only to influence Delhi voters, which went to the polls on February 3, 2025. The minister was wrong about conclusion of the term of 7th CPC, and the time PCs take in completing their work.

His 'assurance' that the 8th CPC would be constituted, submit its report, and the government would review its recommendations for implementation before January 1, 2026 was unrealistic and hollow, as later events also proved. In India's history of setting up PCs (the first PC was established in 1946), never has such a cavalier approach been

adopted by any government.

The government furnished a truthful but strange response to an unstarred question no 3541 (Lok Sabha) on August 8, on the subject of the 'Constitution of the 8th Pay Commission'. The first part of the question was "whether the Government proposes to ensure timely constitution of 8th Central Pay Commission for Central Government employees so that it could be implemented on 01.01.2026." The government replied: "No such proposal is under consideration with the Government for constitution of 8th Central Pay Commission for the Central Government employees." There could not have been a blunter denial of Ashwini Vaishnaw's video tweet.

For the second and third parts of the question, relating to details and reasons for the answer to part one of the question, the government simply stated, "Do not arise." For part six of the question regarding "the other measures being taken by the Government to increase their salary in view of rising inflation", the government recited the general provision that the dearness allowance (DA) is revised every six months on the basis of inflation as per the All-India Consumer Price Index.

While the answers to unstarred questions are finalised at the level of joint secretaries, it would be surprising if the joint secretary

concerned had decided to deny the setting up of the 8th CPC without the knowledge of the Finance Minister and the Secretary Expenditure in such a sensitive matter affecting the pay, allowances and pensions of millions of government servants in India. What is the government thinking?

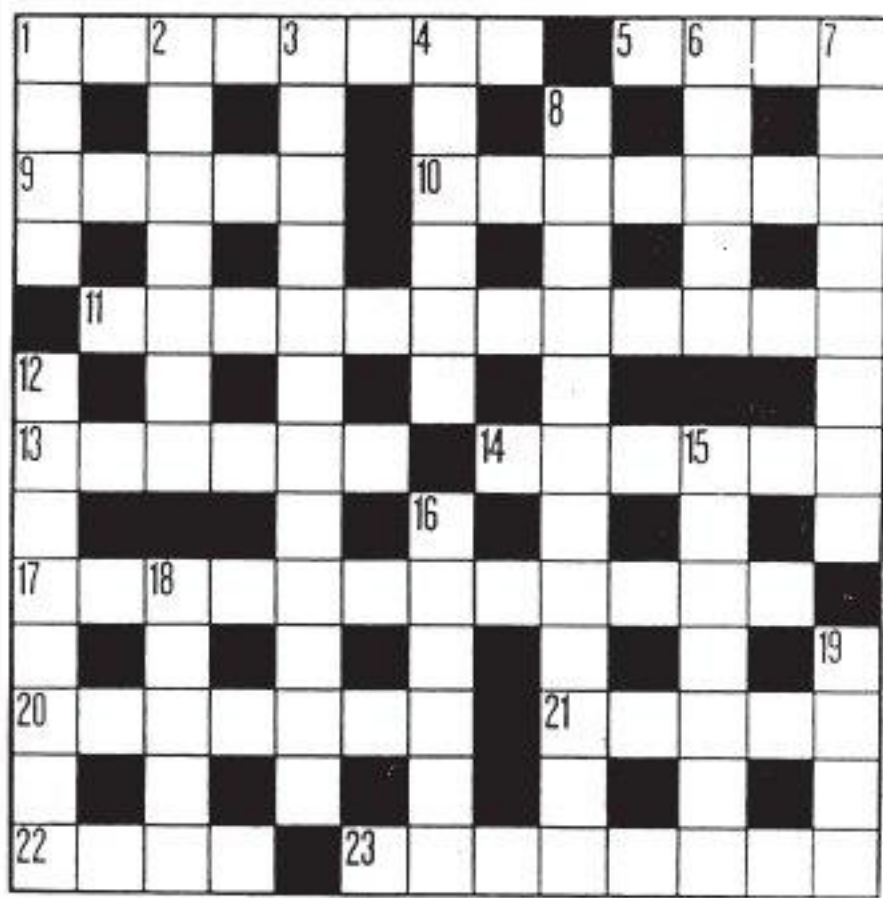
The government has crafted and mastered a new way of granting bonanzas/gifts to the people of India and government servants — directly from PM Modi.

The middle class was given a Rs 1-lakh-crore income tax bonanza in Budget 2025-26 by making all incomes of individuals up to Rs 1 lakh per month tax-free and significantly reducing the tax payment for those with incomes up to Rs 2 lakh per month.

On August 15, Prime Minister Modi announced a Rs 2-lakh-crore Double Diwali Gift GST cut bonanza to the people, rendering all statutory authorities, including the GST Council, ineffective; they duly rubber-stamped it.

It appears quite likely that Modi will announce a handsome pay and pension hike to please over two crore government employees and pensioners (including of the state governments) at a time of his choice — a direct gift from him. The minor procedural correctness of a technocratic exercise by a PC can be conveniently dispensed with in the battle of winning perceptions and votes.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 An aromatic herb (8)
 - 5 Monetary unit of South Africa (4)
 - 9 Principle held by person (5)
 - 10 An upper limit (7)
 - 11 Testify (4,8)
 - 13 Great in number (6)
 - 14 Ship (6)
 - 17 Use of overwhelming force (5,7)
 - 20 Bankruptcy (7)
 - 21 Household tableware (5)
 - 22 Walk lamely (4)
 - 23 A cause of inconvenience (8)
- DOWN**
- 1 A nocturnal winged insect (4)
 - 2 In succession (7)
 - 3 Keeping watch (2,3,7)
 - 4 Recess (6)
 - 6 Foreign (5)
 - 7 With grim persistence (8)
 - 8 Nonsense! (12)
 - 12 Perfectly happy (8)
 - 15 Part cut off (7)
 - 16 Rich cream-filled cake (6)
 - 18 Widespread dislike (5)
 - 19 Counterfeit (4)
- Yesterday's Solution**
- Across:** 1 Precipice, 8 Sense, 9 Dracula, 10 Corral, 11 Slalom, 12 Ecstatic, 15 Expelled, 18 Energy, 20 Talent, 21 Stirrup, 22 Light, 23 Hot potato.
- Down:** 2 Rural, 3 Cackle, 4 Pell-mell, 5 Escort, 6 Ingrate, 7 Real McCoy, 11 Sweet talk, 13 Sidestep, 14 Apology, 16 Length, 17 Secret, 19 Gaunt.

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION															
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CALENDAR															
OCTOBER 23, 2025, THURSDAY															
■ Shaka Samvat	1947														
■ Kartik Shaka	1														
■ Kartik Purnima	7														
■ Hijari	1447														
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 2, up to 10:47 pm															
■ Ayushman Yoga up to 5:00 am															
■ Vishakha Nakshatra up to 4:51 am															
■ Moon enters Scorpio sign 10:06 pm															

FORECAST

CITY	THURSDAY FRIDAY		17:44 HRS 06:30 HRS	
	MAX	MIN	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	33	19		
New Delhi	33	20		
Amritsar	31	16		
Bathinda	35	14		
Jalandhar	31	16		
Ludhiana	31	19		
Bhiwani	32	17		
Hisar	33	17		
Sirsa	33	17		
Dharamsala	28	11		
Manali	20	08		
Shimla	22	12		
Srinagar	23	08		
Jammu	32	16		
Kargil	19	01		
Leh	14	-02		
Dehradun	30	16		
Mussoorie	23	13		

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

— Ramnath Goenka

DON'T PROLONG I.C.E. AGE, REMOVE SOPs FOR POLLUTING HYBRIDS

WHILE the nation looks appalled at the smoke from firecrackers enveloping the national capital post Diwali, new research shows there is need to worry about something they thought was far less polluting. A study has questioned the widely held view that plug-in hybrid electric vehicles (PHEVs)—ones that combine an internal combustion engine (ICE) with an electric one—lower pollution substantially. The research analysed onboard fuel consumption data of 8 lakh cars in Europe between 2021 and 2023, and found 'real world' carbon dioxide emissions from PHEVs to be 4.9 times greater than those reflected in standard laboratory tests.

The non-profit Transport and Environment showed hybrids emit just 19 percent less CO₂ than petrol and diesel cars. Under laboratory tests, PHEVs were assumed to be 75 percent less polluting. The research found that weak electric engines lead to only 27 percent of the driving being done in the electric mode, rather than 84 percent estimated earlier. The new data may push big car companies like Toyota, who have adopted hybrids as long-term bets, to revise their plans. Interestingly, the faulty lab data allowed four major car companies in Europe to skip €5bn (more than ₹50,000 crore) in pollution taxes between 2021 and 2023. The Indian government has been offering various exemptions and subsidies to EVs and hybrids, too. However, hybrids pay GST at 40 percent, compared to 5 percent for pure EVs.

Insufficient recharging networks and a general distrust over performance have resulted in a mere 5 percent share of EVs and hybrids in a market that sold 43 lakh passenger cars in 2024-25. Interestingly, the two segments' shares stand at 2.5 percent each, though hybrids are priced 70-80 percent higher than ICE cars and 60 percent more than pure EVs. This is also despite just four hybrid models on offer compared to more than 20 EV models. It probably reflects the thinking among those upgrading to better technology not to go too far from the security of the combustion engine. With the new data on PHEVs, the government should class hybrids in the ICE category and end incentives for them. If India is to achieve its EV target of 80 percent of 2-3 wheelers and 30 percent of cars by 2030, more needs to be done to counter carmakers' campaign to prolong the ICE age.

REMOVE RED-TAPISM IN INFORMATION REQUESTS

A villager's seven-year wait for information—ending in two appeals and an eventual dismissal by the Odisha Information Commission (OIC)—has rightly drawn the ire of the Orissa High Court. The case, which the court last week sent back to the State Information Commissioner for a fresh hearing, stands as a travesty of the Right to Information Act, 2005.

The story began in 2017, when a resident of Bhadrak district petitioned the state chief secretary, seeking removal of illegal encroachments from a government plot in his village. His representation set off a chain of administrative directions, but no real action followed. Left in the dark, he turned to the RTI Act in 2018—only to be told in the first appeal that "information is not available."

Worse followed. In February 2024, the OIC chose to rely on a joint affidavit filed by the First Appellate Authority and the Public Information Officer to drop the matter altogether. That prompted the villager to seek judicial redress—and the High Court did not mince words. It held that the OIC had "mechanically accepted" the state authorities' version, ignoring glaring contradictions. "If such a stand of the state authorities is accepted at face value... without due scrutiny, the right of a citizen to get information as codified by the Act, 2005, would be a dead letter," the court observed.

That sharp observation cuts to the heart of the problem. The RTI Act was enacted to "contain corruption and hold governments and their instrumentalities accountable to the governed." When information commissions—the very institutions meant to uphold the Act—allow themselves to be "entrapped in officialdom and red-tapism," as the court put it, they erode public faith in transparency itself.

This order should serve as a wake-up call to all state information commissions. The right to information is not a bureaucratic courtesy; it is a constitutional guarantee that empowers the citizen and disciplines the state. Transparency in public authorities is the cornerstone of accountable governance, and information remains the most powerful weapon in the citizen's arsenal. To fulfil their mandate, information commissions must stand firmly independent of the administrative machinery—not become a part of it.

QUICK TAKE

LEARN FROM TAMIL NADU

THE Centre's call to set up organ and tissue donation cells in all hospitals of the country is a welcome move. Having trained counsellors to walk the families of those near the end of their lives through the possibility of donation is a welcome move in a country desperately in need of more donors. There is much to learn from Tamil Nadu, which has led the country in kidney and liver transplants for several years. Apart from setting up counselling cells in hospitals, the state government has laid down procedures for cadaver transplant, criteria for non-transplant centres to retrieve organs, and mandatory declaration of brain deaths. All other states must learn from Tamil Nadu's best practices on this front.

ON October 6, lawyers in the Supreme Court were apparently perturbed when an advocate abruptly hurled a shoe at the Bench led by the Chief Justice of India. Yet, the CJI and Justice K Vinod Chandran remained calm and continued the proceedings. The act was purportedly a token of protest against the CJI for certain remarks he had made while hearing a public interest litigation. The PIL was for restoration of a statue of Lord Vishnu at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh.

The Bar Council and the Supreme Court Bar Association acted promptly and suspended the advocate, effectively blocking his practice at least for the time being. Of late, sanction for prosecuting the advocate for criminal contempt has been granted by the attorney general.

Such incidents are, however, not unprecedented. It is heard that decades ago, another CJI in the Supreme Court faced a similar situation with shoes thrown upon him. He then ordered the return of the shoes to the litigant, saying that he who lost the case should not also lose the shoes!

In the UK in the 1960s, when books were thrown at a Bench comprising Lords Denning and Diplock, they refused to take action for contempt against the woman, earning praise from her as she was being led away. However, in 2009, in another disturbing incident, a woman who threw a slipper at a judge of the Supreme Court of India was immediately taken to custody and proceeded against.

Unlike these events, the latest assault was not by a disgruntled litigant, but by a person who was part of the institution, a citizen who was supposed to uphold rule of law. The motive was not merely personal but also ideological. The event, in a way, shows India's 'Capitol moment' in a singular form. It was a clear attack on the supreme seat of constitutional adjudication; an attempt to demolish something more fundamental for the nation's existence.

The SCBA said the incident is a direct slap on the independence of the judiciary. The act amounts to *in facie* contempt, or contempt on the face of the court, apart from a few other offences enumerated under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. The conduct of the advocate outside the court—justifying the act and again accusing the CJI—might invite action for *ex facie* contempt as well.

But there are more serious issues behind the incident that stare at the future of our republic. The attitude, the audacity, and the total lack of repent-

A lawyer's ideology-driven attempt at assaulting the Chief Justice was India's 'Capitol moment'—an attack on the top seat of constitutional adjudication. Duress cannot be a tool for dissent

SHOEGATE: DON'T REPLACE DISSENT WITH DOGMATISM

KALEESWARAM RAJ

Lawyer, Supreme Court of India



SOURAV ROY

ance from the advocate who did the mischief' makes a compelling case for an analysis into the divisive ideological trends surrounding us.

The PIL, on the face of it, did not involve any issue warranting judicial interference in the constitutional sense, since the prayers made were out of the purview of the court's writ jurisdiction under Article 32 of the Constitution. At best, those would fall within the policy domain of the executive. The plea could have been crushed at the threshold by any Bench. An advanced democracy would have had a discourse on the CJI's judicial behaviour in such a situation. The open statement subsequently made by the CJI that he treats all religions with equal respect ought to have given quietus to the entire controversy.

To say that the CJI invited trouble by

his remarks is casual and irrational. Such a view, expressed even by a former judge of the Supreme Court, is dangerously superficial and inherently problematic. Even judicial aberrations from the Bench can only call for people's criticism and not physical assault.

As Lord Atkin famously put it: "Justice is not a cloistered virtue, and therefore, must be allowed to suffer the scrutiny and respectful, even though outspoken comments of ordinary men." Yet, the social media backlash following the Vishnu idol case hearing was neither civilised nor respectful. In a way, what happened in the open court on October 6 was an aggravated and crude extension of this mindset, which requires to be condemned in the strongest terms.

The incident signifies gradual collapse of rule of law that has been taking place

BIHAR LEADERS FACE YOUTH TEST

SANDEEP SHASTRI

Vice President, Nitte (Deemed) University, Bengaluru, and co-author of *Indian Youth in a Transforming World*

been chief minister for little less than two decades—save for the nine months between May 2014 and February 2015—those aged 18-29 were either born after he became CM or were socialised during this time. This explains the anti-incumbency sentiment against the CM.



One of the largest youth electorates is looking keenly at the promises being made by the three main players in Bihar. They have all grown up during Nitish Kumar's reign as chief minister and are increasingly aspirational. Though they feel a strong sense of anti-incumbency, they want leaders who can deliver

However, this outlook may not translate into unhappiness with the NDA itself. This helps understand why the BJP seems to be at the forefront of the campaign and Nitish has fallen in line. A recent study by Vote Vibe estimated that the broader NDA coalition's support is compensating for anti-incumbency against Nitish. The study also showed that the youth among those who strongly feel the anti-incumbency sentiment. Yet, the intensity of unhappiness among the youth is less visible when it comes to the NDA.

The Mahagathbandhan, on the other hand, is making a strong pitch for local employment opportunities. The decade after the 2011 census, which

showed about 61 percent literacy in Bihar, has seen greater access to higher education and a resultant rise in aspirations among the youth.

Today, they seek quality education and meaningful employment within the state. A 2024 International Labour Organization study had indicated that about a fourth of those who migrate to other states do so mainly for employment opportunities.

Amid this, RJD's Tejashwi Yadav's campaign focuses on the younger generation, with a strong focus on job guarantees. One is not sure whether the squabbling over ticket distribution within the Mahagathbandhan will frustrate the younger generations, who want 'a government that performs and not merely promises'.

The impact of Prashant Kishor and his Jan Suraaj party will be clearer as the campaign unfolds. In the past, a lot of survey respondents indicated that they decide their votes once the candidates are announced and the campaign is rolled out. The youth have clearly been impressed by Kishor's agenda, but it is still unclear whether that fascination will translate into votes. Studies have also indicated Jan Suraaj may well cut into both the NDA's and the Mahagathbandhan's vote shares.

It's important to note that the youth voter of Bihar is difficult to win over. He has been increasingly frustrated by the absence of attractive job opportunities in the state and continues to desire a government job. At another level, young people aspire for education and skills that will make them more employable, something missing in their state.

These are also generations that will not be gullible to tall assurances and would prefer to go by actions on the ground. So Bihar is a litmus test for not just the promises made, but the youth's belief in the intention and capability of the one making the promise. This factor will be a key deciding dynamic in the coming polls.

(Views are personal)

for quite a long time. The country faces a new normal where hate speeches and hate crimes are encouraged often by the State, and genuine dissent is criminalised and dissenters incarcerated by the very same State. Selective use, misuse, and non-use of law is a striking feature of a country losing its grip on rule of law.

The Supreme Court's pronouncements on hate speech and hate crimes as made in *Tehseen S Poonawalla* (2018), *Kodungallur Film Society* (2018) and *Amish Devgan* (2020) were ignored by a mighty and partisan executive. Its directive to register a first information report on every incident of hate crime also met almost with the same fate. Calls for genocide became the new normal in our public life.

On the other hand, when the political dissidents were jailed indefinitely, the Supreme Court often remained a helpless onlooker. This paradox of the Indian legal system was abetted by the diminishing number of public intellectuals from among the legal fraternity. The incident in the CJI's court needs a reading between and beyond the lines. It motivates us to deconstruct the present situation.

India, as a nation and society, has grown up through dialogues. Though the society essentially remained caste-ridden and hierarchical, there have also been finer streams of Hinduism that encouraged fearless discussions.

With the advent of constitutional democracy, we tried to replace the clashes with dialogues and bloodshed with handshakes. Freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a) became the cornerstone of India's deliberative democracy. Fraternity, the most vital constitutional value, is significant for any democracy to carry forward the conversations.

The CJI's reaction—of ignoring the attack, remaining unaffected, and pardoning the man—was not a tactical or procedural gesture. It was not merely a matter of magnanimity either. It was a deeply spiritual act, perhaps the best possible answer to a culture of violence and intolerance based on religious fanaticism. In the process, the CJI had an enormous moral victory.

The incident demands conscious efforts for revitalising India's republicanism at the institutional and people's levels. It tells us about the need for reasserting dignity for all sects of people, including Dalits and minority groups at various levels—from the streets to the highest constitutional offices. Those who try to substitute dissent with duress and dogmatism always remain on the wrong side of history. (Views are personal)

(kaleeswaramraj@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

In-house boost

Ref: *Global partners in defence can be catalysts* (Oct 22). India's journey towards self-reliance in the defence sector has just begun by curtailing imports and boosting domestic manufacturing. We need to build higher-order defence capabilities for which strategic global partnerships, innovation and advanced technology are crucial. Total self-reliance lies in developing in-house technology and innovative products.

Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Collegium opacity

Ref: *Judicial independence* (Mailbag, Oct 22). The collegium system is exclusive to the judges and is answerable to none. The Supreme Court has already rejected the reformatory judicial appointments act passed by parliament and has no standard practice in granting bail. Justice should not only be done, but also seen to be done.

Shreeram Paranjape, email

Global family

Ref: *Warp and weft of peacemaking amid violence* (Oct 22). I was reminded of Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Flower in the crannied wall' after reading the column. When all the people realise that they are parts of a bigger whole, differences, hatred, and enmity disappear—and love emerges, leading us to peace.

Prema, Thanjavur

Indore model

Ref: *Waste land: A nation of landfills* (Oct 22). We appear to have generated more slogans than devices to handle urban waste. Looking inward, there is Indore to learn from; and looking abroad, we have the Boston model to adopt technologies. Yet, we prefer to remain unconcerned.

Rajan Ugra, Bengaluru

Diwali blues

Ref: *Post-Diwali air quality* (Oct 22). Despite warnings and bans, the excessive bursting of firecrackers has choked the city's air once again. Festivals should bring joy, not toxic smoke. True celebration lies in caring for our planet and people.

Safa K K, Kannur

Welcome scholars

Ref: *Top SOAS Hindi scholar deported* (Oct 22). Sending back Professor Francesca Orsini just for attending a conference on a tourist visa feels unfair. She came to share knowledge, not break rules. India should welcome scholars who contribute meaningfully to its culture and academic landscape, not turn them away.

R Vetriselvan, Vellore

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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COMMUNALISM AND ‘SECULAR’ HINDI CINEMA

On the one hand, Hindi cinema industry proudly calls itself the last resort of secularism, with a supposedly seamless co-existence of various religions and faiths to keep churning out potboilers, one after the other. On the other, vigilantes who keep a constant track on the goings-on in the world's largest film industry react vociferously, critically commenting on the 'selective equality' which the industry bigwigs practice. Two such incidents have once again had the social media circuit flapping about. One is the Diwali greetings of Shah Rukh Khan when he posed with a 'tika' on his forehead along with his sons; this led to his fans and detractors clashing with each other online. Obviously, questions were

raised about the Islamic identity of Shah Rukh, who has a Hindu wife. Not surprisingly, the liberal, secular types led by Shabana Azmi quickly rushed to his defence, supporting him for his well-meaning extension of greetings to his Hindu fans, a part of the 'Ganga Jamuni Tehzeeb', which our country has seemingly adhered to for eons now. Shabana's rabble-rouser husband Javed Akhtar too raised the hackles of the conservatives on both sides when he referred to the famous scene in the 1975 block-buster 'Sholay' when Dharmendra hides behind a statue of Lord Shiva, attempting to make his ladylove Hema Malini believe it is the Lord himself who is speaking to her. Akhtar doubted whether in today's

times, he would dare to write such a scene again! Taking him on, Lucky Ali, the maverick singer-hero son of comedian Mehmood, pointed out that Akhtar had the gumption to tell the audience that the Hindus should not become like Muslims (read intolerant) and instead make the minority community like them (alluding to the tolerance levels of the majority community, one presumes). Lambasting the lyricist writer, Ali called him a 'shameless bigot masquerading as a wise man'. Though Akhtar has not officially responded to Ali till the time of writing this, he has answered many who questioned him whether he would dare to recreate the same scene from behind a mosque today. His contention was that he has been

under police protection as he faced more threats from members of his community than Hindus and has been subject to constant hate mail. Salim-Javed will continue to remain the most famous writer duo who inspired a generation and more of Hindi film lovers, recalibrated the career of Rajesh Khanna before he conceded the mantle to the one-man industry, Amitabh Bachchan, the largest beneficiary of the writer pair's 'angry young man' image. In the first decades after Independence, the communal undertone to the Hindi film industry was managed without much ado and it went on to appeal and sustain its popularity among the largely accommodating audience of the nation. After the first wave of heroes,

in which there were Muslim matinee idols like Dilip Kumar, the same film industry had many from the minority community take over the business from the late 1980s to the beginning of the new millennium. So much so the pun was Bollywood was their 'khan-daan'. However, the atmosphere is not conducive and adaptable any more with the industry openly being patronised by political elements, persons with questionable fund sources and brazenly one-sided movies being made and exhibited. Not surprising then that the sensitive Hindu-Muslim issue finds a resonance in the world of make-believe too, where reality seems to bite more often than not, in recent times.

MEDLEY



LETTERS

OMG! BMW cars to ‘combat’ corruption!

Fighting corruption with seven BMW cars worth ₹five crore for the Lokpal team starkly contrasts with the country's economic reality, where barely two per cent of citizens pay taxes for 1.4 billion people. Such extravagance by those meant to curb corruption reflects misplaced priorities and misuse of public money. Officials need not chase the corrupt in luxury but render their duties with integrity and simplicity. Minds that justify such waste only encourage corruption rather than fight it. They must be replaced with pragmatic and upright individuals, who remain true to their profession, even if it means sacrificing brilliance for integrity and purpose.

R S Narula, Patiala

Digging history to taunt is reprehensible

YOUR editorial "Govt must stop blaming past regimes for economic failures" (Oct 22) is an eye-opener. It applies not only to economic failures but each and every failure; State governments are no exception. It is true that they claim credit for every positive outcome and absolve themselves of blame for everything that boomerangs. Certain amount of criticism for a while is acceptable but digging history and playing the blame game is not always appreciated and unwarranted.

Dr J Bhagyalakshmi, Madanapalle

Centre must restrategise exports policy

THIS is further to your editorial "Government stop blaming past regime for economic failures" (Oct 22). At the outset, politics in India has never lacked drama. It is well known that NDA rode to power in 2014 largely due to the UPA government's failures. Now the Union Minister Piyush Goyal pointing at the Congress administration for the increase in exports exposes his own inability to balance imports and exports with Japan and South Korea. In short, he appears to be walking on political quicksand than coming out with concrete measures to increase exports to these two nations. It is time the NDA government realises that eventually only aspirational and credible leadership would work in favour of India. Blaming the Congress rule serves no purpose.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad-3

BRS finds Basti Dawakhanas in utter state of neglect

It seems like state-run hospitals, community health centres and primary health centres (PHCs) are in terrible shape as they must reckon with inadequate infrastructure, staff shortage, non-availability of quality medicine and not paying salaries for months together. It is time that the Department of Health pulls up its socks and start focussing on the wellbeing of the poor and middle-class section, who cannot afford treatment in corporate hospitals. It is appalling that doctors have been giving expired medicine to the patients, which amounts to gross negligence as this will endanger the lives of the people. The concerned authorities must focus on sanitation both within the hospital premises and its surroundings; provision of drinking water and encourage NGO's who can provide hygienic breakfast and meals to patients and their attendants at affordable costs. The Minister for Health, senior bureaucrats and doctors should make surprise visits to PHCs and CHCs to make sure that the health providers are functioning well and catering to the needs of its citizens, especially the poorer strata.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Setback for south India's first inter-state Metro dream

BENGALURU: The ambitious plan to build South India's first inter-state metro line connecting Bengaluru and Hosur has hit a major technical roadblock. The Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRL) has clarified that the project is not technically feasible in its current form, raising the likelihood of the proposal being shelved.

The Union government had directed BMRL to prepare an expansion plan to extend the Bengaluru Metro network to 470 km. As part of this plan, BMRL conducted a feasibility study for the Hosur-Bommasandra corridor. The Chennai Metro Rail Limited (CMRL), which also studied the project, had proposed a 23-km stretch powered by a 25 kV AC overhead electrical system. However, since the Bengaluru Metro operates on a 750 V DC power system, integrating the two distinct electrical systems is technically incompatible, BMRL informed the Karnataka government — posing a significant barrier to project implementation.

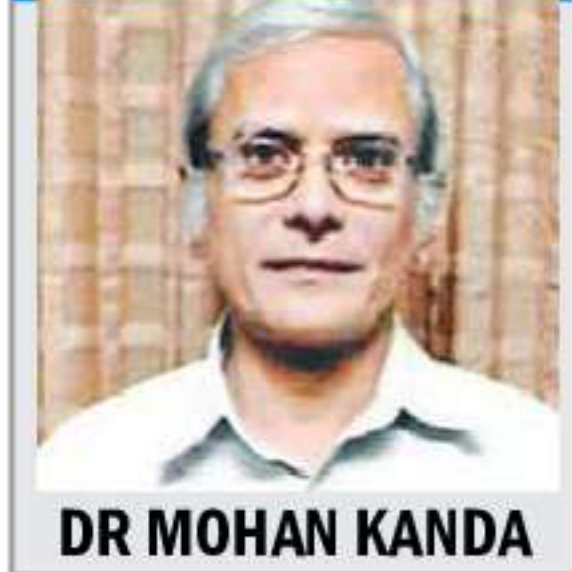
Meanwhile, BMRL carried out its own feasibility study for a shorter 11-km extension from Bommasandra to Attibele, within Karnataka, designed to use the same 750 V DC system as the existing network.

In parallel, several other metro extensions are progressing: the Blue Line from Doddanekundi to Devanahalli, the Purple Line from K.R. Puram to Hoskote, the Silver Line from Kadugodi to Tavarekere, and a new 68-km corridor from Kalena Agrahara via Bannerghatta, Jigani, Attibele, Sarjapur, Dommasandra, and Varthur Kodli to Kadugodi Tea Park.

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Indulge in temptations but with moderation

TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

“EVERYTHING I like is either immoral”, is a well-known saying attributed to Alexander Woollcott, American drama critic for the New York Times in the New York Herald.

Most of us have the experience that the most enjoyable things in life are considered bad, because of their health or moral implications. Woollcott, as witty critics always do, was exaggerating. There are, as a matter of fact, many enjoyable and positive things, such as music and hobbies, and loving relationships that are neither unhealthy nor immoral.

Even the so-called vices, such as smoking, drinking and gambling, can have a moderating and balancing impact on the body, mind, and emotional apparatus of a person, when practised in moderation.

Take for instance, the habit of smoking. I recall, with nostalgia, my childhood days dating back to the 1960s, when one dreamt

PART 1

of becoming an adult with a cigarette dangling from the lips. Awareness about the evils of excessive smoking was not widely prevalent, and the ban on the habit was still a thing in the distant future. Smoking was, as a matter of fact, a fashion those days and added to the 'macho' image of young men. Elderly people, however, preferred a cigar. That is, if they were not using snuff or opium, both of which were quite common at that time.

I remember how my father, otherwise a man of very spartan habits, was a regular, but moderate, smoker of cigars, often used the well-known saying, "a woman is a woman, but a cigar smoke!", in defence of the habit, out of the earshot of my mother, of course!

Vividh Bharati was still very much in the future and Radio Ceylon was the preferred channel for the youth. It was a commercial channel, and advertisements were quite common for various products. Cigarette advertisements were common, known for their clever jingles and sophisticated approach, designed to appeal to both Sri Lankan and broader South Asian audiences. One distinctly recalls the famous crooner C.H. Atma, as the ambassador for a particular brand of cigarettes, commending the product through the lyrics of a song which went: "Aaj Zamana Hai Dee-



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wana", followed by the name of that brand.

This columnist smoked for over 55 years and thoroughly enjoyed it. It, however, never really became an addiction. So much so that when it was given up, there was neither any symptom of withdrawal effects nor any significant lasting impact on the body.

Some people, regrettably, lack the ability to have a shot at different practices without becoming addicted to them. Instead of being pleasant diversions, or a pastime, habits become crutches in the long run. That, however, is not the case with most sensible people. My father, for instance, was a keen punter and regu-

larly went to the races whenever he was in Hyderabad, Bangalore, Bombay or Delhi. He, however, made sure that it remained a pastime for him, a form of relaxation and a diversion from his daily routine, and something which kept him engrossed in preparing for the weekly fixtures, enjoying the ambience of the racecourse and the race itself, as a postmortem after the event. He would ask me to get him a copy of Original Vel, a publication that contained details of the entries for the coming Sunday, together with the credentials of the horses, their handicaps and the jockeys, among other things. I remember how, week after

week, he went with precisely ₹150 in his wallet and, invariably, returned with it empty!

I have never been regarded as much of a chip of the old block as, compared to my father or my elder siblings, I am made of much more inferior intellectual equipment. There is, however, that Telugu saying, that while wealth may not be bequeathed, shortcomings often are! Thus, one quality, which I have certainly inherited from my father, is a weakness for gambling, although of a very moderate and restricted variety.

I was never much of a race goer. Once, however, when Governor Sharda Mukherjee went to the Hyderabad Race Club to give the Governor's Cup to the winner of the annual customary race, I accompanied her as the Secretary to the Governor. As Oscar Wilde said, I have always been able to resist anything except temptation. I, therefore, duly wagered a modest ₹25, and was handsomely rewarded with a return of ₹28!

The gambling instinct, apparently, runs in the Kanda blood. I remember how a nephew of mine, also named after my father, was once shown a huge advertisement in a newspaper by his father, my elder brother. Barely two years old, the little one ignored the whole ad, and pointed to the four corners, where playing cards were part of the design!

I have described, earlier in this column, a very interesting experience I had. In 1981, I accompanied Vice-

President Mohammad Hidayatullah, on an official visit to Canada. We had halted at Las Vegas, while returning home via Japan and Singapore. Quite naturally, both of us had a go at the slot machines, to the extent of even indulging in a last-minute fling with a machine available at the VIP departure lounge at the airport!

I had once referred to an incident when K.K. Das, the Director of the National Academy of Administration (as it was then known), responded to an incident relating to a loud session of drinking on the occasion of the IAS Officer Trainees building farewell to their IPS counterparts. "Drinking is not discouraged here," he told us, in a meeting the next morning, "but it needs to be practised in moderation. And moderation," he continued, "is precisely two half pegs of whiskey or a bottle of beer!"

As we noted at the beginning of this article, it is perfectly human to feel the urge, occasionally, to indulge oneself in the many temptations that the ambient environment offers. The mantra, however, is moderation.

And, while on the subject of weaknesses, and to end this piece on a humorous note, I heard a wise guy once quip that horse sense is the wisdom that prevents horses from betting on men!

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

Polavaram and the angst of Adivasis

LAKSHMAN KOYA

THE Polavaram multipurpose project, widely hailed as the 'lifeline' of Andhra Pradesh, has become more than just a construction site. Decades after its inception, the incomplete project is now a crucible of political, technical, and, above all, severe humanitarian crises. Behind this colossal structure, meant to symbolise hope for East and West Godavari and Krishna, lies the anguish of thousands of Adivasi communities losing their centuries-old roots and identity. The anguished question emerging from their hearts is: "Did we ask for Polavaram?" This challenge strikes at the very model of development that has been adopted by the state.

For whom is this great sacrifice?

The stated objectives of the Polavaram project are clear-to provide drinking and irrigation water to the coastal and drought-prone Rayalaseema regions. The anticipated benefits—stabilising millions of acres of existing command area, river interlinking, and generating 960 MW of power—are immense. These outcomes are undeniably crucial for the state's future. However, we cannot ignore the vast disparity between the generations that will enjoy the fruits of this development and the estimated one lakh-plus displaced people who have lost their all. There is a strong suspicion that this model of development is designed to 'sacrifice the poor for the benefit of the affluent.'

The Adivasi sacrifice and the value of identity:

Most of the villages facing sub-



mergence under the reservoir are Adivasi habitations. These communities are not merely losing physical assets like houses and farms. Their way of life, cultural heritage, spiritual connection to the forest, and ancient deities—everything—is being submerged. Is it just that the population of one region must sacrifice their very existence for the development of another?

While economically better-off regions stand to gain, the impoverished Adivasis are losing their roots and being forced into miserable conditions in substandard rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) centres. Delays and quality flaws in the legally mandated compensation and rehabilitation packages have made their lives precarious.

Uprooting-An irreversible loss:

The life and culture of Adivasis are inextricably linked to the forest, hills, streams, and valleys. When they are separated from the land of their ancestors, the sacred soil, the forest they regard as their

mother, and their hills and groves, no amount of monetary compensation or concrete housing can ever mend that loss. For them, money and houses are temporary comforts; they do not fill the resulting cultural vacuum. Those who benefit from this development must acknowledge this profound, permanent loss.

The curse of floods-A man-made disaster:

Even before Polavaram's completion, the heavy Godavari floods in recent years have caused severe alarm, particularly in upstream areas like Bhadrachalam. Experts and neighbouring states allege that the cofferdams and the height of the reservoir are increasing the 'backwater effect,' which pushes the river flow backward, intensifying the flood threat.

Stagnant water and the struggle for survival:

Due to this flood risk, water often remains stagnant around vil-

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lages for days, completely devastating the people's livelihood. Farms are submerged, making cultivation impossible. People are unable to travel to outside areas for labour work, and the lack of income is leading to severe financial distress and misery. It is highly tragic that a project built with the aim of development is instead robbing people of their livelihoods and becoming a constant source of suffering.

The way forward:

The question, "Did we ask for Polavaram?" is not a rejection of progress. It is a powerful voice of defiance that has emerged against injustice and negligence.

The Central and State governments must urgently focus on:

Prioritise R&R completion: Full statutory rehabilitation must be completed for all displaced persons before the project proceeds any further. This means more than just providing a house; it requires ensuring livelihood security tailored to their traditional life and maintaining cultural continuity.

Scientific solution: A permanent,

scientific solution to the flood inundation problem, particularly the 'backwater effect,' must be formulated after taking into consideration concerns of the upstream states and strictly adhering to the Godavari River Tribunal guidelines.

Transparency: The rights of the Adivasis under the relevant laws and environmental regulations must be strictly implemented, and complete transparency must be maintained in every aspect of the project.

Development loses its meaning when the hopes of one region are built upon the tears and soul-less rehabilitation of another. While the speedy completion of Polavaram is necessary, wiping the tears of the Adivasis, who staked their lives for it, is far more critical.

It is only when appropriate justice is served that this 'great sacrifice' will become meaningful. Otherwise, every time we taste the fruits of such a development, history will continue to ask us what we lost.

DECCAN
Chronicle

23 OCTOBER 2025

UP FIRs: Don't misuse law
to circumvent Constitution

The Supreme Court judgment last week quashing five first information reports against a set of people for alleged mass conversions under the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021, comes as a welcome relief. The right-minded people in the country who fear for the survival of several values, including secularism, that guide its governance have reason to feel comforted as the ruling has sought to address several issues worrying them.

While quashing the FIRs against several persons including Rajendra Bihari Lal, vice-chancellor of Uttar Pradesh's Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences (SHUATS), the court observed that "criminal law cannot be a tool to harass innocent citizens" and even questioned the constitutionality of several sections of the law. It issued a stern warning against the misuse of the law, saying "the criminal law cannot be allowed to be made a tool of harassment of innocent persons, allowing prosecuting agencies to initiate prosecution at their whims and fancy on the basis of completely incredulous material". The court has also brought to the attention of the country how legal processes can, after all, be abused by vested interests when it pointed out that the FIRs were vitiated by procedural lapses, lack of credible material and legal infirmities. Prosecuting people with such documents will amount to a travesty of justice, it has said.

The court's order and the accompanying comments point to a pattern where laws are being brought to undermine the Constitution and the principles it espouses, misused to take on people who are on the wrong side of the establishment, and finally cited to invoke the legal processes in order to harass them. This is a disquieting phenomenon and the Supreme Court has rightly intervened to stop it.

It is no secret that the Hindu conservatives in India have serious differences of opinion with the values enshrined in the Constitution of India, every article of which has been passed by the Constituent Assembly after exhaustive debates. Their objections start with Article 1 which defines "India that is Bharat" as a "union of states" as it sets the tone for the nation-building process based on diversity and other democratic ideals. Right from day one, there have been concerted efforts to undermine the Constitution through devious means, and several of them have taken the legislative route.

Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees the fundamental right to freedom of religion, ensuring that all individuals have the freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practise and propagate their religion. This right is fundamental to all modern democracies as it respects citizen as the foundational block of the country and ensures that nothing comes in their way as a thinking individual. However, religious bigots do not like it one bit and would by legal or other means try to make life hell for those that do not subscribe to their murky views. They have even won in some countries, which have dropped secularism as a value to follow and made themselves into monotheistic fiefdoms. India has till now resisted it, successfully, on the strength of the Constitution, the institutions that are built on it and the people who swear by it. The Supreme Court's judgment will strengthen their resolve to run the country as the Constitution-makers wanted it to be.

BMW fleet for Lokpal stirs fury

In floating a tender to buy seven luxury BMW cars for its members, the anti-corruption ombudsman has stirred a hornet's nest. Politicians have had a field day mocking the Lokpal, a readymade target since it can never be a popular institution with its target group comprising public functionaries, including the Prime Minister, Union and state ministers and MPs.

The wood is being missed for the trees in the Lokpal's mobility aspirations because the brand of cars they are seeking — BMW Series 3 — is made in India as much as many of the other cars that automobile manufacturers based in the country produce. It is the luxury factor that may set the marque brand apart from many other SUVs, MUVs and sedans that are made in India from mostly Indian components though in a globalised world of car making there can never be a car made only from local components.

It is the equality of status factor that may be driving the Lokpal's aspiration because the institution is made up of former Supreme Court judges who would like to emulate their brethren still serving on the bench and who are eligible for this class of car. The luxury factor falls foul of more than the Swadeshi argument because there are any number of vehicles made in India by the likes of Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, Mahindra, Nissan and myriad others that offer comparable driving quality and comfort at half the price of a luxury German-engineered (in India) vehicle like the BMW.

In fact, a great pride of India is the quality of its cars that are competitively priced and sell like hot cakes in over 65 countries. Maruti Suzuki, in collaboration with a Japanese car maker and Hyundai, owned by a Korean chaebol, have been exporting quality cars for years now. The manufacturers have also had a field day in the domestic market after the GST rate drop since when cars have been zooming out of showrooms as an aspirational India aims at SUVs and middle-level sedans, both internal combustion and electric-driven.

Politicians can snigger at the Lokpal, the guardians of integrity, a quality which can be said to be fast disappearing, particularly in that class of citizens, but their scorn should be directed at the profligacy of Rs 70 lakhs per vehicle in lesser GST days. And however luxurious the make of car, Indian roads have a way of equalising the ride.

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As toxic air chokes Delhi,
will we learn any lessons?



Nilanjan
Mukhopadhyay

Paradoxically, in large parts of north India, Diwali — also called the Festival of Lights — heralds, give or take a week or fortnight, the beginning of the season when practically the entire region gets shrouded in depressing grey smog. For weeks, the pall of gloom filters sunlight and the sound of hesitant to wracking coughs of people, a constant reminder to all-pervading toxicity. It is turning out no different this year.

For over three decades, since when awareness about this gained currency, people and the government, courts, doctors, media and environmental scientists played their roles in setting rules, issuing orders and mounting campaigns to educate people on harmful effects, on health, as well as the environment, of the excessive bursting of crackers. People were told while burning of crop stubble by farmers was a key factor, unfathomable amount of crackers and other fireworks burst and lit in almost every large city, especially Delhi, spiked the level of pollutants. The city's air pollution this year was reportedly 15 times the WHO limit.

Other approaches were used, including a humanistic one. Children in schools were lectured that numerous factories manufacturing crackers employed child labour because of their nimble fingers. Many of them, the students were told, got grievously injured, requiring amputation of fingers or limbs. The children were told it was "immoral" to enjoy by bursting crackers and playing with fireworks manufactured by kids like them, only born in poorer families and had to contribute to the family's kitty.

For a variety of geographical, topographical, meteorological, industrial, human practices, and either government inaction or

misdirected action, Delhi was from the beginning, not just India's capital, but also the epicentre of India's most-polluted urban space. There was no single factor behind the capital's infamy, but Diwali was undoubtedly one of the biggest, and its effect lasted days, except when the winds blew kindly, carrying away smoke and chemicals in the air. For as long as anyone can remember, Delhi's political leaders cautioned citizens and pleaded for restraints while bursting firecrackers. In time, curbs were also placed on their sale. Gradually, this had a positive effect: while pollution triggered by Diwali continued being a cause for concern, the number of crackers and people bursting them, declined appreciably.

Against this backdrop, the Delhi government this year was the biggest facilitator for the more raucous and polluting Diwali. Much before the festival, the first BJP CM since 1998, Rekha Gupta, urged the Supreme Court to permit firecrackers. It had the desired effect: an apex court bench comprising Chief Justice B.R. Gavai and Justice K. Vinod Chandran relaxed the blanket ban on fireworks in Delhi and the NCR. It permitted the sale of so-called "green" fireworks for a few days and especially within a short time window.

At the risk of offending the higher judiciary, one must say that the judges were naive to believe their order would be followed to the letter. Eventually, as many noted on social media, "green" firecrackers were an oxymoron. Furthermore, the Delhi police did not conscientiously enforce either the time-band or dates when shops could sell the firecrackers. The problem was compounded as the order was applicable to Haryana and UP too. It is well known that the enforcement of judicial orders by

The Delhi police did not conscientiously enforce either the time-band or dates when shops could sell the firecrackers. The problem was compounded as the order was applicable to Haryana and Uttar Pradesh too.

the state police in districts bordering Delhi is even more lax. However, instead of pinning the blame on people and institutions in the middle of the power rung, one should heed what the SC noted: that the Centre too had sought relaxation of the firecracker ban, "at least during the festive periods".

The judges also recorded that solicitor-general Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre and NCR states, made a "fervent plea" to lift the ban during Diwali and other major festivals, including Christmas and New Year's Eve. This certainly made it seem that the government was not pleading for "full" celebration of the festival of just one community.

The cat was, however, let out of the bag by Ashish Sood, Delhi's minister for home, power and education departments. He said the SC verdict was a significant step towards enabling the majority community to celebrate "their" festivals "freely". Mr Sood alleged that previous governments (AAP and Congress) blocked firecrackers on Diwali because of "minority and vote bank politics". He further claimed the two previous governments "used to block opportunities where the majority community could celebrate their festivals openly". Mr Sood's attempt to classify festivals under column heads of "ours" and "theirs" may have been endorsed by many Hindutva votaries. But it runs against the Indian tradition of such festivals being celebrated across communities.

A cursory Internet search reveals how Diwali was celebrated in the Mughal courts. The idea of cultural nationalism, the basis of Hindutva, talks of a common "culture" of this

nation's people, that is distinct from religion. This kind of Diwali is a people's culture that is still alive. The conceptualisation of Mr Sood and others like him, that this is the festival of the majority community, is reductionist and downgrades it into a sectarian and crude ritual, where the primary objective is to make the loudest noise and pollute the atmosphere.

These assertions and the episode involving Diwali celebrations in Delhi-NCR was echoed by Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath during the record-breaking lamp lighting ceremony in Ayodhya on Diwali eve. Although this performance has been staged since he assumed office in 2017, Adityanath still referred to the previous governments (headed by SP's Akhilesh Yadav and BSP's Mayawati), alleging that previous governments "fired bullets" in the temple town, while "his government lights lamps". This is symptomatic of the BJP government's empty chest of accomplishments; as Adityanath could not speak about a litany of achievements, and had no option but to stir forgotten memories of police firing from the past.

This year's winter is yet to set in appreciably in most parts of north India. Pollution levels are rising. There might be a short respite, once Diwali fumes get blown away, but there is a long haul ahead till well into 2026. Will the BJP government approach the challenge from pollution diligently and come up with fresh ideas on ways to combat this hazard, or will it continue to look solely at how the previous governments failed? Past experience since 2014 indicates how the coin will land, but we shall remain hopeful that Ms Gupta and Mr Sood will look beyond jingoism and playing the blame game.

Author-journalist Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay's latest book is The Demolition, The Verdict and The Temple: The Definitive Book on the Ram Mandir Project. He is also the author of Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times. He tweets at @NilanjanUdin.

LETTERS
GOVERNOR'S ROLE

The question raised by the Supreme Court whether it should remain a mute spectator if a State Governor sits on the resolutions and or bills passed by the State Assembly concerned without assenting to it for an indefinite period. The question seems very reasonable and logical too. The SC however seems to ignore the fact that a State Governor is not an illiterate who can't weigh the pros and cons and motive of a resolution and if his intuitions and conscience make him feel that the resolution is one that would be detrimental to the defence and common interest of the people of the State and those of others in other States he can reject the resolution in toto. If the Governor is obligated to merely endorse whatever a State Assembly decides without having the power to decide on the merits or demerits, the Assembly Speaker can do that job and bring the resolutions into effect.

MuthuSubramanian
Coimbatore

JAPAN'S NEW PM

Japan's choice of its first woman prime minister is more than a political milestone — it's a quiet revolution in a country long shaped by traditional gender roles. Her ascent signals a shift in public sentiment and a readiness for broader representation. Yet, it's not just about breaking a glass ceiling; it's about reshaping old mindsets. If she can blend empathy with firmness, reform with respect for tradition, she may redefine what leadership looks like in Japan. Her success could open doors for countless women and recast Japan's global image as a society ready to evolve while staying true to its values — a balance that could set a bold new tone for the nation's future.

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Devi Kar



Why children must
learn to accept any
criticism... Leaders,
writers, artists too

We have all noticed how some political leaders have become so averse to criticism that even comedians are afraid to open their mouths lest they are taken to task. There is a general murmur about shades of dictatorship prevailing, when ordinary citizens become wary about criticising their government. Like the story about the little boy and the king without any clothes, leaders are basking amid fans and flatterers, while critical judgment is rare. The media is influenced, intimidated or owned, and there is no way leaders can be sensitised to flaws in their policies until it's too late.

This rot can be traced to early childhood. For decades, criticism or negative remarks about children were frowned upon. Today, even the way teachers correct students must be done mildly. Teachers find it difficult to be artificially restrained, and it is seen that excessive political correctness ends in covering up the truth. It is important that children learn to receive and process honest criticism. The criticism should certainly not be unduly harsh and should be made with the sole intent of improving or at least of drawing meaningful attention to the work or behaviour in question. A proper appraisal of any work involves criticism.

But a strange malady has struck today's parents: they are either blind to their offspring's blemishes

or they don't want to face them. They are constantly praising and complimenting their children and tend to be partial to the teachers who do likewise. No wonder children are becoming less discerning — though more competitive — these days. It's not about the quality of their work but who have scored more. The two meanings of the term "criticism" are: "the expression of disapproval of something that is perceived to be faulty or blemished" and "the analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of a literary or artistic work". We should be able to accept criticism of both kinds. If someone expresses her dislike of something you have done or said, he/she is free to do so. Everyone does not criticise out of malice. Voltaire is supposed to have said: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." And this attitude is admired to this day except that people, and especially people in power, are becoming increasingly intolerant.

It is the same with parents of schoolchildren. Teachers today have to stretch their imagination to think of suitable euphemisms to use in their remarks about their students when it is time to send reports home. Some years ago, it was perfectly acceptable to call a spade — well, a spade. But now you need well-honed mental skills to be able to read between the lines and successfully "decode" your child's report. Of course, you can

choose to remain unenlightened and take what the report says at face value. Teachers know very well they cannot write in negative terms about any child — no matter how difficult, wayward, uncooperative or disruptive he/she may be. Parents are lulled into a happy state of fulfilment when they see words like "energetic", "spirited", "satisfactory", "fair", and so on. "Readily takes part in discussions" is likely to mean "talkative" while "keeps trying" means "still hasn't been able to pick up much". And when a teacher writes that she hopes X enjoys his next year in school, parents probably don't realise that the teacher would have loved to add: "I know I will, without his terrifying presence!" But why are we bending over backwards to cover up the truth? Simply because schools cannot afford to displease parents. All parents wish to be told what treasures their children are. They want to be assured of their multiple talents, people skills and potential for future success in life. And a school that does so will always be wholeheartedly supported by them.

The blocking of criticism is of late being associated with restraints on free speech, which the public feels is their right in a democratic country. Ironically, it is in some democracies that a kind of censorship is in effect which shields the government from any kind of serious denunciation. Yet, it is in the name of free speech that political lead-

ers keep hurling abusive criticism at each other. What is dangerous is the trend to prevent all criticism and pretend that everything is perfect. In such a climate, where the "yes men" are the trusted ones and only flatterers flourish, cracks in the structure widen and deepen. The disintegration of the whole edifice, grand though it may seem for the time being, is imminent. The weighing, the checking, the doubting are all essential to any stable system as it is to an individual. In this context I am reminded of the forms we had to fill up for high school students applying for seats in colleges and universities in the United States. One of the required criteria that we teachers had to indicate for each applicant was his/her "response to criticism". By then, I knew how important it was to have a healthy attitude towards criticism for any worthwhile learning to take place.

In conclusion, one should mention the vital role of critics in the visual and performing arts. It has been said that critique "helps improve art, fosters critical thinking, prepares artists for the professional world, and is essential for growth and development". Perhaps it is also pertinent to note that only secure and self-confident persons, who wish to improve, welcome criticism.

The writer is a veteran school educator
based in Kolkata