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{ OUR TAKE }

Social media ban alone won't work

Protecting children online calls for a range of measures, including improving parental awareness to monitor risky behaviour

The Andhra Pradesh government is considering legislation to ban children under 16 years from accessing and using social media. It has formed a group of ministers to examine the existing legislative framework in the country to regulate social media platforms. The power to regulate social media and other communication intermediaries is vested in the Union government under the Seventh Schedule, but states can enact laws covering cyberspace access by citing public order necessities. So, if the Andhra Pradesh government finds the grounds to legislate a ban, it will join a growing list of jurisdictions moving towards such interventions — Australia enforced this last year, while Denmark, France, and Malaysia are considering doing this in various forms.

The need to protect children from harm in cyberspace — particularly from social media — can't be overstated. Several studies have underlined the harm that social media does to young users. Experts have listed several dangers of unregulated use, from the retarding effect on physical activity to the worsening of psychosocial challenges typical among young users, specifically adolescents. These include warped identity formation and perception of the world outside, exacerbation of self-harm and bullying risks, addictive usage, and deep isolation due to unchecked use over long periods daily, stunting social and behavioural development. Over the long-term, social media harm could manifest as a large cohort of young adults who have squandered the potential of their formative years.

As US court filings in a case against Meta have shown, social media companies can't always be depended upon to correct this scenario. They have either minimised potential harm in their narratives or have denied this outright. In this light, there may be a case for State intervention. But it is not clear whether a ban by itself can be an effective and practical response to the challenge. To illustrate, Australia's ban puts the onus of compliance on social media companies, calling upon them to use multiple age-assurance methods, such as requiring government ID for signing up, voice and face recognition, and even "age inference" through analysis of online activity and patterns of individual users to determine the age cohort they belong to. Apart from questions on accuracy, there are several concerns about data privacy in deploying such methods. Also, sidestepping the ban is almost too easy, with escape routes such as location masking through VPN — given a ban will only cover the state, even intra-country masking can defeat the move. Administrative wherewithal can also prove a hurdle for the enforcement of the ban.

Rule-making on social media use by children must consider all aspects of digital engagement.Critics of banning social media point out that this carries the risk of pushing young digital users to darker areas of the web, where the potential for harm is exponentially greater, or towards other online activities that have similar mental and physical health fallouts, such as online gaming. So, efforts to increase awareness among parents on risky online behaviour and habits of adolescents and rigorous monitoring of online activity must preface any move to ban social media for young users. There are too many avenues for online activity for a social media ban alone to drive healthy engagement. A carefully calibrated range of measures is perhaps what is needed.

{ MINOR HINTS }

Rahul Sagar

The national anthem before our national anthem was adopted

The British struggled to give India a universally acceptable national anthem, given the country's rich diversity of language, music and sensibilities. The freedom movement and independent India faced no such challenge

The task of popularising the UK's anthem in India fell to Frederick Harford's National Anthem for India Fund. Thousands of pounds poured into the effort. But little went as planned. PTI

Republic Day is upon us. But when we hear *Jana Gana Mana* play, we would do well to remember that there was a time when people questioned whether India would ever have its own national anthem. This doubt arose shortly after Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1877. Hereupon it became increasingly common for public events to feature *God Save the Queen*. Since few Indians felt confident singing in English, compositions in regional languages emerged to help Indians better express their "affection" for the Crown. Perhaps the most well-known offering was the Poona Gayan Samaj's *Devi Shri Victoria*, which the Marathi press deprecated as "meaningless rigmarole". What made this composition especially unpopular was that it went on for nearly ten minutes — few Indians or Britons were loyal enough to stand that long.

Consequently, there emerged in London the "felicitous thought" that more needed to be done to popularise *God Save the Queen* as a national anthem for India. As the English press reminded its readers, "the power of music in which the masses can freely join has been shown in all ages". The task eventually devolved upon Frederick Harford, a minor clergyman at Westminster Abbey, who had a characteristically Victorian interest in the "spiritual and emotional power" of hymns. With the help of the National Indian Association, Harford recruited Mirza Bakir Khan, a Persian linguist who had studied in Calcutta, to produce a Hindustani translation. But when this piece was performed in London in May 1882, by an all-British troupe no less, it was panned by "old India hands" who warned that not only the words but the melody too should be "Oriental".

Stung by the criticism, Harford appealed to Sourindro Mohun Tagore, the renowned "practical musician" of the era, for help. Tagore rapidly produced a Bengali edition which he set a dozen different ways. Yet, even before his version was performed in London in November 1882, Tagore had discerned a problem: The "musical proclivities" of the Indian people were "too diverse to fix a melody". The *ragas* he had selected suited Bengali tastes but not those of Bombay or Madras. Nonetheless, there was cause for hope, he reasoned, as other musicians were attempting metrical renderings of *God Save the Queen* in other languages. The Jewish philanthropist, David Sassoon, had commissioned a Hebrew edition; Kaikhosro Kabraji, the editor of *Rast Goftar*, had produced one in Gujarati; the Maharaja of Travancore had likewise prepared one in Malayalam; and even Max Müller, the famed Orientalist, had drafted a Sanskrit version.

Still, it was an uphill battle. With critics demanding that the anthem be set in 20 "Oriental languages", Harford was compelled to establish a National Anthem for India Fund to support the enterprise. Seeking donations, he went about lecturing on the good that would result from transplanting *God Save the Queen*. A national anthem, he argued, helped "to form and preserve national character". But as Indians had "no common bond between them", a national anthem could "never be evolved by India from her own resources". Hence, "if she is to have one at all", Harford concluded, "it must be proposed to her by England".

Thousands of pounds poured into the Anthem Fund. But little went as planned. The original translation into Hindustani, it turned out upon closer inspection, implied that Indians wished for the widowed Victoria to remarry. It was hurriedly abandoned in favor of Müller's Sanskrit edition, which was then savaged by the pandits of Benares (who then fell out over which of their own versions was better, leading the British authorities to voice exasperation at "how fond native scholars are of criticising one another"). Meanwhile, the Punjabi "adaptation" sent in by Ram Das Chibber caused an uproar in Victorian circles when it turned out to be based on the jaunty local melody, *Haar Phulan Di*.

At one level, the problem was technical. Since India and England were "one united Empire", grandees in London insisted that it was "absolutely necessary that the music should be the same in India and in England". But how to translate the words of *God Save the Queen* into India's many languages while retaining the "stirring" tune and the "rhyme and rhythm" of the English original? The challenge was "insurmountable", as Tagore had warned Harford at the outset.

There was a political challenge too. There quickly emerged an "anti-anthem" party, composed of both Britons and Indians, that mocked Harford for leading a "singularly ridiculous movement" that sought to instill "second-hand loyalty". "National songs are like flowers", the *Daily Telegraph* observed, "they may be planted anywhere but in order to bloom the soil and seed must suit". Or as Richard Carnac Temple put it when Harford ignored his valiant attempt to promote Chibber's idiomatic Punjabi version, "so long as the Englishman will not fall in with the Indian's music, the hope that they will ever sing together is an idle dream".

Little wonder, then, that by the end of the decade, Harford's "chimerical project" had vanished from public view. It nonetheless deserves to be recalled because, as the musicologist Charles Capwell has noticed, at the very moment the British were convinced that Indians, being made up of "countless races, tribes, and creeds" lacked the "spirit of unanimity" required to produce a national anthem, Bankim Chandra Chatterji was finishing his novel *Anandamath*, which contained the glorious *Vande Mataram*. Within a decade, this song was being sung, by a very different Tagore, before the Indian National Congress, and in two decades, it had become the watchword of the revolutionary societies that were spouting up around the country.

Bankim succeeded where Harford failed because he divined our great truth. Our hearts could learn to love the heroic Shivaji of Maharashtra and the brave Ranjit Singh of Punjab, and our tongues could learn to recite a Bengali song — if it were equally rousing. It is not easy, schoolchildren know, to memorise the exalted language of *Vande Mataram* — and of *Jana Gana Mana*, the hymn that eventually became our national anthem. But ensconced in this happy childhood struggle is the story of how India, which so often appears to be losing its footing, surprises history. The genius of our civilisation is that we are ever willing to adapt, slowly but assuredly. And thus it was that when bombs and *bandhs* were launched in 1905, they were accompanied by cries of *Vande Mataram*. To the horror of Victorians, Indians had learnt to sing together.

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How India can become a deep-tech powerhouse

V Ramgopal Rao

Ashish Bharadwaj

India granted over 100,000 patents last year — a big surge compared to pre-pandemic data. This was based on increased activity in frontier technologies — or, deep tech — such as Artificial Intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, renewable energy, space tech, semiconductors, and biotech. These innovations are based on advanced science and engineering aimed at solving complex problems.

Patent rights offer a legally recognised exclusive opportunity to startups to commercialise their inventions. They serve as a defensive mechanism and catalyst for innovation-led growth. Patents also help secure funding, protect inventions from imitators, and enable collaborations. In 2025, Indian deep tech companies raised over $1 billion in equity funding. Investors are seeking patent portfolios as a prerequisite for funding.

Deep tech startups create new industries and tackle challenges like the climate crisis, health care, space exploration, and efficiency in judiciary. Despite India's global rank (sixth) in patent filings, converting patents into commercial products remains a challenge.

The real worth of a patent lies in its commercial potential in the market. This makes it a "high-quality" patent. Successful startups commercialise patents by bridging the academia-industry divide and building a viable business model.

The government has provided more research funding and incubation programmes. Policies for startups include reduction in patent fee, expedited examination, and assistance for international filings through SIP-EIT scheme. The Draft National Deep Tech Startup Policy, RDI Scheme for private sector, Startup India Seed Fund Scheme, SAMRIDH program for IT, and iDEX scheme for the defence sector are laudable initiatives.

In India, deep tech startups struggle with incubation support, funding shortage, and dysfunctional patent monetisation framework. Experience of universities such as the IITs, IISc and BITS reveals that the real problems are insufficient funding, inadequate mentoring, lack of access to a patent system, and inability to monetise patents. What are the reasons?

Long gestation period, risky R&D, funding uncertainty, and lack of patent-protected innovations are existential challenges. The return on investment for patent licensing is low, and institutions retain ownership of patents — making it difficult for inventors to commercialise independently. The lack of interdisciplinary awareness between technical know-how and legal knowledge — the necessary and sufficient conditions — for patent licensing aggravates the problem. As a result, most Indian deep tech startups gradually die. Those who are able to secure patents fulfil the requirements of "novelty" and "inventive step", but ex post fall short of the third requirement of "industrial applicability".

Some problems are systemic. The average pendency — from application to grant of patent — is 40-50 months. The average time to receive the first examination report is almost 12 months. This is disastrous for deep tech startups. Since patented innovations are business assets that help attract funding, delay in getting patents granted risk collapse of the idea. Here, we make six actionable recommendations.

Strengthen academic-startup linkages: Over half of deep tech startups originate from within academia. Collaborations with top academic institutions are vital for knowledge transfer, joint intellectual property (IP), access to talent, and sharing of labs and R&D facilities. Doctoral (PhD) programmes need reorientation to promote entrepreneurship and making company formation or prototype development, instead of just academic publications, as PhD outcomes.

Expand access to strategic capital: Startups require long-term capital to support high R&D costs and longer time-to-market — typical of all deep tech fields. Leveraging government funds — such as the Deep Tech Fund of Funds and thematic venture capital vehicles — with domestic and foreign private investments can create an enabling environment for deep tech innovation.

Foster IP literacy and support robust patent portfolios: Engineers and scientists in this space should actively seek IP education, institutional support, and professional advisory to build defensible and high-value patent portfolios. IP literacy must be part of early-stage accelerator and incubator support. Building a culture of IP and fostering greater collaboration with legal professionals are essential.

Promote regulatory ease and fast-track approvals: The government and regulatory agencies should simplify procedures and introduce regulatory sandboxes for AI, robotics, quantum computing, semiconductors, biotech, and autonomous vehicles. Fast-track mechanisms will help startups bring complex, high-impact technologies to market rapidly. The focus should be on patent quality rather than numbers.

Institutional framework for academia: There is a dire need to create new India-centric institutional frameworks for assisting faculty and founders in deep tech space. This can be done by enabling access to skilled professionals for prototyping, certification, validation, trials, reliability, regulatory approvals, patent filing/prosecution, and licensing.

Incentivise commercialisation and international collaboration: Targeted incentives — for example, grants for prototype development, revenue-linked tax benefits, and prioritised government procurement — will help startups cross the critical commercialisation chasm. Thematic global partnerships and collaborations with tech companies can open new markets, facilitate tech transfer, and accelerate commercial scale-up for Indian startups.

Patents beget innovation and innovation catalysis growth — as demonstrated by the phenomenal work of the 2025 Nobel laureates in economics. Innovation will help our startups scale and enhance India's economic resilience to achieve technological sovereignty. This is achievable if these recommendations see the light of day in a timely manner.

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In Noida, reminder of the sinking state of humanity

Ashish Magotra

Death shouldn't be a mere number. But in India, it often seems to be reduced to exactly that. The government response to an accident is intrinsically linked to one question: What was the damage? The conversation isn't about whether the tragedy could have been averted, rather it quickly shifts towards the death toll and the number of those injured and the candy that we all know as compensation. It happens in such a cold-hearted manner that it makes one wonder: What is the value of a life in India?

In Greater Noida's Sector 150, a 27-year-old software engineer, Yuvraj Mehta, tragically died after his car plunged into a water-filled construction pit on the night of January 16–17. The night was cold and foggy, and the bend on the road that Mehta could not see was very likely a case of bad design, with fatal consequences. Eyewitnesses reported that he struggled for nearly 90 minutes, screaming for help, even as his father, the police, the fire brigade, and personnel from the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) watched on. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) could arrive only much later. It was a death that was the direct result of criminal negligence on the part of the administration and societal failure.

With its gross domestic product (GDP) valued at $4.18 trillion, India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth largest economy, it aims to become the third largest by 2030. But what is the point of this growth if it is soaked in the kind of apathy that allows its citizens to drown without so much as batting an eyelid, or moves on after some shortlived outrage.

Around 9.5 million people die in India every year. This is the second largest number of annual deaths of any country in the world after China. So perhaps the death of one techie doesn't mean much in the larger scheme of things.

But it is only when a country starts reacting to such incidents by asking questions that are aimed at getting to the core of the problem rather than covering things up can we talk about maturing as a society. Surely, an ancient civilisation should have had at least this part pinned down in the modern age.

We have unfortunately reached a point where such incidents have started to seem like the norm — people dying because of potholes, contaminated tap water, or even stampedes at religious gatherings. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The problem, though, is the pattern that follows. Politicians quickly look to apportion the blame and not take any responsibility for what has happened or what will. Someone will be suspended. A probe will be ordered. And then there will be silence. Not even a sincere sorry follows.

In the hierarchical Indian society, deferring to authority figures and navigating big egos is almost a given. Every citizen uses a coping skill called masking: concealing thoughts or behaviours to fit in. But sometimes, you just have to do what's right.

And this is where the Indian State machinery fumbles with startling consistency. Ideally, in a democracy, the ordinary citizen must have the right of way. But it rarely ever happens, so much so that the sinking man feels like an apt metaphor for the state of humanity. A slow descent into a hell where we'll watch, we'll outrage, perhaps even cry, and then we'll let them die.

The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

MORE THAN AN ISLAND

After a backlash from Western allies, US President Donald Trump scaled back his rhetoric on America taking over Greenland. The island-territory has always been a theatre of geopolitical competition, which is now getting headted due to the energy and trade realities the world faces.

Australia-based researcher Elizabeth Buchanan's *So You Want to Own Greenland?: Lessons from the Vikings to Trump* offers the reader important perspective on why the island is a key piece in the ongoing great power race. From the earliest expeditions to the island by Norse sailors to the US using the island as a military base during the Cold War and the island's relationship with the Kingdom of Denmark, of which it remains a territory but with significant autonomy, the book offers the reader a detailed sketch of the past, present and future of the island. It also delves into the fallout on the immediate neighbourhood, specifically Canada, if Trump's plans come to fruition.

So You Want to Own Greenland?
Elizabeth Buchanan
2025

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Opinion

SATURDAY, JANUARY 24, 2026

TARIFF TROUBLE

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi

India's textile industry is the second largest employer in our economy—our textiles are loved worldwide, and the craftsmanship of our tailors is truly unparalleled. Yet today, this industry is facing deep uncertainty and fear because of US tariffs

Earnings, not narrative

FPIs are voting with their feet, will return only if there is a clear improvement in the durability of corporate numbers

MUCH BEFORE BERNSTEIN downgraded its stance on Indian equities in early January, foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) had already begun voting with their feet. Through 2025, FPIs found better opportunities elsewhere—betting on markets in China, Korea, and the US, and being handsomely rewarded. In the process, they pulled out nearly $19 billion from Indian equities. The trend appears to have spilled over into 2026, with outflows so far of around $3 billion. The disenchantment is not primarily about the rupee's depreciation or geopolitical risks. It stems instead from a slowing economic momentum, limited headroom for further fiscal stimulus, the absence of strong catalysts to lift corporate earnings, and persistently expensive valuations. Over the past few years, the government has done most of the heavy lifting—supporting growth through tax cuts and a sharp increase in capital expenditure.

That support now faces constraints. With economic growth—and more importantly nominal GDP—slowing, the government has limited room to provide fresh stimulus as it remains committed to fiscal consolidation. At the same time, private corporate investment has stayed hesitant, with companies citing weak demand visibility. Stronger investment would have helped generate jobs and revive consumption, but that impulse has yet to materialise. Monetary easing, too, has had a muted impact. Despite the Reserve Bank of India cutting policy rates by 125 basis points, credit has not become meaningfully cheaper except for select borrower segments. Banks have struggled to mobilise retail deposits, keeping loan growth modest. India Ratings expects credit growth at shadow lenders to moderate to 15-16% next year as they turn more selective following stress in the micro, small, and medium enterprise sector. Economists now see GDP growth in FY27 settling around 6.7-6.8%.

An India-US trade deal, or interim tariff relief, could provide a fillip to exports, jobs and incomes. Until such a deal materialises—and on terms favourable to India—export momentum is likely to remain under pressure. Against this backdrop, India entered 2026 as one of the world's most expensive equity markets, trading at over 20 times one-year forward earnings, compared with an average multiple of about 15.1 times across 15 major economies. While the recent market correction has made valuations marginally more reasonable, corporate earnings this season have also been soft. Despite cuts in income tax and goods and services tax rates, consumption demand remains tepid, as reflected in subdued earnings at Reliance Retail, Shoppers Stop, and Avenue Supermarts, and provisional data from fashion retailers such as Trent.

With the impact of the new wage code rules yet to fully play out, earnings growth may remain stuck in high single digits. That, combined with a heavy primary market pipeline that could cap secondary-market returns, has kept FPIs cautious. Returns from benchmark indices between July 2004 and January 2026 have been mediocre, while small-cap funds delivered negative returns between June 2024 and December 2025. Indian equities also continue to trade at a premium to most global markets. Even after recent corrections, valuation multiples remain well above those of several markets—making India a tougher sell in a world where investors are increasingly price-sensitive. The retreat of FPIs is, however, less about losing faith in the long-term India story. For them to regain confidence in the India story, what is needed is not narrative optimism but a clear improvement in the quality and durability of corporate earnings. That revival, for now, appears some distance away.

CLIMATE CHANGE

US EXIT FROM GLOBAL BODIES FOLLOWS PAST CHICANERY, MAY NOW GIVE DEVELOPING WORLD A GREATER SAY

Deceit and intimidation

SOMIT DASGUPTA

Visiting Professor, ICRIER

TOP EMITTERS

Year	US	China	India	World	Share of US (%)
1925	1.76	0.04	0.04	3.74	47
1950	2.54	0.07	0.06	5.93	43
1975	4.41	1.18	0.20	16.99	26
2000	6.02	3.64	0.98	25.5	24
2024	4.90	12.29	2.19	38.6	13

(Figures in billion tonnes of carbon dioxide) Source: Our World in Data

AFTER WITHDRAWING FROM the Paris Agreement (PA) for the second time, the US administration recently dissociated itself from 66 international organisations out of which 31 were linked to the United Nations (UN). The organisations from where the US withdrew are involved in a host of activities, which include climate change bodies such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and also others like the International Solar Alliance, UN Population Fund, UN Conference to Trade and Development, UN Women, etc. The US government opined that the functioning of these organisations was contrary to its interest, and constraining its sovereignty apart from wasting taxpayers' money. The immediate impact of the US move would be a cutback on jobs. And of course, there are larger issues involved since organisations like the UNFCCC and IPCC are affected.

I would like to argue about issues only related to climate change. Before taking a deep dive into the US action, as an eye opener, it would be good to see its role in carbon emissions (see *table*).

Today, China, the US, and India are the three largest emitters. China is head and shoulders above both—about two and a half times more than the US, and nearly five and a half times more than India. One should, however, add that the US has already peaked its emissions in 2007 (6.12 billion tonnes) and is now on the decline, while China and India are yet to peak. Of course, these are total emissions and if per capita emissions are estimated, the top honours would go to countries like Qatar, Singapore, Bahrain, and Iceland. In cumulative terms, the US is the highest emitter, responsible for 25% of global emissions.

Despite being the highest cumulative emitter, the US has been conceited when it comes to dealing with climate change, almost cocking a snook at the world community. Though the US played a positive role in setting up the UNFCCC and IPCC, it has always resisted laying down targets for reducing carbon emissions. It never ratified the Kyoto Protocol which had laid down targets for developed nations on the grounds that countries like China and India should also be assigned targets. Of course, the US was not the only country to demand this; similar sentiments were aired by many of the western nations. The US went a step further by trying to confuse the issue when it said that climate change is actually caused by methane emissions, something that China and India does in plenty on account of paddy farming and cattle rearing (*Raghunandan*). Though the US will not accept any targets for reduction in carbon footprints for itself, it wanted the steps taken by developing countries to be monitored and reviewed. The US, along with its western allies, sought to dilute the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities, which recognised that the developed countries were responsible for climate change. After pursuing this end for several years, they finally tasted success in the PA (2015) which stipulated that all countries will formulate their nationally determined contributions (NDCs). It kind of made every country responsible for combating climate change. And, in a way, erased the fact that the developed world was primarily responsible for climate change.

While insisting that all countries formulate their NDCs, the US and the other developed nations did concede that the developing nations would require concessional resources to finance both mitigation and adaptation projects. A paltry sum of $100 billion a year was fixed (2009) but virtually nothing was made available. This was raised to $300 billion in 2024 (COP29), and it remains to be seen how much is actually transferred. The contribution of the US to the Loss and Damage Fund is a mere 17%—a disgrace considering it is the largest cumulative emitter. The US has resisted mandatory contributions to any such fund and has always stressed that they should be voluntary. Further, it categorically stated that any contribution should not be seen as an admission of guilt from the emissions angle.

The US exit from the UNFCCC, IPCC, and also the PA could be disastrous as it may have a demonstration effect on the fence sitters, and emissions may spurt. It could, however, be a blessing in disguise since this will cede space to the developing world to have a say in the future protocols of climate change discussions. The absence of the US in climate discussions may also see less of bullying tactics. There are unconfirmed reports that officials from other nations were threatened with visa bans, etc. during an International Maritime Organisation meeting in October 2025, which was convened to discuss carbon pricing for shipping.

To sum up, insofar as climate change is concerned the role of the US is nothing but chicanery, deceit, and intimidation. This is true of successive US administrations, be it under Obama, Biden, or Trump. It would be very difficult for the next US administration to return to climate change negotiations even if it wanted to, because one would have reached the point of no return by then.

Views are personal

E-commerce promise for a *Viksit Bharat*

DHANENDRA KUMAR

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The goal should not be regulation of the sector for its own sake, but a framework that fuels growth and fairness equally

E-COMMERCE IS ONE of the defining narratives of India's economic transformation. What began as a niche, urban-centric phenomenon has rapidly become a core pillar of economy, MSME empowerment, jobs, retail, digital payments, logistics, and exports. Yet the question is, how can we harness its full promise for *Viksit Bharat* with fair competition and inclusive growth?

India's e-commerce market is projected to expand from around $125 billion in 2024 to $345 billion by 2030, and approach $550 billion by 2035 driven by rising internet penetration, smartphone adoption, ease in transactions, and growing middle-class consumption. Significantly, Flipkart, the largest platform, has got an approval to flip back to India, paving the way for an initial public offering.

Domestic digital payments underpin this growth. Unified Payments Interface (UPI) processed an astounding 20 billion transactions with nearly $289 billion in value last August alone, showing how deeply digital commerce has permeated everyday life, including in tier-II and -III cities.

With scale comes scrutiny—particularly over competition and fair play. The Competition Commission of India (CCI) rightly recognised that e-commerce brings novel market dynamics that differ from traditional retail. Its enforcement actions and investigations into practices were meant to uphold competition law while allowing markets to evolve organically. Judicial oversight has reinforced the CCI's mandate, ensuring that checks and balances operate within the constitutional and legal framework.

Different stakeholders view the sector through different lenses. Platforms highlight innovation and customer benefits—personalised search, price discovery, ease of transactions, efficient logistics, fast delivery, and digital payments—as core drivers of consumer welfare. MSMEs and artisans see digital marketplaces as a doorway to markets previously out of reach though they also flag challenges around compliance, fees, and algorithmic opacity. Consumers have benefitted from competitive prices; convenience and doorstep delivery, with concerns about discount sustainability and data-driven pricing.

This multiplicity of perspectives underscores why policy cannot be one-dimensional. Balanced regulation must promote efficiency while preventing dominance. Government platforms like the Open Network for Digital Commerce will democratise, although public digital infrastructure may complement private platforms, not substitute.

For consumer protection and digital safety, transparency should be enforced in ranking, pricing, and data usage

E-commerce's biggest social and economic contribution lies in its ability to integrate MSMEs and artisans from the hinterland into the mainstream economy. About 70% of e-commerce sales in India are attributed to MSMEs, reflecting how digital platforms have provided entry for small businesses and craftsmen including women-led enterprises.

Digital tools are helping ground realities—over 73% of MSMEs in semi-urban and rural India have reported business growth after adopting digital transactions and platforms, driven by smartphones and UPI. Large platforms are helping the digitisation of small stores.

On the export front, the potential is enormous but under-leveraged. However, Flipkart and Amazon are helping sellers reach over $20 billion, with targets of scaling this to $80 billion by 2030, underscoring global reach.

Employment benefits are equally significant. E-commerce catalyses jobs in logistics, supply chain management, digital marketing, tech support, and customer service, with new investments set to generate millions of new jobs.

The next frontier of growth will be artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, predictive analytics, and automation.

Generative AI alone could enhance productivity in retail by about 35% by 2030, enabling smarter supply chains, personalised marketing, dynamic pricing, and better inventory management. AI-driven loyalty systems, virtual shopping assistants, and real-time demand forecasting will help small sellers. These technologies can mitigate traditional barriers, giving online sellers a global reach.

Despite the promise, challenges persist. Algorithmic opacity in ranking and pricing can inadvertently favour larger sellers. Quick commerce models have drawn scrutiny over pricing strategies that may edge out local stores. Data privacy and cybersecurity remain paramount; as e-commerce expands, so do the risks of breaches and misuse of personal and commercial data.

To ensure India's e-commerce ecosystem is competitive, inclusive and future-ready, we need multi-layered reforms. The first layer involves empowering competition-centric regulation by strengthening the CCI's analytical capabilities to monitor data-driven digital markets and algorithmic impacts; promoting interoperability and data portability to reduce entry barriers; explicitly distinguishing between marketplace-led enablement models and inventory-led dominance so that regulatory responses are seen as proportionate to structure; and focusing on the value of evidence-based, ex-post enforcement over heavy ex-ante prescriptions to strengthen the competition narrative.

The second layer should involve MSMEs and export enablement. Export procedures should be simplified with digital-first documentation and compliance portals; targeted training and incentives must be provided for cross-border e-commerce; and schemes like One District One Product and GI must be aligned with monitoring.

The third layer should concern technology adoption support by enabling MSMEs' access to AI, cloud infrastructure, and digital tools and creating innovation clusters to integrate e-commerce with supply chain, logistics, and payment ecosystems.

Finally, for consumer protection and digital safety, transparency should be enforced in ranking, pricing, and data usage. Cybersecurity frameworks should also be strengthened for digital payments.

India's e-commerce evolution is a story of entrepreneurial aspiration, technological innovation, and economic inclusion. With prudent competition policy, calibrated regulation, and forward-looking technology enablement, this sector can not only deliver consumers greater choice and value, but also empower MSMEs, boost exports, create jobs, and strengthen the economy. The goal should not be regulation for its own sake, but a framework that fuels growth and fairness equally.

Dying alone Is China's latest tech obsession

CATHERINE THORBECKE

Bloomberg

THIS TIME LAST year, the hottest Chinese tech product was DeepSeek's market-moving artificial intelligence model. In 2026, it's something far simpler: an app for people worried about dying alone.

The bluntly named "Are You Dead?" platform rocketed to the top of the app-store charts in China before going viral globally. The interface is almost aggressively plain. Users, largely people living alone, tap to confirm they are still alive. Miss two days in a row and an emergency contact gets notified.

Besides its provocative moniker, there's a reason the app went mega-viral without spending a dime on advertising—and didn't even have to pretend to be a buzzy new AI product. Its surge coincided with the nation's birth rate plunging to its lowest on record, at a time when marriage figures are falling and divorces are ticking up.

While many assumed it was developed for elderly users seeking to hold on to their independence, it was actually created by a team of Gen-Z developers who said in interviews they were inspired by their own experiences of isolating urban life. One-person households are expected to swell to as many as 200 million in the country by 2030.

These demographic changes aren't unique to modern China, but they're definitely not the kind of publicity Beijing wants right now. The platform was quietly removed from Chinese app stores last week. In a culture where frank mentions of dying are seen as taboo and inauspicious, the creators also said on micro-blogging site Weibo that they were planning on rebranding. The new international name, "Demumu", is a Labubu-fied riff on the word "death". It didn't catch on as expected, and the developers are now crowdsourcing a new idea via social media.

Despite striking a nerve in Beijing and around the world, the product's concept is annoyingly good. As Big Tech and start-ups race to come up with the next hit AI app, the most common complaint I hear from actual humans is that many of these tools are solutions hunting for a problem. I don't need a model to summarise a two-line message from a friend, and having software interpose itself in basic intimacy can feel more intrusive than helpful.

"Are You Dead?" does the opposite. It's not trying to be clever, but purely practical. It offers a small sense of security to people living solo—even as its existence makes plain a rising loneliness epidemic. The name, a dark twist on the "Are You Hungry?" food delivery platform, channels the nihilistic Gen-Z humour of the lay-flat generation.

Efforts to force AI into more facets of our life have rightly commanded the spotlight. But in Asia and beyond, eldercare tech is poised to boom. Beijing has been touting the silver economy as a future engine of growth, hinting at seniors' rising spending power and willingness to adopt new digital platforms. Instead of discourage these innovations, the government should welcome such tools.

The American Association of Retired Persons forecasts that older Americans' tech spending will rise to $120 billion by 2030, despite 59% of adults over 50 feeling it isn't designed with their age in mind. There's a ballooning opportunity globally for developers to tap into this market and ameliorate that disconnect.

But the deeper debate unleashed by the app's virality is something that will be even harder for the industry to address: Is technology making us more or less lonely? Globally, social media has made it much more convenient to avoid meeting in-person. In China, super-apps have optimised everything—you don't have to say a word to a real person to hail a ride or order delivery meals and essentials. And in the pursuit of AI supremacy, people are working longer hours, driven by a gruelling (and technically illegal) 996 culture that encourages more time away from home.

DeepSeek was China's splashy tech moment; "Are You Dead?" is the hangover. The app went viral because it translated demographic and social anxiety into a push notification. Beijing can scrub it from the stores and its creators can try to Labubu-fy "death". The underlying demand it exposed for connection won't disappear.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Aviation challenges

Apropos of "Turbulence in the sky" (*FE*, January 23), the losses incurred by IndiGo and Air India reflect structural vulnerabilities within India's aviation ecosystem. Despite operational scale and a cost-efficient model, IndiGo has faced margin compression due to elevated aircraft leasing costs, volatile aviation turbine fuel prices, currency depreciation, and prolonged groundings linked to engine supply constraints. Air India's challenges are more entrenched, shaped by legacy debt, inefficient systems, and the capital-intensive burden of fleet renewal and organisational restructuring after privatisation. Rising competition, regulatory fare interventions, and uneven post-Covid demand recovery have further constrained revenue optimisation. These losses highlight the capital-heavy, shock-sensitive nature of aviation, where profitability remains elusive without policy stability, operational discipline, and sustained structural reform.

—N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bangalore

Davos reality check

Apropos of "Davis without delusions" (*FE*, January 23), the erosion of rules-based norms in favour of raw power politics, as displayed in trans-Atlantic tensions, is the new reality. Mark Carney's warning is particularly resonant: clinging to the facade of a defunct order is perilous. For nations like India, strategic autonomy is non-negotiable. Pragmatism demands that we forge agile alliances with other middle powers. This also means evaluating multilateral engagements, distinguishing genuine cooperation from frameworks designed to undermine existing institutions. Our diplomacy must be clear-eyed, anchored in sovereign interest, and prepared for an era where might, not just right, dictates terms.

—K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

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WEB EXCLUSIVE
Wrong again, President Trump: The Soviet Union, not the US, stopped Nazi Germany — *By Kuldip Singh*
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WORDLY WISE
Peace is liberty in tranquillity.
— Marcus Tullius Cicero

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RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Manipur imperative: Peace & political process

FOR OVER 11 months now, Manipur has been under President's Rule. At the outset, few would have disputed the move, given the evident inability of former chief minister N Biren Singh — widely seen as a partisan figure — to contain the ethnic conflict. But almost 33 months since the violence first erupted, Manipur remains carved up into buffer zones that rigidly segregate the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities. While there have been sporadic bouts of violence, the past few months had seen a lull — until the evening of January 21, when a man, a Meitei, living with his wife, a Kuki, for the past month in Kuki-dominated Churachandpur district, was shot dead by suspected Kuki militants. Mayanglambam Rishikanta Singh's killing was recorded on video and circulated with a chilling message: "No peace, no popular government." In its aftermath, one thing is clear: The state cannot allow the heinous crime to derail efforts to restore the political process and bring in an elected government.

The video was clearly intended as a warning to Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups who are engaged in talks to build a consensus for the formation of a popular government. In mid-December, the BJP convened a meeting in New Delhi that brought Meitei and Kuki-Zo legislators under one roof. Last week, Kuki-Zo MLAs and insurgent groups that are part of the Suspension of Operations agreement met to discuss the conditions under which such a government could be formed. This marks the first time tribal bodies have indicated willingness to join the state government. While they made it clear that their MLAs would not take part without a written assurance from the Centre on a separate administration — a long-standing tribal demand that is a point of contention — the fact that representatives from both sides had begun talking is an encouraging sign. That fragile opening must be built on. Moreover, while President's Rule may be imposed for a maximum of three years, any extension beyond one year requires declaration of a national emergency and certification by the Election Commission that conditions are not conducive to holding elections.

Manipur needs to be freed from the prolonged impasse. The longer the fragmentation and militarisation of society persist, the harder it will be to stitch the state back together again. The Centre, political parties, and civil society groups must stand firm in the face of provocations and build on the hard-won initial progress towards reconciliation.

Amid volatility, a supply comfort in commodities

IN 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even as the world was recovering from the post-pandemic supply chain disruptions, sent international prices of food and other commodities soaring. The benchmark FAO Food Price Index scaled an all-time high of 160.2 points in March and Brent crude futures crossed $139 per barrel on March 7 that year. In contrast, the recent geopolitical storms — whether in Venezuela, Iran or Greenland, not to speak of US President Donald Trump's seeming upending of the world order — have had minimal effect on the global commodity trade. The FAO index is well below the 2022 peaks, averaging 124.3 points in December, while Brent prices are at around $65 per barrel now.

As far as supplies go, the world is moving to surpluses. Global wheat production is projected to reach a new high, mainly on the back of bigger crops in Argentina and the EU. The same goes for rice, corn and barley, where the drivers for record output are India, the US and the EU respectively. In oilseeds, too, the expected bumper production of soyabean and palm oil is largely courtesy of Brazil and Indonesia. On top of that, take India's own total stocks of wheat and rice in government godowns on January 1, which were nearly 4.5 times the required minimum level for that date. The good monsoon rainfall in 2025, in combination with moderate temperatures, has also delivered a good harvest in the kharif and, in all likelihood, the current rabi season as well.

The supply comfort in commodities, both global and domestic, is a redeeming feature in the present situation, where the rupee and the stock market are in freefall amid continued selling by foreign portfolio investors and capital outflows from India. Soft commodity prices are cushioning the impact of a weakening rupee that would otherwise have engendered imported inflation. The Union Budget should focus on macroeconomic stability. Far from taking the foot off the pedal of fiscal consolidation, there should be a clear glide path for a reduction in the deficit and debt ratios of both the Centre and state governments. Geopolitical risk and uncertainty are often beyond any government's control. The same cannot be said, though, about macro stability and policy predictability.

On the red carpet, the teacher

WHO WOULD Ryan Coogler have been if, long ago, a teacher had not recognised and encouraged his raw talent? Those who watched the filmmaker walk the red carpet at the National Board of Review awards in the company of his college professor Rosemary Graham — a week before his genre-bending vampire musical *Sinners* broke the record for most Oscar nominations — may well have mused on the "what if" scenario. Coogler, who credits Graham with changing his life by telling him to go to Hollywood, likely himself wonders where he would have been but for the clear-eyed view of one teacher.

Because often, that's all it takes for a life to be transformed and a different future to be written: A sympathetic teacher who shapes the child's plastic mind, stokes her curiosity and enlarges her reality. How well such a teacher — or guru or mentor — does can be seen most clearly in how well her pupils do; not just how successful they become, but how fully they're able to inhabit the promise that every individual holds. To become a teacher is, therefore, to enter a vocation where the usual yardsticks of productivity and efficiency, calculated in cold numbers, cannot apply. Where the sum of all that is owed to them goes far beyond the often paltry salaries they draw and the inadequate systemic support they get.

Reframe that first question, then, to this: What if there had been no teacher to see in Coogler the early sparks of a brilliant career? The filmmaker gets it right when he thanks his professor. Just as Albert Camus, freshly anointed a Nobel laureate, acknowledged in 1957 his debt to his own teacher, or when generations of students, year after year, express similar gratitude towards those who have taught and counselled them. Where, indeed, would anyone be without their guiding hand?

The familiar world order will not return. What India and EU can build

JAWED ASHRAF

THE VISIT by European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as chief guests for India's Republic Day celebrations and the EU-India Summit on January 27 come in the context of New Delhi's rapidly rising engagement with the EU and its members. In her new term, von der Leyen's first visit outside Europe was to India in February 2025, accompanied by the entire cabinet or College of Commissioners. Visits by leaders of member states and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's travels have also strengthened ties across Europe.

This could be a moment of enormous global consequence. US President Donald Trump has untethered the long-adrift transatlantic relationship from its anchors of security, economics, and values. His posturing on Greenland has injected hostility. This, together with the Russia-Ukraine war, economic pressure from China, crumbling multilateralism and fragmenting global economic and energy systems, has put unprecedented strategic pressure on the EU.

Yet, Europe has shown cohesion and resolve on multiple issues, including the Ukraine war. From the crises, it is now seeking to build a new sovereign future, independent of the US. It has the intellectual, industrial, and financial capacity for the task. It also needs new alliances and trusted partnerships of complementarity, not competition. India would be an obvious choice.

India, too, is at a moment of reckoning. Many of the trends and forces that are affecting Europe have forced reappraisal of India's strategic bets, exerted stress on the framework of its global engagement and raised risks and barriers for national economic transformation.

Adjustments often follow a J-curve. Short- term costs can yield to long-term gains with the right strategy. India's response to the shifts has many dimensions: Rapidly adding to domestic capacities, affirming strategic autonomy, reframing traditional relationships, expanding plurilateral engagement and diversifying partnerships to mitigate risks and build influence. A partnership with Europe touches each dimension of India's strategy. The value of a relationship is not just in the strength of a partner, but in the need it fulfils and the benefits it brings. India's extensive European outreach and the EU's New Strategic EU-India Agenda 2025 signal a higher level of mutual priority.

Of the greatest consequence is the expected conclusion of the EU-India free trade agreement (FTA). Pursued and abandoned more than a decade ago, it was resurrected with greater ambition and scope in 2021. Growth in the EU's trade with India, and its FDI stock in the latter, is already among the fastest in the Indo-Pacific region. The trend reflects growing trade-investment linkages and ongoing adjustments in the supply chains in response to geopolitical risks. The negotiations are nearly complete. The high-quality FTA will address the compelling need to diversify trade and investment, deepen India's integration into global value chains, stimulate the development of resilient supply chains, and foster greater industrial and technological collaboration. This will enhance the viability of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) — the great new strategic initiative that reprises an old India-Europe corridor.

> Technology determines power and leadership, but its use also shapes the character of our society and world. India and Europe can collaborate to gain self-sufficiency in the building blocks of the digital age such as artificial intelligence

Technology determines power and leadership, but its use also shapes the character of our society and world. India and Europe can collaborate to gain self-sufficiency in the building blocks of the digital age, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductors. That can help prevent a global duopoly. India and Europe also converge on the public character and purpose of digital technology. Indeed, science, technology, and innovation should drive the partnership to lead industries of the future, address global priorities, and support development in the Global South. Guided by this vision, the two sides are building a comprehensive mobility programme of higher ambition for students, scholars, and scientists.

EU-India relations are built on India's deep ties with key member states. France has been a strong and reliable strategic partner for decades, from consistent support in the UN to long-standing defence, nuclear, and space collaboration. Germany, a major economic partner, is developing stronger defence and strategic cooperation with India. Spain and Italy, too, are prioritising India. The Nordic countries are the new frontiers of India's engagement. Attention is now turning to the strategically important and dynamic east.

Europe has emerged as India's major partner in advanced defence platforms. Europe, seeking to rearm itself, and India, pursuing *atmanirbharta* (self-reliance), will benefit from the scale that collaboration in development, production and supply chains brings. New domains of conflict such as maritime, underwater, space, and cyberspace call for cooperation in operations, capacity-building, and global regulation. Countering terrorism must be an essential element of the security partnership. Beyond technical and intelligence cooperation, it must also focus on the sources of terrorism, especially in Pakistan.

India and Europe can together play a bigger role in addressing the challenges of our times: Recourse to power over norms, the perilous course of our planet, the arrested future of the Global South, growing global fragmentation, emasculated multilateralism, fragile security in the Indo-Pacific, and seemingly intractable Eurasian security challenges. The two can, thus, influence the evolution of a new multipolar global order that will arise from the broken present — one of greater diversity, but still underpinned by the rule of law and collective choices.

There are challenges. That includes carving out influence in a world buffeted by the major powers. The EU must remain cohesive and united, with sovereign capabilities and an independent foreign and security policy. India's relationship with Russia and Europe's relations with China cast a shadow of concern. The two sides have clashed in multilateral forums and on political and human-rights issues. Negative public perceptions and narratives on both sides impose constraints. There is a need for continuous engagement and greater mutual sensitivity and respect, collaboration over censure, and dialogue over prescription.

The familiar world order that shaped national choices will not return, even if a change of political actors on the global stage raises hopes. India and Europe need to turn the turbulence of a world in transition into a tide of opportunities that steers their nearly 2 billion people, living in democracy and diversity, to a future of resilience, security and prosperity.

The writer, a retired ambassador, currently serves as chairman of Indian Trade Promotion Organisation (ITPO). Views are personal

In BJP, a millennial president and his high command

AAKASH JOSHI

JUST FOR a moment, let's look back from the current phase of BJP dominance and the elevation of Nitin Nabin, 45 years old, to the post of party president. Across parties and movements, India has witnessed "generational shifts", each accompanied by a new politics. They have enriched the entrenched establishment within a party by forcing its politics to evolve. At times, they have led to a shift in the grammar of politics.

Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose were once the "young guns" in Congress. Their rise was a major factor in how its opposition to colonial rule evolved from elite missives demanding minor concessions for Indians to complete independence. From the late 1950s through the '60s and '70s, with Ram Manohar Lohia, various shades of socialists, emerging communist leaders, figures in the Jana Sangh and through splits in the Congress, several other "young" leaders burst onto the national scene. But the reason even his greatest detractors acknowledge that Lalu Prasad changed the social equations of power and politics in Bihar and beyond, but do not extend the same courtesy to Tejashwi Yadav, isn't just "dynasty". It's also that the latter does not represent a rupture or a shift — just continuity.

The BJP has gone to great lengths to argue that, despite 18 per cent of its over 2,000 legislators being "dynasts", it is not a dynastic party. There is some merit to this argument. It is only in the BJP and the Left parties that successive generations of top leaders have not hailed from political families. The BJP can also justifiably claim that it rewards political talent if it is combined with ideological fealty — just look at the meteoric rise of Yogi Adityanath and Himanta Biswa Sarma, to say nothing of the PM. In fact, the BJP and its supporters have often argued that it is this room for growth that makes it "a party with a difference". And that Nabin is the face of a carefully crafted "generational shift" that includes chief ministers like Pushkar Singh Dhami, Rekha Gupta, and Mohan Charan Majhi.

A question that is largely missing from this conversation is: What do the "young" leaders bring to the table? What difference will they make to the party?

The Modi-Shah BJP differs fundamentally from the Advani-Vajpayee variant in at least three ways. First, there is a concentration of power at the top, rather than a dyarchy. Both L K Advani and Atal Bihari Vajpayee had their factions within the party, among allies and even vis-à-vis the broader electorate. The lack of a single, centralised and centralising figure led to a generation of "young" leaders coming to the fore, not least among them Narendra Modi. Second, the BJP today is among the most dominant and certainly the most dominating force in India's recent political history. A "young" party president cannot really bring about change. Simply put, if it isn't broken, why tinker with it? Earlier, skills like managing allies, the Opposition, businesses, and most importantly, the RSS, were needed. Now, having the favour of the high command is almost enough — as long as you're not too objectionable to the Sangh. Finally, as a result of being a top-down organisation, the question of feedback becomes important. Can any party leader criticise the government?

Like the relatively unknown CMs of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana, Nabin has been picked out of nowhere. The signal his appointment sends is that the high command is supreme, and there is no other source now (including perhaps the RSS) that can countermand its wishes. Given their electoral success, the Modi-Shah duo are perhaps justified in wanting their way. But that doesn't mean the rest of us can't be clear-eyed about what its new president means for the BJP, despite the PR push.

Nabin is being touted as the "millennial" BJP president. But it is unlikely that he will be a decision maker in the party. An apparatchik is not an ideologue. And the "boomers" in charge — like everyone who has enjoyed power before them — won't let go. Nabin's elevation is not the renovation of a political edifice. It is, at best, a paint job.

> It is unlikely that Nabin will be a decision maker in the party. An apparatchik is not an ideologue

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Decoding Washington's new coercive diplomacy

RAJAN KUMAR

EUROPE WAITED with bated breath as US President Donald Trump delivered his keynote speech at the World Economic Forum. In his quintessential style, Trump bragged about his dubious economic accomplishments, blasted former President Joe Biden, pilloried European leaders, blamed liberal and radical values for the decline of Western civilisation, and left Europeans guessing on Greenland. The concession offered to Europe was that the US would not use military force to acquire the island. Trump's claim rests on the ground that America defended Greenland during World War II and guaranteed Europe security for seven decades.

European leaders pushed back on Trump's unrelenting demands on Greenland. French President Emmanuel Macron said, "We do prefer respect to bullies. We do prefer science to plotism, and we do prefer rule of law to brutality." Immediately after Trump's speech, the European Parliament announced the suspension of ratification of the EU-US trade deal that the two sides had reached a year earlier. And European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced Europe's trade diversification plan, including a landmark trade deal with India.

The European pushback has yielded results. After a bilateral meeting with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Trump announced a "framework deal" over Greenland and revoked his plan to impose punitive tariffs on Europe. It is likely that Denmark may allow some military bases in Greenland. The danger of American aggression has been postponed. It also saves NATO from a potential rupture.

Nonetheless, there are lessons from the drama at Davos. First, the policy of appeasement does not work with Trump. One needs to stand firm in dealing with him. Second, he has no compunction in using economic and military coercion even against his allies. Third, his coercive diplomacy functions as a prelude to a deal, situating his real intent somewhere between threat and concrete action. Fourth, he does not value the confidentiality and subtlety of diplomacy: He revealed his private conversations with Macron to the global audience to showcase his coercive skills. He has done that with India, too, in the context of the India-Pakistan ceasefire. Fifth, deals with him are not final because he is prone to reimposing tariffs on any country that rubs him the wrong way.

Finally, Trump views the existing international order as detrimental to America and beneficial to other countries. The reality is that America is the principal beneficiary of the world order that emerged after World War II. No county in the world has ever acquired so much wealth and power in known history. But Trump is determined to undermine this order in pursuit of restoring America's past glory. That outcome is unlikely, not because America has lost its capacity, but because its relative power in the system will diminish further with the rise of the rest.

> The policy of appeasement does not work with Trump. He has mastered the art of exploiting vulnerabilities

The writer is professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

40 YEARS AGO
January 24, 1986

INDIAN EXPRESS
38 killed, 46 hurt in Delhi hotel fire
Victims mostly foreigners
Poor fire-fighting operation

Delhi hotel fire kills 38

THIRTY-EIGHT persons, mostly foreigners, died in a fire that blazed through the Siddharth Continental Hotel in South Delhi. Within hours, the glittering luxury hotel became a dark house of death. Two persons were burnt alive — a Chinese cook and a steward. The rest were asphyxiated. Forty-six others were injured, among about 125 rescued as they groped and gasped in hot clouds of suffocating smoke. The fire that started mysteriously in the banquet hall of the hotel at about 1.30 am raged up three floors of the 11-storey hotel before it was declared under control at 7.05 am. But there was enough smoke to kill guests on almost every floor above. Most died on the topmost floors, beyond the reach of a crippled fire brigade.The fire had become a conflagration before the fire brigade arrived. A hotel guest informed the fire brigade at 2.12 am, more than half an hour after the fire had started. Within a few minutes, the fire was out of control.

President, PM express grief

PRESIDENT ZAIL SINGH and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi expressed their shock and distress over the loss of lives in the major fire in the Siddharth Continental Hotel. Both the President and the Prime Minister offered their heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families.

L-G orders probe

THE LT GOVERNOR, H L Kapoor, ordered a judicial inquiry into the fire in the Siddharth Continental. The commission will submit its inquiry within a month.

Kiwis beat India

INDIA SLIPPED to the bottom of the standings in the triangular one-day World Series Cup Cricket Championship after losing to New Zealand by five wickets in a day-and-night match in Melbourne. India scored 238 for eight in their 50 overs after being put to bat. New Zealand crossed the score with one ball of their 50 overs remaining.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

There is no guarantee that Donald Trump's unexpected about-face on Greenland will be the last

— Le Monde, France

READ. THINK. SHARE.
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Needed in Trump era: An India that can stand up for itself and can pay the price

SANJAYA BARU

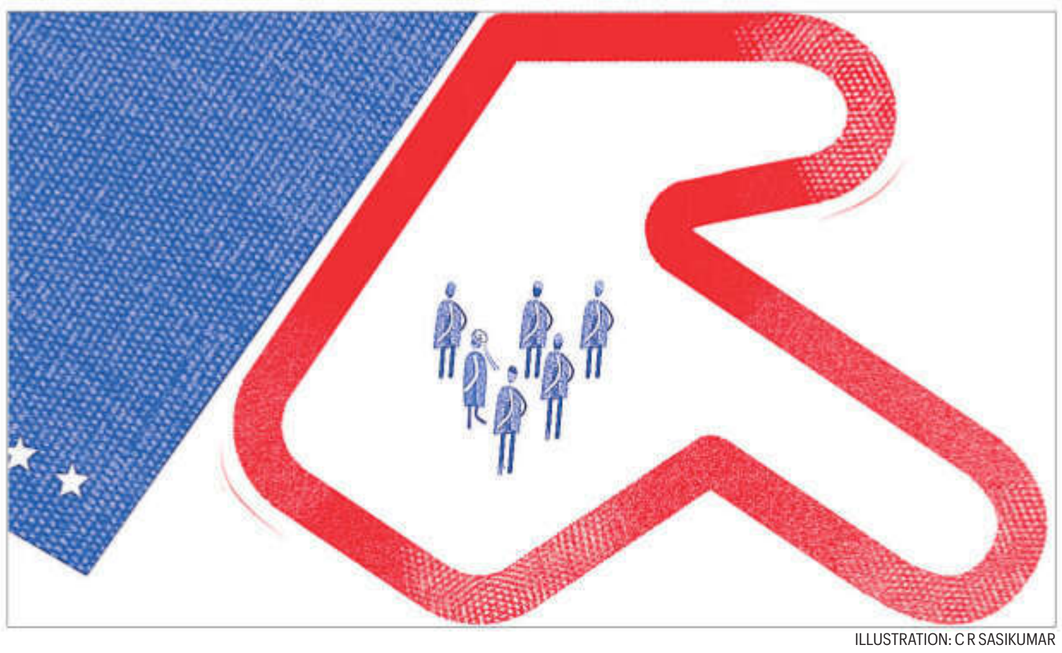

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

IN A different era, an Indian Prime Minister would have delivered this speech. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's address to the annual meeting of the Davos World Economic Forum is a manifesto for global solidarity against Big Power hegemonism. Carney very modestly calls it guidance for "middle powers". It is more than that. It is a call to arms against the reassertion of imperial interests.

Canada, too, was once a colony but very easily became part of the so-called "West", enjoying the benefits of membership of the Group of Seven (G7), the boardroom of global capitalism. There was a time when "Third World" leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sukarno and Gamal Abdel Nasser came together, after the end of World War II, to challenge a global order being erected by the victors of that war. Anti-colonialism and hegemonism defined their collective movement and gave space to a large number of smaller powers, not just middle powers, in global governance.

Carney spoke well when he said, "We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically, and we knew that international law applied with varied rigor, depending on the identity of the accused or the victim. This fiction was useful, and American hegemony in particular helped provide public goods, open sea lanes, a stable financial system, collective security, and support for frameworks for resolving disputes."

This fiction was then followed by the ideology of the so-called "Washington Consensus" that all nations, including Communist China, embraced enthusiastically because that too was defined in the language of rules and not of power. Unlike the Soviet Union, China made good use of that system and rose rapidly to be able to challenge it.

The ideology that shaped Donald Trump's "America First" and "Make America Great Again" was a response to this change. Lest other nations, in Europe and Asia, imagine that they can unite to create a "multipolar" power balance, that does not yield to the assertion of Big Power hegemony, Trump has opted to deploy hard power and arm-twisting as a warning to nations that, he believes, are mere pretenders to power.

In a different era, Trumpism and the re-assertion of American hegemonism would have been challenged by leaders of post-colonial nations, most certainly India. It is just as well that rather than a victim of Big Power hegemonism and Western imperialism, it was left to a member of the Western alliance to challenge Trumpism. Canada, after all, is not just a G7 nation but a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and has, on occasion, partnered with the West in opposing, for example, India's nuclear ambitions.

Even today, countries like Germany, Italy and Japan, nations once occupied by the US, are trying to find ways to appease Trump. They have not had the courage, as Carney put it, to pull down the signboard in Václav Havel's greengrocer's shop. In quoting from Havel's 'The Power of the Powerless', Carney draws attention to what is possible today in dealing with the powerful.

Many today misread and misinterpret post-Cold War strategic thinking in India. India's decision in the 1990s to befriend the United States was not aimed at becoming an American ally. In a moment of excessive enthusiasm, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee referred to the US as a "natural ally". The term was dropped quickly and never repeated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Both Vajpayee and Singh were seeking ways and means to fortify India's nuclear power and capability to assert strategic autonomy. Some in India promoted the misplaced ambition of India becoming part of the Western alliance, joining hands with the West against the rising power of China. It is now clear to the Indian leadership that such a policy does not serve Indian national interests.

> In a different era, Trumpism and the re-assertion of American hegemonism would have been challenged by leaders of post-colonial nations, most certainly India. It is just as well that it was left to a member of the Western alliance to challenge Trumpism

Thanks to Donald Trump, sense has dawned on New Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has refused to kowtow to Trump. But while India is not kneeling, it often bends to please. New Delhi has not regained its confidence of the post-colonial era to be able to articulate the views that Carney did this week. We are satisfied with admonishing Poland for befriending Pakistan.

The tragedy is that the Bharatiya Janata Party, under Modi's leadership, has defined Indian nationalism in the contemporary era within a narrow framework of Hindutva, challenging Hindu-phobia in the Western world, without challenging the neo-imperialism of the West. We seek friendship with Trump and are delighted when he celebrates Deepavali in the White House, but find it difficult to call him out for his bullying.

Indian policymakers understand very well Carney's message that, "A country that cannot feed itself, fuel itself, or defend itself has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself." That is the essence of "strategic autonomy". Thanks to the Green Revolution of the 1960s, India can feed itself. However, it continues to depend on the world to fuel and defend itself. The Modi government's policy of "*atmanirbharta*" in these areas — promoting non-renewables and indigenisation of arms manufacturing — has to deliver more.

Indian leadership must recognise that US leadership has been trying hard to reduce India's market access and capabilities in these fields. By sanctioning India against import of oil from Iran, Russia and Venezuela (till now), the US has systematically curbed India's options. By pushing arms sales and making this a test of friendship, it does the same.

Prime Minister Carney has called for "principled pragmatism". A call that must find an echo in New Delhi where pragmatism often overshadows principles. But as Carney has warned, an assertion of national interest and strategic autonomy requires a nation to pay a price. There was once an India that was willing to pay that price. One often wonders whether the nationalism of today's Indian elite and the "aspirational middle class" extends to a willingness to pay that price.

Baru is a writer and former editor, The Financial Express. *His books include* India's Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution

Tricolour's journey to citizens' hands & hearts, a democracy story

C RAJ KUMAR

INDIA'S TRYST with the tricolour began on July 22 1947, when we received our national flag. The struggle for Independence from colonial rule gave a new meaning to the national flag. However, the tricolour's journey has more than ceremonial meaning. After Independence, the national flag was seen as a revered symbol but not necessarily one that related to citizens' civic rights. Its extraordinary transformation from a state-controlled symbol to a marker of citizens' constitutional rights was a gradual process that was contested and democratic.

January 23 marked the 22nd anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark judgment in *Union of India vs Naveen Jindal*. The SC recognised the fundamental right of citizens to fly the national flag as part of the freedom of speech and expression. Last year marked the 30th anniversary of the Delhi High Court judgment that upheld the citizen's right to hoist the national flag throughout the year. It was also the 20th anniversary of the amendment to the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971, which enabled citizens to respectfully display the national flag on apparel. We, therefore, stand at the confluence of law, legislative processes, and civic engagement that led to milestones in the journey of democratisation of India's national flag.

The idea of the national flag —from the *vajra* flag to the present tricolour – evolved through public debates. In 1947, the Constituent Assembly and the doyens of the freedom movement recognised that the flag was not a sectarian symbol but a marker of constitutional belonging in India. However, access to the flag was restricted. It took the tenacity of Naveen Jindal to recognise that the flag must be accessible to citizens for them to appreciate its significance to the fullest. The story of his challenge to the law that restricted the right of citizens to fly the national flag is a stellar example of citizens accessing democratic institutions to uphold fundamental rights. The Flag Code of India and other laws had sustained a culture of government control rather than civic trust and citizen engagement. This limited civic consciousness, deprived citizens of emotional ownership, and restricted their democratic participation.

On January 26, 1993, Jindal hoisted the flag at the Jindal Strips factory. However, the next day, government officials insisted it be taken down as the Flag Code allowed private citizens to display the national flag only on specific national days. Jindal, who used to proudly display the Indian flag every day as a student government president at the University of Texas, Dallas, could not reconcile with this restriction. He filed a writ petition in the Delhi High Court, challenging the restriction. The HC ruled that the Flag Code couldn't restrict citizens from flying the national flag all year round. However, the Centre appealed the decision in the Supreme Court. Twenty-two years ago, the SC delivered a landmark judgment upholding the HC's decision. It held that the right to fly the national flag with respect and dignity is part of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression.

However, judicial recognition alone does not complete the democratisation process. Naveen and Shallu Jindal established the Flag Foundation of India to take the flag to every corner of the country and strengthen people's emotional connection with it.

The act of flying the national flag is an act of civic responsibility. It is an example of *dhvaja upasana*, a resolve that national symbols and emblems must live within the people. It reminds us of constitutional duties and obligations. The idea of nation-building is deeply embedded in this act.

The national flag's journey, from the first version designed by Sister Nivedita (the *vajra* flag) to Naveen Jindal, reflects a remarkable continuity in India's democratic imagination. In 1947, Hansa Mehta presented the national flag as a tribute to the contribution of the women of India to the Constitution-making process. Decades later, Jindal took inspiration from this foundational vision. These contributions remind us that the national flag is not merely a symbolic object of the state but a shared constitutional inheritance that binds citizens through rights, responsibilities, and democratic participation.

The writer is founding vice-chancellor, O P Jindal Global University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Long-run harm

FEAR OF economic decline, immigration, and global uncertainty has been repeatedly weaponised to mobilise public sentiment ('Trump is succeeding because of the leaders who want to be little Trumps', *IE*, January 23). While such tactics may deliver short-term political gains, they weaken democratic institutions and international cooperation in the long run. Leadership built on anxiety, such as that of US President Donald Trump, normalises division and erodes trust both domestically and globally.

Ankit Patel, Jammu

Review required

IT IS time India reviewed its foreign policies because of which cracks have appeared in our relationships with many friendly countries. (Best of Both Sides on invite to India to join Trump's Board of Peace: 'Four reasons Delhi should decline', *IE*, January 23).That sharp thorns have cropped up in our relationship with the United States of America, forcing it to impose unprecedented tariffs on us that have very badly affected the economy of our country is also a case in point.

Tharcius S Fernando, Chennai

State failure

THE DEATH of Yuvraj Mehta in Noida is not an isolated incident; it is a reflection of the deep fractures and failures in urban planning, disaster management, and accountability ('Behind the shiny facade, the cracks in the city', *IE*, January 23). The incident has deepened public cynicism and eroded trust in institutions. What adds to the irony is that it occurred in Noida, which is part of the National Capital Region and just a few kilometres away from New Delhi. Even more shocking is the callousness of those in power.

Abhay Negi, Dehradun

Davos is a Western, not world, forum

RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

THE WORLD Economic Forum's Annual Meeting at Davos concluded earlier this week with much fanfare. Besides important panel discussions on issues like AI and green energy, the highlight this year was the high-profile list of keynote speakers. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and He Lifeng, Vice Premier of China, attended, as did President Emmanuel Macron of France, Mark Carney, PM of Canada, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, President of Egypt, and Javier Milei, President of Argentina. The icing on the cake was the presence of US President Donald Trump, making it one of the year's most high-profile events.

The meeting could not escape the long shadow of Trump's attacks on the global economy, trade and the rules-based order. Tariffs, the US-EU trade deal, NATO, Ukraine and Greenland dominated the discourse, highlighting the growing tensions between Europe and America.

Ursula von der Leyen insisted that the "geopolitical shocks" Trump is causing must serve as an opportunity "to build a new form of European independence". Plunging relations between the US and Europe into a downward spiral "would only aid the very adversaries we are both so committed to keeping out of the strategic landscape", she warned Trump. Macron and Carney were more forthright in their criticism of Trump's policies, although not naming him directly. "We do prefer respect to bullies... And we do prefer rule of law to brutality," Macron thundered in response to Trump's tariff threats over Greenland and other issues. Carney talked about the breakdown of the world order. He called for middle powers to unite against the "use of economic tools as coercion" and warned that "if we are not at the table, we are on the menu".

> As the Davos discourse is turning increasingly irrelevant for them, more and more countries in the Global South are opting for Chinese-led forums that hold focused discussions on economy, trade, and related issues

Trump seemed undeterred. He defended his stance on Greenland, NATO and tariffs. Unlike his critics, Trump made personal jibes. Referring to Macron's dark glasses, he joked: "I watched him with those beautiful sunglasses. What the hell happened?" Going after Carney, he said, "Canada lives because of the United States. Remember that, Mark, the next time you make your statements". Trump defended his case on Greenland by referring to World War II, when the US armed forces entered that country to defend it from the Nazis. "We were stupid to give it back to Denmark," he quipped. He came down heavily on NATO allies, whom he almost called ungrateful.

At the end of the day, it appeared as though Davos was far from being a meeting with an economic agenda, slowly becoming a proxy platform for strategic and geopolitical conflicts among the Western powers. Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed to be enjoying this transatlantic cacophony by throwing his weight behind Trump in the Greenland matter in the hope that the Europeans would forget Ukraine, at least for some time. Meanwhile, China is quietly stealing the show by hosting events like the Boao Forum for Asia and the Annual Meeting of the New Champions, described respectively as Asian Davos and Summer Davos. As the Davos discourse is turning increasingly irrelevant for them, more and more countries in the Global South are opting for Chinese-led forums that hold focused discussions on economy, trade, and related issues.

One thing that was conspicuous at Davos this year was that it had very few takeaways for the rest of the world. Even the panels of CEOs, executives and public intellectuals were dominated by Western companies.

Davos looks more like a Western Geopolitical Forum summit than the World Economic Forum meeting. I hope that Børge Brende and his team are taking note.

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

Now in the Beckham family, 'kahani ghar ghar ki'

AISHWARYA KHOSLA

HIGH-PROFILE mothers-in-law are a species under siege. Between Victoria Beckham in Britain — accused of sabotaging her son's wedding — and Pakistan's Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz, who found herself trolled for outshining the bride and serving "lewks" deemed too opulent for the mother-of-the-groom, the global "*saas*" is having a not-so-good moment.

Gone are the days of snide whispers over the neighbour's fence. Today, a family tiff is one tap away from becoming a transnational soap opera. Content creators from Ludhiana to Lahore serve up hilarious, painfully relatable re-enactments in vernacular scripts — distilling this drama into 60-second Punjabi or Bhojpuri skits — before the original participants have finished their morning tea.

Let's face it: The Beckham saga reads like a plot straight out of a Hindi serial. The formidable matriarch (Victoria), her smile a perfectly curated accessory? Check. The son (Brooklyn), torn between filial duty and marital bliss? Check. The new *bahu* (Nicola Peltz), an heiress in her own right, navigating power plays. *Bilkul*. The *saas*, a world-renowned designer, rescinds the offer to dress the bride at the eleventh hour? Cue the suspenseful background score. Hijacking the first dance? *Kya. Kya. Kya*. A classic "my territory" power grab, instantly familiar to every desi wife who's ever had to plan a holiday around her mother-in-law's "sudden illness".

While the prurient accusations had readers around the world spitting out their coffee — a mother inappropriately dancing on her son! — international portals ran live-blogs tracking every detail: What the "*beta*" said, when the "*bahu*" had praised the "*saas*", why the "*beta*" skipped the family docuseries, what the patriarch (David Beckham) didn't say (while cautioning about social media), and the almost conciliatory, "Children are allowed to make mistakes." Even a wedding guest-turned-helpful-uncle corroborated the dance-floor debacle.

> By washing private linen in the public square, these high-profile figures turn their grief and grievances into a tragicomedy for an audience of billions. There are no real winners

But while Western audiences marvel at these "shocking" revelations, we in the Subcontinent offer a collective, weary eye-roll. We've had front-row seats to this theatre of "controlling mothers and mothers-in-law" and "brainwashing wives" for millennia. "A son is a son till he gets him a wife" laments a mother's perceived loss; its opposite is the "Shravan Kumar son", so dutiful the wife fades into the background. What's new is the globalisation of the grievance. Meghan and Harry first turned royal dirty linen into a Netflix franchise; the Beckhams now offer the season's most riveting spin-off.

The schadenfreude that has launched a thousand memes (*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* ft the Beckhams), may yet deliver a tell-all or docuseries à la Meghan and Harry. But herein lies the tragedy. By washing private linen in the public square, these high-profile figures turn their grief and grievances into a tragicomedy for an audience of billions. There are no real winners. The West, of course, is merely catching up to ancient wisdom, neatly captured in the aphorism *ghar ka bhedi Lanka dhaye* (a traitor within the home destroys it from within).

Years or even decades after the storm, family reconciliations usually happen at unexpected moments — a shared glance, an unforced invitation, and a deliberately overlooked slight. However, once you monetise the feud and weaponise the gleeful masses into troll armies, that space disappears. What remains is a crude public scorecard, tallied in likes, shares, and think pieces (*mea culpa*!)

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• ECONOMICS

Corporate India's sales data raises questions over GDP growth

GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES
BY UDIT MISRA
WEEKLY ECONOMIC AND POLICY INSIGHTS USING DATA

ACCORDING TO the official forecast — technically called the First Advance Estimates — in this financial year that ends March, India's economic output (measured by Gross Domestic Product, or GDP) will grow by 8% in nominal terms and 7.4% in real terms.

The difference between real and nominal growth is the level of inflation in the economy. Nominal GDP is the actual observed value of the GDP that includes inflation. The real GDP growth rate is derived by removing the effect of inflation. The curious thing about these numbers is that, when compared to past standards, an 8% nominal GDP growth is fairly weak — more often than not India's nominal GDP has been closer to 12% — and a 7.4% real GDP growth is fairly strong.

This rather confusing situation has been compounded by persistent arguments by critics, including the former Chief Economic Advisor to the incumbent government, that India's official data for economic growth doesn't tally with many other sets of data in the economy.

For instance, if the whole economy is growing at 8% on an average, which is a fairly low growth rate by itself, then it would stand to reason that the biggest companies in corporate India would be growing their sales at a much faster rate. India's GDP is the average and many parts of the economy, such agriculture, often grow at a slower rate.

The question is this: While India's GDP growth has been surprising observers on the upside every quarter this financial year, what has happened to the growth rate of net sales in corporate India?

The table below shows the growth rates for the past five quarters, going back all the way to the quarter ending December 2024. Since net sales data is in nominal terms, India's GDP growth rate is also in nominal terms for a fair comparison. As can be seen, corporate India's net sales growth has lagged the overall GDP growth rate.

The December 2025 data for net sales growth rate has been sourced from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's Economic Outlook database. It is based on the financial statements of 319 "early birds" — or companies that have released their results for the December quarter sooner than others. The data for the rest of quarters is based on the results of almost 5,000 companies.

CMIE's analysis finds that sales growth has remained consistently in the single digits for the past ten quarters. It notes that results of the early birds indicate that growth in net sales may have lost a little more steam in the December 2025 quarter. "The average year-on-year growth in corporate sector sales in the first three quarters of 2025-26 works out to about 5.8%, in nominal terms. This, at least to an extent, belies the story of the non-farm Indian economy growing at about 8% in real terms in the same year," says Mahesh Vyas, the MD and CEO of CMIE.

• Corporate sales growth lags GDP rate

QUARTER ENDING	NOMINAL GROWTH RATE OF GDP	NOMINAL GROWTH RATE OF NET SALES OF CORPORATE INDIA
December 2024	10.30%	6.20%
March 2025	10.80%	6.10%
June 2025	8.80%	5.10%
September 2025	8.70%	7.20%
December 2025	7.5-8%*	4.90%

*ESTIMATE; SOURCE: CMIE, INDIAN EXPRESS RESEARCH

• HEALTH

'The antibiotic pipeline is running dangerously dry'

Antimicrobial resistance is emerging as a major public health threat globally. Curbing the overuse of antibiotics is key to tackling it

EXPERT EXPLAINS
KAMINI WALIA
SENIOR SCIENTIST AT ICMR

OVER THE last few weeks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Union Health Minister J P Nadda have all spoken publicly about a growing public health threat — anti-microbial resistance (AMR) because of antibiotic overuse.

According to the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, Washington University, an estimated 2.67 lakh deaths were attributable to AMR in 2021.

Key statistics highlight high resistance rates (one study, for instance, shows 83% of Indians carrying resistant bacteria), treatment gaps and heavy misuse of antibiotics, making common infections untreatable and jeopardising modern medicine.

"In one of the studies, which we are conducting right now, we are seeing that one in 10 patients in India who are admitted to hospitals with some kind of infection are resistant to last-resort antibiotics," says **Dr Kamini Walia**, senior scientist at ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research), who coordinates its Antimicrobial Resistance and Diagnostics initiatives. Speaking to **Rinku Ghosh,** she says: "Globally, the antibiotic pipeline is running dangerously dry. While a few antibiotics have been approved over the past two decades, almost none represent truly new classes or mechanisms of action. As antibiotics are overused, we risk exhausting the limited effectiveness of the drugs we already have — without adequate replacements in sight."

What is the extent of antimicrobial resistance in India now?

Antimicrobial resistance is a silent pandemic. Often dismissed as a hospital-acquired infection or complication, its impact was felt during Covid when patients were impacted by drug-resistant infections. In hospitals, where there is high use of antibiotics, that pressure forces the bacteria to develop ways to survive them primarily through genetic mutations. Then they pass on resistance genes to other bacteria, accelerated by the overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans.

The patient gets admitted with one problem, which could be a myocardial infarction or kidney disease. But during the course of hospitalisation or treatment, they acquire drug-resistant pathogens, which cause infections, some of which claim lives. It is because of this invisible reason that we don't have a quantifiable burden of drug-resistant infections in our country or globally. The first figures actually came in 2021... We still need a more reliable number.

Apart from hospital-acquired infections, there are community-acquired infections which are becoming drug-resistant, like typhoid, diarrhoea and pneumonia. We do not yet have an exact figure, considering we have 18% of the world's population. So of the total infections which were estimated, almost 20% happens in India broadly.

How much antibiotic overuse is behavioural?

In India, there is learned behaviour that has happened over time. Whenever Indians have a cough, cold or diarrhoea, they reach for an antibiotic. Some wouldn't wait to find out if their infection is viral or bacterial, not knowing antibiotics don't work for viral infections. Sometimes, people rely on pharmacists for what they perceive are seasonal infections. Physicians, themselves, prescribe them for prophylactic use.

In India, there is a need to unlearn the behaviour of immediately reaching for an antibiotic without finding out the nature of the infection. UNSPLASH

Bitter pill

While a few antibiotics have been approved over the past two decades, almost none represent truly new classes or mechanisms of action.

•

Without replacements in sight, there is a risk of exhausting the limited effectiveness of current drugs.

Does antibiotic stewardship work?

It is more effective than an overnight ban on over-the counter (OTC) sales. Take the case of Kerala, the first state to launch the antimicrobial stewardship programme in 2015, which focuses on rationalising antibiotic prescription and awareness at all levels. They banned OTC sales only last year with a reasonable amount of success. It took 10 years. We have a knife at home but do we use it to kill people? Similarly, we must first internalise what antibiotics are meant for. Only then can we be responsible.

How difficult has it become to treat routine infections?

There are two sides to this. One is getting infected with the drug-resistant bug that requires a next-level antibiotic. The other is a community-acquired infection, for example UTI, becoming complicated because of improper and inappropriate use of antibiotics over a period. Salmonella typhi strains are becoming resistant to fluoroquinolones. Drugs like ceftriaxone and azithromycin are being overused and risk becoming ineffective for treatment of typhoid.

But the good news is that when you stop using the drugs for a short while, the sensitivity also comes back. For example, in the 1990s, typhoid was resistant to three commonly-used drugs — co-trimoxazole, chloramphenicol and amoxycillin. Then we stopped using these drugs and shifted to fluoroquinolones. Fifteen years later, research has shown that the old drugs are regaining effectiveness.

Is antibiotic use in livestock, agricultural practices and the environment complicating AMR?

First, we must find the attributable risk to humans from the antibiotics being used in animals. Some of the antibiotic classes to which we are seeing very high levels of resistance in humans are not used in animals. If we are seeing 60-70% resistance to the drugs used by humans, then the root cause is human behaviour. ICMR did a study at two sites in Delhi and Vellore with two pathogens, E coli and Klebsiella pneumoniae, drawn from veterinary, environmental and clinical samples. We found a sizeable overlap of antibiotic resistance genes between human and environmental isolates from hospital surroundings, but very minimal overlap between the human and the animal. What we need to be vigilant about is antibiotic residues from food which continue to persist in your gut microbiome. The gut microbiome functions as a hidden reservoir of antimicrobial resistance, especially under antibiotic pressure.

What are the challenges in data collection?

At ICMR, our network is limited to 25 tertiary care hospitals, all of which have well-functioning clinical microbiology labs. We publish the data every year, this being our eighth edition. The reason this cannot be taken as representative of the entire country is that this data is coming from tertiary care hospitals where patients come with a previous history of hospitalisation and excessive antibiotic usage. That's why the data that we present has a very high level of resistance. We need to widen the circle of authentic data collection. The Japan Nosocomial Infections Surveillance has data from around 2,000 hospitals.

What are the alternative therapies that can beat AMR?

One is phage therapy, which involves bacteria-eating viruses. It is effective in treating UTIs. But it requires a kind of precision to identify which phages will work for your infection. Resistance develops even to phages.Then you have to use a cocktail of viruses. This is an evolving field and needs customisation for patients depending upon the nature of infection. There are monoclonal antibodies but they are at a nascent stage.

• LEGAL

Echoes of Gujarat as Rajasthan looks to bring 'disturbed areas' law

Vineet Bhalla
New Delhi, January 23

THE RAJASTHAN government has decided to introduce a Bill designating certain zones as "disturbed areas" to curb what it terms "demographic imbalance" and "improper clustering". While the Bill is not yet in the public domain, it is drawing comparisons with the Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provision for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act, 1991.

Legal experts and civil rights activists have long raised concerns about the constitutional validity of the Gujarat legislation. Also, over the years, the Gujarat High Court has narrowed the scope of the state's power to interfere in private property transactions under the law.

Gujarat Disturbed Areas Act

Enacted in 1991 following a series of communal riots, the Act was originally conceived to prevent "distress sales", which occur when an individual is forced to sell their property at a value lower than the market rate due to fear of violence or intimidation.

Under the Act, the state government can declare a specific area as "disturbed" due to a history of communal violence or mob unrest. Once an area is notified, the transfer of immovable property – houses, shops or land – in that zone requires the prior sanction of the district collector. Without their approval, any sale or transfer is considered void. The collector must hold a formal inquiry to ensure the sale is consensual and not driven by coercion.

However, legal experts say the Act effectively allows the state to police the demographic composition of neighbourhoods. By regulating who can buy property where, the state can prevent the organic mixing of communities. This raises questions regarding Article 19(1)(e) of the Constitution, which guarantees every citizen the right to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India, and Article 15, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

Pending legal challenges

The constitutional validity of the Act is currently under challenge before the Gujarat HC. Two major petitions — one filed in January 2021 and another in August 2022 — are pending adjudication before Benches led by the Chief Justice of the HC.

In January 2021, a significant legal victory came for the petitioners after the Gujarat HC stayed the operations of the 2020 amendments to the Act. The amendments had expanded the law's scope by introducing vague terms like "proper clustering" of persons of one community, and empowering the collector to check if a property's transfer would disturb the "demographic equilibrium" or lead to "polarization".

The court had restrained the state government from issuing notifications based on these new, broader powers. The interim stay has continued to date.

The Rajasthan government's stated rationale of checking "improper clustering" mirrors the language of this stayed Gujarat amendment.

Free consent, fair market value

Gujarat's Disturbed Areas Act says the decision of the collector — and the state government in appeal — shall be final and conclusive and "shall not be questioned in any Court." However, since HCs are empowered under Article 226 of the Constitution to review administrative actions that violate fundamental rights or principles of natural justice, the Gujarat HC has repeatedly been petitioned to scrutinise orders passed by collectors that went beyond the scope of the law.

Through a series of judgments, the HC has established a clear doctrine: the collector's power is limited strictly to verifying free consent and fair market value to validate a sale. They cannot block a transaction based on "law and order" fears or neighbours' objections if the sale is genuine.

For instance, in a case decided by the court in March 2020, Hindu sellers had sold a shop to Muslim purchasers in Vadodara. The district collector denied permission, relying on a police report that cited potential law and order problems. Quashing the order, the HC ruled that the police inquiry was "completely out of context with the provisions of the Disturbed Areas Act".

The court noted: "It is undisputed that the property in question was sold on a fair value and with free consent... When the scope of inquiry is that of free consent and fair value, the role of neighbours in the context of such sale becomes irrelevant."

Key concerns

- Over the years, legal experts have raised concerns about the constitutional validity of the Gujarat law.
- Experts say the law allows the state to police the demographic composition of neighbourhoods.

• POLICY

Coming this year: Foundational Census phase seeking data on internet use & more

Deeptiman Tiwary
New Delhi, January 23

AS PREPARATIONS gather pace for the 16th Census of India, to be held after a six-year delay, the government has formally notified the questions that will be asked during the Houselisting and Housing Census — the first and foundational phase of the exercise. Slated to be carried out between April 1 and September 30, 2026, it will map every structure and household in the country and generate the framework on which the entire Census rests. The second phase, population enumeration, will begin in February 2027. This Census will also include the first nationwide caste enumeration since 1931.

What is the houselisting phase?

The phase is designed to create an inventory of buildings, Census houses and households across India. Unlike population enumeration, which focuses on individuals, houselisting captures information about where and how people live. Enumerators visit every structure — residential, commercial or mixed-use. Each household is assigned a unique Census house number and household number, which later becomes the basis for enumerating individuals. This phase also allows the Registrar General of India (RGI) to assess housing conditions and household assets.

How will it be conducted?

For Census 2027, houselisting will be conducted primarily through a digital-first approach. Enumerators will use a mobile application to collect and upload data.

For the first time, self-enumeration will be allowed. Households can fill in their details through a government portal, after which enumerators will only verify the entries during their visit. Each Census house will be geo-tagged, enabling precise mapping and reducing the risk of errors. Supervisors will monitor progress in near real-time through dashboards under the Census Management and Monitoring System.

Why has houselisting been reimagined?

The previous houselisting exercise for the 2011 Census was largely paper-based, dependent on handwritten schedules and physical maps. Data entry and validation often took years. In contrast, the 2026 houselisting will use GPS tagging of houses, rely on standardised drop-down menus instead of descriptive handwritten answers, enable instant validation checks, and allow faster aggregation and processing of data.

According to the RGI, unlike earlier Censuses, where houselisting largely served descriptive and tabulation purposes, the 2027 Census treats this phase as the backbone on which digital enumeration, self-enumeration, geo-referencing and quality control will rest. Once enumeration shifts to mobile apps and near-real-time monitoring, errors or gaps at the houselisting stage can cascade through the entire exercise. Accurate identification is, therefore, critical not just for coverage, but for linking housing data with individual-level socio-economic information — including caste — in the population phase. This explains why greater precision, standardisation and verification have been built into the houselisting design.

Another important change is the expanded scope of questions, reflecting shifts in living standards, digital access and consumption patterns over the past decade.

What questions will be asked?

Under a notification issued in January 2026, the government has authorised officers to collect information under 33 items during the houselisting and housing census. Broadly, the questions fall under six categories:

1. IDENTIFICATION AND STRUCTURE: These include the building number, Census house number, and the predominant material used for the floor, walls and roof, and the condition of the house.

2. HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION: Enumerators will record the household number, total number of persons usually residing in the household, the name and sex of the head of household, and whether they belong to a Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe or other category.

3. OWNERSHIP AND SPACE: Information will be collected on the ownership status of the house, the number of dwelling rooms in exclusive possession of the household, and the number of married couples living in it to assess overcrowding and housing shortages.

4. WATER, SANITATION AND ENERGY ACCESS: Questions will cover the main source of drinking water, availability, source of lighting, access to a latrine, waste water outlet, and whether the household has LPG or piped natural gas (PNG).

5. FUEL AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY: Households will be asked about the main fuel used for cooking and access to the internet — a new indicator reflecting the centrality of connectivity in governance and service delivery.

6. ASSETS AND CONSUMPTION: Enumerators will record ownership of assets such as radio, TV, laptop or PC, phone, bicycles, two-wheelers and cars. A new question asks about the main cereal consumed.

There are seven new or revised questions this time, compared to the 2010 houselisting phase. These concern digital devices and connections, gas connection type, vehicle ownership and cereal consumption, offering insights on dietary patterns and food security. In another first, households will be requested to share a mobile number, which officials say will be used for follow-ups and disseminating information.

Why do the questions matter?

Houselisting data feeds into policymaking. Information on housing informs schemes such as PM Awas Yojana, while data on water, sanitation and cooking fuel shape interventions under Jal Jeevan Mission, Swachh Bharat Mission and Ujjwala. Asset ownership and internet access help governments identify digital and economic divides. The updated question set also reflects how the definition of deprivation has evolved — from basic shelter to connectivity, clean energy and mobility.

The unseen hands behind India's rich botanical history

H.J. Noltie's new work sheds light on the lives of painters who were largely erased by their British colonial masters

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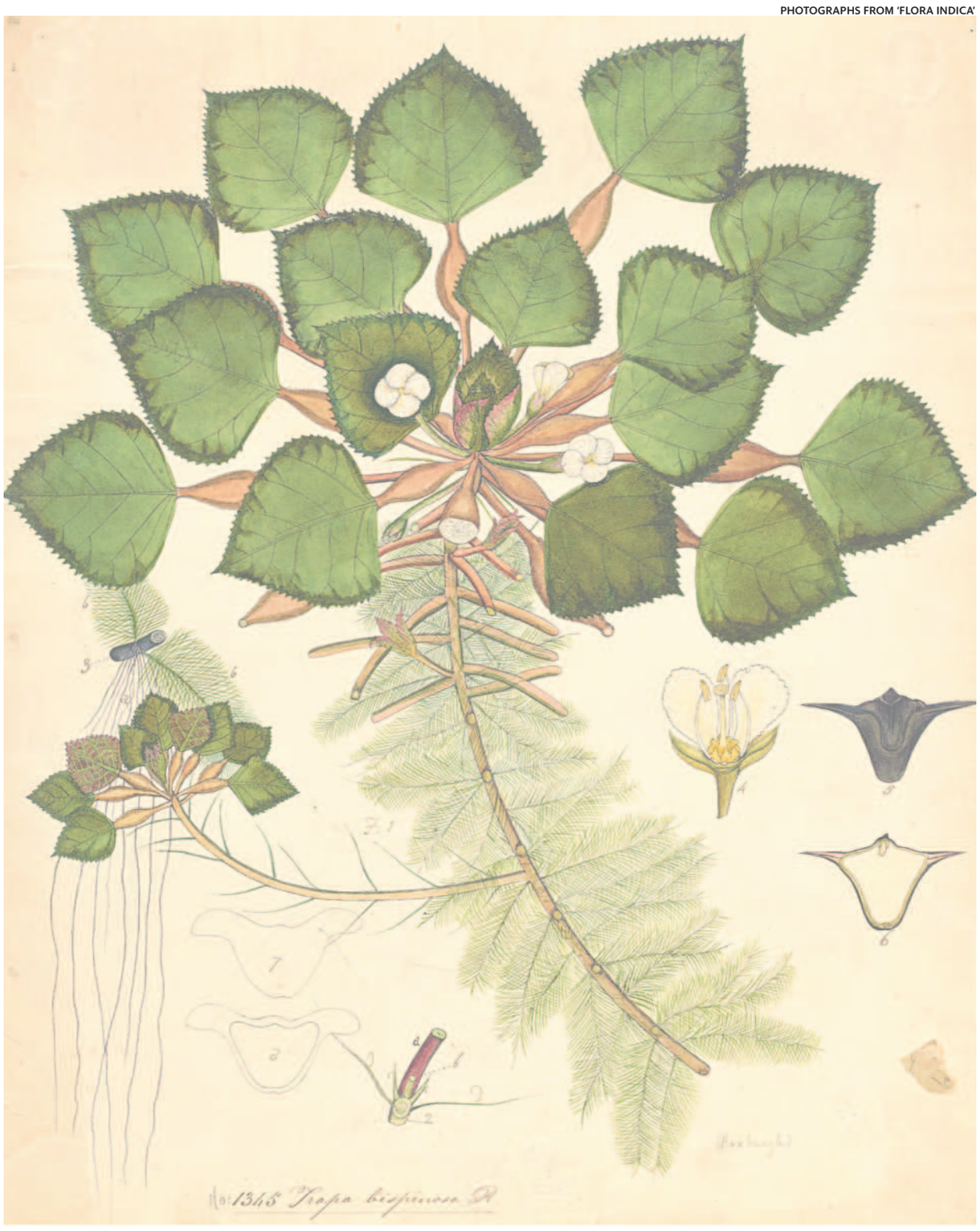
PHOTOGRAPHS FROM 'FLORA INDICA'



(left) 'Trapa natans var. bispinosa', unknown artist, Calcutta, c. 1800; and 'Pinus roxburghii', unknown artist, 1826-32, Saharanpur drawing.

These are palimpsests that combine art and science," says taxonomist, curator and botanical historian Henry J. Noltie by way of explaining the paintings we are looking at. Created in the 18th and 19th centuries by Indian artists, these works were meant to record the abundance of flora and fauna that the subcontinent held, mostly at the behest of the officers at the East India Company (EIC) and, later, by British authorities after the EIC was dissolved. The taxonomic principle is so strongly at work that some of the paintings remain only partially coloured, just enough for a botanist to glean a fuller picture from the faint outlines.

We are meeting on a particularly bleak morning in Delhi at his publisher's office to talk about Noltie's latest work, *Flora Indica*, a handsomely produced catalogue accompanying a show at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew in London (on till 12 April). The book's subtitle, *Recovering Lost Stories From Kew's Indian Drawings*, signals the intentions behind this project—to appreciate the rich history of botanicals from the subcontinent while also making reparations to the artists who made these works and remain unsung to this day.

Noltie, who has spent his long career working at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, took up the daunting task of going through more than 7,500 botanical paintings that lie in the collection at Kew and selecting just a handful for the exhibition. Working with historian and independent researcher Sita Reddy, he organised the show, as well as the book, under three broad thematics: "The life of the paintings, the lives of the artists who made these, and the afterlife of the works and their makers," as he says. The focus of this selection is on paintings from North India, from herbariums in Saharanpur and Calcutta (now Kolkata). The works from the south reveal other styles and stories. What emerges from this exercise is not just a slice of history but also a jigsaw puzzle that is fascinating and complex, cohering in parts but far from finished.

The scholarly interest in recovering the identities of a group of artists who worked in 18th and 19th century India and were, until recently, lumped together under the rubric "Company School" has gathered momentum in recent years. In 2019, historian William Dalrymple curated *Forgotten Masters: Indian Painting For The East India Company* at the Wallace Collection in London, which showcased a wide range of paintings by artists like Mazhar Ali Khan, Yellapah of Vellore, Shaikh Zain ud-Din, Bhawani Das and Manu Lall. Apart from the sheer diversity of their subjects—focusing on the flora, fauna, and peoples of India—the exhibition made the world aware of the different approaches adopted by the painters.

Noltie's work takes this effort a step ahead by humanising some of the artists in ways that hadn't quite been done before. In the course of his archival sleuthing, for instance, he found a touching letter from Vishnuprasad, a senior artist, writing to his former boss, Nathaniel Wallich, who "had just returned to his post of Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden after an absence in Europe of nearly five years," to quote Noltie. Apart from it being a supplication to be reinstated to Calcutta from his current post in Saharanpur, Vishnuprasad's letter, with its faulty English, gives him a personality that the "Company School" had long anonymised.

The blame for this erasure lies with the patrons who had originally commissioned the paintings. Only in rare instances, a colonial sahib would take the trouble to inscribe the name of the artist who had made a painting. More commonly, the works were known by the collections they were part of—such as the *Fraser Album*, which Dalrymple drew on, or the commissions by Scottish botanist and surgeon William Roxburgh (1751-1815). Even great scholars, like the late B.N. Goswamy didn't think it worthwhile to exhume the names of the artists from the oblivion into which they had been thrust. More recently, scholars have started paying closer attention to the paper trail that accompanied the paintings, making discoveries about the provenance of the work as well as the hands behind them.

Noltie, for instance, was lucky to stumble on a set of stylistically intriguing paintings and trace them back to their makers, thanks to Adam Freer (1747-1811), who was rather scrupulous about attributing credit to the artists who worked under him. In other cases, labels stuck on the paintings claim these were the handiwork of British artists like Mary Govan, but such anomalies, Noltie explains, are due to later additions made by the successors of the families. Govan, however, was a trained artist herself and did add her own embellishments to some of the works made by Indian artists.

In spite of their less than respectful attitude to the painters, the British masters did not compensate them badly. Compared to the wages of the gardeners and other staff, the artists made a far better income. Some of the kinder patrons, like Hugh Falconer (1808-65) for instance, lobbied with the authorities to pay a pension to the widows of some of the deceased painters. Talent often triumphed over truants, as in the case of Lutchman Singh, who sowed his wild oats and got into trouble as a young man, but was bailed out by his masters for his exceptional gift (Noltie describes him as a "loveable rogue"). In the end, Singh had a long and prosperous career spanning several decades. Presumably, he was paid well enough to survive into old age at a time when life expectancy was far less than what it is today.

Flora Indica: *By H.J. Noltie, Roli Books, 224 pages, ₹2,495.*

There are instances, however, such as in the painting of a fern, where it is evident that climatic and environmental changes have indeed impacted certain species over the centuries. Where once the tree used to grow to be several metres tall (as it is depicted in scale next to a Lepcha person), it no longer does so. Once these valuable paintings are digitised and made accessible to a wider community of scholars, maybe more such revelations will come to light.

Like most colonial projects, the botanical mission, too, was an expression of the urge to control, tame and classify. Historian Eugenia W. Herbert's 2013 study *Flora's Empire: British Gardens in India* showed that the "garden imperialism" of the British was yet another means to fill the coffers of the Raj, be it through poppy farming or tea plantations. "The officials who commissioned these paintings were not ecologists," Noltie clarifies, "though they were deeply interested in natural history."

The Buddhist monks who live by violence

Sonia Faleiro's new book explores violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand through the lens of the past and present

Arshia Sattar

Sonia Faleiro's new book examines the increasing use of violence in word and deed by Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. There are many and various religious groupings across the world that support nationalist aggressions against minorities in their own countries, but the Buddhist case is presented as especially disturbing because the common perception of Buddhism is as a religion of non-violence. Pankaj Mishra's insightful blurb nails the nub of Faleiro's inquiry, pointing to "...the social-economic shifts that make even an ancient spiritual tradition devoted to renunciation hospitable to modern fanaticism." Faleiro provides a historical backdrop for her arguments and presents us with incidents, movements and the formation of radical right-wing political groups from the recent past. This gives the book an immediacy that most exploratory disquisitions lack. What we have in our hands when we read this book is the best of both journalism and analytic thinking.

Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand is the older, austere Theravada form, very distinct from the more complex tenets and flamboyant practices of the Mahayana and Tantra schools which prevail in Nepal, Tibet and all the way across eastern Asia through to Japan. In all these diverse cultures and societies, Buddhism maintains the sanctity of a strict monastic order. Monks and nuns are revered and live lives of simplicity and renunciation outside society—praying, meditating and immersing themselves in the holy texts. For the lay community, feeding a monk each day accrues as much religious merit as donating to a monastery or temple.

Hence, it can surprise us when monks choose to advocate violence and get involved with politics, governance and avenues of exercising power. More so when the creed they espouse is predicated on non-injury to others. Faleiro tells us when and how monks in Sri Lanka turned the ethnic and nationalist energies unleashed and nurtured during the long and bloody civil war on to Muslims and Christians. The newly purged Sri Lankan nation that rose like a phoenix after 2009 did not put aside the divisive emotions that had fuelled that conflagration. Monks led the hate-filled speech and calls to kill, loot and burn, secure in the impunity provided by a ruling party that was not only complicit but actively involved in the communal violence.

Sinhala people were fed a narrative of victimhood: Tamils, Muslims and Christians were marauding outsiders who enjoyed deeply rooted privileges and entitlements they did not deserve. Buddhism was turned into a central element in Sinhala identity and charismatic (if corrupt) monks and powerful (and equally corrupt) political families joined forces to ensure that a miasma of fear and insecurity continues to hang over the island.

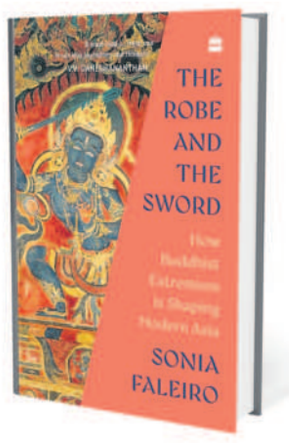
Myanmar's monks encouraged and joined a similar nationalism that called for ethnic and religious cleansing, focused primarily on the Muslim Rohingya population. While monks also led the resistance against authoritarianism, what took root were nationalist movements that aligned themselves with exclusionist policies of the military junta that has controlled the nation for decades. Faleiro points to Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to support democratic movements in the country as a crucial factor in their suppression and erasure.

The book combines the best of journalism and analytic thinking. ISTOCKPHOTO

In Thailand, an entrenched monarchy with absolute powers has kept monks out of the political realm but they flourish as gatekeepers of an opulent religion based on donations even as they themselves violate the most basic rules of monastic life.

In her Introduction, Faleiro reminds us of the courageous Buddhist monks from south and eastern Asia who performed self-immolations to draw attention to injustice, how they appeared as conscience keepers to the world by living out the ultimate Buddhist injunction of sacrificing oneself for the good of others. But she also tells us about cruel hierarchies within the monasteries and, more particularly, about the patriarchal practices that keep nuns away from scholarship and other advancements within the system. It appears that all religions have failed in history. Certainly, when they become institutionalised and respond through the ages to the world, they seem unable to maintain the ennobling thoughts and practices that were so profoundly their inspiration when they functioned as small cultic groups with a teacher in their midst.

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha, lived at a time when the great river plains of the northern subcontinent were undergoing both political and spiritual transformations. Vedic religion, by now heavy with ritual and in control of priests, was being challenged by more individualised searches for the truth. Asceticism and meditation and other kinds of quietism grew popular as spiritual practices. The Upanishads, composed around the same time as Siddhartha and Mahavira were preaching their new creeds, rejected ritual and religious mediators and explored self-knowledge and the possibility of an eternal soul. All of these new doctrines placed ahimsa at the centre of their understanding of spiritual development, so the idea of non-injury is hardly unique to Buddhism.



The Robe and the Sword: How Buddhist Extremism is Shaping Modern Asia: *By Sonia Faleiro, HarperCollins India, 152 pages, ₹599.*

Faleiro frames her argument (that militant Buddhism is a recent and highly volatile player in current Asian politics) carefully and her research and authorial position are equally circumspect. I find her book to be politically sharp but also very moving as a story of dissent and resistance. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in South Asian nation states that are all moving simultaneously but separately towards deeply riven polities and communally fractured, flailing democracies.

We can even take a step back and consider the larger and less immediate context for an inquiry such as hers: how it is that men (and it is almost always men) who have taken religious vows to spread peace can embrace violence? This question could be asked of any of the monks, priests and saints who incite violence each day in some corner of the world. Every religion has its fanatics. Every religion also has its quietists, its mystics lost in divine love, its ordinary people who live in peace and tolerance with those who are unlike them. Non-violence is not specifically a Buddhist virtue. Nor is the propensity for violence an exclusively Islamic vice, as popular rhetoric would have us believe.

The larger question (which Faleiro briefly touches upon in her introduction when she speaks of the patriarchal structures within Buddhism) is this: why have our religious identities and expressions of religious faith become inextricably entangled with muscular narratives and performances of aggressive masculinities? Why are women locked up in homes or nunneries? Why do men get to speak for us all?

C.M. Naim, who taught Urdu and Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago and espoused a liberal, tolerant and inclusive Islam, talked of his upbringing in Uttar Pradesh around the time of Partition. In an essay titled *A 'Hyper-Masculinised' Islam?* (2024), he said that he learned his religion from the women in his family whose practices and faith "...did not reflect any self consciousness that was imbued with power and authority. On the contrary, they expressed, on the part of the practitioners, a profound sense of humility...The diminution of the women's role has removed the poetry, ambiguity and humility that my generation commonly experienced, from the religious experience of my young students."

The problem is not the monk who carries the sword, it is the man who has been taught that it is not love or compassion that has made the world safe, it is hatred. Faleiro's book encourages us to ask deeper and wider questions about the political violence that shadows our times.

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Managed Transition

The appointment of Nitin Nabin as the national president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) marks a moment that is less dramatic than it appears, yet more revealing than it seems. In Indian politics, generational change is often mistaken for ideological renewal. In fact, the two rarely travel together. At 45, Mr Nabin represents a cohort shaped by liberalisation-era aspirations, expanding urban-rural mobility, and the transformation of politics from street mobilisation to system-driven organisation, one that operates comfortably in a political ecosystem driven by data, artificial intelligence and rapid communication. His elevation, therefore, signals not novelty, but organisational confidence.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's repeated assertion that he remains a "party worker" even after three terms at the helm of government is not merely symbolic humility. It is a reminder of how the party seeks to define itself ~ as an institution where authority is structured, transferable and larger than individual stature. This distinction matters because Indian political parties have often struggled with succession. Many have relied on charisma, lineage, or crisis to manage leadership change. The BJP, by contrast, continues to emphasise internal grooming and cadre legitimacy, projecting stability rather than transition anxiety. His rise also reflects a conscious organisational choice. By elevating a leader without an independent national power base, the party reinforces central coherence, rewards organisational reliability, and ensures that authority flows from structure rather than personal charisma or regional mass following. Yet, youth here should not be confused with disruption. Mr Nabin does not represent a break from ideological direction. Instead, he embodies a managerial generation of politics ~ one focused on execution, message discipline and organisational coordination rather than ideological experimentation.

Technology, in this framework, becomes an instrument rather than an idea. Artificial intelligence and digital outreach expand reach, but do not redefine political purpose. The emphasis remains on continuity, not reinvention. The repeated invocation of tradition, culture and national identity further underlines this approach. Leadership may change, but the narrative framework remains intact. The generational shift is therefore tactical ~ aimed at energising party workers and preparing for sustained electoral engagement rather than signalling a philosophical pivot. For younger political entrants, the messaging is carefully calibrated. Politics is presented not as spectacle or shortcut, but as endurance ~ a marathon requiring patience, hierarchy, and long-term loyalty. This discourages impulsive ambition while reinforcing organisational discipline.

At the same time, such stability carries its own challenge. A generation raised entirely in the digital era may eventually demand politics that extends beyond symbolism and structure ~ seeking sharper accountability, governance outcomes, and economic mobility. For now, however, the leadership transition reflects confidence rather than uncertainty. The party appears less concerned with redefining itself than with proving that its political model can be reproduced across generations. In that sense, Mr Nabin's elevation is not a reset, but a relay. The baton has changed hands, but the track ~ carefully laid over decades ~ remains the same.

Power Unbound

The international order built after World War II was never flawless, but it rested on a shared assumption: that power would be exercised within agreed limits. Alliances, institutions, and international law existed not to eliminate conflict, but to manage it. That assumption is now under visible strain. President Donald Trump's return to the White House has accelerated a shift already under way - from rule-based cooperation to raw transactional politics. What distinguishes this moment is not merely unpredictability, but an open rejection of the idea that restraint itself has value. Power, in this worldview, needs no justification beyond national interest. In his second term, President Trump has dispensed with diplomatic language that once softened American dominance. Long-standing alliances are treated as liabilities rather than assets. Multilateral institutions are dismissed as obstacles. Even the sovereignty of friendly nations is increasingly discussed in terms once reserved for adversaries. This is not an impulsive departure from convention; it reflects a deeper philosophical break. Supporters describe this approach as realism ~ a long-overdue correction to decades of strategic indulgence. They argue that allies benefited from American protection while contributing too little in return. From this perspective, pressure succeeds where persuasion failed, and disruption delivers outcomes consensus could not. Coercive diplomacy has occasionally unlocked stalemates others could not move. In a fractured world, decisiveness can appear more effective than deliberation. Yet such gains carry costs that are less immediate but far more lasting.

When power becomes personal rather than institutional, stability depends on temperament instead of principle. When alliances are conditional, trust weakens. When rules apply only until they aid the strong, smaller states begin to hedge, diversify, and prepare for a future without guarantees. Countries once anchored firmly within established strategic frameworks are quietly recalibrating. Trade routes are being diversified. Security relationships are being reassessed. Diplomatic language has grown more guarded, less idealistic, and more transactional. The danger is not an abrupt collapse of the global system, but its gradual hollowing out. Institutions may continue to exist, but their authority erodes each time norms are breached without consequence. Over time, international order decays not through dramatic rupture, but through repeated exception. Perhaps the most profound change lies in how leadership itself is defined. Where earlier eras sought legitimacy through example, the emerging model seeks compliance through leverage. Victory matters more than consensus. Outcomes matter more than process. The message is blunt: strength commands respect; restraint invites challenge. This approach may deliver tactical successes, but it reshapes global expectations. If the world's most powerful democracy no longer values predictability, others will follow ~ not out of admiration, but necessity. History suggests global systems rarely collapse from external assault alone. They weaken when those who once sustained them stop believing they are worth preserving. What the world is experiencing today is not a smooth transition between orders. It is a rupture ~ one in which the future depends less on shared rules, and more on how long raw power can stand in for them.

Tale of two mayors

There is a lineage of conscience which accompanies the violent history of conquest and subjugation. Zohran Mamdani's inauguration is seen in this context of the awakening of conscience. As a Pakistani supporter congratulating the young mayor said, "logon ke dil badal gaye hain" (people's hearts have changed)

When on a bitterly cold January afternoon outside New York's City Hall, Zohran Mamdani raised his right hand and took the oath of office as mayor of New York City, the first Asian and Muslim mayor to do so, a universal political tradition was once again being embodied in 2026: conscience in public life. Beyond the spectacle of a victory against all odds, and the accompanying pageantry of inauguration, Mamdani in office is a moral signal in America and for those who are in awe of the American way of life.

For us in India, it became an occasion to recall another young mayor in another era, when the country was subjugated under British colonial rule: Subhas Chandra Bose when he assumed office as mayor of Calcutta (now Kolkata) in August 1930. He was barely 32 at that time, hailing from a privileged, cultured family which could trace its ancestry over 27 generations in Bengal. Subhas Chandra as mayor captured the imagination of Calcutta and Bengal; for the youth it was a call to their conscience, being unafraid of facing ruthless subjugation of colonial power. The brutality of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 was still fresh in their minds, nor was the partition of Bengal and the upsurge of the Swadeshi movement forgotten by any means.

There is a lineage of conscience which accompanies the violent history of conquest and subjugation. Zohran Mamdani's inauguration is seen in this context of the awakening of conscience. As a Pakistani supporter congratulating the young mayor said, "logon ke dil badal gaye hain" (people's hearts have changed). What is inspiring is Mamdani's journey from Kampala where he was born, early years in Cape Town and finally in New York City where he studied. In 2014, he earned a degree in Africana Studies from Bowdoin College. It is not the typical tearful story of a migrant: "it is the story of an American citizen formed by American schools, American cities, and American struggles, one whose worldview reflects the global entanglements the United States itself helped create," commented George Cassidy Payne, a Rochester-based poet and writer.

On his 129th birth anniversary on 23 January 2026, to use phrases like 'a born patriot and man of action' is not to be cliché-ridden but to describe Subhas Chandra Bose as the product of the tempestuous 1920s when Bengal was seething with discontent against repressive policies of the British Empire. To say that the young Bose symbolised the indomitable rebellious spirit of Bengal would not be an exaggeration; and his fervent patriotic attitude was that 'no sacrifice is too great in the national cause'. The intellectual foundations of young Bose were laid when he voraciously read writings and speeches of Swami Vivekananda; at age 15. It was a spiritual revolution for him.

From Vivekananda, he turned to the former's master, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, and imbibed his teachings from books, and diaries published by his disciples. Vivekananda taught Subhas that the greatest ideal was service of humanity, including service of one's country. Ramakrishna stressed that renunciation of lust and gold was the test of a man's fitness for spiritual life. Subhas had found a new ideal, which inflamed his soul: to effect his own salvation and to serve humanity by abandoning all worldly desires and breaking away from all undue restraints. The more his parents tried to restrain him, the more rebellious he became like a true-to-type teenager.

As he approached the end of his school career, his religious impulse began to grow in intensity and studies were no longer of primary importance. Subhas was fortunate to grow in an environment conducive to the broadening of his mind. His attitude towards Muslims in general was largely influenced by his early contacts: living in a Muslim locality, taking part in their festivals, watching his father whom Muslims looked up to as a patriarch, and having Muslim teachers and Muslim class-mates, to say nothing of devoted Muslim servants at home, wrote SA Ayer, in the introduction to 'Selected Speeches of Subhas Chandra Bose', published in 1962. Ayer was a minister in the Azad Hind Government.

In Subhas's undergraduate days, Aurobindo Ghosh was easily the most popular leader in Bengal, despite his voluntary exile in Pondicherry since 1909. A regular reader of Sri Aurobindo's monthly journal Arya, Subhas was impressed by the mystic's deeper philosophy - how by a proper use of the different yogas one could rise step by step to the highest truth. Sri Aurobindo's simple words were a clarion call: "I should like to see some of you becoming great; great not for your own sake, but to make India great, so that she may stand up with head erect amongst the free nations of the world. Those of you who are poor and obscure - I should like to see their poverty and obscurity devoted to the service of the motherland. Work that she might prosper, suffer that she might rejoice."

In his January 2026 inaugural address, Mamdani thanked his parents -"Mama and Baba"-acknowledged family "from Kampala to Delhi," and recalled taking his oath of citizenship on Pearl Street. When he declared, "New York belongs to all who live in it," he rejected the logic that has long justified war: that difference must be governed through force. "No more will New York be a city where you can traffic in Islamophobia and win an election," is a quote echoing in the global media. He vowed that under his administration City Hall will "deliver an agenda of safety, affordability, and abundance, where government looks and lives like the people it represents, never flinches in the fight against corporate greed, and refuses to cower before challenges that others have deemed too complicated."

BBC reported: Mamdani ran an impressive campaign, recruiting an army of volunteers 100,000 strong to pound the pavements and knock on doors. His social media videos in multiple languages are credited for a vastly increasing voter turnout from a range of South Asian communities. A left-wing democratic socialist, his message was laser focused.

By naming mosques alongside churches, synagogues, temples, gurdwaras, and mandirs, Mamdani has affirmed pluralism as a condition of peace, not a threat to it. By speaking of halal cart vendors, Palestinian New Yorkers, Black homeowners, and immigrant workers bound together by labour and survival, he articulated a civic vision rooted in coexistence rather than coercion. He did not defend his Muslim identity in the face of a vicious, abusive campaign by the opposition.

RAJU MANSUKHANI

The writer is a researcher on history and heritage issues, and a former deputy curator of Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya.

In 1921 in Calcutta, Subhas met Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das; he knew he had found a leader and meant to follow him. Deshbandhu had always been a friend of youth; Subhas began to feel that here was a man who knew what he was about and to whom youthfulness was not a shortcoming but a virtue.

When the Calcutta municipal corporation was established, and elections were held in March 1924, the Swaraj Party won with a comfortable majority. Chittaranjan Das was elected as the Mayor of Calcutta; Husain Shaheed Suhrawady was deputy Mayor. Under Das, Subhas Chandra Bose joined as the chief executive officer of municipal administration. It was an initiation in public life and administration for Subhas who devoted himself completely to the work of the corporation paying special attention to improving health and educational infrastructure. He set up primary schools and dispensaries in every ward, providing access to basic amenities. A weekly paper 'Calcutta Municipal Gazette' was begun to spread awareness among citizens.

Bose's work in the corporation suffered a blow when he was arrested on 25 October 1924, but he continued with political and administrative work from the Alipore Central Jail for six weeks until he was shifted to Berhampur jail. Bose's role in the corporation exemplified the meaning of Swaraj and furthered the nationalist cause. The functioning of municipalities, headed by Indians, was not a smooth affair, as nationalistic objectives of Indian leaders often collided with repressive counter-policies of the British government.

The exile in Burma from 1924 to 1927 was the first major turning point in Subhas's public career, in that it saw the transformation of a lieutenant to a leader. Netaji Research Bureau notes. "In the late 1920s, Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru, despite fundamental differences in ideological foundations, emerged as two ambassadors of youth and the spokesmen of the rising Left in national politics.

Bose's appearance at the Calcutta Congress in 1928 in resplendent military uniform was not so much a spectacle as a vision of the future. His sponsoring the Independence resolution at that historic meeting in opposition to Mahatma Gandhi was the first demonstration of his being ahead of his time and of his contemporaries. He went a step further at Lahore in 1929 by his call for a parallel government and mobilisation of peasants and workers." In 1930, Subhas became the fifth Mayor of Calcutta and the journey which had begun with Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das had now reached a milestone. For Zohran Mamdani in New York, the journey has just begun in 2026.

The Kathmandu Post

An uncommon test of political readiness

Nepal is undergoing variegated yet interconnected crises, where conjoined challenges stemming from perpetual political instability, stunted and uneven economic growth, weakened social capital and ever-escalating climate impacts in recent years are amplifying one another in ways that exceed the sum of their individual impacts. Yet, the political will and leadership needed to tackle these issues remain largely ineffective. Lately, this void has drawn many into politics, clamouring for the seemingly ever-elusive idea of 'good governance'.

However, aspiring leaders and parties have yet to comprehend the depth of these crises or articulate clear roadmaps to address the stunted economic growth by accelerating public investment and diversifying beyond remittance. This cannot be addressed without building resilience against the escalating climate risks, as they are closely intertwined.

The earlier the aspiring leaders acknowledge that we are fast descending into this abyss of intersecting polycrisis ~ worsened by decades of performative politics ~ the greater our capacity to mobilise the much-needed collective action would be.

The political landscape has never been so depressing in the history of modern Nepal. For the past two decades, no single party has secured a clear majority in parliament. Political alliances of all possible permutation combination, often reappointing the same individuals under different coalitions, became the norm in the relentless pursuit of power. This 'power-first' political wrangling, unfortunately, pushed the ever-growing critical issues concerning the public.

The everyday concerns ~ from the economy to social ties and the environment ~ the bread-and-butter issues that matter most to people, failed to receive the political backing they deserved.

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This in turn has worsened the issues and has now necessitated far greater, costlier and sustained efforts, which, at least considering the current political and economic scenario, seems to be a pipe dream.

Political instability has also fanned a pervasive mood of anxiety and despair among citizens. People's confidence in the state machinery has eroded so much so that they will not confront it unless absolutely necessary.

It's not the rules or the rights but rather acquaintances within the machinery that people look to when they need to get things done. The younger generations in particular report widespread hopelessness amid these overlapping pressures. Economically, the growth rate remains stunted and uneven. In 12 of the last 25 years, the growth rate hovered around 3 percent, while it fell below 1 percent for three years due to both internal and external factors.

These growth rates are inadequate to support the growing population and modern infrastructure. The promulgation of the constitution in 2015 ushered in a brief period of political stability. It contributed to an economic rebound when the growth rate jumped to 9 percent in 2017.

But it declined to 7.6 percent the following year, due to the 2017 floods, and 6.7 percent in 2019. The drop is likely to have been caused by summer droughts in the eastern region that severely impacted agriculture. In 2026, the growth rate is projected to fall to 2.1 percent reflecting, among other extant factors, the impact of the Gen Z-led September protests and the subsequent political instability.

IN MEMORIAM

KARNANI KISHAN LALL WHO LEFT FOR HIS HEAVENLY ABODE THIS DAY IN 1976. FONDLY REMEMBERED BY FAMILY MEMBERS

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Tasks for Nabin

Sir, This refers to the front page report, "Youngest ever, Nitin Nabin takes charge as BJP chief" (21 January). The BJP's appointment of Nitin Nabin as its national president marks a significant organisational moment. At 45, Nabin becomes the youngest person to hold the post, but his elevation is more about the BJP's faith in disciplined party machinery as it prepares for a politically demanding 2026. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remark that he remains "a party worker" while Nabin is now his "boss" reaffirms the party's cultivated narrative of collective leadership within a central command.

With senior figures occupying key roles in government, Parliament and state administrations, the party presidency assumes

importance as the nerve centre for coordination, discipline and conflict management. The leadership's trust in Nabin suggests a preference for administrative efficiency. His organisational background positions him to manage factional pressures, oversee state units and ensure alignment between the government and the states.

The tasks ahead for the new President are demanding. Nabin will have to arrest signs of organisational fatigue in states where the BJP has governed for long periods; manage candidate selection amid rising internal competition and strengthen booth-level mobilisation ahead of the coming Assembly elections. His leadership skills will be tested early on.

The BJP's strategy under Nabin is likely to emphasise micro-management, data-driven campaigning and tighter control over state organisations. Ultimately, the success of BJP's leadership transition will be measured by the party's ability to translate organisational strength into electoral outcomes.

For the Opposition parties, an organisation-driven BJP raises the bar for political coordination. It places pressure on parties that continue to struggle with leadership issues and internal discipline.

Yours, etc., S S Paul,
Nadia, 21 January.

Boon for pilgrims

Sir, It was heartening to learn that Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a new 15-km railway line in Bankura between Jayrambati and Maynapur, and launched a new passenger train in this section ("PM Modi flags off three Amrit Bharat Express trains, inaugurates new 15-km rail line, MEMU service", 19 January).

Jayrambati is the village where Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi was born in 1853, and thus, thousands of disciples of Bhagwan Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Maa Sarada visit the pilgrimage spot throughout the year. Now that the train has been flagged off on the new route, it will surely be much easier for many to reach Jayrambati.

Yours, etc., Sourish Misra,
Kolkata, 19 January.

India slips in quest for economic freedom

PATRANGA BASU

Economic freedom is one of the most desired fundamental human rights. It gives one confidence and ability to live in peace and to combat the hurdles of life boldly. Economic liberty includes freedom to decide how to use one's labour and work, to enjoy the fruits of labour; the freedom to own and control private property and also to participate in a free market.

Free markets and free people are the two major propellants of economic progress. We value freedom as individuals and as a society, and a good economy is one that promotes freedom.

The common belief that enthrals millions of minds is that more the GDP, the better is the condition of the people. It is not just economic size that can bring true prosperity and freedom. It ignores crucial factors like income inequality, environmental damage, health, education, and quality of life, focusing only on market transactions. GDP measures material goods and services, but leaves out the assessment of the state of freedom.

Economic freedom is being measured and expressed as a numerical figure. The Heritage Foundation of America has published every year since 1995 an Index of Economic Freedom covering every country. The index takes a comprehensive view of economic freedom. The Index Report 2025 conceded that economic freedom is under attack worldwide.

India is no exception. In the 2025 Index, India ranked 128th among 176 countries. India's status, with a score of 53 on a scale of 0 to 100, is described as 'mostly unfree'. India is consistently being marked as 'mostly unfree' since 2002. Prior to that India was designated as a 'repressed' country.

The report observed that freedom of the middle-class is stifled while the powerful are getting richer. It recommended rebuilding the well-functioning and healthy institutions of civil society that we need and deserve.

India's GDP growth is predominantly consumption driven, about 60 per cent of the GDP. The main 'consuming class' is the top 10 per cent of the population. They have the power for 66 per cent of the discretionary spending on non-essential goods in the country. They enjoy real economic freedom. Capacity to spend on non-essential goods is the critical indicator of economic freedom. This top 10 per cent group is not widening but is deepening.

The Indus Valley Report 2025 published by Blume Ventures designates this top 10 per cent of population as 'India1', the "engine of the Indian consumer economy". The report advocates that India1 constitutes a 'high income country' within India, and will be an advanced economy well before India overall becomes a developed country. India1 alone would form the tenth most populous country in the world, with 14 crore people. In terms of per capita income, India1 would rank 63rd in the world, way ahead of India's 140th rank, as per World Bank data.

The spending pattern in the market is changing over recent years based on mostly the preferences of the top 10 per cent population. These people suggest how the consumption pattern should look like from gated communities, travel, destination weddings to luxury brands and even 'the way our cities look'.

The India1 segment prefers living in gated communities which are the concentrations of affluence. Their rights are well protected here. These are the 'islands' where 'people pay a premium not for quality but for invisibility of other Indians. Currently 16 million such gated households comprise 32 per cent of the population in 50 cities. These communities have become an economic powerhouse as they account for a disproportionately large share - 45 per cent - of overall spending in top cities despite having fewer households. The trend of 'luxury living' in gated communities reinforces existing disparities in society.

India's real estate market is now booming and is projected to reach the milestone of $ one trillion by 2030. The sector is driven by strong demand in residential (especially luxury), commercial housing. Share of high end to ultra luxury housing has doubled in last five years. This sector is gradually being overtaken by big builders and developers. India's housing market is shifting as more buyers seek larger, premium homes. Survey shows 36 per cent buyers now prefer properties priced between Rs. 90 lakh- Rs 1.5 crore up from 18 per cent before Covid-19. Luxury home demand in India remained strong in 2025, with sales of Rs. 4 crore and above rising nearly 28 per cent YoY across seven major cities.

Share of foreign travel expenses in outward remittances increased from 21 per cent in 2014-15 to 54 per cent in 2023-24. India's car market experiences slow growing passenger vehicle sales while a sharp rise has been seen in premium segment cars over the years from FY 2019-20 to 2023-24. The market forces consumers to behave in certain ways. On the other hand, the market is also energised by the high-income household's spending, which leads to skewed growth. The luxury market has experienced exponential growth signifying economic inequality in society. This implies that while GDP increases, along with it increases inequality.

Premium-brand products give high profit margins. Corporates' rising

focus on producing and selling high-margin premium luxury items divert resources, innovation, and attention away from providing affordable quality products to low-income consumers. The monopolistic inclination of the market poses constraints for the enhancement of freedom of individuals. Without free markets and free enterprises, big corporations can exploit both consumers and their own workers thus expanding their profit. They enjoy freedom in the economy through the power of coercion.

The bottom 90 per cent in India are not in a position to join the top 10 per cent. A staggering one billion Indians are left with no money for discretionary spending after meeting their basic needs. Most are operating on razor-thin margins, with rising food costs, housing, healthcare and education consuming their entire incomes. They have nothing to save; luxury is a dream. Poverty is the major obstacle to economic freedom.

The ability of individuals to find good employment opportunities and work is essential to the advancement of economic freedom. But job creation remains weak. Individuals in India are being faced with difficulties in choosing work. Inflation overshoots increase in wages, resulting in decline in real wages. Markets are not delivering what a majority in society want and need - like social security, jobs, increase in wages and better working conditions for labour.

The problem is not only about poverty in the traditional sense but also about the growing financial constraints among all segments of society barring the top 10 per cent. Society faces a serious imbalance of freedom. Economic freedom in general is in danger. Freedom of a few has increased at the expense of freedom of many.

The problems in our economy and society were not inevitable. They are in a sense a matter of choice; the result of policies, rules and regulations that govern the economy.

The Indus Valley Annual Report warns: "When a billion citizens can no longer participate in the non-essential economy, the ripple effects will be felt across every sector - from industry to innovation. The challenge for policymakers is to restore not just incomes, but hope." Protection of economic freedom requires elimination of coercive power from market. Reforms in the economic sector are essential to establish balance of freedom. Economic intent of national policies should aim at breaking the shackles of poverty for good. The same people should not suffer forever.

(The writer is a Cost Accountant who served as General Manager (Finance and Accounts) of a public sector power utility.)

Modern methods aid revival of golden fibre

PURBA SAHA

Jute has long been known as the "Golden Fibre" of West Bengal, supporting the livelihoods of farmers across districts such as Murshidabad, Nadia, Hooghly and North 24 Parganas. For generations, jute cultivation has played a central role in the rural economy of the state. However, in recent years, many farmers reduced jute acreage due to rising labour costs, uncertain market prices and competition from synthetic materials. Today, jute farming is slowly witnessing a revival, driven by modern agricultural practices, improved varieties and renewed demand for eco-friendly products.

One of the most visible changes in jute cultivation is the shift in sowing methods. Traditionally, farmers broadcast jute seeds by hand, which often resulted in overcrowded plants and uneven growth. This led to poor fibre quality and additional labour for thinning. Farmers in Murshidabad and Nadia are now increasingly adopting line sowing with recommended spacing. Line sowing ensures uniform crop establishment, better sunlight penetration and easier intercultural operations. Many farmers have reported improved fibre quality and better prices after switching to this method.

Weed infestation remains one of the biggest challenges during the early stages of jute growth. In districts like Hooghly and North 24 Parganas, farmers often struggle with labour shortages during peak weeding periods. Earlier, manual weeding was the only option, making jute cultivation costly and time-consuming. Recent advances in integrated weed management have provided relief. By combining timely hand weeding, mechanical weeders and selective herbicides, farmers are able to control weeds effectively while reducing labour dependency. This approach not only lowers production costs but also improves crop growth and yield.

Balanced nutrient management has also emerged as a key factor in improving jute productivity. Many farmers traditionally apply fertilizers without soil testing, often focusing mainly on nitrogen. Research conducted by institutions such as ICAR-CRIJAF, Barrackpore, has shown that jute responds well to sulphur and micronutrients like zinc, in addition to nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Farmers who have adopted integrated nutrient management using organic manure along with recommended fertilizers have observed stronger and finer fibres. Improved soil health has also helped sustain productivity over multiple seasons.

The introduction of improved jute varieties has further strengthened farmers' confidence in the crop. New varieties developed by research institutions are high yielding, disease resistant and better suited to the agro-climatic conditions of West Bengal. These varieties mature earlier and produce uniform fibre, reducing the risk associated with unpredictable weather. Farmers in Murshidabad district, in particular, have reported more stable yields after switching to certified seeds of recommended varieties.

Retting, the post-harvest process of separating fibre from the jute stem, has traditionally been one of the most problematic stages of jute cultivation. Conventional water retting depends heavily on rainfall and the availability of clean water bodies, often resulting in inconsistent fibre quality. In recent years, improved retting methods such as ribbon retting and microbial retting have been introduced in several parts of the state. These techniques reduce retting time, require less water and produce cleaner fibre with better colour and strength. Farmers adopting these methods have been able to secure higher fibre grades in the market.

Market demand for jute is another encouraging sign for farmers. With increasing concern over plastic

pollution, jute is gaining renewed importance as a biodegradable and sustainable alternative. Jute products are now widely used in packaging, geotextiles, handicrafts and eco-friendly consumer goods. Government initiatives promoting natural fibres and restricting single-use plastics have further boosted demand. For jute-growing farmers in West Bengal, this shift presents new income opportunities.

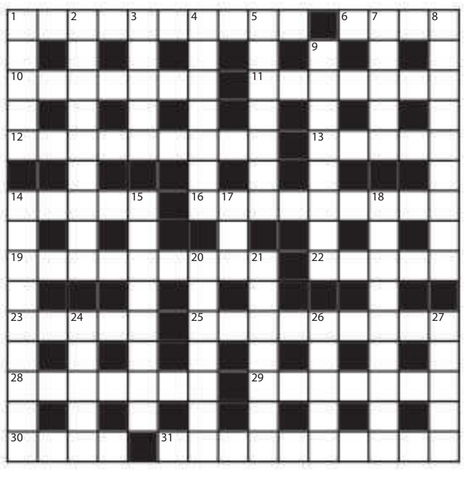
Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Climate change has made rainfall patterns unpredictable, affecting sowing and retting operations. Small and marginal farmers often lack access to modern tools, quality seeds and timely extension support. Delayed procurement and price fluctuations also discourage farmers from fully investing in jute cultivation.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of jute farming, coordinated efforts are essential. Strengthening extension services, promoting farmer training programmes, encouraging mechanization and ensuring fair and timely prices can make a significant difference. With proper support, jute can once again become a profitable and dependable crop for West Bengal's farmers.

Jute farming today stands at a crucial turning point. By adopting modern practices and responding to changing market demands, farmers can improve their income while contributing to environmental sustainability. The revival of jute is not only about preserving a traditional crop but also about securing rural livelihoods and building a greener future.

(The writer is a B.Sc. (Hons) Agriculture third-year student at Adamas University, with academic interest in fibre crops and farmer-oriented sustainable agriculture.)

Crossword | No. 293354



Yesterday's Solution

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

ACROSS

1 Actor reflected on the subject of food – plant-based food (10)
6 Factory is initially removed to make way for a shopping centre (4)
10 Expression of frustration about a ring road somewhere in Hertfordshire (7)
11 President taking time with good shots on the green (7)
12 Going back, headed for an exit (9)
13 Doctor tries another examination (5)
14 Sounds beginning at the left part of the mouth (5)
16 Completely and remarkably weird niche trousers (5,4)
19 Criticise players in front of international fans who`ve paid to watch (9)
22 Uncover extremes of in-fighting hidden by party (3,2)
23 Tobacco in tin used up (5)
25 Vehicle travelling east (not south) or west (3-6)
28 Advances in marketing of Japanese medical kit? (7)
29 On retirement, give a speech that`s hated (7)
30 The crux of marrying is trust (4)
31 Broadcast on iPlayer buffers at the start, with no means of being fixed (10)

DOWN

1 London district heralding extremely inventive musician (5)
2 Video game created by American on drugs (9)
3 Healthcare provider`s customers centrally held in automated systems (5)
4 Labour policy is something that won`t be compromised (3,4)
5 Old sheet covering small area (7)
7 Nice friends succeeded? Wrong! (5)
8 Navigational craft easily performed last of tasks with it (9)
9 Multi-level shop looked to have a late opening? (8)
14 Action on course to promote change in voting habits (9)
15 Satirical, lively Scotsman (8)
17 Storage facility set up outside back of arena (3)
18 Heads of campus halls worked with uni and LGBT music venue (9)
20 One skilled amateur trains frantically (7)
21 Bloke got ripped, partly as a morale booster (3,4)
24 Leader ousted from one-time car plant (5)
26 Little fish always grabs line (5)
27 Former New York official smuggling diamonds? Damn! (5)

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

100 Years Ago

Front page of The Statesman dated 23 January 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE scandalously inadequate punishment meted out on Friday to a drunken taxi-driver by the Third Presidency Magistrate affords a partial explanation why the Calcutta taxi is rapidly developing into a serious danger. The man in question was chased for a mile by a police sergeant in a motor bicycle and was eventually brought to a halt opposite the Lower Circular Road Cemetery. The policeman swore that the taxi was driven at between 35 and 40 miles an hour and the magistrate accepted this statement. When arrested the man was found to be drunk and to have no licence. He was fined Rs. 50, the magistrate arguing apparently that because no one had been killed, the gravity of the offence was somehow lessened. At a time when in Great Britain heavier penalties of imprisonment are being enacted for the drunken motorist the punishment in this case cannot be regarded as other than an example of judicial perversity.

News Items

"SOVIET EFFRONTERY"

THE RUSSIAN MASK DISCARDED

(SPECIAL CABLE.)
PEKING, JAN. 22.

THE Press Comments reveal extent of the Sino-Russian disagreements.

A semi-official organ, the *Peking Daily News,* talks of the effrontery of the Soviet agents in China and invites the student leaders to examine M. Karahan's protest in the light of his teachings against so-called imperialism, and also to examine the reasons for the lose of Mongolia, the activities of the Soviet agents in Sin Kiang and elsewhere, and the ruinous conditions imposed on South China by the Soviet agents at Canton and other southern centres.

The Chinese newspaper *Shihjuij Ijpao* referring to the threat of armed Soviet intervention, says: If reports are true, then the mask of friendship which the Soviet agents have been wearing in China in the past years will be exposed in all its nakedness. We are opposed to imperialism, but equally oppose Red Imperialism.—*Copyright.*

"A LEAKY HOUSE"

COUNT VOLPI & ITALIAN DEBT NEGOTIATIONS

("TIMES" SPECIAL SERVICE)
LONDON, JAN. 21.

THE Italian Press is inclined to be pessimistic regarding the London debt negotiations which are considered to have reached a difficult stage.

The Rome correspondent of the Times states that Count Volpi is reported as saying "Our house has been built but rain pours through the roof," which has prompted a cartoon in which Count Volpi is pictured offering Mr. Churchill an umbrella labelled "May, 24, 1915," showing that Italy has not yet abandoned hope, and that her war intervention to save the Allies, is being used as a deciding factor in the negotiations.

GRAVE SITUATION

RUSSIAN RAILWAY MANAGER ARRESTED

TOKIO, JAN. 22.

ACCORDING to the newspaper *Asahi* a message from Dairen says that Marshal Chang Tso-lin has ordered the arrest of M. Ivanoff, a Russian, and general manager of the Chinese Eastern Railway.

A message from Harbin says that the situation is becoming graver. Chinese troops are preparing to concentrate at Harbin. The Soviet Am-bassador, M. Kopp, is reported to have declared that the Russian Government is prepared to back up its demands forcibly, if necessary meeting troops with troops.—*Reuter.*

Mindless killing

Manipur is still reeling from the mishandling of the 2023 protests

In multi-ethnic Manipur, the divide between communities continues to grow and spill over into violence. With people still trying to rebuild lives upended by two years of mindless hostility that began on May 3, 2023, another senseless killing has led to fresh tension. On Wednesday night, a 29-year-old Meitei man was killed by unidentified assailants. Mayanglambam Rishikant Singh was visiting his wife, who is from the Kuki-Zo community, in Churachandpur district, when the couple was picked up from home by masked gunmen. While she was allowed to walk away, Singh was shot dead, which was recorded on camera. There were demonstrations in Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley, and at Kakching, from where Singh hailed, people blocked the Indo-Myanmar Sugnu Road to seek justice for his family. According to security officials, on Wednesday night, a video of the killing was shared on WhatsApp from a Guwahati IP address with the title, 'No peace no popular governments'. A joint action committee, set up in the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley, demanded that the case be handed over to the National Investigation Agency. The acute trust deficit among the people in a State which has been under President's rule since last February is palpable. The faultlines between the hills, dominated by the tribes, and the Valley, home to the Meiteis, have sharpened.

Manipur, which became a State in 1972, has 33 recognised tribes. Each tribe, including the Kuki-Zo and Nagas, and several non-tribal communities such as the Meiteis have their unique identity and culture, which the political leadership has to be mindful of. Despite witnessing waves of insurgencies and ethnic conflict since 1972, people of different tribes and non-tribal communities did work and live together without fear of reprisal. That has become almost impossible now, and the killing of a Meitei in a Kuki-dominated area will only add to the mistrust. The present cycle of violence began after the Manipur High Court gave the go-ahead to the State government to grant Scheduled Tribe status to the Meiteis, an old demand. Tribal groups vociferously protested, saying this would give the Meiteis unprecedented advantages. Things soon got out of control after the Meiteis and Kuki-Zo tribes clashed. The Biren Singh government may have resigned in February 2025, but the State is still reeling under the consequences of the manner in which the Centre and State leaders handled the situation. To find permanent peace, civil society and political leaders need to continue to work tirelessly to bring all stakeholders on board and resolve underlying issues of identity and marginalisation.

Right to dignity

Governments must ensure equitable pay for ASHA workers

The ongoing protests by ASHA and anganwadi workers in West Bengal demanding their wages be increased to ₹15,000 a month is a sour reminder of efforts to deny them permanent employee status despite their centrality to many national and State welfare schemes. The Indira Gandhi government denied the first of many of these workers 'worker' status under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), laying a foundation that India has continued to build on to bypass labour laws. As the workload increased, the formation of a national union followed in 1989, but even in the liberalisation era, the state created the category of 'scheme workers' and expanded social schemes but not permanent government jobs. The *State of Karnataka vs Ameerbi* (1996) – tribunal decision – further excluded anganwadi workers from the set of government employees even as the top court expanded the right to food, and thus the need for these workers, in 2004. The ASHA programme took root in the mid-2000s and followed a similar trajectory, with the government framing them as 'activists'. Worse, in the 2010s, when the government, employers, and workers' unions recommended job regularisation, minimum wages, and pension and gratuity for ASHA workers at the 45th Labour Conference, successive UPA and NDA governments chose not to implement this. In 2015, the NDA government slashed the ICDS budget, and these workers have been protesting since at regular intervals just to make ends meet.

The Centre also froze its contribution to these workers' pay in 2018, in effect leaving ASHA and anganwadi personnel to absorb fiscal shocks. Together with the lack of a guarantee of better working conditions for gig workers in the new labour codes, the state has effectively exited the social contract for many of its most vulnerable labourers in favour of promoting business metrics and more fiscal headroom at the Centre. States do wield more power in hiring and dispute resolution and are also more vulnerable to electoral pressure, which unions have taken advantage of, but there is also considerable disparity between States. As central honoraria stagnated, States were compelled to top up payments from their own budgets. Predictably, wealthier States and those facing sustained Union pressure have been able to offer more or additional benefits than fiscally constrained ones. Nonetheless, it is unconscionable that the practice of denying these workers their due still continues to be knowingly exploitative. The Centre must legally reclassify these 'volunteers' as statutory employees under the Code on Social Security, guaranteeing minimum wages and pension coverage. The Centre and States must also bridge fiscal gaps to ensure equitable pay across regions. Only by institutionalising these protections can India grant these essential workers their rightful dignity.

Delimitation after 2027, redrawing power in India

S.Y. Quraishi

is a former Chief Election Commissioner of India and is the author of 'An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian Election'

Every democracy must periodically redraw its electoral map to reflect population change. In India, this process is known as delimitation. On paper, it is a routine constitutional adjustment. In reality, the next delimitation exercise – due after Census 2027 – will be the most consequential redrawing of political power since Independence. It will redefine how seats are distributed in the Lok Sabha and how India understands fairness, federalism and regional balance.

The Constitution required delimitation after every Census. But this principle has been suspended for nearly half a century. Inter-State distribution of Lok Sabha seats has remained unchanged since 1976, frozen at 1971 Census figures so that States would not be penalised for controlling population growth. The 84th Amendment in 2001 specified that redistribution would remain suspended until "the first census taken after the year 2026".

That suspension effectively expires with Census 2027. At present, representation still rests on an India of 548 million people (1971), not today's 1.47 billion reality.

Delimitation is time consuming. India's four previous Commissions took between three and five-and-a-half years – and the last one (2002-08) only redrew internal constituency boundaries without reallocating seats among States. The next Commission would probably reallocate seats among States for the first time since 1976, redraw all constituencies, and create reserved constituencies for women's 33% quota. Even if Census 2027 data is published in 2028, completing delimitation before 2031-32 seems impossible. As a result, women's reservation cannot be implemented before the 2034 elections. But we cannot rule out surprises.

The complexity around numbers

In the 1970s, fertility rates across States were similar. Today, they have sharply diverged. The southern and western States achieved below-replacement fertility through investments in education, health and women's empowerment. Northern States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar continue recording higher population growth. If population alone determines representation, States that controlled growth will lose political weight, while those that did not will gain significantly.

The numbers are stark. According to delimitation projections, if seats were allocated purely by population in an expanded Lok Sabha of approximately 888 members, Uttar Pradesh would rise from 80 to 151 seats and Bihar from 40 to 82 – just over 26% combined. Tamil Nadu would have 53 seats (from 39) and Kerala 23 (from 20). Though their absolute numbers rise, their share in the total Lok Sabha strength would fall from 7.2% to 6.0% and 3.7% to 2.6%, respectively, as the northern States gain disproportionately. This creates a moral paradox. Why should States be punished for good governance? For 50 years, India urged States to implement population control. Those who succeeded now stand to lose representation. The logic which forced the freeze in 1976 and 2001 is still valid.

> If done poorly, driven by political arithmetic alone, it can deepen distrust and injure India's federal spirit

Union Home Minister Amit Shah stated in 2025 that "not even one seat will be reduced" for any southern State. But this promise cannot offset the imbalance if northern States gain massively – or it may require suspending constitutionally mandated redistribution altogether, inviting legal challenge.

The arithmetic reveals a deeper complexity. Even if southern States retain their current seat numbers in an expanded House, their influence diminishes significantly. Parliament functions on absolute numbers, not proportions. When the combined strength of U.P. and Bihar rises to over a quarter of the House, the bargaining power of other regions inevitably declines – despite the promise being kept technically.

Options worth pondering over

There are six options that merit debate.

First, extend the current freeze beyond 2026, delaying redistribution until fertility rates converge. This preserves current balances but denies fast-growing States fair representation (a legitimate concern) and risks constitutional challenge under Article 14, as unequal representation based on 50-year-old data undermines the principle of equal suffrage.

Second, expand the Lok Sabha from 543 to, say, 750 or 888 seats, ensuring that no State loses seats; some gain more. However, proportional distribution means that larger States still get bigger shares, leaving southern concerns unaddressed.

Third, adopt a weighted formula: 80% weight for population, 20% for development indicators such as literacy, health, or sustained fertility control – analogous to how the Finance Commission uses composite indicators for tax devolution. This rewards governance outcomes, not just population size. The ratio could be 70:30.

Fourth, strengthen the Rajya Sabha as a genuinely federal chamber. Earlier, domicile requirements ensured that Members represented the States from which they were elected. Now, anyone can be elected from anywhere, weakening that link. The domicile condition must be restored. Additionally, Rajya Sabha seats remain distributed largely by population – Uttar Pradesh has 31 seats while Sikkim has one – blunting its federal purpose. Consider adopting the American system of equal seats a State, irrespective of size (California 39 million, Wyoming 0.5 million both have two Senators). An Indian model could be evolved which could have three tiers: largest States (15 seats each), medium States (10 seats), smallest States (five seats). Within each tier, States would have equal representation regardless of population, balancing federalism and restoring the Rajya Sabha's moderating role.

Fifth, bifurcate Uttar Pradesh into three or four States to neutralise its excessive weight. U.P. was already divided in 2000 to create Uttarakhand, and movements for Bundelkhand and Purvanchal Statehood have persisted for decades. If U.P.'s projected 151 seats were divided among four States (about 38 seats each), no single State would dominate – making this a federalism solution, not just an administrative one.

Sixth, implement phased redistribution across two election cycles. Reallocate half the adjusted seats in 2034, the remainder in 2039, giving States and parties time to adapt. This reduces political shock while honouring constitutional requirements.

The need for careful navigation

Delimitation will reshape coalition politics fundamentally. If two States command a quarter of Lok Sabha seats, the mathematics of government formation changes entirely. Regional parties that historically provided parliamentary balance would find their leverage reduced, regardless of absolute seat numbers. The choice between constitutional fairness and political stability requires navigating this structural tension carefully.

Beyond formulas, procedure matters. The Delimitation Commission should include experts in demography, constitutional law and federal studies, with meaningful State representation. Transparency, extensive public hearings and robust oversight are essential.

The next delimitation will also redraw internal constituency boundaries – considering geography, administrative convenience, and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) representation. While the number of SC and ST reserved constituencies is determined by strict population proportion, the location of specific SC constituencies involves Commission discretion, potentially creating scope for manipulation." The ST formula should apply to both.

Delimitation is a national milestone that will redistribute political voice and shape coalition politics for decades. Done well, it can reaffirm India's unity and modernise representation. Done poorly, it can deepen distrust and injure the federal spirit.

The Census will measure India's population; delimitation will measure its democracy. Once Census data is released, positions will harden and consensus will fade –making now the moment for dialogue.

If guided by transparency, empathy and shared justice, the exercise can renew faith in federalism and democracy. But if driven by political arithmetic alone, it may redraw the moral balance of the Republic itself.

India and the EU — a fit partnership in a divided world

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In geopolitics, clarity is rare. But when it arrives, it demands action. Both are now embodied within the deepening relationship between the European Union (EU) and India as the two sides prepare for the upcoming visit of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the President of the European Council, António Luís Santos da Costa, New Delhi. As chief guests at India's 77th Republic Day on January 26, 2026, and co-chairs of the 16th India-EU Summit on January 27, their presence is more than ceremonial. It is an alignment of intent. The optics of EU leaders standing alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi at India's most symbolic national celebration will underscore the urgency of this moment.

India, once confident of its rapport with United States President Donald Trump, now finds itself in the crosshairs of America – hit with punitive tariffs and disparaging rhetoric, including being accused with the farcical charge of 'Modi's War' in Ukraine over Indian purchases of Russian oil. New Delhi has rejected this inflammatory rhetoric as "inaccurate and misleading", cautioning against "double standards", even as it insists that the partnership has survived many challenging transitions and will press forward on the basis of mutual respect and shared interests. Europe understands this rupture all too well. Today, the message is clear: alliances no longer guarantee protection, and strategic autonomy must take precedence over strategic patience.

A relationship with potential

For too long, the India-EU relationship has simmered with unrealised potential. The two sides have committed to strengthening the relationship but progress has remained episodic. It is often derailed by narrative wars over Russia and China, and by the simple reality that the two sides were more focused on their respective relationships with the U.S. But the new urgency behind this specific visit means that it could now result in relationship-defining outcomes.

> The two sides have the potential to write a new chapter in multilateralism

What the FTA can deliver

First, India and the EU are in the final stages of negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that has been sputtering along since 2007. It should be viewed as a geopolitical insurance policy. If realised to its full potential, the agreement could unlock major opportunities in textiles and apparel, where India seeks tariff reductions to boost exports to Europe; pharmaceuticals and chemicals, sectors where India's competitive edge can meet EU demand; automobiles and machinery, where Europe wants greater access to India's growing market; and digital and services trade, where India's IT sector could gain from regulatory harmonisation.

For India, the FTA is also about climate equity. One sticking point continues to be the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which levies a 20%-35% effective carbon charge on materials such as steel, aluminium, cement and fertilizers from India. India sees it as a non-tariff barrier that has the potential to erase the gains an FTA would provide. In the interest of both sides, Europe should be able to offer some relief to India on this front, while still ensuring that climate remains a top policy priority.

Second, while maximising cooperation in issues of trade and technology remains vital, perhaps the hardest and most necessary conversations lie in defence. Ms. Von der Leyen has called for a Security and Defence Partnership with India, on a par with Japan and South Korea. And while it is not headline-grabbing like the FTA, it is almost just as important. For the EU, it would offer access to India's defence market, and the opportunity for co-production of defence equipment.

For India, it compliments Mr. Modi's 'Make in India' initiative, which aims to transform India into a global manufacturing hub. It would also offer access to European technology and a framework for more joint exercises and coordination in the Indian Ocean.

As a template for the world

Finally, on a strategic level, the EU-India partnership could be a model for other nations as they recalibrate and search for new partners. With America's unpredictability and China's continued assertiveness, India and the EU could offer a model of relationship building that respects internal domestic sensitivities, while recognising the need for flexibility and pragmatism. At the heart of this alignment is a shared belief that sovereign choices must remain sovereign, and that neither Beijing, Moscow nor Washington should hold veto power over India or Europe's strategic decisions. India and the EU have paid the price of over-dependence – whether on Russian gas, Chinese markets or American security guarantees. Both also recognise the need for strategic autonomy, which is about enhancing flexibility, reducing over-exposure to or over-dependence on certain countries, and amplifying each other's voices on the global stage.

India and the EU have the credibility, the capability and the capital to co-create a new chapter in multilateralism. If they choose to seize this moment and avoid the trappings of internal bureaucracy, the two sides could help realise a multipolar order that is resilient, equitable and sovereign.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Now, the third Governor

The Karnataka Governor's walkout from the State Assembly (Front page, January 23), can only be seen as an act of shirking duty.

A Governor's role is to serve as a constitutional functionary, but this episode is another instance of the dangers of gubernatorial politicisation. That such problems arise with a troika of Governors, in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka — also non-BJP ruled States — shows that there needs to be deep introspection.

Governors, in the words of Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava, Member of Constituent Assembly, "... shall be a guide, philosopher and friend of the Ministry as well as the people in general... He will be a man above party and he will look at the Minister and government from a detached standpoint. He will be able to influence the Ministers and Members of the Legislature in such a manner that the administration will run smoothly."

Divyanshi Soni,
New Delhi

The ostensible reason for these worthies throwing tantrums is that they are only acting on the dictates of the dispensation at the Centre which mandates that they cause maximum discomfort and inconvenience to the State governments. Such events never occur in States ruled by the BJP or its allies.

C.V. Aravind,
Bengaluru

The Governors of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are supposed to read out the address, through the legislature, as it reflects the vision and the aspirations of people's elected government. It is time that the gubernatorial role is redefined to ensure the stature of the office.

Dr. D.V.G. Sankara Rao,
Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh

Tension in Manipur

The killing of a 29-year-old man in Churachandpur district and the circulation of the video of his murder by the perpetrators points to a premeditated attempt to not just end innocent lives but to also cause disorder in the State. These criminals must not be allowed to succeed and the community at large must see through the motivations of such evil individuals.

Anany Mishra,
Bhilai, Chhattisgarh

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

Shimjitha Musthafa accused U. Deepak of sexually harassing her on a bus in Kerala. In buses across India, people are often crammed together. This is a representational image. RAGESH K.

Trial by social media

A day after a woman posted a video on social media alleging sexual harassment by a man on a bus, he died by suicide. The episode sparked outrage across Kerala and led to heated discussions on the use of social media, the possible consequences of public shaming, and mental health. **Mini Muringatheri** reports on an episode that has divided society

Trigger warning: This article contains references to sexual abuse and suicide. Please use your discretion in deciding if, when, and where to read.

It was U. Deepak's birthday on January 17. The 42-year-old sales executive, who worked at a garment company, lived with his parents in a two-storey house in Govindapuram, a couple of kilometres from Kozhikode city in Kerala. He had promised his father, Choyi Ullattuthodi, and mother, K. Kanyaka, that he would take them to Guruvayur temple, an ancient Hindu site dedicated to Lord Krishna and popular among pilgrims. For the closely knit family of three, whose lives were rooted in routine, such pilgrimages were not rare, Kanyaka says.

Deepak had instructed his parents to be ready by the afternoon for the journey that would take about 2 hours. He said they would leave once he returned from work. But when he came home, his parents realised that he was not himself.

"He was very upset," Kanyaka recalls. "He didn't eat. Without any explanation, he said, 'Amma, we will go to Guruvayur later'." Kanyaka kept asking him what had happened, but Deepak did not respond. He shut himself inside his room.

That night, citing incidents of theft in the area, Deepak asked his parents to close their bedroom door. They did as they were told. The next morning, they found Deepak dead in his room.

For Ullattuthodi and Kanyaka, the discovery was shocking especially since they saw no warning and no visible signs of despair. "We couldn't understand why he took his own life," says Kanyaka, her voice cracking.

A day earlier, unbeknownst to his parents, Deepak had struggled to process a video in the public domain that featured him. The circumstances surrounding his death have sent shockwaves across Kerala, sparking widespread discussion and outrage. His death highlights the complex intersection of social media, public shaming, sexual abuse, and mental health.

The incident on the bus

The pervious day, 35-year-old Shimjitha Musthafa from Vadakara, who describes herself on Instagram as a 'trained psychologist', posted a video. She alleged that Deepak sexually harassed her on a bus in Payyannur, Kannur district. She claimed that Deepak, who had been travelling in the private bus from Payyannur railway station to the bus stand, deliberately elbowed her breast.

The video struck a nerve. Sexual harassment in crowded public transport is a lived reality for countless women across India. The clip went viral, reaching more than 2 million people within a few hours. When some people in the comments section questioned her intent and the framing of the video, Musthafa deleted the clip. Later, she posted a follow-up video. She said that her aim was not to target an individual, but to highlight a "serious social and mental health issue."

> When I spoke to him on the night of his birthday, he was very distressed. He feared public humiliation.
>
> **ASGAR ALI**
> Deepak's friend

It was Asgar Ali, a friend of Deepak, who informed him about the video. "Deepak was introverted," Ali says. "He was recovering from the trauma of a divorce. When I spoke to him on the night of his birthday, he was very distressed. He feared public humiliation. He told me he would take legal measures against the woman."

For Kanyaka, the memory of that night is unbearable. "Though he was 42, he was like a child," she says. "He was very delicate. He would not do anything without asking me. To take such a step, he must have been broken inside. How much my son must have cried all night...."

Deepak's cousin, U. Jayaprakash, and his wife Sini are in a state of disbelief. "Nobody who knew Deepak would ever believe that he could sexually harass someone," says Jayaprakash. "He was very attached to his mother. He must have worried about how such an allegation would affect her."

The family accused Musthafa of using the video to gain fame and followers. Public anger swelled rapidly. Soon, Deepak's death was no longer a private tragedy; it became a public flashpoint. While several women's rights activists urged people to stay calm and not lose sight of the complexity of the issue, many men were angry. A series of videos showed men travelling in buses with cardboard boxes covering their bodies. One of the most widely shared clips featured a bus conductor wearing a cardboard box over his upper body, bearing a message demanding the formation of a men's commission.

Complaints and inquiries

On January 19, Kanyaka filed a complaint against Musthafa with the Kozhikode City Police Commissioner. The Kozhikode Medical College police registered a case and invoked Section 109 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. This is a non-bailable offence relating to abetment to suicide. The police arrested Musthafa from her relative's house in Vadakara and remanded her to judicial custody for 14 days. The State Human Rights Commission directed the police to submit a report within a week.

Deepak's parents, Choyi Ullattuthodi and K. Kanyaka, discovered his body in his room the morning after his birthday. RAGESH K.

In its remand report before the Judicial First Class Magistrate Court, Kunnamangalam, the police stated that Deepak had died by suicide due to the humiliation caused by the videos filmed and shared by Musthafa.

The investigation, the police said, included a review of CCTV footage from the bus in which Musthafa and Deepak had travelled. "There was nothing abnormal or objectionable [in it]," they wrote in the remand report. "The footage does not show any inappropriate or unusual behaviour." Statements from the bus staff and fellow passengers also reportedly confirmed that no incident of harassment or misconduct took place during the journey, the remand report said.

The police also said that Musthafa recorded multiple videos of the alleged sexual harassment in the bus and deleted some of them. Her phone has been sent for forensic analysis. "We have sought police custody of the accused for further questioning," says a police source.

The police added in the report that Musthafa, who holds a postgraduate degree and is former ward member of the Areacode Grama Panchayat, was aware of the legal requirement to approach the police if she had experienced harassment.

Meanwhile, from Manjeri jail, Musthafa filed a complaint through her brother with the Payyannur police, reiterating that she was sexually harassed on the bus on January 16. The Payyannur police have initiated a preliminary inquiry.

A battleground

As legal processes unfolded, public discourse exploded. Almost overnight, the public perception of Musthafa shifted. Initially seen as a victim of sexual harassment, she came to be seen as an abettor of suicide. Social media turned into a battleground. Many people questioned the authenticity of the video, arguing that the contact between Deepak and her could have been accidental as the bus was crowded. Some influencers and YouTubers branded the video "fake."

Deepak's death altered the narrative entirely. What was once a conversation about women's safety in public transport turned into a bitter debate on false allegations, public shaming, and the destructive power of social media. The case raised uncomfortable questions about accountability, justice, and empathy in the digital age.

Feminists themselves appeared divided. "When a woman says she was sexually harassed and shows video evidence of it, how does that automatically become abetment to suicide," someone wondered. Some women argued that suicide cannot invalidate an allegation, especially when the woman continues to stand by her claim even after the man's death. Others asked whether the video should have been made public before an investigation. Should social media influencers assume the role of arbiters of justice? Should public opinion be allowed to determine guilt?

Cyber crime investigator Pattathil Dhanya Menon points to legal grey zones. "Technically speaking, in a public space, you cannot shoot another person without consent," she says. "If it was recorded as evidence against violence, it should have been submitted to the pol0ice. It should not have been edited or tampered with." She stresses the urgent need for awareness about the legitimate use of social media.

As the debate raged on, Musthafa became the target of vicious online abuse. She received rape and murder threats. Ajay Unni, from the Bharatiya Janata Party, who contested the recent Thodupuzha Municipality elections, said women who create such videos should be raped first.

Seeing the firestorm, many women came out in support of Musthafa. They said that there are barely any women who have not experienced harassment in crowded buses or public spaces in India. Detailing their own experiences, women also spoke of how they are routinely shamed and isolated when they speak up.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau show that India's crime rate against women increased in 2022 by 4% points compared to 2021. The national average stood at 66.4 cases per lakh women, driven by high rates in Delhi (144.4), Haryana (118.7), and Telangana (117.6). States such as Kerala (82) and Madhya Pradesh (78.8) were closer to the national average.

"School and college students are the most frequent victims," says Radhika P., a 53-year-old sales staff member in Kozhikode. "My daughter often complains to me. Even at my age, I'm not spared. Women always travel with fear. We have to remain alert in crowded buses."

Musthafa's supporters also pointed to the apathy of the police and the judicial system in handling harassment complaints. This, they argued, pushes women to post videos online as a form of self-defence, a way of reclaiming agency and deterring potential perpetrators. They cited the 2023 case of Savad Sha, who was arrested for masturbating inside a Kerala State transport bus while sitting next to a woman. She uploaded a video of the act online. The woman, an actor and model, faced severe attacks online from men's groups. Some of them even received the accused after he obtained bail. In 2025, Savad Sha was booked again for molesting another woman in another bus, validating the earlier complaint.

"If the promptness shown in arresting Musthafa had been shown in acting on complaints of harassment in buses, things would be different," says screenwriter and feminist activist Didi Damodharan. "There is hardly a woman who has not had a bad experience in public transport. That is what Musthafa tried to say through her video. Whether this specific case is true or not should be decided by the police and courts."

She adds, "Mobile phones can be effective tools of self defence. The very awareness that one might be under watch can make public spaces safer for women." At the same time, she cautions against the oversimplification of Deepak's suicide. "There may be many reasons behind this death. The video could be one factor, but it may not be the sole reason."

> If the promptness shown in arresting Musthafa had been shown in acting on complaints of harassment in buses, things would be different.
>
> **DIDI DAMODHARAN**
> Activist

Damodharan is blunt about how the narrative has been weaponised. "The tears of the mother are being used to attack the women's liberation movement. Instead of emphasising that suicide is never a solution, all anger has been directed at the woman and the video. There appears to be a deliberate effort to crush even the smallest possibility of women's empowerment," she says.

She also points to deeper anxieties at play. "The accessibility of social media and phones for women disrupts power equations in a patriarchal society. That is why the issue is framed as a problem of women using social media," she says.

Drawing lines

As Musthafa was brought to the Medical College police station, people blocked traffic and shouted abuses. Similar scenes were reported outside Manjeri jail. People posted Reels on social media, attacking women and feminist activists. Political parties and their cyber warriors jumped in, each pushing their own agenda.

In the 2017 case involving the abduction and sexual assault of a Malayalam actor, the court took the ages of the accused into account while determining the sentence. In another instance of sexual misconduct, the court showed consideration to the accused, filmmaker P.T. Kunju Muhammed, because of his age. "What, then, is the 'right' age for a man to be punished adequately in a case of harassment," asks Damodharan.

Women activists also point out that the gravity of the allegation against Musthafa is far less severe than crimes such as rape and gang rape. They question the disproportionate response and the intensity of the punitive action in her case.

On the other hand, men's rights activists claim that Deepak's death is not an isolated incident. They argue that men are increasingly victims of public humiliation and reputational damage without evidence. Activist Rahul Easwar announced a 24x7 helpline for men facing mental harassment and declared January 17 as 'Men's Rights Day'. He gave Deepak's parents "initial aid" of ₹3.17 lakh.

Psychiatrist Dr. Shaju George, who is from Thrissur and works in Dubai, says, "Ending one's life is almost normalised as a response to mental trauma. What is tragic is that neither he nor his friends or family sought professional psychological or legal help."

Deepak's death has left behind grieving parents, a woman in jail, and a society deeply divided. It is the story not just of one man and one video, but of a social contract stretched thin by technology, patriarchy, fear, and grief. It forces Kerala, a State that has just declared itself 100% digitally literate, to confront an uncomfortable truth: in the age of social media, justice is seen as everyone's business, delivered in quick, reckless shorts. And the cost is often paid in lives.

Suicide Prevention Helpline: Disha - 1056, 0471-2552056

mini.mk@thehindu.co.in

the hindu businessline.
SATURDAY - JANUARY 24, 2026

Schemes galore

Centrally Sponsored Schemes should be rationalised

The Centre, according to a recent report in this newspaper, is keen to rationalise the number of Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSSs) — those run with Central and States' contributions. The intent coincides with the five-year term of over 50 of these schemes ending this March. CSSs have been criticised for over two decades for being clumsy arrangements that evade accountability and generate poor outcomes.

With the upcoming Budget faced with a revenue constraint as well as inflexible expenditures, moves to rationalise CSSs, which account for over 8 per cent of the total Budget size or about ₹4 lakh crore, can make a major difference in improving the efficiency of allocations. The Centre said last May that efforts in this direction had helped release funds for capital expenditure. Indeed, there have been enough CAG reports to show that many of these schemes are riddled with inefficiencies. Various committees over time — such as one helmed by former Cabinet Secretary BK Chaturvedi whose report was submitted in 2011, and a panel of chief ministers about four years later — have suggested changes, which have in turn been echoed by the 15th Finance Commission. They have said that schemes below a certain minimum fund size should be dissolved. Many suggestions of the CMs' panel have since found their way into policy, although their target of reducing the number of CSSs to 30 seems a far cry — with 'flagship schemes' being announced from time to time. Schemes have been divided into ''core' and 'optional' — although it can perhaps be said that the panel's proposal to reduce the numbers to one 'umbrella scheme' per sector remains a work in progress.

An important move with respect to increasing State autonomy was taken in 2016, when 25 per cent of the central allocation was earmarked as a 'flexifund', to be used by the States to design and implement the concerned scheme or its variant in its own way, but in keeping with Central guidelines. Whether this effort has paid off is worth an evaluation. Meanwhile, CAG reports on the National Health Mission and the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana point to a familiar tale of unused allocations, mismatch between Central and State contributions and underwhelming outcomes. The lack of coordination, of course, turns into a political issue. Amidst this mess, it is best that more CSSs, especially those that fall under the State and Concurrent Lists, are run either as wholly central or State schemes, with a clear accountability trail.

CSSs, to be fair, were conceived under Article 282 of the Constitution in order to empower the Centre to implement schemes outside of its strict domain to deal with development deficits of States. There was certainly a case in post-Independent India to equalise the provision of basic services across States with different governance capacities. But the times have changed, and CSSs do not inspire the same confidence. It is time to review the design and *raison d etre* of CSSs.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH

C RANGARAJAN
DK SRIVASTAVA

How to achieve Viksit Bharat goal

GROWTH CATALYSTS. Boosting the investment rate, adopting new tech and focusing on labour intensive sectors are among the key measures needed

EMMANUAL YOGINI

The aspiration of every Indian today is that our country should become a developed country by 2047, that is by the time India completes 100 years after Independence. There is no unique definition of a developed country. Analysts usually go by the criterion which World Bank uses to classify a country as a high income country. The cut off used for 2024-25 was per capita income of $14,006 at market exchange rates. By 2047, the criterion may rise to $18,000. Some estimate it at $20,000.

Based on assumptions relating to population growth, exchange rate and inflation, it is estimated that India needs to grow between 7.5 per cent and 8 per cent to reach the required per capita income in 2047. The critical question to ask is, can India do this? There are countries which have achieved such a transition. We set below a five-point agenda to achieve this goal. It is also important to emphasise that these five measures need supporting action from other spheres. Monetary and fiscal stability must go hand in hand with the development process.

Raise the investment rate by two percentage points: India's Gross Fixed Capital Formation rate (GFCF) in real terms has been hovering around 33.6 per cent of GDP recently. For 2025-26 it is estimated at 33.8 per cent. The ICOR of the economy has been close to five. Given this situation, India can grow comfortably between 7 and 8 per cent only if the GFCF rate is lifted by two percentage points. A recent phenomenon is in the GFCF — government capital expenditure has played a progressively more important role. This cannot go on indefinitely. Private investment must pick up. Government should analyse at the aggregate and sectoral/industry level the factors that may be holding back private investment and take appropriate measures.

Absorb new technologies: Occurrence of new technologies has been part of history since Industrial Revolution. However, the induction of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) have been welcomed with both enthusiasm and trepidation. The nature of the new innovations, some argue, is different from earlier innovations. Obviously the new innovations will improve productivity and output. But its impact on employment is uncertain.

Even a populous country like India cannot ignore the adoption of AI, if we have to remain competitive. Absorption of new technologies is a must, AI is a horizontal innovation and it will affect all sectors. AI and related technologies would also increase the rate of capital depreciation and obsolescence. This needs to be compensated by increased capital formation in gross terms.

Focus on relatively labour intensive sectors: To offset the probable negative effect on employment of the new technologies, it is important to pay special attention to relatively labour intensive sectors. Such sectors can be identified in many ways. One way is to look at those activities in which per unit of output more labour is employed. Industries which may fall in this category will be leather and related products, wearing apparel, etc. Hospitality is one large sector which is labour intensive. We need to be careful that such relatively labour intensive

The strategy of development must not be unidimensional in the sense that the focus should not be on a single sector like exports or services

activities must be efficient and competitive.

Strategy of development to be multi-dimensional: The strategy of development must not be unidimensional in the sense that the focus should not be on a single sector like exports or services. Such a strategy might have worked at one stage but not now. It is true that several of the East Asian countries like South Korea and Taiwan grew fast on the basis of exports. China also joined this club a little later. China's merchandise exports in 1973 was 1 per cent of world trade. In 2021, it grew to 15.2 per cent. In the case of India, its share in world exports was 0.5 per cent in 1973 and it grew to 1.6 per cent in 2021.

Growth of India will have to depend on a simultaneous growth of agriculture, manufactures, services and exports. The role of the government must be to provide an overall environment in which new enterprises can spring up and there is development all around.

Invest in health and education: The 1991 reforms signalled a movement of government towards greater investment in social infrastructure. Reforms meant not so much as 'less government' but 'different government'. Investment in health and education is aimed at providing opportunities to grow for all. This is an important aspect of social justice. Also, training, skilling and education including technical education are needed for taking advantage of India's unfolding demographic dividend.

Subsidies may provide some relief to vulnerable groups immediately. But for long term sustained well-being of vulnerable groups, what is needed is to provide them good health and good education. India's demographic profile indicates a young dependency ratio that exceeds the old dependency ratio until 2055 calling for high prioritisation of government spending on education.

This five-fold strategy will help India not only to grow at the required rate to achieve the status of a developed country but also to ensure social justice. Growth and equity should not be posed as opposing considerations. They must be woven together to achieve an acceptable pattern of development.

The Budget must outline a roadmap for achieving the goal of Viksit Bharat.

Rangarajan is Chairman, Madras School of Economics, former Chairman, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, and former Governor, Reserve Bank of India; Srivastava is Honorary Professor, MSE and Member, Advisory Council to the Sixteenth Finance Commission. Views are personal

Telecom shouldn't go the aviation way

While both sectors are duopolistic, telecom can infuse competition and improve service through functional separation

V Sridhar
Rohit Prasad

The IndiGo fiasco with thousands of flight cancellations during December teaches the telecom industry a lesson or two.

The domestic aviation industry is dominated by IndiGo with about 60 per cent market share and the Tata group with about 26 per cent, indicating thereby a near duopoly market structure. In terms of fleet ownership, IndiGo and the Tata group combine account for about 90 per cent of the aircraft in the domestic market.

Similarly, the two main telecom operators in the country, RJio and Airtel, with a subscriber market share of 40 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively, dominate the industry. In terms of revenue share, the numbers are even higher at 42 and 39 per cent respectively for RJio and Airtel. In terms of radio spectrum, which is the fuel for mobile services, RJio and Airtel have about 45 per cent (about 25,520 MHz) and 39 per cent (21,910 MHz) respectively. A precarious duopoly much in like the aviation industry.

As with the aviation industry, the telecom industry is characterised by high upfront sunk cost including cost of radio spectrum and the pan-India network infrastructure, and hence a near duopoly market structure. However, unlike the aviation industry, there are mechanisms by which competition can be introduced in the telecom sector — by functionally separating the infrastructure layer from services. This has been made possible by the introduction of Virtual Network Operators (VNOs) that use (or home on to) the infrastructure including radio spectrum with the Network Service Operator (NSO) to provide voice, data and content services. Having functional separation is likely to increase service competition and improve quality of service.

NOT TAKEN OFF

Though the licence and authorisation of VNOs was promulgated in India in 2016, it has not taken off. On the contrary, there are about 250-300 active Mobile VNOs (MVNOs) in the US, with visible consumer brands such as Cricket, Metro, Spectrum, and Mint homing on to the three main NSOs, namely, T-Mobile, AT&T and Verizon. A well-known case is Google Fi, a smart and advanced MVNO that primarily uses the network resources of T-Mobile to provide seamless international data roaming to all its customers.

Another country that has witnessed growth of MVNOs is Australia, that has about 70 of them with about 14 per cent share, homing on to the three main NSOs — Telstra, Optus and TPG Telecom. Virgin Mobile, the pioneer in the MVNO space, operates profitably in many countries, notably in the UK and Australia.

The moot question is whether such an MVNO story is viable in India? One of the reasons for MVNOs not taking off in India is the high regulatory levies in the form of spectrum charges and licence fees as a percentage of Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR).

TELECOM. Reforms needed for fostering competition ISTOCKPHOTO

Further, the guidelines state that an MVNO can only home on to one parent NSO, though it has been relaxed for wireline VNOs in the 2024 recommendations by TRAI.

Apart from these, one of the reasons for the tight stronghold of the NSOs is that the entity that owns the infrastructure also provides services, and hence lacks any incentive to encourage service competition. In our recent book, we advocate structural and accounting separation of the NSOs at the infrastructure and service layers. This will keep the heavy investment infrastructure to be provided by the 2-3 operators, while facilitating new entrants in the services layer with light touch regulation. For the incumbent NSOs, spinning of the services arm is expected to provide regulatory relief in the form of reduced levies and taxes. This will also facilitate leasing of underused/unused assets of the NSOs including spectrum to be put in to optimal use. The 2024 recommendation by TRAI on the framework for service authorisation is precisely along these lines to introduce light touch regulation in the telecom sector.

The recent report by the leading GSM Association, indicates that MVNOs worldwide have grown by more than 60 per cent over the past decade. New MVNOs are entering the market, looking to strengthen customer acquisition and compete with traditional operators. MVNOs are also positioning for the future through innovating in technology, capturing growing demand for Internet of Things, bundling content with connectivity, and forming partnerships along the way.

The Government has been facilitating the survival of Vodafone Idea (VI) as an NSO by converting the regulatory dues into equity shares and allowing moratorium on payments. Going forward, VI should seriously consider functional separation of its entity so that the services arm can compete and offer services efficiently to become an active third private operator in the country.

Sridhar is Professor, IIIT-Bangalore, and Prasad is Professor, MDI Gurgaon

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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

IPO pricing

Apropos 'Primary concerns' (January 23), the rapid growth of the primary market makes stronger safeguards around IPO pricing both timely and necessary. The regulator's move to tighten surveillance and refine the call auction process is welcome. Introducing standardised price bands, widening participation by genuine investors, and extending the price discovery window can improve transparency. Equally important is a more realistic method for fixing base prices, especially for relisted stocks. These steps can curb excess speculation, protect retail investors, and reinforce confidence in India's capital markets.

M Barathi
Bengaluru

Investment pitch at WEF

Apropos 'At WEF, India invites investors to tap $300 bn clean energy opportunity' (January 23). Prime Minister Narendra Modi rarely attends the World Economic Forum at Davos, preferring to send Union ministers, Chief Ministers and CEOs to showcase the country's diverse strengths. This decentralised model highlights State autonomy but risks fragmented messaging and competition among various States, which may confuse investors, thereby preferring other countries.

O Prasada Rao
Hyderabad

Trump on the back-foot

This refers to 'Why Trump softened push for Greenland takeover' (January 23). President Trump's assertion that the US could deploy full military power to seize Greenland was less a concrete policy than a calculated attempt to intimidate NATO allies resisting his demands. However, when those allies responded with hardened positions and credible military preparedness, the asymmetry of power Trump sought to exploit dissolved. Confronted by collective resolve and alliance unity, he retreated. The episode illustrates how brinkmanship, while theatrically assertive, becomes strategically untenable when met with organised resistance and institutional constraints.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

On businessline.in

Reforms needed to make agriculture more viable

Making the country a single agri market and free trade of agri products are necessary to boost farm income, **R Gopalan** and **MC Singhi** point out

https://tinyurl.com/2av9m5zn

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A CH-CHE

Lower the Flight Risk Of These Two Flyers

IndiGo, Air India, get your acts together

IndiGo and Air India are set to post grim numbers this year as safety, operational and macro conditions turned adverse. Mass flight cancellations gouged out IndiGo's profits in the December quarter, and the June crash of an Air India Dreamliner will push back the airline's profitability timelines. Depreciation of the rupee and closure of Pakistan's airspace are bumping up operating costs for the two airlines, which makes it difficult to take on entrenched West Asian carriers for rising international traffic from India. Foreign airlines are piling on pressure to increase capacity on international routes as IndiGo and Air India await deliveries against their big aircraft orders. Regulators have taken a hard line after the winter flight disruptions by capping fares and seeking accountability.

Calls for more competition in Indian skies are getting louder. But the airline industry is particularly susceptible to business cycles that tend to dampen enthusiasm for running them. Several decades of open sky policy has left only one private carrier standing among a heap of grounded airlines. GoI, on its part, had a tough time finding a buyer for Air India. The Tatas merged a clutch of airlines with Air India to give themselves elbow room for a turnaround. The pandemic caused a meltdown in the global airline industry and recovery has been nursed by governments. Expecting a third strong player in Indian aviation at this juncture would be a triumph of hope over reality.

The way forward for the world's fastest-growing aviation industry is that it backs local players with muscle to take on international competition. More players are likely to step up as the market grows. Some degree of market concentration is unavoidable to recover from decades of underinvestment in Indian aviation. IndiGo and Air India happen to be India's best available bet for an airline industry that can take the fight to foreign rivals. They need to take lessons from 2025 and get their act together.

Don't Make the Law Squash Young Love

Outside the parameters of law, being an 'adult' has changed drastically over time. Within the law, however, being an 'adult' — 18 — hasn't changed since 1875, when the Indian Majority Act was passed. In this context, two individuals in their late-teens having a consensual sexual relationship is drastically different from any relationship involving younger teens. The Supreme Court's concern on misuse of Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso) Act 2012 should be seen in this light. The law, as it stands now, can be weaponised, and used to settle scores and put an end to 'undesirable friendships'. Earlier this month, while hearing an appeal against an Allahabad High Court order, the apex court asked GoI to consider including 'Romeo-Juliet' exemptions — decriminalising sexual activity between teenagers close in age, typically with a small age gap, say 2-3 yrs, and above a certain age, say, 14. GoI should.

The 'Romeo-Juliet' exemption has been adopted by countries like Japan, France, the Philippines, Britain, and most US states. A modified law can protect minors from sexual abuse while protecting young love from being stifled. Yes, this can be a tightrope. A 2023 Unicef report found nearly 23% of girls in India illegally married before turning 18, despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) 2006. At the same time, courts are finding an increase in Pocso cases filed to break up 'undesirable' relationships.

Building in a Romeo-Juliet provision to protect genuine adolescent relationships from falling foul of the law will require setting a band for close-in-age relationship, with a minimum age below which sex be treated as abuse. Consent has to be the cornerstone of these relationships. It's time India grew up.

JUST IN JEST

Misunderstanding apart, Captain Don has won a ratings war

Move Over Avengers, It's 'Bored of Peace?'

When Gandhian Donald Trump unveiled his grand initiative, Board of Peace, MAGA pundits hurrahed, even as they expected Captain America to look different. But the rest of the world, the American public included, heard something else entirely: that Don Don had established an 'international organisation' called 'Bored of Peace?' Which kinda made sense. Trump, went the general belief, had appointed a panel of thrill-seekers tired of tranquillity who wanted to bring back chaos — 'It has better ratings'. Couch potato dads worldwide signed petitions demanding more minor wars to spice up TV news. College students staged sit-ins, chanting, 'No justice, no boredom!' Meanwhile, Wall Street speculators began trading futures in global unrest, convinced boredom was bearish.

The confusion spiralled. The Pentagon received thousands of résumés from adrenaline junkies hoping to join 'Bored of Peace?' One applicant offered his services — specialisation in awkward silences at summits. Even the UN, till then busy twiddling its thumbs, panicked lest they no longer become unable to do nothing. Greenland, sensing opportunity, announced it would host BoP? headquarters. In the end, Trump clarified that it's 'board, not bored'. But you know how liberal media and their fake news agenda is. By then, the damage was done. And so, like it or not, 'Board of Peace?' it is.

Qcom, even minus a '10-min' pledge, is getting wired to a 'timeless, but timely' fulfilment system

JALDI KA NAAM DELIVERY

Shivaji Dasgupta

Fast but not furious

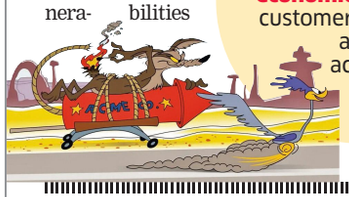
In 1919, John Reed wrote an eye-opening account of the Russian October Revolution, 'Ten Days That Shook the World'. If living today, he may have been tempted to write a sequel on the Indian Quick Commerce Revolution, with 'minutes' replacing 'days'. Both dramatically transformed the communities they impacted, whether politics or business.

According to Statista, India's qcom market is projected to reach $6.94 bn in 2026, expected to demonstrate a CAGR (2026-30) of 12.41%, resulting in a projected market volume of $11.08 bn by 2030. User penetration is scheduled to be 3.2% in 2026, and touch 4.3% by 2030.

As per data from Mordor Intelligence, grocery and staples held 61.33% of the Indian qcom market share in 2025, with electronics and accessories projected to expand at a 17.78% CAGR through 2031. Fresh produce and dairy, snacks and beverages, personal care products, over-the-counter pharma, gifting, and household and cleaning goods are other categories topping the charts.

None of them are, of course, genuinely 'instant necessity' consumables, unlike, say, life-saving medical or firefighting services. 'Urgency addiction', a term coined by Stephen Covey in a managerial context, has been clinically applied by an opportunistic marketing machinery, trespassing on sociocultural vulnerabilities of an evolving customer base.

Jcom's timing and pricing SOP can be determined by the triad of unit economics, genuine customer necessity and societal accountability



'Waiting' for almost everything, whether a Bajaj Chetak or promotion, still torments the lifestyle narratives of Indians. We seek every opportunity to gain symbolic control over purchase experiences — no-questions returns, cashback and EMI being some notable instances.

'10-min delivery', however socially irresponsible and practically irrelevant, was clearly the 'most valued player' of this brigade, ably serving indulgences, utilities and egos. Quite like the old '30 minutes promise' of Domino's Pizza. A numerical commitment added enormous weightage to a potent proposition, which was understood and valued by all. To add, a prevailing sentiment for 'replacement' over 'repair' acted as further fuel to goods from mobile phones and chargers, to electric kettles and jackets.

The win-win dimensions expanded to other frontiers as well, with qcom becoming a major revenue contributor for both traditional and D2C brands. It helped businesses gain newer customers and accelerate buying cycles, even as geographical expansion continued rapidly. Delivery partners can earn ₹21,000-25,000 a month, often more than food delivery drivers, due to higher order volumes and shorter distances, with earnings boosted by incentives and bonuses.

Reportedly, the 'dark store' is rapidly turning into a rest-cum-rejuvenation hub for this cadre, an advantage denied to their Swiggy-Zomato counterparts. Even with GoI pulling the plug on companies promoting '10-min delivery', much like John Reed's summary of the Russian Revolution, qcom in India is, indeed, the future.

From a customer PoV, the main source of value is 'convenience', aided by easy access, competitive pricing and predictive choice. The 'time' proposition is simply a façade of the experience package, which is unconnected to growth, as the essence of the attraction remains intact, with newer candidates emerging daily.

'Ugency addiction' has been clinically applied by a marketing machinery, trespassing on sociocultural vulnerabilities of an evolving customer base

Blinkit today is offering 30,000-plus products at our doorsteps. This will expand farther. Spencer's Jiffy, from RPSG Group, is a fine use case, reportedly showing 58% user growth and 47% order growth in Kolkata, and notable revenue jumps (30% q-o-q in Q2 FY26). It's a business model that leverages existing stores for 30-min delivery in core regions like UP and West Bengal.

P&G had pioneered the concept of EDLP — Everyday Low Pricing — in retail stores. This was a 'comparative' proposition, without a percentage commitment. Qcom may hinge its service on EPQD — Every Product Quick Delivery — with time ranging anywhere from 10 to 30 mins, or even longer for, say, high-end electronics.

Jaldi commerce (jcom) is emerging as a time-elastic but rapid-fire delivery ecosystem, by which drivers don't have to pretend to be ambulances and jump traffic signals routinely for a faux sense of urgency. Jcom, leveraging EPQD, will evolve from the current ecosystem of fulfilment — whether dark stores, partner kiranas or own stores.

Timing and pricing SOP can be determined by the triad of unit economics, genuine customer necessity and societal accountability — the last factoring in safety and profitability of the ecosystem at large. As the juggernaut extends beyond the 125-city mark, as reportedly achieved by Swiggy Instamart, a stable yet dynamic equilibrium will organically emerge from the triad itself, as localised factors come to the party.

As already experimented by Blinkit in Gurgaon, ambulances, home diagnostics and care, and even counselling services can join the party. This could eventually lead to an Urban Company-Blinkit type de facto merger — unifying products and services under the jcom umbrella.

'Demi Moore's Law' is a term coined by Bhaskar Chakravorti, dean of global business, The Fletcher School, Tufts University, to describe how technology's impact in networked marketplace proceeds at only half the pace of (Gordon) Moore's Law. A version of this may well apply for jcom — while the 10-min delivery is technically possible, it will be swiftly replaced by a 'timeless, but timely' fulfilment system, without affecting prolific growth. As integrated sustainability merges with customer-centric delight-mongering, a lesser price will be paid by all, not just the buyer.

The writer is an autonomous brand consultant

Let AI Scale, With Humans in Loop

Samir Kumar

San Francisco: For decades, global services economy — from IT outsourcing in Bengaluru to management consulting in New York — was bound by a rigid arithmetic: to scale revenue, you had to scale headcount. If you were a BPO, a systems integrator or a creative agency, your output was capped by human hours. Growing the business meant growing the payroll.

But as we settle into 2026, a quiet revolution is dismantling this equation. We are entering an era of exponential leverage, where the defining characteristic of an 'AI-native' company is the decoupling of revenue growth from headcount growth. The metric of success is shifting from the size of your workforce to outcome per unit of intelligence. This shift is no longer theoretical. It is hitting the balance sheets of Global 2000.

For the last two years, we treated AI as a 'copilot', a tool to help individuals work faster. Now, we are seeing the shift to 'agents', systems that execute entire workflows. This is the moment white-collar labour gets disrupted not by replacement but by re-architecture. The AI platform shift that is underway is resulting in the cost of cognitive labour for routine tasks collapsing, forcing every enterprise to choose between clinging to labour arbitrage or pivoting to intelligence arbitrage.

While the promise of autonomous agents is intoxicating, the reality is far messier. On complex reasoning and benchmarks like SWE-bench (software engineering benchmark) and GAIA (general AI assistants), fully autonomous agents often fail to complete multi-step tasks without human intervention. In real-world enterprise environments — where regulatory compliance and brand safety are paramount — these failure rates are non-negotiable. This 'reliability gap' creates a permanent, high-value role for the human: the maestro.

What does a maestro do? They don't just 'use' AI; they govern it. They design the workflow, set guard rails, monitor outputs and intervene when systems drift, much like a portfolio manager overseeing volatile assets rather than executing individual trades. Value of the human shifts from doing the work to ensuring the outcome.

The advantage of AI-native companies isn't just that they are cheaper; it's that they are faster. In a traditional enterprise, the feedback loop — launching a campaign, gathering data, analy-

AI-addin's lamp

sing results and making decisions — can take weeks. AI-native companies collapse this latency. They don't just automate tasks but also automate loops.

▶ **Faster experimentation** Instead of A/B testing two marketing messages over a month, an agentic system can test 200 variations in an hour, analyse the sentiment and iterate the copy in real time.

▶ **Reduced decision drag** By processing vast streams of data instantly, 'computational capital' allows organisations to make decisions at the speed of software, not the speed of scheduled meetings.

Winners of the next decade will be companies that use this speed to outlearn their competition. We are already seeing the scale of this shift. IKEA offers one compelling blueprint. By deploying their AI agent, 'Billie', to handle 47% of all customer support queries, they didn't just cut costs but also reallocated talent.

The company retrained 8,500 call centre workers to become 'interior design advisers'. They swapped the routine 'human capital' required for answering basic questions with 'computational capital' (the agent) and reinvested the human potential into high-value creativity.

This represents a fundamental transfer of value. Organisations are swapping salary overhead (operating expenses) for inference costs (cost of goods sold). While we may need fewer humans to generate the same output, the demand for compute scales aggressively. In this model, the efficient allocation of compute becomes just as critical as the efficient management of people.

It is easy to look at these efficiency gains and the commoditisation of intelligence and conclude a future of doom and gloom for human cognitive labour. But the future of work is not humans vs AI. It's humans amplified by the computational leverage that comes with AI.

Winners won't be companies that automate most tasks, but those that redesign work itself by placing humans where judgement matters most and machines where scale matters most. Efficiency gains are starting to become real and are reshaping enterprises. The question is no longer whether this transition will happen, but whether we are building organisations and careers designed to conduct intelligence rather than compete with it.

The writer is co-founder, Touring Capital

Let's Junk Those Junk Food Ads

Arun Gupta

January may come to be seen as a turning point in global food policy. Within weeks, Britain and the US signalled a decisive shift in how governments are responding to junk food, or ultra-processed food products (UPFs), particularly with respect to their marketing and advertising. At the core is a growing recognition that rising consumption of UPFs is accelerating diet-related diseases, such as obesity and diabetes, especially among children.

These developments send a message: this is no longer about individual choice or parental responsibility. It is about commercial practices that shape dietary patterns at a population scale.

▶ **Britain** From January, the nation has implemented a statutory ban on advertising unhealthy foods — no TV advertising before 9 pm, and a complete ban on paid online advertising. The government estimates that this will remove 7.2 bn calories from children's diets each year and prevent tens of thousands of future obesity cases.

This is not symbolic regulation. It rests on an evidence-backed premise that UPF advertising displaces healthy diets. Reducing exposure reduces consumption.

▶ **US** Release of Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2025-2030 for the first time explicitly calls for a dramatic reduction in highly processed foods and those with added sugars. They link such diets to obesity, pre-diabetes and chronic disease. Backed by federal law and reinforced by school food mandates, the guidelines carry real policy weight.

The language is unusually direct. UPFs, referred to as 'highly processed' in the guidelines, are identified as those high in refined carbohydrates, added sugars, excess sodium, unhealthy fats and chemical additives. Processing is recognised as a risk factor, not merely the nutrient profile.

This marks a break from decades of nutrition policy that focused narrowly on individual nutrients, allowing companies to reformulate while leaving the underlying problem intact. A 'health drink' in India reduced sugar from 50% to 43%. It may be marketed as progress but remains harmful. Reformulation cannot address a crisis in which one in four adults is overweight or obese.

▶ **US Congress** Childhood Diabetes Reduction Act, a bipartisan bill currently under consideration, would require mandatory health warning labels on UPFs and explicitly link their consumption to increased childhood diabetes risk. Although legislation has not yet been enacted, it highlights a significant policy gap alongside a growing political consensus. For years, consumers — particularly parents — have lacked access to material information about long-term health risks associated with these products. In this context, advertising restrictions and warning labels are increasingly framed not as 'nanny-state' interventions but as essential consumer protection measures.

Don't have the guts

India is undergoing a rapid nutrition transition. UPF consumption, once marginal, is rising sharply, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, with aggressive expansion into rural markets. Running in parallel is a steep rise in overweight and obesity. NFHS-5 data show significant increases among children and adolescents, while adult obesity has nearly doubled in many states. Childhood obesity coexists with persistent undernutrition, creating a dual burden that strains families and the health system.

This parallel rise is not coincidental. Children are exposed daily to junk food advertising across TV, digital platforms, gaming apps and influencer marketing. Marketing of UPFs also includes incentives, yet existing regulation remains largely voluntary, unclear, fragmented and weakly enforced.

'Advertising restrictions will harm business', 'violate free speech' or conflict with trade obligations are common arguments. Recent developments in Britain and the US weaken these claims. If advanced market economies can impose statutory ad bans, reject UPFs in dietary guidance and consider warning labels, it becomes difficult to argue that similar measures are unreasonable or anti-growth.

India-UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA) explicitly recognises the right of parties to regulate to protect public health. Allowing cheaper imports of foods high in fat/sugar/salt (HFSS) from a country that bans their advertising and mandates front-of-pack labelling risks creating an uneven and unfair situation for Indian consumers, particularly children.

The core issue is not whether parents should make better choices. It is whether it is acceptable for corporations to spend billions engineering demand for products known to increase disease risk, while withholding clear warnings and saturating children's environments.

India already recognises child protection and public health as constitutional priorities. Evidence-based restrictions on marketing fall squarely within legitimate regulatory powers. What is missing is political resolve.

Across democracies, the regulatory direction is unmistakable. UPFs are no longer treated as lifestyle options but as policy problems. The question for India is no longer whether action is justified but how long we can afford to delay. Because every year of inaction quietly transfers future healthcare costs, lost productivity and preventable disease onto the next generation.

The writer is convenor, Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPi)

THE SPEAKING TREE

Self-Belief In AI Era

SRIPRIYA SATISH

Martin Luther King Jr said, 'Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.' Faith is not blind belief; rather, it is the courage to move forward despite uncertainty. But is faith, whether in the divine, in ideals or in oneself, truly powerful enough to shape destinies and alter the course of life?

One finds a compelling explanation of this power in Soundarya Lahari, a celebrated spiritual text composed by Adi Shankaracharya. The work describes the divine beauty and boundless grace of Goddess Kamakshi. In the 6th verse, it is said that even Manmada, god of love, derives his immense power from the Goddess's side glance. Though formless and armed only with fragile weapons and aided by the fleeting and unreliable spring season, Manmada is able to subjugate the entire universe. His strength lies not in physical might but in his unwavering faith in the all-powerful Divine Feminine.

Prahlad, a child devotee of Vishnu, is another striking example. Despite facing relentless cruelty from his powerful father, the demon king Hiranyakashipu, Prahlad's steadfast faith remained unshaken. His life demonstrates that faith in the Divine can render even the impossible possible.

In a world increasingly shaped by AI, faith in our own abilities becomes essential.

LOLLING ON SATURDAY

A Bear Market

A Washington real estate developer announced plans to build luxury condos in Greenland. Reporters asked him, 'Why Greenland?'

He said, 'Simple. Climate change is melting the ice, so it's basically beachfront property now. Imagine: 'Ocean view igloos, starting at $12 million.''

One reporter laughed, 'But who would live there?'

The developer replied, 'Oh, we're not selling to people. We're selling to polar bears. They've been squatting rent-free for centuries — it's time they started paying HOA fees!'

Haunted Open House

A realtor was showing a couple around a beautiful old Victorian home. The wife whispered, 'It's gorgeous, but… is it haunted?'

The realtor smiled, 'Of course not! But if you hear footsteps at night, don't worry — it's just the previous owners checking the plumbing. They've been dead for years, but they're very responsible.'

The husband frowned, 'Wait, you mean ghosts?'

The realtor replied, 'Sir, I prefer to call them long-term tenants with no exit strategy.'

Posh Outhouse

A man listed his outhouse for sale at ₹1 cr.

The neighbours laughed: 'Who would buy a shed for that price?'

He shrugged. 'It's not about the shed — it's about the location. It's zoned for imagination. You could build a high-rise, a chicken coop, or just brag at parties that you own the most expensive outhouse in town.'

Two weeks later, someone bought it.

Chat Room

Docked in Reality, Not Containerised

Apropos 'India, Don't Drift from Chabahar' by Harsh V Pant and Vivek Mishra (Jan 23), India stands at an inflection point that will test not just its foreign policy acumen but also its civilisational self-conception. The geopolitical churn in West Asia is not merely a regional flashpoint. It is a crucible in which India's strategic clarity, moral compass and diplomatic dexterity will be forged or found wanting. Historically, Indian statecraft has oscillated between moral idealism and realpolitik, seeking to balance autonomy with engagement. India must signal that it is not a passive node in someone else's strategy, but a civilisational power with its own vision for regional stability, energy security and multipolar order. To act now is to invest in long-term credibility.

Amarjeet Kumar
Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

A thought for today

Hope in reality is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Huang Or Musk?

Nvidia boss's vision of future better than Tesla chief's

Who's right, Nvidia chief Jensen Huang, or Elon Musk? At Davos on Wednesday, Huang assured "plumbers, electricians, and construction and steelworkers," their jobs are safe. Reason: you can take all the AI in the world, and still struggle to thread a needle with it. A day later – same stage – Musk declared AI and robots will make work obsolete soon. It's the sunnier view for a Saturday morning, until you reflect. You know what six months of lockdowns did to the divorce rate. A world without work will kiss goodbye to marriage. And children. Hear that, Musk?

There are fewer than half a million elephants in the world – one for every 20,000 of us. If indeed "there'll be more robots than people," as Musk says, we'll be hemmed in by eight or nine billion such machines, each one strong enough to toss us in the air. Not a comforting thought, unless you're on ketamine. But won't they be our minions, doing our dishes, making our beds? Says who? According to Musk, by 2031 AI will be "smarter than all of humanity collectively." Had horses become smarter than humans, you know where they would have put you relative to the proverbial cart. So, expect smarter-than-human AI to do just that.

What might be our fate in a world run by AI, supposing that our population does not collapse? Musk says, "aging is a solvable problem," so perhaps robots will keep us as pets, for entertainment between their hallucinations. But only if we prove trainable. There's a reason why chimpanzees aren't our housemates. BTW Musk, a world where AI and robots decide and do everything will mark the end of capitalism, the *human* system where the better electric car or the better space rocket wins. All said, Huang's world that promises more jobs and human agency might be sunnier.

Dhaka's Loss

B'desh cricketers victims of its cricket admin's politics

It's uglier than the worst sledging – and now feuding Bangladesh Cricket Board wants to take ICC to a tribunal. Per reports, BCB has written to ICC asking its independent Dispute Resolution Committee to decide on its appeal to shift Bangladesh's T20 World Cup matches from India to Sri Lanka. This came after ICC had effectively rejected BCB's request.

The drama before the World Cup, which starts in India on Feb 7, was avoidable. The original problem was BCCI forcing IPL franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to release Bangladeshi pacer Mustafizur Rahman, after vocal trolling, mainly by fringe groups. That saw BCB ban IPL matches telecast in Bangladesh and then, suddenly, discovering playing in India was a security risk.

But Dhaka is on a weak wicket. Bangladesh cricket, despite progress over the years, isn't exactly a powerhouse. Plus, citing the India-Pakistan arrangement where the two teams play each other in neutral venues, is also not helpful – India & Pakistan have a separate history, their matches are of a completely different level, and India has good reasons to play Pakistan in third party venues. Post-regime change Bangladesh is simply politicising the issue because elections are due in that country. Note that New Zealand, currently touring India, haven't expressed any security concerns. So, Bangladesh will lose out here, both in terms of money ($500,000 participation fees) and experience for its players. Dhaka administrators should come to their senses.

Three Biases That Make Us Human

Conformity, religiosity (minus god), tribalism

Using his fortune of $200bn (2024 figures) Musk could build 1,000 Great Pyramids, writes ***Harvey Whitehouse*** in ***Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World.*** Whitehouse is only prodding readers to question if ancient societies were more unequal than the modern world. The belief that democracy closed the gap between rich & poor, pharaoh & slave is untrue – today's richest 1% own twice as much wealth as the rest of the world combined.

The provocative part: At least Inca rulers who demanded human sacrifice – however misguided – claimed it served collective survival against natural disasters. Ancient cruelty at least gestured toward common good. Today's inequality serves a tiny elite alone, no pretense. Whitehouse writes: "If Elon Musk were obliged to devote even half his fortune to tackling today's climate crisis, imagine how much better off we would be as a global human tribe."

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS

The global human tribe is Whitehouse's focus in his study of societies across Asia, Africa, South America, Australasia and Melanesia. Two evolutionary processes – biological and cultural – have produced the cumulative wealth of human knowledge that defines the modern world. A combination of *culturally evolved traditions* and *biologically evolved intuitions* forms our "collective inheritance as a species."

What is *distinct* to human species is collective beliefs. For example, all societies in some form believe spirits are "incorporeal" but have minds that "allow them to emote, remember, understand." Our closest primate relatives "do not conjure up a world in which spirits of the dead demand to be fed, placated, or petitioned for assistance." Yet across societies, such ideas "proliferate like wildfire."

The bedrock of such evolutionary processes are three biases – generational bias for *conformism, a religiosity bias* that has little to do with god, and *tribalism*. To conform is human nature – copycat behaviour, compulsion to imitate, to belong or emulate. What binds groups are rituals that have *meaning* for the group, even if the ritual may be obscure. Rituals are all in the mind, anything to ring a group together.

Religiosity bias shaped human cooperation. In cooperation lay strength that, eventually, enabled new forms of leadership via religion. From ancestor worship to inherited authority and divine kingship, humanity's now in a period where "grip of organised religions is loosening, and new forms of religiosity are taking over, largely below the radar."

These are the advertising industry, social media and news conglomerates, who're harnessing "natural religious intuitions" to modify behaviour. It's how small elites increasingly profit from "our credulity on a scale far greater than any organised religions of history."

The third bias that primes humanity is tribalism, the root of warfare. Yes, misplaced tribalism may lead to violent football fan groups or religious extremists. But, the book argues, what may still help the world is more *tribalism* in the development of "new forms of global tribal identity." Tribal instincts can be tuned to common good.

Whitehouse concludes that ignoring the three biases is a missed opportunity in the fight to tackle environmental and global issues. World religions have the leadership structures and motivational base to implement action plans on climate change – Sikhs planted a million trees to mark their founder's 550th anniversary. As for Musk, Whitehouse says, it's hard to imagine the super-rich being reined in "not because it is impracticable, but because our routinised habits of thought make such ideas almost unthinkable."

The Himalaya's Vanishing Snow?

Though it's finally snowing heavily in Uttarakhand, white mountaintops in winters are no longer guaranteed. Because two major weather systems, monsoon and Western Disturbance, have changed behaviour

Mohd Farooq Azam

The Himalayan region, encompassing the river systems of the mighty Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra, contains over 42,000 km² of areas covered by glaciers and nearly 1.6mn km² of seasonal snow cover. While it is known that glaciers are retreating due to climate change and regional warming, rapid decline in seasonal snow cover has received far less attention. Yet, notwithstanding current snowfall in Uttarakhand, this change carries equally serious consequences.

Together, these river basins support nearly 600,000 km² of irrigated land and about 26,000 megawatts of hydropower capacity. Any alteration in meltwater availability directly affects the livelihoods of nearly 1.1bn people downstream.

Decline in seasonal snow cover is not driven solely by rising temperatures or the shift from snowfall to rainfall. Climate change is also altering the behaviour of the two major circulation systems that bring moisture to the Himalaya in summer and winter. One is the monsoon.

Second, the 'Western Disturbance'. This is an extra-tropical cyclone that develops in the Mediterranean, bringing sudden winter rain, sleet, and snow to the Hindu Kush Himalaya region, and maintaining the flow of northern rivers. Its changes are reshaping when, where, and how precipitation falls across the region.

● Seasonal snow acts as a natural reservoir, storing water during winter and releasing it gradually in spring and early summer. Recent observations underline the seriousness of the situation. The seasonal Snow Update released by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in April 2025 showed that snow persistence during the Nov 2024 and March 2025 season reached its lowest level since 2003, with a deficit of 23.6% compared to the long-term average.

This marked 2024-2025 as the third consecutive winter of below-normal snowfall. The ongoing winter has continued this trend, with large parts of the Himalaya receiving little to no snow, confirming the emergence of a widespread snow drought. Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Ladakh experienced almost no precipitation through Dec 2025, with only a few weak snowfall events in early Jan 2026.

Against this backdrop of prolonged dryness, IMD issued a forecast on Thursday, predicting an intense Western Disturbance that could bring snowfall to higher elevations of Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and adjoining regions of western Nepal between Thursday-Friday, followed by another event later in the month. Yesterday, as forecasted, it snowed. However, such short-lived spells are unlikely to make up for an otherwise dry winter.

Studies indicate that Western Disturbances, which bring most of Himalaya's winter precipitation, are becoming more variable as large-scale atmospheric circulation changes. Warming over the Arctic and the Tibetan Plateau may be influencing the subtropical jet stream that steers these systems, possibly leading to altered storm tracks and reduced snowfall in some Himalayan areas.

UTTARAKHAND THIS WINTER

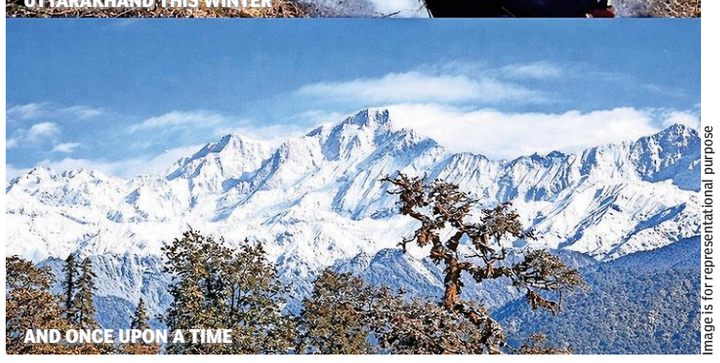

AND ONCE UPON A TIME

Image is for representational purpose

● Seasonal snow is critical for glacier health, especially in the Indus Basin, which contains nearly 70% of the Himalayan glacier ice volume. Snow cover reflects solar radiation and insulates glacier ice, slowing melt. Reduced winter snowfall exposes glacier ice earlier in the spring, lengthens the melting season, and accelerates mass loss from glaciers already under stress from rising temperatures.

While rainfall dominates river flows in the Brahmaputra and Ganga basins, snowmelt contributes up to 40% of total runoff in the Indus Basin, and even up to 60% in certain sub-basins. A decline in winter snow therefore reduces spring meltwater, increases dependence on groundwater, and raises the risk of drought. Over time, this can disrupt agri cycles and food security, reduce hydropower generation, and increase flood risk due to altered flow patterns, particularly during the pre-monsoon season.

Impacts are especially severe in high-altitude cold desert regions such as Ladakh in India, and Humla, Jumla, and Mustang in Nepal, where glaciers lie above 5,000 metres. Here, glacier melt peaks in summer rather than spring, creating a mismatch with irrigation demand.

The unusually low snowfall this winter has caused serious concern among farmers, because they fear drought and crop failures, especially for staples such as barley and oats. In Ladakh, artificial ice reservoirs have been developed as an adaptation measure and provide limited relief, but their scale remains small and their long-term effectiveness uncertain.

Reduced winter snow cover also significantly increases forest fire risk. Lower snow accumulation means less moisture stored in soils, earlier drying of vegetation, and longer fire seasons. This creates a dangerous feedback loop in which fires further degrade ecosystems and intensify regional warming.

● Tourism sector is also seeing the impact of declining snow. In the north Indian Himalayan Region, Gulmarg received some snowfall only in early Jan 2026, while Auli experienced snow after a delayed arrival of Western Disturbances in the third week of Jan. Lack of snow in Dec 2025 led to widespread cancellations and delayed ski operations. In Manali, artificial snow had to be produced to sustain tourism. Although the ongoing late snowfall offers temporary relief, the growing unreliability of winter snow is threatening the long-term sustainability of mountain tourism.

Steady loss of winter snow makes it clear that Himalayan water management can no longer rely on past patterns. Strengthening drought preparedness, improving monitoring of snow and meltwater, and investing in efficient water storage systems are now essential. Since rivers flow across borders, coordinated regional action will be critical to manage the shared risks created by declining snow cover.

The Himalaya is warming nearly twice as fast as the global average, and snow is its most sensitive indicator. When the snow disappears, it is not merely a mountain problem – it is a warning for the entire subcontinent.

The writer is a glacio-hydrologist, working with ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development), Nepal

Beckham Brawl Brings *Kyunki*... Back To Our Screens

East to west, the DIL-MIL warfare begins in their common alienation. It ends when the *ghar ki bahu* mindset changes to *bahu ka ghar*. Don't ask her to fit into her new home, fit it around her

Shinie Antony

An XX chromosome was never a good look on Asian embryos. For the longest time girls and boys had different welcomes in labour rooms. Sexist sayings set to music included a *beti* being *paraya dhan*. 'A tenant in her father's house,' sighed female relatives, themselves waiting for in-laws to leave for heavenly abode so earthly abode was legally theirs.

But with the growing parity between genders, the sex ratio in property stakes has somewhat somersaulted. So what if the master bedroom is occupied by Prof Higgins' mum. When Eliza Doolittle wants a room somewhere, she will rent it herself.

But right now, the *saas-bahu* serial is having a global episode. Not only did David Beckham's firstborn Brooklyn take on his wife's surname, he has also chewed out his parents in public, leaving social media foaming at the mouth. Most people are taking this opportunity to take potshots at their own husband's parent or son's spouse. Tabloids have happily divided themselves into Team Beckham and Team Peltz Beckham. *Saas-bahu* drama has officially left the Third World and landed in the First World.

TV dinners are turning into food fights as entire families take sides. The drabbest of mothers-in-law are identifying with fashionista Posh Spice, while Brooklyn's wife Nicola, a billionaire heiress and actor, is the new pinup for brides whose bridegrooms are honeymooning with Mummyji.

Nicola is compared to Meghan Markle, Prince Harry's wife, who some accuse of breaking up the British royal family. But Harry lost his mother long ago, while Victoria, says her son, danced 'very inappropriately on me' at the wedding. Social media has stopped posting everything else in their frantic quest to locate that particular video.

Just when the *saas-bahu* warfare was being largely dismissed as stereotypical nonsense, comes melodramatic news of many such family infightings. We aspired for their designer sequinned purse, so we aspire now for their private strife. This is *dishoom-dishoom* straight from the kitchen – if you are real quiet, you can hear pans clatter to the floor. Families who stay together have two stoves. Of the two *khichdis*, each man knows which one he must eat.

Image: AI

The underlying notion here is that the fight between a boy and his parents is only a smokescreen. The two opposing armies are actually the missus and the mommy. One perimenopausal, the other suffering from postpartum depression. When in doubt, have a baby: Old Indian Saying. Said to save bad marriages, heal family rifts and secure ancestral homesteads. Especially if it looks like granny. Staring at the baby, *bahu* thinks tenderly, 'I will find a good plastic surgeon.'

Ads that show *saas* and *bahu* baking together? Just models paid to grin at each other, who never have to meet after the shoot. The other mystery is how a daughter-in-law suddenly meets the mother-in-law of her dreams – the pity being that they are not in any way related. These soul moments happen when you vibe so well with a younger or older woman you sit next to on a flight or a swim in a hotel pool. It is a feminist Mills & Boon. Your eyes meet in that star-crossed way: if only I'd met you earlier and your son was not gay.

When men propose, they nervously allude to their dads, warning fiancée not to confuse the old man's lack of emotions for facial paralysis. But most women find fathers-in-law receptive to small talk and stray attempts at cooking. Not so much the woman their hubby dotes on. The man in the middle may praise one to the other in a desperate attempt to broker world peace, but the female equation depends solely on the…females. The poor besotted fool, thinks one. Mama's boy, scoffs the other.

Since the planet must go on, men and women have no choice but to populate it. Men, now and then your better half will run into the matriarch. Chances are they will hit it off, and get on like a house on fire – but a house that belongs to both of them. *Ghar ki bahu nahi, bahu ka ghar*: she no longer has to fit into the home, the home fits itself around her. On the off-chance that they do not get on, don't worry, for you have something to chat with the Beckhams if you meet them.

Of Life And Love
STORIES OF THE WAY WE ARE

Now that the older generation treats *bahu* like *beti*, in-laws are in turn treated like parents – both ignored alike. When all is milk and honey, the tendency is for each woman to take credit. *Bahu* is too busy with her own life to badmouth *saas*. And *saas* throws shade at her own MIL: 'See, I'm not like *her*'. *Kyunki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi*, you see many a mother-in-law coo over a bracelet from their daughter-in-law. A bracelet the former had gifted the latter last Christmas.

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacred*space*

Time is a sort of river of passing events, and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place, and this too will be swept away.

Marcus Aurelius

Uncertainty Of Death And Certainty Of The Divine

Stuti Malhotra

A recent accidental drowning of an engineer in Noida shook many people: a young man, full of promise and plans, lost his life suddenly and unexpectedly. Such news arrests our routine thinking. It disrupts the illusion that life is predictable and that tomorrow is guaranteed. In a moment, a person who was planning the next project, meeting, or vacation is no longer with us. This is not merely a tragedy for one family; it is a silent reminder for all of humanity.

We live as if time is unlimited. We delay reconciliation, and defer spiritual awareness, believing we will attend to these matters someday. But death does not announce its arrival; it does not respect age, profession, intelligence, or success. It comes when it wants to, and its unpredictability is itself a profound teacher.

Sikhism places this truth at the very heart of spiritual consciousness. Guru Nanak Dev repeatedly reminds us that life is fragile and fleeting. *"Jeevan maranaa jai kai ethai khaajai kaal (SGGS P 15),"* –Life and death come to all who are born. Everything here gets devoured by death.

Sikh thought does not treat uncertainty of death as a source of fear, but as a call to awareness. It inspires us to live mindfully, with integrity and compassion, recognising that every breath is a sacred gift. Death is not seen as an end, but as a passage, and life as a precious chance to harmonise ourselves with truth, kindness, and humility. This world is transient, and a higher, enduring reality lies beyond it.

Death serves as a reminder that directs our attention to what is eternal: *Naam*, remembrance of the Divine; seva, selfless service; and a life rooted in truth. These values rise above physical existence. When a person remains anchored in *Naam* and compassion, their life becomes aligned with *Hukam*, the divine will, where the will of Creator takes precedence over all else. Death, then, is nothing but an expression of Hukam, a divine decree that one must accept with surrender, for there is no other path but to submit to the divine will.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Death confronts us with uncomfortable questions: Have we lived meaningfully? Have we expressed enough gratitude and love? Have we forgiven and sought forgiveness? Have we used our time to serve or merely to accumulate?

Remembrance of death, *memento mori*, is not morbid; it is liberating. Guru Nanak Dev says: *"Maran na moorat puchhiaa puchhee thit na vaar, (SGGS P 1244),"* –death does not ask for the date or day of the week.

When death becomes a conscious reality, life becomes sacred. We stop wasting moments in resentment. We start valuing relationships. We begin to see service as worship and kindness as devotion.

This incident is a call, not just to mourn, but to awaken. The uncertainty of death invites certainty in purpose. If tomorrow is not guaranteed, then today must be lived with depth, gratitude, and integrity. Life teaches us an invaluable, timeless lesson: Do not wait until tomorrow to become spiritual. Do not wait for loss to become grateful. Do not wait for death to understand life.

For while death is uncertain, the opportunity to live meaningfully is always present – right now, in this very moment.

Market institutions: Roles blurred

AJAY TYAGI

Market infrastructure institutions (MIIs) — stock exchanges (SEs), clearing corporations, and depositories — play a pivotal role in developing and regulating capital markets. Chapter V of the Securities Markets Code Bill, 2025, deals with the registration and regulation of MIIs. It does not merely reaffirm their traditional frontline responsibilities under the existing law; it elevates them to the status of quasi-sovereign authorities with wide-ranging powers of market access, conduct, investigation, and enforcement.

While having a first-level regulatory body, supervised and regulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), is a pragmatic necessity, considering the large number of regulated market intermediaries, of various categories, it is time to take a relook at the structure and functioning of MIIs in the context of them playing the role of public institutions while simultaneously engaging in commercial activities. This column focuses on SEs.

SEs' proximity to trading enables real-time monitoring, enforcing listing standards, and maintaining orderly markets. Chapter V goes significantly further. It vests SEs with the authority to frame binding bylaws, conduct inspection, initiate investigation, and impose sanctions. More notably, these powers extend beyond members to market participants at large. What were once limited, delegated functions are now core statutory powers, effectively embedding quasi-regulatory authority within commercial entities.

SEs are for-profit organisations and privately owned. They are commercial enterprises with shareholders, revenue imperatives, and competitive strategies. Their business models depend on trading volumes, listing, data monetisation, and ancillary services. They compete with one another for order flow, issuers, and intermediaries. Two SEs are listed, and some others are planning to list.

When such entities are simultaneously empowered to act as rule-makers, market operators, investigators, and enforcers, structural tension is unavoidable. Even the perception of uneven treatment can erode confidence in the neutrality of the system. Any amount of supervision and regulatory prescription by Sebi is not likely to be able to credibly address these concerns.

The lack of competition among SEs is yet another issue. This is not only due to legacy reasons but also on account of barriers to entry for new aspirants. According to the prescribed ownership structure, no single person or entity (other than specified exemptions) may hold more than 5 per cent of the equity of a recognised SE; certain categories such as public financial institutions, banks, insurance companies, and stock exchanges/clearing corporations may hold up to 15 per cent, with Sebi approval.

While a diversified ownership concept is fully justified, prescribing it from day one of setting up an exchange makes it virtually impossible for a new entrant to join the exclusive club.

This then leads to an absurd situation, that is, the system protecting the existing institutions from competition, thereby encouraging oligopolistic behaviour and simultaneously entrusting them with statutory powers!

This column is not about comparing the performance of the existing exchanges. Nor is the intention to comment on the functioning of any particular exchange. However, to get a sense of the issue involved, let's take the case of the National Stock Exchange. It had about 94 per cent market share in the cash equity segment, about 87 per cent in equity options, and almost 100 per cent in equity futures in FY25 among all exchanges. As for its financials, earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation (Ebitda), and profit after tax (PAT) for FY25 were about 73 per cent and 57 per cent of revenue, respectively. It virtually faces no threat of any competition. Can one imagine any other business that enjoys such an enviable position?

International experience across major jurisdictions shows separation of regulatory authorities and commercial operations as the norm. The underlying logic is consistent: Regulatory legitimacy depends not merely on legal authority but on institutional independence. Where enforcement power intersects with commercial interests, confidence erodes even in the absence of misconduct.

For instance, in the United States, exchanges operate as for-profit entities, but frontline regulation is vested in FINRA, a non-profit organisation under the Securities and Exchange Commission's oversight.

Establishing a genuinely independent frontline regulatory body in India, accountable to Sebi but institutionally separate from exchanges, would preserve enforcement credibility while freeing market institutions to focus on their core economic functions.

Such separation would also unlock possibilities. Treated unambiguously as platform businesses, exchanges could be governed by normal competition and corporate-governance norms. This would allow opening the door to fintechs, technology firms, and long-term strategic investors. The future of market deepening lies in enabling competitive, technology-driven platforms to flourish under clear and neutral oversight.

The Securities Market Code Bill provides an opportunity, for the government and regulator, to recalibrate the framework for the first-level regulator and MIIs, in a way that preserves enforcement effectiveness and institutional trust, while encouraging innovation and competition among commercial entities, with a fair and level playing field.

The author is former chairman, Securities and Exchange Board of India

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

End of 'permanent' alliances?

VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The United States (US) and Canada had their last military conflict in 1812, when Canada was a British colony. The two nations have long had an open border and have fought on the same side several times. The last time the US was in a military conflict with Germany and Japan was in 1945; those nations have also been its allies since. The US dollar last saw a saddle point in 1971, when President Richard Nixon moved off the gold standard, thus establishing the dollar as the anchor global fiat currency.

When alliances last this long, they are assumed to be permanent. But, as the famous saying goes, nations have no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent national interests. And Donald Trump has undermined these "permanencies".

Canada was said to be making contingency plans for possible US military action, following White House rhetoric calling for the country to become the "51st state" (of the US). Mr Trump's stated intentions regarding Greenland have stretched the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) alliance to near breaking point.

Let's assume, however, that military action by the US against Canada or Greenland is off the table. Yet the economic conflict will almost certainly escalate. The European Union (EU), plus the UK, Japan, Canada and other US allies could be looking at a battle of tariffs and counter-tariffs. There are several other economic levers the EU and other trading partners could use.

For example, the US has a large federal debt overhang, which is higher than its gross domestic product (GDP), at about $30 trillion. As much as $7-8 trillion of that debt is held by overseas entities. It also had a trade deficit of about $1 trillion in 2025 and needs to regularly auction new debt. If overseas entities just refuse to buy new debt, bond market yields will rise, with a negative impact on the US economy (and global markets). If overseas investors start selling the US debt they hold, it would spark a big spike in yields, with very painful fallout in the US.

Right now, and in the last 50-odd years, the US hasn't cared about big debt, including overseas debt, because it is in a unique position. It can just print currency (or make equivalent electronic entries) and hand over the paper to creditors, because the dollar is the world's reserve currency. But that situation may not hold.

Given the irrational and inconsistent American policy, attempts are being made to decouple global trade from the US and, consequently, from the dollar. Certainly, multinational companies everywhere are looking to rejig supply chains to have low or zero US dependencies. China is pushing for an alternative system to settle trade accounts in renminbi. Sanctioned nations like Iran may also have to go that route. India, too, could be considering such arrangements if the US threatens more tariffs and sanctions.

More retaliatory measures from the EU could also be on the table. Some "extremists" like the French economist Gabriel Zucman have suggested targeting US billionaires with a wealth tax conditional on allowing America-based companies access to the EU.

In a separate statement, the US economist Dean Baker has suggested even more extreme measures, such as the EU refusing to recognise US patents, copyright and intellectual property. Any such nuclear options would obviously walk the global economy into a further round of turmoil. But it could, according to the logic cited by Zucman and Baker, put pressure on the ultra-rich who donate to the Republican Party to seek regime change within the US.

If any of this happens, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's viral assertion that this is a "rupture, not a transition" may come true. Whatever the eventual outcome of all these uncertainties, global markets appear to be headed for a period of higher volatility and disorderly behaviour. That is why gold, silver and platinum are in an extended bull run.

Indian markets are well correlated with global sentiment, as India has a high exposure to global trade. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) sold over ₹1.6 trillion in equities in 2025, and India's stock-market valuations have stayed afloat only because of retail flows into domestic mutual funds. In part due to FPI selling, the rupee has underperformed the dollar, which has itself underperformed against other hard currencies since Mr Trump took charge. If FPI selling accelerates and global markets fall further, domestic inflows may not be enough to prevent a big bear market. Traders might welcome that, and investors should be prepared for the scenario.

The end of Nato is coming

No President has created so much doubt about America's commitment to trans-Atlantic security

US President Donald Trump's hopes to annex Greenland appear to be at an end. On Wednesday, he pulled back from the prospect of military invasion and abandoned the threat of tariffs to secure the territory. Instead, he wrote on Truth Social, there is a "framework" agreement in place, the details of which are still to come to light. The crisis, for now, seems to be averted.

That is a relief. But the aggression cannot be forgotten. In an extraordinary conceit, Mr Trump said he'd like to buy the island, an autonomous territory of Denmark, and could take it by force if necessary. No one imagined that the United States, Nato's founder and prime protector, would threaten to invade one of its members. Yet that's where we got to.

What happens next? To judge by the comments of those gathered this week in Davos, Switzerland — where Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada announced a "rupture" in the world order — nobody really knows. Europeans are surely scrabbling to make good on Mr Trump's climb-down. But after the shock of recent weeks, nobody should be in any doubt: Nato as we know it, the alliance that has been the bedrock of trans-Atlantic security for over 75 years, is coming to an end.

RAJAN MENON

To be sure, its unraveling won't be immediate and will entail all manner of disruption. But it will be no disaster. For Europe, which has long subcontracted its security to Washington, possesses both the motive and the means to protect itself. Indeed, this week showed how effective it can be when its leaders work in concert with one another. Amid Trumpian turbulence, Europe has a chance to step out of America's shadow.

Mr Trump has consistently claimed that owning Greenland is vital for American national security. For one thing, he believes that China and Russia are eyeing it, in part for its untapped store of minerals. For another, he wants to build his "Golden Dome" missile defence system on its territory. The United States currently deploys around 200 military personnel at Greenland's Pituffik Space Base, and a 1951 treaty with Denmark enables the United States to increase that number and build additional installations on the island. But Mr Trump insists that to protect something, you must possess it.

The United States, of course, doesn't own any of its fellow Nato members. By Mr Trump's logic, their protection therefore can't be assured: It's not clear that he would honour the alliance's self-defence clause, Article 5. In fact, Mr Trump has previously suggested that he might not defend Nato allies under threat and recently, when pressed, wouldn't rule out exiting Nato over the Greenland controversy. In a peevish speech in Davos, he struck a plangent note. "We give so much," he said, "and get so little in return."

No president has created so much doubt about America's commitment to trans-Atlantic security. That seems to stem from Mr Trump's disdain for Europe, a sentiment expressed unsparingly in his administration's National Security Strategy. Released late last year, the document paints Europe as economically declining, at risk of "civilisational erasure" and less important than other regions, not least Latin America and East Asia. It even questions whether some European countries will have the muscle required to "remain reliable allies."

Europe, having courted Mr Trump with gifts, flattery and talk of "misunderstandings," has finally begun to show some resolve. In response to his Greenland threats, the European Parliament suspended ratification of the bloc's trade agreement with the United States. European leaders mulled counter-tariffs and, at the urging of President Emmanuel Macron of France, considered invoking the European Union's anti-coercion instrument, which enables the bloc to retaliate against economic pressure. More immediately, a Danish pension fund said it would offload $100 million in US Treasuries.

Europeans are doubtless relieved that the dispute over Greenland didn't boil over. But they are wrong if they think that Mr Trump alone is the problem. Even if he doesn't seek an unconstitutional third term, his "America first" worldview and antipathy toward Europe resonate within MAGA's ranks, one of whose leaders could well succeed him. And if a Democrat wins the next presidential election, the United States is likely to be increasingly focused on China, the only plausible challenger to its global dominance. Either way, Washington's strategic priorities will continue to shift elsewhere.

For European leaders, infantilised by decades of reliance on American protection, a world without Nato is all but unimaginable. But they must open their minds. Only by jettisoning their supine attitude and committing to military autonomy can Europe, along with Britain and Canada, free itself from dependence on a country that, more and more, views its traditional allies with scorn and condescension.

The continent certainly has the wherewithal to do so. Standard measures of military power — population, gross domestic product(GDP), technological advancement— show that Europe can attain security on its own. What it lacks is the political will. Because Europe consists of many sovereign states, acting in unison is inherently difficult. Yet these obstacles, while undeniable, aren't insuperable. The European Union, itself an ensemble of states, has achieved astonishing economic and political integration, including supranational institutions with substantial power.

In any case, its leaders don't really have a choice. They can either retreat into fatalism or opt for political agency. The latter will require rethinking their America-centred security strategy and making changes to modernise and improve the continent's military hardware and infrastructure. It will also require revising their defence industries' habit of duplicating production, instead dividing up tasks based on whose is best placed to do them.

There's much work to be done, including increasing investment in air power, integrated air defences, drones, and command and control systems. Change, at least, is afoot. Nato countries, America aside, have significantly increased defence spending. Only two allocated 2 per cent of GDP to defence in 2014; by 2025, all had reached that threshold and six were spending 3 per cent or more. Their combined military spending totalled $608 billion — more than four times Russia's expenditure.

For all its hybrid high jinks and bluster, Russia doesn't pose an unmanageable military threat. Just look at President Vladimir Putin's shambolic invasion of Ukraine. Nearly four years into a war against a far weaker country, Russia's armed forces have suffered staggering losses in troops and materiel, for meager gains, and are in no condition to march on the rest of Europe. The war's direct and indirect economic costs, an estimated $2.4 trillion so far, mean that Russia will spend many years in recovery.

"Tell that to the Poles and Balts," a skeptic might counter. It's a fair point. But there's no reason that Europe cannot come up with a strategy to protect its eastern flank, especially if it forges a long-term defence partnership with Ukraine by training Kyiv's troops, selling it weaponry and helping to modernise its defence industries.

Mountain air can be clarifying. In Davos, European leaders have been able to breathe in the fact that America is no longer interested in European security and may even be a threat to it. The choice is clear. Europe can remain a vassal of the United States, without being able to count on its protection. Or, by coming together, it can take control of its own destiny.

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Let's talk about the GenZs

EYE CULTURE

ABHIJEET KUMAR

There are a few phrases that we of late have come to increasingly hear, and even use. "Oh, these GenZs"! "They don't take anything seriously. They are too blunt. They get worked up over the smallest things." These are some of the usual things we all have started hearing about everywhere, be it at parties, in offices, inside metro coaches, or during family dinners. Some years ago, what passed off as casual generational banter has now increasingly begun to resemble a quiet war of identities. And like most such wars of identities, it feels deeply misplaced.

The accusation that GenZ lacks depth is simplistic. The generation scrolls too much, reacts too quickly, consumes culture in fragments, and turns everything, from politics to poetry, into mere aesthetic without engaging with it in depth. But beneath this complaint lies a more uncomfortable truth, one that the "non-GenZs" are rarely pausing to confront. What if GenZ is not the cause of our cultural exhaustion but merely its most visible inhabitant?

Culture, for some time now, has functioned in a way where it has been repetitive and algorithm-driven. We know nostalgia is being endlessly reheated and sold back to us as comfort. We know outrage is monetised, depth is penalised, and complexity is uncomfortable. The warnings have been issued for decades now and yet the consumption continues.

Cinema makes the scapegoating easiest to see. Films like *Dil Se…*, *Devdas*, *DDLJ*, or *The Lunchbox* return into people's social media feed, not as objects of interrogation but as relics, where they are stripped of their context and sold as "the" emotional truth. Contemporary cinema too barely hides this inheritance. From *Rockstar* to *Aashiqui 2* to *Saiyaara*, the template remains the same, where pain is mistaken for depth and sameness is sold as sincerity. And mind you, these repetitions are not audience-led accidents. They are institutional decisions, safe bets made by studios, financiers, and platforms that know nostalgia travels further and faster than risk. The examples are too many, the space too little!

Music follows the same logic. What is marketed today as the advent of techno Bhajans, or revival of electronic cool remixes, or endless versions of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan *sa'ab*, is often little more than a return to old material. Remix culture did not begin with reels or algorithms of today. It flourished decades ago, when old superhit songs were stripped of context and rebuilt for dance floors. The "millennials" would remember DJ Aqeel, Bombay Vikings, Bally Sagoo, etc who birthed the remixed versions of Asha Bhonsle, Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore, and Rafi. That cycle never ended, it only grew more confident. It's just that today — repetition no longer pretends to innovate, it just declares itself a "vibe" and moves on.

And when seen this way, it is at this inflection point that GenZ is often placed in the witness box as the primary offender, the generation accused of demanding culture that is instantly digestible, endlessly scrollable, yet emotionally lightweight. But this is also where the argument collapses.

GenZ did not design the platforms that reward brevity over depth. They did not build the algorithms that punish attention and monetise outrage. These systems were constructed, refined, and normalised by older generations of editors, executives, producers, and advertisers who understood precisely how to turn repetition into profit. GenZ did not design this menu, it simply consumes what has been endlessly served.

And let's be clear here. There never was a golden era where culture was universally braver, deeper, or more honest. The literary critic Terry Eagleton once warned that capitalism has an extraordinary ability to absorb rebellion and turn it into style. Postmodern culture, he argued, creates rebels without causes, individuals who feel oppositional but never locate the system they are opposing. That diagnosis feels uncomfortably true even today, and maybe more so vehement. The result is a generation that appears radical in tone but constrained in outcome, great at performance but extremely cautious about rupture.

But blaming the next generation is easier than confronting one's own surrender. It is easier to accuse the youth of not creating something new than to admit that those in power stopped insisting on better.

This is why blaming GenZ feels misleading and extremely convenient, more so like a rant of a "bitter old uncle". It suggests age-driven change when the real engine is cultural exhaustion. So the question remains, is the whole identity war in itself an old genie but perhaps in a new bottle?

Consistency in tough times

THE WISE LEADER

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

Turbulent times may trigger cultural inconsistency in organisations. Long-living institutions need consistent values. In fact, the older the institution, the more crucial consistent values are — the upholding of institutional values and purpose, though individual leadership styles will differ. History teaches us that leaders should not dwell on past glory; rather, they should focus on creating an exceptional future (Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and the Fall of Great Powers*). From my world of corporations, I explore three leadership transitions: JRD Tata, Ratan Tata, and N Chandrasekaran. For JRD, I rely on archives and narratives; for Ratan, I rely on my lived experience; for Chandra, I rely on reports. No corporation or leader is perfect.

Here are lessons about consistency in institutional culture:

1. *Perform without blaming predecessors:* When JRD took over in 1939, he was young (35) and inexperienced. The business faced great stress due to unsuccessful past investments and efforts. JRD never criticised, he did what was needed. In response to new monopoly laws, he reluctantly watched the reduction of Tata shareholding in many key companies and diluted the interconnection among companies. Ratan did the opposite — strengthening Tata shareholding in companies and increasing the interconnectedness of Tata companies, without ever criticising JRD. Ratan unified Tata like Sardar Patel and V P Menon did for India in 1947. Now, Chandra demonstrates institutional continuity by demanding that companies execute three S's — simplify, synergise, and scale.

2. *Adopt what is relevant for the times yet keeping the core intact:* JRD faced the turbulence of controls, socialism, and the consequent public corruption. JRD emphasised Tata values, which, in hindsight, was exemplary for his times. Ratan grasped shaping up as his theme. He advocated strategic and operational excellence, high ethics, and innovation. Chandra is advancing the game by seeking more boldness and risk-taking in response to turbulent times. Chandra discusses, debates, and then demands disciplined execution, a great way forward for a complex organisation.

3. *Impact the future:* JRD created Indian civil aviation with Air India. He supported Darbari Seth to invest in indigenous technology development in Tata Chemicals, which was considered a hopeless investment in early days. JRD trusted Faqir Chand Kohli to seed and nurture Tata Consultancy. Recall Kohli's legendary plea to Tata Sons in 1971, "Allow TCS to import just one computer for ₹4 crore, and TCS will pay back Tata Sons several times over." Ratan admitted that Tata Motors occupied a special place in his heart. He trusted a young team of engineers to launch India's first indigenously engineered Indica. He wagered his own reputation on an imaginative Nano car. Chandra has placed a truly long-term bet on Air India, which we hope may become corporate India's greatest turnaround story. He has placed a big bet on semiconductors and electronics manufacturing, comparable to Jamsetji's bet on steel making, and addressing Kohli's regret that India had missed the microelectronics revolution.

4. *Be true to who you are:* Turbulent environments pressure leaders to be expedient. The challenge is to be practical and yet authentic. JRD was deeply conscious of his lack of technical training and yet he supported Homi Bhabha in setting up the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR). He championed the setting up of the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS). He supported Jamshed Bhabha in pioneering the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA). Ratan's failed attempt in the mid-1990s to set up an airport and airline business is well known because he would not compromise on institutional ethics. Likewise, his decision to move the proposed Nano plant from Singur came with financial cost and reputational risk, but he did what he thought was right. The 1989 JRD Tata response after the Jamshedpur fire, the Ratan response after the 2008 terror attack at the Taj Hotel, and the 2025 Chandra response after the Air India crash all bore a consistent cultural flavour: Calmness, clarity, and conviction.

This is not a eulogy for Tata leaders, who were, and are, people with faults. Neither is it a prescription for Indian companies, or even for our nation. This narrative exemplifies the four sound pillars for renewal and transformation: (i) Perform without blaming the past, (ii) adopt what is relevant for the times, yet keeping the core intact, (iii) impact something futuristic, (iv) be true to who you are.

The author's book *CHANAKYA AND SUN TZU: A Business Lens on Trade, Thought, and Travel* between India and China, coauthored with Nirmala Isaac, will be published in February

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Trump's U-turn on Greenland

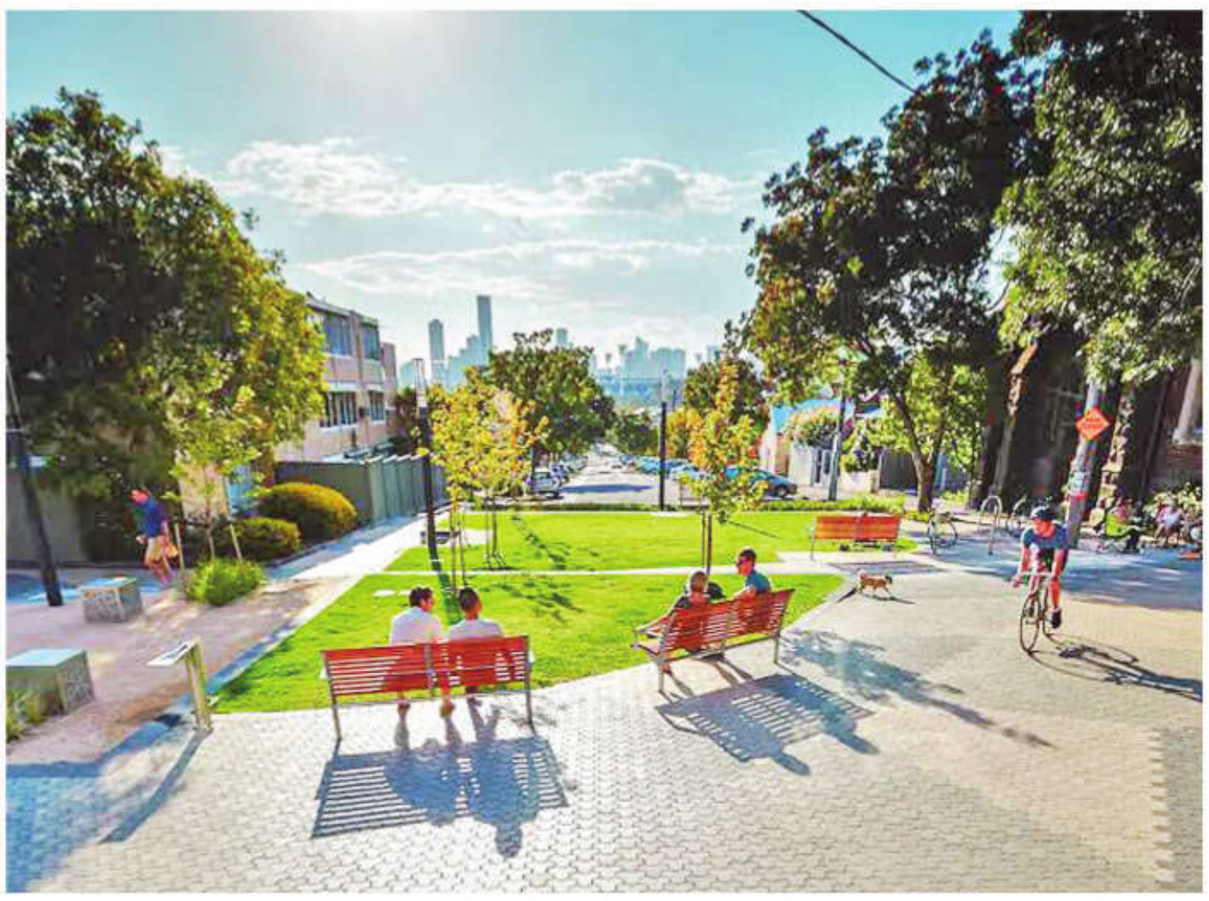
At the World Economic Forum in Switzerland on Wednesday, US President Donald Trump spoke for 75 minutes instead of the scheduled 45, dedicating half of his speech to justifying his plan for an American takeover of Greenland, while the other half was spent criticizing major world powers. It is said that the Davos conferences determine the future of trade, investment, and politics in the coming days. Donald Trump is a master of changing his statements and making provocative remarks. From the Davos stage, he said that Greenland is merely a piece of ice. He claimed that the US had saved Denmark from defeat, and that Denmark was being ungrateful by not giving Greenland to the US. He added that the US has the power to take control of Greenland without even deploying troops. Why did Trump make a U-turn on his statement about a military takeover of Greenland? The reason is that Trump has already deployed troops in Venezuela, Iran, and Cuba. If he were to use military force in Greenland, which is a NATO member country, the US could find itself embroiled in a military conflict with the 27 other NATO member states. Trump likely doesn't want to open another front. Meanwhile, the European Union countries and Europe have maintained their unity. It's worth noting that Britain is not part of this, as it has already struck a separate trade deal with the US. The US currently has a 10 percent tariff on British goods, but the 10 percent tariff currently imposed on the European Union could rise to 25 percent in June. The European Union has also ordered a halt to the trade deal with the US that was agreed upon in July. As a result, global markets saw a decline in share prices on Wednesday, including in India. However, after the speech, during a conversation with journalists, Trump praised Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and assured a quick trade deal with India, and the market now appears to be recovering. More on the market later. Let's turn to Trump for now. Trump is still insistent on acquiring Greenland. He has stated that he wouldn't do this out of greed for Greenland's rare earth minerals, but rather because acquiring Greenland is necessary for American security.Trump reiterated once again that he has stopped eight global wars, including the one between India and Pakistan. He even went so far as to say that if he hadn't become President of the United States, the world would be on the brink of a third world war today. The question is, did Trump save the world from the brink of a third world war, or did his actions bring the world to the edge of a world war? Trump spoke for 75 minutes. He even called Putin and Zelenskyy fools. He said that Canada is a country that thrives on our subsidies, and we can end those subsidies whenever we want. He called Denmark ungrateful.Donald Trump delivered his entire speech in his characteristic domineering style. Trump doesn't hesitate to backtrack on his statements. After the speech, while talking to reporters, he once again called PM Modi his great friend and said that a trade deal with India would be finalized soon. Perhaps that's why the Indian stock market is showing signs of recovery. However, Trump's repeated creation of an image of the US as a country that constantly reverses its positions on global platforms is making the situation uncertain for the US itself.

-Abhishek Vij

Save Sukhna Lake from Dying

After issuing directives to stop the rampant mining in the Aravalli mountains, the Supreme Court has now expressed serious concern over the plight of Chandigarh's famous Sukhna Lake. If you visit Sukhna Lake now, you'll notice upon arrival that the lake's area is shrinking. Sukhna Lake is drying up. Supreme Court Chief Justice Surya Kant expressed deep concern about this. He said that the collusion between builder mafia and officials is responsible for the deplorable condition of Chandigarh's famous lake. The court has banned any new construction in the lake's catchment area. Now the court has directed strict adherence to these rules. Although the rules already exist, the builder mafia is ignoring them, posing a threat to the very existence of Sukhna Lake. The Chief Justice said that this uncontrolled construction is endangering the lake's existence. An application against this had been filed in the Supreme Court. Speaking on this, he said, "It seems that some builders and others are in collusion with the officials." It should be remembered that the Supreme Court took cognizance of the situation at Sukhna Lake in 2020. The court primarily focused on protecting the catchment area from encroachment. In 2020, an order was issued to demolish the structures built in the protected area. However, anyone visiting Sukhna Lake can see that these structures have not been demolished; instead, they are being expanded under the guise of renovation. The Chief Justice bluntly asked, "How much more will you dry up Sukhna Lake?" He reprimanded the officials, stating that their negligence has led to increased encroachment in the catchment area. In this regard, a public interest litigation (PIL) was filed in 1995 before a bench of Justices Bagchi and Pancholi. The hearing on that PIL was underway, and it was in this context that the Supreme Court made these remarks. It is strange that the first petition to protect Sukhna Lake was filed 30 years ago, and orders were issued, yet while hearings are ongoing, encroachment continues in the Sukhna Lake area. Is this how we promote scenic tourism in the country, from which we intend to earn so much revenue? The Supreme Court has given a perfectly valid warning regarding Sukhna Lake. The concerned authorities must pay attention to this.

How urban green spaces are transforming city life



Urban green spaces—parks, community gardens, and tree-lined streets—are more than just aesthetic additions to cities; they are transforming the way people live, work, and connect. Across the world, city planners are increasingly prioritizing greenery to improve quality of life, boost mental health, and foster community engagement.

One of the most visible benefits of urban green spaces is their impact on mental and physical health. Studies consistently show that access to parks and gardens reduces stress, improves mood, and even encourages physical activity. In cities like Singapore, which is renowned for its "City in a Garden" approach, residents have easy access to lush greenery integrated into urban architecture. Walking along tree-lined streets or jogging in a local park has become a routine that promotes both mental clarity and physical well-being.

Environmental benefits also play a critical role. Trees and plants act as natural air purifiers, absorbing pollutants and releasing oxygen. They help reduce urban heat by providing shade and cooling the surrounding areas, making cities more resilient against rising temperatures. In New York, the MillionTreesNYC initiative has planted over a million trees across the city, significantly improving air quality and enhancing biodiversity. Urban green spaces also support local wildlife, creating micro-habitats for birds, insects, and small mammals.

Community bonding is another positive outcome. Parks and gardens provide shared spaces where people of all ages can interact. Neighborhood gardening projects allow residents to work together, exchange knowledge, and create a sense of pride in their surroundings. In London, community gardens have become social hubs where residents host workshops, cultural events, and fitness sessions, helping to reduce social isolation and strengthen local networks.

> Walking along tree-lined streets or jogging in a local park has become a routine that promotes both mental clarity and physical well-being.

Moreover, green spaces have economic advantages. Properties near well-maintained parks tend to have higher real estate values, attracting families and businesses. Local tourism can also benefit, as scenic parks and botanical gardens draw visitors seeking recreational and cultural experiences. Cities like Barcelona have successfully leveraged their green areas as part of sustainable urban tourism, balancing environmental goals with economic growth.

The success of urban green spaces depends on thoughtful planning and maintenance. In addition to creating new parks, cities are increasingly adopting innovative solutions such as vertical gardens, green rooftops, and pedestrian-friendly green corridors. These initiatives ensure that even densely populated areas can enjoy the benefits of greenery without sacrificing space.In conclusion, urban green spaces are redefining city life by improving health, enhancing the environment, fostering community, and contributing to economic development. As more cities recognize the multifaceted value of greenery, residents can look forward to urban environments that are not only livable but also vibrant, sustainable, and socially enriching. Investing in green infrastructure is not just a design choice—it is an investment in the well-being of generations to come.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Keep your face always toward the sunshine-and shadows will fall behind you.

-Walt Whitman

Making travel meaningful

Volunteer tourism, or "voluntourism," is reshaping the way people travel, combining adventure with social impact. Across the globe, travelers are increasingly seeking opportunities to contribute to communities, the environment, and local development while exploring new destinations. One of the most impactful aspects of voluntourism is its contribution to local communities. Travelers engage in projects such as building schools, teaching languages, supporting healthcare initiatives, and assisting in conservation efforts. In countries like Nepal, Costa Rica, and Kenya, voluntourists help address urgent local needs while sharing knowledge and skills, fostering sustainable development and community resilience. Environmental conservation is another positive outcome. Many voluntourism programs focus on protecting ecosystems, wildlife, and natural resources. Volunteers plant trees, clean beaches, monitor wildlife populations, and participate in ecological research. In Australia, programs protecting the Great Barrier Reef allow travelers to contribute to coral restoration, combining adventure with hands-on environmental stewardship.Personal growth is a key motivation for participants. Engaging in volunteer projects abroad fosters empathy, adaptability, and intercultural understanding. Travelers develop problem-solving skills, leadership abilities, and a sense of responsibility toward global communities. These experiences often inspire lifelong commitments to service, environmental advocacy, or sustainable living.Voluntourism also strengthens global connections. Working alongside local residents and fellow travelers fosters mutual respect, cultural exchange, and collaborative problem-solving. Projects that involve teaching, healthcare, or environmental protection create lasting relationships, leaving a meaningful impact on both volunteers and host communities.Economic benefits flow to local areas as well. Unlike conventional tourism, voluntourism often channels funds directly into communities through accommodation, local transportation, food, and project-related purchases. This sustainable model supports small businesses, encourages local entrepreneurship, and ensures that tourism contributes to genuine community development. Education and awareness are additional advantages.

Renewable energy revolution: Powering a positive future

The global shift toward renewable energy is no longer a distant vision—it is a rapidly unfolding reality that promises environmental sustainability, economic growth, and energy security. Countries around the world are embracing wind, solar, and hydroelectric power to reduce carbon emissions, combat climate change, and create new opportunities for innovation and jobs. One of the most compelling advantages of renewable energy is its environmental impact. Unlike fossil fuels, which release harmful greenhouse gases, renewable sources generate electricity with minimal carbon emissions. Solar farms in India's Rajasthan desert and wind farms in Denmark illustrate how countries are harnessing natural resources to produce clean, reliable energy. By replacing coal and oil with renewable energy, cities can significantly reduce air pollution, improving public health and slowing global warming. Economic growth is another key benefit. The renewable energy sector is becoming a major source of employment worldwide. Engineers, technicians, and project managers are in high demand, creating thousands of new jobs. In the United States, solar energy alone employs over 250,000 people, a number expected to grow as technology advances. Countries investing in renewable infrastructure are also attracting international investment, fostering innovation, and building long-term economic resilience. Energy security is strengthened through diversification. By generating electricity from local renewable sources, nations reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels, enhancing stability and resilience against geopolitical disruptions. Countries like Germany and Brazil have strategically invested in renewable grids, achieving impressive levels of energy independence while maintaining affordability for consumers. Technological innovation is driving further positive change. Advances in battery storage, smart grids, and offshore wind turbines are increasing efficiency and reliability. Communities can now store excess solar energy during the day and use it at night, ensuring uninterrupted power supply. Innovations in floating solar panels, bioenergy, and hybrid systems are expanding possibilities even further, demonstrating that renewable energy is adaptable to diverse environments and scales. Community involvement and social benefits also stand out. Local solar cooperatives, wind initiatives, and government incentives enable citizens to participate directly in the green energy transition. Schools, businesses, and households adopting renewable systems contribute to sustainability while lowering electricity costs. Beyond financial benefits, these initiatives inspire awareness and action, fostering a culture of environmental stewardship.

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Crackdown in Canada, Heat in UK- Khalistan Elements Flee West, Find New Haven in Australia

Intelligence agencies have flagged a sharp surge in Khalistan-linked activities in Australia, even as Canada and the United Kingdom tighten the screws on pro-Khalistan elements, forcing them to divert operations to a new geography. Security officials say that Khalistan-related activity has shown significant rise in Canada and the UK following diplomatic pressure from India and increased scrutiny by local authorities. With space shrinking in these countries, Australia has emerged as the new operational hub for separatist groups. Officials confirm that resources, manpower and propaganda machinery are being systematically shifted to Australia, a move reflected in the recent spike in vandalism, provocative protests and anti-India graffiti across several Australian cities.

While so-called "referendums" had earlier been conducted in Australia, the scale and frequency of Khalistan activity have risen sharply in recent months, triggering serious security concerns. Investigations reveal that social media campaigns by groups such as Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) are now largely Australia-centric, with repeated online calls to vandalise Indian symbols, target the Indian community and raise incendiary anti-India and anti-Prime Minister Narendra Modi slogans. Intelligence officials said these acts are deliberate and tactical.

> During an Independence Day protest in August, Khalistani elements attempted to provoke Indians, but swift intervention by Australian police prevented a street clash. Officials say a violent confrontation would have served the separatists' narrative.

Australia offers a fresh ground where they hope to operate under the shield of free speech," the official said. India has formally raised the Khalistan issue with both Canada and the UK, and both governments have acknowledged the problem and committed to closer cooperation. In recent months, visible action against Khalistan elements in these countries has pushed the network to seek refuge elsewhere — primarily Australia.

Khalistan-related incidents have been openly visible in Australia during July, August and December, with separatist flags waved at protests and slogans raised against India. These demonstrations have frequently turned provocative, including acts of vandalism, trampling of the Indian flag and its public desecration. In December, a protest saw the Indian national flag torn, with videos circulated widely on social media platforms — a tactic officials say is routinely used by SFJ to incite unrest and provoke the Indian diaspora.

Unlike Canada and the UK, Khalistan groups in Australia are now facing strong pushback from the Indian community. Chants of "Khalistan Zindabad" have been met with resounding slogans of "Bharat Mata Ki Jai", signalling growing resistance. Officials warn that provocation is the core strategy. "These acts are designed to trigger confrontation and then play victim," an officer said.

During an Independence Day protest in August, Khalistani elements attempted to provoke Indians, but swift intervention by Australian police prevented a street clash. Officials say a violent confrontation would have served the separatists' narrative.In July, a Melbourne gurdwara was vandalised with anti-India graffiti, and images of Adolf Hitler were pasted to insult Indian leadership, further escalating tensions. Australia's large Indian population — around 800,000 people — has made the country an attractive target. Officials warn that such incidents risk alienating the wider Indian community, with locals often unfairly associating all Indians with these extremist actions.

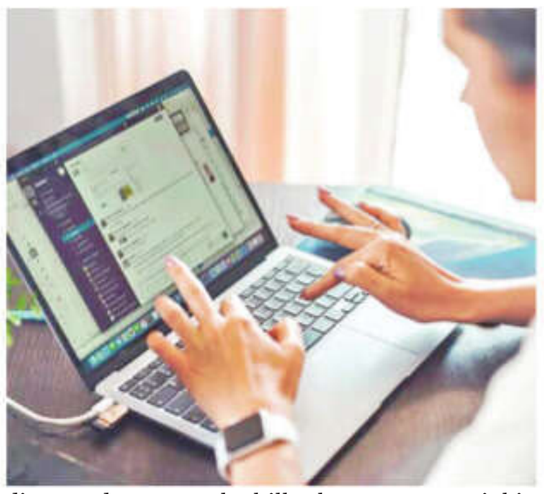
As in Canada and the UK, Khalistan groups in Australia exploit the broad interpretation of free speech, often escaping accountability while spreading hate and incitement. Security agencies caution that unless firm and timely action is taken, the problem could spiral beyond control. Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong acknowledged the concern, stating: "We uphold free expression but draw firm lines at violence or incitement, and continue engaging with Indian counterparts on these matters."

Officials, however, stress that words must now translate into action, warning that Australia risks becoming the next major staging ground for Khalistan extremism if decisive steps are delayed.

The rise of digital education

Digital education has emerged as one of the most transformative forces in modern learning, breaking traditional barriers and creating opportunities for students around the globe. From online classrooms to interactive learning platforms, technology is making education more accessible, flexible, and engaging than ever before.

One of the most significant advantages of digital education is accessibility. Students in remote or underserved areas can now access quality educational resources without relocating. For instance, initiatives like India's DIKSHA platform and Khan Academy worldwide provide free lessons, tutorials, and practice exercises to millions of learners. Rural children who previously had limited exposure to specialized subjects such as coding, robotics, or environmental science can now explore these fields from their homes.Flexibility is another major benefit. Online learning allows students to study at their own pace, accommodating different learning styles and schedules. Busy professionals and adult learners can pursue certifications or degrees alongside their work, while schoolchildren can revisit lessons as needed. Interactive tools, quizzes, and video lectures make learning more engaging, catering to both visual and auditory learners. Digital education also promotes skill-based learning, preparing students for the demands of the modern workforce. Platforms offering coding bootcamps, digital marketing courses, and entrepreneurship training enable young adults to develop practical skills and secure meaningful employment. Countries investing in digital skill programs are witnessing a surge in employability, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and industry needs.The social dimension of digital learning is equally significant. Online forums, discussion boards, and collaborative projects encourage interaction among students from different backgrounds and cultures. This virtual collaboration fosters global awareness, cross-cultural understanding, and teamwork skills that are essential in today's interconnected world.



Technology continues to innovate learning experiences. Artificial intelligence-driven tutoring systems, virtual reality classrooms, and gamified learning environments make education immersive and adaptive. Students can experiment with virtual labs, simulate historical events, or explore scientific phenomena interactively, deepening understanding and encouraging curiosity.Moreover, digital education contributes to environmental sustainability. By reducing the need for physical textbooks, classrooms, and travel, it lowers carbon footprints and promotes eco-friendly practices. Schools and institutions adopting digital resources are setting examples for sustainable learning models, showing that education and environmental responsibility can go hand in hand.In conclusion, digital education is revolutionizing how knowledge is delivered, making learning more inclusive, engaging, and impactful. As technology continues to evolve, it promises a future where education is not confined by geography, socioeconomic status, or traditional boundaries. The rise of digital learning empowers students, strengthens communities, and creates opportunities for growth, innovation, and lifelong learning.

Sports activities boost fitness, teamwork, and togetherness

Community sports programs are making a powerful impact worldwide, fostering physical health, social cohesion, and personal development. From local football clubs to neighborhood fitness initiatives, sports are becoming a tool for improving individual lives and strengthening communities. Regular participation in sports enhances physical and mental health. Engaging in activities such as soccer, basketball, or yoga improves cardiovascular fitness, strength, and flexibility. It also reduces stress, anxiety, and depression, promoting overall well-being. In cities like Tokyo and Melbourne, local government-supported sports programs have led to measurable improvements in residents' physical activity levels and health outcomes.Sports programs are also powerful tools for social inclusion. They bring people of different ages, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds together, fostering cooperation, mutual respect, and teamwork. Initiatives like the "Right to Play" program in Africa and Asia use sports to empower marginalized children, teach life skills, and promote gender equality, proving that sports can be an instrument for social change. Youth engagement is another key benefit. Community sports provide young people with structured activities that channel energy positively and build discipline. By participating in teams, children learn leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills. In the United States and Europe, after-school sports programs have successfully reduced youth delinquency rates and improved school attendance.Sports programs also support local economies. Community leagues, tournaments, and sports
events attract participants, spectators, and sponsors, generating income and creating jobs. Small businesses, such as sports equipment shops, cafes, and fitness studios, benefit from increased community engagement and foot traffic. Cities that invest in sports infrastructure often see broader economic and social returns.Inclusivity and accessibility are central to successful programs. Adaptive sports initiatives ensure that individuals with disabilities can participate fully, while senior fitness programs help older adults maintain mobility and social connections. Programs designed for all age groups and abilities ensure that no one is left behind, reinforcing community cohesion and mutual support.

Moreover, sports cultivate environmental awareness when combined with sustainability initiatives. Eco-friendly stadiums, recycled sports equipment, and community clean-up games teach participants the importance of protecting natural resources while encouraging physical activity. Sports become a platform not just for health but also for responsible citizenship.In summary, community sports programs are transforming societies by promoting health, inclusion, youth development, economic growth, and environmental awareness. They demonstrate that physical activity is not only a personal benefit but also a communal one, fostering stronger, happier, and more connected communities. By investing in sports at the local level, governments and organizations are creating pathways for healthier, empowered, and resilient societies.

The positive impact of music therapy on mental health

Music has long been celebrated as a universal language, but its therapeutic potential is only now being recognized as a powerful tool for mental health. Across hospitals, schools, and community centers, music therapy is helping individuals manage stress, improve cognitive abilities, and enhance overall well-being. One of the most notable benefits of music therapy is its ability to reduce stress and anxiety. Listening to calming music or participating in guided music sessions lowers cortisol levels, promotes relaxation, and stabilizes heart rates. Hospitals and rehabilitation centers worldwide use music therapy to ease patient anxiety, helping them cope with pain, treatment procedures, and emotional distress.Music therapy also improves emotional expression. Individuals struggling with mental health challenges often find it difficult to articulate feelings verbally. Through songwriting, instrument playing, or improvisation, clients can express complex emotions safely and creatively. This form of expression helps therapists understand patients' experiences and facilitates emotional processing, reducing feelings of isolation. Cognitive benefits are equally significant. Music therapy has been shown to enhance memory, attention, and problem-solving skills, particularly in individuals with neurological conditions such as Alzheimer's disease or stroke recovery. Interactive music exercises engage multiple areas of the brain simultaneously, stimulating cognitive functions while promoting enjoyment and motivation. Social and community benefits also emerge from music therapy programs. Group music sessions encourage collaboration, communication, and mutual support. For children in schools or individuals in mental health facilities, making music together strengthens relationships, builds confidence, and fosters a sense of belonging.

Programs like "El Sistema" in Venezuela and similar community initiatives worldwide have transformed lives by providing access to music and mentorship.Therapeutic interventions using music are adaptable and inclusive. Different genres, instruments, and techniques can be tailored to individuals' preferences, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. From classical piano to drumming circles, music therapy respects diversity while delivering measurable mental health benefits. Technology has further expanded accessibility, with digital music therapy platforms enabling remote participation.Moreover, music therapy can complement traditional treatments, such as psychotherapy or medication. It enhances relaxation, motivation, and emotional regulation, supporting overall recovery and well-being. Healthcare providers increasingly integrate music therapy into holistic care models, recognizing its ability to improve quality of life alongside conventional therapies.In summary, music therapy is transforming mental health care by reducing stress, improving emotional expression, boosting cognitive abilities, and fostering social connection. Its versatility and accessibility make it a powerful tool for people of all ages and backgrounds. By embracing music as a therapeutic medium, communities, healthcare providers, and educators can create environments where mental well-being is nurtured, resilience is built, and lives are positively transformed.

Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

"Trade is like a river, water. You put obstacle, it goes around it. ...Things had changed for good: How many of you have seen the movie, The Wizard of Oz? We are not in Kansas any more

KRISTALINA GEORGIEVA
International Monetary Fund head

India is a very stats obsessed country. Even among players, it is often about, 'I scored so many runs ...' I had to take all of that out. ...if you do not have a World Cup, all those stats do not matter

ROHIT SHARMA
Former skipper

Just last year, in Davos, I ended with: Europe needs to know how to defend itself. A year has passed. And nothing has changed. We are still in a situation where I must say the same words"

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY
Ukrainian President

'Mother of all deals' to redraw economy

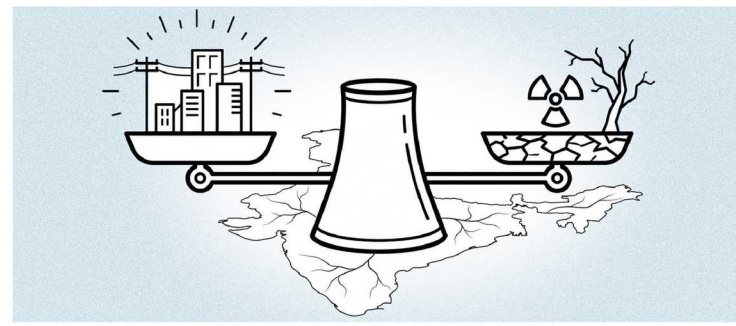
The participation of European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in the Republic Day celebrations as the Chief Guest carries significance that goes beyond diplomatic optics. It sends a crucial message of realignment of the global economic map at a time when the world is grappling with unpredictable and whimsical tariff policies of the United States. During her recent address at Davos, she described the imminent trade agreement with India as the "mother of all deals", indicating the potential of its impact on global geopolitics. The renewed momentum to finalise the historic Free Trade Agreement was evident during German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's visit to India earlier this month, which underscored Europe's growing recognition of India not merely as a market, but as a long-term partner in global growth, technology, and resilience. The signing of the FTA will be just the starting line for businesses on both sides. The real impact of the India–EU FTA will be shaped by how effectively it is implemented, how ambitiously industry engages with it, and how decisively both governments support collaboration beyond tariff reductions and legal frameworks. The deal presents a win-win situation for both. For Europe, struggling with energy shocks, slowing growth, and an uneasy dependence on China, India offers scale, stability, and a democratic counterweight in the Indo-Pacific. For India, it opens privileged access to one of the world's largest consumer markets, accelerates technology transfers, and strengthens its ambition to become a global manufacturing and services hub.

The real impact of India–EU FTA will be shaped by how effectively it is implemented, how ambitiously industry engages with it

Europe brings deep expertise in advanced engineering, clean technologies, precision manufacturing, and trusted regulatory systems. India brings scale, cost competitiveness, a large and skilled workforce, and one of the world's fastest-growing domestic markets. The FTA has the potential to align these strengths far more systematically than has been possible so far. Across India, European companies are increasingly moving beyond sales and assembly operations to establish manufacturing, design, and engineering hubs. Today, nearly 6,000 European companies operate in India, supporting millions of jobs across sectors such as clean energy, mobility, digital infrastructure, aerospace, advanced materials, and manufacturing. At present, India–EU trade and investment are concentrated in a limited number of Indian States and a handful of EU member countries. This leaves large parts of both economies underrepresented. Many European SMEs, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe, are actively seeking reliable global partners. At the same time, several Indian States are positioning themselves as manufacturing and services hubs with global ambitions. An effective FTA can help widen these corridors, connecting new Indian States with new European regions and integrating them into shared value chains. Such diversification is essential if the partnership is to deliver inclusive and sustainable growth.

Big energy, bigger risks

SHANTI Act opens door to private nuclear investment but raises questions about liability limit and safety



ATUL KRITI
BHABYA
BALHASAN ALI

In December, Parliament passed the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025, reshaping India's nuclear framework after nearly seven decades. For the first time since independence, private companies can now build and operate nuclear reactors. The law repeals the 1962 Atomic Energy Act and supersedes the 2010 Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act. The government hailed it as a watershed moment for clean energy. Yet examining its provisions raises significant questions about whether it truly balances the need for investment with adequate protection of public interests.

India's energy challenge is undeniable. Nuclear power currently contributes 8.8 GW to the installed capacity, accounting for 3.1% of the total electricity generation. (Department of Atomic Energy data for FY 25) The government plans to expand this to 100 gigawatts by 2047, which is essential for meeting its net-zero emissions targets.

Realising this ambition requires mobilising Rs 15–20 lakh crore in investment. Since the public exchequer cannot sustain this burden alone, permitting private participation represents a rational policy response. Yet critical infrastructure carrying existential risk demands equally rigorous attention to safeguards, accountability mechanisms, and democratic oversight.

Where Risk Falls

The Act establishes tiered operator liability, with Rs 100 crore for small reactors and Rs 3,000 crore for large installations. Beyond these caps, a central Nuclear Liability Fund covers remaining costs. Two-tier liability models are designed to expedite victim compensation by minimising prolonged litigation. France and the US employ similar structures. However, this framework raises concerns about risk allocation. India's constitutional jurisprudence, established in *MC Mehta v union of India* (1987), established the doctrine of Absolute Liability. While the 'polluter pays' principle is often cited, the concept was officially adopted into Indian environmental law in 1996. The 1987 ruling specifically mandated that enterprises engaged in hazardous activities are fully responsible for any harm caused, regardless of whether they took reasonable precautions. The Act introduces liability caps that create asymmetry with this principle.

Consider a concrete scenario: a private operator runs a reactor for 40 years, earning substantial profits. If an accident causes Rs 8,000 crore in damages, the operator pays Rs 3,000 crore and incurs no further liability. The remaining Rs 5,000 crore becomes public responsibility. Profits flow to investors; citizens bear residual losses.

International experience warrants attention. Fukushima's cleanup costs exceed $180 billion, illustrating the magnitude of tail risks that remain within the realm of possibility. India's cap of Rs 3,000 crore amounts to just 0.2% of that burden. The government could have addressed these concerns through automatic liability escalation indexed to inflation, mandatory decommissioning funds (as France and the US require), and explicit inclusion of non-radiological damages such as thermal pollution, losses in agricultural productivity, and chronic health effects arising from long-term low-level radiation exposure. The current framework excludes these categories.

Environmental Oversight

The Act elevates the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) to statutory status, requiring it to report directly to Parliament. Independent regulators with transparent mandates strengthen safety cultures, and this institutional change merits recognition. However, statutory designation does not guarantee meaningful independence. The law is silent on appointment procedures, staff protections from arbitrary termination, budgetary autonomy independent of executive discretion, and insulation from ministerial direction. These procedural safeguards are essential for converting formal independence into substantive autonomy.

The appeals mechanism also warrants examination. Challenges to AERB decisions are first heard by the Atomic Energy Redressal Advisory Council. The claim of "direct" and independent oversight is weakened by the fact that the Council is chaired by the Chairperson of the Atomic Energy Commission — the same body responsible for promoting nuclear policy and development. This arrangement creates institutional overlap rather than external review. Moreover, AERB remains substantially under-resourced. With limited inspectorate capacity, it may face constraints as private operators proliferate across dispersed sites.

Section 87 grants SHANTI supremacy over conflicting legislation. While this streamlines implementation, it risks sidelining environmental oversight. Nuclear facilities consume vast amounts of freshwater, discharge thermal pollution, occupy ecologically sensitive land, and generate waste that requires secure storage for thousands of years. India's environmental regulatory framework, comprising the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1974, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1981, the Indian Forest Act of 1927, the Coastal Regulation Zone notification of 1991, and the Biological Diversity Act of 2002, imposes specific operational constraints.

State pollution control boards, forest departments, and coastal authorities currently exercise supervisory functions over their respective areas. Invocation of SHANTI's supremacy clause risks relegating these environmental agencies to a secondary role. By contrast, Finland, Sweden, France, and the US mandate parallel environmental and nuclear reviews with both authorities retaining independent denial powers.

Democratic Accountability

A related concern involves information access. Section 39 allows broad categories of information to be designated as "restricted," exempting them from the Right to Information Act without any balancing tests or appeal mechanisms. Once designated, data on nuclear material locations, reactor designs, and inspection reports are entirely removed from public scrutiny. This opacity is particularly dangerous as private operators enter the sector. Information asymmetry has historically facilitated regulatory capture; when citizens and civil society cannot examine compliance, accountability and oversight weaken.

Fukushima's cleanup has exceeded $180 billion, a reminder that even low-probability nuclear accidents can impose catastrophic costs

The SHANTI Act also bypasses standing committee scrutiny. Transformational legislation affecting critical infrastructure typically undergoes detailed parliamentary examination. Such deliberation enables scientific institutions, environmental groups, and affected communities to present evidence, flag technical concerns.

Necessary Refinements

The Act addresses real financing constraints, and private participation is a defensible policy. Nevertheless, governance could be substantially strengthened through targeted refinements: automatic liability escalation indexed to inflation; mandatory decommissioning funds; transparent regulatory appointment and removal procedures; independent budgetary allocations; quarterly parliamentary oversight; direct appeals to the Supreme Court; parallel environmental reviews with independent veto authority; amend Section 39 to retain RTI exemptions, with a public-interest override; and enhanced regulatory capacity through additional inspectors and competitive recruitment.

Regulatory independence, though formally strengthened, remains procedurally vulnerable. Environmental oversight continues to operate hierarchically while information access is constrained by blanket exemptions. These are not inevitable consequences of privatisation; they reflect policy choices. Subordinate legislation, rules, and administrative practice can substantially address these gaps.

Whether governance evolves in this direction will depend on the commitment of government, regulators, and civil society to enforce safeguards that may, occasionally, slow nuclear development to strengthen accountability. The coming years will determine whether the SHANTI Act enables clean energy expansion with adequate public protection or becomes a template where growth repeatedly takes precedence over governance rigour.

(Atul Kriti is a PhD scholar at Tata Institute of Social Sciences [TISS], Hyderabad. Bhabya is a Young Professional-II (AICRP-WIA) at Govind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Uttarakhand. Dr Balhasan Ali is Assistant Professor at TISS, Hyderabad. Views are personal)

Letters to the Editor

Animals' safety

The four-lane Elevated Road Corridor Project in Assam's Kaziranga National Park and Tiger reserve along the existing National Highway-37 will go a long way in ensuring the safety and security of the animals. During rains, as the park gets flooded, the rush of animals towards the nearby Karbi Anglong hills by traversing across the highway has resulted in deaths of many animals. Therefore, the corridor will shield many endangered species. Drastically reduced chances of animal-vehicle collisions also mean safe commuting options for tourists.

GANAPATHI BHAT, Akola

Global chessboard

The US proposed 'Board of Peace' resembles a global chessboard. President Donald Trump, like the King, has made the opening move, but the consequences remain uncertain. Much depends on how President Putin, playing the role of a calculating Bishop, responds through strategic manoeuvres. NATO, the powerful Queen, appears aggrieved, especially over the US stance on Greenland, exposing visible cracks within the Western alliance. Meanwhile, India and China, like strong Rooks on opposite ends, are carefully observing before committing themselves. Smaller nations resemble Pawns, often sacrificed in great power rivalry. In this unfolding geopolitical game, the relevance of the United Nations appears like a silent spectator. If diplomacy turns into mere power play, the world may face Checkmate, not peace.

PH HEMA SAGAR, Secunderabad

Mentally ill prisoners

Prisoners often develop mental illness due to the severe environmental and emotional stress of incarceration, including overcrowding, isolation, lack of privacy, and so on. ('Forgotten behind bars'. Jan 22) These conditions, combined with guilt, stigma, fear of violence, and separation from support systems, trigger or worsen mental health issues. Such prisoners should receive specialised care, equivalent to community standards, including immediate screening upon admission, access to psychiatrists and evidence-based treatment like medication and therapy. Shortage of trained staff and limited access to healthcare services hinder treatment. Effective implementation of the Healthcare Act 2017, which gurantees right to affordable and quality mental healthcare even to prisoners, will certainly address the sufferings of such forgotten people in prisons across India.

P VICTOR SELVARAJ , Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu

Spaceflight legacy

Sunita Williams, who retired from NASA after 27 years of meritorious service, leaves behind a spaceflight legacy. Sunita spent more than 600 days in space and took part in nine spacewalks. She also became the first person to run a marathon in space. When she was stranded in space, it was a test of her patience and fortitude. She will continue to be an inspiration for millions of people across the world. An advocate for the collaboration between India and the US in space missions, she sees a lot of opportunities in the commercialisation of space. Sunita's life and career serve as a source of inspiration for our youth who are passionate about science and technology. Let our education system take a cue from her career and give importance to scientific applications and explorations.

VENU GS, Kollam

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

India in the hotspot

■ The Economist

Homegrown apps make dating less awkward

Imagine showing up for a first date with someone you met online, only to find your prospect has brought along their mum. In India that experience is not uncommon. The country's dating culture requires homegrown dating apps—or so say entrepreneurs who are trying to part lonely hearts from their cash.

■ The Guardian

Exclusively for the elite': Mumbai's new motorway

Mumbai has a new symbol of the gulf between rich and poor: a high-speed, eight-lane motorway on its western coast, which critics say serves only the wealthy despite being built with taxpayers' money. An engineering marvel, it connects north and south, and is a dream for car owners.

■ The New York Times

A house suspended over a 23-foot-deep gorge

Ashish Shah, 50, always wanted to build a farmhouse in the countryside, his wife, Nipa Shah, said. ...they came across a two-acre plot near Karjat, 40 miles from Mumbai, that was surrounded by the grassy peaks of the Western Ghats mountain range. But there was one problem: A gorge 23 feet deep.

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THE GOAN EVERYDAY

If you fell down yesterday, stand up today
HG Wells

Why was racing event at Mopa kept a secret?

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant has recently announced that the Indian Racing Festival will be held at the Goa Street Circuit, near Manohar International Airport, Mopa. Very soon, details emerged that the races will be held between February 14 and 15 as Round 4 of the Indian Racing League and FIA-certified Formula 4 Indian Championship. The races across a 2 km circuit will be streamed live by national channels.

Surprisingly, the local MLAs, panchayats or locals were unaware of such a race happening in the locality. A week later, a growing sense of unease among locals prevails, as it becomes apparent that an event of such magnitude is being kept under wraps. Panchayats are known to be custodians of local interests, but it is unfortunate they learn of a project in their area through media reports and press releases.

It was in October last year that the government was forced to retract the racing event scheduled at Bogda-Sada after locals raised objections due to narrow roads. Sawant had a patient hearing of residents along with Mormugao Municipal Council Chairperson, councillors and MLAs Sankalp Amonkar and Krishna Salkar at Ravindra Bhavan, Baina, before deciding to withdraw. Interestingly, despite working out solutions, including opening up a temporary road, the locals object to the race, prompting the government to beat a retreat. "The government cannot go against people's wishes," Sawant had said then.

Surprisingly, the race makes a comeback in just over three months, this time at Mopa, with people and their representatives having no clue. Large-scale events such as Formula 4 racing are undeniably attractive for tourism since these will help Goa carve out a new name on the international arena, attract more visitors and boost revenues. However, the manner in which plans are unveiled without any community involvement runs the risk of unnecessarily turning opportunities into areas of conflict. This lack of communication with local stakeholders will only erode public trust further.

A pattern of opaque decision-making has been a striking highlight in the development story. In recent years, various infrastructure, tourism, or industrial projects have faced protests because of a fundamental failure to involve local communities. Moreover, time and again, there are indications that Goans are becoming increasingly sensitive to any project or development that affects the environment or ecology.

The State has had bitter experiences in setting up IIT in Goa, having exited at least five different locations beginning with the Loliem-Canacona in 2016 after locals moved in to protect the Bhagawati plateau. In 2021, the project exited Melauli in Sattari after violent protests, only to meet with opposition from farmers in Cortali-Sanguem in 2023. The Rivona site also faced issues, forcing the government to drop that site in 2023.

The theory that the government cannot seek approval for every project from the people is flawed, especially in scenarios that are prevalent now. When there is hostility in the air, there is a need to tread with caution because even a minor slip could trigger a pubic debate and gather traction. Failure to engage people will be construed as arrogance and cause unnecessary roadblocks to development.

The Formula 4 race in Goa is an excellent idea and can do a world of good to the battered image of being seen solely as an alcohol-narcotic-party-related destination. The question is, why take this detour of bypassing everyone? The government may have the plan well laid out, and possibly, there may be no objections like those faced in Mormugao; all that was required was proper communication.

The government must understand that growth prospects hinge on balancing progress with participation. Sustainable development is rooted in dialogue and respect for the people of the land. Events such as these have global outreach and hence need to be handled carefully. We hope that the race does not go off the track this time too.

OPEN SPACE ››

Stop forced mega projects

The villagers and people of Goa strongly oppose the Unity Mall and other mega projects in our small State. When the people clearly do not want these projects, why is the government pushing them forward? Who is the central government to force such developments upon Goa? Why is CM Sawant listening to the centre instead of standing up for the people of Goa, especially when both the State and central governments are led by the same party? These projects are destroying our lands, water bodies, and greenery, turning Goa into a concrete jungle. As the head of the state, CM Sawant must prioritise the voice of the people over the interests of those with deep pockets eager to exploit Goa's resources. Please do not bring people out onto the streets and go on hunger strike again and again, especially on the soil where the Niz Goenkars are born and brought up. Enough is Enough. Remember that Goa is not for sale.

RONNIE DSOUZA, *Chandor*

Take pledge, take photo, take no responsibility

In Goa and across the country, National Girl Child Day has slowly slipped from reflection into performance

›The writer is an Assistant Professor of Social Work, Goa University and Founder, Human Touch Foundation

PETER F BORGES

January 24 arrives every year with clockwork precision. So do the banners, the stages, the cultural performances, the carefully worded speeches, and—inevitably—the pledge. The ritual is now predictable. Gather a crowd, raise a slogan, extend a hand, repeat a sentence, take a photograph. Commitment declared. Conscience cleared. Content posted. Move on.

What has changed is not the celebration, but its intent. In Goa and across the country, National Girl Child Day has slowly slipped from reflection into performance. Symbolism has replaced substance. Visibility has replaced vulnerability. And the girl child—ironically—has become secondary to the event organised in her name.

The modern obsession with the pledge deserves scrutiny. Online pledge. Offline pledge. QR-code pledge. Group pledge. Pledge walls and pledge hashtags. Entire programmes now culminate in this ritual, proudly presented as an "outcome." The pledge has become the cheapest form of social engagement—requiring no policy shift, no budgetary commitment, no institutional reform, and no accountability. It offends no one, demands nothing, and yet allows everyone to feel morally accomplished.

Alongside this has emerged another parallel performance: the social media post. On National Girl Child Day, timelines are flooded with photographs of political leaders—those in office and those aspiring for the next election—holding placards, standing beside children, attending events for precisely the duration required to be photographed. The captions are earnest, the hashtags are trending, and the optics are flawless. What is missing is continuity. What happens to the girl child after the post is uploaded? After the applause fades? After the algorithm moves on?

A social media post is not governance. A reel is not reform. And a photograph with a slogan does not translate into safety for a young girl navigating abuse, coercion, or neglect. Yet the politics of visibility has ensured that performative concern is rewarded far more than quiet, sustained work.

"The pledge has become the cheapest form of social engagement—requiring no policy shift, no budgetary commitment, no institutional reform, and no accountability. It offends no one, demands nothing, and yet allows everyone to feel morally accomplished

The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) campaign was envisioned as a transformative intervention for the survival, safety, and empowerment of the girl child. However, it has long been criticised for its disproportionate emphasis on publicity. A December 2021 report by the Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women revealed that between 2016 and 2019, nearly 79 per cent of the scheme's funds were spent on media and publicity. From its inception until 2020–21, over 58 per cent of total expenditure went towards advertising, prompting strong criticism of the scheme's priorities.

In response, recent years have seen a reduction in publicity spending and a stated shift towards on-ground interventions, with the scheme now integrated under Mission Shakti. On paper, this signals correction. In practice, especially in Goa, the campaign continues to manifest largely through one-off events, award ceremonies, cultural programmes, and symbolic observances. There is little evidence of a sustained strategy or measurable outcomes that reflect the lived realities of girls today.

It must be stated plainly: dance performances do not address violence. Felicitations do not prevent exploitation. Pledges do not dismantle systems of neglect. Empowerment cannot be staged for a day and archived in a folder of event photographs. A girl child's empowerment is measured by her safety—at home, in school, in public spaces, and increasingly, in digital environments.

This is where the neglect becomes most dangerous. One of the most serious and emerging threats to the girl child today is technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Online grooming, sextortion, circulation of intimate images, deepfake sexual content, cyberstalking, and harassment are no longer marginal issues. They are widespread, fast-moving, and devastating, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls.

This violence does not remain online. It spills into offline trauma—manifesting as anxiety, depression, self-harm, school dropout, fear, and silence. Yet policy conversations in Goa continue to lag behind this reality. While harm has evolved, responses remain outdated. We continue to celebrate girls in auditoriums while failing to protect them in the spaces where they are most vulnerable.

If National Girl Child Day is to mean anything, it must force a shift from optics to outcomes. The critical questions remain unanswered. Are schools equipped with clear reporting and escalation mechanisms for digital abuse? Are teachers and parents trained to recognise early signs of online harm? Are police and child protection systems prepared to respond sensitively and effectively to technology-facilitated violence? Are mental health services accessible to girls in distress? Without addressing these questions, the day risks becoming a collective exercise in self-congratulation.

If pledges are to be taken, let them be uncomfortable and binding. Pledges to allocate budgets, to train systems, to establish accountability, and to measure impact. A pledge without a plan is not empowerment; it is theatre. A social media post without follow-up is not advocacy; it is branding.

National Girl Child Day should not be reduced to a festival of hashtags and hand-holding photographs. It should be a moment of reckoning. Goa does not need more events in the name of social causes. It needs honesty, courage, and course correction.

Because empowerment is not a slogan. Protection is not a performance. And young girls cannot be left paying the price for political and institutional complacency.

THE INBOX ››

Hypocrisy in claims

I am writing to highlight the gap between what Goa's Chief Minister says and what his government does. At the Goa Forest Diversity Festival 2026, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said that the government is committed to protecting water, forests and land, and that safeguarding nature is the duty of every citizen. However, when citizens do raise their voice, the response is disappointing. People of Chimbel are protesting against the Unity Mall project, saying it will damage Toyyar Lake and destroy forests and farmland. Environmentalists have also warned that the project will harm plants, animals and the local ecosystem. Despite this, the Chief Minister has refused to stop the project, calling it a "central government initiative". This shows that politics is being placed above people's concerns and environmental protection. A similar situation can be seen in the proposed bridge from Salvador-do-Mundo to Chorao island. The project threatens mangroves, khazan lands and the Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary. Experts have warned of pollution, landslides and long-term damage to wildlife. Yet, the government continues to push the project. These cases reveal a clear double standard. While public statements speak of protecting nature, government actions support projects that harm it.

ALWYN FERNANDES, *Benaulim*

No leniency for accused in Arpora fire tragedy

The seriousness of the fire that led to the death of 25 people at Birch of Romeo Lane, Arpora, should not be taken lightly. Any leniency will send a wrong message that the accused are not being punished properly. The structure was built illegally on a salt pan and should have been demolished immediately. The Luthra brothers and others responsible should have been sentenced. Suitable compensation should be provided to the victims. At least Rs 10 lakh should be given to the next of kin of each person who died, and Rs 10 lakh to each injured person. Justice delayed is justice denied, and punishment should be imposed without further delay. If the negligence of the owners and those associated with them is not dealt with strictly, it will harm Goa's image as a safe tourist destination. Such incidents can seriously affect the confidence of tourists who visit the State for peaceful and memorable holidays.

STEPHAN DIAS, *Dona Paula*

Building a bridge will change Chorao island

The Goa government has reportedly proposed to build a bridge connecting Chorao island to the mainland. The proposal promises improved connectivity, economic opportunities, and easier access to essential services. But at what cost will the development come? Does Chorao really need a bridge when Ro-Ro ferries are in operation? Chorao island is a living, breathing ecosystem and one of Goa's last remaining pockets of rural serenity. Known for the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, lush mangroves, narrow winding roads, and close-knit village life, Chorao represents a Goa that has largely disappeared elsewhere.
A bridge, while convenient, threatens to irreversibly alter this fragile balance. Supporters of the bridge argue that island residents deserve better access to healthcare, education, and markets. Dependence on ferries can be inconvenient, especially during monsoons or medical emergencies. These concerns are genuine and cannot be dismissed. However, history has proof that wherever large bridges and highways are built, uncontrolled development has followed. This has led to real estate development, traffic congestion, and environmental degradation.
Chorao is surrounded by mangroves that act as natural buffers against flooding, support biodiversity, and sustain local livelihoods. Construction activity poses serious risks to these sensitive ecosystems. Approximately Rs. 274 crores is to be spent on building the proposed bridge. This amount could be spent judiciously to provide basic amenities for the villagers.

ADELMO FERNANDES, *Vasco*

Intimidation by Colva panchas

This is to bring to the notice of Colvenkars that there are at least two or three Colva panchas who intimidate or threaten people who complain about illegal activities in the village. This happens when (a) the concerned pancha is directly involved, or (b) the pancha, in an official capacity, supports or allows the illegal activity that has been exposed. A few months ago, a complainant even approached the Colva Police Station. However, the policewoman on duty avoided registering an FIR against the concerned Colva pancha. The main purpose of this message is to advise complainants that whenever there is an inspection related to any illegality in Colva, they should ensure that a video recording is done at the same time and shared publicly. Without this, these elected persons may freely intimidate or threaten complainants.

ARWIN MESQUITA, *Colva*

Tourism on our terms

The Goa government's decision to offer a Rs 2-crore airline incentive scheme for one year to attract more flights and strengthen air connectivity to the state does not appear to be a well-thought-out plan. Why should Goa, which is often described as a world-class destination, have to offer such incentives when there are several basic issues that need urgent attention? These include establishing a credible taxi and bus service, repairing back-breaking and bumpy roads, cleaning dirty bus stations, reducing exorbitant food prices at the airport, ensuring safe locales for visitors — with incidents such as the Birch Romeo case being a blot on Goa's reputation — protecting rivers, eliminating illegal land deals and removing casinos.
If we do not treat Goa's natural treasures with respect, how can we expect to treat those who visit the state any better? What is needed is a tourism policy that respects the state's residents, not one that makes them victims of short-sighted decisions and continued neglect. The government appears to react to issues in a knee-jerk manner, without thinking through the long-term impact on Goa's many challenges, including declining greenery. Is it any surprise, then, that tourists choose to fly halfway across Asia to destinations such as Thailand or Vietnam?

BRIAN DE SOUZA, *Margao*

Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

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In defence of the federal compact

The Sarkaria Commission, which submitted its report in 1988, was anchored in the philosophy of cooperative federalism. Nearly four decades later, however, there is a growing chorus of complaints that instead of consolidating this spirit, India is sliding towards a regime of coercive centralism. This concern was articulated forcefully by Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah at the South Indian Socialist Conference recently. His warning about this "dangerous shift" goes beyond partisan rhetoric and raises serious constitutional questions about the balance of power. At the heart of Siddaramaiah's critique is a convergence of concerns regarding the erosion of Centre-state consultation. A primary fear is "demographic punishment" through delimitation, which could diminish the political voice of the southern states despite their success in achieving population stabilisation. This is compounded by fiscal inequity; Karnataka receives barely 13 paise for every rupee it contributes in taxes, while the divisible pool is increasingly shrunk with the centre retaining cesses and surcharges. Siddaramaiah also argued that states are expected to deliver central schemes without adequate funds, flexibility, or prior consultation, violating both the federal and socialist spirit of the Constitution.

Unilateral central policies hinder regional aspirations, place cooperative federalism under strain

The ground-level impact of this lack of consultation is perhaps most visible in recent agricultural decisions. Unilateral central trade policies, such as permitting imports despite domestic surpluses, have repeatedly destabilised farm economies. Maize imports triggered procurement price crashes across producing states; duty-free pulse imports hurt growers during peak harvests; and cheap pepper imports have impacted farmers across the Western Ghats. Such decisions, taken without meaningful engagement with states, have left them scrambling to manage rural distress with limited fiscal tools.

The Sarkaria Commission, which anticipated these conflicts, made 247 recommendations, including setting up a permanent Inter-State Council headed by the Prime Minister, as a forum for dialogue and consultation. Although established in 1990, the Council has been steadily marginalised. Its last full meeting was held in July 2016, despite a mandate to meet at least three times a year. In the absence of this constitutional forum, disputes over policymaking and federal balance remain unresolved. Deepening these tensions is the confrontational role of governors in states with non-BJP governments, where Lok Bhavans are increasingly seen as sites of political obstruction rather than constitutional bridges. Cooperative federalism is not a slogan but a safety valve. It ensures that regional aspirations are negotiated within the constitutional framework rather than being overridden. Reviving institutions like the Inter-State Council and adopting a genuine 'Team India' approach, where the Centre facilitates rather than commands are essential to preserving the federal compact envisioned by the Constitution.

Ending child marriage begins with education

Bal vivah mukt abhiyan, a 100-day initiative launched by the Central government in December, is aimed at creating greater awareness about the regressive practice of child marriage. It was conceived in the wake of reports of the practice being prevalent in many parts of the country, even after decades of campaigns against it. Apart from the Prevention of Child Marriage Act of 2006, which has stringent provisions, India has other laws enacted for the safety and well-being of the girl child. State schemes such as *beti bachao, beti padhao* – envisioned to promote and ensure education of the girl child – have also been initiated, but the country is still far from its stated goal of ending child marriages by 2030.

Over the decades, the number of child marriages has consistently dropped. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), the incidence dropped from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 23.3% in 2019-21. This is, still, a very high incidence. According to UNICEF, India accounted for one-third of the 63 crore child marriages in the world in 2023. Variations in incidence within the country are striking. Kerala and Tamil Nadu have reported low rates, while West Bengal and Bihar – at over 40% – are among the states with the highest incidence. Intra-state variations in the numbers have also been prominent. Karnataka, which has a high incidence, has taken legislative measures to strengthen the Prevention of Child Marriage Act. Last year, child betrothals were sought to be made punishable; the quantum of punishment has also been enhanced.

Laws and campaigns have had a positive impact, but real reform should start in the classrooms

Socio-economic conditions and the education of girls are important factors that influence decisions behind child marriages. Lack of education and poverty often prompt parents to consider marrying off their daughters at an early age. It is a practice entrenched through generations. Though boys also used to be married off before adulthood, child marriages now mostly involve girls. These marriages push girls into a life of dependence, robbing them of their agency. They also risk exposing the girls to health complications from early pregnancy. Strategies to end the practice should aim at keeping girls in schools and colleges for longer periods. This can enable them to have a bigger say in matrimonial decisions and choices. Existing laws need to be enforced with greater intent and alacrity. Not all cases are reported or lead to prosecution; the rate of conviction is low. Campaigns should adopt a multi-pronged strategy, incorporating awareness about the social costs and legal deterrence.

FUTURE SHOCK

In a climate of unease, youth seek justice and jobs

Anxieties over the economy and technology are real, but the young are coping and hopeful of fairer societies

P JOHN J KENNEDY

A new global survey of young people has revealed a paradox about the world we are building: uncomfortable yet hopeful. According to the World Economic Forum's *Youth Pulse 2026* report, more than half of young people worldwide say financial stress and anxiety dominate their lives. Nearly one in two believe that the growing gap between the rich and the poor is the single most important economic force shaping their future. These are not theoretical worries. They are everyday experiences seen in rising rents, uncertain jobs, mounting education loans, recurring climate shocks, and the relentless pressure to get ahead in an unequal world.

The survey, based on responses from nearly 4,600 young people from 489 locations worldwide, captures a generation that is both worried and remarkably clear-eyed. Inflation, instability, and inequality are not just economic trends to them; they are daily constraints on their choices. When as many as 57% say financial worries weigh heavily on their minds, it is not just about short-term difficulties. It reveals a deeper flaw in the system: the economy may be expanding, but everyday life feels insecure, and wealth is being generated without reaching most people. What stands out is that inequality, not unemployment alone, sits at the centre of youth anxiety. Young people are not merely asking for jobs; they are asking for fairness.

Over decades, global economic growth has lifted millions out of poverty, but it has also concentrated wealth in fewer hands. Studies by institutions like the World Bank and Oxfam have repeatedly shown that income and wealth inequality have widened in many countries since the 1990s. Young people today enter labour markets where wages lag behind housing costs, where permanent jobs are replaced by contracts, and where social mobility feels more like an exception than a rule. However, this generation is not paralysed by pessimism. In regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful force.

Where formal employment systems fail to absorb young people, innovation becomes a survival strategy. From modest digital ventures to neighbourhood businesses, young people are finding ways to create work when jobs are scarce. While this spirit is admirable, it cannot be used as a reason for governments to step back from their duty to ensure stable employment, keep markets fair, and invest in public services.

The priorities young people have identified are strikingly practical. Creating employment opportunities tops the list (57.2%), followed closely by equal access to affordable, quality education (46.1%). Affordable housing and financial independence (32.2%) come next. These are not radical demands. They are the basic pillars of a dignified life. That these still need to be demanded so forcefully tells us how far policy has drifted from everyday realities.

Interestingly, climate change has refused to fade into the background, even under economic pressure. More than half of respondents (56%) see it as the greatest threat to the world, and 41% see it as a direct threat to their own lives. Young people are growing up amid floods, heatwaves, water shortages, and food insecurity. For them, climate change is not a future scenario; it is a present condition. What worries many is that climate action is often framed as a trade-off against jobs and growth, when young people increasingly see it as inseparable from economic justice.

Involved, but concerned

Politically, the survey pushes back against the idea that young people are apathetic. Nearly half of respondents see positive political changes, such as stronger civic participation and more inclusive policymaking. Notably, 36% say they are likely to run for political office. This is not a disengaged generation, but one that is tired of talk without power, protest without policy, and representation without tangible results.

Trust, however, remains local. Young people place more faith in community leaders than in distant national or global institutions, reflecting a desire for visible and accountable leadership. This also explains why 95% believe purpose-built youth communities are important, as they enable learning and collective problem-solving. That over 800 youth-led initiatives reached more than 2.2 million people in a single year shows that young people are already leading in practice, even without formal power.

Technology adds another layer of complexity. Two-thirds of respondents believe that artificial intelligence will reduce the number of entry-level jobs. This fear is not unfounded. Automation is already reshaping sectors like customer service, data processing, and even creative work. At the same time, nearly 60% of young people regularly use AI to build skills. This mix of unease and confidence captures the mood of the moment. Young people are learning to adjust faster than the systems around them, but they also know that personal adjustment has its limits. Without clear, future-ready policies on education, skill development, and job creation, new technologies risk widening existing gaps rather than closing them.

What the survey reveals is not a generation seeking pity, but one asking to be taken seriously. Young people are fully aware of the challenges before them. They may feel anxious, but they are also informed, involved, and willing to step up. They are not turning their backs on democracy, markets, or technology. They simply want these systems to serve more than a small, privileged minority. Leaders, therefore, must remember that inequality cannot be solved with speeches alone; it demands concrete action. It remains to be seen if they will rise to that expectation.

(The writer is a former professor and dean, Christ University, Bengaluru)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Before banks, there was courtyard

Wealthy families lived under constant insecurity and the threat of losing their chattel

SIDDHARTH NANDI

Ours was a joint family residing in our ancestral home in a remote village in Bengal. More than thirty members shared the same roof. Except for my grandfather, a high school headmaster, every adult in the family was engaged in the wholesale business of conch shell materials.

Needless to say, our family was a comfortably rich one in the village. Even during the great Bengal famine, popularly known as *Panchasher Mannantar*, the family was neither scorched nor singed by the heat of poverty and starvation. We possessed enough wealth in the form of gold ornaments, which were under the safe custody of my great-grandmother.

Before the nationalisation of banks in 1969, public trust in the banking system in India plummeted woefully. Wealthy and well-to-do families lived under constant insecurity and the threat of losing their chattel. Robbery was so prevalent in rural areas that miscreants would barge into houses and plunder everything with impunity. In our ancestral village home, however, robbers dared not enter forcefully, as the family consisted of several strong and stout young men who had foiled multiple burglary attempts.

I once heard my father recall an interesting incident involving our great-grandmother. My father was then a boy, not yet in his teens. On one occasion, the entire family had to travel to the district town and stay there for a few days to attend a post-funeral ceremony of a close relative. It was the first time the house had been left without a single family member.

When everyone returned after a few days, no sooner had my great-grandmother stepped into the courtyard of the house than she began searching nervously for something on the front porch. Suddenly, she picked up a small crowbar and started digging the soil frantically. Other members of the household joined her digging, mechanically unaware of what they were looking for.

When my great-grandfather noticed this, he scolded her sharply and demanded an explanation. With trembling lips, my great-grandmother revealed that she had packed all her gold ornaments in a small brass jewel case and buried it in the courtyard before leaving. She added that she had placed a stone to mark the spot. To her utter bewilderment, she could no longer locate her valuables.

My great-grandfather then took charge. He began tapping the ground lightly with the flat end of the crowbar until it sank slightly at one particular spot where the soil felt softer. He dug a little more, and a faint clink was heard. The tip of the crowbar had unmistakably touched the brass coffer.

My great-grandmother heaved a sigh of relief as she examined its contents and found them intact. My great-grandfather calmly explained that the stone must have been displaced somehow.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Board of Peace a threat to UN's role

US President Donald Trump's initiative to establish a US-led Gaza Board of Peace, and to invite world leaders including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan's prime minister, appears designed to undermine the United Nations and effectively usurp the peacekeeping role of the UN Security Council. The Board's mandate, authority and governance remain opaque, but its intent is clear: to assert unilateral US dominance over an issue that demands multilateral legitimacy. India has wisely refrained from joining so far, signalling its continued commitment to a just resolution of the Palestine question through dialogue and a two-state solution. Participation merely to appease President Trump would damage India's diplomatic credibility and long-standing foreign policy principles. Any such decision must follow wider consultation with opposition leaders, diplomats and regional experts, rather than be driven by personal equations or political spectacle.
S K Choudhury, Bengaluru

Punish the guilty

I refer to 'Airport ground staffer held for sexually harassing foreigner' (Jan 23). It is concerning that public spaces like airports are not safe for women. Despite rigorous security checks, women remain vulnerable. Such incidents harm India's image as a tourist destination. Officials must punish the offender harshly, setting an example that such behaviour won't be tolerated. Women, Indian or foreign, deserve safety and respect. The guilty should be given exemplary punishment to set an example to deter potential offenders.
Niveditha Sreejith, Bengaluru

Build AI capacity

Karnataka Chief Secretary Shalini Rajneesh's admission that the state is struggling to find AI professionals should be a wake-up call (Classrooms lag behind state's AI ambition, Jan 22). For a region that prides itself as India's technology capital, the inability of even premier institutes to supply adequate AI talent exposes a widening gap between ambition and capacity. The IT Policy 2025-2030 aims for an "AI-native" economy, but a lagging education system may hinder progress. Karnataka must focus on skilling its students to address this issue.
K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Do away with the post

The increasing confrontation between governors and non-NDA-ruled states is a serious concern. Instead of acting as guides and philosophers, Governors have become obstacles to smooth relations between state governments and the Centre, threatening the foundations of our democratic republic. As these posts are a colonial legacy, it is time to consider abolishing them.
V Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: **letters@deccanherald.co.in** (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

I was the CM twice. I worked without betraying the people. I served the people in a way that satisfied my soul...When I waived off loans twice, I did not look at the Centre. I waived loan repayments by drawing on the state treasury.
H D Kumaraswamy, Union Minister and JDS MP

Self praise is no praise at all.
Lord Byron

TO BE PRECISE

Pollution poses greater threat to India's economy than tariffs: Former IMF chief economist at Davos

IN PERSPECTIVE

India on a tightrope at Chabahar

Tariffs push India to reassess its stakes in the port. Strategic interests must be secured without alienating the US

MAHESH GANGULY AND MOHD HADI RAZA

The strategic bet India placed on Chabahar is facing its strongest test in recent times. Donald Trump's recent threat to impose a 25% tariff on countries trading with Iran amid the ongoing volatility in the country and Washington's push to further isolate the Islamic Republic has ruffled feathers in New Delhi's strategic circles. Compounding this, the six-month US sanctions waiver shielding India's operations at Chabahar is set to expire in April 2026, deepening uncertainty around one of India's most critical projects. With reports of India's possible pullback from the port circulating widely, officials in New Delhi have indicated cautious engagement with Washington to manage the fallout.

Located on Iran's southern coast along the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar offers India a rare strategic corridor that bypasses Pakistan and opens direct access to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Its position outside the Strait of Hormuz shields it from maritime choke point risks; its deep-water capacity allows it to handle large vessels while its status as a free economic zone simplifies customs and taxation procedures – factors that boost its commercial viability.

More critically, Chabahar underwrites India's access to Central Asia, a region of renewed geopolitical attention, and a rich source of uranium, rare earths, and critical minerals vital for India's semiconductor self-reliance, defence indigenisation, telecom expansion, and green transition. New Delhi has been steadily seeking to anchor itself in the region through the Connect Central Asia policy (2012) and the India-Central Asia dialogues. Trade with Central Asian economies has steadily grown from $500 million in 2014 to nearly $2 billion in 2025, with estimates suggesting an additional $2 billion in untapped potential.

Chabahar also underpins the tentative reset in ties between India and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan by serving the interests of both sides. Since Kabul fell to the Taliban, India has used Chabahar to send 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses, keeping its humanitarian and development outreach intact.

Besides these, the port anchors the broader connectivity initiatives such as the 700-km Chabahar-Zahedan railway and the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-km multimodal network linking India to Russia and Europe via Iran. Its proximity – 170 km west of Pakistan's China-backed Gwadar port – significantly elevates its geopolitical significance, offering India a counterweight to China's expanding maritime and continental footprint.

Thus, India's long-term involvement in Chabahar reflects a multifaceted strategic logic. Its commitments reflect a confidence in Chabahar as a long-term strategic asset. However, evolving geopolitical pressures now cast uncertainty over these investments.

Fallout and damage control

Trump's renewed sanction threat confronts New Delhi with a delicate balancing act. Scaling down operations would mean relinquishing a key geopolitical asset at a moment when India's Central Asia ambitions, re-engagement with Afghanistan, and regional connectivity through INSTC depend on Chabahar's viability. Any retreat could weaken India's credibility as a reliable long-term partner, potentially ceding greater strategic space to Beijing.

Conversely, openly defying US sanctions carries high long-term costs, particularly at a time when India is already under US sanctions for its continued purchase of Russian crude and souring tensions following India's Operation Sindoor and New Delhi's rejection of Trump's claim of brokering an India-Pakistan ceasefire. Further friction risks undermining India's broader relationship with Washington – spanning from the Mineral Security Partnership, India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem, Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology, and the Quad – platforms that are central to India's global positioning.

More importantly, Trump's increasingly fluid and transactional approach towards Pakistan pushes India to tread carefully since any further deterioration in India-US relations could allow Islamabad a greater room to align itself more closely with Washington's shifting priorities.

As pressure mounts on India's strategic hinge at Chabahar, New Delhi has been compelled to reassess multiple options. Discussions within the Ministry of External Affairs on reallocating the committed $120 million or creating a separate operating entity to limit direct governmental exposure signal this recalibration. Yet tactical adjustments alone will not suffice. India must intensify diplomatic engagement with Washington to seek workable alternatives, while simultaneously preparing contingency pathways that preserve Chabahar's operational continuity without breaching US sanctions.

The Chabahar episode captures a classic foreign policy dilemma for India: how to safeguard a vital geostrategic asset while preserving sufficient diplomatic elbow-room to manage inevitable political and strategic fallout. The port thus stands as a strategic tightrope where every step demands balance, and every misstep carries significant trade-offs.

(Mahesh is a teaching assistant and research fellow at IIT-Bombay and Raza is a researcher at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi)

EDITORIAL

"The simple step of a courageous individual is not to take part in the lie — Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.
— Ramnath Goenka

WORLD DECLARES DEATH OF OLD ECONOMIC ORDER, BUT NEW ONE IS UNBORN

THE just-concluded World Economic Forum at Davos drove home a bitter truth. That globalisation has failed us all, and the world no longer relies and operates on the rules-based international order that once promised shared prosperity. From Asia to Europe, leaders asserted that we are witnessing a permanent shift and economies are caught unprepared. As Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani of Qatar observed, the checks and balances put in place following the Second World War are now gone. Echoing the sentiment, Singapore's Tharman Shanmugaratnam recalled how we are witnessing an erosion of the norms, conventions and trust built over 80 years, reinforcing the decline into disorder. Speaking for Europe, Ursula von der Leyen cautioned that the world can capitalise on the opportunity only if it recognises that this change is irreversible.

The most notable commentary came from Canada and the US. If Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney characterised the moment as a rupture, and not a transition, US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick concluded that globalisation has failed as policy. Their views on the beneficiaries, however, differed starkly. Carney stressed that free-trade globalisation under US leadership never really offered win-win outcomes for other countries. Instead, the arrangement favoured American corporations and banks, and like-minded capitalists elsewhere. But since this bargain no longer works, he urged economies to adapt to a world in which US capitalism no longer offers predictable leadership. Lutnick, on the other hand, played victim of US policies, reasoning that globalisation, free trade and offshoring had left America and its workers poorer. Hence the Trump administration's about-turn, advocating an America First policy—prioritising domestic workers and national interests—even if it means demanding alignment and obedience from everyone else.

What's clear is that the economic order is undergoing a tectonic shift, much like it did after the two World Wars and the Cold War. Even if globalisation's death is clear and present, in truth, there are few alternative paths to proceed along right now. The multilateral world continues to be grounded in the existing institutions and norms, though it's possible that the power structure would move from the West to the Global South. When that happens, one speaker noted, the task would not be to abandon alliances, but to engage on equal and transparent terms.

DOGS SUFFERING IN GAP BETWEEN PLAN AND ACTION

THOUGH the Supreme Court has vacillated on the issue of stray dogs in recent times, it has not ordered their killing. Yet, that is what has been happening across Telangana in recent weeks. In Kamareddy district, 244 dog carcasses were found; on the outskirts of Hyderabad, dozens of dogs were reportedly poisoned. This is fear translating into vigilante action.

Following the death of a child from rabies, the apex court had initiated *suo motu* proceedings and directed that strays be shifted from the streets to shelters. Later, it modified the ruling, allowing release of the dogs after sterilisation and vaccination as per the Animal Birth Control Rules, 2023. Feeding was restricted to designated zones. It further ordered that strays be removed from the premises of schools, universities, hospitals, bus depots, railway stations and other public places. The question the court is now considering is whether to make the states liable for failing to enforce the rules.

It is obvious that the states and related institutions have so far failed to implement the directives. But do civic bodies have the capacity to strictly follow them? There is neither the infrastructure, nor the funds and personnel. There also seems to be an absence of strong will for it among bureaucrats. Take Hyderabad. It has five animal birth control centres, none of them certified by the Animal Welfare Board. And now, dogs are being removed from 'sensitive areas' with no clear destination. When governance fails, people do what they can to save themselves. The legal framework asks for patience, monitoring and sustained investment. The administrative response, shaped by public anger, falls far shorter. In this gap, the poor animals are facing inhuman cruelty.

India has a garbage management problem that helps feed the strays, a broken ABC system refuses to scale up, a data problem that masks the reality and a funding vacuum that cripples long-term control. Add to this a governance culture that substitutes knee-jerk reaction for planning. These failures make no noise and bite no one immediately—which is why they are easier to ignore than the dogs. Hence the cycle continues. For any measure to be effective, the system must work as it is intended to. Unfortunately, at the moment, we have a policy without the practical tools to implement it.

QUICK TAKE

JOIN POLLUTION FIGHT

THIS week, the judiciary again emerged as the main driver in the fight against pollution. Days after a three-judge Supreme Court bench ordered time-bound action on a report by the Commission for Air Quality Management, the Bombay High Court threatened to withhold the salaries of commissioners of the Navi Mumbai and Brihanmumbai municipal corporations if they did not implement effective anti-pollution measures. Concluding that vehicular emission is the biggest polluter in the national capital, the commission underlined the need for reducing polluting vehicles, implementing a tougher pollution certificate and improving public transport. On the first two measures, the onus is squarely on the government. But for the third one, citizens bear the responsibility to change their commute habits.

THE speech Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered at the World Economic Forum in Davos has become popular. In social media parlance, it went viral though it was no contagion. On the other hand, it was like announcing vaccine trials for the rapaciousness and provocations of President Donald Trump, who is trying to reshape the US in his own image. Carney's was the first official announcement of the end of the world order as we knew it.

"Let me be direct. We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition," Carney declared with the ease of a historian. There was a quiet dignity and extraordinary clarity in the language he employed. There was no trace of mourning and complaining, but only an urgency to formulate a pragmatic future. "We know the old order is not coming back. We shouldn't mourn it. Nostalgia is not a strategy, but we believe that from the fracture we can build something bigger, better, stronger, more just," he said.

At the end, Carney said it was time for the world's "middle powers" to pull down the pretence that we had put up, which conveniently suppressed "the risks of extreme global integration". He made it sound more like a convenient exhibition of loyalty to a mafioso led by bigger economies and greater powers. There was no need to continue with the pretence because the gloves were off: "In a world of great power rivalry, the countries in between have a choice: compete with each other for favour, or combine to create a third path with impact."

Since 1991, India too had put up the show Carney referred to. But now that there is a broad agreement that it should be pulled down, the question is how does one do it—loudly or quietly? Should it be done by engaging Trump on every provocative statement, matching him word for word, following every twist and feeding a gathering storm? Or, should one ignore the bullying with a mesh and wisdom of silence while working firmly towards an alternative path of impact, as Carney suggested.

It appears Prime Minister Narendra Modi has chosen the path of silence to deal with the threats and insults of Trump, which are occasionally punctuated by concessions of absurd love and admiration. In the case of Modi and India, Trump has not been totally dismissive or wholly embracing. However, his middle path is not one of balance, but of extreme fickleness and precariousness.

India has deployed silence as a strategic political tool in the face of recent geopolitical ruptures. Several prime ministers have used quietude to effect, but spurred by different impulses

WHEN SILENCE IS GOLDEN, IT'S A FOLLY TO BE VERBOSE

SUGATA SRINIVASARAJU
Senior journalist and author of *The Conscience Network: A Chronicle of Resistance to a Dictatorship*

SOURAV ROY

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated in Davos that India and the EU were on the "cusp of a historic trade agreement", and it was the "mother of all trade deals". If this is indicative of anything, it is about the beguiling stillness with which India has reoriented and reorganised itself, and begun the search for alternatives in a ruptured world. This is far from the casualness of political verbosities that often take over noisy democracies.

We have witnessed something similar in Modi's approach when it comes to Russian oil, Iranian affairs, Ukrainian peace and the Palestinian question. Silence has been deployed as a strategic political tool. It is not about avoidance or being bewildered, but the simple wisdom of not adding to the mess that already exists, of not having to negotiate the emotion and emptiness of one's own words when meaning has become a slippery customer. It is a time of "rupture" as Carney said, and Modi seems to have read it well and early.

This silence of Modi, in this particular phase of global chaos, has to be distinguished from the accusations of his other silences. They have to be looked at independently. But it appears the Congress and its 'liberal' fellow travellers have lost the ability to slice, separate and place the silences in different silos.

A certain ideological stubbornness they have displayed has had a strange effect on the common man—they seem to be living up the pervasive allegation that they dance to foreign tunes in their minds. When the whole world is dumbstruck by Trumpian vulgarity and madness, they come across as enjoying the discomfort of Modi without realising that his discomfort is equated with that of India, and that it's deployed to frame national interest.

Just imagine Rahul Gandhi endorsing Trump's "dead economy" charge, and holding Modi to account on every unsubstantiated claim Trump has flung. More recently, Congressmen were caught interpreting Trump's half-sentences of ridicule. One office-bearer wrote in a social media post: "No American President ever dared to say that an Indian Prime Minister wanted to 'make him happy'. Trump said it about Modi because Washington knows India now has a weak PM, obsessed with optics, applause and propaganda."

Congress loyalists have forgotten that Manmohan Singh, in a moment of uncharacteristic articulation of unrequited feelings in 2008, told George W Bush that "the people of India deeply love you". Bush was no saint. And Nixon was downright abusive towards Indira Gandhi, irritated by her "moody silences". Singh was known for his silences too, but those largely sprang from his need to delicately negotiate political authority above him.

However, the legendary silences of Singh's mentor, P V Narasimha Rao, came from a certain nonchalance and cynicism, and perhaps also from a karmic belief about things sorting themselves out. H D Deve Gowda has used a Sanskrit phrase to speak of Modi's silence: "*Mounam kalaham naasti*" (There will be no quarrel if one is silent). Gowda said that Modi listens, but never reacts. Vajpayee's was about pauses, not silences.

In a recent book titled *Democracy and the Politics of Silence*, academic Mónica Brito Vieira argues about the underestimated place of silence in democratic life. In the mainstream Western tradition, there is a celebration of speech and its capacity to make things happen. The eastern traditions, however, have accommodated silence far more and perhaps to greater effect. While silencing is about repression, silence has a deeper and positive play.

Mohandas Gandhi was the greatest practitioner of the ritual of silence. For all the eloquent political communication Modi does with words, he does as much with his undercurrents of silence. If he has remained in power continuously, it means he has found his personal balance of words and silence.

(Views are personal)
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ARCTIC THAW, ALPINE MELTDOWN

PRATIK KANJILAL
Senior Fellow, Henry J Leir Institute of Migration and Human Security, Fletcher School, Tufts University

SPEAKEASY

WHO could have expected that news of the end of the world would be broadcast not from the UN General Assembly or a parliament, but from a talkshop run by an NGO set up by an engineer? That's what Davos is, actually. And who could have expected that 1970s' vintage Václav Havel would be invoked to make sense of the news? Or that the news peg would be Arctic Greenland, whose vicinity has been in the news only because global warming is shrinking the permanent ice pack, with consequences for global weather? Only the Russians are pleased because their northern ports may become all-weather, and anyway, they're tired of being cold and dreaming of holidays in Goa and Pattaya.

The Arctic is also important for aviation, and found its place in culture in Arlo Guthrie's 1969 hit '*Coming into Los Angeles*', which described his flight amid a planeload of chickens: "Coming in from London from over the pole/ Flying in a big airliner." During the Cold War, ballistic missile flight paths between the US and the USSR also passed over those regions, hence the strategic importance of US assets in Greenland. But the Cold War is long over and though Moscow still owns more nukes, Russia is not the same as the USSR. In contrast, Xi's China is greater than Mao and Deng's China. The geopolitical landscape has changed.

Canadian PM Mark Carney and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen turned a page in world affairs when they said at Davos that the crisis over Greenland and Nato is not a temporary aberration, and that the rules-based system and the idea of global governance are already history. Carney quoted Havel's 1978-79 *samizdat* essay, '*The Power of the Powerless*', which had travelled underground to Poland, where it provided the moral basis of the Solidarity movement.

Carney quoted Havel's parable of a grocer who puts up a sign on his shop window every day that says: "Workers of the world unite." Neither the grocer nor the observers believe in the Marxist slogan, but he puts it up in a ritual of compliance. The ritual is observed by all, and their mass compliance props up the totalitarian state.

Havel had alluded to the work of another now-forgotten dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who urged his readers not to live a lie. In Havel's parable, when one of the millions of people propping up the lie by observing empty rituals just stops, the edifice of absolute power begins to crumble. Carney applied the logic to the post-war world, which had willingly worked towards common security. But in the face of annexation, it is time for the grocer to take down the sign.

Indeed, the idea of a grand Western alliance of equals was a lie, because after the colonial period, European powers declined while the US grew. The latter became the steward of a reasonably stable global system that protected the interests

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The invocation of Czech author Václav Havel's words on dissent was unexpected at the Davos talk-shop. As was the focus on Arctic geopolitics. The US-anchored Western order is over. But the rhetoric of collapsing institutions opens an opportunity to forge a more representative international community

of lesser Western powers. It was flawed, but far more humane than the multi-polar network of spheres of influence it supplanted, in which it was easy to get away with murder in your own territory. Nations hesitated to intervene in the spheres of influence of others—which included their imperial possessions.

The Bengal famine of 1943 killed millions because Winston Churchill rejected international aid. The Allies were capable of shipping grain to Calcutta despite wartime rationing among their own people, but they hesitated to intrude without permission upon a British colony. A decade earlier, Stalin's forced collectivisation policy had precipitated the Holodomor in Ukraine. In the press, the world saw pictures of starved people in the streets of Kharkiv, which was then the capital—a decade later, they would see similar scenes in the streets of Calcutta.

But Ukraine was part of the Russian empire, and nations and agencies that would have liked to help hesitated to cross a line. Similarly, the Western powers knew of atrocities committed by the Japanese for over three decades in Korea and Manchuria. They did not intervene for fear of having to tangle with Japan until Pearl Harbour was attacked.

These are only a few of many humanitarian outrages which could have been contained, had not the great powers carved up the world into imperial territories and spheres of influence. The idea of an 'international community' developed after the Second World War and the founding of the UN. It is a legal fiction, but since it represents the union of national wills—often via the UN—it carries much more moral weight than individual nations, even those which lay claim to manifest destiny. This quality gave legitimacy to the coalition intervention in the Balkans, and to elements of the international community that have intervened in African conflicts from Biafra to Rwanda and Mali.

Now, as the collapse of Nato reorders the strategic landscape, and in the absence of an effective UN, there appears to be no nation which can lead a new international community or coalition. So the world is ready to fall back on the only alternative it knows—spheres of influence. The system permitted unbelievable violence against civilian populations in the pre-nuclear world. Now, with nine states owning over 12,000 warheads, it is unlikely to go anywhere except a dark place. But the rhetoric at Davos offers an opportunity to imagine a new, more globalised and more representative international community, instead of regressing back to the age of empires.

(Views are personal)
(Tweets @pratik_k)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Don's tactics

Ref: *Greenland marks the return* (Jan 23). Wisdom dawned to Don as fast as the melting rate of ice in Greenland. Trump's recalibration must be to revert to his favourable tariff and trade treatment of the UK and cause the near-Arctic nation to drift further away from the continent to help him get closer to Greenland.
K S Mohana Murugan, Chennai

Tech-led probe

Ref: *DGP's sleaze video* (Jan 23). Scandals are not new, but this case marks a dangerous first. Power vitiates consent; office demands unimpeachable conduct. If genuine, the security failures are grave. Only an independent, tech-led probe can authenticate consent and accountability and protect institutional credibility.
K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Education priorities

Ref: *One more bhasha, many questions* (Jan 23). Rather than enriching education, such a mandate risks diluting academic focus and diverting already-stretched resources. One must ask what a postgraduate science student in Uttar Pradesh would truly gain by being compelled to learn a South Indian language. Higher education should prioritise depth, relevance and academic freedom.
Venkata Kommula, Hyderabad

Organic multilingualism

The directive overlooks how students in border areas absorb a neighbouring state's languages organically through communication and commerce. Mandating yet another language adds needless pressure. Genuine choice would honour diversity, ease burdens and truly encourage multilingualism.
K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

Board bluff

Ref: *India skips Board of Peace* (Jan 23). India did well to skip the launch which is nothing but a handmaiden of the unpredictable Donald Trump to further his shoot-from-the-hip *modus operandi*. Pakistan's attendance, despite domestic opposition, is indicative of the board's quality and justifies India's non-attendance.
George Jacob, Kochi

Vijay's challenge

Ref: *ECI gives Vijay 'whistle' symbol* (Jan 23). The approval must have come as a shot in the arm for TVK cadres. But Vijay cannot whistle away the issues confronting the people. The battle of the ballot is not a cakewalk in a thriving multi-party system.
S Ramakrishnasayee, email

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Time is ripe for boosting nano-GCCs in India

GLOBAL Capability Centres (GCCs) have emerged as an important fulcrum of Indian IT industry. With around 2,000 GCCs and more than $64 billion of exports, India is leading the way in the global GCC ecosystem. In addition, around two million people are working directly in these GCCs, making it one of the fastest growing job creator segments in the country. Against this backdrop, the Budget 2026 can be a gamechanger in pushing the growth further. Currently, most GCCs are concentrated in the tier-I and II cities. Only a handful of GCCs have gone to the tier-III cities. In a practical sense, big foreign firms with thousands of technology professionals may not be keen to open their GCCs in tier-III centres. It is more suitable for nano GCCs. It means GCCs with 10-50 employees will be keener to establish technology centres in tier-III cities than investing heavily in a metro centre, where the real estate prices are sky high. These nano GCCs will be interested to enter tier-III centres if they get optimum talent in good numbers and active support from the state agencies. These centres can be opened in satellite cities, which are near to metro centres. Here, talent can be tapped from nearby centres.

In this respect, the Budget 2026 can act as a facilitator. Earlier budgets have already brought in several facilitative steps for the growth of GCCs in India. For instance, 100 per cent Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has been allowed under the automatic route in sectors where GCCs are established like BFSI (banking, finance services & insurance), IT, technology and others. Simplified regulatory processes and digital compliance have been introduced for setting up GCCs. Attractive financial incentives are being given to GCCs if they set up centres in Special Economic Zones (SEZs). For instance, 100 per cent tax exemption is being given to all exports done from such centres. Many states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and others have come up with state-specific GCC policies. Similarly, many have been providing active encouragement to set up GCCs in their states as part of their ICT policy framework.

These are encouraging developments. Meanwhile, the central government is in the process of coming up with a National Policy Framework for GCCs. Hopefully, the Budget 2026 can provide a boost to this framework. Tax incentive for wider geographical distribution is the need of the hour. Without a robust incentive structure, foreign firms may not be keen to set up their technology captives in tier-III cities. In recent years, it has been seen that many foreign firms having presence for more than one decade or so, are expanding to other cities. These big companies will be interested in entering small urban centres with the right amount of fiscal and monetary encouragement. Notably, many GCCs execute cutting-edge technology work from Indian centres. In the AI era, Indian centres have emerged as key innovation units for their parent firms. This should be encashed on a priority basis. If GCCs can enter small urban centres then it will not only ensure regional growth, it will also stop talent migration to metro cities. Currently, promising talent must move to metro centres because of job opportunities and career growth prospects. If this can be available in tier-III cities, then reverse migration will happen. This augurs well for equitable distribution of wealth. Budget 2026 will be important in many ways for the Indian IT industry. At a time, the US policies are becoming restrictive in nature with global companies flocking India for setting up technology centres, significant push for GCCs through budgetary provisions is of significant importance.

2026 elections: Electorate is moving on; Opposition is trapped in a losing loop

BOLD talk
V RAMU SARMA

As India enters a prolonged election cycle, its opposition remains trapped in moral posturing and selective outrage. Defiance of judicial scrutiny, double standards on free speech, and a refusal to introspect have replaced credible political alternatives. From attacks on Sanātana Dharma to the manufactured charge of Islamophobia, ideology increasingly trumps constitutional restraint—leaving voters disillusioned and democratic institutions weakened ahead of the 2026 polls.

THE country is set to witness 12 Assembly elections over the next 24 months. This near-continuous electoral cycle ensures that India's political ecosystem—ruling BJP, opposition parties, ideological fellow travellers, NGOs, social media influencers and large sections of the commentariat—will remain locked in campaign mode. Unfortunately, it also means being trapped in a narrow rhetorical groove, where narratives matter more than governance and posturing replaces introspection.

If recent trends are any indication, the opposition ecosystem shows little inclination to course-correct despite repeated electoral defeats. Its playbook remains unchanged: selective outrage, ideological rigidity, and a reflexive reliance on constructed binaries—secular versus communal, progressive versus regressive, liberal versus majoritarian. The most visible manifestation of this stagnation is its silence—or worse, active defence—when Sanātana Dharma is attacked.

Those who describe Sanātana Dharma as "dengue" or "malaria" and openly call for its "eradication" are not only shielded but valorised. When courts intervene, as the Madras High Court did in the case of Udhayanidhi Stalin's controversial remarks, the response is not introspection but defiance. The judgment is dismissed as erroneous, inconvenient, or ideologically motivated. What emerges is not dissent but disdain for constitutional restraint.

DMK's refusal to accept judicial scrutiny exposes a deeper ideological rigidity that goes beyond a legal disagreement. The High Court, while examining petitions seeking action, reaffirmed a foundational constitutional principle: free speech is not absolute, and inflammatory calls targeting belief systems followed by millions carry consequences. Instead of engaging with the legal and ethical implications, the DMK framed the verdict as an attack on Dravidian ideology and rationalism.

This is a dangerous distortion. Rationalism does not grant a license to demonise faith. Constitutional democracy does not permit calls for eradication of belief systems, irrespective of which religion is targeted. By rejecting the verdict, the DMK signalled to its cadre that ideology trumps constitutional balance—a message that weakens the rule of law itself.

At the heart of the opposition's favourite charge—Islamophobia—lies a deliberate conflation. Criticism of Islamist extremism, scrutiny of minority appeasement, or debate over religious practices is routinely equated with hatred of Muslims as a community. This is not accidental; it is strategic. By collapsing nuance into outrage, the opposition ecosystem constructs a moral shield that forecloses debate.

Anyone who questioned triple talaq before it was outlawed, raised concerns over Waqf Board overreach, radical sermons, or even demographic anxieties has been swiftly branded bigoted. Fear of being cancelled replaces reasoned argument. Public discourse is impoverished, not enriched.

This strategy serves two immediate political purposes. First, it consolidates minority vote banks by projecting the opposition as the sole bulwark against an allegedly majoritarian state. Second, it delegitimises political opponents without engaging them on governance or policy.

But the long-term cost is severe. It freezes Muslims into a perpetual victimhood narrative, denying them agency, self-critique and reform. This asymmetry is not accidental. It is electoral calculus masquerading as moral virtue.

The hypocrisy is glaring. The same voices that demand zero tolerance for "hate speech" when minorities are concerned suddenly discover free speech absolutism when Hindu beliefs are targeted. This selective morality erodes credibility and fuels public cynicism.

The organisational decay of the opposition only compounds this problem. Family-run parties like the Congress and the Samajwadi Party have steadily lost credibility. The Samajwadi Party does not even have a president outside the family. The Congress, despite having an octogenarian president, still looks to an undefined "high command" for all major decisions.

After covering Congress politics since 1980, one thing is clear: the Congress Working Committee is not the high command. It routinely passes one-line resolutions authorising the high command to decide. The identity of this high command is no mystery—it was Indira Gandhi earlier and is now the Gandhi family, led by Sonia Gandhi. This opacity weakens institutional legitimacy and leadership credibility.

In contrast, the BJP—despite being criticised for centralisation—follows a more transparent decision-making structure. Major decisions are debated among senior leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh and J.P. Nadda, but the final announcement is made by the party president from the party office. The absence of a mystical "high command" lends institutional weight to party positions. Even symbolic gestures—such as Modi stating that the party president is his "boss" in organisational matters—help project the party as larger than individuals. Congress and the likes would do well to take note.

As Assembly elections approach, the opposition appears determined to cling to familiar tropes while ignoring ground realities.

Take Tamil Nadu, which goes to polls later this year. The situation is complex and fluid, marked by silent voter churn, generational shifts, alliance anxieties and fatigue with predictable politics. The DMK's welfare-heavy governance model—free travel for women, health insurance expansion, school infrastructure and urban development—has created tangible grassroots touchpoints.

Yet beneath this apparent solidity lies unmistakable anti-incumbency. It is not a revolt but a quiet questioning. Rising prices, youth unemployment, law-and-order perceptions and excessive centralisation of power within a small leadership circle are part of everyday conversations. Tamil Nadu's electorate is no longer monolithic. Urban middle classes, first-time voters and aspirational youth are weary of the DMK-versus-AIADMK binary.

The AIADMK, under Edappadi K Palaniswami, has stabilised after years of internal chaos, but stability is not momentum. Its criticism of the DMK often sounds reactive rather than visionary. The BJP, meanwhile, remains a polarising presence—making incremental gains but still seen as culturally distant from Tamil political ethos. Actor Vijay's Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam adds an unpredictable layer, reflecting a deeper yearning for alternatives.

West Bengal mirrors a similar unease. The high-voltage TMC–BJP confrontation dominates public space, but voter fatigue is growing. Mamata Banerjee remains the state's most formidable mass leader, with welfare schemes like Kanyashree and Lakshmir Bhandar securing loyalty. Yet prolonged dominance has normalised allegations of corruption, syndicate culture and political intimidation.

Urban middle classes and youth increasingly speak of stagnation—limited economic opportunities and politicisation of everyday life. The BJP has pockets of strength in North Bengal and Junglemahal but has failed to convert discontent into trust. The Left and Congress survive largely on nostalgia, unable to convert intellectual sympathy into electoral traction.

What makes the 2026 election cycle significant is not the promise of transformation but the risk of entrenchment. Voters are not choosing who inspires hope; they are choosing who provokes less fear.

Democracies are not sustained by narratives alone. They endure through institutions, laws and a shared commitment to fairness. Until the opposition internalises this truth—moves beyond selective outrage, respects judicial authority, and engages honestly with social complexity—it will remain trapped in rhetoric: loud, moralistic and increasingly disconnected from the lived reality of the Indian voter.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

Chandrababu Naidu is indeed the 'original man of Davos'

Neelayapalem Vijay Kumar

CHIEF Minister of Andhra Pradesh N Chandrababu Naidu was during his ongoing Davos Summit's sojourn has been called in certain quarters with a sobriquet, 'The Original Man of Davos'. Naidu and Davos have become so synonymous over the past three decades that Davos has become a must-visit destination in his itinerary every year.

Representing an Indian State in Davos for 15 years since his first visit in 1997 along with H D Deve Gowda, the then CM of Karnataka, in terms of the present history is a considerable period. While it is true that many national leaders and heads of state, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Chinese President Xi Jinping, or various European Commission Presidents, attend Davos frequently, they usually do so in the capacity as head of a nation. Perhaps, there cannot be any other sub-national political leader in the World, who had so many visits to Davos.

Two key questions arise for any Zen X generation who might chuckle seeing the rousing attention Naidu at Davos. The first question is that in this long association with Davos, what has Naidu achieved to his State and the country during his 15 visits; two, why was Naidu so sought after that became dear to many of the industrialists out there in Davos?

The results of any effort often match with the order of the world during that period. Naidu was instrumental in placing both India and Andhra Pradesh as an opportune place with the investor's global investment map. Until then, no Indian state had its self-promotion system as the Centre handled the processes. Honestly, he was just a Chief Minister of a State, but he entered uncharted territory on which no other Chief Minister had dared to venture earlier. It was such a massive transformation that Naidu began being referred to as the CEO of Andhra Pradesh.

He virtually introduced Andhra Pradesh to the world as a possible investment destination. Naidu famously used the Davos platform to network with global tech leaders; telling India's story echoing that India and Andhra Pradesh mean serious business.

Notwithstanding the number of MOUs signed, it was a relentless pursuit with the investors that decided the positive outcome. The first break to happen was undoubtedly, Microsoft establishing its first development centre outside the United States in Hyderabad. His persistent outreach eventually convinced Bill Gates in 1988. That gave the fillip and confidence for Naidu to strive to get more capital flow into Andhra Pradesh.

The initial years visits to Davos led to engagement with many global leaders and investors. These Davos interactions provided the international credibility needed to attract IT giants, leading to the establishment of HITEC city in Hyderabad, which today is a sprawling global technology hub.

The second major recognition came in the form of Naidu getting recognised by the World Bank. The global interactions both in Davos and in several other leading platforms paved the way for the World Bank to extend loans directly to Andhra Pradesh, a first for any Indian state, for economic restructuring. This was a direct result of Naidu's governance and the reform-oriented practices ranging from collegiate technical education, livelihoods, electricity roads, that he promoted.

Until he lost elections in 2004, Naidu utilised the Davos platform to effectively position Andhra Pradesh as the best possible investment destination. He was in fact considered a pioneer in effectively utilising the platform to brand build Andhra Pradesh. The then capital of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, has seen a steady flow of IT companies starting with Microsoft and continued have the likes of MNC biggies like, Oracle, Deloitte, etc along with Indian IT biggies like Infosys, Wipro, TCS, Satyam and others who established huge campuses. Naidu effectively made Hyderabad which was largely a tourist place of historical importance to a bustling IT City which works on cutting edge technologies in just a span of about seven years.

He participated in the WEF conferences continuously from 1997 to 2004. Naidu's visits helped establish not only Andhra Pradesh, but India as a credible investment destination on the world stage. It also instilled in industrialists the belief that "Andhra Pradesh means Business".

The irony is that the same recognition for Naidu from world's institutions, including the World Bank and others was exploited shrewdly by the then opposition in the State, Congress Party, while Communists branded him as the pawn in the alleged evil designs of WB and other organizations which led to his downfall in 2004. But then, he took it as professional perils of being involved in reform-oriented governance. He continued with his reform zeal even when out of power thus making him the darling of professionals. The seeds of development thus laid by Naidu did not go futile. IT companies grew manifold in the next ten years.

Naidu was on a renewed mission post bifurcation of the State. It is a mission as he needs to rebuild an entire state. During 2014-19 his visits to Davos were instrumental in getting companies like Airbus, Pioneer Hitachi, Med Tech, etc along with many Indian companies. The dialogues in Davos helped AP to organize three industrial conferences in the state between 2014-19 resulting in lakhs of crores of agreements.

Coming to the present times, the present visit to Davos has its own challenges. The real ambition of Andhra Pradesh is not just to attract investment but to attract the right kind of capital. The business and world dynamics that led to the success in the late 90s and early millennium have changed. Not only are the world's geopolitical flavours getting changed frequently, but even business perspectives have also changed. Andhra seeks to become a strong force in AI, green storage energy, advanced manufacturing, space, reduction of emphasis on fossil fuels etc. Destinations like Davos are no longer just a marketplace where MOUs can be made just like that. Global investors are now looking at intellectual inputs.

Chandrababu Naidu's consistent participation in Davos investment summits to promote investments for Andhra Pradesh and in turn for India, continues to be a trailblazer for Indian leaders at Davos.

WEF Davos can be said to be a part of Naidu's turn-around story of Andhra Pradesh. He can be rightly called as the original Davos Man at least in Indian shores.

(The writer is a spokesperson of TDP and Chairman of AP Bio-Diversity Board)

LETTERS

Distributed national capital model makes sense

THE insightful article, "Indraprastha is welcome but Dakshinprastha also essential" (THI Jan 23) rightly underscores the strategic importance of Hyderabad and Amaravati in shaping a more balanced, resilient, and future-ready national urban framework. Recent developments reinforce this argument. Amaravati's capital construction has formally resumed, thanks to substantial financial support from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the Centre. Likewise, Hyderabad continues to consolidate its position as a global technology, life sciences, and innovation hub. These twin engines of growth in southern India offer a compelling model of decentralised, disaster-resilient urban development. In this context, India must rethink its capital-centric planning philosophy. Rather than concentrating enormous financial and administrative resources in a single, environmentally vulnerable location, it would have been far more prudent to explore the strategic relocation of core administrative functions to a safer, less congested, and more sustainable geography. A distributed capital model would not only enhance disaster preparedness but also promote regional equity and balanced economic growth. As climate risks, seismic vulnerability, and urban saturation intensify, the case for a multi-nodal governance framework grows stronger.

Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, Hanumakonda-506009

BJP should empower state units

YOUR editorial "Modi calling Nitin Nabin his 'boss' is not mere optics" (THI, Jan 23) correctly highlights how symbolism and power signals matter deeply in party politics. Leadership transitions, especially in a cadre-based party, must balance authority with institutional stability. While strong central leadership has delivered electoral success, excessive dependence on a few individuals risks weakening internal processes and discouraging second-line leadership. Going forward, the focus should be on strengthening organisational mechanisms, empowering state units, and ensuring transparent decision-making. Clear role definitions and collective functioning can help manage ambitions and generational shifts more smoothly. Ultimately, durable political strength comes from robust institutions that adapt to the changing political realities.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai-23

BJP must chalk out clear succession frameworks

APROPOS "Modi calling Nitin Nabin his 'boss' is not mere optics" (THI Jan 23). It makes a fair point that such gestures signal a shift from over-centralised leadership in the BJP. Yet, with party decisions often flowing top-down, there's a risk that this remains symbolic unless backed by real decentralisation, potentially sidelining capable leaders and fostering internal unease. Nabin's rise through step-by-step upgradation, hard work and genuineness sets a strong example. To build on this, the party could introduce clearer succession frameworks, empower state units with more autonomy on local issues, and hold regular internal consultations. Mentoring younger leaders through structured programmes will help distribute power effectively and sustain its democratic ethos.

S M Jeeva, Chennai-32

Nabin will be a sound investment

THIS has reference to your editorial 'Modi calling Nitin Nabin as his 'boss' is not mere optics'. That Nabin has been chosen as the national president of the BJP unanimously is reflective of the tremendous trust and deliverability that the party expects in him to shoulder and carry forward the organisational work. This is a very futuristic move. Narendra Modi and Amit Shah can now focus on issues challenging the nation. One can by no means call the choice of Nabin a dynastic preference as he is the son of a senior BJP leader Nabin Kishore Prasad. Nitin Nabin is a five-time MLA, and a minister in the Bihar cabinet. The 'boss' symbolism by Narendra Modi has a profound connotation to dispel misgivings prevailing in the minds of people since they must not view the choice akin to Congress choosing the party president to be a symbolic gesture while powers being centred securely in the family.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

Rectify technical issues in MeeSeva App

WE have noticed that in the Telangana MeeSeva mobile app, the 'Temple Online Services' section, the Online/Service Name" tab is not working. This tab is intended to provide people with information related to temple poojas and other available services. However, due to this technical issue, many devotees and users are subject to tremendous inconvenience. As a result, the app is currently ineffective for devotees who rely on it for temple-related services. On behalf of thousands of pilgrims, I urge the Telangana government to take speedy action and resolve the technical problem to ensure that the MeeSeva app serves its intended purposes.

C V R Krishna, Adikmet, Hyderabad

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BENGALURU ONLINE

HC lifts ban on bike taxis, services to resume

BENGALURU: The Karnataka High Court on Friday lifted the ban on bike taxis, paving the way for the resumption of services across the state. Karnataka Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy said he had not yet received a copy of the order and would comment after reviewing it. However, he said the division bench of the High Court had quashed the single-bench order. "The single-judge bench of the High Court had prohibited bike taxis. The division bench has quashed the single judge bench order and allowed the writ appeal. Let the judgment copy come. I will read it and then discuss it with you all," the minister told reporters. Uber hailed the court order. "We welcome the Hon'ble High Court's decision to recognise bike taxis as a legal mode of passenger transport in Karnataka," Uber said in a statement.

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

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Cancer impoverishes

Treatment costs expose limits of health safety net

WHEN cancer strikes in India, it is not just the body that breaks down, the household economy collapses too. The stark contrast highlighted by a *Lancet*-flagged study, reported recently by *The Tribune*, lays bare this cruel arithmetic: an average monthly income of about Rs 11,000 versus cancer treatment costs that can touch Rs 93,000 for a single hospital visit. This is the lived reality for millions of poor and lower middle class families forced to choose between continuing treatment and financial survival. Despite the expansion of health insurance schemes such as Ayushman Bharat, out-of-pocket expenditure remains the dominant payment mode. Insurance ceilings, exclusions for advanced therapies, diagnostic costs and non-medical expenses — travel, lodging and loss of wages — together push families into debt, distress sales and, often, treatment abandonment.

The deeper problem is structural. Late diagnosis is common due to weak screening programmes and low awareness. By the time patients reach tertiary hospitals, the disease is advanced, treatment is prolonged and costs escalate sharply. Geography compounds the burden: advanced oncology facilities are concentrated in cities, forcing patients to migrate temporarily for care. The crisis is particularly stark in Punjab's Malwa region, where cancer prevalence has risen alarmingly. Years of intensive farming, excessive pesticide use, industrial pollution and groundwater contamination have degraded the land, turning the state's breadbasket into a health hotspot and increasing exposure to carcinogens among rural communities.

The *Lancet* study's emphasis on social inequities should serve as a warning. Those with the fewest resources bear the heaviest burden, financially and medically. To achieve the government's stated goal of universal health coverage, cancer care must move beyond insurance promises. Stronger public oncology infrastructure, realistic package rates, price regulation of essential drugs and investment in prevention and early detection are imperative. Without this, cancer will remain a pathway to impoverishment.

Operation Prahar

Punjab's war against gangsters is a long haul

THE 72-hour Operation Prahar has signalled Punjab's resolve to combat gangsters, who have become a major menace for the border state over the past decade or so. Going beyond routine crackdowns, the ambitious offensive involved over 12,000 cops. It's laudable that the AAP government, which will complete four years in March, is going all out to dismantle the deeply entrenched ecosystem of organised crime. Finance networks, weapon supply routes, communication systems — the objective is to cover all bases. The raids linked to 60-odd gangsters operating with impunity from countries such as the US, Canada, UAE and UK have made a forceful statement about a zero-tolerance approach.

The state police's warning that gangsters should not feel safe overseas marks a growing recognition that Punjab's crime problem has gone transnational. The establishment of the Overseas Fugitive Tracking and Extradition Cell and the push for Red Corner Notices against gangsters are crucial steps that highlight the linkage between local violence and global safe havens. Equally significant is the state's attempt to involve citizens. The anti-gangster helpline and a Rs 10-crore reward policy aim to break the cycle of fear and silence that allows criminal networks to thrive. However, such measures will succeed only if anonymity is genuinely protected. Operation Prahar should be seen as a good start, not an endgame. The state government must be well prepared for legal hurdles and procedural delays. This is not a battle that Punjab can fight alone. It needs the support of Central agencies in India and abroad.

Punjab's gangster scourge is intertwined with drug trafficking and arms smuggling. The ongoing war against drugs needs to be intensified. Upping the ante on the law enforcement front can help the state turn the tide.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JANUARY 24, 1926

Education in Punjab

THE review by the Punjab Government of the report of the Director of Public Instruction, for the year ending March 31, 1925, giving an account of the progress of education in the province, is, naturally enough, a sustained eulogy of the Education Department. We do not for a moment grudge the department the credit that is due to it in respect of several sides of its work, where it can certainly claim to have made some progress. When, for instance, we are told that a net increase of 362,660 in the number of pupils has taken place during the last four years, the total on March 31, 1925, being "919,649 pupils, or 77,743 more than in the previous year," and the percentage of pupils to the total population having risen from 4.07 during the previous year and 2.7 four years previously to 4.44 during the year under review, we feel that there is just ground for congratulating the department on this increase, howsoever inadequate it may appear when the appalling extent of illiteracy, which is yet to be overcome, is taken into consideration. In the matter of primary education, the review says: "The Punjab Government is in agreement with the Director of Public Instruction that the most effective means of removing illiteracy is the successful and widespread application of the principle of compulsion, and views with satisfaction the expanding field of its operations. On March 31, 1925, compulsion was in force in 25 urban and 250 rural areas; and the more recent reports of the department show that the number of the latter now exceeds 400."

Let cricket break the ice

The time for India and Bangladesh to reach across the divide is now

THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA

POLL MODE : If all goes according to plan, ex-PM Khaleda Zia's son, Tarique Rahman, will be the new prime minister of Bangladesh in less than a month. REUTERS

A full-blown crisis currently commandeering the India and Bangladesh relationship, interestingly, also has all the elements fit for resolution — and the opportunity for New Delhi to turn the tables on all the gloom-and-doom naysayers announcing the end of the very special relationship that has survived at least since 1971.

On top of the charts is a resolution of the cricket crisis, triggered by fringe Hindu outfits a fortnight ago demanding the banning of Bangladeshi cricketer Mustafizur Rahman from the Indian Premier League, which starts in March. The BCCI fell in line and young Mustafizur was sent home packing. The irate Bangladeshis have since been unstoppable, pulling out of the India matches of the T20 World Cup — including playing at the holy grail, Eden Gardens in Kolkata — and demanding that their share of cricket be moved, just like Pakistan, to neutral Sri Lanka.

Here, then, is an idea. Perhaps the Bangladesh matches can be moved to South India where the audience is less Bengali and not as intimately aware of the precious turbulences Amitav Ghosh has chronicled (*The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*) so intimately over the decades. Now's the time for a top BJP leader to reach out to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) — and vice-versa — and its boss, Tarique Rahman, these days storming the country with rallies and meetings in preparation for the February 12 elections.

After all, if the RSS can talk to the Communist Party of China, everything else is possible too.

The idea is for both sides to save face, let cooler minds talk and not hotheads run away with the programme. Far worse has transpired in our bilateral history. In fact, the euphoria of 1971 didn't last that long; less than four years later, on August 15, 1975, Bangladeshis were killing Bangladeshis again.

Fast forward to the present. Today's story is no longer about Mustafizur Rahman or even Sheikh Hasina, who in her interview to *The Print* described the banning of the Awami League in the coming Bangladeshi polls as "authoritarianism dressed up as transition." Or the fact that she has delivered a voice message at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Delhi which basically delivered the same message. (It is said the compromise involved her not being present at the Club or delivering a video message.)

Fact is that the relationship between India and Bangladesh — both stirred and badly shaken since Hasina was overthrown in August 2024, and the much more recent, disturbing vengeance killings of innocent Hindus inside Bangladesh — is far too precious to not start damage control immediately.

> The way forward, then, is to sequester Hasina, and not allow her presence in India to contaminate the bilateral relationship.

A beginning has been made. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar travelled to Dhaka to pay India's last respects at Khaleda Zia's funeral. Last November, Bangladesh's National Security Adviser Khalilur Rahman came to Delhi to meet India's NSA Ajit Doval.

There are enormous stakes on both sides. Delhi needs Dhaka on board to secure its fragile North-East, a cocktail of tribes and religions and clans and political parties, as well as its rapidly changing East — and not just because elections are taking place in West Bengal and Assam, both states that border Bangladesh, in the next few months.

Hasina's arrogance and misrule is cited by many as to why she was overthrown. It is equally true that Delhi overlooked much, including the fact that she and the BNP were always at loggerheads — the BNP twice didn't contest the national elections, thereby exacerbating political strife at home.

But the reason why Hasina continued to be an India favourite, across the Congress-BJP spectrum, is because she was truly secular, understood the importance of keeping the Hindu minority safe, was in favour of open conversations as well as trade across the border. Most importantly, she held off the bad guys led by Pakistan's ISI — they could have wreaked such damage in the Bay of Bengal region, making *Dhurandhar* in comparison look like a kitty party serving Darjeeling tea and watercress sandwiches.

Who can forget the enormous arms haul that was accidentally discovered when Tarique's mother, the late Khaleda Zia, was prime minister and that was intended to stir up trouble in the Seven Sisters?

Still, the past is past. Today, Hasina is in Delhi and Delhi will never give her up — that much Dhaka must understand and even appreciate. That India doesn't give up on its friends, no matter what the stakes are and however many tribunals demand she be returned because she is "guilty of crimes against humanity."

Above all, the elites in both countries must realise that today's India and Bangladesh is far younger, much more aspirational, ambitious — 63 per cent Bangladeshi and 52 per cent Indians are below 30. They don't carry the baggage of the past. They were not even born when the liberation of Bangladesh took place. They would rather move on and schmooze — not brainstorm — about life. Even their vocabulary is different.

The way forward, then, is to sequester Hasina, and not allow her presence in India to contaminate the bilateral relationship. *Naya* Dhaka must understand that India's enormous size and presence gives it an extraordinary leverage that middle powers can only dream of. If all goes according to plan, Khaleda's son, Tarique, will be the new prime minister of Bangladesh in less than a month. By all accounts, he had a good meeting with Jaishankar. The time for both sides to reach across the divide is now.

The truth is that Dhaka needs Delhi even more today. Xi Jinping's China may cut an even larger cheque for Tarique, like Xi did with Hasina in 2016, and Pakistan may begin to fish in the Bay. But everyone knows that Pakistan is more than 2,000 km away and its economy is in such a shambles that it has virtually handed over itself to China. The natural neighbour is India. The natural market is India. The natural partner is India.

That's why cricket can become an ice-breaker and take the sting out of the tensions between the two sides. Let Litton Das meet Suryakumar Yadav. Let people play.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"Bangladesh must be turned into a country where people of all religions can live safely & peacefully. — Tarique Rahman"

Right to vote and the daily grind

VIJETA SHRIVASTAVA

EVERY morning, after my children leave for school and my husband goes to work, I instinctively turn to the newspaper when I finally manage to find a little time for myself. I don't quite know why. Perhaps because somewhere between the headlines, I am searching for myself.

As a middle-class woman, I look for the same sense of belonging in these news pages that I have been searching for in my in-laws' home for the past 10 years of marriage. When I first learned about National Voters' Day (January 25), curiosity led me to a Google search. Maybe because every time I go to vote during any election, I am made to feel like the most important person, the one whose presence turns a structure into a house, yet who owns nothing inside it.

What falls to her share is only the daily struggle. A struggle that looks like expensive medical bills for flu, viral infections and breathing problems, illnesses caused by pollution and smog in cities like Gurugram and New Delhi. A struggle that looks like quietly ignoring other household needs in order to pay exorbitant school fees in a country where education is a fundamental right.

I do this silently, much like I am ignored after casting my vote.

Because I do not fit into the news stories where women voters receive Rs 10,000 each, nor into reports about the SIR (Special Intensive Revision), nor into any of the government's so-called women-centric self-reliance campaigns, just as every room in a house needs me, yet no room belongs to me.

Waterlogged roads after even a short spell of rain force me to curse the day I carefully decided to cast my precious vote. Amid rising inflation, when I ask for discounts on everyday essentials, I try to protect my household budget the same way a woman protects herself while walking on the roads of Delhi-NCR.

As a woman voter, I continue to watch everything silently and accept it without protest. Why? I don't know. But I do know this much: regardless of which government is in power, women are always kept behind a veil. A veil that one particular community may wear by choice, but which is forcibly draped over those who do not.

The right to vote often feels like the one right that deprives me of many others.

And yet, I continue to watch quietly, carrying within me the desire for safety, self-reliance and equality, and I go back to vote again.

Because, after all, this is my right.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BJP juggernaut in Maharashtra

Refer to 'BJP tightens grip on Maharashtra'; the saffron party has become the largest party in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. The richest civic body in India is set to have a BJP mayor, bringing to an end three decades of Bal Thackeray-founded Shiv Sena rule. The BJP will also control most of the state's important corporations, such as Pune, Nagpur and Nashik. If Eknath Shinde's rebellion weakened the Thackeray legacy in Maharashtra, the loss of the BMC dealt a decisive blow to it. The BJP established its dominance in the 2024 Assembly elections in Maharashtra, the civic elections held last year and now the BMC this year. The BJP juggernaut seems unstoppable.

SS PAUL, NADIA

Cooperation, not dominance

Apropos of 'Why India's rise hasn't won it friends'; economic growth alone does not guarantee regional goodwill. While India has strengthened its strategic and military presence, New Delhi will have to shift from a security-first approach to a people-centric regional policy. India should revive neighbourhood diplomacy through transparent development partnerships rather than ad-hoc assistance. Long-term investments in health, education, climate resilience and digital infrastructure in South Asia can generate genuine goodwill. Consistent engagement will help counter perceptions of dominance.

ANKIT PATEL, JAMMU

Trump playing with ice

Like Alaska, Greenland is of immense interest to the US owing to its geostrategic importance. Melting of ice sheets due to rising global temperatures has opened up the possibility of new maritime routes in the region besides creating opportunities for drilling and mining. China and Russia have already shown interest in exploring commercial opportunities in the Arctic and President Trump does not want to be left behind. It is not only the ice, but what lies beneath it that Trump is obsessed with. Given his indifference towards climate change, the frenzy over this "big piece of ice" will cost the planet dearly.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Peace Board's role beyond Gaza

The US invitation to join the Gaza Peace Board must be weighed for its options and interests. Beyond Palestine and Gaza, the architecture of this proposed Board, keeping in mind the current global situation, raises many uncertainties which must be looked into very cautiously. The vague language about its mission of restoring lawful governments and enduring peace in conflict areas, leaves room for many contradictions. Peace and rebuilding in Gaza isn't like a property project, it needs consensus and negotiations between a range of regional and global players.

PS HANSPAUL, BY MAIL

Leave no space for communalism

Refer to 'Sajjan's acquittal'; a 75-year old mature democracy like India should be ready not to tolerate repetition of mindless violence like the 1984 Sikh riots. The professional, political and academic elite of India need to rethink and reflect on how to make communal carnage a preventable situation. A suitable environment and mechanism will have to be created which makes law and order an unbreakable system, notwithstanding any onslaught by vested interests or a culture of sycophancy. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere is the fundamental lesson. Protagonists of good governance need to set a new benchmark for others to follow.

JAGVINDER SINGH BRAR, PATIALA

Constitution supreme

Refer to 'Federalism at stake'; it is generally endorsed by all political parties that the Constitution is supreme in running the Central and state governments. If it is so, how come Governors appointed by the President are trying to exert more power than the state government, which is directly elected by the people. The Constitution, in its relevant sections, clearly mentions that a Governor of a state shall function as per the advice of the state government led by the chief minister. So, both are obliged to perform their duties according to the Constitution.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**

Bad & less bad choices for Punjab voters

NIRMAL SANDHU
SENIOR JOURNALIST

THREE recent political developments — the Congress high command berating its Punjab leaders for publicly voicing differences, the Aam Aadmi Party rolling out the Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojna and the BJP and the Shiromani Akali Dal getting aggressive with their Punjab agenda during the Maghi Mela — all point to the sort of issues that will be tossed around ahead of the elections.

That factionalism plagues the Punjab Congress is well known, but the party's central leadership wakes up only when things come to a boil. Punjab Congress leaders are not exactly known for maintaining party discipline or resisting the temptation to take on opponents within the party. Infighting frequently comes in the way of the party's pursuit of power.

Intra-party sparring was largely responsible for the Congress not holding a political rally at the recent Maghi Mela. It could not find a better excuse for skipping Muktsar than saying that it had abided by the Akal Takht directive urging parties not to indulge in any politicking during a solemn religious occasion. That excuse, however, is indigestible from a party responsible for the terrible 1984 assault on Akal Takht.

Both the Congress and AAP are formidable rivals in the race for power. With the introduction of the health scheme offering free treatment up to Rs 10 lakh to every family in Punjab, AAP is taking its vote-winning populist policies to another level. At the Muktsar Mela, the Chief Minister had announced that the coming budget would provide for the payment of Rs 1,000 to Punjabi women.

In addition to carrying forward the party's agenda of handouts, Bhagwant Mann has, of late, been venturing into the landmine of the religious arena, which has already led to his appearance before Akal Takht and an embarrassment over the so-called recovery of some missing "saroops" of Guru Granth Sahib.

Mann, no doubt, is unbeatable when it comes to public connect. But his opponents make light of his jokes and remind people of what a comedian-turned-politician has done to Ukraine. Lately, he has started displaying signs of intolerance, if not dictatorship. His government has slapped FIRs on quite a few journalists and youtubers and is arm-twisting a newspaper group, that too in an election year.

FOOTPRINT: Quite surprising was the BJP's decision to drum up a gathering at the Maghi Mela. FILE PHOTO

Quite surprising was the BJP's decision — the first of its kind — to drum up a gathering at the Sikh religious mela. In recent years, the Hindutva-wedded party has been welcoming into its fold turbaned Sikhs who have dabbled in politics, with or without a shady past, regardless of their anti-BJP stance in their previous avatar, just to spread its footprint in Punjab.

BJP loyalists are justifiably disappointed by this free-for-all entry of defectors, though none are perturbed enough to vocally express their displeasure to the leadership in Delhi. Many at the top now holding the BJP flag are Congress leftovers who had been swept aside by AAP's electoral tornado in 2022.

> Every party relies on the same winning model of freebies. Punjab's economic turnaround is on no party's agenda.

A surprise, however, was the arrival of Chief Minister Nayab Saini from the neighbouring Haryana, with which Punjab has a longstanding water dispute. Donning a turban, he mistakenly believed, would endear him to the Sikh masses, who are particularly annoyed by his government giving frequent parole to a dera head convicted of murder and rape. Saini did raise a valid question: If Haryana can procure 24 crops at the minimum support price, why can't Punjab? This was meant to needle his Punjab counterpart.

Punjab BJP chief Sunil Jakhar, who had ditched the Congress after being dumped for the post of Chief Minister, highlighted the Mann government's failure to effectively address the serious problems of debt and drugs. The latter issue is expected to dominate pre-poll election speeches.

Another notable speaker whom the BJP fielded was Manpreet Singh Badal, a former Congress Finance Minister who is best remembered for his repeated "treasury-is-empty" statements, implying not to expect anything from him. At Muktsar, he punctured Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's boast of providing 60,000 jobs to youth, saying that over four years, a minimum of 72,000 employees had already retired.

Unemployment has been a serious and emotive issue in Punjab, resulting in the large-scale outflow of precious young talent and hard-earned money of Punjabis. Chief ministers, eager to be seen as job creators, have made it a ritual to hand over job offer letters to young people at well-publicised official functions.

A former Congress Chief Minister, Capt Amarinder Singh, now in the BJP, had won his second term in 2017, partly by luring unemployed youth into voting for him by making them fill job forms on the disingenuous advice of poll strategist Prashant Kishor. The job scheme ultimately fell far short of its ambitious promises.

One party that BJP speakers chose not to attack was the Shiromani Akali Dal led by Sukhbir Singh Badal, who also helpfully played along. Sukhbir also laid bare the SAD electoral agenda, which contained promises like free tubewell connections to farmers and interest-free loans up to Rs 10 lakh to youth, apart from the party's commitment to "correct historical injustices", including the diversion of Punjab's waters to Rajasthan through the Indira Gandhi canal.

Sukhbir Badal keeps accusing AAP of plundering Punjab for the party's expansion elsewhere. But these days he himself is at the receiving end with the arrest of his chartered accountant in the case of 328 missing Guru Granth Sahib "saroops". Given the sizable turnout at the SAD conference, it is clear that people in increasing numbers are willing to give him another chance.

The present electoral system propagates poseurs who blather endlessly, promising everything but delivering little. Thanks to shortsighted, people-pleaser politicians who hardly have any credible development model, Punjab has in the last two and a half decades slid from its once number one position in the country. It is falling behind on almost every parameter.

There are, therefore, no good choices before the Punjab voters, only bad or less bad ones. Regardless of which party wins the next election, there is little hope of economic resurgence, at least in the near future. Every party relies on the same winning model of freebies. Punjab's economic turnaround is on no party's agenda.

Why the EU-India trade deal matters now

LARAVEYS MAHMOUDI
RESEARCH ASSISTANT, INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

AS India prepares to celebrate Republic Day on January 26 and hosts the European Union on January 27 for its annual summit in New Delhi, attention turns once again to the long-anticipated EU-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Originally set to be concluded by the end of 2025, negotiations on the FTA have stretched beyond initial expectations.

However, notable diplomatic momentum in the opening weeks of 2026, marked by a series of high-level engagements and intensified negotiations, signals continued determination on both sides to expedite the agreement's conclusion by the end of January.

On January 9, India's Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal concluded a two-day visit to Brussels, following preparatory engagements earlier in the month. After talks with European Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security Maroš Šefcovic, Goyal indicated that remaining differences were narrowing and that negotiations had entered their final phase.

His visit followed External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's trip to France and Luxembourg earlier in the month, as well as India's participation, for the first time, in discussions with the Weimar Triangle, signalling New Delhi's growing engagement with key European groupings.

European leaders have reinforced this momentum. During German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's visit to India on January 12, he suggested that Brussels and New Delhi could finalise the FTA by the end of the month, highlighting the strategic impetus driving negotiations.

This has been complemented by parallel diplomatic engagements, including a visit by French Presidential Diplomatic Adviser Emmanuel Bonne ahead of President Emmanuel Macron's planned visit in February, as well as a visit by Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski on January 17-19.

EU-India FTA negotiations have spanned nearly two decades. First launched in 2007, suspended for several years and formally revived in 2022, their longevity reflects both the scale of ambition on both sides and the political sensitivities involved.

INDIA VISIT: Friedrich Merz suggested that Brussels and New Delhi could finalise the FTA by January-end. ANI

Against a backdrop of growing fragmentation in the global trade environment, Brussels' search for reliable, long-term partners has sharpened.

Against a backdrop of growing fragmentation in the global trade environment, marked by transatlantic uncertainty, structural dependencies and supply-chain vulnerabilities, Brussels' search for reliable, long-term partners has sharpened.

An EU-India FTA offers a strategic pathway to diversify Europe's economic relationships, deepen engagement with a market of over 1.4 billion people and anchor cooperation within a rules-based framework aligned with shared principles.

Outstanding issues

Despite evident political momentum, several unresolved issues continue to constrain finalisation of the FTA. Market access remains one of the most persistent points of contention. The EU is pressing for deeper tariff reductions in high-value sectors such as automobiles and medical devices, while India remains cautious about liberalisation that could affect domestic manufacturers and small businesses.

The EU has sought to protect its domestic steel industry through tariffs, quotas and safeguard measures, alongside increasing emphasis on climate-linked regulation. India, by contrast, has raised concerns over restricted access to the European market and the cumulative impact of trade-defence instruments on its exporters.

Agriculture is expected to remain largely excluded from the agreement. Given the sector's political sensitivity and the scale of employment it supports in India, New Delhi has shown little willingness to open this market freely, limiting the scope for comprehensive liberalisation.

The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) also remains a significant point of friction. While Brussels frames the mechanism as a tool to align imports with its climate objectives, New Delhi has expressed concern over its potential obstructive impact on Indian exporters, particularly in energy-intensive sectors.

Furthermore, negotiations on services trade, intellectual property and regulatory alignment remain ongoing, with differences persisting over the scope and enforcement of intellectual property provisions.

Ultimately, the agreement will require the EU to balance its economic priorities with commitments to sustainability and regulatory standards. Both sides have nevertheless stressed the importance of delivering a fair and balanced outcome. These considerations continue to shape the final compromises currently under negotiation.

What EU will gain

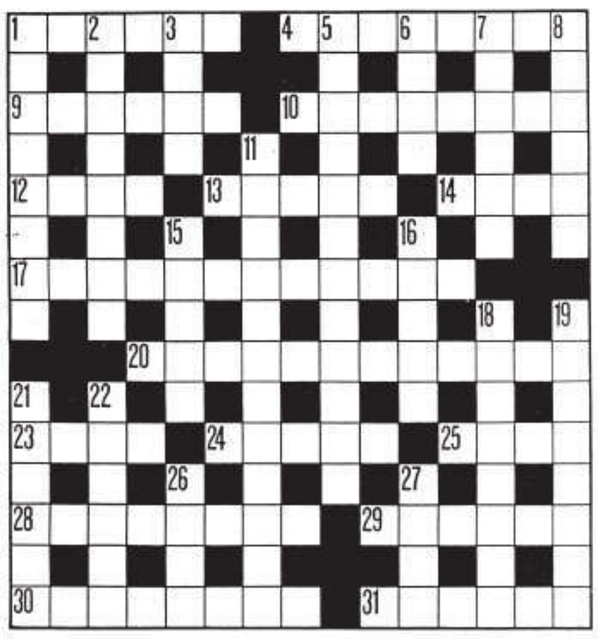
For the EU, the prospective benefits of an FTA with India are both economic and strategic. On the economic front, the agreement would deepen trade and investment ties, expanding opportunities for European firms in one of the world's fastest-growing major economies.

Beyond tariff reductions, the FTA would facilitate stronger investment flows and supply-chain integration, offering European industry a credible alternative market and production base as it seeks to reduce exposure to concentrated supply chains and geopolitical risk.

Strategically, the agreement would strengthen the EU's footprint in the Indo-Pacific and anchor relations with a partner that broadly shares Europe's commitment to democracy and a rules-based international order.

Finalising the FTA with India offers Brussels a means of embedding long-term stability and openness into its external economic strategy, particularly as it seeks to diversify key economic partnerships. Set to be one of the EU's largest trade agreements to date, the conclusion of the deal would signal a durable recalibration of Europe's global economic posture.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Infer (6)
4 For practical purposes (2,6)
9 Motionless (2,4)
10 Dishonour (8)
12 Low-pitched (4)
13 Nation (5)
14 Person's bearing (4)
17 Noble (12)
20 Take foolish risks (4,4,4)
23 Without added water (4)
24 Demon (5)
25 A stroke in a game (4)
28 Of similar kind (8)
29 To lament (6)
30 Entrust to another (8)
31 Suppress (6)

DOWN

1 Protector (8)
2 Went to bed (6,2)
3 Otherwise (4)
5 Discussions to find agreement (12)
6 Dupe (4)
7 Evoke (6)
8 Testing one's patience (6)
11 Difficult situation (6,6)
15 Pursue stealthily (5)
16 Specialist market (5)
18 Repel with effort (5,3)
19 Punishment imposed by court (8)
21 Fresh (6)
22 Call off (6)
26 Advertise insistently (4)
27 Keen enjoyment (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Cabot, 4 Depress, 8 Too, 9 All square, 10 Payment, 11 Aired, 13 Warsaw, 15 Attune, 18 Aspic, 19 Arcadia, 21 Summing-up, 23 Rut, 24 Timbers, 25 Empty.

Down: 1 Cat's-paw, 2 Booby trap, 3 Trace, 4 Delete, 5 Piquant, 6 Era, 7 Spend, 12 Round trip, 14 Ascribe, 16 Exactly, 17 Ganges, 18 Asset, 20 Copse, 22 Mum.

SU DO KU

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

V. HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 24, 2026, SATURDAY

Shaka Samvat	1947
Marghshirsh Shaka	4
Marghshirsh Parvishte	11
Hijari	1447
Shukla Paksha Tithi 6, up to 12:40 am	
Shiva Yoga up to 2:02 pm	
Uttrabhadrapad Nakshatra up to 2:16 pm	
Moon in Pisces sign	
Gandmoola start 2:16 pm	

FORECAST

SUNSET: SATURDAY 17:52HRS
SUNRISE: SUNDAY 07:17 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	17	08
New Delhi	17	07
Amritsar	13	10
Bathinda	18	10
Jalandhar	13	10
Ludhiana	16	08
Bhiwani	16	06
Hisar	16	12
Sirsa	16	11
Dharamsala	18	03
Manali	12	00
Shimla	14	02
Srinagar	08	00
Jammu	18	08
Kargil	02	–07
Leh	00	–09
Dehradun	17	04
Mussoorie	12	03

TEMPERATURE IN °C

بالحِرصِ في الرِّزقِ يذِلُّ الفتى
وفي القنوعِ الشَّرفُ الشَّامِخُ
(ابو الفتح كشاجم)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Avarice demeans people, while contentment brings honor and respect.

Abu Al-Fat'h Kashajem
(Abbasid-era poet and scholar)

Opinion

Lebanon: From state to open arena

KHALAF AHMAD AL-HABTOOR

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Nothing is more dangerous for a state than a passing economic crisis, except the moment when the absence of the rule of law becomes the norm, when slander replaces truth and defamation takes the place of accountability. At that point, it is not investment alone that collapses; the very idea of the state begins to unravel. What Lebanon is experiencing today is neither a media debate nor a personal dispute. It is a decisive test of whether the rule of law still exists.

Lebanon was never, to me, a temporary venture, a testing ground or a transactional deal. It is a country I genuinely loved, invested in with conviction and stood by during its darkest times; when remaining was a risk, not a gain.

But what is happening in Lebanon today has crossed every red line.

This is no longer merely a difficult investment environment. It has become a complete legal exposure, where anyone who seeks to help, invest or even defend themselves is subjected to orchestrated campaigns of defamation, false accusations and media attacks, without evidence, without accountability and without deterrence.

What we are witnessing is a dangerous transformation in the role of the media — from a watchdog to an instrument of violation. The media is not a court. Defamation is not criticism. False reporting is not opinion. Constructive criticism is legitimate and offering advice is a duty. But insult, baseless accusations and systematic incitement are acts punishable by law in any state that respects itself.

In fairness, it must be said that this conduct does not represent the Lebanese media as a whole. There remains professional, national media that we respect and value. What we are addressing is a segment of paid media that has deliberately chosen to become a tool of distortion and slander rather than a platform for truth and responsibility.

This breakdown has not stopped at defaming individuals and institutions. It has expanded to include attacks on Gulf states and their leaderships; an unacceptable violation that strikes at sovereignty and dignity and violates all political and ethical norms.

Most alarming is that Lebanese law itself explicitly criminalizes insults against a sister state or its leadership and obliges judicial authorities to act when such offenses occur. In such cases, the Public Prosecution is expected to act on its own initiative, without awaiting any complaint or request from any party. This article itself constitutes a clear legal notification to the Public Prosecution, from which action is expected, in accordance with due process, to initiate the necessary measures.

Any state that respects itself does not allow its territory or media platforms to become arenas for attacks against others, nor does it permit international relations to be violated under the pretext of freedom of expression. Official silence in the face of such abuses cannot be interpreted as neutrality; it is read as weakness and sends a dangerous message that there are no limits, no red lines and no accountability.

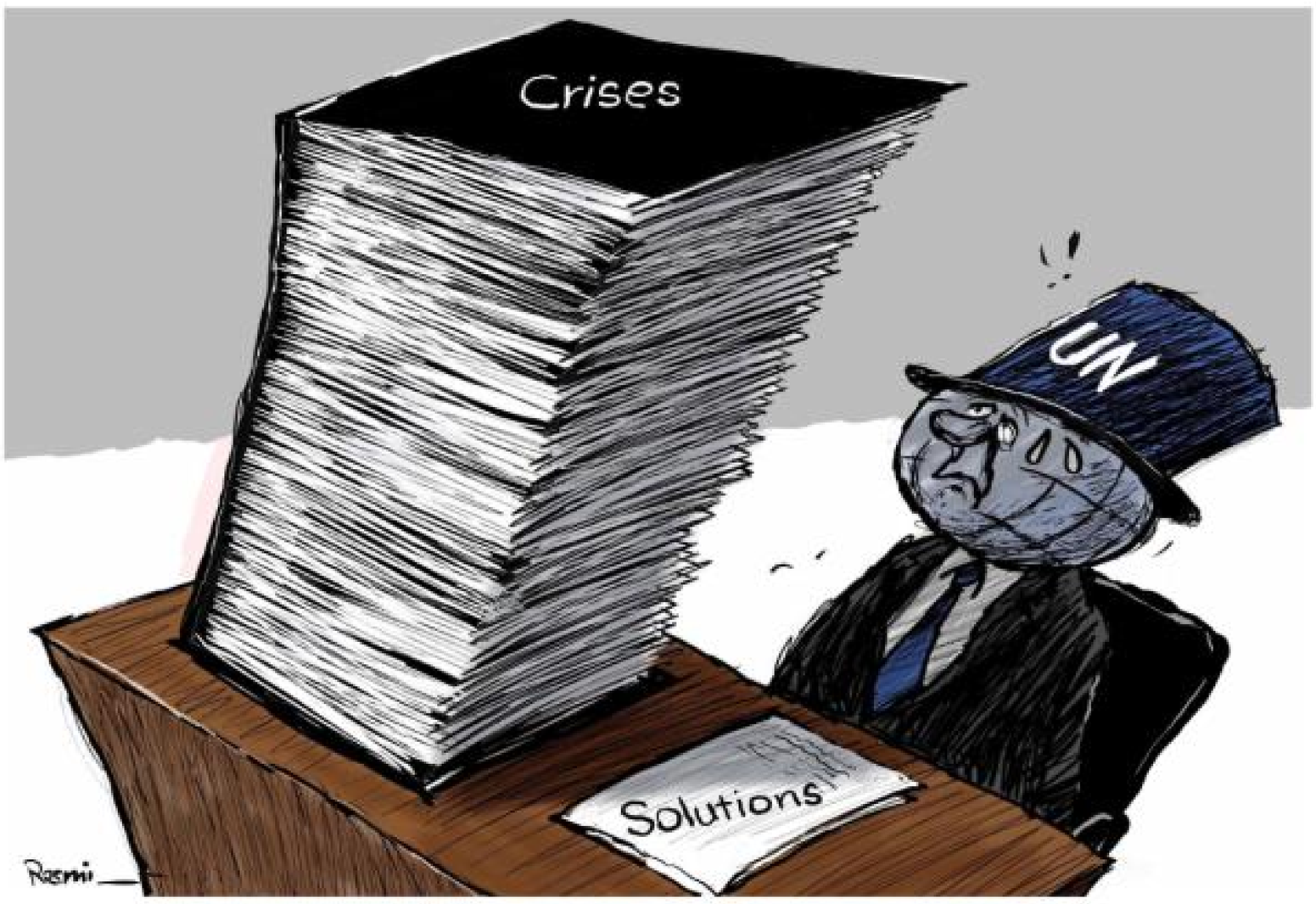
What is happening in Lebanon today is a clear institutional failure.

No investor, partner or visitor will return if this approach persists. The problem is not the Lebanese people, it is a system that consumes, through corruption and indifference, all who become part of it.

Lebanon deserves better. It deserves a state that protects it, not one that looks on. It deserves a law that is applied, not exploited.

And I say this as someone who loves Lebanon, not one who has abandoned it; as a responsible investor, not a bystander: A state that does not protect the rule of law cannot ask for trust.

What we are witnessing is a dangerous transformation in the role of the media — from a watchdog to an instrument of violation



COURTESY: ANWAR RASHID/ASHARQ AL-AWSAT

It is obvious that the remnants of the Assad regime could coordinate with Hezbollah and initiate violence

Halting Hezbollah's illegal activities a priority

KHALED ABOU ZAHR

Khaled Abou Zahr is the founder of SpaceQuest Ventures, a space-focused investment platform. He is CEO of EurabiaMedia and editor of Al-Watan Al-Arabi.

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Can Naim Qassem read the room? In recent declarations, the Hezbollah secretary-general issued a typical Lebanese warning to his enemies by stating: "It will hang long on your necks."

This warning to Lebanese political figures and others calling for Hezbollah to give up its arms is clear on what to expect. Yet, for once, what is interesting is not his declarations, which were expected, but the massive answers against them from the entire Lebanese political and media spectrum. From outright condemnations to mockery, Qassem must now understand that the days when a Hezbollah secretary-general could point his finger to warn, threaten and instill fear and silence are long gone.

After so many years of abuse, Lebanon is now capable of standing up to the Iranian proxy. But we should also take Qassem's declarations at face value. Within these threats, there are other elements to take into consideration, including the Assad regime's remnants in Lebanon.

Recent media reports have highlighted the presence of members of the former Assad regime in Lebanon, especially close to the border with Syria. These remnants include former military commanders and security staff, which is worrying for both Lebanon and Syria.

It is obvious that these remnants could coordinate with Hezbollah and initiate violence and instability. This could also be part of Qassem's threat to Lebanon, at a time when the country already has a precarious security situation.

The possible dangers presented by these remnants of the Assad regime aligning with Hezbollah go beyond localized security issues. They threaten the entire Lebanese state and the figures demanding both their arrest and Hezbollah's surrender of its arsenal. This is why the government needs to deal with this ongoing presence.

This not only has the possibility to ignite internal political conflicts — it could also undermine the Lebanese state's capacity to uphold control over its land and increase tensions with the new leadership in Syria. It is easy to see how the agendas of the Assad regime's remnants and a weakened Hezbollah could converge to threaten Lebanon and the fragile regional stability. Both groups have the same goal in Syria and Lebanon, which stands against any efforts to reinforce state authority.

As always, Qassem's threats to those who dare demand Hezbollah's disarmament are made by presenting them as traitors who align with "Israeli-American" agendas and who are exposing the country to danger. These are all lies that the Lebanese now reject.

It is time for the Lebanese state and the people to be ready to stand up for what they believe in.

Even though Hezbollah's grip on dissenting voices has loosened due to various attacks, from the exploding pagers to targeted military strikes, the group remains capable of extreme actions. This is why the Lebanese government and military should not and cannot delay their actions to isolate and cut off all adjacent operations of nonstate groups.

For both groups, illegal activities are an important source of financing for their operations. Hence, Lebanon must prioritize confronting the illegal activities of Hezbollah and the remnants of the Assad regime. Achieving this would be an important step toward restoring the state's exclusive authority over weapons, borders and security. These activities constitute an important challenge to state authority and positive bilateral relations with Syria, a key element to reaching full sovereignty.

All cross-border operations, weapons and goods smuggling, money laundering and coordination with criminal networks must be targeted decisively. Dismantling these parallel structures is essential.

The potential collusion between the Assad regime's remnants and Hezbollah cannot be ignored any longer and needs to be tackled. As the threats from Hezbollah increase, the risks of seeing coordinated action also increase.

Opinion

World cannot allow the Sudanese to starve

DR. MAJID RAFIZADEH

Sudan is going through one of the gravest humanitarian crises of the 21st century and it is approaching another dangerous threshold. According to a warning issued by the UN, existing food aid reserves may be fully depleted by the end of March. This crisis is unfolding within the context of the prolonged civil war, the collapse of state institutions and the near-total erosion of structures and mechanisms that protect civilians.

The UN warning is critical because it means that millions of civilians are at imminent risk of starvation in Sudan. The warning does not merely point to a logistical problem or a temporary interruption in assistance; instead, it signals the possible shift of a severe humanitarian emergency into a large-scale famine.

Humanitarian agencies, which are operating under extraordinary constraints, have already reduced food rations to survival levels. In other words, what remains is no longer a question of adequacy or efficiency but one of existential urgency. The UN warning also reflects the exhaustion of international political attention.

If food aid does run out, the consequences will be immediate and catastrophic. First of all, entire communities, including children and women, will face acute malnutrition. Children will most likely succumb to preventable disease, fragile social structures will further collapse and displacement will ratchet up across national borders. As a result, starvation would be the most likely result of international inaction.

What remains is no longer a question of adequacy or efficiency but one of existential urgency

Secondly, the humanitarian implications of such an outcome extend far beyond the immediate death toll. Food insecurity at this scale can reshape societies by eroding trust, dissolving communal bonds and producing long-term psychological and physical damage among those who survive.

Third, it would most likely accelerate cycles of violence in Sudan by forcing civilians to compete over scarce resources, while women and girls would become more exposed to exploitation. Such conditions usually give rise to more localized conflicts and further recruitment by armed groups. In addition, a generation that is shaped by hunger would also be a generation deprived of education and stability.

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Preventing the collapse of food aid in Sudan requires an immediate, coordinated and multifaceted response. Donor states must increase their emergency funding to UN agencies and their operational partners. Current contributions seem to fall far below what is required.

Nevertheless, financial support alone is not adequate if aid cannot reach those who need it. This means the opening and protection of humanitarian corridors must become a central diplomatic priority. Roads, border crossings and air routes must be demilitarized. This, of course, requires sustained pressure on all armed factions within Sudan. There should also be clear international consequences for obstructing or diverting aid and attacks on humanitarian personnel.

Such conditions usually give rise to more localized conflicts and further recruitment by armed groups

Parallel to this effort, it is vital to focus on renewed diplomatic pressure for a ceasefire. While humanitarian operations can reduce suffering, they cannot be a political resolution. The involvement of key regional and international actors — particularly Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the US — has been a step in the right direction. Ceasefire mechanisms must be verifiable, any violation must carry tangible costs and humanitarian access must be embedded within any agreed political framework.

Finally, the crisis in Sudan demands renewed global attention and visibility. The erosion of global media attention may have contributed to donor fatigue and political complacency. The problem is that humanitarian emergencies that fade from public attention rapidly lose their capacity to mobilize resources. The suffering of Sudan's civilian population has been steadily displaced by other global news and crises. Therefore, it is vital to restore Sudan to the center of global attention to sustain the political pressure required to mobilize aid.

Sudan's civilians did not create this war, nor did they play a role in the violence or the economic collapse that are now threatening their survival. If the international community allows Sudanese people's food supply to run out, the results would be catastrophic. This outcome should be prevented at all costs. The international community must act before mass starvation becomes another devastating result of this bloody and protracted conflict.

Europe needs a new security framework

CARL BILDT

It is becoming increasingly apparent that a viable framework for European defense and security cooperation will require establishing something like the old Western European Union, the 10-member bloc that ceased operations in 2011. Many would counter that we already have the EU and NATO and that, whatever one cannot do, the other can. But this argument no longer holds water. Recent developments have made clear that neither NATO nor the EU is fully suited to meeting the evolving challenges Europe faces.

Consider Ukraine. On the one hand, the EU is playing a vital role in providing financial assistance to that beleaguered country. It has rapidly improved cooperation among its defense industries and opened a pathway for eventual Ukrainian accession. On the other hand, it ends up paralyzed whenever just one or two member states veto its decisions.

Worse, NATO has long been key to Europe's territorial defense but the US' commitment to the alliance — and especially to European security — is increasingly in doubt, as the White House's designs on Greenland, a sovereign territory of NATO and EU member Denmark, have made clear. As a result, dialogue among NATO member states is no longer as relevant as it once was, especially on the matter of Russia's war in Ukraine.

That is why new, informal frameworks have already been taking shape on the sidelines. Over the past year, the coalition of the willing that emerged to maintain support for Ukraine has become increasingly important. Many now refer to it with capital letters: the Coalition of the Willing. While the US unilaterally pursues incoherent frameworks to end the fighting, key European countries have been meeting under this new banner to articulate a more serious long-term policy.

The coalition of the willing that emerged to maintain support for Ukraine has become increasingly important

One of the coalition's distinct advantages is that it includes the UK and Norway, while excluding Hungary, whose pro-Russian prime minister, Viktor Orban, has consistently frustrated EU-level responses to the war. Its informal leadership, an "E3" triumvirate of Britain, France and Germany, now meets fairly regularly, demonstrating that it fulfills a need that neither the EU nor NATO can.

So, why not take the logical next step of creating a new version of the old Western European Union? By the time it was formally dissolved nearly 15 years ago, its remaining functions had been taken over by the EU, whose mandate and structures had extended to include security and defense policy. In fact, the mutual defense clause in the EU's Treaty of Lisbon was copy and pasted from the Western European Union treaty and goes further than the collective defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty.

But then came Brexit. The UK left the EU because a narrow majority of voters believed the argument that their country would fare better alone, even in a more turbulent world. Ten years later, it is now abundantly obvious that this was a mistake. Not only is Britain smaller and weaker, but so too is the EU. As an EU member state, the UK had played a key role in shaping the common policies of a bloc that mattered on the world stage. When it left, this major source of relevance dried up.

Since the new Western European Union already exists de facto, would it not make sense to institutionalize it formally?

But given the challenge posed by Russia's war on Ukraine, shaping an effective European response without the UK simply was not realistic. With the makings of the Coalition of the Willing already present, the new E3 triumvirate emerged and quickly rose in strategic importance. NATO was too busy trying to stay onside with US President Donald Trump to develop much of a policy response and the EU struggled with Hungarian and Slovakian obstructionism.

Since the new Western European Union already exists de facto, would it not make sense to institutionalize it formally? At a minimum, the question should be seriously considered. The key countries of Western Europe — however we want to define that term — need a firmer framework not only for coordinating policies on Russia and Ukraine. They also need to counter American bullying, exemplified by the announcement of now-abandoned additional tariffs on European countries for opposing the proposed annexation of Greenland.

There are many ways to institutionalize a new Western European Union without building big structures and excessively complicated arrangements — and without further undermining or duplicating either the EU or NATO. What matters is that those who are still willing to defend Western values do something. The first year of Trump's second administration has forced this reckoning upon Europe. With three more years to go, dithering is not an option. Establishing a new Western European Union should be high on the agenda, because European security cannot wait.

Carl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden.
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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Trump Davos antics further erode trust in US leadership

For decades, the World Economic Forum was the ultimate symbol of globalisation. This week, we may have witnessed the end of that symbolism as the so-called rules-based order looks to be crumbling. US President Donald Trump flew into Davos and held forth on his view of the world, promptly starting a clash with long-standing American allies hoping for some semblance of sense and order.

From Canada and Greenland to Ukraine, from trade preferences to tariffs, Trump demanded his pound of flesh from allies desperate for a compromise, lest the Western order fractures so much that the damage is irreversible.

It is no exaggeration that Trump is openly using America's awesome powers to upend the fundamental pillars of the world economy and global order.

The Davos gathering, until recently an annual meeting to discuss and celebrate open trade and liberal politics, now looks more like a last hurrah for open borders and multilateralism.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, in a speech to the forum that has gone viral, denounced the hypocrisy of the rules-based order. "Stop invoking rules-based international order as though it still functions as advertised," he said. "Call it what it is – a system of intensifying great power rivalry, where the most powerful pursue their interests, using economic integration as coercion."

That said, while many may see this as the end of globalisation, there are still countries and people who believe in it, among them China. This was evident at the forum. The world's second largest economy remains a strong advocate. Vice-Premier He Lifeng delivered a message of multilateralism and dialogue – the latter being the theme of the forum – saying the world must not return to the law of the jungle, where the strong prey on the weak.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen highlighted the need to build a new form of European independence. French President Emmanuel Macron said Europe would not "passively accept the law of the strongest". It is perhaps ironic that Carney recently secured a grand trade and diplomatic bargain with China, which still sees virtue in globalised trade.

Meanwhile, Trump not only railed against Carney's speech but also the Western alliance, other European leaders and their societies. In this context, it is no longer a question of whether Trump will relent on some of his worst threats but whether America has lost the trust of the West and the world – trust that will be hard to regain, whoever comes after him. More countries are likely to follow Carney's prognosis and his trip to Beijing. After all, which superpower is now more reliable and trustworthy?

Little room for error in landslide prevention

Slope safety monitoring is rightly under scrutiny after an investigation by the Hong Kong ombudsman turned up an alarming number of landslides. The city must redouble efforts to reclaim its reputation for good management of such sites after several government-managed slopes were found to have repeatedly failed in recent years.

The Office of the Ombudsman released a report on January 8, based on its review of nine serious landslides at man-made slopes since 2008. Four incidents took place along Wing Lung Road in the New Territories over the past five years, despite the area being on an official monitoring list.

Ombudsman Jack Chan Jick-chi focused on landslide prevention work and management of man-made slopes maintained by the authorities. Even when emergency work was carried out after an initial incident, "potential landslide risks" were "not necessarily" fully mitigated, the report found. Most slopes with repeated landslides were either not included in a specific monitoring programme or considered relatively low priority. It also said some sites had "repeated landslides" within three years of the first incident taking place. A spokesman for the ombudsman said recurrences raised concerns about the "potential risks and structural safety of these slopes".

The results suggest an erosion of Hong Kong's reputation as a world leader in slope engineering. The safety infrastructure was put in place after deadly landslides in the 1970s at Sau Mau Ping and Po Shan Road, Mid-Levels. But yesterday's engineering standards are being tested by climate reality today.

Global warming has fuelled increasingly unpredictable and ferocious rainstorms that have set records for precipitation and duration. Slope registration, monitoring systems and stabilisation works must evolve quickly ahead of changing weather patterns.

While landslides in recent years have not led to the great loss of life of more than 50 years ago, there must not be complacency among site managers. It is a good start that relevant government departments have already accepted the ombudsman's 32 recommendations. In a city where more than 60 per cent of the land has natural hillsides, there is precious little margin for error.

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At Trump's mercy

Nicholas Spiro says despite some powerful tools in its economic arsenal, the European Union lacks the leverage and stomach to take Washington on

It's been one year since US President Donald Trump began his second term. Few analysts and investors doubted Trump 2.0 would be more confrontational and disruptive. Still, the ferocity of Trump's attacks on the rule of law, institutions and US allies have far exceeded the worst fears of his sternest critics.

That a supposed ally is using economic coercion to seize the sovereign territory of a fellow member of Nato shows how fast the unthinkable has become real.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Trump ruled out the use of military force to take possession of Greenland, a self-ruling territory of Denmark. He also claimed he had formed "the framework of a future deal" on Greenland during a meeting with Nato Secretary General Mark Rutte.

Yet while Trump dropped plans to impose tariffs on eight European countries that sent military teams to Greenland, the uncertainty over the fate of the territory persists. The stand-off has eased somewhat but Trump's determination to acquire Greenland, by hook or by crook, is an existential crisis for the European Union and Nato.

Europe is struggling to come to terms with Trump's use of tariffs as a multipurpose tool to address economic, geopolitical and security concerns. The EU is still shell-shocked that its strongest ally has turned on it with a vengeance. The US' National Security Strategy last month framed Europe as at greater risk from its own democratic failings than from a revanchist Russia.

This partly explains why the EU has opted for diplomacy, so much so that it has appeased Trump. Under the terms of the trade agreement signed with the US last July, which the European Parliament has refused to ratify, the EU accepted a 15 per cent tariff rate on its exports to America without retaliating.

However, Greenland is the straw that broke the camel's back. The EU was readying aggressive countermeasures in the event Trump followed through on his tariff threat.France and Germany were even pushing for the deployment of a "trade bazooka" that could restrict US companies' access to Europe's single market and impose new taxes on tech firms.

Yet the tough talk belied long-standing weaknesses that have left European policymakers with little leverage. While Europe has a couple of strong cards, it has a weak hand. Brinkmanship is not a game the EU can win.

First, getting enough members of the bloc to agree on a response to a crisis is like herding cats. Painfully slow consensus-building and messy compromises have undermined the credibility and effectiveness of the EU's crisis management, a weakness that was glaringly apparent when the euro zone was on the verge of breaking up in 2010-12.

Bureaucratic, pragmatic and preferring to play for time, Europe is unable to move quickly. In the US, meanwhile, Trump's controversial use of executive orders has empowered the executive branch of government. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent's comment that "the dreaded European working group" will take precedence over rapid action rings true.

Second, Europe depends on the US for its trade, security and digital infrastructure. In a paper in May 2025, Brad Setser, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, said "even excluding tax driven trade in pharmaceuticals, [European] exports to the US are two times those to China. That kind of demand is hard to replace in today's world."

Moreover, Europe is a minnow in the technology sector. Nine of the 10 largest companies by market capitalisation in the MSCI All Country World Index are US firms. The Atlantic Council said Europe "has failed to develop a tech sector with either the vibrancy of Silicon Valley or the growing capabilities of China's industry". Three US companies control two-thirds of global capacity in cloud services.

Third, Trump has it in for Europe, politically and economically. The White House "does not appear to fear the loss of the EU as a trading partner, nor the destruction of Nato that would follow a move to 'annex' or otherwise acquire Greenland", said Fordham Global Foresight. Trump's fusion of trade with domestic politics, defence and national security makes it more difficult for Europe to gain leverage over the US.

Fourth, there is no rare-earths equivalent when it comes to European retaliation. Although comparisons between the crisis response of the Communist Party of China and the EU are inapt, Beijing had been preparing for an intensification of the trade war for several years.

In a report on January 13, Gavekal noted that "the single most important macro development of recent years was China's decision (following the [US] imposition of the semiconductor embargo) to de-westernise its supply chains". Beijing's prioritisation of technological self-reliance allowed it to exert "escalation dominance" in the trade war, forcing Trump to back down.

Some analysts believe the EU would have significantly more leverage if it weaponised its holdings of US financial assets. European countries, including Britain, hold nearly 40 per cent of US Treasury bonds, almost double the share held by Japan and China. A signal from EU policymakers that European pension funds are reviewing their exposure to US debt could spark a major sell-off of US Treasuries.

However, Europe can barely stomach a trade war, let alone a capital war. The EU can only hope the crisis over Greenland recedes due to Trump's capriciousness. Otherwise, Europe's weaknesses and China's strengths in escalation and retaliation will become even more apparent.

Nicholas Spiro is a partner at Lauressa Advisory

US exercise of raw power puts global order at risk

Bernard Chan says what troubles many is the inconsistency emanating from Washington. When force underwrites rules, principles become negotiable

The recent drama surrounding US action in Venezuela, its renewed interest in Greenland and tariff threats on governments that object, along with comments on Cuba, Colombia and Mexico, appear disjointed – part diplomacy, part law enforcement, part political theatre.

Like many observers, I rely on the news to try to make sense of the policy logic and what it may mean for those who have to live with its consequences.

Washington's rationale for its actions in Venezuela was initially framed as law enforcement against narco-terrorism. Within days of the arrest of the president and his wife, the action was reframed as a matter of safeguarding the country's oil revenues – and ultimately increasing production capacity – in the interests of both America and Venezuela.

The administration invoked the Monroe Doctrine, asserting that the western hemisphere should remain an exclusive sphere of US influence. It made clear its desire to prevent China and Russia from strengthening their presence in the region.

These measures signal Washington's belief in policing the western hemisphere through tariffs, gunboats and special forces to deter external rivals, whether in the Arctic or the Caribbean. While much of the rhetoric focused on sovereignty and the rule of law, its underlying intent was unmistakably strategic: to deny China and Russia valuable footholds in Venezuela's energy and infrastructure sectors.

The renewed focus on Greenland as a US security priority follows a similar pattern. The US military base there is a key link in missile warning, missile defence and space surveillance. The island is also rich in critical minerals vital to digital infrastructure, energy and advanced weapons systems.

The administration's suggestion that the US might "acquire" Greenland has reignited debates about territorial control and integrity. In response, several Nato allies deployed limited numbers of their military, reinforcing that Greenland's security is a shared responsibility of transatlantic security alliance members and signalling support for Denmark.

US President Donald Trump had threatened new tariffs on imports from eight European allies that opposed his plans to acquire Greenland. At Davos, he withdrew the threat.

From Washington's perspective, Greenland, despite straddling the northern and western hemispheres, is considered part of the North American continent and a strategic line of defence. Therefore, excluding rivals appears logical and few American policymakers would willingly cede strategic space.

But logic does not equate to legitimacy within the international rules-based order or among global civil societies. When power underwrites the rules, principles become negotiable and double standards become evident.

What troubles many observers is the inconsistency emanating from Washington. For example, China is often criticised for protecting its territorial integrity, even as the US military footprint extends across the Pacific to Asia. Similarly, when Hong Kong courts issued arrest warrants for individuals overseas under its national security law, the US and others condemned the move.

Yet in Caracas, Washington has shown it is prepared to enforce its domestic indictments extraterritorially, even in violation of another state's sovereignty.

The pattern of boundary testing was raised during my recent visit to Europe, where a former senior official observed that dealing with Trump had forced a reassessment of how Washington operates. In his view, Trump routinely tests boundaries, often leaving allies uneasy and institutions under strain.

Across China, recent US actions are seen as reinforcing the case for strengthening domestic resilience in many areas, including technology, logistics and critical infrastructure.

For smaller states, the lesson is that long-term security depends on navigating the behaviour of major powers rather than replicating it. Singapore's former prime minister Lee Hsien Loong has made clear that normalising the use of force without authorisation undermines the security of small states. He believes the US action violates international law and the UN Charter. He sees the erosion of legal restraint as a net loss for the international system, leaving weaker countries more exposed.

History offers little reassurance. The US has a long history of intervention and leadership change, with scant evidence of lasting success, underscoring how much easier it is to remove a government than to stabilise what follows. That pattern is familiar: Venezuela, weakened by fractured institutions and armed groups, risks following the same path. Iraq and Libya are just two examples of regime change that slid into years of instability, despite the initial joy and elation.

For now, the real test will be how the Greenland situation unfolds and whether the administration can advance its interests without sliding further into threats and coercion.

Bernard Chan is a Hong Kong businessman and former Executive Council convenor

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OPINION

The pragmatic choice

Zheng Zhihua says Xiamen's experience makes it suitable to host High Seas Treaty secretariat

The United States' abrupt withdrawal earlier this month from dozens of international institutions, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, was more than another episode of diplomatic retrenchment. It was a reminder that the post-war architecture of global governance, particularly in environmental affairs, is under strain.

Against this backdrop, China's decision to nominate Xiamen as the host city for the secretariat of the new High Seas Treaty should not be read as a quest for prestige. It is a proposal about how the global commons ought to be governed when traditional pillars begin to wobble.

The new High Seas Treaty, which entered into force on January 17, has finally closed a 40-year legal gap. For decades since the 1982 adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, two-thirds of the world's oceans existed in a regulatory vacuum, where fisheries and mining operations were conducted without coordinated oversight.

The treaty is built around four pillars: equitable sharing of deep-sea genetic resources; binding marine protected areas; mandatory environmental impact assessments; and technology transfer to developing nations.

But its true significance is in the institutional architecture that will enforce it.

The contest between Brussels, Valparaiso and Xiamen – all candidates to host the secretariat's headquarters – is often framed as a logistical or geopolitical choice. In reality, it reflects three distinct approaches to international governance.

Brussels offers administrative continuity. It sits at the heart of dense diplomatic networks, with mature UN support services and proximity to European institutions. Its case is built on efficiency, predictability and bureaucratic familiarity.

Valparaiso advances a different claim. Chile's Pacific identity and its early ratification of the treaty speak to demands for greater Global South representation in global environmental institutions, many of which remain concentrated in Europe and North America. Its bid is about symbolic rebalancing.

Meanwhile, Xiamen's proposition is not primarily about location or symbolism, but about governance capacity demonstrated in practice.

Four decades ago, Xiamen's coastal waters were heavily polluted, a by-product of rapid industrialisation and lax regulation. The city's subsequent transformation into a recognised model of integrated coastal management is well documented.

The so-called "Xiamen Model" rests on three elements that are directly relevant to the treaty: science-based decision-making, cross-departmental coordination and transparency.

Real-time ecological monitoring, community support for mangrove restoration and the integration of digital tools into marine management have turned policy goals into measurable outcomes. These are operational systems that can be observed, evaluated and replicated.

The High Seas Treaty depends heavily on environmental impact assessments, data sharing and capacity building. As the host of its secretariat, Xiamen could function as a knowledge hub linking science, law and diplomacy.

Any serious assessment of China's bid must also confront its vulnerabilities. China operates the world's largest distant-water fishing fleet, parts of which have been linked by external reports to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. It also holds the largest number of exploration contracts approved by the International Seabed Authority, placing it at the forefront of deep-sea mining, an industry with uncertain environmental risks.

Yet, a country with substantial extractive interests can still credibly host an institution tasked with conservation and restraint. Xiamen's experience suggests that economic activity and ecological protection are not necessarily mutually exclusive, provided that transparency, monitoring and accountability are embedded into governance structures. Mangrove rehabilitation projects that enhance carbon sequestration while protecting coastlines demonstrate how policy trade-offs can be managed.

> **Xiamen could function as a knowledge hub linking science, law and diplomacy**

The deeper issue in the debate on host city selection is institutional culture. Secretariats do more than organise meetings. They shape agendas, frame compliance discussions and mediate between scientific assessments and political negotiation. Over time, they develop norms about transparency, inclusiveness and responsiveness.

Brussels would probably reinforce established bureaucratic habits. Valparaiso would send a powerful signal about representation. Xiamen, if selected, would test whether governance innovation rooted in practical experience can travel from the national to the global level.

Consider overfishing, one of the treaty's most urgent challenges. Effective environmental impact assessments require timely data and credible monitoring. Xiamen's experience with integrated ocean health dashboards and training programmes for regional fisheries officials offers a concrete reference point. When the treaty speaks of "capacity-building", this is what it looks like in practice.

China's bid should not be overstated as a claim to leadership. Hosting a secretariat does not confer control over a treaty, nor does it guarantee normative dominance. What it does offer is an opportunity – and an obligation – to bridge the gap between agreed rules and daily implementation. In an era when parts of the international system are fragmenting, this matters.

The decision is therefore not a technical one. It is a choice between different governing philosophies. Should priority be given to administrative efficiency, symbolic redistribution of institutional power or experimentation with governance models grounded in practice?

The location of the secretariat will not determine the success or failure of the High Seas Treaty. But it will shape its institutional DNA – how it balances conservation and use, how it handles data and technology, and how it builds trust among states. For the treaty to succeed, trust, transparency and learning will be equally essential.

The High Seas Treaty entered into force without fanfare. Its real test begins now – in the quieter, harder work of governance.

Dr Zheng Zhihua is an associate professor and head of the East Asia Marine Policy Project at the Centre for Japanese Studies, Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Thanks to the US, China has a clear development path

Wang Wen says Washington's constant pressure has strengthened Beijing's capacity to adapt

After a year of Trump 2.0, China has much to be thankful for. This is not an endorsement of US hegemony but an expression of confidence in China's increased resilience and an acknowledgement of the US policies that pushed it there.

The Chinese government's stance towards Trump 2.0 remains the same: to adhere to its own principles, respond rationally and look to turn any crisis into an opportunity.

For a start, Trump 2.0's tariff war has backfired. All it did was force China to diversify. Last year, trade with Belt and Road Initiative partner countries grew by 6.3 per cent to reach 23.6 trillion yuan (HK$26.4 trillion), accounting for 51.9 per cent of total foreign trade value. Trade with the European Union also grew by 6 per cent to 5.93 trillion yuan to account for 13 per cent.

In contrast, trade with the United States fell by 18 per cent to 4.01 trillion yuan and only accounted for 8.8 per cent. In particular, trade with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) grew by 8 per cent, with Latin America by 6.5 per cent and with Africa by 18.4 per cent.

By October, China had upgraded its free trade agreement with Asean. In November, Chinese companies secured a record US$83.5 billion in import deals at the China International Import Expo (CIIE) in Shanghai. In December, the Hainan free trade port came into operation.

China can thank Trump 2.0 for putting the resilience of Chinese companies to the test, forcing them to go global and diversify under the catalyst of trade pressure.

Secondly, China remains undefeated by Trump 2.0's tech war, which targeted the core of the industrial chain with chip export controls, an expanded entity list and other technological restrictions.

In semiconductors, China's production of 28-nanometre chips is stable and improving, and locally produced electronic design automation (EDA) tools – used in chipmaking – are estimated to have supplied as much as a quarter of the domestic market last year. In a growing range of fields from electric vehicles to artificial intelligence, quantum computing and biomedicine, Chinese technologies are leading.

China can thank Trump 2.0 for forcing it to become more technologically self-reliant. But the leap could not have happened without national policy and the building of a technological foundation over the past decade. In the end, the US tech blockade spurred breakthroughs such as Huawei's Ascend chips and champions such as Yangtze Memory Technologies Co (YMTC), China's top flash memory maker.

Thirdly, Trump 2.0's designs on Venezuela and Greenland, and threats on Iran, have taken the hegemonic logic of "America first" to the extreme. This is in contrast to China's four global initiatives – for development, security, civilisation and governance – and its concept of a community with a shared future.

> **The current situation of suppression and international tensions is not tenable. China wants to see healthy relations with the US**

Thanks to the hegemonic arrogance of the US, more countries are seeking a different way and endorsement of China's initiatives is growing. This is reflected in increasing interest in the Belt and Road Initiative, which saw its highest engagement last year in terms of the value of construction contracts and investments.

Trump 2.0's protectionism and internal divisions contrast with China's advantages in governance and opening up. Last year, America saw partisan disputes worsen, social divisions intensify and governance efficiency drop. China, however, continued its "high-level opening up", welcoming 17 per cent more foreign-invested companies in the first 11 months of last year. Grassroots governance continues to modernise, with community "grid" workers – who manage residential areas – reporting a conflict resolution rate of over 98 per cent in some areas last year.

But while China counts its blessings, this does not mean ignoring its many challenges.

The short-term economic impact of Trump 2.0 cannot be underestimated. Tariff barriers have hit profits for some exporters and supply chain adjustments have raised costs. A declining share of the US market has led to job pressures in some export-oriented coastal cities. The risk of global inflation and financial market fluctuations is increasing the difficulty of macroeconomic regulation and control.

Also, Trump 2.0's tech blockade poses long-term challenges. There still remains a gap between the US and China in areas such as high-end chips, core industrial software and precision instruments. Significant investment and sustained effort are needed in Chinese technology. Restrictions on the flow of high-end Chinese talent to the US for further study and tech cooperation hinder the openness of the innovation ecosystem.

The escalation in geopolitical risks also has an impact. Trump 2.0's "Donroe" Doctrine poses a direct threat to China's interests in Latin America, even as China's overseas interests in general are braced for regional conflicts.

While China has a lot to be thankful for – its growth under pressure is an affirmation of national resilience and potential – the current situation of suppression and international tensions is not tenable. China wants to see healthy relations with the US, but this requires equality and mutual respect. Neither American hegemony nor all-out aggression is acceptable.

The intense US-China competition is becoming the new normal. China will continue to advance its national rejuvenation, maintain strategic composure in a complex environment, look to turn crises into opportunities, build a new development paradigm and promote reforms in the global governance system. China will proceed at its own pace; it will not be led astray by Trump 2.0.

Wang Wen is a professor and dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China

LETTERS

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How professionals can navigate child abuse reporting law

Hong Kong's Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Ordinance commenced on Tuesday, imposing a legal duty on 25 categories of specified professionals in social welfare, education and healthcare to report suspected serious child abuse "as soon as practicable". The policy creates a wide protection net for children by ensuring concerns do not stay siloed within institutions.

The duty triggers where, in the course of work of a specified professional, there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a child under 18 is suffering serious harm (be it physical, sexual, psychological harm or neglect) or is at real risk of the same. While existing cases meeting this threshold will need to be reported, the ordinance does not require a reopening of every historic concern without current risk. Specified professionals should review high-risk cases via the decision trees in the Guide for Mandated Reporters, rather than adopt a report-everything approach.

Reports should be made to the director of social welfare or commissioner of police, with flexibility for urgent cases such as those involving imminent danger.

The process starts by spotting signs, using the decision trees to confirm the threshold, then submitting details including the child's information, particulars of the serious harm and the reporter's contact details via an electronic platform. In emergencies, contact police immediately. As a matter of good practice, the professional should always record the concern, the decision process and then make a report where necessary, then cooperate during any follow-up inquiries.

It must be highlighted that good-faith reporters enjoy immunity from civil and criminal liability or professional sanctions solely in complying with the reporting requirements under the ordinance. The reporter's identity is protected (disclosure of the reporter's identity is an offence in itself). Obstructing a professional from making a report also carries a penalty of fines up to HK$50,000 and up to three months' imprisonment. Failure to make a report carries the same penalty though there may be defences.

This regime demands much of frontline workers who fall under the umbrella of specified professionals.

It does, however, build a safeguarding culture for our society. With training and protocol, professionals can act confidently to protect our children.

While no law can prevent all tragedies, consistent reporting boosts early intervention. This shared duty belongs to all child-facing professionals.

Derek K. Ho, chairman of Hong Kong Family Law Association and head of family at Tonys Lawyers

Marriage equality advocates have to secure broader support

I refer to the letter, "Hong Kong will benefit from being more inclusive" (January 16). I believe sexual equality is worth pursuing but the time is not ripe for it in Hong Kong yet.

Although support for same-sex marriage soared from 38 per cent in 2013 to 60 per cent in 2023, such support seems to consist more of navel-gazing and has not transformed into real influence.

The legislature, with its functional and geographical constituencies, is still lacking voices supportive of sexual minorities. Legislators are directly or indirectly elected to the Legislative Council by residents. Without their support, there is no way a bill recognising same-sex relationships will be passed.

The key to promoting sexual equality pragmatically, it would seem, is to increase the civic participation of sexual minorities and their supporters. They should communicate with the legislative councillors for their functional or geographical constituency and organise more events across the community to familiarise people with concepts like the importance of sexual equality.

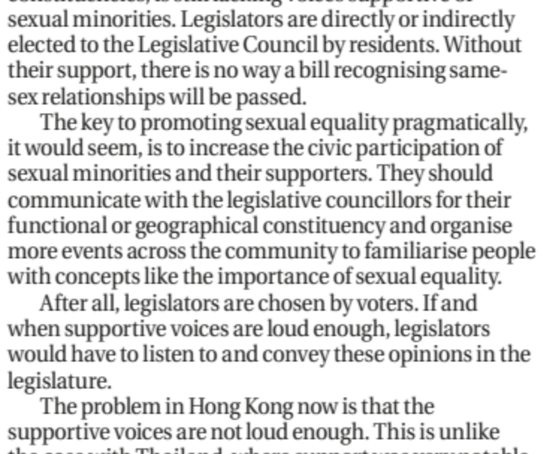
After all, legislators are chosen by voters. If and when supportive voices are loud enough, legislators would have to listen to and convey these opinions in the legislature.

The problem in Hong Kong now is that the supportive voices are not loud enough. This is unlike the case with Thailand, where support was very notable both in society and the political system.

For Hong Kong, national security also needs to be factored in when it comes to sexual equality. After the unrest in 2019, Hong Kong needs to be wary of people with a hidden agenda to use a social issue as a pretext for stirring things up.

In the past, support for sexual equality mostly came from either independent or pan-democratic politicians. This is unhealthy for the development of sexual equality in Hong Kong. To really get things done, it is necessary to have support from pro-establishment politicians. If advocates could assure that sexual minority rights would be advanced in a way that social order and national security are maintained, there would be a higher chance of securing support from pro-establishment politicians.

A. Chan, Guangzhou



Former Thai prime minister Srettha Thavisin (right) with same-sex couples at a marriage event. Photo: AFP

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EDITORIALS

We can't relive the remote learning horror. If not school, then a snow day

Many parents remember the misery of remote learning during the dark days of COVID-19 school shutdowns.

Hours spent sitting alongside your child, listening in on lessons and urging them to stay focused on a screen for hours at a time. Tears shed by frustrated children, burned out and exhausted. Tears shed by parents, too, trying to hold down jobs and pay the bills while also serving as their child's primary teacher.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine this was life for so many of us for so long.

We should not go back. Not even for a day.

Yet by Thursday morning, ABC affiliate WLS-Ch. 7 was publishing comprehensive lists of Chicago-area school closures — including districts announcing shifts to remote learning for Friday.

Kids and parents alike detest remote learning, but teachers aren't fond of it, either. We've heard from educators who speak with genuine dread about the prospect of trying to replicate real school online.

Suburban public schools in Joliet, Orland Park, Franklin Park, Glen Ellyn and many other communities announced closures in favor of remote learning. The list grew longer by the minute.

To those running our schools, we say: Give the kids a snow day if you must (although the bar should be high), but don't send us back to the horrors of remote learning.

Either students are in school or they are not. "Remote learning" is no substitute for in-person instruction.

Kids and parents alike detest remote learning, but teachers aren't fond of it, either. We've heard from educators who speak with genuine dread about the prospect of trying to replicate real school online.

The shortcomings of remote learning are by now well documented. COVID-19-era decisions inflicted real harm on a generation of students — harm that was not felt equally. Many families with means fled districts that kept children out of classrooms for extended periods, enrolling in private schools that found ways to remain open safely. Others left the system entirely. For some parents, forced into becoming full-time learning monitors, homeschooling began to look like the more honest option.

We forget the lessons learned during COVID-19 at our own peril. When it comes to our kids, the primary lesson was there's no place like the classroom. A day behind a screen is a day lost.

We won't argue that little ones should be trudging around outside when in extreme cold. With wind chills expected to dip as low as minus-30 degrees in many parts of the Chicago area, we'd say Friday's weather qualifies as justifiable conditions to keep kids home, warm, safe and snug. But they shouldn't be expected to log on to the computer for a day of screen school.

If it's really impossible and unsafe for schools to be open, have a snow day. We object to this remote learning creep playing out in many districts, which quietly reintroduces the worst aspect of COVID-19-era education into the baseline expectations of public schooling. What began as an emergency measure cannot become a convenient default whenever there is snow on the ground or temperatures drop precipitously.

Remote learning should no longer be tolerated or normalized as a stand-in for real school.

ON THIS DAY 86 YEARS AGO
HITLER AND THE FLYING TRAPEZE

There is speculation in France whether Hitler may not intervene in Finland as a mediator. That sounds crazy, but not, for that reason, peculiar. Things are and have been crazy in Europe. By now the Nazis must be convinced that however low their estimate of the Red army was, it was not quite low enough. They may know that Stalin is not using his best troops, but they also know that he cannot have very many good ones, even if they are not being used, and that the command and the service of supplies are both terrible.

Hitler in taking on Stalin alienated three allies, Italy, Spain, and Japan. Two were not signed up in complete agreements, but the Rome-Berlin axis was supposed to be the tightest military bond in the world. Hitler has not called on Mussolini to meet any obligations, but he knows that the Italian and Spanish Fascists have had much of the ground cut from under their feet by the German accord with the communists.

The Balkan countries are not as afraid of the soviets now as they were and that makes them more belligerently anti-Red. Stalin has nearly all the world against him, and Hitler, who was his greatest professed enemy, is now his only friend. ... The about-face on the holy crusade sufficiently proved that Herr Hitler is not bound by the consistencies which are the virtues of smaller minds. That performance is probably the base for the extraordinary idea that he might do another whirl in the air and again at least frown upon his Red friend and tell him to desist from an adventure which is making a monkey not only of the dictator in the Kremlin but out of the Nazi Fuehrer himself.

The confusion of issues which might be presented by Hitler joining his enemies to protect Finland against what he called the world's greatest menace would be beyond the limits of understanding, but would it be beyond the moral and intellectual capabilities of the star gazer of Berchtesgaden, who has done everything he said he would do and everything he said he wouldn't? Who can tell? Soon the great question in Europe may be, who is fighting whom and for what? ...

Tribune Editorial Board, Jan. 23, 1940

Devices on light poles related to the ShotSpotter system are seen on Sept. 23, 2024, in the Garfield Park neighborhood in Chicago. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

A bloody winter day underscores Johnson's terrible ShotSpotter decision

Sunday was a day of uncommon excitement in Chicago. The Bears, coming off a thrilling victory against the Green Bay Packers, were preparing to play a second postseason game at Soldier Field for a chance at the NFC championship.

But in Woodlawn on the city's South Side, in the predawn hours, a body lay silent in an alley.

Kiara Jenkins, a 36-year-old mother of five, was found on Sunday afternoon near her home in the 6400 block of South Drexel Avenue. She had been shot to death. The details were agonizing. A longtime member of the Mt. Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church in Woodlawn, Jenkins was on her way to the church when she was shot, according to ABC-7 reporting.

Police estimate the shooting occurred shortly after 4:30 a.m. There's now a $10,000 reward available from Cook County Crime Stoppers for information leading to an arrest.

Here's where the narrative gets more tragic. Her body wasn't discovered until 2:44 p.m., some *10 hours* after the time of the attack, according to Chicago police. There had been a call of shots in the area near to the time police believe Jenkins was shot, but the caller hadn't seen anything and responding officers didn't locate her, according to crime website CWB Chicago.

This would have been an instance where ShotSpotter gunshot-detection technology, which was deployed in this neighborhood until September 2024, could have helped pinpoint the location of her body. At the time, it was dark. It doesn't surprise us that responding police didn't find her.

Since Mayor Brandon Johnson insisted over the objections of a majority of City Council members on ending ShotSpotter in Chicago in September 2024, CWB has tracked instances in which shootings occurred in parts of the city previously covered by the technology and emergency response was delayed due to the lack of a 911 call or information from a caller that was vague. Jenkins was the 72nd such case reported by the outlet, with two additional cases occurring later on Sunday.

The day itself, in which seven Chicagoans were shot to death, was one of the bloodiest winter days in Chicago in ages. The Tribune reported that Sunday was just the fourth January day since 1991 in which at least seven homicides happened in Chicago.

The bloodshed was a harsh reminder that gun violence in Chicago remains at unacceptably high levels despite a substantial decrease in homicides last year.

So, once again we decry the lack of a gunshot-detection system in Chicago's most violent neighborhoods. Johnson pledged to find an alternative to ShotSpotter itself that could provide the same function. But that was well over a year ago, and the procurement process has crawled ever since.

A Johnson spokesperson tells us the administration has "finished the testing of applicants and (is) now in the review process to determine next steps."

That doesn't sound to us like a new gunshot-detection system will be in place anytime soon. Will the administration have a vendor before the next mayoral election a little over a year from now? We wouldn't bet on it. But it should.

If and when it happens, it will be too late for Kiara Jenkins and more than 70 other victims who might well have seen a more timely response had ShotSpotter been continued.

The debate over ShotSpotter's utility, as we've discussed more than once before, long ago transitioned from an argument over whether the technology helps prevent crime or catch criminals to one over whether it gives first responders more precise and timely information on fired shots to enable fast medical attention to victims. For gunshot victims, time is of the essence and can mean the difference between death or survival.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab in 2024, just days before the mayor sent ShotSpotter packing, offered a compelling op-ed in our pages outlining a data analysis making a highly persuasive case that ShotSpotter's continuation would save dozens of lives each year. Certainly, not every one of those victims who have died in the months since would have been saved with ShotSpotter. But, based on the Crime Lab's work, some surely would have survived.

One of the imponderables of Johnson's ideologically based decision to pull the plug on ShotSpotter is that the people being harmed by the loss of the technology overwhelmingly live in neighborhoods and are part of communities that the mayor considers his political base.

For all the progress made in getting violent crime rates down in 2025, the city of Chicago remains unacceptably unsafe, particularly in too many neighborhoods on the South and West sides.

We don't know if Kiara Jenkins could have been saved. She was shot in the abdomen and legs, according to police. We do know, though, that if she had a possibility of survival with a timely emergency response, ShotSpotter could well have provided that chance.

EDITORIAL CARTOON

MICHAEL RAMIREZ

OPINION

Thank you, Derrick Rose, one of Chicago's own

By Michael Reinsdorf

Former Chicago Bulls player Derrick Rose speaks while being honored at halftime of a game between the Bulls and the Knicks at the United Center in Chicago on Jan. 4, 2025. **CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

If you want to understand Chicago, just look at Derrick Rose.

He's from the South Side, and he carried himself with the toughness, humility and resilience this city is known for. He brought that mindset to every court he stepped on, letting his play do the talking. Even at the height of his career, when he was as electric and explosive as anyone in the game, he carried himself with a quiet confidence that lifted his teammates and made the city proud.

And while many remember Derrick's MVP trophy, his record-setting rookie playoff game against Boston in 2009 and the two-handed dunk over the Phoenix Suns' Goran Dragić in 2010, when I think about Derrick, I think about his character. on the court, as a teammate, and in the way he handled hardship.

During the 2011-12 season, before the knee injury that would ultimately change the course of his career, Derrick missed time with a few minor injuries. I remember having lunch with him during that stretch. Instead of frustration, he talked about it as a positive. He said his teammates were learning how to win without him and that when he came back, the team would be stronger because of it. What struck me was how naturally he viewed the game through the lens of his teammates, the trust he had in them and how instinctively he put the "we" ahead of the "me."

I saw that same perspective during the Eastern Conference finals in Miami. After a tough loss, I was in the bowels of the arena following the press conference when Derrick turned to a family member and asked where his mom was and if she was OK. In a moment filled with frustration and disappointment, his first instinct wasn't about basketball. It was about family. That moment stayed with me, because it revealed what mattered most to him, even when things were hardest.

Derrick's story isn't a straight line of highlights. It's a Chicago story. Growing up in Englewood, fighting through injuries, and continuing to show up with belief and resolve, he kept going. That kind of perseverance connects a city, whether you're from the North or South Side, the city or the suburbs. He connected fans around the world not just to the Bulls but to Chicago itself.

One last thing stays with me. In my conversations with Derrick over the years, it was clear that he never wanted to be defined only by basketball. Even when he was young, he talked about himself first as a father and about wanting to build a full, meaningful life beyond the game, whenever that time came.

We don't take jersey retirements lightly at the Chicago Bulls. Each one is an enduring statement about who we are and whose impact on our organization and our city is undeniable. When people walk into the United Center and look up, they see the names that tell the story of Chicago basketball and Chicago character. Derrick belongs there.

And while fans loved him, what stayed with me most was how his teammates felt. In recent years, when I spoke with former teammates, there was a shared sense that hanging his jersey was simply the right thing to do. Hearing that told me everything I needed to know. Derrick was, and still is, loved. Not just for what he did, but for who he is.

On Saturday, Derrick joins Michael Jordan, Bob Love, Scottie Pippen and Jerry Sloan. His number belongs in the rafters not only because of what he accomplished but also because of the responsibility he carried and who he is.

Humble. Tough. Generous. A teammate. A son. A father. A Chicagoan.

Derrick, this honor reflects the player you were, but even more, the person you've always been. Thank you.

Michael Reinsdorf is president and CEO of the Chicago Bulls.

The violence in Iran has been stark. The nation faces a dangerous historic passage

By Pegah Banihashemi

A tax office burned during protests is seen during a tour for international news media in Tehran on Wednesday. The Iranian government said on Wednesday that it had successfully suppressed anti-government protests that had roiled the country for weeks, after a crackdown that killed thousands. **ARASH KHAMOOSHI/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

As Iran's internet and communications blackout enters its third week, reports from inside the country point to a catastrophe far larger than many initially feared. Thousands of protesters have been shot, and more than 25,000 people are being held in detention centers run by the Islamic Republic. According to The Sunday Times, over 700 protesters across Iran have been blinded as a result of gunfire and crowd-control weapons.

The Iran Human Rights organization has reported that prison doctors have been barred from treating injured detainees, allowing some to die from their wounds. Other accounts describe protesters who, after being shot, lay motionless among corpses for days out of fear that any sign of life would result in a final, fatal bullet. For Iranians living abroad, every day begins with the same dread: If the internet were suddenly restored, what scenes would come to light? The scale of the tragedy, many fear, will be far worse than imagined.

One relative from the religious city of Mashhad described how, during the height of the protests, municipal water trucks arrived daily to wash blood from the streets. But while the streets may be cleaned, the lives lost and the parents left grieving cannot be washed away.

Iranian law, on paper, tells a very different story. The country's criminal code explicitly guarantees detainees access to legal counsel, and the Islamic Republic's constitution recognizes peaceful, unarmed protest as a basic citizen right. These provisions are routinely invoked by the regime to reassure the international community that Iran possesses an independent judiciary operating under the principle of separation of powers, comparable to legal systems elsewhere.

In practice, however, the law is consistently interpreted in favor of the system. Judiciary Chief Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei recently declared that "our real work has only just begun," as courts barred lawyers from representing detainees and emphasized severe punishments for protesters labeled "rioters" and "agitators."

Days before the protests escalated, several figures close to the regime wrote on X that Iran was "approaching the God of the 1980s" — a chilling reference for Iranians. The phrase evokes memories of the mass executions of political prisoners during that decade, culminating in the 1988 prison massacres, for which no official has ever been held accountable.

President Donald Trump has claimed that Iran has revoked the death sentences of 800 prisoners. Yet families have contacted the BBC stating that their children have been explicitly informed they have received death sentences. Elaheh Mohammadi, a journalist previously imprisoned during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, described the atmosphere succinctly: "The city smells of death. I have never seen people this stunned. The country is in mourning. People only have the strength to cry."

Against this backdrop, Trump has emphasized the need to deliver assistance to the Iranian people — a message many Iranians say they heard clearly during the peak of the protests. Meanwhile, U.S. naval forces and military equipment are being positioned closer to Iran. At the same time, the Iranian regime has warned that any attack on Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would be met with the harshest retaliation, prompting Gulf states to quietly urge restraint and warn against setting the entire region ablaze.

No one can yet say with certainty whether the Middle East is approaching a full-scale war or whether a diplomatic solution is being pursued behind closed doors between Iranian and Western officials. What is clear is that, despite decades of activity by exile groups — ranging from the People's Mojahedin Organization to various ethnic movements — none command broad legitimacy or popularity inside Iran.

One figure, however, stands apart: Reza Pahlavi. During the current protests, demonstrators repeatedly chanted his name, along with that of his late father, Mohammad Reza Shah, and openly called for the return of the Pahlavi monarchy. Pahlavi, who left Iran as a teenager, has long been regarded as a prominent opposition figure. In recent months, many Iranians have increasingly looked to him in practice, not merely symbolically.

Pahlavi has stated that he seeks to act as a transitional leader — returning to Iran to facilitate a national referendum and oversee a democratic transition. He is supported by advisers who function as political "kingmakers," shaping strategy and messaging. While these figures are not universally popular among other opposition groups — leading some to question whether Pahlavi can be fully trusted — others argue that, in the absence of any functioning parties or organizations inside Iran, he represents the only viable figure capable of guiding the country through a transitional phase.

Through decades of maximum pressure, repression and systematic delegitimization of domestic political activists, Khamenei has effectively erased most internal opposition figures from public life. Apart from individuals such as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi and reformist politician Mostafa Tajzadeh — both currently imprisoned — few recognizable domestic leaders remain. Neither commands broad popular support, though it remains impossible to accurately measure internal opposition strength until genuine political space exists.

Nevertheless, if Khamenei were to exit the political stage, the most difficult phase would only then begin. A society that has lived for decades under dictatorship, with little opportunity to practice democratic governance, and that has been severely weakened by economic hardship resulting from sanctions and systemic corruption, would suddenly be required to embrace dialogue, tolerance and mutual recognition. This transition will not be easy.

Yet there remains a source of cautious hope: Iran's rich cultural heritage, the ethical capital of its society and a long-standing tradition of solidarity and empathy that has repeatedly surfaced in moments of national crisis. It may ultimately be this cultural and moral reservoir that enables Iranians to navigate this historic passage and lay the foundations for a more just and humane political order.

Pegah Banihashemi, a native of Iran, is a legal scholar and journalist in Chicago whose work focuses on human rights, constitutional and international law, and Middle East politics.

OPINION

Humoring Trump is appeasement, and appeasement is surrender

Elizabeth Shackelford

People walk on a snow-covered shopping street in the city center on Wednesday in Nuuk, Greenland. **SEAN GALLUP/GETTY**

Most of us learned this lesson in grade school: Appeasement doesn't stop a bully. It invites only more bullying. The only thing that works is standing up for yourself. It isn't a guaranteed win. You might still get a bloody nose. But if you don't fight back, you are certain to lose, again and again.

Europe learned this lesson in 1938, when Adolf Hitler threatened war on Europe unless Czechoslovakia surrendered its border region of Sudetenland. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain infamously led Europe's negotiations, on behalf of the United Kingdom, France and Italy. He ultimately capitulated, pressuring Czechoslovakia to cede Sudetenland to Germany in return for the promise of peace. That appeasement only emboldened Hitler, and the rest is history.

Europe faces a similar choice today, and the continent needs to admit it. Threatening broad financial punishment or military force if Denmark, a close and reliable NATO ally, doesn't hand Greenland to President Donald Trump, is not something Europe can negotiate with, even if Trump later walked it back. There is no middle ground here. If Europe does not stand up now, it surrenders.

China understands this lesson. By April of last year, Trump's tariffs on China reached 145%, but China consistently counterpunched. China not only escalated tariffs on U.S. goods to nearly the same prohibitive amount, but it also introduced export restrictions on rare earth minerals — something the United States cannot live without or effectively substitute from elsewhere. The Trump administration backed down each time within weeks, amid no Chinese concessions. The two major powers have since continued a cycle of trade escalations and truces. Trump keeps blinking and tries to cover his tracks, as things returned more or less to the status quo. One year into Trump's trade war, his administration is worse off vis-à-vis China than it was before.

Other countries can punch back too. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney explained during his powerful and on-point speech at the World Economic Forum this week: "Other countries, particularly middle powers like Canada, are not powerless. ... The power of the less powerful begins with honesty." He added that sovereignty "that was once grounded in rules ... will be increasingly anchored in the ability to withstand pressure."

When Trump claimed he would make Canada the 51st state, Canada didn't respond by trying to determine how it could make him happier with less. It responded by diversifying and preparing for a world that no longer depended on a southern neighbor it couldn't count on anyway. Canada has since signed 13 trade and security deals across four continents. Carney's message is simple: Other countries might not be strong enough to withstand a great power's bullying on its own, but they are together. "Middle powers must act together because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu," Carney said. It's a lesson that U.S. law firms and universities should have internalized too.

Europe needs to relay to Trump that his threats are unacceptable, not negotiable, and it has the tools to do so. Some European leaders called for the use of Europe's Anti-Coercion Instrument, known as the European Union's "trade bazooka," a legal tool established in 2023 specifically to counter the use of economic tools as blackmail. This tool allows the EU to impose or increase customs duties, restrict exports or imports with quotas or licenses, restrict trade in services, and curb public procurement access, foreign direct investment, intellectual property rights and access to EU financial markets.

Europe could also finally impose the tariffs on the more than $100 billion in U.S. goods that it designated after Trump's "Liberation Day" in April but froze for six months based on negotiations with the Trump administration. That freeze is set to expire in February.

The EU collectively — across public and private sectors — also owns about $8 trillion in U.S. stocks and debt, which is "twice as much of the rest of the world combined," according to Deutsche Bank's head of foreign exchange research. This matters, since dumping a chunk of this debt would undoubtedly trigger a financial crisis in the United States — something Trump couldn't ignore. That would mean significant financial losses in Europe too, but if it were sufficient to scare the Trump administration straight, the continent's sovereignty would remain intact, and ultimately that's the whole ballgame.

Some European leaders are still hoping to avoid the worst by offering concessions and buying time. NATO officials are reportedly considering rewarding Trump's aggression with sovereignty over the land where it houses its foreign military bases. This is a fool's errand that will only embolden a president who continues relentlessly to storm past the limits of laws and reason precisely because people keep letting him do so.

Some European leaders understand this reality and steadfastly oppose compromising with wrong. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said on X, "Appeasement is always a sign of weakness. ... Appeasement means no results, only humiliation. European assertiveness and self-confidence have become the need of the moment."

Admittedly, this is not an easy path, but it's the only choice to preserve sovereignty in Europe. Europeans, more than anyone, should understand that this is no time for Chamberlains.

Elizabeth Shackelford is a senior adviser with the Institute for Global Affairs at Eurasia Group and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune. She is also a distinguished lecturer with the Dickey Center at Dartmouth College. She was previously a U.S. diplomat and is the author of "The Dissent Channel: American Diplomacy in a Dishonest Age."

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Suggestion for Bears

We have gotten to a point where it seems that money is the only factor in many corporate decisions. I just read that the Bears organization is worth more than $8 billion. How about letting the Bears do a joint project with the people of Illinois and let the stadium be owned by the people? The Green Bay Packers are publicly owned.

People in Illinois want the Bears to stay in Illinois. So why not offer a compromise that the Bears can certainly afford? I'm sure a lot of Illinoisans would put up their hard-earned money to make that happen.

I think Virginia McCaskey would be happy.

— Christine Hanslik, Warrenville

Transparency needed

For almost two decades, Chicagoans have been paying for the disastrous parking meter deal to the "private" company Chicago Parking Meters LLC. Apparently, that payment will continue for decades to come. Who are the owners/shareholders of CPM? How can public property be sold without the public knowing who bought it?

Who are the individuals who are profiting from the sale of Chicago's parking meters? Are they living among us or have they moved to warmer locations? Don't Chicagoans have the right to know whose retirement they're paying for?

— Marilyn Kelly, Chicago

Mayor showed character

Chicagoans and others may disagree on many issues with Mayor Brandon Johnson, but he saved Chicago in one regard. Instead of saying no to the budget he did not like, he allowed it to pass. He would rather have a budget he does not like than have no budget for the city, thereby letting the city be the victim of some sort of paralysis.

— Michael M. Kazanjian, Chicago

Give patients a break

Isn't it enough that families have to pay high tolls, parking fees and food costs when their loved ones are cared for in the Illinois Medical District in Chicago? Now there's talk of adding another 1.5% tax to downtown hotel bills.

Regardless of the other arguments for and against this extra tax overall, give the already-challenged patients and families a break.

— Lori Miller Reszel, Libertyville

License plate readers

As a police district councilor and executive director of a youth-focused nonprofit in Englewood, I spend a lot of time thinking about what contributes to safe communities.

My nonprofit, Mr. Dad's Father's Club, works to engage fathers in their children's lives through literacy and mentorship. We've witnessed the power of early intervention — catching kids early, building trust and helping them chart a positive course. Our work starts with prevention, not punishment.

That same principle should guide how we think about public safety technology such as license plate readers, or LPRs.

There has been a lot of noise about LPRs in recent months. From my perspective, LPRs are an essential public safety tool, similar to a security camera in a corner store. They capture still images of vehicles that pass by, the same as what anyone could see from the side of the road. They don't follow people or monitor continuous movement.

But what they absolutely do is help solve crimes faster. The images captured by LPRs are put into a database for officers to access, often as their first point of reference in an investigation. Through this data, officers in Chicago have confiscated weapons, brought drug traffickers to justice, captured violent criminals, solved hit-and-run cases and more. LPRs are effective in solving crime, which in turn makes them effective in deterring and preventing future crime.

Concerns about privacy and security are understandable, and strong guardrails are essential. Most agencies have stringent data protection and retention policies, and Illinois law prohibits the sharing of LPR data with federal agencies. Continued accountability and transparency from local agencies in how their LPR data is used, stored and retained will be key in building more support.

It's a challenging time right now, both for law enforcement and the communities they serve. Distrust is at record levels. But we cannot afford to waiver in our support for tools that are making our streets safer. Violent crime was down double digits last year in Chicago. What we're doing is working, and we must stay the course.

License plate readers are a practical, commonsense tool that helps law enforcement respond faster and, ultimately, frees up officers to focus on community engagement and prevention. If we want safer neighborhoods, we should invest in both people and the tools that help protect them.

— Joseph Williams, police district councilor, Chicago

Protect worshippers

As a Chicago resident and member of our local Jewish community, I urge the passage of the bipartisan Pray Safe Act so all faith-based communities can be secure and stay safe before another tragedy strikes.

Keeping our faith-based institutions and houses of worship secure is more important now than ever before. In 2024, the Anti-Defamation League documented more than 9,350 hate-related incidents; 335 were aimed at our Jewish community right here in Illinois. As the city reported, anti-Jewish hate crimes increased by 58% over 2023.

No matter how or to whom you pray, all Americans have a right to do so safely, and our congressional leaders have an obligation to make our houses of worship as safe as possible so we don't have to worry about when and where the next attack will come.

I call upon U.S. Sens. Tammy Duckworth and Dick Durbin to support the bipartisan Pray Safe Act so we can all gather in our communities and pray without fear.

— Greg Stewart, Chicago

Officers' mental health

As we enter 2026, I want to speak directly to police officers, supervisors and leaders from lived experience, not theory.

Law enforcement has normalized exhaustion, emotional suppression and suffering in silence. That mindset is costing careers, families and lives. This year calls for honest resolutions that actually keep officers alive and well.

To police officers: Needing care is not weakness. I killed someone in the line of duty, and after years of pushing through trauma, stress and critical incidents, I learned the cost of waiting too long. Make your mental and physical health a priority. Check in after critical incidents, talk to someone you trust and use professional resources without shame. Mental health care preserves careers and lives.

To supervisors: You shape the culture every day. Pay attention to changes in your officers and intervene early. Normalize mental health conversations and model healthy leadership by taking time off, setting boundaries and seeking help when needed. What you tolerate becomes culture.

To police leaders: Wellness is not optional; i's operational. Healthy officers make better decisions and build stronger community trust. Departments must stop abandoning officers when they struggle and start supporting recovery and accommodation. Leadership is measured by action, not policy.

My resolution for 2026: End the silence, end the stigma and change the culture. Taking care of the officer strengthens the badge and saves lives.

Let 2026 be the year we stop equating toughness with suffering alone and start protecting our own with the same urgency we protect the public.

— Capt. Adam A. Meyers,Hartford Township Police Department, Hartford, Wisconsin

Pace paratransit trips

Three years ago, I stopped driving. I am a senior using a cane, and I applied for and was approved by Pace. This service has allowed me to be independent as I can shop, see doctors, eat out and visit friends as I did when I drove. The Pace drivers on both the buses and taxis are very patient, courteous and helpful. One driver helped me bring my shopping cart into the house. I was able to meet many of the drivers, and they remembered me.

This is a wonderful service that Illinois offers and should be continued and given more money since some of the ride options were curtailed recently.

— Judy Arkes, Chicago

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OPINION

Keep Congress Ineffective

By Michael A. Fragoso

Congress last year passed the fewest laws ever in the first year of a new presidency, according to a recent study. That reinforces a common refrain in establishment-conservative circles: Congress should legislate more and stop ceding so much policymaking authority to the president.

But there are worse things than an ineffective Congress. In our polarized political environment, an empowered Congress would be far more dangerous than an empowered president.

The reason Congress has passed so few major bills in recent years isn't laziness or shirking but rather a combination of Senate rules and party polarization. Because of the filibuster, it takes 60 votes for the upper chamber to pass most significant legislation. With hardly any remaining moderate Democrats or liberal Republicans, assembling a bipartisan coalition that reaches 60 votes is maddeningly difficult. This means the minority party has a practical veto over grand legislation, and legislative interventions are limited to areas that have broad bipartisan support.

This is a recipe for relative stability in our laws. The swings between emboldened presidential administrations are comparatively minor and can be changed by a subsequent administration without too much difficulty. Swings between emboldened Congresses, however, can be both significant and unpredictable.

We have little recent experience in the sort of dangerous change that can be brought about by an emboldened legislature. The best example was when Democrats briefly had a 60-vote supermajority and passed the first version of ObamaCare in 2010. (After Republicans won the special election to replace the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, Democrats resorted to budget reconciliation to pass a House-approved version by a simple majority.)

In a polarized age, an empowered legislature would be the most dangerous branch.

Able to enact significant policy changes on a party-line basis, they saddled the country with a badly designed entitlement that still dominates our politics 15 years later.

This was an exception. For the past 80 years Congress has passed most significant legislation through a bipartisan process in which the filibuster prevented half of the country from being able to force its will on the other half. Insofar as this has led to frustration over a supposedly inactive Congress, it's because we have had so little experience with a truly imperial Congress.

Senate Democrats gave us a glimpse of one in 2022, when they attempted to abolish the filibuster so they could mandate their favored election procedures nationwide and ensure a durable advantage at the ballot box. Thanks to two holdouts, they failed. If they eventually succeed, the list of structural changes beyond election law that will be available to Democrats is astounding: statehood for the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, "reform" of the Supreme Court, new entitlements expanding their party's permanent client base, and more.

Given this prospect, some Republicans are tempted to strike pre-emptively: abolish the filibuster and entrench their own advantages. The party of limited government, though, doesn't have a comparable legislative toolbox to ensure its political domination. Republicans—long averse to federalized elections and with an ever-shifting base of low-propensity voters—don't have a federal election reform scientifically designed to harm their opponents like the Democrats' H.R. 1. Neither are there Republican states in waiting, a liberal Supreme Court to pack, nor a reliable base of conservative voters eager for new entitlements.

Even if such legislation were available, the current composition of Congress makes it virtually impossible to pass, with or without the filibuster. In the House, any such bills would need to bring together New York moderates and the Freedom Caucus. In the Senate, the chamber's establishmentarians would need to unite with its Steering Committee conservatives. A Republican Congress whose fractious members recently made passing a tax cut Herculean isn't one that will unify to enact structural political changes.

One suspects that Democrats understand this, and that's why some have been urging the GOP to abolish the filibuster even though it would seem to benefit Republicans immediately. Democrats think they would be getting their opponents to draw first—but with an unloaded gun.

Unsatisfying as it may seem, the best course of action for Senate Republicans is to hold the line on the filibuster and wait out our current polarized moment. With a GOP increasingly split between populists and conservatives, and a Democratic Party that includes both Zohran Mamdani and his affluent-class targets, bipartisan cooperation may not be as far off as it seems.

It's true that the filibuster's minority veto power keeps Congress from legislating energetically. Insofar as that prevents structural changes to benefit fleeting majorities, it's a good thing for the rule of law and individual liberty.

Mr. Fragoso is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. He was chief counsel to Sen. Mitch McConnell, 2021-25.

Kimberley A. Strassel is away.

The Diversity of a Local Parish

HOUSES OF WORSHIP
By Stephen G. Adubato

New York Generation Z is going through something of a religious revival. Zoomers are converting in sharply increasing numbers to Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam. Even in New York City, Catholic parishes report a surge of young people entering the Order of Christian Initiation for Adults, the program for adults to receive confirmation. Outside St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Greenwich Village, young people are lining up a half-hour before Mass to get a seat.

St. Joseph's isn't the only New York City parish teeming with youngsters: The young adult ministries at "Old" St. Patrick's Cathedral in SoHo and St. Vincent Ferrer's on the Upper East Side are also drawing zoomers. Their popularity has spread by word of mouth and by TikTokers who have ranked them among the city's top Catholic parishes.

As a Catholic, I can't help but feel encouraged by all these young people seeking to grow in faith. Yet it gives me pause that they are flocking to parishes with so many other young people, many of them also converts. They may benefit from being around others like themselves but are missing out on many blessings of typical parish life.

For most of history, Catholics attended the parish closest to their home. As they immigrated en masse to the U.S., Catholics usually went to the parish tied to their ethnic group and neighborhood. But as they and their children assimilated, most families left these ethnic enclaves for the suburbs.

After the dawn of intra-Catholic culture wars—spurred by the Second Vatican Council and shifts in U.S. politics—more Catholics chose parishes based on their personal liturgical, ideological and social preferences. In the same vein, many of New York's young Catholics say they find their local parishes boring—beset by poorly sung hymns from the 1970s, priests delivering "cringe" homilies and, above all, a lack of offerings for young adults.

It is obvious why a young person would prefer a parish like St. Joe's, which offers several ministries for young people. It has theological presentations where wine is served, spiritual discussion groups (one of which I lead), charitable initiatives and even a speed-dating night.

As enriching and life-giving as such programs can be, I fear that our youngsters are being exposed to a limited vision of what it means to be Catholic. In parishes with high concentrations of young people, members miss out on the chance to interact with older generations, whom they can learn from and support. They would also benefit from parish staples such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, bereavement groups and even bingo night.

Young converts stand to benefit from time spent getting to know cradle Catholics.

There's also something healthy about being around normie Catholics, including so-called bad Catholics who, despite their lack of observance, still hold on to their faith. They may lack the zeal of the convert, but their faith remains deep in their bones—from growing up with a devout grandma, going to a parochial school, or even simply having gone through the motions for so many years.

Such Catholics are a reminder that faith is ultimately a gift, given to us freely by God and transmitted to us through a particular community. It is not something we earn by our own moral effort or intellectual striving—a point young converts tend to forget. And just as the staid-yet-sincere faith of cradle Catholics can temper the zeal of converts, the presence of converts in these other parishes can reignite the spark of faith in lukewarm or overly complacent cradle Catholics.

I can't blame young people—especially converts—for seeking out parishes that respond to their needs. I hope that after finding spiritual community and maturing in their faith, they will choose to get involved in other parishes—preferably their local one. Ideally, more of these parishes will offer ministries that cater to the needs of zoomers and converts. But without a mix of people of different ages, ideologies, walks of life and levels of faith, parish life risks becoming a stifling, overly homogeneous echo chamber—one incapable of sustaining a lively faith.

Mr. Adubato is an associate editor of Compact, an adjunct professor of philosophy and religion at Seton Hall University, and a founding editor of Cracks in Postmodernity.

How the Deep State Thwarted ICE for Years

By Jimmy Percival

The Fourth Amendment is an essential safeguard of Americans' privacy and personal liberty. Its protections must not be eroded. But they also must not be misappropriated by those seeking to subvert legitimate law enforcement. The left has done that for decades, particularly in the area of immigration enforcement.

Multiple media outlets report that Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers have been using so-called administrative warrants in Minnesota to arrest illegal aliens with final orders of removal in their homes. The Department of Homeland Security welcomes the opportunity to explain this reasonable and lawful approach to the American people and federal courts.

The Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable searches and seizures. It also provides that where a warrant is required, it must be supported by probable cause and specifically describe the places to be searched and the persons or things to be seized. Most Americans are familiar with this process. If a police officer witnesses a crime, the criminal generally may be arrested without a warrant. But if the police come to a home to make an arrest, police generally must obtain a judicial warrant before entering without permission.

Illegal aliens, however, don't have the same rights as citizens. Under federal immigration law, officers may issue an administrative warrant, which means that the probable-cause finding is made by an executive-branch officer rather than a judicial officer.

Bureaucrats falsely claimed the law didn't allow officers into illegal aliens' homes.

This is consistent with broad judicial recognition that illegal aliens aren't entitled to the same Fourth Amendment protections as U.S. citizens. It is also consistent with the Supreme Court's admonition that the touchstone of the Fourth Amendment is whether the search or seizure is "reasonable," not whether it is supported by a judicial warrant. In *Abel v. U.S.* (1960), the justices recognized that there is "overwhelming historical legislative recognition of the propriety of administrative arrest for deportable aliens."

While administrative warrants may satisfy the Fourth Amendment for any arrest of an illegal alien, ICE currently uses these warrants to enter an illegal alien's residence only when the alien has received a final order of removal from an immigration judge. That means the alien has already seen a judge, presented his case, received due process, and been ordered removed from the country. Aliens in this context are fugitives from justice, and the Eighth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over Minnesota, has expressly recognized that administrative warrants may be used to enter a residence to capture a fugitive.

Although the law is clear, deep-state actors in the federal government have for decades told ICE officers that they may not enter a fugitive alien's home even with a final order of removal and administrative warrant. Because Congress hasn't created a mechanism to obtain a judicial warrant, this meant that under previous presidential administrations, ICE would sit outside the homes of fugitive aliens waiting for them to come outside before arresting them. Illegal aliens quickly identified this loophole. Some would openly taunt ICE officers by waving through the window or passing notes under the door.

No serious country would tolerate this clear aberration of its laws or allow its national security to be jeopardized and mocked in this manner. Congress never intended the immigration laws to operate this way, and the Fourth Amendment doesn't require it. The previous approach only perpetuated the false narrative that immigration laws are second-tier laws that may be defied without consequence.

The American people gave President Trump a mandate to restore law and order, in part by removing criminal illegal aliens from the country. Since January 2025, Secretary Kristi Noem and the DHS have rooted out deep-state subversion within the federal government and realigned ICE's approach with the law. The Constitution and federal law are on our side.

Mr. Percival is general counsel for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

BOOKSHELF | By Michael Lucchese

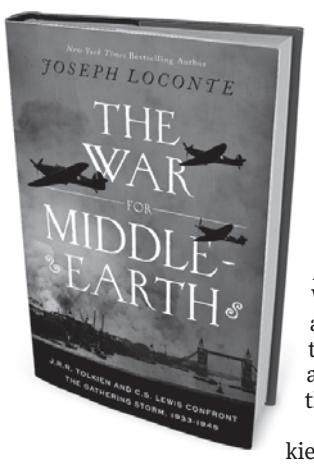
A Faith In Literature

The War for Middle-earth

By Joseph Loconte
Thomas Nelson, 288 pages, $29.99

Generations of readers have fallen in love with the fantasy novels of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, in part for the reprieve they offer from the dreary and mundane. But these tales offer something more enduring than mere escapism: the faith in human dignity and virtue that conservative thinkers have called the moral imagination.

In "The War for Middle-earth," Joseph Loconte explores how World War II—one of humanity's greatest conflicts between good and evil—inspired the literary works of Lewis and Tolkien, among them Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia" series (1950-56) and Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy (1954-55). In this follow-up to Mr. Loconte's "A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War" (2015), the author traces the lives of these two men through a cataclysmic period and illuminates how their moral messages can ward off the forces of hatred and despair today.



As young men, both Lewis (1898-1963) and Tolkien (1892-1973) served in World War I. Mr. Loconte argues that their time in the trenches endowed them with a tragic sensibility and a perception of true heroism. Across Europe, though, World War I was profoundly demoralizing. Intellectuals turned to the twin drugs of ideology and nihilism to anesthetize the pain.

After the war, Lewis and Tolkien were brought together in 1925, when the two took positions at the University of Oxford. As writers and scholars, Lewis and Tolkien ranked among the most perceptive critics of burgeoning totalitarian movements such as Nazism and communism, in no small part due to their shared Christian faith. While Tolkien had been Roman Catholic since childhood, Lewis converted to Christianity in 1931 under Tolkien's influence. Mr. Loconte outlines how their belief in the God-given dignity of man set them at odds with foreign despots and those in England with similar political designs.

Not everyone shared these antitotalitarian sentiments. Left shellshocked by World War I, many believed that the best way to deal with the growing threat in Europe was to disarm the democracies and appease the dictators. One of the most troubling manifestations was the Oxford Oath, a resolution passed in 1933 by a university debating society declaring that "this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country."

Lewis and Tolkien were disgusted by this atmosphere of disillusion. The friends became co-conspirators against the prevailing cynicism of the age. Along with other writers at Oxford, they formed a loose fellowship called the Inklings and began articulating a Christian humanism for a new generation.

Much of Mr. Loconte's history concerns Lewis's and Tolkien's efforts as scholars. Their positions in Oxford's English department gave them authority to promote classic literature as a solution to modern discontent. Tolkien, a scholar of Old English, studied the "theory of courage" found in poems such as the ancient epic "Beowulf," redeeming what he called the "noble northern spirit" from the fascists who would pervert it. Lewis, meanwhile, sought to recover the ideas of love that animated medieval and Renaissance literature. Both authors admired the way that the medievals combined pagan virtues with Christian theology to sustain a culture that was simultaneously vital and humane.

World War II led C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien to infuse their early experiments in fantasy with a sense of moral urgency.

For Lewis and Tolkien, Mr. Loconte writes, the West's literary tradition expressed the profound "moral beauty, when an individual, in the face of death itself, forgets himself and expends himself in a struggle to save another soul from a great evil." Before World War II, England desperately needed a restoration of that kind of moral imagination.

To our benefit, Lewis and Tolkien weren't content to rummage around for these ideals in dust-covered parchment. Their experiences living under the threat of invasion during World War II, Mr. Loconte writes, persuaded them "to use imaginative literature to remind us that the material world, with its temporal aims, is not the sum and substance of our mortal lives." The crisis of World War II provided occasion for Lewis and Tolkien to infuse their early experiments in fantasy with a sense of moral urgency.

At times, Mr. Loconte is a bit too eager to speculate about how Lewis and Tolkien may have taken inspiration from particular wartime events. Although a careful reader will notice parallels between the real and imagined worlds, these authors—especially Tolkien—insisted that their stories weren't simple allegory. Mr. Loconte might also have spent more time addressing the group's conflict with modernist writers: Lewis and Tolkien intended their projects to refute the efforts of poets such as T.S. Eliot or novelists such as James Joyce, whom they viewed as fragmenting English-speaking culture and twisting tradition.

Nonetheless, Mr. Loconte's approach in "The War for Middle-earth" is enlightening. "Like no one else," the author concludes, "Tolkien and Lewis helped a generation to understand that the truths and ideals expressed in the great works of the ancient and medieval worlds bore upon the events of the modern world."

Today, we are likewise in need of these authors' wisdom. As in the years after World War I, many in the West doubt or resent our civilization's ideals, while despots seek to plunge the globe into tyranny. Only courage—the kind inspired by the works of Lewis and Tolkien—can answer the crisis.

Mr. Lucchese is the founder of Pipe Creek Consulting, an associate editor of Law & Liberty and a contributing editor to Providence.

Coming in BOOKS this weekend

The diaries of George Templeton Strong • Sickness and civilization • Revisiting the Black Dahlia murder • The hidden history of Great Britain • The life and work of Emery Roth • Gabriel Tallent's new novel • & much more

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Donald Trump, Not Unchained

His reversal on Greenland shows the limits of his power.

A funny thing happened this week that you wouldn't think possible from reading the common narrative of President Trump as a Frankenstein's monster unchained to do whatever he wants: He backed down from his demands to own Greenland. And he did so after financial markets, European allies and the U.S. Congress raised objections. The "authoritarian" Trump narrative was wrong again.

This isn't to dismiss Mr. Trump's often wild demands and threats. They have consequences in lost trust among allies and doubts about American reliability. These costs are hard to quantify, but they are real and may show up in a future crisis.

But the reality is also that, despite his over-the-top rhetoric, Mr. Trump can't get away with whatever he likes. He is constrained by democratic institutions in the U.S., the necessity of maintaining alliances abroad, and public opinion as measured by polls and investors.

The Greenland saga is a telling example. On Saturday Mr. Trump issued his demand to own the icy island and he vowed to impose tariffs on Europe to compel a sale. Opposition built over the holiday weekend, and financial markets cast a decidedly negative vote on the tariffs and threats on Tuesday.

Members of Congress spoke against the use of military force in Greenland, with even GOP leaders expressing doubts. One Senator told us that, if Mr. Trump had gone ahead, Congress would have voted to cut off funds for an invasion, and with veto-proof majorities. European leaders also made clear that taking Greenland by force, military or otherwise, would break the NATO alliance.

And what do you know? On Wednesday in Davos, Mr. Trump issued his familiar criticisms of Europe's weakness, many of which are accurate. But he disavowed the use of force. And by the end of the day he had canceled the tariffs and claimed victory over what he called a "framework" deal over Greenland that he said will make everyone happy.

The details have to be negotiated, and things could still blow up. But the news is that Mr. Trump claimed victory on terms that appear to be much less than he had demanded on the weekend and were probably achievable without the drama and bluster. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said this was Mr. Trump's plan all along, but if you believe that, you probably believe he planned to back down on his Liberation Day tariffs too.

The story here isn't TACO—that Trump always chickens out, in the Wall Street gibe. It's that Mr. Trump isn't all powerful. As a democratic leader in a constitutional republic, he must cope with checks and balances.

It's true that on foreign affairs a U.S. President has more running room. He can use military force without the approval of Congress or the courts. He can try to appease dictators, as Barack Obama and Joe Biden did. Presidents can do a lot of unilateral damage.

But Mr. Trump also has to be mindful of the results and the reaction from a variety of constituencies at home and abroad. The collapse of NATO on his watch would be a permanent stain on his presidential legacy. So would a Russian victory in Ukraine.

Ah, but what about ICE raids in homes against non-criminal migrants, unilateral tariffs, and lawfare against political opponents? All of these are unwise and harmful to individuals even when they are legal. But when they exceed his legal power, the courts are a check.

This week a majority of the Supreme Court seems poised to block his firing of Federal Reserve Governor Lisa Cook. Lindsey Halligan, his choice for U.S. Attorney who issued indictments against Mr. Trump's enemies, was forced to step down after a judge appointed by Mr. Trump accused her of conducting an illegal "charade" to stay in the job.

* * *

It's hard to know what Mr. Trump might do next, which feeds public anxiety. But as his popularity ebbs, so does his political capital. His approval rating has sunk, his mass deportations are seen as excessive, tariffs are unpopular, and even GOP voters disliked his Greenland demands. Democrats took November's races in Virginia and New Jersey in a rout. The GOP House majority is in peril, and the Senate is competitive. Mr. Trump's attempts to gerrymander a safer House majority have backfired as Democrats have done the same.

The ultimate check on power is an election, and on that score Mr. Trump's bull-dozing governance may be building the opposition that costs his party its majority in November.

Jack Smith Regrets Nothing

Which shows again that he was the wrong man for the job.

Former special counsel Jack Smith testified to the House Judiciary Committee on Thursday, and amid the yelling and partisan posturing, one of the revealing questions was simple: Does he have regrets or think he made mistakes?

"If I have any regret," Mr. Smith's reply began, "it would be not expressing enough appreciation for my staff . . . "

What an answer. He should have shown more gratitude to the waiters, reflects the ghost of the Titanic's captain. It's hard to believe Mr. Smith hasn't ruminated more seriously on what he might have done differently, and maybe he'll share that someday in a forum other than a House interrogation.

But Attorney General Merrick Garland had many options for special counsel, and Mr. Smith's testimony proves again that he was the wrong man for a job that required someone with prudential judgment, rather than a prosecutor determined from the start to prosecute.

His indictments of President Trump, particularly for Jan. 6 and Mr. Trump's destructive attempt to reverse the 2020 election, swept past any prosecutorial restraint. The special counsel brushed aside questions of presidential immunity and how much of Mr. Trump's stolen-election claim was protected speech. But litigation over the immunity issue held up Mr. Smith's case, and then he lost 6-3 at the Supreme Court.

Mr. Smith says he believes a jury would have found Mr. Trump guilty. Yet in 2014 he helped to convict former Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell for alleged corruption. The High Court, warning of the government's "boundless interpretation" of bribery, overturned it unanimously. Asked about that, Mr. Smith said the Justices "changed the law on what constituted an official act." No, Mr. Smith misread the law.

The evidence seems clear that the Democratic indictments of Mr. Trump, including Mr. Smith's, helped to re-elect Mr. Trump. No one knows what might have happened if Mr. Trump had instead faced a narrow, focused indictment. But the Biden Administration wanted a bulldog, and that was Mr. Smith. He might not have any regrets. The country does.

Measles as a 'Cost of Doing Business'

RFK Jr.'s deputy dismisses the latest disease outbreak.

Are measles outbreaks now a "cost of doing business" in the U.S.? Remarkably, that's what a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) official said this week. Let's hope his insouciance isn't as contagious as the virus.

More than 2,200 Americans were infected by measles last year, the most in more than 30 years. Three died. The U.S. is on track to exceed last year's pace with more than 300 cases confirmed this year. Upstate South Carolina is the epicenter of the latest outbreak with 646 cases and some 90 reported in the last week. Most are in school-age children.

Measles is among the most contagious viruses. An infected person will transmit the virus on average to 18 others if those 18 haven't been vaccinated or previously infected. There's a real risk the U.S. could soon lose "measles elimination status," which occurs when a country experiences continuing transmission for a year or longer.

Asked by the press this week if he's worried about this, CDC principal deputy director Ralph Abraham—recently appointed by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—shrugged. "Not really," he replied. "You know, it's just the cost of doing business, with our borders being somewhat porous [and] global and international travel."

Not really. Fewer than 2% of U.S. cases have been imported from abroad. But outbreaks happen when vaccination rates fall below the levels needed to maintain herd immunity, which is about 95%. The kindergarten vaccination rate in South Carolina was 91% during the 2024-2025 school year.

Outbreaks have increased because childhood immunizations have declined since the pandemic. In 2019 only three states had kindergarten measles vaccination rates below 90%. Sixteen did last year. A major culprit is a backlash to Covid vaccine mandates and government health officials who prevaricated and condescended to the public.

But Mr. Kennedy has fueled the vaccine distrust, even saying the vaccine causes disabilities and death like the virus. It doesn't. In November the CDC updated a vaccine safety webpage to state that "The claim 'vaccines do not cause autism' is not an evidence-based claim because studies have not ruled out the possibility that infant vaccines cause autism. Studies supporting a link have been ignored by health authorities."

Like his boss, Dr. Abraham claims people should be "free" not to vaccinate children. "You know, the president, the [health] secretary, we talk all the time about religious freedom, health freedom, personal freedom, and I think we have to respect those communities that choose to go somewhat of a different route," he said.

The problem with this line is that unvaccinated children can sicken infants and immunocompromised children who can't be inoculated, leaving some disabled or worse. In a better Administration, government leaders would explain this to parents rather than brush aside serious illness as inconsequential.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump, NATO and the Big Greenland Gambit

Your editorial "The Greenland War of 2026" (Jan. 20) is right on the money. The insanity and danger of President Trump's actions to acquire Greenland because he "needs" it portend another forever war overseas with NATO allies and further economic chaos here at home.

An important point is overlooked, however. To check Mr. Trump's imperialism and neomercantilist trade policy, Congress must reclaim its power as a separate but equal branch of government. It must prevent a war over Greenland, which would send not only shock waves from the Arctic around the planet but also embolden Russia and China.

If the president won't cease his plan to abandon our binding treaty commitments to Denmark, NATO and the United Nations, then Congress must intervene. Only they can declare war under our Constitution.

Greg Wilson
Estero, Fla.

Not only does Greenland possess key minerals, but it's a gateway to arctic navigation and military advantage over North America, and even Europe. Yet the European Union doesn't seem interested in development and implementation of a strategic plan to keep this island under Western control. The fact that the EU has for decades relied on U.S. military protection shows that Denmark isn't capable of protecting this island from Chinese or Russian adventurism. Maybe the U.S. should finally say to the EU, "you are on your own."

Robert Kring
DeBary, Fla.

Ronald Reagan would like a word: "Our peaceful trading partners are not our enemies; they are our allies. We should beware of the demagogues who are ready to declare a trade war against our friends—weakening our economy, our national security, and the entire free world—all while cynically waving the American flag."

President Trump's coercion is antithetical to Reaganism, underscoring how he is transforming American conservatism. More important, he's weakening our economy, national security and the entire free world.

T. Michael Spencer
Washington

An Argument Worth Having at the Statehouse

The editorial board is correct that further rate reduction for all taxpayers, as opposed to exempting the bottom two-thirds of filers, would be a more growth-inducing way to phase down Georgia's income tax ("Georgia Needs the Right Tax Cut," Review & Outlook, Jan. 20).

The more important thing at present, however, is that Georgia Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and his state Senate colleagues are making it clear to investors and site selectors that Georgia is among the nearly dozen states where leading lawmakers have announced plans or intentions to join the club of no-income-tax states.

Lt. Gov. Jones, if he succeeds Gov. Brian Kemp as many expect, will have stiff competition from the likes of Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders (R., Ark.), Gov. Mike Kehoe (R., Mo.), Gov. Tate Reeves (R., Miss.) and other gubernatorial counterparts pursuing income tax phase-outs. While Georgia has long had no-income-tax states across its northern and southern borders, that may also soon be the case across its eastern border. Not only is the South Carolina Senate fast-tracking legislation already approved by the House that would phase out the Palmetto State's income tax over time, all of the top contenders to succeed Gov. Henry McMaster (R., S.C.) are campaigning on total elimination of the state income tax.

Many will quibble with the Georgia Senate's income tax relief plan, and the Journal has provided helpful guidance for how the proposal could be improved as it moves through the legislative process. But a disagreement over how best to phase down the income tax is a great argument for state legislators to be having, and it's one that isn't heard in any blue state.

Patrick M. Gleason
Americans for Tax Reform and Beacon Center of Tennessee
Nashville, Tenn.

You Can Follow ICE Legally, but Should You?

Regarding William McGurn's "Mayor Frey's Season of 'Love' " (Main Street, Jan. 20): I live in a suburb of Minneapolis, and while I concede Mr. McGurn's broad point that President Trump clearly has the legal authority and broad discretion to enforce immigration law, I keep coming back to a different question: Because he can, does that mean he should?

The same question applies on the local side. Mayor Frey may have the legal right to tell ICE to get out of the city, but does that mean he should? Just because Minneapolis and Hennepin County can refuse to cooperate, does it follow that refusing cooperation is the wisest course of action?

We see this pattern elsewhere. The president may have the authority to challenge the independence of the Federal Reserve—but does that mean he should? Protesters may have the legal right to follow ICE agents, film them, and push right up to the line of harassment or interference. But should they?

What feels missing in this entire debate is restraint. Our political leaders—and, increasingly, our political culture—seem to operate on a "can we?" basis rather than a "should we?" one.

Legal authority and moral or civic wisdom aren't the same thing, and conflating the two only deepens division and erodes trust.

Dan Morin
Chanhassen, Minn.

Cut Spending Not Paychecks

Mitt Romney's letter "My Country Before My Tax Bill" (Jan. 20) is heartfelt and sincere. Unfortunately, America doesn't have a taxation problem. It has a spending problem. You could tax all of our billionaires at 100%, and the government will find a way to squander all that money and before long will ask for more. Look at how California keeps raising our fuel tax yet somehow our roads don't get fixed as promised, but the high-speed rail to nowhere keeps eating money. America needs to stop spending. Until then no amount of tax raises will solve our problems.

Richard A. Schatz
Indian Wells, Calif.

Terror Proxy: 'I Abhor War'

Regarding "Iran's Regime Defends Its Crackdown" (op-ed, by Seyed Abbas Araghchi, Jan. 21): I let out a chuckle when I read that Mr. Araghchi abhors war.

Meanwhile Mr. Araghchi's regime supports some of the most belligerent terrorist groups on the planet, including Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, who have been waging war for decades. The regime is supplying drones to Russia as we speak. I almost feel bad for him trying so pathetically to defend such an execrable entity like the Iranian regime.

Ari Weitzner
New York

CORRECTION

Norway isn't a member of the European Union. The Jan. 20 editorial, "The Greenland War of 2026," misstated that fact.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Now, I'm really starting to worry. They want to borrow some ice."

American Studies Can't Stand Its Subject

By Richard D. Kahlenberg And Lief Lin

The 250th anniversary of America's founding provides an opportunity to reflect on—and fight over—the country's extraordinary story. Unfortunately, many of the serious scholars who study America—its history, literature and culture—fail to provide a balanced and nuanced account of the country's complex tale.

On the one hand, America's is a story of greatness: The U.S. is the wealthiest and most powerful nation on the planet. Its founders created what is now the world's longest-lasting liberal democratic constitution. The Declaration of Independence put forth revolutionary ideas about human freedom and equality that ushered in a new era for the world. At the same time, the American experience is complicated. Our history includes the mistreatment of Native Americans, slavery and Jim Crow, and high levels of economic inequality that persist to this day.

Eighty percent of articles in the field's leading journal were negative, while not one was positive.

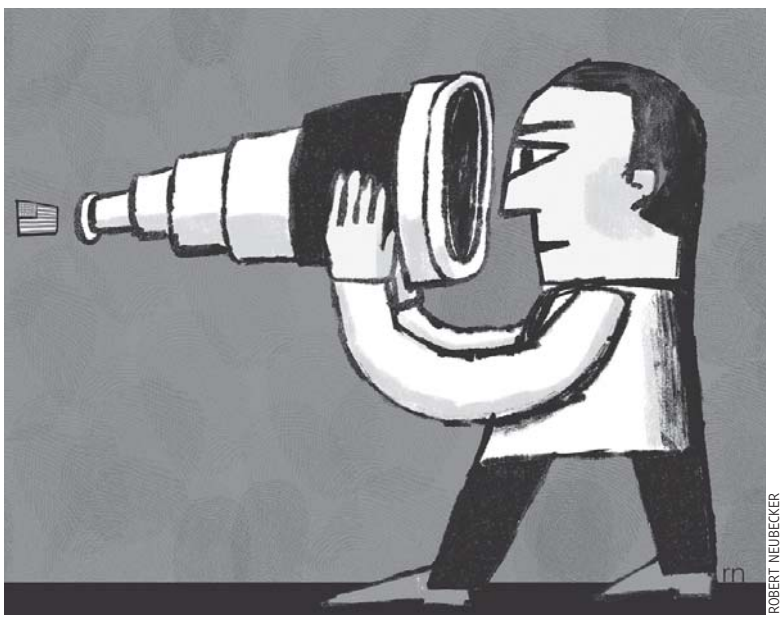
Yet we found only one part of this narrative presented in most of almost 100 articles we examined from over a three-year period in American Quarterly, the flagship journal of the American Studies Association. Published by Johns Hopkins University, it's widely considered the country's premier journal of American studies.

The journal's scholarship paints a one-sided and unrelentingly negative portrait of the U.S. We found that 80% of articles published between 2022 and 2024 were critical of America, 20% were neutral, and none were positive. Of the 96 articles we examined, our research identified 77 as critical, focused on American racism, imperialism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia. Some articles went to absurd lengths to identify sins. One essay posited that thermodynamics—the science dealing with the relationship between energy, heat, work and temperature—is "an abstract settler-capitalist theory that influenced the plunder of Indigenous lands and lives."

We were generous in tagging articles as neutral. Virtually every one of these 19 articles raised at least one critique (racism, sexism and the like), but they also typically described the ways in which members of marginalized communities were able to resist. Implicit in the articles is the sense that there may be a kernel of something good in a society that enables individuals to rise above oppression.

We coded as neutral, for instance, an article describing how the black American journalist Ida B. Wells fought against "narratives of black criminality, sexual aggression, and amorality" that "would be reanimated over and again to motivate racial and gender solidarity among whites and sanction white supremacist violence." We also tagged as neutral an essay about the 1894 film "Buffalo Dance," in which the author contrasts Native American culture and performance in the film with the "genocidal conditions caused by US colonization, including cultural prohibitions, imprisonment, and starvation."

It's astonishing that we couldn't find a single positive article over a three-year period. There were none on American ingenuity. Readers wouldn't come to understand why as



ROBERT NEUBECKER

of 2020 the U.S., representing about 4% of the world's population, won 42% of the individual Nobel Prizes since the awards' creation in 1901. Or why the U.S. was the first country to land a man on the moon. There wasn't a single article about America's vanquishing Nazi Germany in World War II or the Soviet Union in the Cold War. There was no discussion of why the U.S. is rated as the most desirable destination for immigrants across the world. Readers of American Quarterly learn a great deal about America's moral failings but nothing about its virtues.

What's striking is the complete lack of gratitude on the part of scholars who write for the leading journal of American studies and benefit every day from the country's commitment to liberty. Four-fifths of the world's population can't criticize their government without fear of reprisal. Despite the White House's crackdown on universities (which we oppose), professors can and do regularly criticize President Trump without worrying about losing their livelihood or freedom.

American Quarterly is only one journal, but what's found in its pages captures a much larger problem in education, particularly at the collegiate level. During our research, we contacted University of Texas at Austin historian Steven Mintz, who has analyzed the field of American studies. He told us: "A field that once asked, 'What is America?'—exploring its myths, music, monuments, and contradictions—now too often narrows its focus to a different question: 'Whom has America silenced, failed, or harmed?' "

This deeply pessimistic view of the U.S. has taken hold of many young people. When asked whether America's founders are "better described as villains" or "heroes" in a poll cited by the Atlantic in 2024, about 4 in 10 Gen Z respondents chose "villains," compared with only 1 in 10 baby boomers. The bigger problem, as Rep. Ritchie Torres (D., N.Y.) has said, is that "a nation cannot endure if its children are taught to loathe it."

Mr. Trump goes too far in the other direction. His administration seeks to play down references to slavery in our national parks and has rejected an advisory committee's recommendation to create commemorative coins for America's 250th anniversary featuring heroes in the fight for racial justice such as Frederick Douglass and Ruby Bridges. As the nation focuses on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Democrats can and should critique Mr. Trump's sugarcoated interpretation of history—but they will be credible only if they also loudly reject the distorted version of America articulated by the academic left.

This shouldn't be hard. In the mid-20th century, Democrats like Robert F. Kennedy were unabashed patriots. When RFK ran for president in 1968, he spoke at the University of Alabama and underlined the privilege of being an American. "History has placed us all, Northerner and Southerner, black and white, within a common border and under a common law," he said. "All of us, from the wealthiest and most powerful of men to the weakest and hungriest of children, share one precious possession: the name American."

Academics will point out that they're not running for office. Their commitment is to writing what is true, not what is popular. But on that measure, American Quarterly is a failure. The cartoonish picture of America found in its pages constitutes educational malpractice.

Mr. Kahlenberg is director of the American Identity Project and Mr. Lin is a policy research fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute. This essay is adapted from their report, "The Distortion of American Studies."

Japan's Economy Is Worse and Better Than the Doom and Gloom

POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

It's rarely a good sign when global investors start paying a lot of attention to Japan. This week is only a partial exception.

Japanese government bonds had what one could call "a moment" on Tuesday when yields surged, to above 4% on 40-year bonds (a near-30-year high) and to well above 2.3% on the 10-year (a 27-year high). Their rise was accompanied by a depreciation of the yen toward the ¥160-a-dollar mark, a line Japan's currency has crossed only once (in 2024) in the past 36 years. This combination of developments usually indicates a loss of investor confidence in an economy.

You can't fault markets for worrying. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has called a snap election for early next month, and the only economic ideas anyone is prepared to campaign for involve spending money Tokyo doesn't have. Ms. Takaichi's promise to cut (temporarily, she claims) the consumption tax on some items is the smallest part of the problem, despite garnering most of the media attention. At a cost of a few tens of billions of dollars, this is minor relative to the major fiscal "stimulus" plans she also wants—none of which will boost economic growth.

The Japanese government already has a debt problem, with liabilities running at about 250% of gross domestic product. Any new spending will worsen Tokyo's developing debt-servicing problem. Gradual interest-rate normalization by the central bank to suppress inflation is placing greater strains on the government budget, and interest expense on the debt now exceeds defense spending. It isn't surprising that investors would look at all this and decide to sell off government debt and the yen.

Yet in other ways the Japanese economy's turn in the spotlight this week defied the usual pattern, for both better and worse. The gloomy narrative sits uneasily alongside Japan's recent string of good news. Animal spirits are astir after several decades of hibernation. Corporate bankruptcies have surged in recent years as interest rates climb upward, and yes, this counts as a net positive. A legion of zombie companies—those whose revenue is insufficient to cover debt repayment and that are sustained only by forbearance from lenders—have long been a drain on Japan's economy. A cull of these half-dead businesses is freeing up capital and labor for more entrepreneurial, productive firms, while also allowing those healthier companies to improve their own profitability.

This week's bond-market hubbub highlights the perils of a much-needed return to normalcy.

Separate but related, mergers and acquisitions are expanding rapidly. Last year set a record for M&A activity, with deals valued at around $350 billion. Mergers, hostile bids, take-private deals (including management buyouts)—it's all kicking off. Shareholder activism in various forms is on the rise. Companies face new pressures to return cash to shareholders via rapidly increasing dividends or share buybacks.

Much of this is a consequence of corporate governance reforms that the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced a decade ago. Usually, "corporate governance reform" is a gimmick deployed by left-wing activists to hamstring corporations. In Japan, it's causing more capitalism rather than less. That includes requirements that institutional investors act with greater care for their fiduciary duty to their clients and that companies hire independent directors and reduce cross-shareholdings with other firms. These measures (and a new Tokyo Stock Exchange rule requiring listed companies to improve capital efficiency) have created the type of market for corporate control that has long existed in the West and has been damagingly absent in Japan.

These developments, coupled with gradual monetary-policy normalization, make it easier than it has been in decades to imagine Japan one day functioning as a normal economy. Yet this week offered a reminder of what a perilous transition that may be.

While the immediate cause of Tuesday's bond-market movements may be electoral politics combined with bad fiscal policy, the background is the financial system's pivot toward a new normal. A sustained return to economic growth implies higher interest rates across the board.

One practical consequence is that the spike in yield on the 40-year bond has been exacerbated by life insurers' decisions over the past year or two to reduce holdings of longer-dated bonds and rebalance their portfolios toward durations such as the 10-year, which now deliver higher returns than before. That makes sense on the actuarial merits. It's still a market-disrupting change given that Japan's four largest insurers alone manage total assets in excess of $1.5 trillion. Now multiply similar rebalancing considerations across other financial institutions—inside and outside Japan—as well as nonfinancial companies and households.

I defy anyone to predict what this transition will mean for the yield of a given bond, for the yen, or for financial flows between Japan and the rest of the world. A snap election starts to look like the least of the country's challenges.

Why Putin Was Rooting for a U.S. Invasion of Greenland

By Angela Stent

When Vladimir Putin was elected president of Russia in 2000, a reporter asked what he did as a KGB case officer in Dresden, East Germany. Mr. Putin's response: "We were interested in any information about 'the main opponent,' as we called them, and the main opponent was NATO." The mission hasn't changed. In office, Mr. Putin has consistently sought to weaken the Western alliance.

Since its founding in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been the Kremlin's No. 1 enemy. Successive Soviet and Russian leaders sought to undermine the alliance and separate the U.S. from Europe. Mr. Putin and his inner circle can only marvel at the dangerous game President Trump has been playing. His confrontation with the allies over Greenland's future threatened to damage the world's most successful alliance in a way that decades of Russian sabotage failed to do. The gap between the U.S. and its allies, on full display this week, can only reinforce Mr. Putin's conviction that the trans-Atlantic alliance is seriously weakened.

The Soviet Union's answer to NATO was the Warsaw Treaty Organization, created in 1955. Before disbanding in 1991, it was the only such alliance in history whose members invaded each other. Soviet troops invaded Hungary in 1956 and Warsaw Pact troops marched into Czechoslovakia in 1968. These invasions ensured Soviet supremacy in Eastern Europe. Mr. Putin aspires to control the former Warsaw Pact states, as he made clear in the draft treaty he presented to NATO before Russia invaded Ukraine.

After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the future of NATO was debated in Russia and the West. Did it still have a purpose? Communism was defeated and Russia wanted to become a democracy. What was the need for this Cold War relic? Why not create an all-European security organization in which Russia and the U.S. would have an equal voice?

While Russians and their Western supporters argued for a new Euro-Atlantic security architecture, NATO and its supporters understood that the world's most successful alliance shouldn't disband but adapt and admit those former Warsaw Pact states that were clamoring to join.

The Clinton administration offered Russia a distinctive partnership with NATO, hoping to give Moscow a stake in the trans-Atlantic order. The NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed in Paris in 1997, but it did little to diminish the Russian conviction that NATO was the adversary. Mr. Putin early in his presidency discussed the possibility of joining NATO with both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, but it became clear that Russia wouldn't join an alliance it couldn't dominate.

Without lifting a finger, Russia seemed about to vanquish its 'main opponent,' NATO.

Mr. Putin's antipathy toward NATO has only grown. The Kremlin has increasingly supported European political parties and groups on the left and right that oppose NATO and the U.S. Mr. Putin justified Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 by declaring that, if Russia hadn't moved, "it would have meant that NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of Southern Russia."

Mr. Putin doesn't fear NATO because it threatens Russia's physical security. Rather, he understands that expanding NATO membership to former Soviet states and Warsaw Pact members undermines his goal of reestablishing Russia's sphere of influence. NATO remains the chief obstacle to Mr. Putin's imperial ambitions. Had Ukraine been a member of NATO, Russia wouldn't have dared to invade it.

How ironic, then, that a dispute between the U.S. and its allies over a NATO member's territory could end up undermining NATO and helping Mr. Putin realize his goal of subjugating Ukraine. "It was hard to imagine before that such a thing could happen," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Tuesday. He added that it could create a scenario in which "one NATO member is going to attack another NATO member." Although three NATO members—Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia—have experienced something similar.

Ms. Stent is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and author of "Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest."

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Notable & Quotable: Refugees

Helen Pidd and Eli Block reporting for London's Guardian, Jan. 19:

Last year, 76 Americans claimed asylum in the Netherlands. . . . The Netherlands does not rent out hotels or houses for asylum seekers, instead housing them in fenced-off camps. . . . Many of the American refugees, like Jane-Michelle Arc, a 47-year-old software engineer from San Francisco, are transgender. In April last year she flew into Schiphol airport in Amsterdam and, sobbing, asked a customs officer how to claim asylum. "And they laughed because: what's this big dumb American doing here asking about asylum? And then they realised I was serious." . . .

Arc knows how that might sound. "I hear a lot of people saying: 'You are an idiot. You came here from America.' People will tell me: 'Did you think about moving to California?' And then I say: 'Well, I lived in San Francisco' and then they go: 'Oh, that's a heaven for gay people.' But it's different for trans people, particularly for trans women, to the extent that my experience in San Francisco, robot taxis aside, was indistinguishable from [that of] the people that I knew from Libya and Iran and Morocco and Algeria."