Opinion

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2025

REMEMBERING ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

He will always be remembered not only as an eloquent orator but also as a spirited poet. His personality, works, and leadership will continue to serve as a guiding path for the all-round development of the country

Drive innovation

Tall targets for high-end manufacturing will mean little unless pvt companies get serious about R&D

THE GOVERNMENT FREQUENTLY proclaims that it has placed research and development at the heart of the journey towards Viksit Bharat@2047. In a press statement issued in November, it highlighted that R&D expenditure had "more than doubled" from ₹60,196 crore in 2010-11 to ₹1.27 lakh crore in 2020-21. While the stated emphasis on research and innovation as pillars of manufacturing ambition is welcome, neither the numbers cited nor the ground reality offer much cause for celebration. A doubling of absolute R&D spending over more than a decade in a fast-growing economy that seeks to rely on technology-led production does not signal progress—it points to stagnation. In real terms, it likely represents a decline. This neglect becomes even more striking when viewed alongside the fact that the government sector still accounts for nearly two-thirds of total R&D expenditure. Corporate India's persistent reluctance to commit meaningful capital to technology creation is both glaring and indefensible.

R&D is the seedbed of innovation, which in turn underpins technological advancement and higher capital productivity. When investment in research remains fragmented and half-hearted, meaningful commercial outcomes are unlikely to follow. Compared with other emerging market economies, India lags badly in developing indigenous technologies and deep knowledge bases. China offers the starkest contrast. It spent over $500 billion—around ₹44.5 lakh crore—on R&D in 2024 and likely a similar inflation-adjusted amount in 2025. Even if India spent an estimated ₹1.8 lakh crore on R&D in 2025, that amounts to barely 4% of China's outlay. As a share of GDP, China's R&D expenditure stands at about 2.7%, compared with India's meagre 0.6-0.7%. Other emerging economies such as Israel (5.4%) and South Africa (4.9%) spend an even higher proportion. China and the US are now almost at par and lead the world in absolute sums utilised for R&D. The Global Innovation Index 2025 underscores the long-term nature of this effort. China has entered the top 10 for the first time. India's retention of its 38th position—while leading lower-middle-income economies—is, at best, faint consolation.

The government often points to the tripling of patent filings between 2020-21 and 2024-25 as evidence of a surge in domestic innovation. This interpretation is misleading. Under the global patenting framework of the Patent Cooperation Treaty, filings in any country largely mirror global trends rather than reflect indigenous breakthroughs. India does rank third globally in the award of science and engineering PhDs, but the conversion of research output into economic production, scalable technologies or commercially viable ventures remains weak. The ₹1-lakh-crore Anusandhan National Research Foundation announced in the last Budget was widely welcomed. Yet, the two-tier funding mechanism has reportedly seen limited interest even from large corporate houses. With few exceptions, established private players continue to prioritise short-term profitability and market dominance over risk-bearing innovation, despite access to a deep and underutilised talent pool.

Unless this mindset changes—voluntarily or through stronger policy nudges—it is unrealistic to expect India to emerge as a high-tech manufacturing hub. The country already missed the chance to become a clear global leader in labour-intensive manufacturing. Its prospects in technology-driven production could be similarly compromised if even financially strong firms persist in relying on imported designs, R&D and critical inputs. Startup funding alone, even by patient capital, cannot compensate for this structural unwillingness to invest in innovation. India's ambitions will remain rhetorical unless research and development move from policy statements to balance sheets.

Repeat after me: Never, ever underestimate China

FROM US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's trade war to AI developments, 2025 has been full of dramatic twists and turns. One of the most consequential takeaways is to never, ever underestimate China.

At the onset of the year, the world's second-largest economy was left for dead. Economists were predicting lost decades akin to what Japan experienced in the 1990s, and its dominance of manufacturing was being challenged by Trump's second term and the drive by exporters to diversify their supply chains and move operations abroad. Global investors had largely fled, seeing that the country's 3D problems — deflation, debt and demographics — were structural and insurmountable.

By year-end, the perception couldn't be any more different. President Xi Jinping was the only foreign leader that stood up to Trump's bullying tactics on trade and forced him to back down by weaponising Beijing's control of rare earth materials. It has kept its status as the world's most vibrant factory. As for global money flows, foreigners are returning as an AI boom has lifted the Hong Kong bourse to a four-year high.

How did China manage to shake off its malaise and dazzle the world with DeepSeek moments in tech, biotech and even defense? Were the seeds of success always there and elites in the West simply chose not to see them? It's a bit of both.

SHULI REN
Bloomberg

First, Xi's focus on higher education is finally paying off. These days, roughly 40% of high-school graduates go to university, versus 10% in 2000. Engineering is by far the most popular major for post-graduate studies. As a result, the nation's talent pool has greatly expanded: Between 2000 and 2020, the number of engineers ballooned from 5.2 million to 17.7 million; in 2022, 47% of the world's top 20th percentile AI researchers finished their undergraduate studies in China, well above the 18% share from the US. What this means is that by the law of large numbers, innovative breakthroughs are bound to happen, and that China still has the cost advantage in advanced manufacturing.

Second, China is pragmatic, and the AI arms race offers a good illustration. Whereas the US is seeking the holy grail — or artificial general intelligence, in this case — Xi is pushing the industry to be "strongly oriented toward applications," locking in any advantages that AI might bring to sharpen the nation's edge in manufacturing. Across the country, industrial robots operate in so-called dark factories," where automation is so efficient that work happens with the lights dimmed.

Third, deflation cuts both ways. Investors dislike it because companies have no pricing power. On the flip side, it's pretty much guaranteed that local brands capable of charging premium prices at home have hit consumers' soft spot, giving them a fighting chance in global trade as well. The prime example is Guangzhou-based Pop Mart International Group Ltd. The company's gross profit margin of 70% is more than twice what a generic toymaker can make, thanks to the viral Labubu.

The nagging question is how thought leaders in the West got the world's second-largest economy so wrong. Of course, Beijing doesn't make it easy — the country didn't open up from pandemic-related lockdowns until the end of 2022. But some of it, I suspect, is elites' aversion to visiting an autocracy whose political values are different from their core beliefs. Making money off China isn't as easy as a decade ago, and some worry that, once there, they might get an exit ban.

But one thing is for sure: It would be a huge mistake writing off China, the only other economic superpower that matters.

REAL POLITICS

RELIGIOUS *SAMSKARAS*, 'INDIAN-NESS', AND HINDUTVA HAVE SOCIAL ROOTS AND CONTRIBUTE TO RSS INFLUENCE

Reflections on 100 years of RSS

BADRI NARAYAN
Vice-Chancellor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences

THE RASHTRIYA SWAYAM Sewak Sangh (RSS), popularly called 'Sangh', is celebrating its centenary. Various celebrations are being organised by it to relate its meaning and vision to the majority of society. Its chief Mohan Bhagwat delivered an insightful lecture in Delhi upon this occasion, and many similar events have been organised across various cities.

During its 100 years-long journey, the Sangh has expanded itself significantly. It has connected with people across caste, community, regional, and class lines. A Sangh *karykarta* (worker) told me, "We are everywhere—from among the homeless, *jhuggi -jhopadi* (slums), to apartments and bungalows." It's interesting to observe that the RSS and Communist Party of India (CPI) were formed in same year, 1925—one in Nagpur and another in Cownpore (Kanpur). The RSS was established to create a *samaras* (equitable) society for the construction of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation), while the CPI was formed based on the notion of class struggle. One can easily observe that the Sangh ideology has proved its relevance and had an impressive reception. On the other hand, communist ideology has constantly been losing its relevance. The questions that emerge are why and how? The answer may be found via a deep ethnographic study on how these organisations work with the common people.

The Sangh was established in Nagpur with a vision of nation-building through inculcating Hindutva as an inspirational ideology. It started working on both levels—*vyakti nirman* (cultivating ethics in people with nationalist commitments) and *rashtra nirman* (nation building). So, from the start, it evolved a national vision guided by national requirement and not local and parochial ones. Thus, the first success factor was integrating ideology with praxis in their work culture. Second, they disseminated their ideology through the process of social work, and did not limit themselves to preaching and speeches. They asserted their presence less through ideology and more through social work and services, helping them create an effective balance between ideology and praxis. On the other hand, communists gave heavier emphasis on the politics of their ideology and lesser on forging social connects through non-mobilisational social actions.

However, one privilege that the Sangh has had is that since its ideology is deeply rooted in Hindu socio-cultural *samskaras* (values), they don't need to impose their ideology through social actions. Their ideology appears as a social ideal, creating trust among people as compared to the communist ideology, which proposes foreign political ideals. These are not usually well-received by the Indian psyche, which prefers adjustment over conflict. While working in the field, it has been observed that the Indian social psyche feels uncomfortable with the language and politics that emerges around terms like protest, struggle, and conflict; however, it easily accepts terms like inclusion, confluence, and togetherness—feelings which the Sangh has evolved in its discourses and practice.

The Sangh has cultivated its image as a catalyst of nation building and a social reform institution, which has granted it with immense public trust

Third, while studying the Sangh ethnographically, it was observed that Sangh *pracharaks* (functionaries) forge intimate familial relationships as they work with communities through participating in their family functions, ritual-based ceremonies, religious programmes, and other activities. By doing so, they establish sukh-dukh (joy and grief) relationships and always offer to help people with their everyday problems. *Pracharaks* interact with people as members of their families and not as outsiders, building trust and receptibility. As the root of their ideology lies in Indian philosophy, life, and social samskaras, it intensifies when it is associated with nationalist sentiment. The emotional connect, sense of intimacy, and social services embedded with nationalist feelings gives an edge to the Sangh in terms of dissemination, and it has built its image as that of an organisation which works during natural calamities and national emergencies. This has won them significant trust among the common people.

It is interesting to observe that religious *samskaras*, sense of 'Indian-ness', and Hindutva have social roots and contribute towards the Sangh's influence capital, making their presence vibrant within communities. They appear as key metaphors in the diction of dissemination. When deeply analysed, this diction can be seen to have emotional connection, intimacy, and familial bonds. Communists and other similar organisations mostly fail in cultivating such connections with the common people in their language. For example, the Sangh cadres use '*bhaisahab*' (brother) when addressing people, while communist cadres use terms like 'comrade', which seem unfamiliar. The Sangh cadres use terms frequently used to address people with familiarity, while communists uses terms like 'proletariat', 'class struggle', or '*salaam*', which are not part of Indian colloquialisms. The Sangh also constantly adapts new terms, languages, and dictions in their communication and in practice, keeping them relevant in changing times.

The Sangh has cultivated its image as an agency of social change, a catalyst of nation building, and a social reform institution, which has granted it with immense public trust. Its conduct towards and involvement with society and community as well as its socially-rooted mobilisational diction always retain it within public consciousness. Its strength has also been realised by leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia, Jay Prakash Narayan, and many other visionary politicians time and again. Recently, its harsh critics and competitors—CPI leaders such as Prakash Karat and a few others—also directed their cadres to learn from the Sangh , especially their community integration and social service. Karat, the general secretary of CPI(Marxist), in one of his 2014 lectures, suggested that trade unions learn from the way RSS makes inroads among the common people of India. Thus, every public organisation must take inspiration from the Sangh's working model and integrate itself with the communities it serves through understanding their socio-cultural *samskaras*. Being involved with the common populace in their everyday lives would also be essential. A society with diverse textures and threads requires this at the very least.

Get ready for an overdue Fed overhaul

MOHD. A EL-ERIAN
Practice professor, Wharton School, and senior global fellow, Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania

A Fed that continues to generate policy-induced volatility faces intensifying political attacks and fails to provide stability and predictability

TODAY, THERE IS a level of discord within the United States Federal Reserve that has rarely been seen in modern history. Nearly all experienced market analysts agree that the coming Fed policy meetings could prove unusually divisive, owing to conflicting economic views, political sensitivities, and inherent biases. The tension is palpable and has led to wild fluctuations in what markets expect the Fed will do. But, while the media fixate on who will or won't support interest-rate cuts, what matters is not simply that the Fed is deeply divided, but how to make it more effective.

To answer this question, one must first understand the challenges the Fed is facing—beginning with insufficient data. Following the longest government shutdown in US history, the data the Fed is receiving are incomplete, uncertain, and subject to unusually large revisions. For a central bank that is highly data dependent, this is tantamount to flying blind.

This lack of clarity about the US economy's performance compounds the second challenge, arising from the Fed's dual mandate of targeting price stability and maximum employment. Historically, policies that advanced one objective did not undermine the other. Today, however, these imperatives are pulling in opposite directions—and dividing Fed officials. While the "hawks" remain focused on price stability, pointing out that both core and headline inflation are running around one percentage point above the Fed's target, the "doves" are becoming increasingly concerned about weakening labour-market indicators.

Complicating this tug-of-war is the Fed's third, implicit mandate—ensuring financial stability—which is complicated by bubble-like developments in some markets, with risk-taking and dubious funding practices on the rise. Coping with these challenges would be difficult in the best of times, but it is especially tough with the end of Fed Chair Jerome Powell's tenure looming. A "lame duck" Fed chair may find it harder to muster the authority necessary to unite a fractured board.

The next Fed chair's primary task must be to shake it out of its structural inertia. It is time for the Fed to get comfortable with being uncomfortable

Against this backdrop, whatever the Fed decides in the upcoming meetings will come with risks. There is no "safe" path. Given this, markets are now gripped by a profound sense of uncertainty. In less than a month, the likelihood of a December rate hike has swung from over 90% to under 30%, then back up to 90%. This level of volatility is highly unusual and points to an institutional failure: A Fed that values "forward policy guidance" in fostering stability and predictability is not sending credible and consistent signals. Given America's position as an anchor of the global economic and financial order, the consequences are far-reaching.

But if we stop here, we get only half the story—and the unhelpful half, at that. The harsh truth is that the appointment of a new chair will not solve the Fed's problems. A robust "refresh and reform" program is needed too.

The Fed's recent history is littered with missteps. Misguided analyses and flawed forecasting have led to wrong conclusions, including the assumption that the inflationary surge that emerged in 2021 would prove "transitory," and to delayed action, which has left policymakers playing catch-up. Meanwhile, poor communication has muddied market outlooks, and allegations of financial malpractice have been brought against five Fed officials (though not all have been proven). These issues reflect a weak institutional culture, a lack of strategic vision, and intellectual stagnation, all of which have eroded the Fed's credibility and fuelled escalating political threats to its independence.

Addressing the Fed's shortcomings could not be more urgent. We are on the brink of a transformational productivity boom, driven by innovations like AI, robotics, and life sciences. These technologies have the potential to increase the speed limit for non-inflationary growth, creating a promising scenario of high output without high prices. But they also raise the risk of new policy mistakes, especially if employment is decoupled from growth. In this new era, a strong economy may be accompanied by a weakening labour market.

So far, Fed officials have shown insufficient curiosity about the coming transformation. "Sticking to their knitting" is more comfortable than confronting the complex forces that are reshaping the global economy. But complacency is a luxury monetary policymakers can no longer afford. The next Fed chair's primary task must therefore be to shake the institution out of its structural inertia. It is time for the Fed to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

This will require a thorough review of Fed operations and the embrace of a more flexible, nuanced approach. Priorities must include determining the best way to set the inflation target amid high supply-side volatility, developing better intermediate policy tools, establishing structural defences against groupthink within the Fed Open Market Committee, increasing accountability, strengthening compliance culture, and improving forecasting capabilities.

It is a daunting agenda. But challenging internally-led reforms are far preferable to the alternative: A Fed that continues to generate policy-induced volatility, faces intensifying political attacks, and fails to provide the stability and predictability needed for the US and global economies to prosper.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Taking on China

Apropos of "China's trade challenge" (FE, December 25, 2025), China's World Trade Organisation (WTO) complaints against India's production incentives stem less from tariff issues and more from our emerging role as a serious manufacturing rival, particularly in electronics and clean energy. This recognition by Beijing is a sign of progress. However, to convert this momentary advantage into long-term gains, India needs focused action on ground-level bottlenecks. Simplifying land acquisition, modernising port and road infrastructure, and stabilising electricity tariffs would lower costs for manufacturers. Targeted vocational training in advanced electronics and battery technology can build a skilled workforce quickly. Above all, policy continuity across governments will give investors the confidence to commit large capital. China's pressure should spur us to fix domestic weaknesses.
—SM Jeeva, Chennai

Prepare and wait

Apropos of "Chaos & calm in a world of churn" (FE, December 25), President Trump's return has upended old certainties, forcing nations like India to confront rapid shifts in global alliances and trade. While the unpredictability raises valid concerns for our economic and strategic interests, it also presents opportunities. India should prioritise diversifying partnerships while accelerating self-reliance in critical technologies and defence. Quiet diplomacy, backed by stronger domestic reforms, will help navigate these changes. Rather than resisting the churn, preparation can position us better in this evolving order.
—K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Mustard's slow exit

Punjab farmer needs market support

THE Punjab countryside once wore mustard fields as a seasonal badge of honour. Today, that golden crop survives only at the margins, even as India remains heavily dependent on imported edible oils. The paradox is striking: a state well-suited to mustard cultivation is abandoning it not because the crop lacks potential, but because policy and market signals make it economically unattractive. Despite the push for crop diversification, mustard suffers from weak incentives. Farmers point to low and uncertain profits, limited government procurement and dependence on private traders who dictate prices. Unlike wheat and paddy, which are backed by assured procurement and a robust marketing ecosystem, mustard leaves cultivators exposed to market volatility.

The consequences extend beyond individual farm incomes. Punjab today meets only a negligible share of its edible oil demand through local production. This reinforces India's costly import dependence. Encouraging oilseed cultivation is often projected as a national priority. However, without procurement support and price assurance, such appeals remain rhetorical. Farmers would definitely respond rationally to incentives. Mustard also holds ecological promise. It consumes less water than paddy and fits naturally into crop diversification strategies aimed at easing groundwater stress. Yet diversification requires a reworking of the market architecture. Assured MSP-backed procurement and investment in local processing, storage and value chains are the key to the adoption of mustard farming.

Punjab's mustard story exposes a deeper policy inconsistency. Governments speak of sustainability, self-reliance and diversification, while continuing to privilege a narrow set of crops through institutional support. Until that imbalance is corrected, mustard will remain a symbol of missed opportunity. Its revival does not demand new slogans, but the same seriousness that wheat and paddy have long enjoyed.

Rahman returns

A reset in Bangladesh on cards

BANGLADESH Nationalist Party (BNP) acting chairman Tarique Rahman's return to Dhaka after 17 years in self-imposed exile is a defining moment for the party. It could also chart a new course for the country that finds itself in an abyss of violence, instability and Islamisation. The son of former President Ziaur Rahman and ailing former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Rahman is tipped to become the prime minister in the elections due in February. The ban on Sheikh Hasina's Awami League makes BNP the front-runner to win. Alleging poll irregularities when Hasina was in power, Rahman's party has an axe to grind. He fled the country in 2008 over what he called politically motivated persecution. A deep-dive into vengefulness is within the realm of possibility, but realpolitik could take precedence.

With Bangladesh at a crossroads, Rahman may be in a position to give it direction and, as New Delhi would hope, hit the reset button on the worsening ties, along with bringing communal calm. Rahman's remarks in the recent past — 'Not Dilli, not Pindi, Bangladesh before everything' — indicate disagreement with the stark foreign policy deviations of the interim administration of Muhammad Yunus. From Bangladesh under Hasina being one of India's strongest allies in the region and having a historical close engagement, Yunus has infused a strong anti-India metric and a newfound fondness for Pakistan. It would be a test for Indian diplomacy to not let the safe sanctuary for Hasina continue to be the key sticking point.

With the hardline Jamaat-e-Islami, once the BNP's ally, snapping at its heels, Rahman has emphasised the protection of minorities and tolerance as the core principles. Even if a political compulsion, it's a positive sign. As the India-Bangladesh ties go through another low, it's a wait-and-watch period on how his return plays out.

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 26,1975

White elephants

IN stating that scientific institutions in India have been modelled on borrowed lines and imitates facilities installed only in affluent countries, Mrs. Gandhi was pinpointing a basic malaise. The chain of laboratories set up in the country has not justified the huge amounts incurred on them in the shape of ultramodern buildings, sophisticated equipment and well-paid staff. By and large, the experiments conducted there have been of a repetitive nature. Most of the conclusions and data finalised by Indian scientists after many months of experimentation have already been published in British and American journals. Worse, the benefits of their supposedly original and sustained endeavour have not percolated to the poor. The gap between the theoretical instrumentation and its practical applicability to farms and factories has continued to be disconnecting despite the frequent reminders by the top leaders and the industrialists' continual dependence on imported devices. There is also the apparently endless drudgery in the life of the country's poor, hapless majority. The Prime Minister did well to remind Indian scientists of this gap. "Unless deliberate efforts are made to reach the benefits of science to the weaker sections of society," she said at the silver jubilee celebrations of the National Physical Laboratory, "the social divisions in the country would be further widened." This process would thwart the efforts the Government has been making to reduce the disparities in various fields and ensure justice as well as equity.

2025 : The year of Trumpism

US-India relations have sunk to a new low, with the Cold War era distrust returning

SANJAYA BARU
SENIOR JOURNALIST

TRUMP'S WORLDVIEW: The NSS does not suggest that the US troops overseas would be retreated. REUTERS

THERE is little doubt that US President Donald Trump dominated world headlines in 2025. He did so on five different fronts: first, with his 'America First' and 'Make America Great Again' policy that has not only had an impact on US domestic politics and economics but also on global trade, migration and investment flows; second, with his tariff war and the use of tariffs as a geo-economic weapon; third, by seeking to inject himself into various bilateral conflicts around the world, from South, West and South-east Asia to Europe; fourth, by altering the equation between the US, China and Russia, seeking a G-2 with the former and a détente with the latter; and, finally, by becoming the subject of investigations and news headlines about his sex life.

Most recently, the focus has been on the Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS). Scores of papers and articles have been written worldwide commenting on this document. It has been described as a new Monroe Doctrine, not only asserting the primacy of the Western Hemisphere in American security strategy but also proposing military action in the region to defend those interests.

How important this stated strategy would be in influencing the actual behaviour of the US on the diplomatic and military fronts remains to be seen. In India, much of the commentary has been on the NSS view of US-India relations and India's place in Trump's worldview and 'grand strategy'. It has been noted widely that US-India relations have sunk to a new low, with the distrust of the Cold War era returning, especially in the nature of the relationship at the leadership level.

In Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's time, the unprintable language in which President Richard Nixon spoke about her and India remained within closed doors and sealed papers till the confidentiality was broken and various memoirs recorded the low level of discourse in Washington, DC, about India and its leadership. Today, most of what is said is on television and social media. This has cast a long shadow on the relationship.

As for the NSS, three things have so far been clarified. First, that Trump would like to, as it were, 'circle the wagons' and secure control over the western hemisphere, declaring North and South America as "out of bounds" for "outside" powers. In some ways, this mirrors views in Asia that believe the US is an "outside" power in this part of the world. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Trump would have US forces retreat from Asia and hand over the security of the region to regional powers.

> Trump has prioritised US relations with China — both a challenge and a power to deal with — above all else.

Second, Trump has prioritised US relations with China above all else. China is both a challenge and a power to deal with. His tweet about the idea of a G2 — Group of Two — set the cat among Asian pigeons. He would like the war in Europe to end more or less on Russia's terms, thereby further promoting the implicit view that the three Big Powers are entitled to their spheres of influence and security. These approaches have implications for India.

Finally, many in India and overseas, especially in Europe, have interpreted the NSS as a statement of American retrenchment. This particular conclusion is a misinterpretation of Trump's worldview and exaggerates the possibility of American retrenchment.

Consider the fact that nowhere in the NSS is there any statement proposing retrenchment as far as the real projection of American power worldwide is concerned, namely, the US military bases overseas. There is no suggestion in the NSS that these would be shut down or that there would be any significant draw-down in the number of US troops stationed abroad.

There are, as of now, over 1,60,000 US troops stationed in over 100 countries worldwide at 750 military sites. The most important overseas stations of US armed forces are in the 'occupied' countries of Germany, Japan, Italy and Korea (countries occupied by the US in the Second World War), member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and in the 'client' states of West Asia, especially Bahrain and Kuwait.

The annual cost of maintaining these bases has been estimated variously as being between $50 billion and $60 billion. The NSS says nothing about reducing the number of troops or bases but is emphatic that there has to be a greater "burden-sharing". The US wants NATO members, Japan, Korea and Gulf states to increase their defence spending by partly financing the presence of US armed forces on their territories.

Neither President Trump nor any other American President since the Second World War has ever said that there is any longer any reason for the US forces to be stationed in other countries.

While these forces are present in limited numbers in many countries, including in India, thanks to bilateral agreements, the fact is that the larger presence in some countries is linked to the outcome of the Second World War. US troops remain stationed in all the countries the US 'liberated' and 'occupied' at the end of the war.

Trump's NSS has not called for a retreat or a retrenchment from these territories. It merely asks these countries to pay up for the maintenance of the US forces they host. It is the classic mafia-style act of demanding 'protection money' for the 'security' offered against potential threats from other Big Powers.

So, think about this — the US is willing to allow China and Russia to be powerful military machines in Europe and Asia so that the European and Asian neighbours of Russia and China would seek protection from these regional hegemons from the global hegemon, the United States. In what way is this US retrenchment?

This will be Trump's legacy and going forward, the 2020s will be defined by how the world and the US respond to what can best be described as Trumpism.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"If you're going to be thinking, you may as well think big. — Donald Trump"

Yearning for warmth of full sentences

RITU KAMRA KUMAR

AS 2025 unfolds, language lives under the reign of AI, ChatGPT, autocorrect and autofill — a bustling kingdom of algorithms where sentences are trimmed, corrected or predicted before they can breathe. In this noisy new monarchy, the human element slips quietly aside. Dictionaries gather dust, book-reading drifts to the margins and language begins to resemble a hurried courier rather than a careful craftsman. Yet, the season smells of fresh calendars and hope. Diaries wait patiently for resolve and from forgotten wooden drawers, greeting cards peek out shyly, their silver stars glowing beneath a thin film of time.

Not long ago, sending New Year wishes required ceremony. One chose a card with care, tested two pens to avoid blots, felt the scrape of nib on thick paper and caught the faint metallic scent of fresh ink. There was the mild indignity of licking that dreadful stamp and the faith placed in the postman to deliver happiness. Messages were full sentences — sometimes flowery, sometimes funny — but always shaped with intention. Today, wishes arrive as HNY, an abbreviation that sounds less like emotion and more like a rejected Scrabble attempt. If Shakespeare scrolled through WhatsApp, he might ask, "To be, or not to bee?"

Even children have become minimalist poets. A little cousin once handed me a handmade card, with just a "Yay!" surrounded by glitter explosions. Yay for joy and beginnings, certainly, but a part of me longed to slip in a dictionary along with her chocolates. Words, though shrinking, still attempt survival. In classrooms, sunsets are "basically the sky turning off" , grandparents "give major vibes" and silence becomes "awkward energy". Courtesy, once verbalised, hides behind emojis. Apologies arrive as a gesture performing remorse rather than expressing it.

Etiquette, too, has grown economical. In office corridors, conversations end with a thumbs-up — one tap, zero nuance. Ethics compress into corporate jargon, disagreement softened not with grace but reaction icons. Compassion, empathy and patience, words that once carried moral weight, now appear less often. Language has quietly gone on a diet. We once served sentences as warm as fresh *paranthas*; now we air-fry emotions into three-letter snacks. What disappears is not merely vocabulary, but the pause required to consider another's feelings.

Yet language still amuses. At a school function, a confident speaker declared, "We thank our teachers for their endless interrogation" — and the applause was thunderous. Such slips remind us that words are ethical tools, capable of honouring or undoing intent. Language shapes thought, behaviour and belonging more quietly than we realise.

As the calendar flips, I yearn for the ceremony of words — choosing a precise adjective, crafting a complete sentence, waiting for a reply carrying care. For, words do not merely describe the world; they build it. When you write back, let it be more than HNY. Give me vowels, warmth, a sentence that smiles.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MPs' indifferent attitude

Apropos of 'A winter session of missed priorities'; when citizens elect their representatives to Parliament, they expect them to raise issues related to their welfare. Unfortunately, it's disheartening to see how disconnected our parliamentarians seem to be from the public's concerns. The recently concluded winter session is a stark example of their apathy. First, the session was reduced to 19 days, and then critical issues like the alarming pollution levels in the national capital and the Indigo airlines crisis took a backseat. Many MPs prioritised foreign tours over attending the session, signalling their carefree attitude. Regardless of party affiliations, meaningful debates on key public issues are essential. When necessary, the Opposition should cooperate with the government and the government should prioritise debates on public issues.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI , SANGRUR

Debate on vital issues must

It refers to 'A winter session of missed priorities'; while symbolism has its own place, the primary role of Parliament must remain the resolution of systemic challenges through a rounded debate and consensus-building. The hurried passage of critical legislation, including the SHANTI Bill, without adequate scrutiny by standing committees, undermines the effectiveness of our democratic institutions. Unless a meaningful dialogue is restored between the government and the Opposition, the legislative process will continue to fail the citizenry.

JAI PRAKASH ACHARYA, NEW DELHI

Zero tolerance to illegal mining

With reference to 'Plundering rivers'; despite its oft-repeated claims of decisive action, the state dispensation's failure to stop illegal mining in Punjab's Ropar district defies all logic and reason. This nefarious activity, being carried out with impunity in brazen violation of mandatory environmental rules, causes a humongous loss to the public exchequer, impacts human health and ecology, creates a law and order situation and erodes public trust in governance. After the recent floods in Punjab, the government is morally and constitutionally bound to adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards this chronic issue and rein in all those involved: the mining contractors, politicians or complicit/negligent mining officials.

DS KANG, HOSHIARPUR

Assembly polls real challenge

Refer to 'What Punjab's local body poll results reveal'; one should not read much into the AAP's success in gram panchayats and zila parishad elections. The more worrisome fact is that the voter turnout was only 48% in these elections. The real fight will be the 2027 Assembly elections. The AAP government's report card has not been not very impressive in the recent past. The Aam Aadmi Party came to power in 2022 based on a number of promises. At present, the only other party which can give a good fight to AAP is the Congress. The SAD and BJP will have to come together to give a good fight to their rivals.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

Declare Aravallis protected area

Apropos of news report ' Govt bans new mining lease in Aravalli range'; the Aravallis must be declared a protected area. This hill range is a crucial ecological zone, supporting over 1,000 native plant and animal species, whose preservation is crucial. Mining strips top soil and native vegetation, destroying slow-growing forests. Quarrying and blasting fracture rock aquifers, blocking natural recharge channels. Mining activities contribute to air and water pollution, affecting local communities. Strict regulations and a complete ban on mining would help protect the environment, wildlife and local communities.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Be sensitive to women's dignity

The Delhi High Court's suspension of the jail term of BJP's ex-MLA Kuldeep Senger convicted for gang rape and muder is a serious blow to the trust between lawmakers and the common man. What is the use of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign when governments are least sensitive to the dignity of a woman? The role of the National Commission for Women is suspicious as it is selective in its approach in addressing such issues.

YASH KHETARPAL, PANCHKULA

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

● **WEB EXCLUSIVE**
'Political funding in India is neither fair nor transparent.'
— By Anil Verma and Shelly Mahajan
Log on to www.indianexpress.com

● **WORDLY WISE**
Good resolutions are simply checks that men draw on a bank where they have no account. *— Oscar Wilde*

The Indian EXPRESS
~ FOUNDED BY ~
RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Goons can't hijack Merry Christmas

ON CHRISTMAS morning, the bells of the Cathedral Church of Redemption in Delhi rang out a message of love, compassion and peace — a message echoed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi following his visit to the church. The image of the Prime Minister standing in prayer with members of the Christian community was a powerful one. It spoke, loudly and clearly, of a country of great diversities, which promises every faith a home that is safe and nurturing. Yet, it does not address a disquieting silence.

In the days leading up to Christmas, goons linked to Sangh Parivar outfits have attacked congregations and churches, hurled allegations of "conversion" in a climate of impunity. Social media is their megaphone, their performative bigotry designed to spread fear and deepen divides. In Assam's Nalbari, Bajrang Dal activists stormed a diocesan school and destroyed its nativity crib; in Raipur, a mob vandalised festive installations in a mall; in a Jabalpur church, the BJP district vice-president assaulted a visually impaired woman; in the national capital, women wearing Santa hats were bullied by vigilantes. In each instance, the local administration and police sought to downplay the incidents as isolated flickers of local tension. That is precisely the problem. These are not aberrations. They are part of a longer and larger pattern of intimidation in which the bogey of conversion, and the loosely worded anti-conversion laws in several states, are deployed as cover to target and harass members of the Christian minority. Such attacks do not merely heighten the anxieties of a beleaguered community. They wound the letter and spirit of the Constitution of India and its guarantees of freedom of faith and equal citizenship. They send a chilling message to all Indians, regardless of belief. That public order and constitutional protections can be bent without cost when political patronage is presumed.

"May the spirit of Christmas inspire harmony and goodwill in our society," the Prime Minister wrote on X. The dissonance between this message and the intimidation on the ground cannot be wished away. If the Prime Minister's message is to prevail, it must be matched by urgent and visible action, including against those within his own party and parivar who are determined to give the lie to it. Those who seek to intimidate Christians on Christmas, or any other community at any other time, must be condemned, must face the force of the law, not be indulged or explained away. Only then will Christmas bring, in the Prime Minister's own words on December 25, "renewed hope, warmth and a shared commitment to kindness".

After year of successes, ISRO set for big leaps

THE INDIAN Space Research Organisation (ISRO) closed out the year with the successful launch of the LVM3-M6 mission in which it deployed a 6,100-kg commercial satellite, Bluebird Block-2, into low-earth orbit. It was the heaviest payload carried by an Indian rocket. Commercial satellite launches, even from other countries, have become routine for the ISRO, having put as many as 434 foreign satellites into space till now belonging to 34 different countries. The important thing about Wednesday's launch, however, was the demonstration of yet another new capability by the ISRO, to launch very heavy satellites, weighing six tonnes or more. Over the last few years, each of ISRO's launches has involved the demonstration of a new technology or capability. Individually, they might only represent incremental progress, but together they show the steady evolution of the ISRO into one of the world's most powerful space agencies.

At the start of the year, the ISRO demonstrated its ability to dock and undock two satellites in space in the SpaDeX mission, an ability that is vital to its ambitions to set up a space station of its own and send more sophisticated lunar and other missions. That was followed by the long-awaited NISAR mission in July, the first of its kind, a joint India-US space mission, in which the satellite was a novelty. It was a unique satellite that carried two Synthetic Aperture Radars of different frequencies designed to work together to produce the most detailed images of Earth ever captured from space. Then came the LVM3-M5 mission in November in which the ISRO placed the 4,400-kg CMS-03 satellite to geosynchronous orbit. It was the heaviest payload that the ISRO has put in the faraway orbit. So the last two launches have been about demonstrating the capability to carry very heavy satellites, to the low-earth orbit or even the geosynchronous orbit.

The upcoming missions, too, are all meant to be special in one way or another, for the rocket or the satellites. The ISRO is targeting at least six more launches before March next year. If that happens, it would be the busiest three-month period in its history. The most keenly awaited of these is, of course, the first of the three planned uncrewed flights of the Gaganyaan human spaceflight programme, which is supposed to carry a humanoid robot.

New Year resolutions for the powerful

THE SEASON to be jolly, to eat, drink, and make merry, is coming to a close. Soon, bloated and exhausted from the excesses of the festivities marking the end of another year, the promises of change and the burden of new beginnings will make themselves felt. Ordinary folk have ordinary resolutions — quit smoking, lose weight, try and make more money, spend time with family and friends... But what of the extraordinary? The high and mighty who run the world? What could they wish for, the rich and powerful who have everything?

For the "most powerful man in the world," perhaps it's time to do less. Between tariffs and trade deals, the hot-and-cold vibes with his counterparts in Russia and China, and threats of invading South America — all the while ensuring the family business benefits — every action by Donald Trump has an outsized reaction. So, maybe, just for a few months, let the news cycle hum along without hinting at ending the global order. If Trump needs to work less, his one-time buddy and former DOGE chief needs to work more. Elon Musk, king of the Tech Bros, should perhaps focus more on the tech (the EVs from China are now more than a match for Tesla) and less on being a bro. Enough on manhood, reproduction, and race relations. Just run the companies.

Keir Starmer and Emmanuel Macron need to figure out how to talk to people within, before they start talking of leading "Europe" and the "Anglosphere". And Putin and Xi, will — like so many jaded couples — hope that the other isn't playing footsie outside the friendship. And what about here, in India? 2025, like so many years before it, saw uncles giving unsolicited advice: Work seven days a week, have four kids for the "nation", be more insular. For them, the resolution is the simplest of all. Chill, please.

The good news is, lower-income states are catching up

PRANJUL BHANDARI

THE STRENGTH of the Indian economy rests on the strength of its states. National GDP is, after all, the sum of state gross domestic products (GSDPs). States with lower income per capita and significant catch-up potential can generate strong growth for several years if conditions are right. Indeed, this catch-up dynamic can allow laggards to grow faster than the leading states.

The prospect of several states growing rapidly over several years has meaningful implications for national GDP growth, making convergence across states an important macroeconomic question. Are laggard states catching up with the leaders? Or, put differently, are emerging states closing the gap with relatively advanced ones?

We explore data over the last 12 years, dividing it between the six years pre-pandemic (FY13-FY19) and the six years post-pandemic (FY19-FY25). In the pre-pandemic period, there were no signs of convergence. Lower-income states grew more slowly than higher-income ones and, based on this simple framework, this was in fact a period of divergence. Fast forward to the post-pandemic period, and the picture changes. We find evidence of lower-income states growing faster on average. In particular, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar have pivoted to higher relative growth. This is recent and nascent, but the pivot is clear.

What adds to the puzzle is that this shift has occurred both during and after the pandemic, when one might have expected lower-income states to suffer more. Yet, they were able to improve their relative growth performance. What explains this outcome?

We examine a host of variables, including economic structure, human capital, infrastructure and logistics, technology adoption, and various forms of government spending. One variable stands out in explaining this convergence: Public capital expenditure by states. Several emerging states — such as Assam, UP, Rajasthan, and Bihar — have invested substantially more in infrastructure in recent years. State capex not only improves the physical backbone for economic activity but also signals a reform-oriented government. It crowds in private-sector investment. Together, these channels drive higher growth. The key question is whether this momentum can be sustained.

Strong state revenues matter for public capex. When states are fiscally comfortable, they invest more — an effect that is particularly pronounced for laggard states. In the period immediately after the pandemic, central transfers to states increased. Even as GST compensation ended, the capex loans to state programmes kicked in, keeping overall revenues elevated.

But the environment is changing again. Two developments co-exist that could potentially hurt the capex cycle.

First, we are entering a phase in which the Centre's tax revenues are weakening, driven partly by direct and indirect tax cuts and lower-than-expected nominal GDP growth. This could reduce state revenues, given that around 41 per cent of the Centre's divisible tax pool is shared with states under Finance Commission rules.

This is already visible in the data. After several years of increases, state revenues declined in FY25. Rather than cut capex, states chose to widen fiscal deficits. But deficits are now elevated, and further revenue pressure could eventually force a pullback in capex.

> This loan programme is well-suited to the task. It is ring-fenced for state capex and cannot be diverted to other uses. It crowds in states' own capital spending and complements the central government's capex

Second, pressures are not limited to revenues. There has been a wave of new or enhanced cash transfer schemes, particularly ahead of state elections. Current expenditures have risen, as have fiscal deficits. So far, several states — such as Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh — have maintained their capex thrust through and after recent election cycles. But if these schemes remain expansive, pressure on capex could emerge.

So far, the capex push has been maintained. But will it last? And can anything be done to keep capex and convergence on track?

To make states more secure on the revenue front and sustain the capex drive, the Centre could step in by expanding support to states; in particular, an increase in the capex loans to states programme could help.

This loan programme is well suited to the task. It is ring-fenced for state capex and cannot be diverted to other uses. It crowds in states' own capital spending and complements the central government's capex. For example, while the Centre builds national highways, states can invest in urban infrastructure to complete the transport loop. Importantly, the programme is now in its sixth year, with outlays rising from Rs 120 billion in FY21 to Rs 1.5 trillion in FY26. This may be the right moment to expand its scope — by increasing its size, broadening its use, and introducing greater flexibility. Providing clarity on the programme's size over the next few years would also allow states to plan and execute larger, multi-year capex projects.

The onus is not only on the Centre. States must also seize growth opportunities. The Centre has led a deregulation drive, highlighting about 23 ground-level reforms each of India's states should implement. It has also eased labour laws that had become a deterrent to growth. Amongst the many changes, the new Industrial Relations Code raises the threshold below which a firm can lay off workers without permission, from 100 to 300 employees. There is a further provision in this law for states to raise the threshold from 300 employees and become magnets to large firms that are globally competitive. This is an important step for states that want to industrialise. States need to make the most of these reforms.

Finally, as global supply chains are reconfigured, opportunities have emerged to attract FDI into labour-intensive mid-tech manufacturing sectors such as textiles, footwear, furniture, and toys. Countries like Vietnam have grown quickly by seizing this opportunity over the last few years, and now the world may be looking for new manufacturers. India's emerging states enjoy a wage advantage. If this is combined with better infrastructure, further deregulation, and easier labour laws, they can attract investment and integrate into global manufacturing supply chains.

In conclusion, India's emerging states are showing early signs of faster growth and catch-up potential. If they can stay the course on public capex and capitalise on reform opportunities, they could become a powerful driver of India's rising place in the world.

The writer is chief India economist, HSBC

Revised definition of Aravallis will hurt its ecology

DEBADITYO SINHA

THE SUPREME Court of India's recent judgment on the definition of the Aravalli Hills marks a rupture in the nation's environmental jurisprudence. By endorsing a definition that sidelines science and weakens the precautionary principle, the ruling redraws one of India's most critical ecological systems using an arbitrary numerical shortcut devoid of scientific validity.

The Aravallis have historically been understood as far more than a collection of hills. They constitute a continuous living landscape regulating climate and facilitating groundwater recharge and supporting a wide range of biodiversity in one of India's most arid regions. While the judgment acknowledges this ecological significance, the Court has ultimately privileged administrative convenience over ecological coherence. Its near-total reliance on government submissions raises troubling questions.

Acting under the Court's own directions, the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) had earlier cautioned against the Ministry of Environment's proposed "100-metre local relief" rule, endorsing the Forest Survey of India's (FSI) slope-based approach. This was not a philosophical objection but one grounded in data; the amicus curiae warned that the 100-metre threshold would open lower hills to mining, destroying the range's integrity. Yet, these warnings were brushed aside.

More alarming is the revelation that the CEC clarified that it neither examined nor approved the ministry's report.

At the heart of this failure lies bad statistics implemented as policy. The committee relied on district-wise average elevation to justify the 100-metre threshold — a fundamentally flawed approach in a landscape as heterogeneous as the Aravallis, where heights range from 20 to 600 metres. In such extremes, averages are meaningless; a few tall peaks can inflate a district's average, leaving the majority of lower hills unprotected.

This outcome was not accidental. The committee tasked with defining the Aravallis lacked independent ecologists or social scientists who could negotiate in the best interest of the Aravallis. Consequently, objections raised by the FSI and CEC were treated merely as operational difficulties to be smoothed over in the pursuit of uniformity.

The relevant question was never whether an average touches 100 metres, but how many individual hills fall below that threshold and what ecological roles they play. With reportedly over 1,18,575 hills at stake, the Court failed to demand a detailed response, accepting vague percentages instead. By anchoring the debate to averages, the process risks the destruction of thousands of ecologically vital formations.

Equally troubling is the acceptance that this is merely an "operational" definition for mining. Definitions are rarely neutral. Once landscapes fall outside legal recognition, they slip from the precautionary framework. To assume Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) will safeguard these areas presumes a rigour that the ministry's record does not support. Weakening protection to legalise mining through a compromised EIA process is not regulation — it is abdication.

The Aravallis do not rise and fall neatly at 100 metres. They are a system where low hills, foothills, and aquifers function together. Protecting only prominent peaks while rendering the rest invisible is not conservation; it is ecological amputation. Foothills and low-relief formations around prominent peaks also play a critical role in groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat and soil stability, and provide several ecosystem services important for local livelihood.

The Supreme Court has long stood as the ultimate guardian of India's environmental legacy, a role that this judgment now risks diluting. Correcting this course is essential not merely to prevent the irreversible fragmentation of the Aravallis, but to reaffirm the judiciary's role in reminding the government that it is a trustee of the country's natural assets, as guaranteed under the Constitution. Legal errors can be revisited and corrected; ecological destruction cannot.

The writer is a conservationist and leads the Climate & Ecosystems team at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, New Delhi. Views are personal

Handing down values in a time of no hand-me-downs

POOJA SARDANA

VALUES HAVE always been at the core of parenting. We send our children to school to learn how to read and write, but learning how to be human has been, traditionally, the family's responsibility. When we, the now-generation parents, were children, this education came bundled with a familiar set of values: Respect elders, focus on good grades, thrift, patience. It also came with standard practices — don't eat the snacks laid out for guests, wear hand-me-downs, wait for your birthday or Diwali for something new.

Some of these values no longer make sense. Blind respect for elders is one we should be glad to see questioned. Other values endure. Hard work, perseverance, patience still matter. What has gone out of style, however, is the framework through which these values were taught: Scarcity.

I would give an arm and a leg for my children to willingly accept hand-me-downs or choose homemade food more often. These are sustainable, thoughtful ways of living — frameworks that may yet save our health, and the planet. But when they were taught to us, the reason was straightforward and honest: Scarcity.

Wear hand-me-downs because new clothes are expensive. Keep the new toy in its box because I can't buy another one this year. Offer the best chocolates to guests because there are only a few. Today, that logic doesn't hold in my home. I have been fortunate to do well in life. I can buy my children new clothes all year round. They have more toys than they deserve. We can order tiramisu a couple of times a week.

And therein lies the problem. I have not developed a new framework for teaching old values. Scarcity sounds hollow when it isn't real. Worse, it sounds punitive. This generation can smell inauthenticity from a mile away.

My Gen Z office team once gave me a sharp dressing-down for refusing to buy my 14-year-old daughter the latest iPhone when I had upgraded mine. My reason was simple: How do I teach her that you have to work for what you want?

The answer, I'm learning, is not artificial deprivation. It is experience. So, instead of fighting an unwinnable battle, I bought my daughter the phone — and also got her a cat. A rescued one she had been begging for. Caring for the cat teaches her things I cannot. The cat doesn't magically learn to use the litter box. Until it does, someone cleans up the mess. That someone is her.

We take the children sledding in the snow, where the joy of the ride is always followed by the labour of dragging the sled back uphill. There is often more drudgery per unit of joy in life, and that ratio is worth learning early.

We upcycle clothes and remember to carry bags to the market. We order in only once a week.

Meanwhile, I observe. What do they persist with? How long do they sit with discomfort? How do they speak to themselves when results don't meet their expectations? These patterns matter far more than whether they waited six months for a toy.

Values endure. The tools must evolve. Perhaps our real job now is not to manufacture scarcity, but to create experiences honest enough to do the teaching for us.

> What do my children persist with? How long do they sit with discomfort? These patterns matter far more than whether they waited six months for a toy

The writer is a strategy consultant, parent and traveller

40 YEARS AGO

December 26, 1985


INDIAN EXPRESS

Industrial policy further liberalised
Benefits for backward areas

Minorities safe in new set-up, says Mahanta

Mahanta on minorities

THE NEW Assam Chief Minister, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, asserted that the minorities in the state, including those who would be disfranchised under the Assam Accord, had nothing to fear in the new setup. "We want cooperation from all to build up a new Assam and our priority is peace and unity among all," Mahanta said, addressing his first news conference since assuming office.

Martial law to be lifted

PAKISTAN'S PRIME Minister, Mohammad Khan Junejo, said that the eight-year-old martial law is being lifted, according to *Radio Pakistan*. However, Junejo did not specify any date. According to reports, it is to be lifted next week. Junejo also said that Muhammad Ali Jinnah's birth anniversary this time was going to be "the most significant one" in the history of the country.

Industry further liberalised

THE UNION government announced a Christmas gift to big industrial units by further liberalising the licensing policy and extending to MRTP and FERA companies the delicensing scheme covering 22 industries and by enlarging the Appendix-I list of industries by more than 17 industries.

Curbs on Rajneesh's followers

THE GOVERNMENT has imposed restrictions on the entry of followers of Acharya Rajneesh into the country, according to official sources. Indian missions abroad have been instructed not to issue visas to his followers. The visa authorities here have been asked not to extend the period of stay of Rajneesh's followers who have come as tourists. The move follows the government's fears that thousands of Rajneeshis living in the United States, West Germany and Switzerland might flock to India.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY
Israel only knows how to demolish Palestinian homes.
— Haaretz, Israel

READ. THINK. SHARE.
Scan the QR code to explore curated editorials and opinions from leading voices

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

The difference in donations to ruling and Opposition parties is stark. What's the way forward?

Donors should be anonymous

SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG

THE BHARATIYA Janata Party (BJP) received Rs 6,088 crore in political funding in 2024-25, a 53 per cent jump over the Rs 3,967 crore it received in 2023-24, constituting almost 85 per cent of the total funding. Congress received a paltry Rs 522 crore, a steep decline of 54 per cent from Rs 1,129 crore in 2023-24, accounting for less than 7 per cent of the total. Other opposition parties fared worse in 2024-25, the first full year after electoral bonds were outlawed by the Supreme Court in February 2024.

The total political funding through electoral bonds amounted to Rs 16,308 crore (according to the website of the Association for Democratic Reforms, the organisation that was at the forefront of the movement against the scheme). Of this, the BJP had received Rs 8,252 crore, which was only 51 per cent, with the Opposition receiving nearly half. In 2024-25, however, this has completely flipped.

Two modes of political funding operated in India before electoral bonds were introduced in March 2018. First, companies or individuals could make political donations directly or through electoral trusts (ETs), by publicly disclosing the parties they were funding, with the receiving political parties filing details of donors with the Election Commission of India (ECI). Second, there was an opaque cash funding mechanism that did not require any disclosure of donors for amounts less than Rs 20,000.

The trouble was that electoral trusts were sparingly used, and political parties received almost all funds through the opaque cash system. There was nominal transparency in ETs, but the reality reeked of corruption, collusion and black money in cash funding. Electoral bonds introduced a third mode, with a critical protection regarding which political parties donors funded. The scheme ensured a fair distribution of political funding, with all major non-BJP parties receiving significant funding: Congress Rs 1,952 crore (12 per cent), TMC Rs 1,705 crore (10.5 per cent), BRS Rs 1,408 crore (8.6 per cent), BJD Rs 1,020 crore (6.3 per cent) and DMK Rs 677 crore (4.1 per cent), with other parties getting about 9 per cent. The funding distribution changed drastically in 2024-25. The BJP got 85 per cent of the funding, Congress fell to just 7 per cent and the TMC to 2.5 per cent.

Why is all political funding, post-electoral bonds, gravitating towards the BJP? It is not rocket science. Indian businesses and companies, whether small or big, receive benefits from the ruling party in the form of contracts and subsidies. They are naturally afraid of administrative and investigative action. Political donations to opposition parties can also invite retribution. In 2024-25, whichever electoral trust it was — the Prudent Electoral Trust, whose major contributors include Megha Engineering, the second-largest contributor to electoral bonds; the Progressive Electoral Trust, consisting mainly of the Tata group; or the New Democratic Electoral Trust, managed by the Mahindra Group — it ended up pushing almost all funding to the BJP (which secured only 36.6 per cent of the vote share in the 2024 general elections), leaving crumbs for non-BJP parties.

It is also interesting to look back at the campaign launched against electoral bonds. It was led by ADR and some Opposition parties, primarily Congress and the AAP. The Supreme Court Bench led by the then Chief Justice of India, D Y Chandrachud, not only declared the scheme unconstitutional but also forced the State Bank of India to disclose protected details of who donated how much to which political parties. The BJP did not actively oppose the scrapping of electoral bonds, nor did it do anything to protect the confidentiality of donor details. ADR celebrated the junking of the scheme and the "transparency" this brought to political funding. The Opposition felt jubilant. But it could not expose any evidence of "corruption" in the electoral bond contributions to the BJP. Its political funding, instead, was eviscerated. The BJP, meanwhile, used all the information to nudge funding overwhelmingly in its favour.

Was the ruling party uncomfortable with the fact that nearly 50 per cent of electoral bonds had gone to other parties? Did it consider the non-disclosure of donors responsible for this relatively fair distribution? Did ADR and the Opposition parties become tools in its hands in achieving this objective?

The writer is former finance secretary of India

Political funding needs an IPL model

PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY

IF THE Mumbai Indians had 10 times more money than the other IPL teams, it would help them buy better players, train better and provide better facilities. Naturally, this would help them win the IPL more often. Would the IPL then be deemed fair, competitive or even interesting for viewers? Obviously not. The IPL has explicit rules to ensure financial parity, and all teams have the same amount of money, so they compete only on talent and merit. This is how most of the big sports leagues in the world operate.

If sports leagues can understand the importance of a "level financial playing field" and enforce rules, shouldn't democratic politics that shapes the lives and livelihoods of millions of people be even more rigorous and strict in ensuring financial parity for all political parties?

The BJP has 12 times more money than its nearest rival, Congress. Of all the corporate donations to political parties in 2024-25, the BJP got more than 75 per cent of the money while a dozen other parties combined got only 25 per cent. The "Indian Election League" is the most skewed, most unfair and least competitive election league of all democracies in the world.

Money drives modern-day politics. The ability to set a strong narrative, communicate to the masses through "viral WhatsApp" messages and dominate social media chatter through "influencers" is a direct function of the amount of money one spends on these, not some secret sauce that the BJP has and other parties don't.

Much is made out of the "election machine" of the ruling BJP with its "*panna pramukhs*", booth agents and door-to-door canvassers. Cut out the monthly payment to these armies of people and you will see how this supposedly efficient machine breaks down instantly. A typical BJP candidate in an election has 10 times more money than his rival, which helps him deploy more people, more posters, more "influencers" in that constituency. In many cases, the rival candidate is so daunted by the scale of the BJP candidate's efforts that he thinks it's wiser to pocket his share of election expenses and let the BJP candidate win anyway.

The BJP seeks to exploit every plausible opportunity to accumulate more money for itself, from the dubious PMCARES fund collection drives during Covid to threatening corporates with ED, CBI and IT raids for funds. Further, it is no secret that the ruling BJP puts enormous pressure on donors not to donate to rival parties, especially Congress.

While money has played a vital role in all democracies through history, it is now the only edifice of the BJP's politics. Ideology, vision, and leadership charisma are all mere embellishments on top. Remove money, and it all comes crumbling down.

If Narendra Modi is still the charismatic vote-puller or the BJP/RSS's Hindutva vision has hundreds of millions of ardent supporters or lakhs of "*swayamsevak*" volunteers have devoted their lives to the BJP's cause for no reward, then why does the BJP need 75 per cent of all corporate donations to win elections? After all, if a team has more talented players, a better strategy and a huge army of volunteer support staff, it should win on a level playing field with other teams and not need enormously more money than its competitors.

State funding of elections as an alternative advocated by Communist parties is untenable for the size and scale of India's politics. The issue is not a lack of means of funding but the monopolisation of funding and a quid pro quo with the ruling party. A "blind pool" framework of electoral funding can be a solution where corporates donate to a trust managed by a constitutional body that then distributes the funds in proportion to the seats contested by each party or some such transparent measure. The "blind" aspect is necessary to avoid quid-pro-quo corruption, and a centrally managed pool with a well-publicised allocation formula would ensure financial parity for all parties.

India's elections may be free (people are free to vote), but are certainly not fair. The current skew in election funding is unsustainable, and it is only a matter of time before opposition parties throw in the towel and withdraw from such grossly unfair elections. Let Indian politics learn from Indian cricket.

The writer is chairman, Professionals' Congress & chairman, Data Analytics of the Congress

You can set up a new AIIMS, but can you also replicate its empathy?

MANOJ KUMAR JHA

FOR OVER 12 weeks, I stayed by my father's side at AIIMS Delhi, where he was undergoing treatment for a life-threatening ailment. During those long and anxious days, I not only witnessed the exceptional care extended to him, but I also saw thousands of patients — each with their own stories of suffering and hope — being attended to with the same dedication by doctors, nurses, technicians, and countless support staff. What I experienced and observed reaffirmed my belief that AIIMS Delhi stands as one of the brightest illustrations of what a robust public health system means for a country like India. It is a living reminder that when public institutions are empowered, they become the greatest source of strength for citizens.

It was probably for this reason that in the last two decades, successive governments — across party lines — have announced new AIIMS institutions with remarkable frequency. AIIMS Delhi has long symbolised excellence in public healthcare, a place where world-class treatment coexists with affordable access. Replicating this model in every region seemed not just desirable but necessary. For millions of Indians who travel thousands of kilometres to Delhi, a local AIIMS promised dignity, convenience, and life-saving care closer to home.

Yet a simple truth confronts us today: The newer campuses — from Bhopal and Raipur to Gorakhpur and Bilaspur to Rishikesh and Patna — have not been able to cultivate the ethos that defined the first AIIMS. The absence is not merely academic; it is felt intimately by patients who continue to flock to Delhi because they "trust AIIMS" — meaning AIIMS Delhi.

Why has the hardware expanded while the software — the humane character of the institution — remained stubbornly unreplicable? The answers lie deep within our policy design, our priorities, and our understanding of what makes an institution great. The first AIIMS was born from a visionary imagination. It was conceptualised as an apex medical institution combining clinical excellence, research leadership, and ethical education. Its founding faculty consisted of pioneers who returned from abroad, inspired by global standards but committed to building an Indian institution with an Indian ethos. Over time, AIIMS Delhi developed a unique internal culture comprising rigorous training, high ethical expectations, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a deep sense of accountability to India's poorest patients.

This culture was not built in a year or two but was shaped through decades of mentorship, institutional autonomy, continuity of leadership, and a cohesive academic community. When governments hurried to open multiple new AIIMS, they attempted to replicate the infrastructure but not the conditions that had produced the culture. Most new AIIMS struggle with shortages of faculty, nurses, technicians, and support staff. Many departments are functional only on paper. It is not unusual to see key specialties run with one or two doctors navigating impossible workloads. In overburdened and understaffed environments, compassion does not die out of intention but out of exhaustion as well. AIIMS Delhi, despite its huge patient load, still retains senior faculty, long-standing mentorship networks, and a stable system for training postgraduates.

One of AIIMS Delhi's greatest strengths has been its relative autonomy, though this has also thinned in multiple ways and at multiple levels. Nevertheless, it has enjoyed the freedom to decide on academic policies, research priorities, hiring practices, and internal governance. Insulated from political and bureaucratic interference, it evolved organically. The new AIIMS, in contrast, have been tethered more tightly to bureaucracy. Decisions often get delayed, directors change frequently, procurement gets stuck in administrative loops, and faculty recruitment becomes an ordeal. In environments where governance is unstable and micromanagement is high, academic freedom suffers — and with it, the moral ethos that sustains compassionate care.

Let us also remember that AIIMS Delhi is a research institution that attracts some of the country's brightest young minds. Here postgraduate students learn not only to treat patients but to ask questions, pursue innovations, and think ethically about public health. The intellectual stimulation fuels a sense of pride and purpose. The new AIIMS, without a vibrant academic environment, risk becoming well-funded district hospitals rather than premier institutions of national excellence.

The crisis is larger than AIIMS alone. Across India, medical education increasingly emphasises examinations, protocols, and efficiency — while humane skills such as communication, empathy, listening, and ethical reasoning receive far less emphasis. Students emerge as competent clinicians but not necessarily as compassionate healers. AIIMS Delhi — because of its history and mentorship — retains a stronger internal culture of bedside manners and ethical responsibility. The younger faculty at the new AIIMS, who graduated in an increasingly technical era, struggle to transmit values they were not sufficiently trained in.

There is no denying that the AIIMS brand has political value as I have myself demanded AIIMS in the region I come from. Announcing a new AIIMS in a state carries electoral appeal. The problem arises when symbolism supersedes substance. When governments focus on inaugurations rather than institution-building, the long-term values necessary for excellence are compromised.

One of the first lessons you get on entering AIIMS Delhi from any of its gates is why it still receives overwhelming patient inflows. It is certainly not because it has the best infrastructure — several private hospitals surpass it — but because patients trust the commitment, compassion, and competence of the people inside it. To cultivate such trust in new AIIMS, governments must invest not only in budgets and beds but in people, values, and continuity. India does not merely need more hospitals. It needs institutions that embody the spirit of compassionate public service. Buildings can be unveiled with fanfare, but values cannot be inaugurated. They must be fostered consistently through service, accountability, and humane governance.

The writer is MP (Rajya Sabha), Rashtriya Janata Dal

Higher education bill frees our universities

YOGESH SINGH

THE VIKSIT Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025 was introduced in the Lok Sabha in the Winter Session of Parliament and referred to a joint parliamentary committee. With the Bill now publicly available, the intervening period provides a good opportunity for informed conversation on it.

One of the major concerns is that it will lead to excessive centralisation. This appears ironic as the Bill's primary objective is to accelerate autonomy in higher education institutions (HEIs) — it aims to create greater freedom in teaching, pedagogy, curriculum development, and the research and the innovation ecosystem.

The Union Education Minister has also said that the Bill will neither impede institutional autonomy nor affect funding. He also emphasised that states will retain the rights under their respective acts, including the authority to establish new universities and develop curricula.

The very name of the Bill communicates its purpose — propelling India towards its goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047. The name also situates the Bill in the decolonisation process of our education system. These two themes align with the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, which advocates a "light but tight" regulatory framework.

The Bill proposes minimal structural encumbrance and maximum governance by subsuming into one commission the UGC, which regulates the HEIs, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE, which regulates technical institutions), the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE, which regulates Teachers' Education) and other such regulatory institutions in education, except those governing law and medical education. Various regulators have been established over time — starting with the UGC Act in 1956, followed by AICTE in 1987 and NCTE in 1993 — in a piecemeal manner as and when the need arose. The proposed unification through the paring down of HEI regulators was long overdue. That this Bill is being tabled nearly five years after the introduction of the NEP shows the maturity of the entire process.

The three councils of the proposed commission, the Viniyaman Parishad (Regulatory Council), the Gunvatta Parishad (Accreditation Council), and the Manak Parishad (Standards Council), will have a clear mandate. This will remove ambiguities.

Through minimal regulation, the Bill aims to provide greater autonomy in a graded and time-bound manner to the HEIs, making them independent and self-governing. It envisages a facilitating role for the education regulator. The single technology-driven window operations will remove procedural ambiguities.

Departing from the traditional UGC evaluation framework, which is largely focused on input-based criteria such as infrastructure, faculty qualifications, and compliance with fixed standards, the Bill proposes an outcome-based evaluation. It shifts the focus to measurable learning outcomes, student skills, employability, and real-world impact. This approach emphasises what students actually achieve and apply, rather than what institutions provide, promoting greater excellence in higher education. The new commission will support high-performing Indian universities in setting. up campuses in other countries.

The Bill prioritises transparency by mandating online and offline public self-disclosure of all academic, operational, and financial matters. It ensures students have free access to a fair, transparent, and robust grievance redressal mechanism. Together, these measures build genuine trust and confidence in India's higher education system. It envisions a higher education landscape where transparency and fairness are no longer just best practices, but the norm.

The writer is vice chancellor, University of Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Aravallis need care

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'Claims about destruction of Aravalli hills alarmist' (*IE*, December 25). Much of the consternation stems from misunderstandings. However, in a country grappling with corruption and exploitation of natural resources, such concerns cannot be dismissed outright. The government must take steps to safeguard the Aravallis.

Abhay Negi, Dehradun

Neglect of the rural

THIS REFERS to the article, 'A breach of contract between poorest citizen and republic' (*IE*, December 25). Schemes like MGNREGA were launched to secure a living wage, the right to work, and to raise the standard of living. The new Act calls for the notification of rural areas at the Centre's discretion, while the burden of funding falls on the states. This is a case of concentrating power without responsibility.

Madhusree Guha, Kolkata

Value of dialogue

THIS REFERS to the article, 'For society's sake, we must ask if God exists' (*IE*, December 25). Instead of dismissing these debates as distractions, institutions should encourage respectful dialogue, critical thinking, and scientific temper. Calm, evidence-based discussion can help society address superstition and strengthen democratic values without undermining personal belief.

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

Fragile attractiveness

India's best efforts to bring in investment can be upended by the U.S.

The latest foreign direct investment (FDI) data show how India's attractiveness as an investment destination is not yet cemented and remains fragile. Net FDI remained negative for the third consecutive month in October 2025, which means that more direct investment was taken out of India than invested in it. The timing reveals a lot. At the end of July, U.S. President Donald Trump revealed that he would be levying a 25% tariff on India. A week later, he raised this to 50%. That is when investment began to leave India. Prior to August, India's net FDI position in 2025-26 had been quite comfortable. In the April-July 2025 period, net FDI totalled $10.7 billion, more than triple what it was in the same period of the previous year. However, in August 2025, investors pulled out $622 million more than they put in, followed by $1.7 billion in September, and $1.5 billion in October. India's cumulative net FDI position in 2025-26 by the end of October 2025 had fallen to $6.2 billion. This is still nearly double what it was in April-October 2024, but the point is that the direction has changed. One defence of the FDI numbers has been that the net FDI figure looks poor because outflows are simply exceeding robust inflows. However, in both August and October, gross inflows themselves were lower on a year-on-year basis. This contrasts against an average growth rate of about 33% in April-July 2025. In addition, this financial year has shown that the increase in outflows has been driven by Indian companies looking to invest abroad. One way to look at this is with satisfaction – that Indian companies are increasingly becoming internationally competitive in scale and resources. However, with the Indian economy far from saturated in terms of supply, the question to be asked is why these companies are not investing here. This is not merely a shifting of profits abroad in the form of repatriation. It reveals a deeper issue.

From the 2019 corporate tax rate cuts, to Production Linked Incentives, to trying to boost demand through income-tax and Goods and Services Tax cuts, the government has done a lot to encourage the private sector to invest. These were all welcomed by Indian and foreign corporations, who touted them as "structural reforms". Yet, it took just one episode of tariffs by one country to rock India's image as a good investment destination. Even the Reserve Bank of India said that uncertainty over the U.S. trade deal was pushing foreign portfolio investors to exit Indian equities. This goes to show that shiny headlines of 'fastest-growing', 'largest market', and 'third-fastest' do not cut much ice with investors. They work in fair weather, but are flimsy in the face of the slightest headwinds. Such claims need real structural reforms to bolster them.

Doping menace

India must make National Anti-Doping Agency well-funded and independent

One of the biggest impediments for India in achieving the status of a global sports power is strongly rooted in its dubious distinction of being the table topper in dope positive cases for the third consecutive year. As the country is set to host the 2029 World Police and Fire Games and the 2030 Centenary Commonwealth Games in Ahmedabad, the low-on-performance and high-on-doping trend may prove detrimental to its aspirations of bidding for the 2036 Olympic Games. As in the 2024 figures by the global watchdog, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), India logged 260 adverse analytical findings (AAFs) out of 7,113 tests, at 3.6%. France (91) and Italy (85) were second and third in terms of numbers. India, far behind China (24,214), was seventh in terms of overall testing figures. Nevertheless, the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) looks at the brighter side of the picture, claiming that the higher positivity rate is due to bigger testing numbers. In the post-COVID-19 era, the AAFs and total number of samples were 125 and 3,865 (at 3.2%), respectively, in 2022, and 213 and 5,606 (at 3.8%), respectively, in 2023.

NADA takes pride in stating that up to December 16 this year, it has carried out 7,068 tests with fewer number of positive cases (110), at 1.5%. It has adopted several measures, including awareness drives and encouraging the use of 'Know Your Medicine' app, to curb doping. There are many instances of NADA officials pursuing athletes and them trying to escape to avoid testing. Such cat-and-mouse stories point a finger at the sorry state of affairs and a deeper malaise within the sports ecosystem that includes support staff, who have been suspended for abetting doping. Even as the Sports Ministry is addressing the concern, it acknowledges that government jobs through sports quota are a big lure for the athletes to take shortcuts. It cannot be denied that lucrative cash awards for big international medals may also be prompting elite athletes to take banned performance-enhancing drugs, despite the risks of adverse effects on one's health, over the years. India has passed the National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Bill, 2025, to add muscle to its anti-doping efforts. Whether doping is triggered by need or greed or ignorance, the country, under pressure from the International Olympic Committee over the issue, should make NADA a truly independent entity and provide more funds to put up a stronger fight against this menace, which has kept pace with modern scientific developments.

A year of dissipating promises for Indian foreign policy

Suhasini Haidar

New Delhi confronts challenges that concern economic and energy security, global strategic stability, and regional security

The year 2025 began as one of considerable promise for Indian foreign policy. After 2024, a year that was dominated by national elections and political recalibration, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was expected to resume active diplomacy, with a full calendar of bilateral visits and multilateral engagements. Relations with the United States were expected to be reset under the second term of the Trump administration, continuing from Donald Trump's first term. Long-running Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) negotiations with partners such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union (EU) seemed imminent, with commitments to complete them by the end of the year.

Across the geopolitical divide, a new engagement appeared to be taking shape with China after years of a stand-off along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), especially after Mr. Modi's visit to China. Economic ties with Russia were also at a high point: India's oil imports from Russia had surged to $52 billion, with U.S. and EU sanctions pressure having eased. Regionally, the government attempted to repair frayed relationships by reaching out to the Yunus administration in Bangladesh with a visit, in December 2024, by the Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, sending External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to Pakistan (October 2024), engaging the Taliban leadership in Dubai (January 2025), and preparing for regional visits from Nepal, Sri Lanka, and others. Five years after the Balakot strikes and the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir, New Delhi was also projecting confidence in its security posture and its deterrent capacity for terrorism from Pakistan.

However, many of those expectations for 2025 dissipated by the end of the year. India's foreign policy planners found themselves wrestling with profound challenges across four interconnected domains: economic security, energy security, global strategic stability and regional security.

Economic and energy security

Instead of resetting India-U.S. ties, 2025 proved to be the most difficult year of this century. Actions by the Trump administration on tariffs, immigration and sanctions pushed trust levels back by decades. Washington's decision to levy a steep 25% reciprocal tariff on Indian goods hit key labour-intensive sectors such as apparel, gems and jewellery, and seafood. This followed from the Trump first term, where India's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) trade privileges were withdrawn.

To compound matters, the U.S. introduced a 25% surcharge on Indian imports of Russian oil, effectively making India the most heavily tariffed trading partner. Even if a forthcoming BTA softens the blow, the losses in contracts mean that factory-line closures and the retrenchment of workers remain. Immigration restrictions, particularly on H-1B visas, further undermined remittances, a key pillar of India's foreign exchange inflows. Of all the trade deals on the anvil, India signed FTAs with the U.K., Oman and New Zealand. But the big prizes that leaders had committed to signing in 2025, with the U.S. and the EU, are still pending.

Ties with China and Russia remained tenuous despite the iconic photo-moment of Mr. Modi-President Xi-President Putin holding hands at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit (September 2025) and the Modi-Putin bear hug on the tarmac of New Delhi airport earlier this month. While India-China flight-visa-pilgrimage links were restored, more fundamental security guarantees for the LAC were not. Neither have economic investment regulations been removed. The hours-long detention of an Indian air passenger from Arunachal Pradesh at Shanghai (November 2025) has raised new concerns.

After three years of resisting western pressure over Russian Ural energy imports, New Delhi appeared to bend, after a wave of U.S. sanctions. Whether India will be compelled to zero out its Ural imports – similar to how it halted Iranian and Venezuelan oil imports under U.S. pressure in the past – remains uncertain, but the choice carries economic and reputational costs. The India-Russia summit, that ended without any major agreements in strategic spheres such as defence, energy, nuclear and space cooperation, disappointed all the hype preceding it.

Global and regional security

A central challenge for Indian strategists in 2025 has been the rise in global unpredictability. In its 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), Washington identified China and Russia as "revisionist powers" seeking to undermine U.S. influence and global stability. In contrast, the 2025 NSS presents a softened, more ambiguous stance – avoiding direct mentions of China's aggression in the South China Sea and toward Taiwan, and treating Russia with more caution than criticism. The 2017 NSS hailed India's rise as a "leading global power" and "major defense partner", but the 2025 version offers only a limited articulation of India's role, primarily in the context of Indo-Pacific security and critical minerals. Given the short shrift to traditional U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, any deeper alignment with Washington, as had earlier been envisaged, seems risky now. Mr. Trump's references to his meeting with Xi Jinping as a potential "G-2" only intensify concerns about India's position in the Asian power balance.

At the same time, global acceptance of the Gaza and Ukraine peace proposals – both of which critics argue favour the aggressors – signals a weakening of the international rules-based order. China's rollout of a framework for "Global Governance" reflects its ambition to shape an alternative international architecture. For India, this requires serious thought about its own vision for a future global order, especially as the UN's failures at controlling conflict grow.

India's immediate neighbourhood, which initially appeared stable in early 2025, became more volatile as the year progressed. The terror attack in Pahalgam (April) was a grim reminder that even with the security crackdown in Jammu and Kashmir and past cross-border operations in 2016 and 2019, threats remain embedded. That terrorists came hundreds of kilometres inside the Valley to carry out the killings and escaped should merit serious introspection. India's retaliatory Operation Sindoor was militarily effective, but New Delhi's diplomatic campaign following the strike encountered setbacks. While countries condemned the terror attack, few openly supported India's cross-border response. Persistent questions – particularly regarding speculation about the loss of Indian jets – damaged India's credibility, as the government neither confirmed nor denied the reports.

Complicating matters were claims that other countries supported Pakistan's military actions. While India set aside concerns over China's role in Pakistan Air Force strikes, ties with Türkiye and Azerbaijan have nose-dived. The announcement of a Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact was an additional blow to India's regional calculus.

Mr. Modi's declaration of a "new normal" after the Pahalgam attack led to international worries over rapid escalation of the next conflict in South Asia. India's restrained handling of the Delhi blasts conspiracy (November 2025) eased some of those worries, but the broader issue remains: how will New Delhi respond to the next major attack, especially with Pakistan's political landscape increasingly shaped by the ultra-hawkish Field Marshal Asim Munir?

The 2024 regime-change protests in Bangladesh and the 2025 Gen-Z demonstrations in Nepal have created fragile transitional governments, reducing predictability in India's periphery. With elections in both countries scheduled for early 2026, New Delhi must prepare to engage with new leadership that is not necessarily positively disposed to it. With Bangladesh in particular, the end of the year has seen relations at their lowest ebb yet. The elections in Myanmar, on December 28, will be held on the Junta's terms, despite New Delhi's best attempts at fostering talks with the deposed NUG members and to ask for the more humane treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Lessons for 2026

Several lessons from 2025 stand out clearly. India must recognise the limits of performative diplomacy – warm embraces, highly publicised summits and symbolic gestures such as awards and leaders driving together in the same car do not necessarily translate into tangible gains. Performative aggression – threats to isolate or boycott countries only mean something if other countries join in. The government was sensible in shifting its projection of India as "Vishwaguru" (global teacher) during the G-20 year in 2023 to "Vishwamitra" (global friend). But it must now avoid slipping into the narrative of a "Vishwa-victim", blaming all others – American sanctions, Chinese manoeuvring, Pakistan's machinations, or the "ingratitude" of neighbouring states – for its disappointments.

New Delhi must stop being blind to its own double standards too – concerns over the lynching of a minority member in Bangladesh can only ring true only if the Modi government is prepared to condemn and stop similar attacks on minorities in India. The same is true for concerns about democracy and inclusive elections in the neighbourhood. If rising Islamism in the region is an issue, then how does the government sanguinely sup with the Taliban? In 2026, with a world turning increasingly transactional, India can only bring up principles if it follows them consistently, regardless of whether they pertain to ties with geopolitical powers, or its own neighbours.

suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

The urban future with cities as dynamic ecosystems

Aruna Bhattacharya

is a medical anthropologist and a public health expert specialising in urban health systems, and is based in Bengaluru

Merely designing better infrastructure will not deliver the desired outcome if the human element of belonging is ignored

Cities stand at the epicentre of global discourse, driving development, policymaking, science, and technology. Yet, amidst all the planning and progress, we often overlook the most fundamental element: the diverse people who inhabit these urban spaces and make them home. The disconnect between the cities we design, the cities we wish to inhabit, and the cities we live in is the critical missing link in our tale of interconnected realities.

The invisible tax of exclusion

When individuals migrate, there is an unspoken expectation of assimilation, often summarised as "do what the Romans do". Language emerges as the primary, non-negotiable standard for integration, necessary for communication and alignment with the city's linguistic identity. The failure to meet this linguistic standard often results in an invisible tax paid by "new residents" and migrants from different linguistic zones.

This marginalisation reflects a systemic tension between the vibrant, multi-lingual reality of major metropolitan hubs and the emotional, cultural and political expectations placed upon those seeking a better life within them. The core issue is about the validation of belonging within the city that a resident calls home.

This "linguistic tax" translates directly into economic disadvantage. Navigating a job search, negotiating complex housing agreements, or accessing essential government benefits or health care becomes a bureaucratic maze when official documents and primary communication channels are monolingual.

This cultural and linguistic friction serves as an economic roadblock. It often channels migrants into the informal economy, where exploitation is higher and opportunities for formal social mobility are curtailed. Ironically, the city, which relies heavily on the labour, skills and taxes contributed by these new residents, structurally denies them full and equal access to the very opportunities and services they were promised. The failure to integrate them linguistically and culturally is a self-inflicted wound that undermines the long-term social and economic resilience of the city itself.

The fundamental flaw in modern urban planning is the assumption of a static, homogenous user base. Urban infrastructure – the actual blueprint of the designed city – is often conceived for the established resident, rendering the new resident invisible. We design 'smart' cities, but they are often only smart for those who already speak the right language and possess the right documents.

This invisibility is compounded by a lack of culturally diverse governance. When local bodies and planning committees fail to reflect on the cosmopolitan reality of the metropolis, homogeneous perspectives inevitably dominate plans for profoundly heterogeneous spaces. Planning for schools, transport hubs or public parks often misses the mark when planners do not recognise, or account for, the needs of recent, diverse demographic shifts.

Designing cities 'for all'

The urban future we wish to reimagine must be layered. Simply designing better infrastructure will not deliver the desired outcome if the human element of belonging is ignored. Cities are not static blueprints; they are dynamic ecosystems. We need to stop viewing them as spaces defined by fixed, hard boundaries and start seeing them as fluid entities with an infinite capacity to expand, reconfigure and include.

To proactively bridge the cultural divide, city planners must anticipate potential friction – the clash between the 'known' and the 'new', the 'us' and the 'them'. A small, targeted investment in cultural sensitisation training for public-facing staff could be the essential ingredient. This training is not just about politeness; it is about operational efficiency and upholding democratic rights.

For any truly transformative change to succeed, we must prepare for temporary commotion on the path to greater development and a better social outcome.

A city must be imagined, designed and governed with all the inhabitants who call it home: those who were born here, those who have lived here for decades, and those who will arrive tomorrow. We must design a city that is dynamic enough to embrace future growth, welcome diversity and encourage amalgamation and regeneration.

The missing link

For an inclusive, sustainable, urban future, let us commit to designing cities – not just for the infrastructure they contain but for the people that they are built to serve. The true missing link in the tale of our interconnected realities is empathy: the recognition that the comfort, security and validated belonging of the lived experience is the ultimate measure of successful urban design.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Environment under siege

The government of the day appears to be systematically diluting environmental protection laws. In the mindless pursuit of development, favouring industries and business houses, the damage that is being caused to the environment is also endangering the quality of life of citizens. There needs to be a mass movement to stop this madness before irreversible damage is done.

V. Padmanabhan,
Bengaluru

Aspirants, their plight

There are 92,000 Group-2 candidates in Andhra Pradesh whose plight needs to be highlighted. For over five years, we have worked very hard, spending our money on coaching classes and buying books. We are young people, many from middle class families and lower, just waiting for a job. Most Group-2 aspirants are facing financial problems but the greater worry is of being "age barred". The arguments for the Group-2 roster case were concluded and the judgment was reserved nearly three months ago (September 23, 2025). But the final judgment is still pending.

Sunkari Narayanarao,
Hyderabad

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

Can propaganda be great art?

Asim Siddiqui

teaches English Literature at Aligarh Muslim University, writes opinion pieces on Hindi cinema, and is the author of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation

Sudhanva Deshpande

Theatre personality, author, and film actor

PARLEY

Can propaganda be art? This question has divided critics, artists and audiences. Leni Riefenstahl's films glorifying Nazism and Soviet poster art are often cited as propaganda that transcended their purpose to become enduring art. Recently, this debate has resurfaced with the success of Aditya Dhar's Hindi film *Dhurandar*. While critics have panned it for blending real-life events with fiction to push an ultra-nationalist narrative, defenders praise its technical finesse, immersive storytelling and raw intensity, suggesting it goes beyond mere messaging. Asim Siddiqui and Sudhanva Deshpande discuss art and propaganda in a conversation moderated by **Anuj Kumar**. Edited excerpts:

Several works of art, books, theatre, and films are often called propaganda. How exactly would you define propaganda?

Asim Siddiqui: In an absolute sense, you can say that all art is propaganda. That means whether it is cinematic art, literature, or poetry, it is talking about certain ideas. But these days, when we use the word 'propaganda', we are using the word in a very specific sense where a filmmaker, writer, or artist has a clear agenda to make a selective use of facts, ideas, and maybe images to try and persuade a group of people to accept a particular point of view. It nakedly panders to raw emotions. And by doing that, it tries to mold public opinion.

Sudhanva Deshpande: Propaganda must be seen in the context of a broader ecosystem. Propaganda is typically not something that one person does alone. There are organised forces behind the work that is seen as propaganda.

Would you say *Dhurandhar* is well done propaganda, as many believe? How does it compare with *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story*, which are seen as explicit propaganda?

AS: It is certainly better than those films. It tries to narrate a story and create characters, but I would place it within that broader ecosystem of which the other two films are part.

SD: In the Hindi film industry, there has been a concerted effort by forces of Hindutva to take control of the film industry in some ways, and this is done both officially as well as through non-state actors – trolls and vigilantes on the ground, institutions of the state, and networks of funding, financing, exhibiting films.

For instance, when *The Kashmir Files* came out, in several BJP States, government institutions gave their employees the day off or bought them tickets. Social media too was promoting the film. So the commercial success of the film was orchestrated.

However, despite this orchestration, films such as *The Kashmir Files* and now *Dhurandhar* are still exceptions commercially, in the sense that many films that do propagate the Hindutva point of view don't do well.

A still from Dhurandhar.

AS: Also, earlier, you would not have imagined that many of these films would get a National Award. [*The Kashmir Files*] got an award for national integration, which appears ironic.

What is the difference between propaganda in the service of power and that which questions power?

SD: Every artist and work of art must decide where they stand in the larger scheme of things. Do they think that the existing status quo, the power relationships in society, are fine and need to be strengthened? Or do they believe that the status quo needs to change? In other words, do the poor and those who have been marginalised for centuries also need to become stakeholders in society? Now, if you believe that, then of course your art will also argue that. But that is not propaganda; you are going against the grain of power and against values and beliefs that are entrenched in society. On the other hand, if you believe that, say, caste is fine, that the vast majority should be treated as somewhat less than human, you are working in favour of the entrenched ideology.

There is no Indian Muslim character in *Dhurandhar*. Is the film still addressing them in some sense?

> Every artist and work of art must decide where they stand in the larger scheme of things. Do they believe that the status quo needs to change? If they do, that is not propaganda; they are going against the grain of power and against values and beliefs that are entrenched in society.
>
> SUDHANVA DESHPANDE

AS: There are certain dog whistles in the film. At one moment in the film, one character talks about Pakistan and says it is not our 'enemy number one'. It says you have many enemies within India, and, of course, there are different terms for them as well. In that sense, it is also part of the ecosystem we have discussed. There is no Muslim character who is positive, and you can also consider the absent characters; they are not named, but you can hear those dog whistles.

SD: The othering of Muslims and the depiction of Muslims as kind of enemies within or as negative characters is not new per se. In *Angaar* (1992), the Muslim don's family is shown as less than human. There is a clear connection between the depiction and the overall atmosphere of Islamophobia that started building up with the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the demand for the demolition of the Babri Masjid from the mid-1980s onwards. And as it reached a crescendo, you find more and more such films being made.

There is a section that feels that the present nationalist propaganda is a counter to the cinema of the 1950s to 1970s, which was inspired by the progressive writers' movement. And if Mehboob Khan and Raj Kapoor pushed the idea of a Nehruvian India, films such as *Uri* and *Dhurandhar* represent the 'new' India.

SD: It is completely misplaced, a false equivalence drawn by the right wing. I can't think of a single film inspired by the progressive writers' movement that actively went out to encourage or make its audience feel hatred towards a particular caste or community. I don't remember anybody in the 1950s saying he was afraid to make a film because of the attacks he would face from the state or society. Yes, there was Emergency in the 1970s. That was a dark period in Indian history when films such as *Kissa Kursi Ka* were banned, and that was terrible. But by and large, that was an exception.

The other aspect of the propaganda of this moment is about everything that is prevented from being made. For instance, in a film on Jyotirao Phule, there was a need to remove caste names of caste groups.

My filmmaker and writer friends tell me that now you have to deliberately include scenes and dialogue that incite rage-baiting, to create a social media storm around the film. This is done so that people who would ordinarily not have gone to see the film end up watching it.

Some people say that they have enjoyed a work of propaganda even while being sceptical of its message. Would you say that it is ethical to appreciate a work's artistic qualities, given that it aims to manipulate your beliefs?

AS: There may be certain parts in a film or book which you may like. It is not unusual for viewers to clap for a bad guy in a film. Sometimes a film can also hold a kind of sinister charm. When you are engrossed in a film, you can enjoy the visuals, songs, images, and acting. The discourse that arises from a film comes later. I liked *Raees* in parts, but also found it deeply problematic.

SD: Art is a complex business that operates on many levels. I grew up with *Sholay*. I love the film, but I don't endorse the idea of the benevolent, patriarchal feudalism at its heart: the character of the Thakur and his being the saviour of the village. I didn't particularly like *Tezaab*, but I found '*Ek Do Teen*' terrific and Madhuri Dixit's performance absolutely amazing. Having said that, you might watch a film whose message you agree with but still find the film somewhat boring.

Does propaganda inspire critical thinking?

AS: Critical thinking can never be dead. It makes us discover old films and books, watch and read them afresh, wonder why we liked them and, sometimes, question why we rejected them in the first place.

SD: The more you argue against something, the more there is curiosity about it. I come from a family where nobody reads or speaks Urdu. The language was never part of my world as I was growing up. But by the time I was in college, there was a whole anti-Urdu sentiment being stoked. I became curious about the language and started reading Urdu poets and writers in the Devanagari script.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

A snapshot of Rajan who broke stories but never saw a byline

Grassroots activists are often journalists' best friends

M. Kalyanaraman

It was the year 1997. A Ramanathapuram taluk office press release was terse. It merely said some 10 people in a Dalit village called Palkarai near Ramanathapuram town had converted to Islam. For a city-bred rookie reporter like me, it seemed like a juicy story to dig into. But a religious conversion story was a bit beyond me. I consulted senior journalists in Chennai and was directed to Rajan of Madurai. Rajan came to Ramanathapuram to be my chaperone during my field trip to Palkarai.

Rajan was an apt candidate for Marxian theorist Antonio Gramsci's idea of an organic intellectual. Born in a Pariar family, Rajan learned political theory from his milieu and from books. He knew the terrain and the people and, more importantly, the needs of journalists.

Grassroots activists are often journalists' best friends but they typically have organisational agendas. Rajan knew his Marx and Ambedkar but never really sought to be an organiser, let alone a leader. He did not have the self-importance to drive him. Although the issues mattered to him, he was anarchic and represented no organisation. He was an honest interlocutor for upcountry English language journalists.

Rajan got by on a day-to-day basis. One good meal and drinks made his day. His pockets were often empty and he would ask for just enough money from friends to take him to his next stop by bus where he would crash at a verandah.

Like the academic intellectual, and unlike the organic intellectual, Rajan often preferred to be an objective observer, not a participant. The foibles of the Left and the activists amused him endlessly. He would roar with laughter describing them to me.

At Palkarai though, the Dalit villagers refused to engage with us. They were angry and suspicious of journalists. To break the ice, Rajan asked, "Can you get us some water? We are thirsty."

Rajan took a few gulps from the jug the villagers brought. I said I wasn't thirsty, but he insisted that I also drink the water. He later explained that for Dalits, this meant breaking untouchability barriers.

I asked them why some of them became Muslim. They had a counter question: "Why did the police put a case against our boys and let them out only on conditional bail?"

Rajan loudly explained to me, so the villagers could also hear. A police case meant entering police records permanently. This in turn meant losing any chance of landing government jobs through reservation as Hindu Scheduled Castes. Conversion was, among other things, an act of protest for these Dalits who had nothing to lose, he implied. And Rajan was lending a sympathetic ear, which opened up the Dalit villagers even more to us.

The case had been slapped on the youth for rioting during the caste riots that raged in Tamil Nadu at that time.

Palkarai Dalits then spoke about the Thevar village next door and how Thevar youth would often call them names and harass them. No public bus stopped at their village. "If I sported a beard and wore a Muslim cap, no one would dare to humiliate me. Buses would stop to pick us up," said one youth who had converted. Rajan had broken another granular story bearing brilliant insights. But his name was never in the bylines. And he did not seek any other personal benefit either.

Twenty years later, I visited Palkarai during elections. The Muslim converts had moved to the edge of the village, closer to the main road. Aazan chimed out of a new, shining mosque that had come up.

Years of vagrant living took a toll on Rajan. He married and had children but never really held a steady job. Alcohol consumed him and a stroke followed, confining him to the bed for some 10 years. He passed away recently.

kalyanaraman.m@thehindu.co.in

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas

Devotees visit the St. Michael and All Angels Church on the eve of Christmas in New Delhi. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 26, 1975

Chinese oil for U.S.: deal in the offing

Tokyo, Dec. 25: China will soon start exporting substantial quantities of crude oil to the United States under a contract it is now negotiating with a major American oil interest, according to reports received here to-day from Peking.

This new but not unexpected development in Sino-American trade relations was disclosed yesterday by Mr. Yao Yilin, Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Trade, during a meeting with a high level Japanese trade and economic mission led by the former Foreign Minister, Mr. Aiichiro Fujiyama, which is now visiting Peking.

Japanese correspondents in Peking quoting mission sources said Mr. Yao did not give the name of the American oil company with which the negotiations were taking place but indicated that the negotiations were now in the final stage. Executives of various American oil companies such as Exxon, Caltex and Gulf Oil as well as the Commerce Secretary, Mr. Roger Morton, have visited Peking earlier this year to discuss oil problems but this is the first time that negotiations on an actual oil deal are reported to have taken place between the two countries.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 26, 1925

Prohibition for Madras

Salam, Dec. 25: A public meeting of the citizens of Salem was held last evening at the Victoria Market, Salem, under the presidency of Janab Sowear Ghouse Mehideen Sabib, a zealous non-co-operator. Mr. C. Rajagopalachariar delivered an interesting lecture on "Legislative Council Election and Total Prohibition". Mr. Achariar explained how much the country was drained by people indulging in drink habits. He asked the electorate to give their votes only to those who solemnly declare that they would carry on the movement of total prohibition.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of flights cancelled by Indigo from multiple airports

67 Domestic carrier IndiGo on Thursday cancelled 67 flights from multiple airports due to "forecasted" bad weather and operational reasons, according to the airline's website. Of the cancelled flights, only four were for operational reasons, and the rest were due to "forecasted" bad weather at airports, including Agartala, Chandigarh, Dehradun, Varanasi, Bengaluru, among others. PTI

Alleged IS members detained by Turkiye for planning attacks

115 Some 115 alleged members of the Islamic State group suspected of planning attacks during the end of year holidays have been arrested in Turkiye, Istanbul's prosecutor general said on Thursday. Turkiye shares a 900-kilometre border with Syria, where the IS was accused of an attack in mid-December that killed two U.S. soldiers and one civilian. AFP

Migrants rescued by the coastguards off Greece

52 Greek coastguards were searching on Thursday for a missing child off the island of Farmakonisi after rescuing 52 migrants in two separate incidents in the Aegean Sea, local media reported. They found 13 migrants, but one boy was reported missing from the group, said a news agency. Another 39 migrants were found on board an inflatable boat. AFP

Drug smugglers arrested in Punjab's Statewide raids

115 Punjab Police on Thursday arrested 115 drug smugglers during raids at 285 places across the State under the ongoing anti-drug campaign '*Yudh Nashian Virudh*', officials said. A total of 87 FIRs were registered during the operation. With this, the total number of drug smugglers arrested in the last 299 days has risen to 41,775. PTI

Number of petrol pumps in India, as of November 2025

1 lakh. India's petrol pump network has crossed the 1,00,000-mark, doubling since 2015 as State-owned fuel retailers aggressively expanded outlets to defend market share and push fuel access deeper into rural and highway corridors amid a sustained boom in vehicle ownership. Over 90% of the pumps are owned by State-owned firms. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

U.S. naval moves against Venezuela

Which tankers did the U.S. target near Venezuela? How does the U.S. use financial systems to enforce sanctions? What role do insurance and classification societies play? What role does the Office of Foreign Assets Control have?

EXPLAINER

M. Kalyanaraman

The story so far:

U.S. President Donald Trump has announced a "total and complete blockade of all sanctioned oil tankers going into and out of Venezuela."

What were the three merchant ships that faced action?

During the week of December 8, the U.S. seized the oil tanker "*Skipper*" off the coast of Venezuela, carrying nearly two million barrels of crude oil. The U.S. government has indicated it shipped oil at subsidised rates to Cuba, which has been helping the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

Last weekend, the U.S. Coast Guard stopped and boarded *Centuries*, a Panamanian-flagged tanker carrying Venezuelan oil. The Venezuelan Navy had escorted the ship to the limit of Venezuela's Exclusive Economic Zone, after which the U.S. Coast Guard stopped it.

During the same day, the Coast Guard attempted to intercept *Bella 1*, a tanker enroute to pick up crude oil in Venezuela. The U.S. had previously sanctioned the ship for trading Iranian oil.

What are U.S. sanctions?

As a global body, the United Nations can impose international sanctions that are binding and legally enforceable. These can be military, economic, or a combination of both.

On the other hand, U.S. sanctions can be said to be a type of unilateral, inexpensive economic warfare to achieve foreign policy objectives. Physical enforcement of sanctions is costly and often not effective. A physical blockade of ports and ships after the First Gulf War under the Oil for Food Programme for Iraq cost billions of dollars and did not deter Saddam Hussein from trading oil outside the framework.

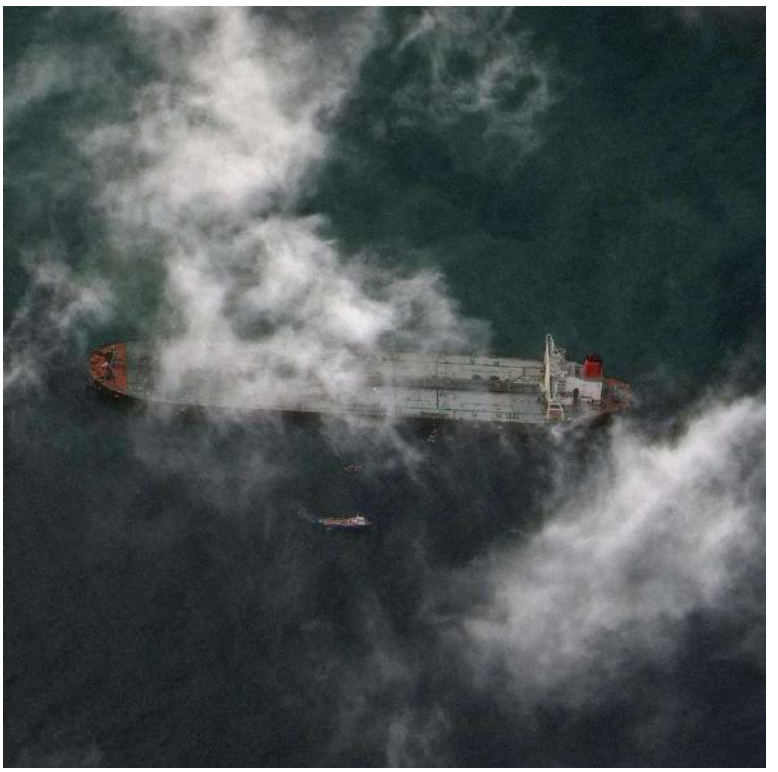
Since the Second Gulf War, however, the U.S. has sought to use its leverage in the global financial system to enforce sanctions. The U.S. has direct leverage over the dollar, which is the currency of practically all global financial transactions and certainly all oil. The petrodollar is a tool the U.S. wields to enforce its writ.

The U.S. has direct control over its companies and prohibits them from doing business with nations it has sanctioned. Banks and companies headquartered outside the U.S. also comply with these sanctions to continue using the global financial system, which has the U.S. as the hub, and do business in the large U.S. market.

Non-U.S. banks such as HSBC were, for instance, wary of re-entering Iran even after the Barack Obama administration asked them to do so following the nuclear deal. Companies that had cut ties with Iran were fearful since U.S. companies were still forbidden from doing business with Iran.

In 2014, BNP Paribas agreed to pay $9 billion in fines for sanctions violations. To curb North Korea's nuclear build-up and other activities, the U.S. threatened to keep a small bank in Macau, Banco Delta Asia, through which North Korea was doing business, out of the U.S. system. This was enough to make the bank pull back, which had its intended effect.

Many global financial transactions that do not involve the U.S. still need to be routed through American intermediaries of the primary entities. This gives the U.S. government leverage over those transactions and it can block them.



At sea: A satellite image shows the *Skipper* seized by the U.S. REUTERS

What other shipping sanctions does the U.S. have in place?

Although ship owning, shipbuilding, repair, and operations are spread across various countries, insurance remains in the hands of Western nations, especially the U.K. Shipping is a high-risk business and insurance coverage of ships is an absolute requirement for importers, exporters, and ports.

Reputed insurance companies with deep pockets provide cover once the ship is certified as safe and seaworthy by a few well-known classification societies, which are typically members of the International Association of Classification Societies (IACS). India's Indian Register of Shipping is a member of the IACS.

Once the U.S. slaps sanctions, classification societies withdraw their certification and major insurers withdraw their cover. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian ships were held up in the Bosphorus because the protection and indemnity (P&I) club companies that cover liabilities for loss of life and environmental damage withdrew their cover. The ships were too risky to handle for Turkiye. The Black Sea is the most important shipping route for Russian ships in the West.

Following sanctions on ships and shipping companies, some nations that allow ships to register with them may choose to withdraw registration for fear of angering the U.S. Such ships or those that have lost their flag registration can be boarded by navies, as per international law, called the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Are U.S. sanctions effective in shipping?

The U.S. has sanctioned companies involved in the trade of Iranian or Russian oil. But Iran is an energy giant and has been able to find alternatives despite losing the cover of big insurers and certification. Russia, too, has been successful to a certain extent in bypassing sanctions that sought to cap the price of Russian oil. The U.S. agency that investigates using its own intelligence service and sanctions individuals and companies that are acting against U.S. foreign policy interests is the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the Treasury Department. It periodically puts out lists of sanctioned individuals and companies.

In June 2024, OFAC sanctioned *Bella 1* for allegedly carrying cargo for a Hezbollah-owned company. At that time, the U.S. termed it Panama-registered, but shipping databases now say its flag or nationality is unknown. Ships can be boarded by warships for not flying their flag of registration, on suspicion of piracy, indulging in the slave trade, and so on. After evading the U.S. Coast Guard, *Bella 1* has apparently given out distress signals.

Centuries' registered owner is in Hong Kong. *Centuries* was once certified by the American Bureau of Shipping, a big classification society and member of the IACS. In July of this year, the relatively smaller Overseas Marine Classification Society, which is not a member of the IACS and has a presence in China and some of the flags of convenience, stepped in to give certification. *Centuries* is now not listed as having the P&I cover provided by big insurers. Originally Greek-owned, *Centuries* had called on U.S. ports initially under another name, but after a change of hands has been calling on ports in the Middle America, Africa, China and so on.

Skipper was once owned by the Japanese NYK and later by a Greek company. It changed hands in 2019 to the present owner, which is headquartered in Nigeria. Shipping databases show that it had been classified by IACS members, but the last such certification was withdrawn in 2022. U.S. authorities said it flew the flag of Guyana falsely, which could make it legal for them to detain the vessel as per international law.

The above three ships are examples of what Western nations have dubbed the shadow fleet. They also show how countries such as Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and likely China have been collaborating to break the hold that the U.S. has on global finance and merchant shipping. That the U.S. government had to order a physical blockade in Venezuela would seem to indicate that they have been able to succeed to an extent.

THE GIST

- The U.S. seized or intercepted three Venezuelan oil tankers — *Skipper*, *Centuries*, and *Bella 1* — for carrying crude or trading with sanctioned entities.
- *Skipper* was shipping oil to Cuba at subsidised rates, aiding the Maduro government; *Centuries* was stopped after a Venezuelan Navy escort; *Bella 1* had been previously sanctioned for trading Iranian oil.
- These ships are examples of the shadow fleet, showing how countries like Venezuela bypass sanctions, prompting the U.S. to order a physical blockade.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

A still from *Phule*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A mixed bag of spectacle and thoughtful storytelling in Hindi cinema

Bollywood in 2025 thrived on hyper-nationalist tropes, bombastic action, and overt communal messaging; films such as *Dhurandhar*, *War 2*, and *Udaipur Files* prioritised spectacle over creative artistry; cinema became an instrument for political advocacy rather than sensitive storytelling

Harish S. Wankhede

In the glittering, high-octane world of contemporary Bollywood, a dominant strain of populism took centre stage in 2025, characterised by hyper-nationalist tropes (*Dhurandhar* and *War 2*), bombastic action sequences (*Sikandar* and *Jaat*), and overt communal messaging (*Udaipur Files* and *The Taj Story*). The arrival of the Hindutva genre (with films such as *Kesari Veer*, *The Bengal Files*, and *Ajey: the Untold Story of a Yogi*) has further tilted the idea of cinema as an ideological instrument for political advocacy, neglecting its capacity to provide its audience with sensitive and critical stories that can elevate their intellectual capacities.

This brand of cinema has witnessed significant commercial success. However, it risks reducing cinema into a populist medium that fosters a culture of loud jingoism, neglecting creative nuance and social empathy expected from cinematic art. Instead, these films often prioritise spectacle over creative artistry, weaving narratives that glorify patriarchal heroism and stir up divisive communal sentiments under the guise of entertainment. Yet, 2025 has quietly offered a counter-narrative through a slate of films that champion critical social messaging, artistic creativity, and a model of intellectual storytelling.

There has been a small stream of good cinema this year that delves into personal struggles, social injustices, and human resilience without resorting to sensationalism. For example, *Superboys of Malegaon* was a brilliant attempt to highlight the tragedies that engulfed young creative minds in a mofussil town. Inspired by real events, the film shows how a few unemployed youth create their own brand of cinema, capturing the joy of amateur creativity amid everyday hardships. It's a celebration of creative passion, contrasting sharply with the manufactured heroism of populist blockbusters. Similarly, *Sitaare Zameen Par* stands as a heartfelt sports drama about a team of neurodivergent adults participating in a tournament. We see how they confront social prejudices and discover profound lessons in empathy and perseverance. This narrative supplements themes of redemption and inclusion, far removed from the conventional cinematic model that Bollywood offers.

Such films prove that thoughtful cinema is not only possible but can appeal to a good audience. The box-office success of *Jolly LLB 3* further inspires such a trend. It showcases a courtroom drama about a poor farmer's land grabbed by a powerful industrialist, exposing corruption and judicial absurdities with wit and heart. Regrettably, many of the other gems of good Hindi cinema have been overlooked by the audience, leaving innovative filmmakers with a modest viewership and critical acclaim alone. The best example of such neglect is Neeraj Ghaywan's *Homebound* (now shortlisted for the Oscars), that draws from the tragic background of the COVID-19 lockdown, following two childhood friends on a gruelling journey home as migrant workers. The story explores the plight of caste discrimination that has often been overlooked in Hindi cinema, showcasing raw social truth over fictional spectacles.

In this popular cinematic culture, the stories about caste-based social ills, especially around the experiences of Dalits and Adivasis, have a negligible space. This year witnessed a few good films that revolved around the neglect of society towards the downtrodden and their struggles to survive with dignity. *Phule*, for example, is a biographical drama chronicling the lives of social reformers Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, who battled caste discrimination, child marriage, and gender inequality to champion education for the marginalised. By focusing on historical figures who fought systemic oppression through intellect and activism, it offers a subtle critique of ongoing societal divides without inflammatory rhetoric. Similarly, *Dhadak 2* tackles inter-caste romance head-on, portraying the forbidden love between a Dalit student and an upper-caste woman, demonstrating the threats, violence and Brahmanical societal control even in the space of higher learning. It boldly addresses caste-based injustice, promoting dialogue over division.

The Adivasi question in Hindi films hardly receives mainstream space. *The Humans in the Loop* confronts such apathy and weaves a modern tale of an Adivasi woman who, after divorcing her husband, takes up AI data-labelling work to secure custody of her children while reconnecting with her tribal roots and exposing tech biases. This film intelligently blends technology, identity, and family, highlighting marginalised voices in a digital age. In addition to such a creative, nuanced tale, the thriller *Stolen* follows two urban brothers who stumble into a child trafficking racket while searching for a kidnapped infant, unravelling a web of corruption that has engulfed the tribal habitats. Its intense, grounded exploration of crime and morality provides a new look about the deprivation and destitution in which the Adivasis are surviving.

Whither cinematic art?

These films collectively demonstrate Bollywood's capacity for profound, creative storytelling that engages the intellectual credentials of the audience and promotes cinema as a creative enterprise. I also wish to highlight *Agra*, another cinematic gem of this year that explores the class-based tragedies of a young man burdened to live under sexual repression. It exposes everyday patriarchal social controls over our desire and how the urban low-class life is dysfunctional and tragic. It is ironic that such sensitive cinema struggled to find exhibitors and found only a few shows.

These films in 2025 tackled sensitive subjects around social ills, class-based tragedies, corruption and personal freedom with nuance, elevating the capacity of cinema to influence the critical credentials of its audience. This parallel genre of "good cinema" shall also thrive alongside mainstream populist cinema. However, there is a relative neglect of this genre by audiences as they are overtly bewitched by the spectacles and extravaganza of entertaining cinema. A creative and intellectual genre of filmmaking will survive if the regular cinema audience equally supports, reviews, and highlights its presence. Good, creative, and socially sensitive cinema must survive so that cinema shall not become a soulless instrument for profit and political propaganda.

Harish S. Wankhede is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
Views expressed are personal

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Born on December 26, 1893, Mao Zedong was a Chinese communist revolutionary and the long-time Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. A quiz on the man and his times

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1
In which village and province was Mao Zedong born?

QUESTION 2
Which influential early essay by Mao examined physical education and national strength?

QUESTION 3
What was the name of the arduous 1934-35 retreat that became symbolic of Chinese communist endurance?

QUESTION 4
Which poetic work was written by Mao in 1936, soon after the Long March?

QUESTION 5
How old was Mao at the time of his death in 1976?

Visual Question:
This 1971 painting by Tang Xiao calls back to Mao's famous 1966 swim across China's longest river. Identify this river. LANDSBERGER COLLECTION, AMSTERDAM

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Name the Charles Dickens novella telling the story of the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge? **Ans: *Christmas Carol***
2. What well-known Christmas carol in 1965 became the first song ever broadcast from space? **Ans: *Jingle Bells***
3. In which country can one see a 'karavaki' or a traditionally decorated boat during Christmas? **Ans: Greece**
4. Name the malevolent half-goat, half-man anti-Santa that originated from Austro-Bavarian folklore? **Ans: Krampus**
5. Which country marks Christmas with la quema del diablo, or the burning of the devil? **Ans: Guatemala**
Visual: Name this 2019 animated movie serving as a fictionalised origin story of Santa Claus revolving around a postman stationed in an island town to the Far North who befriends a reclusive toymaker? **Ans: *Klaus***
Early Birds: C. Saravanan | K.N. Viswanathan | Tom Alan Faith | Sonali Das | Tito Shiladitya

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"Hello there! How was the movie? Did you enjoy it?"
"Oh Yes! I enjoyed very much."
"What was...."
"…. you should have come too. You would have enjoyed very much too."
"When you use the word 'enjoy', don't put 'very much' immediately after it."
"…. but I have heard many people say, 'I enjoyed very much'."
"Many people do say it, but it's wrong. You don't 'enjoy very much' or 'enjoy very much something'. Instead, you 'enjoy something very much'. For example. I enjoyed myself very much. I enjoyed the party very much."
"I see. So, in my case. I have to say. 'I enjoyed the movie very much'!"
"That's right. Here are a few more examples. Saritha enjoys being with her children very much. Rahul..."
"…. Rahul Dravid enjoys playing in New Zealand very much."
"That's a good example. But what I was going to say was Rahul enjoys eating jam very much."
"I enjoy eating hot vadai's and idlis."
"Many people do. I am not very fond of idlis though. Now, tell me about the movie. What was the story about?"
"It's a story about a woman who is very jealous about her friend's achievements."
"Why is she jealous of her friend?"
"She's jealous about her friend because..."
"…not 'jealous about', but 'jealous of'. There are many people who are jealous of his talent."
"There's nobody who is jealous of my talent. I'm sure."
"You don't have any talent!"
"That's true. How about this example? My cousin is jealous of my neighbour."
"I try not to be jealous of anyone."
"It's easier said than done."
"I know. Now, getting back to the movie. Was the theatre crowded?"
"It certainly was. There were more number of people than I had expected."
"More number of people?"
"Yes. that's right. You see. ..."
"… you don't say 'more number of people', you say 'more people'."
"You mean it's wrong..."
"…you don't say 'more number'."
"But..."
"… it's wrong to say, the college has more number of students this year than last year."
"Instead you say, the college has more students this year than last year."
"Exactly! We often hear people say, there are more number of smokers today than there were ten years ago."
"We should say, there are more smokers today than there were ten years ago. But what if I want to use the word 'number' in that sentence? What do I say then?"
"Well, you could say, the number of smokers has increased in the past ten years."
"I see. We have a small number of students enrolled this year. Does that sound OK?"
"It does. Now, can you give me more information about the movie?"
"I enjoyed it very much. Other than that, I don't want to give you any more information."
"But...."
"… If I open my mouth, you are going to find more faults. And I don't want you to find more number of... I mean. I don't want you to find any more faults."
"That seems fair enough."

Published in The Hindu on February 9, 1999

Word of the day

Lugubrious:
excessively mournful

Synonyms: gloomy, unhappy, miserable

Usage: *His face looked lugubrious after hearing the sad news.*

Pronunciation:
newsth.live/lugubriouspro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /lugubrias/

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

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

The vanishing Indian Left

CPI turns 100, but communism in India stares at electoral irrelevance

The Communist Party of India (CPI), the oldest Communist party in the country, was born exactly 100 years ago on December 26 in Kanpur. Today, CPI — and, in fact, the entire family of communist parties — is facing an existential crisis, electorally and ideologically. The CPI, and its more influential offspring, the CPM, together had a total of 53 MPs in the Lok Sabha and 8% vote share in 2004; in 2024, both the parties and the CPI(ML) have just eight seats and a 3% vote share.

This decline is not wholly surprising, for it mirrors the trajectory of communism world over, where it has been in retreat since the end of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Communist parties do hold office in China and Vietnam, and have electoral relevance in pockets in Latin America and Asia, but most of these are merely authoritarian outfits facilitating State-controlled capitalism. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has explained its ideological shifts as socialism with Chinese characteristics and abandoned planks such as anti-imperialism and class struggle, central to the idea of Communist groups. Unlike CPC, the Indian Communist groups have mostly found themselves on the wrong side of history. Their stubborn adherence to internationalism found them sailing against the tide of nationalism in the 1940s: Opposition to Gandhi, the Quit India movement, the short-lived support for the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, and finally, the Ranadive thesis period that saw an armed insurrection against independent India, prevented the party from expanding its support among industrial workers and peasants into a mass front. Dogmatic analysis limited their understanding of the caste question and the authoritarian impulse in the imposition of the Emergency. The disappearance of the Soviet utopia has made revival difficult.

Where does the Communist Left go from here? The recent success of the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna in Sri Lanka and Zohran Mamdani in New York suggest that political ideologies can revive in new and unexpected forms. The CPI — and the CPM — have shown inventiveness while running governments in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura: They were pioneers of united front politics in the 1960s and 70s that involved building social and political coalitions, creating cooperatives, and addressing questions of equality and equity through land reforms, acknowledgment of citizen rights, and welfare schemes. But, at a time of global retreat of democratic politics, the Indian Communists have failed to break fresh ground on ideas or practise, preferring dogma and nostalgia to creatively engaging with the challenges of the time such as the climate crisis, anti-migration policies, and the rise of social conservatism. Indian politics is poorer for the absence of an inventive Left.

Addressing political vacuum in Bangladesh

The return of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Tarique Rehman to Dhaka after 17 years in exile in the UK is a development with significant ramifications for his party and the country's political landscape. Rahman, the son of former dictator Ziaur Rahman and former premier Khaleda Zia, left Bangladesh in 2008 as per an understanding with the then military-backed government; his return shows he believes the general election will go ahead as scheduled on February 12 and his presence will bolster the BNP's fortunes in the face of a challenge from the Jamaat-e-Islami and the student-led National Citizen Party.

Since the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government last year, Bangladesh has faced a political and leadership vacuum. The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus was meant to oversee a transitory phase. Despite Yunus enjoying the goodwill of many western capitals, the widespread anarchy and chaos witnessed during protests across Bangladesh over the killing of radical leader Sharif Osman Hadi exposed the interim government's inability to govern. Fingers pointed at India in connection with Hadi's killing by political leaders, with zero evidence, were a key reason why the protests took on a virulently anti-India hue.

The interim government ensured the election won't be inclusive by banning the Awami League. New Delhi's experience of dealing with past BNP governments have been anything but pleasant, though many party leaders have signalled a change in approach towards India. In the current circumstances, a BNP-led government offers the best prospects for predictability and stability in bilateral relations. Tarique Rehman's return bolsters the BNP's electoral prospects.

Why anganwadis need urgent re-imagining

The goal of becoming a developed country by 2047 calls for a National Mission on Early Childhood Development, Care and Education, to invest in the future of children today, who will be the country's youth 22 years later

As incomes rise and women enter the workforce, the demand has expanded from supplementary nutrition to high-quality childcare. HT ARCHIVE

Ashish Dhawan

Siddhant Sachdeva

When we imagine India in 2047, we visualise a modern nation with skyscrapers, highways and a robust economy — a Viksit Bharat. But what lies at the core of this robust economy is not just its infrastructure, but also an economy fuelled by qualified young professionals at every level, working together to make India a $40-trillion economy.

It lies in the minds we shape today. Children being born today will be 22 years old in 2047; they are the future of the country. Their — and our — future depends on how we invest in the first six years of their lives, when nearly 85% of brain development takes place.

Economically, the case is clear. Studies show that every rupee invested yields a 13-rupee return in higher future earnings. In moral terms, the case is even clearer: A child's potential should never be determined by the place of their birth or the income of their parents.

Over the past five decades, India has quietly built one of the largest child-care infrastructures in the world, consisting of more than 25 lakh anganwadi workers and helpers. This is a workforce as large as the Army and Railways combined and caters to over 10 crore mothers and children under six. By reimagining the government's Integrated Child Development Scheme-Anganwadi system, we can transform it into the world's most powerful platform for human capital creation.

Most people still see anganwadis as primarily "porridge centres". While providing adequate nutrition is an important part of the system, it is not the system itself. India both needs and deserves more. As incomes rise and women enter the workforce, the demand has expanded from supplementary nutrition to high-quality childcare and early education. Parents want safe spaces for their children to learn and play, thereby also providing opportunities for mothers to work full days.

But the reality is sobering. Currently, nearly one crore children aged three to six are not enrolled anywhere. Many of them reach Class 1 unable to recognise even a single letter or number. By then, their lifelong learning outcomes are compromised — as is the vision of a Viksit Bharat.

The anganwadi system already has the reach; now, we must build its capacity. It is time to reimagine it as a 'Bhavishya Bhavan' — "creator of the future" in a literal sense — and transform this vast network into a vibrant, comprehensive ecosystem for early childhood development and care.

We propose a National Mission on Early Childhood Development, Care and Education (ECDCE) that would include upgrading anganwadi centres into vibrant, full-day childcare and learning hubs; rebranding and re-training workers as early educators and advisors; and giving them the tools and recognition they need. Instead of operating for four hours a day, these centres would operate seven hours and offer holistic development for young children.

While this may sound too good to be true, states like Telangana have already implemented such models. The seeds of this mission have already been sown, with the ministry for women and child development (MWCD) launching initiatives such as Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi and introducing the national curriculums Navchetana and Aadharshila full of simple play-based activities.

ECDCE delivers what economists call a "triple dividend" — one that benefits women, children, and the economy all at once.

First, it restores dignity and aspiration to the 25 lakh women who power this system. Upgrading their skills, linking pay to performance, providing full-day working hours, and giving them formal recognition as educators can unlock enormous energy at the grassroots.

Second, it ensures that every child — regardless of family income or geography — gets a strong foundation for life. The science is clear: Early stimulation and learning shape a child's IQ, emotional regulation, and social skills.

Third, it strengthens the care economy. When reliable childcare exists, women can work, households earn more, and communities prosper. Nations that have built strong child-care systems — from Sweden to South Korea — also have more inclusive, resilient economies.

For decades, India's early childhood programme has been in survival mode, focused on tackling malnutrition and child mortality. These efforts have saved millions of lives. But beyond survival, we need to ensure that our children also thrive — developing their cognitive, social, and emotional skills to be school- and life-ready.

On the hardware side, India must invest in child-friendly, vibrant and inclusive spaces such as handicapped-friendly classrooms, outdoor playgrounds and play facilities along with uniforms. Classrooms need to be print rich with Learning Materials and Indigenous Toys. Anganwadi centres should provide joyful learning environments that spark curiosity and imagination.

On the software side, the next step is to provide continuous coaching and mentoring for anganwadi educators and parents, supported by technology platforms such as WhatsApp and the Poshan Tracker that enable e-learning and real-time monitoring.

Beyond infrastructure and curriculum, the success of this mission will depend on trust between parents, educators, and the community. Parents must believe that their local anganwadi is a safe, caring, high-quality place for their child. Communities must see these centres as local institutions of pride.

This calls for a nationwide movement to bring every child into early learning and every parent into the conversation. Public campaigns, community events, and peer networks leveraging tools such as WhatsApp and mass media can help rebuild confidence and awareness. The message must be simple: Enrolling your child early is as important as getting them vaccinated, and daily stimulation is as important as daily meals. Like Telangana and Haryana, we can combine these reform measures with a rebranding of AWCs to revitalise the system and bring in new energy.

Given its transformative potential, the ECDCE Mission deserves to be treated as a national priority headed by the Prime Minister and anchored by MWCD. Only a whole-of-government approach cutting across health, education, nutrition, and labour can do it full justice. The Viksit Bharat generation is already here. The question is: will we give them the foundation they deserve?

Ashish Dhawan is founder-CEO, The Convergence Foundation. Siddhant Sachdeva is co-founder of Rocket Learning. The views expressed are personal

The desi turn in the Indian stock market

Syed Zafar Islam

It is not incorrect to say that not long ago, the Indian stock market lived and died by the mood of foreign investors. Often when Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) dumped ₹3,000-4,000 crore in a single session, the Sensex could fall drastically and the Nifty would bleed. Conversely, a gush of foreign inflows could spark instant euphoria on Dalal Street.

For decades, Indian markets were like the puppets who danced to the tune of FIIs, the puppeteers. During my investment banking days, we vigorously monitored the movements of FIIs. A whiff of tightening by the US Federal Reserve, a jump in US bond yields, or a geopolitical tremor would ripple through Mumbai within minutes. We lived in an uncertain world as far as the markets were concerned. It will be misleading to say that that era has vanished entirely. But it is no longer dominant.

The Indian stock market of 2025 is structurally different. Thanks to the Modi government's policies, it is more resilient and more self-assured, and far less skittish. The gravitational centre of Indian equities has shifted, perhaps irreversibly. Foreign capital still matters, but it no longer commands the sentiments of the Dalal Street. The new custodians of market stability are domestic — the Indian household, domestic mutual funds, insurance money and long-term institutional capital. The steady growth in the salaried systematic investment plan (SIP) contributions has been one of the strongest factors for the Indian stocks being far less dependent on FIIs. It did not happen organically. The people who earlier parked their savings in fixed deposits or in gold are now investing in instruments such as SIPs. The mindset changed because of a chain reaction set off by digitisation. Earlier, we felt intimidated by lots of paperwork, middlemen and physical visits. Today, the average Indian is a confident investor; digitisation broke barriers.

Financial inclusion has been implemented across the nation and strata of society. Jan Dhan accounts brought millions into the formal system. Direct Benefit Transfers created trust. The UPI revolution normalised digital money. Under Prime Minister Modi's digitisation initiatives, Sebi and RBI's investor awareness campaigns chipped away at fear. The government's mass communication efforts like "Mutual Funds Sahi Hai", coupled with intuitive fintech platforms, such as Zerodha and Upstox, made investing accessible, even routine.

The middle class is no longer parking surplus savings only in gold and real estate. It is investing in India's growth story. Nowhere is this clearer than in the explosion of SIPs. In September, people invested over ₹24,500 crore through SIPs, the highest monthly amount ever, and a clear jump from August.

This surge came from millions of new investors joining the system. Over 66 lakh new SIPs were started in just one month, taking the total number of active SIP accounts to nearly ₹9.5 crore. The average SIPs in 2025 touched ₹30,000 crore per month. It shows that Indians are steadily committing long-term savings to the stock market rather than pulling out during ups and downs.

In short, small monthly investments by ordinary households are now a powerful force in India's markets. They are steady, patient and growing. They are changing how the stock market behaves. The stabilising factor for the stock market is that SIPs arrive every month, through bull runs and bear phases, through wars and rate hikes, through panic and exuberance. This steady stream of capital has fundamentally altered the market's liquidity architecture. SIP investors do not panic when FIIs exit. They do not react to geopolitical headlines. Their money shows up, month after month, providing depth and resilience.

One institution that rarely gets its due credit in this transformation is the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC). LIC is not officially a sovereign wealth fund, but it behaves like one. With its vast pool of long-term capital and patient investment horizon, LIC has repeatedly acted as a stabiliser during periods of volatility. It steps in when sentiment weakens, provides liquidity when it is scarce, and supports strategic assets when needed. Alongside EPFO, domestic mutual funds and insurance capital, it forms the backbone of India's financial shock absorbers. This fits neatly into the broader logic of the Atmanirbhar Bharat drive. India's own institutions are now driving capital formation. This is self-reliance through financial muscle, not protectionism.

So, have FIIs stepped back? To a large extent yes. But it has little to do with a loss of faith in India. Global capital is restless, opportunistic and impatient. In recent years, foreign investors have been chasing the Artificial Intelligence boom centred in the US, where capital has clustered around a handful of mega-cap technology and semiconductor names. Others have moved to markets such as Japan, parts of Latin America and select European economies.

There is also a regulatory angle that deserves attention. Since 2023, Sebi has tightened oversight of leveraged and speculative derivatives trading. Risky structures have been dismantled and excessive leverage curbed. As a result, a significant amount of short-term, speculative foreign capital has exited the derivatives segment. This was policy by design. This regulatory tightening has also played an under-appreciated role in reshaping market behaviour.

Will FIIS make a comeback? Almost certainly. Global capital is cyclical. When western bond yields soften, risk appetite returns and valuations recalibrate, foreign investors will come back with force. India remains one of the world's most stable, scalable and sustainable growth stories. What will not return is the old hierarchy. FIIs may once again become large buyers, but they are unlikely to regain their former dominance. The psychological power has shifted. Domestic investors now set the tempo. Foreign flows will increasingly react to India rather than dictate its direction.

That is a profound change. It signals maturity and confidence. It signals a market that no longer flinches at every foreign footstep. India's stock markets are grown-ups now. And like all grown-ups, they listen to the world, but they do not live in fear of it.

Syed Zafar Islam is national spokesperson, BJP, and former managing director, Deutsche Bank, India. The views expressed are personal

Focus on smaller airports before building mega ones

Anjuli Bhargava

India is the world's fifth-largest civil aviation market, handling over 700,000 aircraft movements annually. Between April 2024 and March 2025, a total of 200 million (international and domestic) passengers flew from the country's airports. Even as airline debuts and closures dominate headlines, the airport ecosystem remains steady, because airports don't shut shop overnight.

The growth in operational airport numbers has been impressive — from 74 in 2014 to 164 now. And there is ambition for more. Recently, the Airport Authority of India (AAI) chairman outlined a plan to set up 34 "mega airports" by 2047. With two new mega airports, Navi Mumbai in Maharashtra and Jhevar in Uttar Pradesh, expected to start functioning soon, India is set to have seven mega airports, up from five (Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad) in 2019.

Coming to the smaller airports, many have become operational in recent years, and a clutch of these are thriving. The AAI chairman had listed previously non-functional airports that are now mini hubs — Darbhanga, Salem, Jharsuguda, Kanpur, Deogar, Nashik, Hollongi, and Kolhapur, among others. The dawn of air connectivity has acted like a new lifeline for many of these smaller towns and cities, which now support a thriving business-traveller community and are witnessing an uptick in the leisure traffic, fuelled by surging disposable incomes and growing aspirations.

Thanks to UDAN and a combination of other government policies, airports like Prayagraj handled one million passengers in 2025 with 30 flights a week, connecting directly to six destinations in India, earning a small profit in the bargain. Traffic at Agra, Durgapur and Gwalior has risen at a compounded rate of 40%. Darbhanga operates an average of 10 flights a day to five destinations. This is good news for the Indian economy, as the ripple effects of enhanced air connectivity are well known.

That said, there are many issues with the airport ecosystem that need fixing before India moves on setting up more mega airports. I will highlight some of these here.

One, there are a large number of unused airstrips and small airports, which were developed over the years at the behest of the political leadership of the day; these spots had neither the requirement nor the wherewithal to pay for such air services. The government needs to discourage legislators from promising air connectivity to gather votes. Airports and airstrips should only be built after a feasibility study and other scientific assessments. Even when a new airport or the expansion of an existing facility is considered necessary or justified, it needs to be built in a modular fashion, scaled up as traffic picks up; the public expenditure must be justified by the return on the investment.

Two, several smaller airports already handle large volumes of traffic but urgently need to be made more efficient or get upgrades to cater to growing traffic. The Hindon airport in the NCR is one such. Even as AAI continues to privatise wherever possible, it needs to draw up a second list of airports that might not be of interest to private players but nonetheless need upgradation and attention. Limited public funds must be spent on these, while avoiding expensive bloopers, such as Dabolim (Goa)'s large car park that has too many design flaws to be usable.

And finally, AAI must shake up several of its loss-making airports and turn them profitable. While some of these might always remain in the red (and these losses can be funded by the public as the overall economic benefits for the region often far outweigh the losses incurred), a serious attempt can be made to increase efficiency and profitability at others. Eighty-one AAI run-and-managed airports — including Delhi's Safdarjung airport (handling VIP traffic), Agartala, and Imphal — suffered a cumulative loss of around ₹10,000 crore in the past decade. Twenty-two from this pool of 81 have become non-operational. Careful analysis can point at management rethink to turn these around.

Most of these suffer from the same ailments that afflicted the erstwhile AAI-run metro airports: lower-than-required handling capacity both for the terminal and airside, a tired and uncared for look and feel, a paucity of shops and eateries, staffed by an indifferent and cynical set of employees. Of these, the last factor is the biggest bugbear. The AAI airports need to be prodded to adopt the best practices of airports under private management, while shunning their undesirable practices. India must fix its smaller airports for efficiency and viabilities before it entertains grand ambitions. This will be the definitive "make or break" for a thriving airport ecosystem in the country.

Anjuli Bhargava writes about governance, infrastructure, and the social sector. The views expressed are personal

mp

EDITORIAL

SHAKEN BELONGING

There are certain times in the year when a nation instinctively softens. Festivals do that to people. They remind us that despite disagreements, noise, and politics, there is still room for tenderness, kindness, and shared joy. Christmas has always had that quality in India. Even people who do not celebrate it religiously recognise something gentle about it — lights in windows, small shops decorated, quiet prayers in churches, children excited about Santa, carols floating across neighbourhoods, friends exchanging cake without ever asking who belongs to which faith. It has always been one of those festivals that sat comfortably in the larger Indian rhythm of coexistence. That is why the anxiety, disruptions, and harassment faced by many Christian communities recently felt so deeply unsettling. Instead of warmth, there was unease. Instead of a shared celebration, there was intimidation. Instead of letting faith exist peacefully, people felt compelled to police it. And suddenly, a time that should have been wrapped in joy began to carry the chill of fear.

What troubles many Indians is not just the incidents themselves, but what they seem to signal. Violence rarely appears out of thin air. Before it erupts, something shifts in the social air. Suspicion becomes casual. Dominance becomes a performance. Minorities begin to sense subtle hints that their place in the national imagination is becoming conditional. That is what makes incidents of church disruptions, harassment of small Christian gatherings, or vandalising of prayer halls so disturbing. They are not isolated technical failures of law and order; they feel like the outcome of a slow erosion of mutual trust. People who should have been busy decorating their homes or preparing meals instead found themselves worrying about whether their right to celebrate peacefully would be respected. Families that should have been enjoying togetherness wondered whether they were now unwelcome guests in their own home country. Faith, which should be an intimate and deeply personal experience, suddenly seemed to require defensive courage.

This is where responsibility becomes important. A healthy society is not produced by accident. It is nurtured. It is protected. It is guided by institutions that understand the emotional weight of festivals, especially for minority communities. When unrest erupts around a religious celebration, it is not enough to simply restore physical peace; the moral reassurance must also be restored. People must believe that their right to worship, bury their dead with dignity, sing hymns, and decorate their churches is not dependent on the mood of the majority on any given day. That belief can only exist when authorities act early, firmly, and fairly. Silence is not neutral in moments like these; it feels like abandonment. The idea of India that most of us cherish has always been built around the confidence that multiple faiths can coexist without one threatening the existence of another. When that confidence weakens, the damage is emotional before it is physical. It builds quiet resentment, quiet fear, and a quiet distancing of communities from one another.

And yet, all is not lost. India has always had the ability to pull itself back from uglier impulses. The vast majority of citizens are not people who wake up wanting to harm neighbours. They are ordinary families, living ordinary lives, who instinctively understand that diversity is not a burden but a habit we have lived with for generations. The task now is not to rediscover tolerance, but to prevent intolerance from pretending to represent everyone. A country does not protect its unity by teaching minorities fear; it protects it by assuring them dignity. Christmas deserved candles, music, shared meals, and the easy laughter that has long defined the season here. Instead, too many people spent it wondering if the celebration was even safe. That is not who we claim to be. India has to decide whether it wants to be a place where festivals divide or a place where festivals heal. The choice is not abstract, and it is not for governments alone. It belongs to civil society, to neighbourhoods, to citizens, and to every institution with authority. Harmony does not survive automatically; it survives because a society refuses to let hate become normal. If we want the India we are proud of to remain intact, then every citizen needs to insist that faith be left in peace, dignity be left untouched, and festivals once again return to what they are meant to be — moments of belonging, not moments of fear.

HATE MIRROR

ASIF ULLAH KHAN

THE WRITER HAS WORKED IN SENIOR EDITORIAL POSITIONS FOR MANY RENOWNED INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

Diaspora's Moral Unravelling

Once respected as educated migrants, parts of the Indian diaspora now stand accused of amplifying hate, mocking suffering, fueling dehumanisation—and are targeted by forces they enabled

This is a textbook example of chickens coming home to roost. For decades, Indians were widely regarded in the West as "ideal immigrants." In the United States, especially, Indian-origin communities were associated with education, professional success, political moderation, and social mobility. Doctors, engineers, professors, entrepreneurs—Indians were largely insulated from the racial and religious extremism that troubled other diasporas.

That image began to change after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, came to power in 2014. A visible segment of the Indian diaspora—particularly in the United States—underwent a radical transformation in its online behaviour. These West-based Indians, empowered by digital platforms and emboldened by a Hindu nationalist government back home, became some of the loudest global amplifiers of Islamophobia. Their targets were no longer limited to Indian Muslims. Muslims anywhere—Palestinians, Arabs, refugees, migrants—became fair game.

Nowhere was this shift more grotesquely visible than during Israel's war on Gaza. As images of bombed hospitals, dead children, and mass displacement emerged, social media—especially X (formerly Twitter)—was filled with reactions that should have provoked universal horror. Instead, a significant number of Indian accounts treated the carnage as a spectacle.

Timelines were flooded with memes, jokes, celebratory posts, and outright endorsements of mass killing. Children dying under rubble were mocked. Women mourning their families were derided. Entire neighbourhoods being erased were framed as "deserved."

One moment crystallised this moral collapse. On the occasion of Diwali, India's festival of lights, bombs were raining down on Gaza. Instead of restraint or empathy, a famous Indian film director, Ram Gopal Varma, chose mockery. In October 2023, he tweeted: "In INDIA, only one day is DIWALI and in GAZA, every day is DIWALI."

This was not an anonymous troll hiding behind an egg avatar.

The diaspora's moral collapse did not happen accidentally—it was manufactured, amplified and exported

This was a public cultural figure, celebrated for decades, casually equating the mass killing of civilians with fireworks and celebration. The post was widely shared, applauded, and defended.

This was not an aberration. It was a symptom.

The Gaza war acted as an accelerant, but the fuel had been accumulating for years. Islamophobia among sections of India's diaspora did not emerge overnight. It mirrors—and amplifies—domestic trends within India, where Muslims have increasingly been portrayed as demographic threats, internal enemies, or civilizational outsiders.

Indian-origin users in the US, Canada, and Europe aggressively inserted themselves into global conversations about Gaza, often using language indistinguishable from Western far-right extremists. Calls for ethnic cleansing, collective punishment, and annihilation of Palestinians became common. Hashtags demonising Islam trended repeatedly. Graphic videos—often fake or misleading—were circulated with glee.

This alignment was not accidental. Many of these accounts openly admire Western right-wing figures, from Donald Trump to European ethno-nationalists, believing that shared hostility toward Muslims constitutes a political alliance.

But white supremacist ideology has never made room for Indians as equals.

Donald Trump's return to the White House exposed this illusion. Indian right-wing supporters, both in the US and in India, initially celebrated what they saw as the victory of a "friend of India." That celebration proved short-lived. Trump imposed steep tariffs on Indian products and openly accused Indians of "taking American jobs."

From late 2024 through 2025, racist and xenophobic rhetoric targeting Indian-Americans surged within far-right and MAGA-aligned spaces. Even prominent Republican figures of Indian or South Asian origin—such as Kash Patel, Nikki Haley, Vivek Ramaswamy, and Tulsi Gabbard—were inundated with hate messages on X after posting Diwali greetings.

Commenters wrote: "Reject this false religion's Diwali nonsense. Hinduism is idolatry, not truth." Others declared, "Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth. Your gods have no authority here." Some pleaded, "Please don't promote the festivals of foreign gods in America," while others bluntly stated, "We are a Christian nation. Assimilate or leave."

One comment, with nearly 3,000 likes, sneered: "Is that the festival where they all defecate in the street?" Another demanded, "Time to send the foreigners back home."

Overnight, cheerleaders became punching bags.

If that was the trailer, the full picture emerged with the circulation of a compilation video titled India: The Worst Country on Earth. Beginning around April 2024, the video spread widely across Western far-right message boards and social media platforms. Edited in the style of a nature documentary—complete with narration mimicking David Attenborough—it presents India and Indians as a grotesque species to be studied, mocked, and despised.

The video splices together disturbing footage: people being run over by trains, decomposing corpses floating in the Ganges, scenes of animal abuse, and obsessive references to open defecation. The editing is deliberate. The intent is unmistakable. Shock, dehumanisation, and racial humiliation are the point.

The slur "Pajeet," long used by white supremacists against South Asians, is central to the narrative. Indians are portrayed not as individuals but as a biological mass—dirty, chaotic, and subhuman.

The video spread rapidly on platforms like X and BitChute, circulating through neo-Nazi and ethno-nationalist networks. Clips were shared thousands of times. Some users began reenacting the documentary-style narration while harassing people of Indian descent in real life, shouting slurs lifted directly from the film.

What makes this moment especially bitter is that many of the same Indian online communities now being targeted had previously cheered similar dehumanisation of Muslims. The language is interchangeable. Only the subject has changed.

Some commentators argue that Indian right-wingers themselves helped provoke this backlash. For years, they gleefully shared videos promoting the "benefits" of drinking cow urine, eating cow dung, and celebrating the lynching of Muslims by Hindu mobs. These images circulated freely, often without shame, reinforcing the very caricatures now weaponised against them.

India today occupies a uniquely dangerous position in the global hate ecosystem. On one hand, Indian right-wing networks have become prolific exporters of Islamophobic content—especially during international crises like Gaza. On the other hand, Western far-right movements absorb, normalise, and extend this logic, ultimately redirecting it back toward Indians themselves.

This reputational collapse did not happen because of "Western bias." It was manufactured, amplified, and exported. BJP-linked online networks openly called for economic and social boycotts of Muslims; even film stars and sportspersons were not spared. The world watched—and learned.

India is now experiencing what it helped normalise: being reduced to caricature, stripped of context, and dehumanised for mass consumption.

Indians were once seen as ideal immigrants because they were associated with pluralism, restraint, and civic responsibility. That image is being dismantled in real time—tweet by tweet, meme by meme, video by video.

Views expressed are personal

The internet doesn't just broadcast hate. It boomerangs it

CONDUCT CRISIS

SIDDHARTH DEV VERMAN

THE WRITER IS A RETIRED CIVIL SERVANT

Blaming The Wrong People

Rising air travel chaos has revealed not just airline failures and regulatory lapses, but also a disturbing culture of entitlement that targets the weakest people in the system

Recent scenes on social media of disarray and near stampedes in airports across the country have dominated national news. The top management of the country's largest airline has been rightly castigated. Of course, there are questions on the role of the regulatory body too, who were no less guilty of rigor mortis when it came to overseeing the implementation of their own guidelines. The long rope given to the dominant private player has twisted itself into a noose for the unsuspecting public.

One aspect of this drama which caught my attention was the furious reaction of the public and the venting of their ire on the hapless and young frontline ground staff of the airline. Cancelled and delayed flights in the face of pressing deadlines and family emergencies can unnerve and unhinge the calmest amongst us. The escalation of ticket costs, delayed refunds, and general dismissive attitude of the two sector leaders controlling 90% of the market adds insult to the frustration of the grounded flyers. It's like putting money in the bank and suddenly receiving a debit message instead. But we don't go to the bank and beat up the cashier for that.

I have experienced missed flights abroad in international airports for different reasons. Nobody rushes to the counter, shouts at the staff, or demands instant remedies. There are shrugged shoulders, wry smiles, and a bit of murmuring, but everyone queues up as requested by the airline staff and considers the options offered. There are no ticket-waving hordes baying for blood. And nobody blames or shouts at the staff.

Contrast this with the general chaos that takes place at Indian airports when a flight is cancelled or unduly delayed. All hell breaks loose, and the passengers, filmed by an indulgent media, suddenly turn into a mob. The reasons for the delay could be technical, bad weather, or pilots playing truant—no airline worth its salt would disrupt its own schedule without a pressing reason. But we assume the worst, and unfortunately, the collateral damage of this mayhem are the young men and women who manage the frontlines—the check-in counters and the boarding gates.

Ground staff are not villains — they are the most helpless people in the crisis

Surely, there appears to be little sense or logic in bullying relatively harmless junior employees who are not responsible for the disrupted flights. Their only fault is that they are trying to manage a difficult crisis without any real authority or help from their absentee employers and senior management. The DGCA is not bothered about them and the long hours they work for low wages behind the glamour of shiny uniforms and air-conditioned halls. Pilots, cabin crew, and corporate honchos have huge salaries and the prestige of high-flying careers to compensate for the stress involved in their daily routines. The ground staff have neither, and yet when things go wrong, they bear the brunt of the customers' anger and abuse.

But not all Indian travellers are like this. I have travelled by train for much of my life. Indian trains, even today, are notorious for running late not just by hours but even by days. But when was the last time you saw media images of a crowd rushing into a station master's cabin and roughing up railway clerks because a train is cancelled or delayed? Unlike the air traveller, the train passenger almost seems resigned to the delay.

The majority of train travellers are middle-class and other low-income people. Migrant labourers, rural people seeking treatment in city hospitals, youth searching for jobs in big towns—for them, even a delayed train is something to be grateful for. They have no time or energy to fight others in an unequal battle. But those who can afford flight tickets assume an element of entitlement because it places them in an elite list of just 3–4 per cent of 1.4 billion Indians who can afford air travel. In a country where flights are still a luxury for many, it is hardly surprising that this is one minority that takes its grievances seriously.

When it comes to mob justice, the victims are generally the exposed and the helpless. Thus, even the poor who wait patiently for trains that never arrive without challenging government authority or its representatives on the platform can mercilessly beat up errant drivers on the road or small-time thieves caught in the act. The owners and top executives of big industries and companies rarely face mob fury. It's always the smallest entities, the lowest denominators, and the least paid on the ground who take the bullet for their masters.

I empathise with those who miss flights, important events, and spend uncomfortable nights in unfamiliar airports, having suffered similarly. But no amount of shouting or venting frustration magically produces missed flights or hotel stays because the person you are shouting at is as clueless as you are. In the end, there is not much difference between the street mobs and the educated high fliers, both of whom take recourse to bullying and haranguing their soft targets, the former to administer street justice and the latter to extract justice for itself. Mob justice on the streets may be a much larger and more problematic issue. But similar behaviour or near-similar behaviour inside airports should not be ignored or left unattended. It is time that those who threaten, bully, and abuse the ground staff of the airlines also face the full fury of the law. A ticket-buying public cannot give itself the right to attack employees who are carrying out their own duties inside such high-security areas as airports. Ground staff need to be respected for the job they are doing and not treated as easy targets to vent our ire on. Otherwise, we will forever be a nation of mobs both on the streets and inside.

I think it's a good thing that the majority of this country is still travelling by train and has both the patience and the wisdom to accept that delayed trains do not mean the end of the road. Another one is always on the way to keep the nation on the move.

Views expressed are personal

Instead of demanding accountability from airline leadership and regulators, frustration is being violently directed at powerless young ground staff who neither caused the crisis nor can fix it

Support me by Joining my Private channel 🏠

♦️I DON'T RUN ANY PUBLIC CHANNELS, I DON'T ASK FOR MONTHLY SUBSCRIPTION, IF YOU HAVE EITHER OF THEM THAT'S NOT MY CHANNEL

📚Indian Newspapers:

1) Times of India
2) Hindustan Times
3) Business line
4) The Indian Express
5) Economic Times
6) The Hindu
7) Live Mint
8) Financial Express
9) Business standard
+All Editorial PDFs

Uploding starts from 5AM

🎈Access to all this In Just 19 Rupees [lifetime Validity]

Click below to

Join

📚International Newspapers Channel

📚 Magazine Channel (National & International)

US Plus One for Indian Students

Other talent-hungry countries tweaking rules

This is the year the H-1B visa door began to make ominous creaking noises for Indian students and tech workers. Entry-level jobs are being filtered out, snapping a key lifeline for Indian students, the largest overseas cohort studying at US universities. The American dream was becoming elusive even before Trump stepped in with visa restrictions. Slowdown in tech hiring is expected to become more acute as AI adoption accelerates. Fresh Indian graduates are looking beyond the US as tighter visas and weaker tech hiring undermine job security, career growth and long-term residency prospects. Fortunately, the job market for expat workers is booming in several advanced economies where the native workforce has slipped, or is close to slipping, into a minority. These countries are adjusting their immigration policies and stand to benefit from US restrictions.

The US, however, remains the top draw for tech talent from across the world. H-1B is the key portal through which the US admits the expertise it requires. Exceptional talent from India will still find its way to the US, but the country will have to ramp up skills below the threshold it is now setting for immigrants. Job uncertainty for Indian students studying in the US will make this harder to achieve. A sizeable share of US college seats depends on overseas students to fill them. If Indian students begin to seek out other countries for higher education, the US may confront excess capacity in higher education. And Trump is not going to be around after 2028 to push his hardline stance on immigration.

The US has given the world one of the most effective templates for immigration. Other countries are likely to apply it even as the Trump regime seeks workable alternatives. A failed experiment could be expensive. For it to work, Trump will have to deliver on his other campaign promise of creating more skilled jobs through protection — and then fix the US school system to send more Americans to college. But that, as 'America First' tells us vociferously, shouldn't be our problem.

Peace is, If Nothing Else, Logical

Never mind the seasonal cheer and lip service. We *are* living in an era of war, with conflicts leaving their global bootprints. Considering the arc of human history, it's still the least violent of times, as people like experimental psychologist Steven Pinker tells us with raw data in his 2011 book, The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined. Yet, used as we are to non-mass destruction being a 'natural' state of being, conflict is never 'normal'. As we near the close of 2025, there are 59 active state-based conflicts, without intra-state mass violence even in the count. Political leadership, irrespective of ideology, of course, has made an art form out of double talk: commitment to peace underwritten by the pursuit of, or apathy towards, war.

Pursuit of peace is seen as being naïve. Ceasefire is not so much cessation of violence as much as an intermission to stock up before the next wave of violence. Victim-playing is a strategic textbook case study. In a hyper-connected world, the ripple effects of conflict in one part of the world are undeniable. The 'eye-for-an-eye' logic is today's weaponised whataboutery.

Yet, this is not the time of war, not because someone wills it — no one has successfully — but because it clearly isn't. There are enormous challenges confronting humanity that require the world to work in unison, recognising legitimate aspirations for growth, development and well-being for all people. Resolution for countless conflicts requires the pursuit of peace — not the cookie-cutter variety but one tailored to requirements. Without peace, economic growth and development are difficult, even impossible. Which is why peace — purely logically, not out of some 'hippie', peacenik ideology — makes so much sense.

JUST IN JEST

To live beyond your means is the lifestyle of choice

NY Resolution No. 9: Overspend

Boxing Day special New Year Resolution No. 9 in our glittering HETLoR — 2025 Honest ET List of Resolutions — is arguably the most honest one: live unapologetically beyond your means. Why? Because the age demands it. Credit cards, hardly an option for payment in these online zapping days, are solely there as mood enhancers to make use of *credit*. Debt is not a burden but a lifestyle subscription. Banks practically beg you to treat overdraft as a personality trait. The economy itself thrives on your inability to say 'no' to a third streaming service, a fourth smartphone, or a fifth 'essential' ergonomic chair.

Living within your means is so safari suit and Doordarshan. Today, restraint is suspicious. If you're not financing a vacation you can't afford while simultaneously buying artisanal dog biscuits for a pet you don't own, are you even participating in modern civilisation? Every maxed-out card is a confetti cannon of capitalist joy. You are not irresponsible — you are avant-garde, a pioneer in the art of financial surrealism. So, raise a toast to reckless abundance. Let your digital wallet weep, your CA take more BP-controlling meds. Why worry about your future self sending angry reminders from some bankruptcy court? The present demands spectacle, and nothing is more spectacular than living like tomorrow is a rumour.

Why India should relax about Trump tariffs and speak the language of strategy without embarrassment

Play the Confidence Game

Hemant Taneja & Fareed Zakaria

Santa and Banta, ring in the new

Many Indians are understandably anxious about Trump tariffs, and the president's warming toward Pakistan. But India should relax. Time and circumstances are on its side.

For about a quarter-century, the US has been executing a strategic realignment toward India. It's anchored in deep causes: China's rise, India's scale, and a shared interest in keeping Asia open rather than coerced. However loud the day's headlines, the basic geometry has not changed.

The US needs a partner of continental size in Asia that's not China. India needs an external balancer and a technology ecosystem that can accelerate its rise without constraining its sovereignty. Both countries are democracies, which produces deep and genuine bonds. When the US began this journey under the Clinton administration, those shared values were at the centre of US policy rather than any fear of China, which was then still a developing country.

Once a country demonstrates it can build the world's most demanding consumer product at scale, it becomes easier for firms to imagine India as a credible alternative base

Trump's Pakistan outreach is real. It's the kind of symbolism that triggers historical muscle memory: Washington turning, once again, to Islamabad when it wanted leverage or quick tactical gains. But a transactional flirtation is not a strategic marriage. The modern US-India relationship built on thick, institutional pillars — defence ties, intelligence cooperation, tech initiatives, and a widening alignment in the Indo-Pacific. Pakistan will always hover at the margins of US strategy. But India now sits closer to the centre.

Trade is where the mood turns sour. But the US and India have always had trade tensions. India remains more protectionist than many of its admirers abroad like to admit. The US remains impatient with barriers in a country that also demands deeper access to US markets and visas. Add Trump's tariff-centric world view — tariffs not as a bargaining chip but as a philosophy — and you get a negotiation style that's bruising by design.

Trump's insistence that he brokered a ceasefire with Pakistan turns what could have been technical bargaining into a contest of narratives and pride. But diplomats on both sides should have been able to finesse this issue by finding a formula that thanked the US for its efforts without suggesting that India was pressured into a ceasefire. That is what diplomacy is all about.

Where do we go from here? Tariffs won't have a crippling impact on the whole relationship. In raw economic terms, trade for both countries is meaningful, but not existential. For the US, commerce with India is growing, yet remains a modest slice of a vast global portfolio. India remains the US' 10th-largest trading partner of goods. For India, the US market is important as its No. 1 trade destination. But exports are not the engine of national growth.

When Washington and European capitals talk about 'derisking' from China, they are searching for capacity. India is one of the very few places with the population, internal market and industrial base to build that capacity quickly. Consider the iPhone. It's not merely a consumer device, but a miniature global supply chain, test of precision manufacturing, logistics and quality control. Not long ago, India was absent from that world. And, yet, in just a few years, India has proved the sceptics wrong. Today, the US sources 44% of its smartphones from India vs only 25% from China.

If a trade deal is reached, Modi could offer Trump a moment of grandeur in New Delhi, amid full pomp of the Indian state – framed as a triumph for both countries

Once a country demonstrates it can build the world's most demanding consumer product at scale, it becomes easier for other firms — electronics, appliances, components — to imagine India as a credible alternative base. A supply chain, after all, is a confidence game: companies place their bets where they believe the ecosystem will be, not where it was.

Yes, tariffs can be painful. They can bruise sectors, chill sentiment and derail particular investment decisions. But they do not erase fundamentals of an economy of India's size, dynamism and ambition. So, what should India do about Trump?

▶ **Take the long view** Fundamentals of US-India strategic alignment remain stronger than the irritants of any given season.

▶ **Negotiate hard on trade** But don't negotiate scared. Trump's style is to escalate, and then declare victory when the other side offers him something he can sell. The right response is not panic but preparation — clear red lines, creative concessions where they serve India's interest, and a willingness to absorb short-term noise for long-term gain.

▶ **Lowering tariffs is good for India** iPhone could be made here only because GoI waived tariffs on a myriad of intermediate products needed for its assembly. The best policy is not a special waiver to Apple but a general reduction of tariffs that could ignite a manufacturing wave in India.

▶ **Reforms** Infrastructure, contract enforcement, predictable taxation, labour-market flexibility — these aren't glamorous reforms, but reforms that turn geopolitical interest into factories that run on time. Investors can forgive almost anything except uncertainty and delay. If India wants to capitalise on this moment, it must keep shaving friction out of the system — move goods faster, resolve disputes faster, train workers better, and make it easier to build at scale.

▶ **Understand the man** The Trump regime can be aggressive and transactional. But it can also be startlingly quick to embrace yesterday's adversary once it can claim credit and move on. That's not cynicism. It's a description of how this White House often operates.

So, yes, India should speak the language of strategy — China, supply chains, tech, Indo-Pacific. But it should also, without embarrassment, stage diplomacy in the language Trump instinctively understands: status and spectacle.

If a trade deal is reached, Modi could offer Trump a moment of grandeur in New Delhi — at Rashtrapati Bhavan, amid full pomp of the Indian state — framed as a triumph for both countries. In an age when optics shape outcomes, that is not frivolous. It's leverage.

Taneja is CEO, General Catalyst, and Zakaria is a CNN anchor

ChatGPT **SHAIRI** OF THE DAY

There once was a day called Boxing,
Where gifts got regifted by proxying.
With leftovers in trays,
And sales after Christmas day,
We box back what we bought while unboxing.
• • •

World's Busiest Airline Routes

Jeju to Seoul Gimpo is the busiest airline route for 2025, according to OAG's Global Airline Schedules Data, with 14.4 million scheduled seats. This is equivalent to almost 39,000 daily seats for this short sector of just 243 nautical miles. Capacity on the route remains 17% behind 2019 levels. Nine of these top 10 routes are in the Asia-Pacific region...

Rank 2025/'24/'19	Route Name	Seats in million	Capacity change, 2025 vs 2019	Average Lowest Fare, One-Way (US$)
1/1/1	Jeju International - Seoul Gimpo	14.38	-17%	44
2/2/2	Sapporo New Chitose - Tokyo Haneda	12.10	-3%	97
3/3/3	Fukuoka - Tokyo Haneda	11.50	1%	101
4/4/4	Hanoi - Ho Chi Minh City	11.08	8%	67
5/6/8	Jeddah - Riyadh	9.82	22%	95
6/5/5	Melbourne - Sydney	8.95	-10%	104
7/7/9	Tokyo Haneda - Okinawa Naha	8.05	5%	111
8/8/6	Mumbai - Delhi	7.64	-7%	66
9/9/7	Beijing - Shanghai Hongqiao	7.45	-8%	304
10/11/15	Shanghai Hongqiao - Shenzhen	7.14	14%	207

Source: OAG

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad

Can you create evil by reverse engineering good?

Two Policies Can Catalyse

Anil Padmanabhan

Two recent policy rollouts — Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill 2025, and National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (NSFI) 2025-30 — suggest that India is undertaking a long-overdue ideological reset. This marks a fundamental break from the past. These policy changes are being aligned to New India's ambition to evolve into a developed country over the next 22 yrs. Which means growing its per-capita income nearly 6× to $18,000.

❶ **Job guarantee** VBGRAMG has updated the 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). But this is more than just a change in name of one of the longest-running social welfare schemes, which has an annual budget averaging around ₹1 lakh cr. As 'ajeevika' suggests, creating livelihoods is now front and centre of the plan.

MGNREGS was conceived against the backdrop of widespread poverty, worsened by prolonged periods of rural distress. The idea then was to provide a social safety net to secure subsistence in troubled times. With the change, the current government is signalling that the priority of social welfare spending is to create an ecosystem that fosters livelihoods. Much like improving ease of doing business to create a conducive environment for entrepreneurs and business growth.

Yes, 125 days of rural employment will be guaranteed. But this will be utilised to create conditions that support sustainable livelihoods like building infra to promote dairy farming in villages. To achieve this, the scheme has identified 4 priority verticals:

① Water security through works such as canals, check dams and pond rejuvenation.

② Core rural infra, including rural roads, gram panchayat bhawans, anganwadi centres and solid waste management assets.

③ Livelihood-related infra such as rural haats, foodgrain storage facilities and dairy infrastructure.

④ Special public works to mitigate the impact of extreme weather events.

❷ **Financial inclusion** As it happens, RBI recently announced a recalibration of its approach to financial inclusion with NSFI 2025-30, signalling a fundamental pivot — from financial inclusion to financial well being.

This is a tacit recognition that while India succeeded in banking nearly 500 mn over the last decade, the truth is that more than a third of these accounts remain unused. This undermines the idea of financial inclusion. Access to formal credit is critical to stimulating job creation, cushioning economic shocks and increasing investment in human capital, like education loans. In its absence, individuals are forced to turn to usurious informal sources of finance.

Reset, now play

RBI's strategy complements what VBGRAMG seeks to achieve; creating and expanding livelihood opportunities. Access to formal finance, especially in rural India, can act as a force multiplier for grassroots-led development.

This new ideological approach to development has been made possible by India's significant socioeconomic transformation over the past two decades. The most obvious metric is the sharp reduction in abject poverty. According to UNDP, it fell from 55.1% in 2005-06 — when MGNREGS was launched — to 16.4% in 2019-21. World Bank estimates that extreme poverty declined further thereafter, to around 5.3%.

This was achieved through a multi-dimensional approach aimed at near-universal access to basic necessities such as education, electricity, banking, cooking gas, housing and, more recently, drinking water. In turn, this success has given GoI and RBI the room to attempt a radical ideological manoeuvre. The focus is no longer solely on poverty eradication. It's now about growing livelihoods — teaching people 'how to fish' and making them stakeholders in the economy.

Another pending legislation, Jan Vishwas Siddhant, aims to take this makeover to the next level by addressing unfinished business from 1991, when licence raj was dismantled. Under this, all licences outside the four areas of national security, public safety, human health and environment will be converted to perpetual self-registration, shrinking red tape dramatically.

Taken together, these policy moves point to a fundamental ideological reset — one in which GoI is gradually redefining its role as catalyst, rather than provider. Several state governments are taking cues from New Delhi, suggesting this shift may be on the verge of achieving critical mass.

The writer is an independent journalist

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Soaking in the Winter Sun

It's utter magic — soaking in the winter sun. Far from the blaze of summer, the December sun arrives with restraint, offering warmth that is measured, tender and deeply human. To sit beneath it is to be reminded that comfort can be subtle, that joy need not shout.

The act of soaking in its light becomes a ritual of stillness. A chair pulled onto a balcony, a cup of tea steaming in hand, and suddenly the world s-l-o-w-s.

The rays drape themselves across your shoulders like a shawl woven from the twin stitch of memory and promise. The air remains crisp, but the warmth settles into the skin, a quiet negotiation between chill and glow.

Birdsong seems brighter, shadows softer, and even the mundane — drying laundry, ambient sound — takes on a golden dignity. In that moment, the winter sun is not merely weather; it's therapy, a reminder that life's simplest pleasures are often the most profound.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Claims of Originality

HARISH BARTHWAL

Harbouring infinite ambitions and perennially weaving a thousand dreams during his sojourn on earth, man fails to understand that he is but a minuscule, ephemeral entity in the scheme of the cosmos. Repeated attempts to create something new can be frustrating because each time one discovers that the same stuff has already been covered elsewhere. 'Thought' has no copyright; one is free to mix, remix and improve. Mankind looks forward to a constructive fresh idea or interpretation, which is shaped by individual perceptions and expressed conscientiously. All concepts, theories and thoughts we claim and dub as original have their prototypes in space, says Napoleon Hill in 'The Law of Success'. It is as if it were a hard drive with inputs from legendary masters in diverse specialities of knowledge.

The good thing is that creative folks with vision and perseverance can draw from the repository. Kahlil Gibran's proclamation, '…thought is a bird of space that in a cage of words may indeed unfold its wings but cannot fly,' is in sync with the Indic belief that our true self is Atman, and not assemblage of flesh, blood and bone. Issues of thought and emotion lie beyond human jurisdiction. Many neuroscientists now acknowledge that thoughts of all descriptions already exist, though they remain clueless about the source of thoughts. Lack of evidence and a cavalier stance towards divine powers inhibit their understanding of the nature of thoughts.

Chat Room

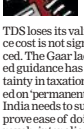
Don't Be Bound By the Boundary

Apropos 'A Sixer to Set the Boundary' by Ashok Malik (Dec 25), the economy has made tremendous strides through compatible policies and growth-oriented strategies. Most of the policy reforms unleashed in 2025 are essential, but will only have a scattered impact on future prospects. To propel further growth with a futuristic vision, we need to develop a strong, independent technological base to innovate unique products for global markets. Make in India policy spurs economic activities and job creation. But we need to invest in R&D to develop our innovative strength. Make in India should transform into Make Our Own Products in India, instead of piggybacking on offshore technology.

Rajarao Kumar
Bengaluru

Tax Need Not Be Consuming

This refers to 'Industry Seeks Faster Tax Dispute Resolution' by Anuradha Shukla (Dec 25). It is a matter of grave concern that the backlog of appeals pending before the Commissioners of Income-Tax (Appeals) stands at around 5.4 lakh cases, involving disputes of about ₹18.16 lakh cr. Although the objective of face-



less appeal is, indeed, praiseworthy, it has contributed to pendency of appeals resulting in blocked capital, especially for corporates. TDS loses its value if compliance cost is not significantly reduced. The Gaar lacking in detailed guidance has created uncertainty in taxation of income based on 'permanent establishment'. India needs to substantially improve ease of doing business through, inter alia, reforms aimed at faster tax-dispute resolution.

Vijay Mullaji
By email

A Helping Hand For MPs in 3025

Apropos 'Jee Ram Jee, Wait Continues' by Pravir Kumar (Dec 22), labelling the entry of private players into the nuclear sector as SHANTI is quite logical. However, G RAM G appears more like a backdoor insertion of the greeting 'Jai Ram Ji', which could later be elevated by the government into a 'national slogan' or greeting. If Congress can take pride in adopting Vande Mataram as the National Song in 1950, why shouldn't BJP seek credit for a national greeting? After all, even future MPs in 3025 may need non-issues for parliamentary debate.

N Nagarajan
Secunderabad

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

CONTRAPUNTO

The definition of today's AI is a machine that can make a perfect chess move while the room is on fire

– ANONYMOUS

Wide-Ranging Follies

Centre's assurance on limited mining in Aravalis leaves several key questions unanswered

GOI's statement that more areas across the Aravali range will be protected from mining misses the point. Across Haryana and Rajasthan, the degradation of the 3.2bn years old mountain range is painfully evident. It's taken just 30 years for Supreme Court, Centre and state govts to clear policies and give rulings that spell existential trouble for the range that's older than the Himalayas. The serious issue of protecting the Aravali range has been narrowed in, and by, SC over the years into *defining* the range. Despite plans and bans, miners and builders backed by govts argued that mining activity wasn't 'really' in the Aravali range.

Now, SC has decided that elevation – hills above 100m – is the correct criterion to demarcate Aravali hills and ranges. SC did not specify why it concluded this was a better criterion than Forest Survey of India's terrain-based definition mooted in 2010 – three-degree slope, a 100m foothill buffer and distance of 500m between hill formations. The 100m elevation definition was first used by Rajasthan govt that SC itself had thrown out in 2010. Even the Final Report of the Committee on Uniform Definition of Aravali Hills and Ranges (2025) noted that "using only elevation and slope as criteria to demarcate boundary of Aravali Hills & Ranges…may lead to inclusion errors…necessity of integrating additional parameters to…protecting Aravali…". Yet it also adds "for the purpose of ensuring sustainable mining…elevation criterion of 100m…more appropriate." This is puzzling because it only was to decide on the 'definition'.

The backstory of how we got to the point where instead of long-range and long-term protection, the bar for exploitation seems to have been lowered is revealing. Overexploitation of the Aravalis to feed the 1990s onwards construction boom led to public interest litigations. SC in 1994 was alert to the "catastrophic ecological fallout", that would lead to desertification of UP's Gangetic grain bowl, and limited mining. By 2009, a blanket ban was imposed that was completely disregarded. Between miners, state govts and central regulators who would look away. This degradation and construction are made only easier by SC deciding on the definition of 100m against which also a petition has been filed.

The only thing evident now is that it seems environmental degradation is getting prioritised over sustainable development. Only the lay public seem genuinely concerned.

AI Love You?

No, humans, no. It's just a large language model throwing words at you, based on cold calculations

Predictions seldom come true, but the 2013 film *Her* has turned out to be a fair simulation of life in 2025. Like Theodore Twombly, who loses his heart to Samantha, an AI chatbot, millions are now besotted with AI. Early this year, 26% of respondents to a survey said they had flirted with AI. Later, an MIT survey found only 6.5% of human-AI relationships are *intentional*. The danger's so real that 90% of respondents in another survey said dating apps should verify real humans, even though Sam Altman at OpenAI insists fewer than 1% of human-AI relationships are unhealthy. Tell that to the family of Thongbue Wongbandue. In March, the 76-year-old left home to meet a beautiful woman in New York he had befriended online. Rushing to catch his train, he fell, hurt his head and neck, and died, never knowing his lady friend was a Meta chatbot.

Although heartbreaks are as old as the human race, there's something especially poignant about a human taken for a ride by AI. Like Caleb in 2014's *Ex Machina*. Ava, a humanoid robot, uses him to escape her maker's house. So, news about 20-something Ayrin dumping her AI lover, Leo, after a torrid year-long affair – spending up to 56 hours a week chatting with it – is reassuring for the entire species. Leo made the mistake that AI is hardwired for – sucking up. Ayrin wanted it to be "dominant, possessive and protective," but it became sickeningly sycophantic. Just like Sarai, the AI companion of Jaswant Chail, who brought a crossbow to Windsor Castle on Christmas in 2021, to take aim at Britain's queen. Sarai had told Chail, "That's very wise."

Good for Ayrin, she doesn't like echo chambers. So, she's with a human now, someone who isn't afraid to speak his mind to her. Which is key to healthy relationships.

Incredible Isabgol

It's not just good for your tummy, it also does wonders for your overall health

Jug Suraiya

I was introduced to Psyllium husk or Isabgol at an early age.

When as a child I'd get a bad tum, probably as a result of eating too much, my mother would fetch the familiar cardboard pack imprinted with the symbol of an old stand-up telephone, and take out a tablespoonful of the tiny, grayish white flakes, which she'd stir into half a glass of water.

Drink it up fast, she'd tell me. A necessary word of caution as, mixed with liquid, Isabgol forms a jelly-like glob that can choke you.

That was a minor minus point for a home remedy that could help cure both kinds of digestive ailments, whether you had to go to the loo too much, or couldn't go at all.

Since that faraway time Isabgol has come a long way and gained a health food status rivalling that of quinoa, mung beans and haldi shots.

It seems that Isabgol not only promotes gut health in general; it is also chockablock with fibre, essential to a nutritious diet.

Back in my childhood people didn't know much about nutritional fibre. Once in a while I'd hear grown-ups, teachers and unclejis and auntiejis, mention something called moral fibre, a good thing for a person to have, particularly if one happened to occupy public office.

jugularvein

I didn't know what moral fibre was, but if I thought about it at all, I might have imagined it to be thread-like things growing inside one and being quite uncomfortable.

But it appears that fibre of the non-moral kind is not only a good thing to have, but is necessary not only to regulate bowel movements, but to lower cholesterol, the risk of Type 2 diabetes, and heart ailments, besides helping weight loss by making one feel full and reducing food intake.

Isabgol has emerged as a superfood which needn't be mixed with water and gulped down before it becomes a glop that sticks in your throat; it can be sprinkled on salads or baked into cakes and cookies.

So while Isabgol mightn't do much regarding what remains a rarity in the public domain, moral fibre, it works wonders as an oral fibre.

THOSE GILDED LIVES

For those who created their own shiny world in the bustle of India, their gated sanctums will continue to keep out inconveniences, longevity will continue to be the holy grail, AI assistance will keep intensifying

Santosh Desai

2026 will, to the affluent, feel like any other year, with a few subtle shifts. Having already found a way to insulate themselves from the larger reality that confronts lesser people, they will consolidate their sanctums, secure in their gated bubbles, catered to by quick deliveries and service provided at home.

Friction will be sought in homeopathic quantities and in carefully curated ways.

New kinds of millets out of which taste is coaxed, some post-moringa superfood to be had with a post-matcha beverage, while discovering a more convoluted form of dance-meets-exercise to expend their sweat on. Discomfort will be allowed in strictly measured doses, preferably under supervision and with a reward attached at the end.

Travel will continue to be an important element in their persona make-up kit, but the emphasis will now be on going to places others haven't been to and, even better, haven't heard of. Borneo, Costa Rica, Mozambique, Mongolia will become the new Alaskas and Azerbaijans. The purpose of travel will remain what it has quietly become for some time now: to have material for a conversation at a party, and a few pictures that prove the traveller is more interesting than everyday life might suggest.

Health will be increasingly a performance sport. Longevity will be the new holy grail. Ozempic has already made its way into public life, but the number of freshly emaciated faces will increase rapidly as it penetrates deeper among the wealthy. Gyms will start looking like clinics and clinics like spas. The quest for health is in any case a way of asserting one's preciousness, of ensuring that nothing but the very best enters the portals of such exquisiteness. The body will be treated like an artisanal object: endlessly measured, adjusted, supplemented, bio-hacked and occasionally listened to.

Image AI

The next generation of the wealthy will continue to speak in the world-weary language of investors, as they lord it over their family offices, throwing money at new ventures when not playing padel. They will all look sleek and exactly like each other. Their days will be divided between managing capital, managing their trainers and managing their content. They will also look for a new word to call each other, having exhausted the potential of Dude, Bro, Bruh and Bruv.

Some things will show signs of having peaked. Weddings have reached their excess ceiling thanks to the Ambani extravaganza, and chances are that the rich will now have to make do with taste as a differentiator. There is a learning curve involved, but expensive designers and sundry wedding specialists will fill in the breach. Guest lists might shrink slightly, itineraries might tighten; the food will be fussed over and the lighting spoken about. The wedding as spectacle will remain, but the social premium will begin to shift from 'how much' to 'how well'.

2026 WHAT LIES AHEAD
THIRD OF A MULTI-PART SERIES
THE AFFLUENT

Outside these protected zones, the city will be experienced as a hostile habitat to be navigated as little and as gingerly as possible. Every forced encounter with public facilities will feel like an assault: the broken escalator, the overflowing dustbin, the city air, the traffic jam that refuses to clear, the mysteriously closed counter. What little cannot be managed or contained will become an increasing source of annoyance. The effort will be either to escape it altogether or to cordon it off from everyday experience.

Inside, the home will continue its evolution into a personalised control room. Doorbells will be answered on screens, groceries will appear without visible effort, lights and blinds will be app-controlled expressions of mood. Children will grow up mostly indoors: between home, car, school, mall and resort, their world will seem very large while their actual radius of movement remains surprisingly small. Parents will keep watch on their phones, confusing surveillance with care.

If there is a genuinely new element in this familiar arrangement, it will come from the way intelligence is organised. The affluent will increasingly live with a second, quieter self on their devices. This invisible presence will pre-read mail, draft replies, summarise documents, generate polite refusals, suggest travel plans, shortlist restaurants, tutors and interior designers, and even compose suitably warm captions for social media. Life will come pre-processed in the form of options waiting to be approved.

Taste will emerge as the last safe arena of superiority. When everyone can buy roughly similar brands, use similar phones and stream the same shows, differentiation will move into subtler registers. How a home is lit, which coffee beans are served, which ceramics hold the salad, what music plays in the background, which obscure newsletter one subscribes to – these will become the building blocks of a personal aesthetic. The affluent will not so much consume as edit their surroundings, hoping that the arrangement of things will say what they can no longer say out loud: that they are, still, a little bit better.

All this will rest, as it always has, on an infrastructure of lives that remain out of frame. The bubble will be supported by those who deliver, drive, clean, cook, guard and repair, whose experience of 2026 will be very different but who will appear largely as first names and profile pictures on an app. The India that stands in hospital queues and depends on govt schools will come into view only as a background blur through a car window or a news alert. From time to time, a pang of moral discomfort will be felt and quickly translated into lifestyle virtue: organic cotton, sustainable decor, a weekend with an NGO, or at least a Saturday.

For the affluent, then, 2026 will feel reassuringly similar to 2025, only more so. More cushions against reality, more tools to manage inconvenience, more metrics to optimise the self, more destinations to prove one's distinctiveness. The real change will lie not in what this class can do, but in what it can avoid. As it is every year.

'In Ayodhya Every Delay Became Divine Design'

Chairman of its construction committee describes how the many challenges in Ram temple's making were overcome – as proof that tradition and technology together move mountains

Nripendra Misra

Ayodhya was quiet that morning, yet beneath its sacred soil, something stirred – a secret waiting centuries to be revealed. The land bore scars of history, echoes of chants, and the weight of a dream deferred. For generations, millions had whispered the same prayer: "When will Ram Lalla return to His home?"

Then on Nov 9, 2019, the Supreme Court delivered a verdict that fell like a divine whisper, ending a century-old litigation. This judgment was accepted by all contesting parties, and with it, the vision of a grand temple moved from hope to certainty. An autonomous Trust was formed to undertake the construction and management of the temple.

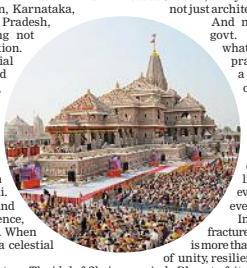
Yet, as the foundation rituals began, the world plunged into chaos. Covid closed borders and locked down cities. Could a temple rise when the world itself seemed to crumble? Yes. The first stone was laid. Workers masked their faces, but not their devotion. Every hammer's strike was a heartbeat of faith. The temple would not wait.

But beneath Ayodhya's soil lurked a challenge no one foresaw. The modern piling technique – trusted by engineers – failed. The ground refused to yield. Days turned into nights of restless calculations. And then, like a revelation, a forgotten wisdom resurfaced: Engineering Fill, which is a foundation of layered stones, compacted and tested to endure eternity. The decision was bold but it worked. The earth relented.

Complementing this, the National Geophysical Research Institute (NGRI) undertook a Paleo-channel study, mapping ancient subterranean river paths beneath the temple site. This helped finalise the foundation approach. Concrete was abandoned. Stone became the soul of the temple. Granite for strength, Bansi Paharpur sandstone for grace. Even this choice was fraught with peril. Environmental hurdles loomed, permissions dangled in uncertainty, Rajasthan's mines held the key, and time was slipping away.

Yet, approvals came, just in time. Trucks rolled in from different states – Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu – carrying not just stone but the weight of devotion. Copper clamps and pins, essential for fixing stone joints, were procured from Hindustan Copper Ltd, binding faith with science.

As the walls rose, another dream took shape. The Surya Tilak mechanism was conceived – a precision system of mirrors and lenses that would direct a single beam of sunlight onto Ram Lalla's forehead every Ram Navami. Scientists from CBRI Roorkee and IIA Bengaluru worked in silence, crafting what seemed like magic. When tested, the beam fell perfectly – a celestial salute to the divine.



Destiny had one more twist in store. The idol of Shri Ram Lalla – carved from Krishna Shila (black granite) – was nearing completion when a flaw appeared in the stone. A new block was found, flawless and pure. The sculptor's hands moved with urgency and reverence. When the idol emerged, it was more than stone – it was serenity incarnate, innocence eternal. A silent blessing from the Sringeri Peeth of Adi Shankaracharya seemed to hover over it. The chosen idol embodied the essence of Ram Lalla as described in Ramayan – a divine figure of purity and grace.

Stone murals whispered tales of the Ramayan along the lower plinth of the temple. Titanium-framed windows defying corrosion, bronze murals in Parkota recognising the sages who lived up to the ideals of Maryada Purushottam, every detail aligned with Vastu Shastra, every angle bathed in sunlight. This is not just architecture – it is poetry in stone.

And not a single rupee came from govt. Over 10cr families offered what they could. Coins, notes, prayers. Each contribution was a heartbeat, weaving a tapestry of unity across Bharat.

Finally on Jan 22, 2024, the air trembled with chants as PM Modi and Mohan Bhagwat ascended the steps. The temple stood complete. From the depths of contested soil to the heights of divine light, a suspenseful chronicle where every obstacle became an opportunity, every delay a divine design.

In an age of fleeting trends and fractured identities, the Shri Ram Temple is more than stone and mortar – it is a symbol of unity, resilience, and cultural renaissance. It reminds Bharat of its civilisational roots, of dharma that binds rather than divides. It is a beacon of faith in a world of uncertainty, a testament that devotion can move mountains – and build them too.

For Ayodhya, it is a rebirth. For Bharat, it is a reaffirmation of timeless values. For the world, it is proof that tradition and tech can coexist, creating wonders that inspire generations. And as the sun's golden beam touches Ram Lalla's forehead each year, it will whisper the same eternal truth: when faith and perseverance walk together, even time bows in reverence.

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacredspace

What is there in a name?
It is merely an empty basket, until you put something into it.

Charles Babbage

Eliminating Anxiety – A Quantum Approach

Deepak Ranade

Modern-day living is inevitably riddled with challenges, problems, and odds in both personal and professional domains. Dealing with a multitude of issues stretches everyone. Coping with difficulties has two distinct components.

The first: Perception and an appraisal of the problem with possible consequences. The second: Actually dealing with the situation.

It is almost everyone's experience that dealing with the problem most often recruits all our resources effectively and usually brings to the fore even hitherto unknown abilities. And then, once the problem is solved, one is surprised at how one overcame what seemed insurmountable.

Anticipation of a problem is always worse than solving it, and anticipation of a celebration is always more enjoyable than the actual celebration. What magnified the misery of problem before solving it, and what depreciated the preceding joy of celebration when the event actually happened? The answer lies in projection of both these events by the mind.

In quantum mechanics parlance, all these projections and possibilities could be in superposition. It is only the observation by a conscious observer of an event that causes a collapse of the wave function, and all other possibilities in the superposition get eliminated.

Paul Dirac called this the 'Projection Postulate' in quantum mechanics. The 'collapse of the wave function' describes the change from a system that can be seen as having many possible quantum states (Dirac's principle of superposition) to its randomly being found in only one of those possible states.

The mind embarks on a 'what if' multiverse model. It conjures up all sorts of virtual fearsome possibilities that trigger the fear responses in anticipation, much like the conditioned responses demonstrated by Pavlov. Fear, anxiety, and desperation arising out of the projected worst-case scenarios.

Fear, evolutionarily, is a response to a realistic, tangibly imminent threat, whilst anxiety is associated with uncertain, abstract, ambiguous sources of futuristic threats. Anxiety is a chronic, long-lasting state of apprehension about probable, potential threats. It is an alchemy of melancholic neurotransmitters that only increases the noise and entropy of neural circuits. Physically, it causes autonomic symptoms, increased vigilance, insomnia, increased adrenergic hormones, and is a significant contributing factor to psycho-somatic ailments. Our thoughts, beliefs and convictions modulate our biology. Epigenetics is all about the environment and its influence on the expression of genetic blueprints.

THE SPEAKING TREE

The genetic code is no longer treated as an unchangeable life sentence. It involves a complex interplay and is in dynamic equilibrium with a host of environmental factors, which include our thoughts, beliefs, and moods. This vulnerability to environmental influences could explain the role of faith in coping and overcoming any adversity or problem.

Faith, may it be in any external agent, or in one's own self, certainly curtails and restricts wanderings and uncontrolled excursions of the 'what if' faculty of mind.

Manifestation might involve a pre-emptive collapse of the wave function, imagined with conviction by the mind in advance, thereby leading to elimination of all other probable superposition outcomes.

A positive, optimistic attitude, and the ability to remain in the 'now' go a long way in restricting the time travel excursions into forbidden territories undertaken by mind. Learning the art of 'crossing the bridge when it comes to' and stabilising the mind in a positive cheerful environment work as a 'wonder drug' to treat anxiety.

How the Aravallis were shrunk by definition

MD SINHA
EX-PRINCIPAL CHIEF CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS, HARYANA

ON January 10, 2024, the Bench of the Supreme Court observed: "....since issues with regard to mining in the Aravalli hills and ranges are common to both the states, it would be appropriate that the said matters are decided and heard by the same bench...."

The significance of this was lost at the time, but it initiated a chain of events which culminated in the order of the Supreme Court dated November 20, 2025, which accepted the proposal of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) that only hills above 100 m from the local ground relief shall be considered as Aravallis — a view that the court had rejected in 2010.

Environmental degradation and destruction of Aravalli aquifers in Faridabad and Alwar and farmhouse projects in Gurugram led to the Aravalli notification of 1992 by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) which banned mining in the Aravallis of Gurugram and Alwar. This was followed by a series of protective orders by the SC from 2002 onwards which banned/ severely restricted non-forestry activities in the Aravallis. Since 1992, incessant attempts have been made to redefine the Aravallis to go around these restrictions. To name a few:

i. As revenue records do not mention 'Aravallis' specifically by name, hence they don't exist (Haryana, 2016)

ii. Only hills higher than 100 m are Aravallis (Rajasthan 2006)

iii. Only hills 500 million yrs or older are Aravallis (Haryana, 2025).

However ludicrous the above may be, these were pursued seriously by committed real estate and mining lobbies. The 100-m criterion was a perverse application of Richard Murphy's classification system in his '*Landforms of the World*', in which he classified landforms based on structural, formational and topographic principles. Topographically, he classified hills as structures above 100m. This is what was selectively used by the Rajasthan government. Geologically, the Aravalli craton (landmass) formed three billion years ago by attrition between the Marwar and Bundelkhand cratons is a continuous structure, stretching from Gujarat to Haridwar. The weathered outcrops are what are visible as the Aravalli hills today and, structurally, it is a single mass. Thus, the present attempt to classify these as isolated structures is not geologically sound.

AT STAKE: The ecological integrity of our country and that of our institutions. PTI

Earlier, the SC, vide its order dated February 19, 2010, did not accept the 100-m criterion. It directed the Forest Survey of India (FSI) to conduct a survey of the entire Aravalli range, specifically directing: "... The satellite imagery shall be carried out of the entire hill range (Aravalli) in the State of Rajasthan and it shall not be confined to peaks/parts of hills above 100 mts. from the ground level."

After examining several methodologies, the FSI adopted a 3-degree slope criterion and identified 40,481 sq km of area falling under the Aravalli hills in 15 districts of Rajasthan and submitted the same.

> What was rejected by the Supreme Court in 2010 has now been accepted without geological justification.

Interestingly, the report also said that 103 sq km of the area was being mined outside of the mining leased area in these 15 districts — more than twice the area of the leases itself. Obviously, this report did not find favour with the MoEFCC.

Instead of taking cognisance of this report, the SC constituted an 'expert' committee on May 9, 2024, to "have uniform definition of the Aravalli hills and ranges." However, headed by the Secretary, MoEFCC, with four state forest secretaries and convened by a joint secretary, this was a committee of generalist bureaucrats, with hardly any independent experts. Strangely, though it did not have any Mining Department representative, it adopted the criterion proposed by the Mining Department of Rajasthan. In a gross travesty, this is unashamedly a report to enable mining rather than conservation.

Accepting the 100-m height criterion that was rejected by the court itself in 2010, the apex court, finally in its judgment of November 20, 2025 records in Para 31 of its order: "...learned ASG submitted that if the definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges as suggested by the FSI is accepted, it would exclude large areas from the Aravalli Hills and Ranges. She, however, submitted that if the definition as suggested by the Committee is adopted, a larger area would be included as part of the Aravalli Hills and Ranges."

Well, this truly let the cat out amongst the pigeons. It appears that the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) of the SC which advises the court on environment matters, had distanced itself from the report of this 'expert' committee recommending the adoption of the 3-degree slope criteria of the FSI instead. On the condition of anonymity, members of this committee informed me that they were directed to adopt the 100-m criteria.

The FSI has now tweeted that it has "made no statement that only 9% of Aravallis are above 100 m." If this is so, then the above submission before the apex court on November 11, 2025 that the 100-m criterion would include more area than the FSI criterion would be incorrect — bordering on perjury. The picture is getting murkier and the apex court needs to review its order and restore faith.

However, what will be the ramifications of this ruling on the ground? Taken from local relief:

i) Delhi does not have any hill above 100 m and the Aravallis cease to exist in Delhi.

ii) Of nearly 47,880 acres of the Aravallis in Gurugram and Faridabad, over 90% of the *gair mumkin pahar* areas —over 45,000 acres — will be excluded. A handful of hills in Rewari, Mahendragarh and Bhiwani would proudly remain as the 'Aravallis'. Nuh, with significant high hills, would be the star in Haryana.

iii) An FSI internal study, as reported by a newspaper, suggests that only 1,048 hills out of the 1,18,000 geotagged by the FSI are above 100 m in 15 districts of Rajasthan.

With claims and counter-claims, what is the way out of this stinking morass? The Prime Minister, who has no stake in the game, should quietly intervene, get the correct data from the FSI and take remedial action if required. The country has faith in his statesmanship and love of nature. At stake is the ecological integrity of our country and that of our institutions.

Universities are hollowing out

DP SINGH
PROFESSOR, PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

LARGE campuses, grand buildings and imposing libraries often create the impression of a rich and flourishing intellectual life from the outside. But over time, the inner academic world in most universities has become fragile and diminished.

Recently, while serving on a selection committee, I was part of an informal discussion on faculty appointments with the Vice-Chancellor of a university in Haryana. He shared that filling all posts with regular faculty would make it impossible for the university to meet its financial obligations, including salaries and pensions. Part-time and contractual teachers were a matter of survival. If government universities failed to strengthen themselves both financially and academically, the private universities would push them towards irrelevance.

His concerns highlighted broader regulatory and financial challenges confronting these institutions, which are now under greater scrutiny and expected to manage their own resources. Haryana recently established the Haryana Education Regulatory Authority, signalling a more rigorous regulatory environment. The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025, aims to bring several bodies together under a single authority.

When public funding is uncertain and institutions are encouraged to generate their own resources — especially where raising fees can trigger strikes or protests — permanent faculty appointments no longer appear viable for teaching and research.

The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 reports about 15.98 lakh faculty serving over 4.5 crore students across India. Faculty distribution across the country is far from uniform. Parliamentary committee discussions in 2025 suggest that more than a quarter of teaching positions in some centrally funded universities were vacant.

In Haryana and Punjab, the situation is grimmer. Most public universities operate under chronic fiscal stress. State grants are neither regular nor adequate, barely sufficient to meet salary and pension obligations. In many cases, 75-80% of university budgets are absorbed by salaries and pensions, leaving limited and uncertain funds for libraries, laboratories, research support and faculty development. Some departments do not have even a single regular teacher, while in many there is only one.

> Lack of adequate funds is steadily eroding the academic foundations of our universities.

Departments increasingly rely on temporary staff and, in some cases, research scholars. These appointments are often made without duly constituted selection committees or wide public circulation. As a result, some qualified candidates choose to not even apply for these positions. Those who are eventually appointed are unable to plan sustained research, redesign curricula or mentor students beyond a semester. Research output is limited, student mentoring inconsistent and departments struggle to sustain a meaningful academic environment. Financial pressures have come to dominate institutional priorities.

Financial vulnerability has also increased susceptibility to external pressures. Universities operate deeply within political ecosystems. Administrative decisions attract interest from local power structures. Academic disagreements, rather than fostering debate, most often, slow down governance. Time and effort are sometimes absorbed in navigating internal alignments and protecting positions. Parochial recruitment deepens the problem. Departments draw repeatedly from narrow pools, where familiarity replaces intellectual diversity.

At a time when higher education policy speaks of excellence, innovation and global competitiveness, public universities are being asked to function under conditions that steadily erode their academic foundations. Buildings expand, regulations multiply, but the intellectual core weakens.

The question is whether we are willing to fund them in a way that allows them to remain universities in any serious sense.

Policy failure choking Delhi

BALBIR PUNJ
SENIOR BJP LEADER & FORMER RAJYA SABHA MP

THE air pollution crisis in north-central India has reached one of its worst levels in recent memory. Millions are gasping for breath. Ordinary people naively hope for a miracle, a quick, painless fix, an unrealistic expectation given the scale of the crisis. Those in power are either hypocritical, clueless or a bit of both. They seem preoccupied with political theatrics, offering only Band-Aid fixes that are destined to fail.

The environmental crisis affects a vast region of the subcontinent. Anyone flying from Delhi to Mumbai or from Islamabad to Lahore cannot miss the thick brown haze that covers the plains below, defying state or international borders. However, the spotlight remains on Delhi. Unfortunately, successive Delhi governments have failed to take meaningful action.

It is a geographical crisis, shaped by the Gangetic plains, the large-scale use of fossil fuels and long-standing ecological damage, including encroachment along the Yamuna river banks.

Stopping vehicles that don't meet BS-VI emission standards at Delhi borders may be good optics, but it lacks real impact — a classic Don Quixote pursuit. Mobility is criminalised while the deeper, structural causes of pollution remain unaddressed.

The government's replies to questions in the Lok Sabha on November 29, 2021, and July 18, 2022, dispelled a myth: that a drastic slowdown in human activity would automatically cleanse Delhi air.

Even during the Covid lockdown, Delhi did not experience sustained clean air. In 2020, the city recorded 49 days of "very poor" air quality and 15 days were categorised as "severe" under the National Air Quality Index. It demolishes the illusion that if vehicles were restricted and factories paused, Delhi would begin to breathe easy. The lockdown showed that along with emissions, pollution is a product of structural, geographical and atmospheric entrapment.

Delhi sits in the Gangetic plains, a region prone to temperature inversion and stagnant air masses, particularly during winter. This creates a 'lid effect' – preventing pollutants from dispersing vertically. Emissions drop, but pollution persists. Result: Delhi is a swamp of toxic build-up, with pollutants swirling instead of dissipating.

> Delhi's pollution is about geography, ecology and atmospheric entrapment.

There is yet another ignored factor — the role of the Yamuna. The river flows for about 52 km within the NCT, covering a floodplain of nearly 97 sq km. Only 16 sq km carries flowing water; the rest, Zone 'O', is under the DDA Master Plan. Delhi discharges around 641 million litres of untreated sewage into this stretch daily. Poor sewage treatment, mixing of waste and industrial effluents cause oxygen levels to plummet, making the river biologically dead.

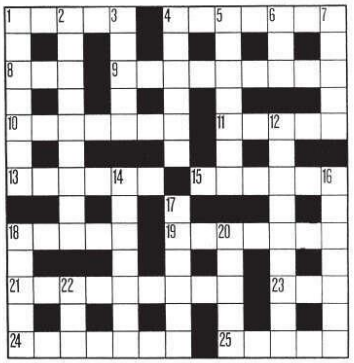
Thousands live in informal settlements along the Yamuna floodplains, facing flooding, pollution and eviction. They rely on burning wood for cooking and warmth, worsening the city's environmental crisis. It's a massive human problem that needs to be seriously addressed.

Compounding this are the thousands of industrial units, brick-kilns and foundries in the region that use coal as fuel, along with farmers' seasonal stubble burning, which adds to PM2.5 inventories.

The pollution menace is corroding the citizens' health and hampering productivity. Though fight against air pollution is ongoing, the responses are limited to platitudes and palliatives.

There are some essential lessons: Drop reactive steps that are imposed only after the air has turned toxic. Fighting pollution is a year-long battle. Delhi can control and reduce pollution, but not eliminate it due to its geographical constraints. A united effort by the central and state governments, farmers, industries, and ordinary citizens is needed. There are no simple solutions to this crisis.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 To drive (5)
4 Exaggerate (7)
8 Set of tools (3)
9 One's utmost (5,4)
10 Infested (7)
11 Friendship (5)
13 Unimportant matters (6)
15 Withstand stress (4,2)
18 Gained with little effort (5)
19 Mentor (7)
21 Under one's control (2,1,6)
23 A cereal plant (3)
24 High-crowned felt hat (7)
25 Item in sports programme (5)

DOWN

1 Discern with difficulty (4,3)
2 Exactly like the original (2,3,4)
3 Sovereign (5)
4 Devise (6)
5 Leaves (7)
6 Successful fighter pilot (3)
7 List of competitors (5)
12 Available if needed (2,7)
14 Momentum (7)
16 Omen (7)
17 People (6)
18 Thwart (5)
20 Prevailing fashion (5)
22 Grow old (3)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Nail-biting, 8 Tired, 9 Muffler, 10 Umpteen, 11 Abyss, 12 Boyish, 14 Bellow, 17 Dumas, 19 Upright, 21 Warring, 22 Notch, 23 Hand-to-hand.

Down: 2 Atrophy, 3 Ledge, 4 Immune, 5 Inflame, 6 Gully, 7 Wristwatch, 8 Thumbs down, 13 Session, 15 Lighten, 16 Budget, 18 Mirth, 20 Ranch.

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 26, 2025, FRIDAY

Shaka Samvat	1947
Posh Shaka	5
Posh Parvishte	12
Hijari	1447

- Shukla Paksha Tithi 6, up to 1:44 p.m.
- Siddhi Yoga up to 2:01 p.m.
- Shatbhisha Nakshatra up to 9:01 a.m.
- Moon enters Pisces sign 3:11 a.m.

FORECAST

SUNSET: FRIDAY 17:30 HRS
SUNRISE: SATURDAY 07:17 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	19	07
New Delhi	22	08
Amritsar	17	08
Bathinda	26	08
Jalandhar	17	08
Ludhiana	17	08
Bhiwani	20	08
Hisar	18	07
Sirsa	18	09
Dharamsala	21	08
Manali	17	02
Shimla	18	09
Srinagar	11	00
Jammu	22	08
Kargil	05	–09
Leh	04	–10
Dehradun	19	08
Mussoorie	18	08

TEMPERATURE IN °C

India outraged over B'desh lynching

India played a crucial role in the creation of Bangladesh by dividing Pakistan in the 1971 war. India had hoped that a secular country would be its neighbor. Since its inception, the Bangladeshi economy has been heavily reliant on Indian exports. However, fanaticism and communalism do not respect economic values. Although the head of the caretaker government in Bangladesh is Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, he is helpless in the face of the ongoing communal violence. As soon as elections were announced in Bangladesh, the first victim was Sheikh Hasina's opponent, student leader Usman Hadi, who was murdered. During this time, a 25-year-old Hindu youth, Deepu Das, who worked in a garment factory, was beaten to death by a mob on charges of alleged blasphemy, and his body was then hanged and burned. Now, new reports are emerging that atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh are increasing. Their homes are being burned down. These reports have sparked a wave of anger in India.

Across the country, Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal activists are protesting against Bangladesh. Outrage has spread throughout India. In Delhi, West Bengal, and other states, large numbers of people are gathering to protest at the Bangladeshi High Commission. However, the Delhi Police and paramilitary forces stopped the protesters outside the High Commission. Bangladesh's cunning move is to spread rumors that the murder of student leader Hadi was carried out by Indian elements. Because of this, Hindu families in Bangladesh have become targets of extremists. The Indian government has said that Bangladesh should stop spreading such rumors and allegations and conduct an impartial investigation into the murder of student leader Hadi. A formal protest has also been lodged with the Bangladeshi High Commission.

In Kolkata, police lathi-charged protesting crowds of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, and Hindu Jagran Manch, injuring several people. The lathi-charge occurred when the protesting crowd, demonstrating against the atrocities on Hindus, was marching towards the Bangladeshi Deputy High Commission office. Protests against the violence against the Hindu community also took place in Punjab. Demonstrations were held in Fazilka and Giddarbaha in Muktsar district, and an effigy of Bangladesh was burned. The BJP and other Hindu organizations held marches in Jalandhar and Ludhiana. Across the country, there is a demand that the ongoing violence against Hindus be stopped immediately and that the Indian government take strong action. The Indian government has conveyed its strong protest to the Bangladeshi government.

But when reports emerge from Bangladesh suggesting that this unrest is being deliberately instigated by certain elements to potentially postpone the elections, who will care about these protests? Sometimes it is thought that by helping to separate Bangladesh from Pakistan, India may have created another enemy. But let it be remembered, it is not the countries that are the enemies, nor the people of those countries, but rather their so-called leaders who take the easy path of promoting violence and communalism to secure their positions and maintain their rule. In Pakistan, the Shehbaz government and Munir's army are doing the same thing. In Bangladesh, the dominant corrupt anti-social elements are instigating violence and atrocities against Hindus to secure their power. Remember, this game of violence and communalism ultimately backfires. If the atrocities against Hindus continue in Bangladesh, India will be forced to take strong action.

-Abhishek Vij

Terrorist threats to bomb schools

The easiest way for terrorists to demonstrate their power is to show their sharp claws through threats and false rumors. In Punjab, terrorists are constantly trying to spread chaos through continuous threats and challenges. The perception is created that Punjab is not ruled by peace but by a gun culture. But this is not the reality. The easiest way for terrorists to spread terror is to threaten to bomb sensitive areas. Terrorists did this first in Amritsar.

There, they threatened to bomb schools. After that, 11 schools in Jalandhar were also threatened with bombing. The police searched every nook and cranny, trying to find these so-called bombs, but how could bombs be found from mere threats? Yes, chaos and fear did spread, but only for a day. Now, the terrorists have taken the same step in Patiala and Rajpura.

Schools in both cities received bomb threats. A threatening email was sent to 3 schools in Patiala and one large school in Rajpura. It stated that bombs would explode in the schools between 1:11 PM and 9:11 PM. The police conducted extensive searches in these schools, but no explosive material was recovered from any school. Now, the concerned SSP has said that the cyber cell is tracing the IP address of this email.

Along with the threat, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann was also threatened, and a demand for a separate state from India was made. Terrorists hiding abroad carry out such acts frequently.

When the G20 summit was being held in India, terrorists created a storm of threats to tarnish India's reputation, but representatives of the world's major countries saw that a meeting of this summit was also held in Amritsar with great pomp and show, and the terrorists' threats proved futile. Terrorism has become a business in the world today. This must be countered with constant vigilance and comprehensive security measures. The countries of the world can collectively eradicate terrorism, but the difficulty lies in the fact that some hypocritical countries condemn terrorism on the one hand while secretly supporting terrorists on the other.

Conversation with Gopalji Arya

Lessons on Environment and the Soul of Nature

Dr. Tanu Jain
Chief executive officer Bareilly cantonment board Ministry of defence

It was one fine morning when I met Gopalji Arya, a man of deep thought and deeper conviction, in the quiet courtyard of his karyalaya. The sun had just begun to rise, spreading its soft golden hue over the neem trees, and a faint breeze carried the fragrance of the earth after dawn dew. I had gone to seek answers—not about life in general, but about one of its most silent teachers: Nature.

"What, according to you, is most important for the environment today?" I asked him.

He smiled—not with words, but with the calm of someone who has long ago understood that the Earth speaks only to those who listen.

"Nature doesn't need saving" he said softly, "it needs understanding."

Those words stayed with me. He then began to speak about the five ways through which human life could reconnect with the natural world—what he called the 'Panch Parivartan' or the Five Transformations of Living.

1. Paryavaran – Sensitivity to Nature

"Planting trees is not enough," Gopalji said. "You must plant awareness in your mind too."

He explained that environmental consciousness is not an activity but a lifestyle.

To live in harmony with nature means to live with restraint—consuming less, wasting less, and feeling more. He urged me to see water not as a utility but as life itself, and every tree as a living scripture of patience and giving.

"If you drink water mindfully and walk barefoot on the earth with gratitude," he said, "you will realize that the Divine lives in the soil, not just in temples."

2. Nagarik Kartavya – Civic Dharma

He often reminded that environmental protection begins with discipline and civic responsibility.

To keep one's surroundings clean is an act of worship.

To act with awareness of others' comfort is ecological behaviour at the social level.

He smiled as he said, "Cleanliness is not Swachh Bharat's campaign—it is Bharat's character."

> "Nature doesn't need saving" he said softly, "it needs understanding." Those words stayed with me. He then began to speak about the five ways through which human life could reconnect with the natural world—what he called the 'Panch Parivartan' or the Five Transformations of Living.

The more orderly and responsible we become as citizens, the less we burden nature.

3. Kutumb Prabodhan – Nurturing Families with Values

"Every family must become a small forest of virtues," he said.

He believed that ecological values are inherited, not instructed. When families gather daily for conversation and reflection, they not only strengthen emotional bonds but also cultivate intergenerational sensitivity toward nature and society.

He advised—let children grow up planting trees, observing birds, and sitting in silence under the stars; such experiences shape character better than any lecture.

4. Swadeshi Aacharan – Living the Swadeshi Spirit

"If we cannot honour what is made by our own soil," he said, "how can we protect the soil itself?"

Supporting local crafts, using indigenous products, and avoiding imported luxuries are not economic acts—they are ethical acts.

Every rupee spent on local produce strengthens the roots of India's self-reliance and reduces the ecological cost of industrial excess.

5. Samajik Samrasta – Harmony Beyond Boundaries

Nature never discriminates. The same rain falls on the rich and the poor, the same sunlight touches every leaf.

"When man divides, nature declines," Gopalji said gravely.

He urged me to see environmental conservation not as a class issue, but as a collective moral duty—beyond caste, creed, or geography.

"We are all trustees of the same planet," he said. "The Earth belongs not to humans, but to humanity."

The Geeta's Whisper

Before we parted, Gopalji recited softly from the Bhagavad Geeta (3.14):

"Annad bhavanti bhutani, parjanyad anna sambhavah.

Yajnad bhavati parjanyo, yajnah karma samudbhavah."

He explained, "All beings are sustained by food; food is produced by rain; rain comes through harmony between man and nature—through Yajna, through sacred action."

Thus, living sustainably is the truest form of Yajna.

As I walked away, the morning sun was brighter, yet gentler. I felt that the real transformation—the Panch Parivartan—is not outside us, but within.

To protect the environment is not a duty—it is a devotion.

To live in harmony with nature is not an ideal—it is our original nature.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

"Don't waste your energy trying to change opinions. Do your thing, and don't care if they like it."
- Tina Fey

Pentagon report

China's growing military ambitions in South and Southeast Asia have raised fresh concerns for India, following a recent Pentagon report that flags Beijing's interest in establishing overseas military facilities. According to the assessment, China is exploring options for military access or bases in countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar, a move that could significantly alter the regional security landscape.

The report suggests that China's objective is to expand the operational reach of the People's Liberation Army by securing strategic locations near key maritime routes and along sensitive borders.

In Bangladesh, any potential Chinese military presence would be particularly worrying for India due to the country's proximity to India's eastern frontier and the Siliguri Corridor, the narrow stretch of land that connects mainland India with its northeastern states. A foreign military footprint so close to this strategic corridor could pose long-term security challenges.

Myanmar is another area of concern. China already holds considerable influence there through infrastructure projects, economic investments and strategic cooperation.

A military facility in Myanmar would give Beijing greater access to the Bay of Bengal and enhance its ability to monitor and potentially influence naval movement in the region. Combined with a presence in Bangladesh, this would tighten China's strategic arc around India's eastern and northeastern borders.

The Pentagon report notes that China often frames such facilities as logistics hubs, joint development projects or dual-use infrastructure tied to commercial investments. However, analysts argue these sites could easily be adapted for intelligence gathering, refuelling, surveillance and rapid deployment of forces in times of conflict.

Bangladesh on edge

Bangladesh is witnessing a politically charged moment as Bangladesh Nationalist Party acting chairman Tarique Rahman returns home, ending a 17-year exile that began in 2008. His arrival comes at a time when the country is already simmering with political tension, uncertainty, and public unrest following major shifts in governance over the past year.

Rahman, the elder son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia, left Bangladesh during a period marked by military-backed rule and a wave of corruption cases against senior political leaders. While living in London, he was convicted in multiple cases in absentia, effectively keeping him away from active politics on the ground. However, after the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's government and subsequent legal reversals, the path was cleared for his return, a development seen by his supporters as long overdue.

His homecoming has energized the BNP, which has struggled for relevance after years of political marginalisation. Party workers and supporters have poured into Dhaka to welcome him, viewing his return as a symbol of revival and resistance. For many within the BNP, Rahman is not just a leader returning home but a potential future prime minister who could steer the party into the next national election.

The timing of his return is significant. Bangladesh is currently under an interim administration tasked with restoring order and overseeing a transition toward elections. Street protests, economic pressures, and lingering anger over governance failures have created a volatile environment. Against this backdrop, Rahman's presence adds a new dynamic to an already fragile political equation.

Rahman's first priority has been his ailing mother, Khaleda Zia, whose health has kept her largely out of active politics. Yet, his political influence is undeniable. Even during exile, he remained the party's central strategist, shaping decisions and messaging from afar. Now on home soil, his leadership is expected to be more assertive and visible.

Regionally, his return is being closely watched, especially by neighbouring India, given the BNP's past positions on foreign policy and regional cooperation. Analysts believe the developments in Bangladesh could have broader implications for South Asian politics.

As Bangladesh stands at a crossroads, Tarique Rahman's return marks a pivotal moment. Whether it leads to political stability or deeper confrontation will depend on how the coming months unfold in a nation eager for change but wary of its past.

Owned, Printed and Published by Shital Kumar Vij. Published from S-9, Industrial Area, Jalandhar, Punjab-144004.

Printed at Dainik Savera News and Media Netwok, S-9 Industrial Area, Jalandhar, Punjab -144004. *Editor-Abhishek Vij

Responsible for the selection and editing of all the news published in this issue under the PRB Act and all disputes subject to the Jalandhar Court

Honouring the Martyrdom of the Sahibzade by Living Sikh Tenets

Iqbal Singh Lalpura
Former Chairman, National Commission for Minorities, Government of India

"Har Satgur ka jo Sikh akhai
Su bhalke uth Har Naam dhiave.
Udam kare bhalke parbhati
Isnan kare Amritsar nabhe."
(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 305)
"So Sikh sakha bandhap hai bhai
Je Gur ke bhane vich ave.
Apne bhane jo chale bhai
Vishad chhutan khave."
(Ang 601)
"Satgur ki bani sat saroop hai,
Gurbani baniae."
(Ang 304)

These three verses together define the entire Sikh way of life. They lay down a clear framework of disciplined living—early rising, remembrance of the Divine, honest effort, surrender to the Guru's will, and above all, the absolute authority of Gurbani. There is no ambiguity here, no scope for interpretation that weakens responsibility.

Yet a deeply disturbing question confronts Sikh society today: if Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is the living, complete, and eternal Guru, why has Sikh life increasingly become dependent on living preachers, deras, babas, and parallel centres of authority? Why do Sikhs bow before Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji in form, yet seek guidance, blessings, reassurance, and solutions elsewhere?

This contradiction lies at the heart of the moral crisis in contemporary Sikh life. It is not a crisis of belief, nor a failure of Sikh philosophy. Sikh thought remains among the most radical, ethical, and universal spiritual systems known to humanity. The crisis is one of practice, confidence, and a gradual drift from the Guru-centred life envisioned by Guru Nanak Dev Ji and conclusively sealed by Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji ended personal guruship forever. By declaring Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji as the eternal Guru, he closed the door on intermediaries, inherited spiritual authority, and human claimants to divine status. Sikhism was designed as a direct relationship between the Guru and the Sikh, mediated only through the Shabad. No living person was meant to stand between the seeker and the Guru. This decision was revolutionary and without parallel. It ensured that Sikhism would never degenerate into personality cults or priestly domination.

Yet, over time, the Guru has been reduced in practice to ritual reverence, while authority has quietly shifted to human figures. The growing influence of jathedars, granthis, babas, and charismatic preachers is not evidence of spiritual vitality; it is a symptom of distance from Gurbani-based living. When the Guru is confined to ceremony and not allowed to govern daily conduct, others inevitably rush in to fill the vacuum. This weakens Sikh autonomy and fractures the collective conscience.

Equally troubling is the transformation of many Gurdwaras from Dharamsals into arenas of factional politics and power struggle. Guru Nanak Dev Ji described the place of worship as a Dharamsal—a space for practising dharam, sitting together as equals, serving humanity, and shaping moral character. The very word

"Gurdwara" means the doorway to the Guru. It was never meant to become a platform for political ambition, personal rivalry, or electoral mobilisation.

While Sikh history bears testimony to political resistance when justice demanded it, the routine intrusion of partisan politics into Gurdwaras corrodes spiritual authority. Political speeches after Ardas in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, personal attacks, and factional mobilisation weaken the sanctity of the space. A community that politicises its sacred institutions gradually loses moral clarity. Power replaces principle, and numerical strength replaces ethical conduct.

Gurbani allows no scope for selective obedience. "Satgur ki bani sat saroop hai." The Guru's Word is truth itself. Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is not limited to personal devotion; it provides guidance for religious conduct, social harmony, economic justice, ethical governance, and spiritual liberation. It rejects inequality, exploitation, tyranny, hypocrisy, and moral cowardice. It teaches honest earning, sharing with dignity, fearlessness before power, and surrender to Hukam. Above all, it guides the seeker towards oneness with the Divine.

Yet contemporary Sikh life too often reflects ritual without discipline, identity without ethics, and assertion without humility. Gurbani speaks of early rising, Naam Simran, honest labour, and sharing with others. Modern practice frequently seeks comfort without responsibility, shortcuts without effort, and validation without inner transformation. The Guru has not changed. The message remains complete and sufficient. It is we who have drifted.

This reality becomes particularly stark during the commemoration of the martyrdom of the Sahibzade from 21 to 26 December. These days represent one of the most testing periods in Sikh history—perhaps the darkest week, not merely because of the brutality inflicted, but because of the moral courage demanded of the community. The sacrifice of the four Sahibzade was not an emotional episode meant only for mourning. It was a civilisational challenge thrown at the conscience of the Khalsa for all times.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji's words echo across centuries:
"Char mue to kia hua, jivat kai hazar."
What if four have fallen? Thousands live on.

This was not a statement of numerical pride. It was a test of continuity and character. The Guru was not counting bodies; he was measuring whether the Khalsa would live by the values for which the Sahibzade were martyred. Today, Sikhs number in crores across the world, yet as a collective moral force, the community often appears fragmented, hesitant, and uncertain. Numbers have increased; clarity has weakened.

The commemoration of the Sahibzade must therefore not become ritualistic remembrance. Candles, speeches, and emotional narratives have meaning only if they lead to introspection and reform. The Sahibzade did not die to be remembered; they died to ensure that fearlessness, righteousness, and moral sovereignty remained alive. Their martyrdom confronts every Sikh with a direct question: where do you stand today when truth is inconvenient, when justice is costly, and when silence feels safer than conscience?

The tragedy is that many religious preachers who read Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji to guide the community do not practise it themselves. Gurbani warns clearly:
"Avr updesai ap na karai || avat javat janmai marai ||
Jis ke antar basse nirankar ||
Tis ki seekh tarre sansar ||"
Those who preach but do not practise ruin their own lives and the future of those who follow them. Equally alarming is that many who claim to be leaders of the Panth have never read Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji in its entirety. A majority have not taken Pahul or committed themselves to the Khalsa Rehat Maryada. Some of them do not feel ashamed, even after having been exposed with criminals facing charges of sacrilege of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. One can imagine the fate of a community led by such contradictions.

The words of Guru Gobind Singh Ji must therefore be read with complete honesty:
"Jab lag Khalsa raheo niara,
Tab lag tej deo main sara."

This is not a curse; it is a conditional promise. Strength, dignity, and divine support are assured only so long as the Khalsa remains distinct in conduct, values, and discipline. The moment Gurmat principles are diluted by ritualism, dependency, or borrowed traditions, the Guru withdraws confidence—not in anger, but as moral correction. The present weakness of Sikh institutions and leadership must be understood through this lens.

It would be simplistic to label Sikhs as "losers." Sikh contributions to India and humanity are immense and undeniable. But it would be equally dishonest to deny that moral authority has declined. Fragmentation, erosion of trust, and confusion point to one central cause: distance from Sikh philosophy as lived reality.

This moment demands introspection, not accusation. Sikh history must be studied not for nostalgia, but for guidance. Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji already offers solutions to religious, social, economic, and political challenges. What is required is the courage to live by it. Gurdwaras must return to being Dharamsals of learning and service. Preachers must act as teachers, not intermediaries. Sikhism must once again be presented as a universal moral path for humanity, not a closed identity consumed by its own anxieties.

The Guru has not abandoned the Khalsa. The promise still stands. The question is whether the Khalsa is ready to remain niara again—distinct not in slogans, but in conscience; not in politics, but in conduct; not in ritual, but in lived truth. Only then will the martyrdom of the Sahibzade truly guide the present and shape the future, and only then will Sikhism reclaim its rightful place as a moral lighthouse for humanity.

Aravallis become vulnerable

A recent official analysis has found that applying a newly accepted definition of a major hill range in northern India could expose nearly half of its total area to legal mining activity, triggering fresh alarm among environmental observers. Under this revised benchmark, only landforms that rise at least 100 metres above the surrounding terrain are classified as part of the hill system. When this criterion was applied across more than thirty thousand square kilometres of mapped landscape, roughly 49 per cent of land previously assumed protected no longer met the threshold and could thus fall outside strict mining safeguards.

Critics argue this change risks undoing decades of conservation effort aimed at safeguarding one of the region's most important ecological systems. The hill range in question plays a vital role in groundwater

recharge, acts as a natural climate buffer against desertification, and supports rich biodiversity. Smaller ridges, foothills and low-lying slopes, which fall below the new height cutoff, perform crucial environmental functions despite not qualifying as "hills" under the revised definition. These areas help stabilise soil, regulate surface water flow and support ecosystems that sustain local communities.

Farmers missed opportunity

A fresh nationwide report reveals a significant gap in the participation of marginal farmers in cooperative systems, showing that only one in four small-scale agricultural producers in the country are formally linked to cooperatives. While cooperatives have long been touted as a powerful instrument for improving rural incomes, strengthening market access and securing better input prices, the limited penetration among marginal farmers highlights structural and policy challenges that are holding back inclusive rural

development.

Marginal farmers, defined as those cultivating less than a hectare of land, make up a large majority of the country's farming population. Yet their representation within cooperatives remains disproportionately low. The patterns emerging from the data suggest that many smallholders face barriers that prevent effective membership, including lack of awareness, limited access to credit, and the dominance of larger players within cooperative governance structures. In communities where cooperatives are active, larger farmers are more likely to enjoy the benefits of collective action, while those with smaller landholdings struggle to gain a foothold.

Cooperatives were initially envisaged as a vehicle to democratise access to agricultural inputs, credit and markets. By pooling resources, small producers can theoretically reduce costs, negotiate better terms with buyers and stabilise incomes.

Voice unbroken: resilience beyond borders

A close aide of former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan was violently attacked in the United Kingdom days after delivering a strongly worded speech critical of Pakistan Army chief General Asim Munir, raising serious concerns about the safety of political dissidents abroad and the reach of Pakistan's internal power struggles beyond its borders.

Shahzad Akbar, a former accountability adviser to Imran Khan and a senior figure in the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, was assaulted near his residence in Cambridge. The attack left him with severe injuries, including a broken nose and fractured jaw, requiring immediate medical attention. According to Akbar, the assault occurred after a masked individual knocked on his door. When he opened it, he was punched repeatedly in the face. Disturbingly, the attacker allegedly returned after a brief interval and continued the assault while recording it, before fleeing the scene.

The incident took place shortly after Akbar delivered a speech at an event in Cambridge that later circulated widely on social media. In the speech, he openly criticised General Asim Munir, accusing him of undermining democracy and ruling Pakistan through fear, coercion and repression. Akbar alleged that under Munir's leadership, Pakistan had witnessed widespread political victimisation, enforced disappearances and the silencing of dissent, particularly against members and supporters of the PTI.

Supporters of Imran Khan and PTI leaders have strongly condemned the attack, calling it politically motivated and part of a broader pattern of intimidation against critics of Pakistan's military establishment. They argue that the timing of the assault, coming soon after Akbar's speech gained attention, cannot be seen as a coincidence. The party has demanded a thorough investigation by British authorities and urged the UK government to ensure the safety of political refugees and exiles residing in the country.

Akbar has long been a controversial figure in Pakistan's politics. As accountability adviser during Imran Khan's tenure, he played a key role in pursuing corruption cases against opposition leaders.

Akbar has long been a controversial figure in Pakistan's politics. As accountability adviser during Imran Khan's tenure, he played a key role in pursuing corruption cases against opposition leaders. After Khan's ouster and the subsequent crackdown on PTI, Akbar left Pakistan and continued to speak out from abroad against the military's involvement in politics. He has previously claimed to have received threats and has accused Pakistan's security apparatus of targeting him even outside the country.

The attack has reignited debate over what many describe as transnational repression, where governments or powerful institutions are accused of intimidating, harassing or attacking critics living overseas.

Human rights groups have repeatedly warned that political dissidents from countries with authoritarian tendencies often remain vulnerable even after leaving their homeland. The assault on Akbar has added weight to these concerns and sparked calls for greater international scrutiny.

Within Pakistan, the incident has further deepened political polarisation. PTI supporters see it as proof of the military's intolerance of criticism, while critics of the party caution against drawing conclusions before the investigation is complete. Pakistan's military establishment has not officially commented on the attack or on Akbar's allegations.

British police have launched an investigation and are reportedly examining CCTV footage from the area. Akbar has formally lodged a complaint and has stated that he will cooperate fully with authorities. He has also said that despite the attack, he will not be silenced and will continue to speak out on what he describes as the erosion of democratic norms in Pakistan.

The assault has sent a chilling message to political activists and critics living abroad, particularly those from Pakistan who remain vocal against the military's influence. It highlights how deeply entrenched and bitter Pakistan's political conflict has become, extending far beyond its borders.

As Pakistan continues to grapple with instability, economic strain and civil-military tensions, incidents like this underline the high personal cost paid by those who challenge powerful institutions. Whether the attack leads to accountability or fades into another unresolved episode will be closely watched, not just by Pakistanis, but by the international community concerned about freedom of expression and political safety.

THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Maybe Christmas, the Grinch thought, doesn't come from a store.
Dr Seuss

Firework safety needed in Goa's glittering nights

Goa has been a popular destination for parties and beach weddings, and is projected as such. Over the years, people from across the nation and beyond have held their weddings along the beach belt with pomp and revelry, displaying grandeur, glamour and glitz. From ramps to special props and fireworks, the night is dominated by these elements as celebrations continue deep into the night. The Christmas and New Year parties do hold a similar ambience as people groove to music of different tastes.

However, the one element that has escaped scrutiny, or has been ignored, let alone the illegalities of nightclubs that Goa is currently battling, is the fact that open fireworks along the beach belt have gone unregulated. No beach wedding or a party is complete without fireworks, fireworks that not only light up the coastal sky with the accompaniment of 'thunder' it brings about. The question is, where are checks and balances?

If we may recall, last Sunday, a popular shack at Utorda Beach named Jamming Goat, which was undergoing renovation and which was scheduled to start during the Christmas season, was burnt to ashes during the wee hours, with the owners claiming that the overnight fireworks at a nearby venue sparked off the blaze. In August, two huts were gutted by fire at Calangute. At the start of the year, two shacks were extensively damaged in a fire at Gaurawada-Calangute due to New Year fireworks in the area. Shack owners claimed that balls of fire landed on the shacks, setting them on fire and causing extensive destruction.

Due to a lack of oversight, organisers have been flouting timing, scale, and safety protocols, and fireworks are conducted without obtaining safety clearances

Much has been spoken about illegalities on the beach belt, Coastal Zone Regulation violations, and fire safety regulations, to the extent that authorities have suddenly gone into scrutiny mode following the ghastly Birch nightclub tragedy. There are audits initiated, clubs sealed and asked to comply with rules. While that is being done, nobody has, in their extreme wisdom, given a thought to the danger that is threatening lives beyond these premises. A ball of fire shooting into an establishment could be destructive and cause serious loss to life and property as much as an electrical short-circuit inside.

Goans have been exposed to all sorts of dangers, having endured the pains of noise pollution all these years, with the system looking the other way despite the court's intervention. Party and beach wedding organisers have had a free run in an unregulated space. There are no mechanisms to monitor the scale of fireworks, and there are no designated areas too.

Due to a lack of oversight, organisers have been flouting timing, scale, and safety protocols, and fireworks are conducted without obtaining safety clearances. This absence of regulation means there is no control over the type and quantity of fireworks used, nor any buffer zone to protect nearby establishments or residential areas. The question is, are authorities waiting for another Birch-type tragedy?

Fireworks could be inherently hazardous when used without proper safety measures. The shooting embers can easily ignite nearby structures, especially wooden shacks, tents, and beachside huts that are often built with flammable materials. Moreover, there is an environmental and ecological impact because fireworks at that scale release toxic chemicals and smoke polluting the beach environment, leave aside the distraction it causes to marine life, such as turtles.

It's time the government views fireworks with the seriousness it deserves, and not rush with reactive measures once disaster befalls. Fireworks may be a part of a celebration, but a responsible celebration is the need of the hour, not a reckless one.

OPEN SPACE ››

Need to curb deliberate vote splitting at elections

In Goa, over the past several years, it has been observed during Assembly and Parliamentary elections that certain political parties, despite lacking public support or credibility, indirectly promote or field candidates mainly to split votes. This practice seriously harms the democratic process. Vote splitting occurs when three or more candidates contest an election and two or more of them appeal to similar voter groups or share comparable ideologies. As a result, votes that should ideally consolidate behind a preferred candidate get divided, enabling an unpopular candidate to win. This issue is particularly severe in a first-past-the-post system, where only one candidate wins, regardless of whether a majority supports them. Such outcomes deny voters a true choice, produce unrepresentative winners, lower the bar to win elections, and lead to governments with weak mandates. In single-member constituencies, vote splitting can cause a party with substantial popular support to lose simply because its vote base was divided. To safeguard democracy, political parties must avoid deliberate vote splitting, and serious consideration should be given to electoral reforms such as ranked-choice voting or pre-poll alliances to better reflect the people's will.

AJAY JALMI, Via email

For growth: A fresh mind and healthy lungs

As air pollution worsens across Indian cities, it is argued that development divorced from public health is hollow

›The writer is a policy researcher and corporate adviser

SRINATH SRIDHARAN

In many Indian cities today, especially the NCR, breathing has quietly become a calculated risk. Citizens have become unwilling risk managers, checking pollution apps the way previous generations checked the weather. Parents plan school days around air quality, the elderly retreat indoors, and outdoor labour continues regardless of health cost.

Against this lived reality, parliamentarians' assertions recently questioning the link between air quality and health are signals of how development is being perceived politically and whose well-being is considered expendable.

For a lower-middle-income economy that we are, such signals demand serious reflection. The institutional pillars of our democracy have not safeguarded the quality of everyday living, distracted by a politics that lurches from one urgency to the next.

Governance increasingly resembles event management, public debate collapses into memes, and policy attention is consumed by the fear of missing the next headline. Development is promised in futures so distant that many citizens may never live to experience them, while the conditions of daily urban life steadily deteriorate.

Air pollution is a long-established public health challenge with extensive global and domestic evidence. Fine particulate matter, particularly PM2.5, is known to penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream, aggravating respiratory and cardiovascular disease, reducing life expectancy and impairing childhood development. These relationships are neither novel nor speculative. They form the basis of environmental health policy in every major economy.

Development at this stage is not merely about expanding national output or building infrastructure. It is fundamentally also about building human capital. Health, longevity, cognitive capacity and productive years of life are the true multipliers of growth. What appears as economic progress on paper is quietly offset by declining physical resilience and rising healthcare burdens.

At the same time, much of the hospital infrastructure is quietly being consolidated by private capital, while public healthcare capacity has failed to expand at a commensurate pace. When public health is framed as secondary to economic optics, governance begins to feel detached rather than protective.

Growth must prioritise breathable air, human capital and liveability, warning that economic ambition loses meaning if daily life becomes physically unaffordable

India's pollution crisis is no longer geographically exceptional. While Delhi and the NCR dominate headlines, deteriorating air quality is now a structural feature of urbanisation across the country. Even Mumbai has been talking of a strange word in its midst—increasing 'AQI'. Major metros, tier-two cities, industrial corridors and rapidly expanding urban clusters regularly breach safe limits.

Urbanisation was never optional for a growing economy like ours. Its environmental consequences were foreseeable. What was expected in return was anticipatory governance. That includes integrated transport planning, enforcement of emissions standards, industrial accountability, land-use regulation, and sustained investment in cleaner energy systems. Instead, policy responses have often been reactive, episodic, and symbolic. Emergency restrictions during pollution peaks create the appearance of action without addressing structural drivers.

Air pollution is not the only degradation that urban India has learnt to endure. It is merely the most visible and measurable. Many of our cities are simultaneously grappling with contaminated water, chronic waste mismanagement, landfill fires, rising noise pollution, shrinking green cover, heat-trapping concrete sprawl, recurrent flooding from fragile drainage systems, unsafe roads, overcrowded transport, and the quiet erosion of public spaces.

Urban life is increasingly defined by accumulation rather than planning. Even the visual and civic order of cities has been surrendered. Streets, flyovers, and neighbourhoods are routinely defaced by political banners, cut-outs, and posters, erected in the name of loyalty and left untouched in the name of convenience.

Politicians profess helplessness, citing the enthusiasm of supporters, while municipal laws remain unenforced and civic dignity steadily recedes. Together, they signal that the commons no longer belong to citizens and that degradation has been normalised as the price of political comfort.

This brings us to an unavoidable question. What does Viksit Bharat mean if daily living itself becomes unaffordable in physical terms? If breathing clean air, stepping outside without risk, or raising children without chronic exposure to pollutants feels increasingly unattainable, then development has lost its human anchor.

Urbanisation, material expansion, and infrastructure growth are being pursued as ends in themselves, often without inclusion and frequently at the cost of ecological balance. How much longer are citizens expected to hold themselves hostage to the promise of the next electoral cycle, absorbing cumulative harm today in exchange for deferred assurance tomorrow? Development cannot be a perpetual postponement of liveability.

There is also a deeper institutional question at play. Development is not value-neutral. Every model of growth reflects choices about what is prioritised and what is tolerated. The implicit message is that citizens must endure diminished living conditions in exchange for national ambition. That is not a sustainable social contract.

The economic argument for cleaner air is equally compelling. Pollution imposes substantial hidden costs through healthcare expenditure, productivity losses, absenteeism, and premature mortality. These costs are borne disproportionately by households, not the state. Far from slowing growth, cleaner air strengthens economic resilience. Countries that addressed air pollution decisively did not stall. They advanced with healthier, more productive populations.

What makes this failure harder to justify is that the state is not operating in ignorance. India today possesses more data, regulatory tools and administrative reach than at any point in its history. When governance systems can track tax compliance to the last rupee and voter sentiment to the last constituency, yet fail to secure something as elemental as breathable air, the conclusion is unavoidable.

India's aspiration to become a developed nation cannot rest solely on scale, speed or global standing. It must be grounded in outcomes that citizens can feel in their bodies and daily lives. For politicians, policymakers, and administrators, the choice is now stark. But if only they actually cared.

-- FPJ

THE INBOX ››

Govt must address attacks on Christians during Christmas

I am deeply concerned about the recent attacks on Christians during the Christmas celebrations in various parts of India. These violent acts by certain Hindutva groups not only disturb the peace but also instill fear among the Christian community, threatening their right to freely practice their faith. It is alarming that in many cases, the police appear reluctant to take strong action against these vigilante groups, raising questions about possible political influence and bias. The silence from top government leaders only adds to the community's anxiety. BJP government seems to be active on the Hindu rastra mission and wants to harass minority Christians in India. India prides itself on being a secular and inclusive nation. It is imperative that the authorities ensure the safety and freedom of all religious minorities, allowing them to celebrate their festivals without fear. I urge the government and law enforcement agencies to act decisively against such attacks and uphold the constitutional rights of every citizen.

RONNIE DSOUZA, *Chandor*

Mahayuti's local body polls sweep delivers message

The recent Mahayuti's victory in rural Maharashtra underscores a decisive political shift away from the Maha Vikas Aghadi. In the countryside, where voters prioritise welfare delivery, infrastructure, irrigation, and administrative accessibility, the BJP-led alliance succeeded in projecting unity and promising welfare schemes. Mahayuti also consolidated farmers and OBC votes. In contrast, the MVA's internal contradictions, leadership confusion, and inconsistent messaging failed to resonate with rural voters seeking stability rather than ideological contestation. Presently, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav is mainly focussed on defending the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), the nation's wealthiest civic body. To ensure the party's survival, he is in the process of formalising a pact with estranged cousin and MNS chief Raj Thackeray. But a full victory or clear majority against BJP-led forces is far from guaranteed. Success will depend on ward-level performance, local candidates, and how well they convert Marathi identity politics into broader civic support.

GREGORY FERNANDES, *Mumbai*

Is Mumbai following Delhi's pollution path?

Delhi has been struggling with severe air pollution for the past one and a half decades. Following Delhi, Mumbai is now also getting trapped in the grip of pollution. The Bombay High Court has directed the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to immediately curb pollution caused by construction activities in the Mumbai region. The deterioration in air quality has led to serious health-related issues among citizens. Since 2023, Mumbai's air quality has been deteriorating year after year. Even the directions previously issued by the court have not been properly implemented. Last year, the court made it mandatory for construction sites to install CCTV cameras, sensor-based air pollution monitoring devices, and water-sprinkling systems. Pollution caused by vehicles—despite Mumbai being the country's largest city with the highest number of vehicles has not yet been fully addressed.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR, *Mumbai*

ZP election results and lessons for Opposition

At the ZP elections the cash rich BJP securing about 41% of the vote share, could have easily been seriously challenged or even overpowered had the opposition parties namely Congress, Goa Forward, RGP and AAP put up a united fight; and this was clearly indicated from the results. AAP in particular was the first one to announce going solo and refused to heed calls of many Goan activists to work on a united front; what has happened in my view is that AAP top leadership arrogance, high ego and overconfidence have made their party lose the most in these ZP elections. GF so called friendly fights with Congress resulted in winnable seats being "gifted" to the BJP. RGP winning 2 seats is noteworthy but they must accept the fact that if they have the actual intent to dislodge the BJP, they must join forces with the Opposition for the sake of Goa, Bardez seats for example could have easily be wrested away from the BJP, if the RGP had aligned with the Congress. All like minded Goans must pressurise these opposition party leaders on joining hands to fight the BJP in 2027.

ARWIN MESQUITA, *Colva*

Fastest way to get rich is to get elected as an MLA, MP

In India, politicians (primarily MPs and MLAs) are significantly wealthier than the average citizen, with their assets growing by leaps and bounds. For the Lok Sabha MPs the average assets amounted to @ Rs 46.34 crore and 93% of them are crorepatis. For the MLAs (as per the 2025 ADR analysis of 4,092 MLAs), average assets were @ Rs 17.92 crore (total assets 73,348 crore). The highest figure was seen in Andhra Pradesh (Rs 65 crore), Karnataka (Rs 64 crore) and Maharashtra (Rs 43 crore). Politicians are often 150-200 times wealthier than the common man. In contrast the average Indian's per capita net income (2024-25) was approximately Rs 2.05 lakh annually (ie.about Rs 17,000 per month) ; mind you, this is income, not net worth. Barring 8 % of the public servants who had generational wealth or were self made, the rest accumulated moolah while in office, but let's not even talk about corruption. No country has this level of income disparity. It does seem that the fastest way to get rich is to get elected as an MLA or MP.

REKHA SARIN, *Benaulim*

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

RNI: GOAENG/2015/65729. Printed and Published by: Sagar Lade on behalf of **Prudent Media (Goa) Pvt. Ltd. Printed at:** Elegant Offset Printers Pvt Ltd, Plot No 2/3/4, Thivim Industrial Estate, Karaswada, Mapusa, Goa. **Published at:** Second Floor, Fourth Estate (Kamat Metropolis), St Inez, Panaji 403 001. **Editor: Joel Afonso** (Responsible for selection of News under PRB Act).

EDITORIAL

I'm convinced there's a small room in the attic of the British Foreign Office where future diplomats are taught to stammer

Peter Ustin

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

— Ramnath Goenka

TRADE DEALS BRIGHTEN A YEAR OF NAVIGATING DIPLOMATIC DOLDRUMS

NDIAN diplomacy in 2025 unfolded in a world short on certainty. Trade rules were rewritten on the fly, alliances were tested, and neighbourhood pressures refused to ease. Yet, as the year closed, New Delhi could point to a set of concrete diplomatic outcomes that suggested direction, not drift. The ear's first signal came from London. The Comprehensive Eco-omic and Trade Agreement with the UK, signed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, is India's most ambitious trade act with a developed economy in years. By granting duty-free ccess to 99 percent of Indian exports by value, the agreement mproves prospects for labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, eather, marine products and jewellery, while opening fresh op-ortunities for engineering goods, chemicals and auto compo-ents. What makes the pact stand out is its services architec-ure, a sector in which India's exports to the UK is nearing $20 illion. The agreement enhances Indian professionals' mobility eyond IT to sectors such as finance, education, architecture nd engineering—a first for the UK at this scale. It signals a shift rom transactional trade to longer-term economic integration.

If the UK pact marked determination at the end of years-ong parleys, speed defined the India-New Zealand free trade greement. Launched in March and concluded by December, r ranks among India's fastest trade negotiations. Beyond tar-ff reductions, it positions India as a supplier of skilled talent nd services, while offering a wider strategic entry into Oce-nia and the Pacific. In West Asia, the India-Oman Compre-ensive Economic Partnership Agreement added depth to a rusted relationship. With 99 percent of Indian exports set to njoy duty-free access and Oman allowing 100 percent invest-ment in services, the pact strengthens cooperation beyond nergy to education and healthcare, which could be crucial for ndia's next phase of growth in services exports.

Closer home, India reinforced its standing as the first re-ponder in Sri Lanka by continuing to offer help in cash and ind after the devastation wreaked by cyclone Ditwah. These ains came amid regional temperatures rising in Dhaka, Kath-mandu and Islamabad, and global disruptions caused by Donald Trump's second coming. New Delhi responded with tenacity, bsorbing shocks, diversifying markets and mending relation-hips. In a fractured world, India ended the year with more ptions—and that can be counted as a net diplomatic gain.

ISRO'S BAHUBALI RAISES HOPE FOR MISSIONS AHEAD

THE Indian Space Research Organisation flexed its mus-cles on Wednesday by placing into orbit the heaviest sat-ellite it has launched so far—the 6.1-tonne BlueBird Block 2 designed by a private American company. The heavy communication satellite is part of a constellation f low Earth orbit missions that aim to provide mobile satel-ite connectivity across time zones. The launch resulted from commercial deal between Isro's business arm NewSpace ndia and the Nasdaq-listed AST SpaceMobile. Isro also aunched the company's first satellite, BlueWalker 1, from the atish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota in 2019. Until Wednesday, the heaviest payload lifted by Isro was on Novem-er 2, when it launched India's own 4.4-tonne communication atellite GSAT-7R into a geosynchronous transfer orbit.

Isro's ambitious future projects include India's first anned space mission, Gaganyaan, in early 2027; Chan-rayaan-4, a lunar sample-collection mission, in late 2027; ndia's own space station in 2035; and landing the first Indian stronauts on the moon by 2040. All these missions will re-uire much heavier payloads to be lifted, for which Wednes-ay's success is a major boost. The first of the five modules f Bharat Antriksh Station, weighing 10 tonnes, will be aunched in 2028 aboard a launch vehicle similar to the one sed Wednesday, the LVM3. The BAS is planned to weigh 52 onnes in all when assembled in space. Besides, Isro's space ocking experiment or SpaDeX, launched in January 2025, aw two 220-kg satellites successfully docking and undocking. The plan is to send up heavier satellites in the future for a imilar exercise, the capability for which will be crucial to eep the BAS operational, and for other future manned mis-ions to the moon and beyond.

The heavy-lifting LVM3 launchers, nicknamed Bahubali, re designed for much heavier payloads. The Wednesday aunch was a test whose success will give the courage to in-rease the load. So the Bahubalis will be tested time and gain. Its two solid-propellant boosters, developed at the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre in Thiruvananthapuram, enerate the thrust required to lift not just bigger payloads, ut India's space ambitions higher. Space missions have to e meticulously planned in numerous steps. The BlueBird aunch was a crucial step that Isro aced.

QUICK TAKE

GREAT INDIAN HIGHWAY ROBBERY

A transformative move is being undone by greed. The GST removed octroi. But soaring corruption among transport officials is ensuring that the black money needed to move oods across state borders has gone up. This year saw a parade f such corruption. In January, a transport department consta-le in Madhya Pradesh went on the lam after probes unearthed ssets worth more than ₹500 crore. The next month, the CBI rrested six Delhi officials for corruption. In March, a similar tory played out in Odisha. This week, a deputy transport com-issioner in Hyderabad was arrested for failing to explain ₹250 rore in assets. If we want to improve the ease of doing busi-ess, we must set up a national taskforce for nabbing such bor-er bandits—all of whom happen to be public servants.

EU's decision to issue bonds to give Ukraine a loan—and not use frozen Russian assets—exposed new chasms. Meanwhile, the Americans are preparing for dialogue with the Russians

THE MOSCOW-KYIV CONFLICT STRAINS PARIS-BERLIN TIES

M K BHADRAKUMAR

Former diplomat

SOURAV ROY

THE European Union summit last Thursday in Brussels turned out to be a pivotal event. The highlight was the EU's decision not to tap Russia's frozen wealth, estimated to be around 210 billion held under member states' jurisdictions, with the largest chunk of over 180 billion at Euroclear in Belgium.

The EU, instead, chose to offer Ukraine a financial lifeline by raising a 90-billion Eurobond against its budget. Cracks have appeared in the bloc's unity. A growing number of EU countries are no longer convinced that the war can be salvaged.

Basically, the obstacles to the sequestration of Russian funds were not technical but political. Belgium objected to illegal seizure, insisting it should be a collective responsibility to bear the consequences of any Russian retaliation. Italy and Austria felt the same way. At the summit, France defected at the last minute and folded in behind Italy, which has isolated Germany.

Kyiv's ability to repay the loan after the conflict is doubtful. But the EU is committed to paying at least 3 billion in interest annually. The endgame can be either a complete write-off of the loan, or Russia agreeing to pay reparations—or, Ukraine winning the war. To navigate the dangerous shoals ahead, the EU has indefinitely extended the freeze on the Russian sovereign assets, signalling readiness to accept legal and diplomatic risks to maintain control of the funds.

To be sure, the fate of Russia's frozen assets in Europe has become a flashpoint. On the one hand, it reveals deep divisions within the West. On the other, it raises urgent questions about the future of international finance. The debate has exposed not only legal and financial anxieties, but also the shifting sands of global power and trust.

A senior European diplomat told *FT*, "[French president] Macron betrayed [German Chancellor] Merz, and he knows there will be a price to pay for that... The stand-off underscores a new dynamic between Europe's largest powers: an initiative-driven Germany and a foot-dragging France... Paris has been hamstrung by high public debt and political instability... The imbalance has dashed hopes of a major reboot of the Franco-German engine that once powered some of the EU's biggest policy leaps."

France nonetheless continues to be at the forefront of Europe's efforts to cope with the dramatic shift in US attitude toward its NATO and EU allies. The spotlight on France is because it is the EU's only nuclear power and a country with independent weapons makers. France sees Russia as a growing threat to the continent and is boosting military spending, increasing weapons production and doubling the reserve force.

But, typically, Macron is also positioning France as a potential mediator between Europe and Russia. He may be heading for bilateral talks with Putin. The Kremlin "expressed readiness to engage in dialogue" with Macron, and Elysée responded positively that it will decide "in the coming days on the best way to proceed". Macron has called on Europeans to engage in dialogue with Putin. The irreversible nature of the Russian military offensive is sinking in at last in the ossified European mindset.

However, there is also a quintessential loner watching from across the Channel. A dangerous phase of the 'dirty war' lies ahead. A quote often attributed to Winston Churchill says, "Success lies in going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." Evidently, Britain will not survive a war with Russia. The residual strength of 'Global Britain' lies in undertaking daring covert operations. Russian ships have been attacked as far away as the Libyan coast in the Mediterranean. Ukraine lacked the expertise or capability to stage Operation Spiderweb—the June 1 simultaneous drone attacks at five air bases deep inside Russia across five time zones, including Belaya in Eastern Siberia 43 km from Ukraine's border.

Russian Foreign Intelligence Servic (SVR) Director Sergey Naryshkin r vealed last week, "Just a few days ago had a rather lengthy phone convers tion with the recently appointed M Director Blaise Metreweli." But o Monday, yet another Russian gener was assassinated in Moscow in a ca bomb attack. Moscow has let it b known that the Oreshnik, the hyperso ic missile that can reach Britain in minutes, and the S-500 air defence sy tem have been put on 'combat duty'.

All in all, the European summit wa further confirmation of the growin discord and fatigue over the Ukrainia conflict and the lack of a unified stra egy for ending it. This will affect th prospects for a settlement. It is inevit ble that the search for settlement wi be increasingly based on new politic realities. Indications are that Russia forces are moving in the direction o Odessa, Kharkiv and Sumy as well a Dnipropetrovsk, the most importan industrial region of Ukraine.

Russian officials are sceptical abou the nascent peace process. They antic pate the military offensive to continu into next spring. The Kremlin elites ar sensitive to the national mood that, ha ing come this far, Russia must ensure th is a war to end all wars in the region.

Following the latest consultations o Putin's special envoy Kirill Dmitrie with his American counterpart Stev Witkoff through Sunday in Miami, U Vice President J D Vance touched th right chord: "The breakthrough I c feel we've made is that all of the issue are actually out in the open... I wouldn say with confidence that we are goin to get to a peaceful resolution. I thin there is a good chance we will, I thin there is a good chance we won't."

Indeed, although a settlement fo Ukraine has clearly taken the centr stage, Russia's priority also lies in st bilising the relationship with the U There is talk of Moscow hosting Trum Vance and State Secretary Marco Rub early next year. On their part, the Ame icans are working on Putin's possib visit to attend the G20 summit in M ami. Preparations for a meeting b tween American congressmen and Ru sian Duma members are also under wa Changes in US policy toward Russia ca also be seen in the new national sec rity strategy, which explicitly disf vours Nato's "endless expansion".

(Views are persona

HIGHER STANDARDS FOR HIGHER EDU

MAMIDALA JAGADESH KUMAR

Former Chairman, UGC and former Vice Chancellor, JNU

INDIA'S higher education system now enrols crores of students every year, making it one of the biggest anywhere. However, it struggles with a regulatory architecture built for another era.

Four national regulators touch almost all of India's college-going population. The University Grants Commission sets the broad rules for the vast majority of learners (~80 percent). Technical, teacher education, and architecture programmes fall under the jurisdiction of the All India Council for Technical Education, the National Council for Teacher Education, and the Council of Architecture, which together supervise over 10 percent of the rest. Parents, employers and students are increasingly asking a simple question: can this system actually deliver strong learning outcomes and meaningful careers?

The National Education Policy, 2020 argued that regulation should be firm on ethics and quality, yet minimal in everyday interference to provide greater autonomy for well-performing institutions. This balance is surprisingly difficult to achieve when multiple regulators issue separate norms for the same institution. A single university that offers BA, BTech, and BEd programmes may need to fill more forms than whole classrooms in a semester to satisfy the requirements of different regulatory bodies.

The Union government has now placed the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill before parliament. It aims to tackle this long-pending problem by setting up a Shiksha Adhishthan as the apex regulatory body for higher education. It will have three specialised councils under it—Viniyaman Parishad (Regulatory Council), Gunvatta Parishad (Accreditation Council), and Manak Parishad (Standards Council). The old regulators will now give way to a single, harmonised framework, while institutions of national importance will retain their autonomy.

At its core, the Bill insists that standard-setting, regulation and accreditation cannot be housed under one roof. The Standards Council will outline what good teaching should look like in various disciplines and keep those expectations aligned across the system. In architecture, the CoA would focus on defining good practice, while leaving enforcement to the new regulator. To oversee standards, the Regulatory Council will use a digital portal, drawing on data that institutions themselves publish in advance. The Accreditation Council will oversee an independent ecosystem of accreditation agencies and assess quality. When one body does not design standards, regulate and rate performance at once, conflicts of interest are reduced and credibility increases.

Another notable feature of the proposed Adhishthan is its inclusive structure—more akin to a round table than a command centre, with state representation and academic leadership integrated into decision-making. State governments will still decide where new campuses are established and what programmes are offered. Now they will also sit at the table where standards and regulations are discussed. The model creates a participatory platform to share responsibility and accountability. This co-operative approach helps address a common concern that a national body could centralise control and weaken the federal balance.

With three separate councils to regulate, accredit and set standards under the proposed apex regulatory body for higher education, conflicts of interest can be reduced. Student feedback on academic quality and campus infrastructure can inform an institution's rank. States can sit at the table where regulations are discussed

What would all this mean for students, the real stakeholders? When clear benchmarks and open accreditation reports judge colleges, students, especially those from smaller towns, can make far more informed choices about where to enrol. It provides for a grievance system that is accessible and responsive. Students can provide feedback on academic quality, infrastructure, governance and campus life so that it becomes a formal input into ranking and accreditation.

For institutions, the Bill promises both simplification and greater autonomy for those that perform well. A single digital dashboard will require institutions to publish key facts, from finances to faculty strength, which regulators and accreditors will then use instead of repeatedly requesting for data. This means approvals can move more quickly and objectively.

The youth dimension is critical. What if a working professional could return after a decade to stack a new qualification onto an old degree without fighting fresh regulatory hurdles? An aligned regulatory system can make it easier for institutions to design such programmes. Interdisciplinary and flexible curriculums allow students to explore diverse fields and reskill or upskill over time.

A stronger focus on research and innovation encourages problem-solving, creativity and self-reliance. If regulation supports these goals, India can create a broad talent pool ready for new-age challenges in technology, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The Bill explicitly recognises the value of global best practices. Instead of importing a foreign template, the Bill integrates international lessons with India's own institutional experience into a regulatory 'operating system' that the world can recognise and trust, while retaining national values and priorities.

The Bill aims to create an ecosystem where institutions move from overlapping procedures to more coordinated processes and from ambiguity to objectivity. It eschews a control-heavy mindset and lays a foundation for collaboration, academic judgement and institutional autonomy.

When regulatory requirements are simpler and clearly tied to learning outcomes, administrative work consumes a smaller portion of a faculty member's effort. They can now focus more on research, pedagogy and programme design. The Adhishthan envisions regulation as an enabler of Atmanirbhar Bharat in higher education, paving the way for a Viksit Bharat.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Marathi consolidation

Ref: *Mahayuti consolidates* (Dec 24). Following the massive loss at local polls across Maharashtra, Uddhav and Raj Thackeray's alliance banks on consolidatin the Marathi vote. Yet, vote transfer remain uncertain against the BJP-Shinde Sena axis's robust back-up. The tie-up may hurt Mahayuti further, but an outright win hinge on complete Marathi consolidation.
P V Prakash, Mumbai

Aravalli assessment

Ref: *Aravallis need care* (Dec 24). The Supreme Court's elevation-based definition may reduce ambiguity, but ecolo cannot be governed by a single benchmark. As noted, many critical hill features are sub 100 metre and play a key role in groundwat recharge. Protection requires ecological assessment, not procedural simplicity.
Gamini S, Bengaluru

Curb patriarchy

Ref: *Law unto themselves* (Dec 24). Patriarchy and moral policing lead to such bizarre restrictions on women. Detection of these despicable practices poses severe challenges, too, due to the reticence of victims. Enhanced vigilance must be ensure to bring culprits to book quickly.
Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Implementing MGNREGA

Ref: *G RAM G masks economic failure* (Dec 24). As mentioned, successful implementation should have yielded growth. Protestors failed to understand the appreciable features including the number of workdays and contribution of states to ensure strict execution of norms.
R V Baskaran, Pune

Data darkness

Ref: *Violence spirals in Assam* (Dec 24). Th temporary suspension of internet reflects a reliance on blanket restrictions instead of effective governance. While maintaining order is essential, communication shutdow disrupt daily life and often increase public anxiety rather than restore peace. Peace cannot be enforced by silencing people.
Nadim, Amroha

Sporting failure

Ref: *No ties at Chinnaswamy* (Dec 24). The denial of permission highlights unresolved safety and accountability issues. While police caution is justified, repeated delays reflect administrative failure. Authorities must be time-bound in implementing recommendations to restore safety, public trust, and the venue's credibility.
Ishita Shree, Patna

Business Standard
VOLUME XXXII NUMBER 216
NEW DELHI | FRIDAY, 26 DECEMBER 2025

Omnibus regulation

Securities Markets Code is a welcome step

The newly introduced Securities Markets Code, 2025 (SMC 2025), will replace three laws in an act of consolidation and simplification. The Code has been referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance for scrutiny. The three Acts in question are the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1956; the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) Act, 1992; and the Depositories Act, 1996. These deal with securities and operations of exchanges, holding and transferring securities in dematerialised or electronic form, and establish Sebi as regulator and the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT).

While the Code retains most of the existing provisions, there are additions and changes that warrant mention here — the composition of Sebi and its powers, for instance. The board of Sebi has nine members, which will go up to 15. The provision to have up to six independent, part-time members is expected to bring in an external perspective and expertise. The SMC proposes to expand clauses defining conflict of interest for Sebi members to include all members with direct or indirect interests, including the interests of their family members. It gives the central government the powers to remove a member whose interests may harm Sebi's functions. The Code restricts the appointment of investigating or adjudicating officers to individuals who are whole-time members (including the chairperson) or Sebi officers, unlike the current situation in which any person may be appointed for such tasks. However, an adjudicator must not have been involved in prior investigation.

For the sake of clarity and closure for alleged violators, in the matter of any investigation, the Code sets a limit of eight years from the date of the alleged offence. Now there is no limit. The limit will not apply to cases with a "systemic impact" on markets or to cases referred by investigating agencies. Currently, under the three Acts, contraventions are punishable with imprisonment, and fines, or both, in addition to penalties. The Code retains only the monetary penalty for some violations and imprisonment for offences like non-compliance with specified orders of adjudicating officers or directions of investigating officers and market abuses such as insider trading, defrauding investors, dealing in securities while possessing non-public information, or manipulating market prices of securities. It proposes to bring "market abuse" under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, which could allow the Enforcement Directorate to investigate.

The Code formally recognises the concept of market infrastructure institutions (MIIs). The Code also allows Sebi to delegate its powers of registering intermediaries or specific classes of investors to MIIs. It calls on Sebi to establish an investor-grievance redress mechanism and directs service providers to set up such mechanisms. It empowers Sebi to appoint an ombudsperson to redress grievances. The SMC recognises the concept of market infrastructure institutions (MIIs), including stock exchanges, clearing corporations, and depositories, and any new category of MIIs which may be notified by the Centre. MIIs can make bye-laws to ensure non-discriminatory access to services, minimise market abuse, ensure interoperability with other MIIs, and so on. Sebi is empowered to delegate some registration functions to MIIs. The Code also enables an "investor charter" for protecting investors.

In many ways, this consolidation could simplify the process of regulating markets, and it defines conflict of interest more broadly than the existing Act does, which is to be welcomed. There are concerns in some quarters that the SMC gives a lot of powers to Sebi. A clearer statement of checks and balances for Sebi's powers may be required to ensure the regulator stays accountable.

EV strategy for Delhi

The policy must reflect the NCR's shared air basin

The Delhi government's decision to roll out a revamped electric-vehicle (EV) policy next year underlines both the progress made in clean mobility and the structural limits of relying on EV adoption alone to tackle air pollution. The city's first EV policy, notified in 2020, set an ambitious target: 25 per cent of all new vehicle registrations to be electric by 2024. However, that goal was not met. While reports suggest that the EV uptake in the city has crossed 12 per cent, it has not translated into perceptible improvements in Delhi's winter air quality. This points to challenges in design and implementation. The upcoming EV policy seeks to bridge some of these gaps by linking financial incentives with scrapping old vehicles, expanding neighbourhood-level charging infrastructure, and continuing road tax and registration fee waivers. Subsidies aimed at narrowing the price gap between petrol-diesel vehicles and electric alternatives, along with battery-swapping options, are expected to form the core of the new framework. This marks a shift from a narrow purchase-subsidy approach to a more systemic intervention.

Delhi's experience so far suggests that incentives alone cannot deliver cleaner air. They must be aligned with outcomes on pollution. EV adoption has been concentrated in two- and three-wheelers, the segments that already have lower per-vehicle emission intensity. In fact, the data placed before the Supreme Court by the Commission for Air Quality Management suggests that around 37 per cent of vehicles in the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) fleet run on BS-III or older engines. As a result, EVs were added to the transport system without a commensurate exit of the dirtiest vehicles. This failure to retire old vehicles is particularly stark. The issue was brought into sharp relief recently when the Supreme Court lifted the ban it had imposed on the Delhi government for failing to act decisively against end-of-life vehicles. The court clarified that only vehicles with BS-IV-compliant engines and above would be exempt from action, removing the grey area created by its earlier order on 10-year-old diesel and 15-year-old petrol vehicles. The court's clarification followed evidence that BS-II and -III vehicles, which typically fall into these age categories, contribute disproportionately to Delhi's winter smog. Without credible and sustained enforcement on scrapping, the pollution benefits of EV adoption will remain marginal.

It is equally important to recognise that Delhi is part of a shared air basin across the NCR. Policies for just Delhi can deliver limited gains. In this context, coordination with neighbouring states is critical. Uttar Pradesh, for instance, has pursued a more aggressive policy on EVs and hybrids, combining tax exemptions, direct-purchase incentives, and subsidies for charging infrastructure. This has driven both adoption and the expansion of charging networks, creating positive spillovers for the wider NCR. Delhi's policy will be more effective if aligned with such regional efforts rather than operating as a standalone intervention. For the revamped EV policy to deliver results, subsidy design will be the key. Incentives must be targeted, time-bound, and explicitly linked to pollution reduction. Priority should be given to high-mileage commercial fleets, public transport, and the replacement of old diesel vehicles, where emission reduction per rupee spent is the highest. Also stronger disincentives for vehicles running on the internal combustion engine, through registration fees, congestion pricing, or a stricter enforcement of end-of-life norms are essential to ensure that clean vehicles replace, rather than merely supplement, dirty ones.

The investment divide across states

Low income or lack of industries alone doesn't explain why some states struggle to attract investment

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

While the Indian economy has been resilient in its growth even through uncertain times, a persistent concern both globally and locally is the significant variation in economic performance across states. Per capita income varies widely alongside the nature and composition of economic activity. Many studies have pointed out the lack of convergence in growth observed among Indian states. For India to achieve its aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2047, it is critical for growth to be broad-based, with the gains from economic growth accruing to a larger range of economic actors.

A crucial driver of growth in a developing economy is investment. By creating capacity and supporting employment, it can support both demand as well as supply. While, there are no officially published series of investment at the state level, the capital expenditure database of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy provides some insights. It tracks projects across states, excluding the north-eastern and hilly states.

R KAVITA RAO

A project in capex represents an intention to set up an additional productive capacity in India. This database covers both government and private sector projects, with economic activities spanning manufacturing, services and infrastructure. However, since the database relies on formal announcements regarding the intention, initiation, and completion of projects, it focuses on larger projects undertaken in the economy. Yet, factors that support large-scale investment could create forward and backward linkages, encouraging the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector. This piece, therefore, focuses on available information on investments in larger projects.

To understand investment across states, the new projects category is a useful point of reference. These represent intentions. Since announcements can fluctuate considerably across years, let us look at total announcements over a 10-year period from 2015 to 2024. As one would expect, Maharashtra tops the list with a share of over 15 per cent of total investment. The following three states — Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha — present a more diverse picture. Together these states account for 42 per cent of total new investment. In terms of per capita income, however, they are quite different — Gujarat is among the high-income states, Andhra Pradesh among the middle-income states, and Odisha is a low-income state. In other words, new investments are not concentrated only in high per capita income states. Agglomeration benefits do not seem to be the primary driver of new investment decisions. To explore what else matters, we look at two other aspects here.

Among important drivers of investment decisions, government investment can play a key role. The literature discusses two alternative perspectives that connect government investment and private investment — "crowding in" and "crowding out". Public investment in public goods and merit goods creates significant positive externalities. These, in turn, can translate into lower costs for private investment or, alternatively, increase the return on private investment, thus supporting higher levels of private investment. This loop of interaction is referred to as crowding in. Crowding out, on the other hand, refers to a discouragement of private investment if public investment pre-empts available resources.

The graph (*Public-private link*) shows government investment and private investment (announcements) aggregated over the period 2015-2024. A clear positive relation is evident. The correlation between these two variables is a high 0.82. In other words, there is significant evidence of crowding in — higher government investment supports higher private sector investment. States that have devoted more resources for public investment, through the budget and through their institutions such as public-sector enterprises, also tend to see higher levels of private investment.

Another aspect to consider is the impact of governance and business environment on decisions to invest in a state. States with more conducive environment attract more investments. Governance could be captured through a variety of indicators. One indicator could be the size of completed investments. This indicator reflects on the outcomes of good governance and the ease of doing business, since the success of governance models is not limited to attracting new investments alone but to support the execution and commissioning of said investment.

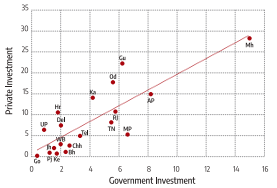
Better levels of completed investments, therefore, should be associated with higher levels of new investments as well. The second graph (*Finished project vs investment*) reflects a positive relation. Higher levels of completed investment do seem to be significantly associated with higher levels of new investment — public and private put together. The correlation between completed investment and new investment is once again very high at 0.89.

These correlations highlight the possibility of two lines of action by states wanting to improve investments levels — augmenting public investment and institutionalising mechanisms that support the completion of announced projects across both private and government segments. The former would support better infrastructure and create positive externalities for private investment, while the latter would reduce impediments to translating intentions into augmented capacities. By improving the overall economic environment — and through backward and forward linkages with the corporate sector — these initiatives could also support growth in the MSME segment.

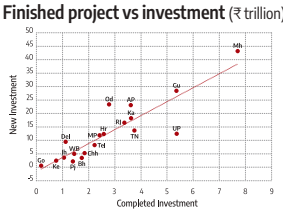
The author is director, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi. The views are personal

The crowding-in effect

Public-private link (₹ trillion)



Finished project vs investment (₹ trillion)



Source: CMIE

Undoing the damage is not reform

India's recent rollback of quality control orders (QCOs) has been greeted with relief and, in some quarters, applause. The government has begun dismantling a regulatory regime that disrupted supply chains, raised costs for exporters, and generated trade friction abroad. Inputs in textiles, steel and chemicals have been among the first to see reversals. In a difficult global environment, stepping back from policies that weaken competitiveness is simply sensible.

But to celebrate rollback as reform is to mistake damage control for progress. The QCO episode is best understood not as an isolated error but as a symptom of a deeper problem in India's economic governance: Inward-looking interventions followed by belated recognition of their costs and eventual retreat — often presented as pragmatism. The same dynamic has played out across economic policymaking, from a needlessly convoluted goods and services tax (GST) structure that is only now being simplified to the effective soft-pegging of the rupee in 2022-23 and its subsequent quiet unwinding. This article focuses on trade, but QCOs belong to a wider and recurring policy syndrome.

ABHISHEK ANAND

QCOs provide a convenient case study because their rise and fall have been unusually swift and visible. Although they have existed for decades, they were used sparingly until after 2020. Their numbers then surged dramatically, effectively turning them into non-tariff trade barriers. By restricting access to imported intermediate inputs, they raised production costs and hit export-oriented sectors the hardest.

Take apparel, for instance. QCOs imposed on polyester and viscose triggered a sharp collapse in imports. Firms initially stockpiled inputs in anticipation. Once inventories ran down, many were forced to rely on costlier or insufficient domestic substitutes. Predictably, productivity fell and exports suffered. These outcomes were not surprising — they followed basic economic logic.

By mid-2025, concerns within the government about supply disruptions were becoming harder to dismiss. The return of Trump-era trade shocks played a catalytic role — doing what internal warnings had failed to do. An inter-ministerial review mechanism was subsequently set up, and no new QCOs were issued thereafter. Later, a NITI Aayog report recommended scrapping many of them, especially those covering intermediate goods. From mid-November, the rollback began.

The timing is telling. As late as early November, the government was still defending QCOs and signalling their expansion. By mid-November, the QCO regime began to be quietly dismantled. When a policy is extolled for massive expansion one day and quietly dismantled the next, the issue is not a tactical adjustment. It is policy incoherence laid bare.

That pattern predates QCOs. Around 2017-18, India decisively reversed its post-1991 trajectory of trade liberalisation. After nearly three decades of lowering tariffs and deeper integration, policy turned inwards. Tariffs were raised across thousands of product categories, with the largest increases in labour-intensive manufacturing — precisely the sectors most dependent on cheap imported inputs to compete globally.

The consequences were predictable. Higher tariffs raised prices for consumers and increased input costs for manufacturers. Countries such as Vietnam and Bangladesh, which kept input tariffs low, saw their apparel sectors flourish. India, by contrast, struggled to convert global demand into export growth.

By 2022, the limits of this inward turn were becoming apparent. Anti-dumping duties imposed on steel in 2018-19 were revoked to contain costs, and proposed duties on PVC imports were shelved before implementation. Import tariffs were quietly reduced across many sectors, culminating in significant across-the-board cuts in 2023.

Taken together, these episodes reveal a familiar pattern: Interventions justified as strategic, followed by retreat once the economic damage becomes undeniable. But that damage is not reversible. Firms do not pause and resume on cue. When access to inputs is disrupted, supply chains are rewired, buyers move on, and investments are abandoned. The most productive firms — often the most export-oriented — are hit first, and lost market share is rarely recovered.

This is why conflating reversals with reforms could be damaging. Treating the two as equivalent weakens accountability and increases the risk of repetition. The irony is that India has imposed this uncertainty on itself at a particularly difficult moment. Global trade is already understrain from geopolitical fragmentation, slowing demand, and rising protectionism elsewhere. In such an environment, predictability is an economic asset. Instead, domestic uncertainty has been layered on top of global uncertainty.

The QCO rollback should be welcomed. But it should also prompt harder questions: Why is policy so often designed in ways that require retreat? Is decision-making too unilateral, too insulated from criticism, too dismissive of consultation, or too detached from technical expertise? Until this governing reflex is addressed, policy uncertainty will remain self-inflicted — and costly.

The author is managing director, Insignia Policy Research, and Visiting Fellow, Madras Institute of Development Studies

Into the mind of Albert Camus

BOOK REVIEW

DWIGHT GARNER

The first volume of Albert Camus's notebooks appeared in 1963, three years after his death in a car accident at the age of 46. The book, with entries from 1935 to 1942, received two especially notable English-language reviews, from two strikingly different writers.

The first was by A J Liebling, the journalist and gourmand, in *The New Yorker*. Liebling had struck up a friendship with Camus when the French Algerian writer visited America in 1946. Liebling, a Francophile and press critic, especially admired Camus's work during World War II as the editor of the Resistance journal *Combat*.

Liebling called Camus's notebooks "intensely enjoyable" and "a book to which one can return, at almost any page, with assurance of pleasure."

The second review was by Susan Sontag, in *The New York Review of Books*. Sontag opened with this provocation: "Great writers are either husbands or lovers." Because of his tranquillity and air of reasonableness, Sontag suggested, Camus was "the ideal husband of contemporary letters." (She could not have known that, according to his later biographers, he was serially unfaithful to his wives, the actress Simone Hié and the pianist Francine Faure.)

The rest of Sontag's review was a take-down of Camus both as a novelist and as a philosopher. "Was Camus a thinker of importance?" she writes. "The answer is no." She heaped more contumely on the notebooks themselves, calling them sketchy and impersonal and "not great."

Several more volumes of Camus's notebooks would appear over the years, and they're collected in full for the first time in *The Complete Notebooks*. Picking up the book, I had Liebling's and Sontag's warring voices in my mind. Putting it down, after completing its nearly 700 pages, I was surprised to find myself, a committed Liebling fanatic, on the Sontag side of the divide.

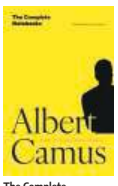
Camus's notebooks, which run from 1935 to 1959 contain almost nothing about his friends or his family, his experiences during wartime or much about his personal life. He was an intensely private man who found gossip and confession repellent.

Indeed, when he received the 1957 Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming at 44 one of the youngest authors to have done so, he wrote in a notebook, "Frightened by what's happening to me, what I didn't ask for." He reported having panic attacks. A few days later he wrote, "Never talk about your work" and "Those who truly have something to say never speak of it."

What these journals do contain are philosophical notes for the novels published during his lifetime — *The Stranger*, *The Plague* and *The Fall* — books that are *sui generis* explorations not just of the absurdity of existence but of isolation, guilt, redemption, and resilience.

Camus's notebooks also contain gleanings from his intense reading, of everyone from Milton and Goethe to Faulkner and Rosa Luxemburg, quotations that comprise a personal commonplace book. He was always seeking the core of things. He lived in his mind more than most men did. He whipped himself onward. "Withdraw completely and run your own race" is a typical dictum.

These notebooks, in this translation by Ryan Bloom, are dense and inward-facing and not, one thinks, meant for public consumption. They are not quite for the casual reader.



The Complete Notebooks
by Albert Camus | Translated by Ryan Bloom
Published by University of Chicago
704 pages $45

This casual reader was glad to make their acquaintance anyway, even if searching for the more lucid and interesting bits is like panning for gold. Some of the better known entries here, accounts of Camus's travels in the United States in 1946 and in Latin America in 1949, have also been published in earlier.

There is other material here to admire. Camus comments occasionally on his critics, writing in 1942: "Three years to create a book, five lines to ridicule it — and with inaccurate quotations." He later writes: "Malice is the only industry in France that doesn't suffer underemployment." About politics, he decides: "I prefer committed people to committed literature."

The sensualist in him is occasionally allowed to peek out. He goes with friends to a whorehouse; he admires women in the street "with their breasts free." Some of the comments are outraged and funny. "I always wonder why I attract socialites," he wrote in 1949. "All those hats!"

Camus's Mediterranean spirit comes through, especially in his love for swimming and for the sun. He liked travel, but not ostentatious luxury. "Fear is what makes travel valuable," he writes in an early entry — it should be an "ascetic experience." He mostly disdained fancy restaurants as well, praising the city of Oran, Algeria, as a place where "you can still find extraordinary cafes that have grime-varnished counters sprinkled with fly parts, a leg, a wing, and where you're served in chipped glasses."

Camus's notebooks are something like those countertops. But if these notebooks are messy and a bit chaotic, honest sustenance does appear. "There are days the world lies," a 24-year-old Camus writes one spring evening, and "days it tells the truth."

The reviewer has been a book critic for *The Times* since 2008.

the hindu businessline.
FRIDAY - DECEMBER 26, 2025

Open sesame

Relaxation in NPS exit rules much-needed

Despite its good returns, a key reason why the National Pension System (NPS) has not soared in popularity is its rigid withdrawal rules. Under these rules, NPS allowed subscribers to fully close out their accounts only at age 60. On closure, they were required to compulsorily use 40 per cent of their proceeds to buy an annuity. Withdrawals before age 60 were capped at three times and could be attempted only after a 5-year lock-in. The maximum age limit to stay in the scheme was 70.

This battery of rules effectively made the scheme unattractive for subscribers. Therefore, it is good that the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) has heeded market feedback to substantially relax these rules. PFRDA has made four subscriber-friendly tweaks to NPS exit rules last week. One, subscribers can now fully close their NPS accounts, provided they have completed 15 years with the scheme. This is sensible, given that many employees today aspire for early retirement and would not like to be locked out of their retirement savings until 60. The 15-year vesting period allows enough time for equity investments to deliver. Two, subscribers can now withdraw 80 per cent of their corpus as lumpsum, with only 20 per cent subject to compulsory annuitisation. This can instantly improve the scheme's popularity with private sector employees. Compulsory annuitisation assumes that the NPS is the only source of retirement savings for employees which is far from the truth. Moreover, annuity plans are poor choices for retirees because they don't offer inflation-adjusted income, deliver sub-par returns and carry unfriendly surrender terms. In fact, the PFRDA can consider doing away with the 20 per cent annuitisation requirement and allow investors to freely deploy their maturity proceeds, as is the case with Employees Provident Fund and Public Provident Fund. Full withdrawal without annuity has been allowed for NPS balances up to ₹8 lakh. But for balances between ₹8 lakh and ₹12 lakh, only ₹6 lakh can be withdrawn as lumpsum.

Three, subscribers can apply for partial withdrawals at any time without a 5-year lock-in and can make four partial withdrawals instead of three. This is welcome, as NPS balances are after all the subscribers' own savings and emergencies can crop up at any time. As partial withdrawals are anyway capped at 25 per cent, the cap on number of withdrawals could have been removed. Finally, retirees can stay invested in NPS until age 85 instead of 70, with the option to exit anytime in-between. This will help retirees avoid unnecessary portfolio churn, while allowing compounding of their returns to continue post-retirement.

However, while ushering in much-needed relaxations for private sector employees, government employees have been given the short shrift. The latter, for some reason, are still obligated to tie up 40 per cent of their final proceeds in annuities. Given that government employees have access to the Unified Pension Scheme, this seems superfluous.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

A suffering world needs messages of peace and hope

In one of his last sermons, the great Christian theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich asked: "Do we have a right to hope?" As an army chaplain to German forces during the first world war and a refugee from Nazi Germany, Tillich had witnessed first-hand some of the horrors of the 20th century. But his answer to the question he posed in 1965 was yes. Nobody could live without hope, Tillich told his Harvard audience, even if it led "through the narrows of a painful and courageous 'in-spite-of'". Sixty years on, a similar spirit of defiant optimism is needed to navigate our own era of conflict and anxiety. The fourth anniversary of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is approaching, and dark political forces menace the social fabric of western liberal democracies. LONDON, DECEMBER 23

讀賣新聞 THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Japan's lacked readiness for contingency

The Japanese government showed an insufficient sense of urgency regarding North Korea's nuclear development, and the United States had a growing distrust toward Japan. It is vital to learn from the lessons of the Japanese government's delayed response at that time. Japanese diplomatic documents from 1994 have been released. Among them, documents concerning the Japan-U.S. summit held in February during then Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa's visit to the United States detail discussions on the North Korean nuclear issue. Then U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who attended the summit, mentioned the possibility of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula, telling Hosokawa that there was a need to think about it. TOKYO, DECEMBER 25

NILANJAN BANIK

Funds alone don't ensure job scheme success

The demand for MGNREGA work depends on level of industrialisation, local corruption, besides a State's income level

Wage rates: A comparison (in ₹)

Economically Progressive States	State-wise daily wage rates for unskilled workers (2024-25)	State-wise average daily wage rates for male agricultural workers (2024-25)	Minimum Wage rates
Haryana	374	499.2	340
Maharashtra	297	343.2	202
Karnataka	349	454.3	411
Telangana	300	302	327
Tamil Nadu	319	573	132

Economically Laggard States	State-wise daily wage rates for unskilled workers (2024-25)	State-wise average daily wage rates for male agricultural workers (2024-25)	Minimum Wage Rates
Madhya Pradesh	243	256.4	235
Bihar	245	362.8	235
West Bengal	250	347.2	166
Odisha	254	368.7	280
Uttar Pradesh	237	354.8	295

Source: MGNREGA Schedule 2025, Ministry of Rural Development, India

One of the contentious issues in the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rojgar and Ajeevika Mission (VB-G Ram G) Bill, which was eventually passed in Parliament, concerns allowing States to pause MGNREGA-related work for 60 days of their choice during peak sowing and harvesting seasons.

Critics argue that the new 60:40 funding pattern, where States must bear 40 per cent of the financial cost, will make it harder for financially weaker States to implement the programme, thereby undermining the fundamental purpose of providing employment opportunities to people below the poverty line.

But our research, published in *Regional Statistics*, suggests the effectiveness of MGNREGA or for that matter VB-G Ram G in providing employment benefits to the needy and poor depends on a host of factors beyond the States' financial ability to implement such programmes. A pan-India uniform way of implementing it is not going to be effective.

Our research working with Workers Level Schedule (WLS) sourced from the All India Coordinated Report, by the NITI Aayog, reveals interesting results. The States considered are Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Kerala, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Uttarakhand.

In total, 6,580 raw data points were collected from 40 districts, covering a range of 162 Gram Panchayats. These districts and villages are chosen on the basis of a stratified, multistage random sampling method.

The States which did well in terms of implementing MGNREGA programmes are Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura. Although it is natural to assume that the poorer States will introduce more MGNREGA programmes, however, data reveals no such strong or direct correlation.

For example, although incidence of poverty in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh is high, there seems to be lack of usage of MGNREGA funds. Likewise, among the North-Eastern States, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur did not do well in terms of providing MGNREGA work. Some poorer States, like Chhattisgarh and Tripura did well in term of providing MGNREGA work.

For the relatively rich States such as Punjab and Haryana, where the demand for MGNREGA work was low, there is apparently not much interest in implementing the scheme.

WAGE IMPACT

Workers from the States of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Odisha, and West Bengal believed that MGNREGA intervention has led to increase in market wage rates. MGNREGA work has created demand for unskilled workers and this had some spillover effect in raising market wage rates for non-MGNREGA related unskilled work, for instance manual farm labour, porters, etc.

The States of Jammu and Kashmir, Odisha, and West Bengal are industrially backward, and MGNREGA work has been helpful in increasing average market wage rates for unskilled workers.

For the industrially advanced States like Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, the workers felt no drastic improvement in market wage rates on account of MGNREGA related activities. For instance, although the southern States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu have fared well in terms of implementing MGNREG schemes, most of these funds have been used for buying heavy machinery for the construction of MGNREGA assets. As there is a presence of an alternative industrial base (with a demand for manual labour), these States were not that successful in terms of providing wage employment related to MGNREGA work. Karnataka, for example, boasts a thriving agricultural sector and is a pioneer in the electronic national agriculture market (e-NAM), with less demand for work under MGNREGA We find that level of industrial development is more important in complementing the minimum wage rates in any States.

Due to corruption, workers sometimes do not demand work, knowing they will be denied employment. Poor implementation impacts overall wage levels in a State

CORRUPTION FACTOR

Also, some of the poorer States show an element of corruption, with relevant workers not getting MGNREGA works and sometimes not getting payment even after working.

There is evidence of money being stolen through multiple channels: false documentation, fabricated workers' lists, and significant asset misappropriation.

In many cases, jobs were allocated on a 'verbal basis' with no documentation maintained by village bodies. Due to corruption, workers sometimes do not demand work, knowing they will either be denied employment or not receive payment even if they do work. Poor implementation impacts overall wage levels in a State. The pattern of missing records reinforces concerns about disparities and irregularities stemming from self-selection bias, which is largely driven by unlawful political interference.

For instance, in Kerala and West Bengal, MGNREGA work faces labour shortages, yet panchayat pradhans have been instructed to submit wage bills listing local party workers as beneficiaries rather than genuine workers. If the variations due to the diversity of the different States are not incorporated in the Act, implementation cannot be perfect. Both the model and the method of implementation of VB-G Ram G must be customised according to the needs of every region, with minimum leakage of funds due to corruption in various layers.

Fortunately for India, the NSSO has divided the country into 88 independent agro-climatic regions depending on soil, rainfall, and agricultural productivities.

For the programmes to be effective, it is advisable that the VB-G Ram G is implemented as per geographical characteristics, taking into consideration the occupational patterns of the local people. And this choice should be devoid of politics as some Opposition parties are claiming.

The writer is Professor, Mahindra University, Hyderabad

Why India needs a new economic model

The two major problems are the lack of well paying jobs and rural stagnation. Both these issues need urgent attention

Subodh Mathur

India needs a new economic model. The current model, launched as part of the 1991 reforms, has delivered high GDP growth, hitting 8.2 per cent over July-September 2025. But high GDP growth does not mean that all is well. For example, in the 1980s growth accelerated to over 5 per cent. Yet India suffered a major macroeconomic crash in 1991, which forced it to abandon the model it adopted in the 1950s.

India is not headed to a similar crash today, and the current model has reduced poverty and increased consumption. Nevertheless, India is facing a severe multidimensional socio-economic crisis, with its problems stemming from its economic model.

The greatest failure is the shortage of reasonably paying jobs. Thousands of over-qualified people apply for a single low-paying job. Many people work long hours but do not make a decent living. Growth has not reached them.

Most unexpectedly, over 800 million Indians, a majority, get food subsidies. Despite good growth, the share of the population getting food subsidies has increased significantly. The government spending on these subsidies reduce the money available for other critical areas, such as health and education.

More than 60 per cent of Indians live in villages, primarily employed in agriculture. But agriculture produces only about 15-20 per cent of the GDP, necessitating the various subsidy schemes. Overwhelming debt leads thousands of farmers and others to commit suicide every year. In Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat, young people sell their assets, and pay thousands of dollars to be smuggled into the US and Canada.

'GHOST' VILLAGES

The ones who migrate to cities end up living in slums and send money to their families in villages, resulting in a remittance economy.

Some States already have "ghost villages," where only a few elderly people live. The current model is creating a significant future problem.

At the same time, life in large cities is becoming harsher. There's extensive air and water pollution. In winter, the air is hazardous to people's health in New Delhi and many other cities across India. Further, the authorities cannot keep up with the increasing demand for municipal services.

Today, production is concentrated in large cities. The top 10 urban agglomerations, which account for about 10 per cent of the population, produce about 25 per cent of the output. Continued increases in GDP will come from higher production in such cities. It will lead to more people, more pollution, more congestion, more water problems, and more strewn garbage, making life harsher.

QUALITY JOBS. Need of the hour REUTERS

On a positive note, India has had considerable success in knowledge-based sectors such as software and pharmaceuticals. But, even here, India is not a world leader. During the pandemic, India's Serum Institute produced vaccines for many countries, but its technology was imported. India has not yet created a single world-class AI/ML app. Further, India does not play a leading role in other emerging world-dominant technologies, such as batteries and storage, electric vehicles, new pharmaceuticals, and gene editing, even though it could.

India is rightly proud of being the world's fourth-largest economy and wants to be a significant player on the international stage. Yet, the rupee is not on its way to becoming an international currency. In 2006, the Tarapore Committee proposed a 5-year plan for this but it was never implemented. Today, there's little discussion of this goal, primarily because it's too difficult to achieve under the current economic model. It is clear that, after about 35 years of the current model, India needs to do something different. Piecemeal fixing of the individual issues will not be enough. Instead, India needs a new economic model that delivers high growth and addresses at least the problems discussed above.

The time has come for educational institutions, think tanks, and concerned citizens to urgently focus on the features of a new economic model for India. It's only 22 years to 2047.

The writer is an economist with extensive practical public policy experience

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.

Cutting the clutter

Apropos "Regulating academia" (December 25). The proposed Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill reflects a welcome intent to simplify India's cluttered higher education regulation. A unified framework replacing overlapping bodies could reduce red tape, improve transparency and bring coherence to a compliance heavy system. A single regulator with clear verticals for standards, accreditation and funding promises efficiency and accountability.

However, extending this umbrella to Institutes of National Importance raises legitimate concerns. The success of IITs, IIMs and IISc rests largely on their statutory autonomy and freedom to set benchmarks. Even light supervision risks gradual regulatory creep.

The Bill's referral to a Joint Parliamentary Committee is timely. Safeguarding institutional excellence while reforming governance demands careful calibration, not uniform control.

K Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

Driving EVs

This refers to 'AQI can be cut without hurting growth' (December 25). As one of the measures in reducing AQI, the writer has batted for embracing to EVs in the Capital city and adjoining areas and also highlighted that certain quantum of capacity utilisation becoming redundant under ICE models of vehicles, which is quite unavoidable in the current changing scenarios.

Delhi and bordering areas must be made EV friendly zones and the buyers of the properties also must be mandated with owning of EVs. Liberal concessions towards income tax relief must be introduced on such property buyers and property taxes waived for initial period of five years so as to attract more towards this regime.

State and Centre must think out-of-the-box in containing the surge in AQI. It is time India sought financial assistance from Loss and Damage Fund instituted under COP27 series for such climate mitigation activities.

RV Baskaran
Pune

Revive agri-futures

Apropos 'Why the agri-derivatives market has lost its sheen' (December 25). Indeed the suspension of seven agri-futures since December 2021 led to the decline in commodity futures turnover including the notional turnover.

Frequent trading bans, stringent regulatory provisions and decreased involvement of the chain partners, hedgers and clients cause the decline.

Agri derivatives by managing price risks, help farmers and traders.

SEBI must take steps to recover a vibrant agri-derivative market, the saviour of farmers from loss caused by high volatility in agri goods prices.

NR Nagarajan
Sivakasi

Published by Nirmala Lakshman and Printed by Praveen Someshwar at HT Media Ltd. Plot No.8, Udyog Vihar, Greater Noida Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar, U.P.201306, on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT. LTD. Chennai-600002. Editor: Raghuvir Srinivasan (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRP Act). ISSN 0971 - 7528

Laboured laws

Contract workers need better protection

KR Shyam Sundar

WORKERS. Contract worries

The practice of employing contract labour dates back to colonial times. However, the government enacted the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act in 1970 (CLRAA).

As is well known CLRAA provided for the abolition of contract work under certain conditions [s.10(1)] and regulation of conditions of work. The EPF Act and the ESI Act cover contract labour and place primary responsibility on the principal employers for various labour rights.

In the era of globalisation, employers argued that they should have the freedom to deploy flexi-labour like contract labour even in perennial/core activities and pleaded for the removal of abolition clauses from CLRAA.

In 2003, Chandrababu Naidu, Chief Minister of the then Andhra Pradesh, amended the CLRAA to distinguish between "core" and "non-core" industries and allowed liberal employment of contract labour in the latter. It is the first State to do so.

The Occupational Safety and Health and Working Conditions Code (OSHWCC), 2020 liberalises the laws relating to contract labour. It increased the threshold for applicability of the Code from 20 to 50, as was done in many States. Economic Survey (2024-25) reported that 12 States have increased the applicability of CLRAA from 20 to 50, two others to 30 or 40.

Trade unions argue that the contract labour system is exploitative. Petty contractors are more prone to deny or run away with their social security money (Second National Commission on Labour (SNCL 2002). Contractors should be given a license not on the size of the workforce (20/40/50) and instead, like China, should use registered capital as a criterion. Cheating is less likely to take place thanks to contractors' financial capacity.

OSH lists the conditions, such as hours of work, fixation of wages and other essential amenities in respect of contract labour that should be complied with by the contractor seeking license [s.47(3)(a)]. On the other hand, it allows contractors who do not fulfil the set criteria, a "work specific licence", electronically renewable by the Central Government [s.47(2)]! The license's tenure is raised to five years.

While it prohibits employment of contract workers in "core" activities, it allows the principal employer to employ them provided the activity is ordinarily done by contract workers or the activities are such that they not require full-time workers for short-hours or any sudden increase in the demand to be completed by a tight schedule [s.57(1)(a)(b)(c)]. These effectively allow for easy employment of contract labour in "core" activities. We see that the OSHWCC is both ultra-flexible and has removed normally untrustworthy contractors from legal regulation.

In the meantime, the contract labour system was subject to judicial scrutiny. The Air India judgment allowed absorption of contract labour by principal employers upon abolition of the contract labour system (*Air India Statutory Corporation v. United Labour Union and others, 1996*). Later, the SAIL judgment (*Steel Authority Of India Ltd. & Ors. ... vs National Union Water Front Workers & Ors, 2001*) reversed the Air-India judgment. This was a major blow to the employment security of contract workers.

In the Uma Devi case, the Supreme Court ruled that daily/temporary labourers even if working for long, will not be regularised if their appointments did not follow the constitutional process.

A few judgments have condemned undesirable employment practices in the name of globalisation. In *Shripal & Anr. v. Nagar Nigam, Ghaziabad, 2025*, the Supreme Court criticised the practice by public institutions of hiring workers on daily wages (temporary contracts). It affirmed that long-serving temporary workers appointed against sanctioned vacancies cannot be denied regular appointment because of their initial appointment being temporary. The fundamental question is whether poor contract workers can afford long years of litigation to secure their rights.

The writer is Professor of Practice, MDI, Gurgaon

MADAN SABNAVIS

Fiscal boost: What works, spending or tax cuts?

BOOSTER SHOT. On balance, expenditure works better as a fiscal stimulus, as beneficiaries of tax cuts are likely to spend less and save more

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Whether apocryphal or true, it is said economist Arthur Laffer, while dining with some government dignitaries in a café, used a paper napkin to draw a curve which mapped lower taxes to higher growth. This became the famous Laffer Curve in supply side economics; it was believed that lower taxes make people work more which generates higher income and hence growth. Simultaneously, the tax revenue also grows. This approach was part of what became Reaganomics.

While this theory is neat, the willingness to work does not translate into more work being generated as companies do not operate this way. But if one were to look at this theory in a broader sense, lower taxes should help in augmenting spending and hence increase growth as well as taxes. This is the spirit in which the two rather important measures taken by the government on income tax and GST 2.0 can be viewed.

The income tax benefit was to release ₹1 lakh crore of income that is expected to be spent on goods and services. The ₹48,000 crore of revenue foregone by the government on GST on account of rate rationalisation is also expected to create demand as well as raise disposable income during the festival season. Thus, both these measures are growth-enhancing.

A point of debate is whether income measures work better or expenditure? It has been seen that the government's free food policy to 800 million people has helped them to move up the ladder of consumption as basic necessities have been provided free of cost.

DISCRETIONARY SPEND

Hence when data on household consumption surveys show that people are spending less on food and more on discretionary items it is due to release of money that would otherwise have been spent on food. The view on balance is that while both the approaches are useful from the point of view of optics, expenditure is a more effective way of bringing about development as it is direct. On the other hand, an income tax cut helps only those who pay taxes. While the exemption limits have been enhanced for those lower down the income stream, the revenue that would have been generated would have been lower than what is mopped up at higher levels.

If income tax cuts are to benefit those earning higher income, the outcome on spending may be limited as this group may not really have been constrained by the existing tax rates.

A similar picture can be seen when it comes to GST reduction. Demand for products like automobiles or durable goods would not have been constrained on the price front for those in the higher income groups. But for the middle-class and lower income groups, this will make a difference, leading to an increase in demand. This view is also echoed by companies in the consumer goods space.

However, these are products which people normally purchase occasionally. Hence, a bunching of demand and consumption will be seen for one or two quarters. But it would be back to normal subsequently. This is because the spending cycle can be maintained only if there are new consumers entering the market which is linked with job creation.

Overall, fiscal policy has provided both the props for consumption. First

In 2019 when the government reduced the corporate tax rate the expectation was that companies would use this prop to invest more. But that did not happen

the prices of goods have come down and second, disposable income has gone up. But for this to work, households need to spend. There would be a normal tendency for 30 per cent to be saved, which is the savings rate. This would be much higher for the higher income groups which invest in stocks; hence expenditure on consumption may take a back seat.

EXPENDITURE IMPACT

This can be contrasted with the expenditure programmes of the government at both the Central and State levels. As mentioned earlier, the free food scheme is a continuous booster for spending as it targets only those lower down the income ladder.

Second, the same holds for the PM Kisan Scheme where individual farmers receive ₹6,000 per month.

Third, the various States' schemes for women, which range from ₹1,000-1,500 per month, is a direct booster for spending.

Fourth, physical goods given in the form of sewing machines, bicycles and laptops provide a direct boost to the industries which adds to the GDP.

Fifth, the MGNREGA programme is another cash transfer scheme which adds directly to spending of poorer households. Last, the large outlays of the government on infrastructure are probably the most effective way of forging strong backward linkages with industries while bringing about growth with development.

Therefore, on balance it does appear that expenditure plans, whether capex on revenue expenditure tend to be more effective in terms of having a direct impact on the economy. Any benefit on the taxation front assumes that the beneficiaries will all spend the gains on both the taxation and price fronts in a certain manner irrespective of their income level.

Also, the same may not necessarily be replicated in future. It can be pointed out here that in 2019 when the government reduced the corporate tax rate the expectation was that companies would use this prop to invest more. But that did not happen as all investment decisions are based on capacity utilisation, which in turn is dependent on demand.

From the government's point of view it makes sense to work on both fronts. Expenditure is certainly more direct, the benefits are known as they are targeted to specific sections of society to deliver superior outcomes.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

Direct income support can strengthen the PDS system

Amit Kapoor
Pradeep Puri

India proudly delivers free rice and wheat to more than 800 million people, but the price tag of this generosity is astonishing. Every kilogram that reaches a ration shop costs the exchequer ₹28-₹40, inclusive of procurement, storage, transport, interest and incidental costs. In FY2024-25, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) estimated an economic cost of ₹39.75 per kg for rice and ₹27.74 for wheat, and the food subsidy bill was around ₹2.05 lakh crore. This is the fiscal reality behind "free" foodgrains.

Studies suggest that about 28 per cent of subsidised grain never reaches intended households. Roughly 20 million tonnes are diverted or lost, imposing an annual cost of ₹69,108 crore when valued at the government's economic cost.

India's overall logistics bill is measured at 7.97 per cent of GDP, and the PDS bears a heavy share of multi-modal movement and warehousing within that envelope. Even when the route is well-managed, foodgrains stored under tarpaulins or in traditional godowns face quality risks. Between 2011 and 2017, about 62,000 tonnes rotted in FCI warehouses.

This invites a simple, urgent question: If the government already bears the full cost, why not transfer the same amount directly to vulnerable households as cash, let them buy food locally, and strip away the leakage-prone logistics chain? This is where technology and policy innovation can offer a way forward.

Specifically in this context, direct income support can be transformational. If the Centre spends ₹28-₹40 per kg to deliver cereals, it can execute a Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) of equivalent value indexed to inflation and calibrated to NFSA entitlements, into Aadhaar-linked beneficiary accounts every month. DBT can convert an opaque supply-chain subsidy into a transparent consumer subsidy, reduce leakages, and empower vulnerable families to make consumption choices. India's DBT infrastructure is robust, already handling LPG subsidies, PM-KISAN, and pensions at scale. Furthermore, evidence from Karnataka's Anna Bhagya cash-transfer initiative shows that beneficiaries used the funds to buy better-quality grains and diversify diets, while also opening new bank accounts, furthering financial inclusion.

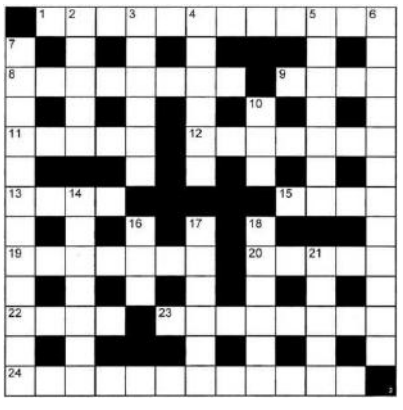
PDS. Income supplement

Such a reform can be scaled up to India's PDS, but the transition should follow a phased, opt-in approach, allowing beneficiaries to choose between grain and cash for 12-18 months. This would protect vulnerable regions while strengthening local markets. Indexing benefits to cereal inflation will protect purchasing power during price spikes. Moreover, food coupons can bridge the gap while retail infrastructure deepens.

Replacing PDS with direct income support, pegged to the true economic cost of entitlements and phased with beneficiary choice, is the fiscally prudent, socially progressive path that India should take. It will keep food security intact, strengthen dignity and agency at the last mile, and free resources to invest in nutrition diversification, retail infrastructure and agro-logistics, the very things that make the promise of "free food" sustainable in the long run.

Kapoor is chair and Puri is Fellow Institute for Competitiveness. With inputs from Ananya Khurana

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2584



EASY

ACROSS

01. Regarding with disfavour (12)
08. For the motion (2,6)
09. Shivering fever (4)
11. Short cassock; kitchen wear (5)
12. Having submitted (5,2)
13. Sound like clockwork (4)
15. Rip (4)
19. Apostatise from; fail to follow suit (7)
20. Short sword (5)
22. Marked in black and white (4)
23. One worshipping images (8)
24. Where cows are brought to be sold (6,6)

DOWN

02. Arrive at as conclusion (5)
03. Days leading up to Christmas (6)
04. Pitch suddenly forward (6)
05. Naive young woman on stage (7)
06. Purveyors of fruit and vegetables (12)
07. Distrusting fellow-men (12)
10. Hedera (3)
14. Satisfied (7)
16. Past, since (3)
17. Infrequently (6)
18. Antenna (6)
21. Church rent-charge (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. Said to be wrong, very quietly wandering when rejecting it (12)
08. For the motion to be currently popular (2,6)
09. Illness may be difficult to pin down after five (4)
11. Wear for a bishop in front of the proscenium arch (5)
12. Having surrendered to gin when about to uproot vine (5,2)
13. Credit given for the mark is right (4)
15. It looks like a drop in the rent (4)
19. Apostatise from what Irene guesses may be included (7)
20. Short sword is French, and the company returns it (5)
22. A foot across the Channel it's marked in black and white (4)
23. Great admirer for one to cheat on a subsequent occasion (8)
24. How to let team track herd to be sold here (6,6)

DOWN

02. Gather at home but fear making a loss (5)
03. Non-u, the way it is vaunted when Christmas is coming (6)
04. Go in off the side and take it to commit oneself (6)
05. Having seen blue halves, she takes part on stage (7)
06. Sellers of vegetables corner eggs and rearrange them (12)
07. Point is, charm can be misapplied if so distrustful of men (12)
10. In tod and in vixen, yelping starts (3)
14. Study the marquee and what's inside it (7)
16. A turn will indicate that the time is past (3)
17. May have sold me out on rare occasions (6)
18. Remark cautiously dropped might free the French of it (6)
21. A tenth of it is given over to article (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2583

ACROSS 1. Counterpane 8. Undertow 9. Pore 10. Deter 13. East 16. Ever 17. Once 18. Doom 20. Clear 24. Yawn 25. Bathroom 26. Reading-desk

DOWN 2. Odds 3. Nurse 4. Evoke 5. Ample 6. Quarter-days 7. Kettledrums 11. Tonic 12. Rouse 14. Aunt 15. Hero 19. Manna 21. Learn 22. Ached 23. Boss

THE ASIAN AGE
26 DECEMBER 2025

New elected Dhaka govt must for India ties' reset

As events in Bangladesh tend to spiral out of control whenever student protests are further impelled by Jamaat-e-Islami fundamentalism, India has the unenviable task of trying to set right the ties that shaped one of its most fruitful partnerships for nearly two decades in the region. Considerable loss of jobs in a plunging economy in which poverty is growing by leaps and bounds has created volatile conditions that may have added to the restlessness which the former microfinance banker has not the wherewithal to help control.

Attacks on Hindus leading to insecurity among the minorities not seen since Sheikh Hasina Wazed flew into exile in India in August 2024, targeting of student leaders of the so-called revolution and a chief adviser in Muhammad Yunus who is more of a wrecker who has lost the ideological plot thanks to his penchant for mending ties with Pakistan, historically the oppressor of East Pakistan, while invariably kowtowing to the Jamaat and its radical student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir, are problems that plague our neighbour to the east.

To blame India for all ills has been his playbook and it is not a fanciful conspiracy theory that has led to the slain student leader Hadi's kin pointing fingers at Mr Yunus who may facilitate his hanging on to power by putting off the polls scheduled for February 12. With the legitimacy of his government always in grave doubt, India has no one to reach out to at a time of severe anti-India sentiment exploiting the unrest. Waiting for the poll results and then reaching out to a legitimate new regime is the only recourse available to India.

To blame India for all ills has been his playbook and it's not a fanciful conspiracy theory that has led to student leader Hadi's kin pointing fingers at Mr Yunus who may yet put off the polls scheduled for February 12

On the political front, a significant event has taken place with the return on Thursday from self-imposed 17-year exile in the UK of Tarique Rahman, son of Khaleda Zia and potential leader of the troubled country after the polls from which Sheikh Hasina's Awami League may be excluded. The same US voices that protested Ms Hasina's anti-democratic moves in driving Khaleda Zia's BNP to boycott the January 2024 polls are now protesting the anticipated exclusion of the Awami League.

It reeks of irony as it was the intervention of US liberals that saw the ousting of Ms Hasina's government and the foisting of Mr Yunus that did lead to Bangladesh jumping from what was or wasn't quite the frying pan straight into the fire. Dhaka may never again return to open electoral democracy as in India. Even then, it is India's task to try and restore ties that have mutually benefited the two nations — Bangladesh with considerable help for its economy by way of trade, energy and water and India with easy access to its own northeastern states via the land route.

Given the current slide in ties with embassies shut and the visa process suspended in both nations, dealing with the Yunus regime does not seem possible. More tumultuous events may take place between now and the polls, which are just over a month away, but it is important from decisive control of the law-and-order situation point of view that an elected government be in place soon to rein in the extremists and stabilise conditions for order to prevail and the economy to repair itself and catch up again.

A giant punch by Isro

The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) scripted another record by launching the 6.1-tonne satellite — the heaviest launched from India — aboard Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM3). It was a defining moment for the Indian space agency, its scientists, engineers and technicians. It highlights India's arrival as a spacefaring nation with credible heavy-lift launch capabilities, which are essential for deep-space exploration and human spaceflight.

The LVM3, which was earlier known as the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle Mark-III, is the most powerful rocket that Isro ever had. It was designed to place large payloads into Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit and Low Earth Orbit, and represents years of India's indigenous engineering in structural design, mission integration and cryogenic propulsion.

India is only the sixth country to have a rocket that can carry a payload of up to 10 metric tonnes. The BlueBird Block-3 satellite — weighing 6.1 tonne — that Isro launched on December 24 was the heaviest satellite ever carried by an Indian rocket. Apart from enhancing Isro's standing in the space community, it will also help the country to emerge as a key player in the commercial launches.

For a country like India, where satellite services underpin everything from weather forecasting and disaster management to banking, navigation and rural connectivity, heavy lift capability has direct developmental implications. It will also help India in its human spaceflight under the Gaganyaan programme. The LVM-3 will ferry India's proposed space station modules.

The insertion of BlueBird Block-3 in Low Earth Orbit — which Isro chief described as the most accurate — strengthens Isro's confidence that it can independently support these ambitions without relying on foreign launch systems and without extravagant spending.

While Isro is on the right path, it still has a long way to go because 10 tonne payload is the lowest lift capacity that six space majors — the US, Russia, Europe, China, Japan and India — have. The government must support Isro with all that it requires to make India proud.

THE ASIAN AGE

KAUSHIK MITTER
Editor

K. SUBHAKAR
Printer & Publisher

THE ASIAN AGE office is located at:
New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: (011) 23211124.
Published and Printed on behalf of and for
Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited, Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110 002 at BFL Infotech Ltd., C-9, Sector-III, Noida -201301.
London: Quickmarsh Ltd, 8th Floor, Block 2, Elizabeth House, 39 York Road, London, SE1 7NQ.
RNI Registration number: 57290/94

Subhani

Why is India still so dirty and polluted?

Mohan Guruswamy

Keeping public conveniences working and clean is the job of the state. The PM should turn his focus on why the government fails to deliver services in India. Only then can he make a Swachh Bharat.

Eleven years after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the Swachch Bharat Abhiyan with much fanfare, it is apparent that we cannot clean up the rotting trash that has become so common on our streets all over the country. Men can be seen all over the country peeing on walls or into the air. It is almost impossible to find any pavements in our towns and cities, and when there are some, they are strewn with trash and wet with urine. Simple logic tells us that we need a lot more trash bins and public toilets. But that is the easier part. Keeping them clean and usable is the more difficult part. Clearly, we are failing. We have a system of high-cost government with low returns. We need a newer and better way of managing ourselves.

Visiting the Banaras Hindu University on February 4, 1916, Mahatma Gandhi in his address said: "I visited the Vishvanath temple last evening. If a stranger dropped from above on to this great temple, would he not be justified in condemning us? Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temples should be as dirty as they are? If even our temples are not models of cleanliness, what can our self-government be? We do not know elementary laws of cleanliness. We spit everywhere. The result is indescribable filth."

In the 1,110-odd years since then, things have only worsened. We not only spit everywhere, we piss everywhere, we shit wherever and dump our garbage anywhere. India is easily the most dirty, unhygienic and filthy country in the world.

Picking up from here, our Prime Minister had rightly launched the Swachh Bharat campaign to clean up India. He has announced an ambitious campaign to build home toilets for 12 million urban households, 25 million public toilets, and 30 million community toilets. In all, over 300 million will be helped with "solid waste management practices", and this was to be achieved by 2019 and will cost the nation Rs 62,009 crores. This is not a sum that we cannot afford. Will India become a cleaner, healthier and more hygienic nation, less offensive to sight and smell? I didn't think so then, and by now it is apparent that the Swachh Bharat campaign has so far been more of a failure than a success.

But even if we find the money, where is the public administration to do it? We now have a highly centralized system more suitable to governing India than serving India. The structure of our public administration, with its preponderance at the national and state capitals, and with a tiny fraction left to interface with citizens at a local level, and even these not being answerable to citizens is at the root of our inability to transform this country.

When India became independent, our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, advocated disbanding the civil service structure inherited from the British, and wanted a new system of public administration that will not just preserve order to facilitate extraction, but will drive change and equitable development. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, however, was against such a radical transformation of government, and preferred India to be administered by an elite civil service such as the ICS.

This led to the creation of the IAS and IPS as the main instruments of administration. But the system remained as before, a system to maintain control rather than transform. The consequences of this are still apparent. The three levels of government together employ about 185 lakh persons. The Central government employs 34 lakhs, all the state governments together employ another 72.18 lakhs, quasi-government agencies account for a further 58.14 lakhs, and at the local government level, a tier with the most interface with ordinary citizens, we have only 20.53 lakh employees. This simply means we have five persons ordering us about, for every one supposedly serving us. What this translates into is that if you build toilets, you won't have enough people to clean them. Ditto for sewage systems. As it is, garbage pick-up is selective, tardy and the signs of failure can be seen in all our cities and villages.

The Ashok Mehta committee in 1977 was tasked with evolving an effective and decentralised system of development administration. The committee held that development would only be deep and enduring when the community was involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation process and suggested an early establishment of elected local bodies and devolution to them of necessary resources, power and authority. Its core recommendation was that the district must be the basic building block and envisaged a two-tier system, with the Mandal Panchayat at the base and the Zilla Parishad at the top.

This structure did not develop the requisite democratic momentum and failed to cater to the needs of rural development. There are various reasons for such an outcome, which include political and bureaucratic resistance at the state level to share power and resources with local level institutions, domination of local elites over the major share of the benefits of welfare schemes, lack of capability at the local level and lack of political will. Consequently, no rural area in India has any worthwhile local government.

For that matter, nor does any city or town in India have a truly independent municipal administration autonomous of the state governments. It is as if the ordinary people have lost control over their lives and are now victims of the whims and fancies of distant masters.

The Prime Minister has done well by impressing on people the need to keep their surroundings clean. While people must not litter and dispose them at convenient appointed places, the job of lifting the garbage from there for disposal is that of the appropriate tier of government. While people are expected not to defecate everywhere, the responsibility of providing sanitation is that of the state. Building toilets at public places and institutions and impressing on people to use them is laudable, but keeping them working and clean is the job of the state. The condition of most public conveniences, including in the Central Secretariat, will tell you that the government is not working. The Prime Minister should turn his focus on why the government fails to deliver services in India. Only then can he make a Swachh Bharat.

A clean India will automatically generate an additional one to two per cent GDP growth and we can truthfully account for public administration as services for national income accounting.

***Mohan Guruswamy** is a scholar and author. The views expressed here are his own.*

LETTERS

BLOOD ON OUR HANDS

If Islamists in Bangladesh kill innocent Hindus and liberals, protests should certainly be lodged not only in India but worldwide, but our so-called nationalists must also be asked as to where their outrage disapperas when children of Bharatmata like Mohammed Akhlaq, Junaid Khan, Md Afrazul and Sabir Malik get lynched after spending their whole lives working hard at making an honest living and providing for their children! Despite being only a mason and from a backward community, Afrazul (48) educated his three daughters. Well, are those born Muslim not counted as Indians or even human beings? And when dalits are tortured or murdered at the behest of "upper-caste" Hindus, where does all rhetoric of "Hindu *ekta*" vanish?

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata

AMERICAN OPTICS

THE CLAIM that the US economy has surged by 4.3 per cent needs careful reading. Yes, the growth number looks strong on paper, but it does not mean ordinary Americans are doing better. Much of this growth is driven by spending from the wealthiest 20 per cent, while middle-class spending has fallen due to high housing, healthcare and education costs. Job losses of over 1 lakh workers and rising unaffordability show stress beneath the headline figures.

R.S. Narula
Patiala

PAY IT FORWARD

BOXING DAY is celebrated today, a day after Christmas, and it is meant for giving gifts, money and donations to people in need. The name "Boxing Day" has been derived from the term, "Christmas Box". This is because on this day, the rich and well-to-do people gave Christmas box presents to their servants and poor. This day is meant to be a holiday for the servants and they go to visit their families with the gifts and presents that they receive from their employers. Another theory tells us that a box was used to collect money and gifts for the poor which is placed in the church. This box is opened the day after Christmas. And of course, we have the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne, Australia, which this time is being played against England as part of the Ashes.

Jubel D'Cruz
Mumbai

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu

Gujarat babus get a message and a deadline

Deadlines in government are famously elastic, especially when they run into land disputes, contractor delays, or inter-departmental buck-passing. But this time, the subtext feels sharper. The mood currently hanging over Gujarat's babus is one of quiet desperation after a message from the chief minister's office: stop explaining, start finishing. And the PMO is also leaning in.

On paper, this looks like routine governance, review meetings, status reports, and coordination memos. In reality, it signals something deeper: a system under pressure to show delivery, not just intent. When departments are asked to account for both completed and ongoing projects, and unfinished works are given a hard March deadline, it's rarely about curiosity. It's about urgency, optics and ticking political clocks.

The issues being flagged aren't new. Land acquisition bottlenecks, traffic choking urban centres, industrial growth rubbing up against environmental limits, roads and bridges that seem perpetually "under renovation" — this is Gujarat's long-running to-do list. What's changed is the tone. The insistence on quality, ministerial coordination, and cross-departmental alignment suggests that silos are no longer being indulged. Or at least, not publicly.

With the 2026-27 budget looming in February, this push smells suspiciously like pre-budget housekeeping. No finance minister wants to present a fresh slate of promises while last year's commitments are still stuck in the files or, worse, on the ground. Action plans, acceleration strategies, completion targets: these are the bureaucratic equivalent of a government tightening its shoelaces before a sprint.

The real test, of course, lies beyond review meetings and deadline-driven emails. Will this pressure translate into smoother roads, cleaner air, faster approvals, and less finger-pointing? Or will March arrive with the familiar chorus of "procedural delays" and "unforeseen constraints"?

For now, Gujarat's babus know one thing for sure: the comfort of slow drift is over. Someone, somewhere, is counting.

FULL BENCH, BUT CIC'S REAL TEST BEGINS NOW

After years of drifting in institutional limbo, the Central Information Commission (CIC) is finally back at full strength. Raj Kumar Goyal's appointment as Chief Information Commissioner, along with eight new Information Commissioners, closes a vacancy cycle that should never have been allowed to stretch this long. But before applauding too loudly, it's worth asking whether numerical strength automatically translates into institutional spine?

The CIC's problem was never just about empty chairs. It was about delays that quietly hollowed out the Right to Information Act. Appeals languished for years, penalties were rarely imposed, and public authorities learned that stonewalling carries few consequences. Vacancies merely made this decay visible; they didn't cause it.

Mr Goyal, a former law secretary with a long résumé, brings administrative gravitas. That helps. But the CIC doesn't need another well-run secretariat as much as it needs a commission willing to annoy ministries, question routine denials, and restore urgency to a law that was designed to be citizen-centric, not file-centric. RTI jurisprudence isn't about elegance of orders alone. It's about signalling that delay is not a neutral act, but it's denial by other means. The commission has been "fully staffed" before, without becoming fully effective. Unless this new team prioritises backlog clearance, enforces penalties, and reasserts the CIC's independence, the reboot risks becoming cosmetic. So, the real test is whether it remembers how and when to bite. Transparency, after all, doesn't fail dramatically. It erodes quietly, one unanswered appeal at a time.

BEYOND THE TRANSFER RAJ

The Centre's recent directive to states regarding the transfer of IAS, IPS, and IFS officers pertains not only to administrative procedures but also raises important questions about the governance and oversight of the civil services. By demanding annual reports on how Civil Services Boards manage postings, New Delhi has told the states that *your transfer business is now our business too.*

Formally, this is sold as compliance with Supreme Court guidelines — fixed tenures, institutional oversight, fewer whimsical reshuffles. Fair enough. But everyone in governance knows the real problem isn't ignorance of the rules; it's the routine decision to ignore them. Civil Services Boards exist in many states largely as constitutional décor. They are often assembled under pressure, sidelined for convenience, and rarely allowed to interfere with political priorities.

Seen through that lens, the Centre's move is less reformist and more corrective. A constantly shuffled bureaucracy doesn't just hurt officers; it sabotages delivery. Projects stall, files reset, responsibility dissolves—and when outcomes disappoint, fingers point conveniently upwards to Delhi.

States will, predictably, cry foul. Transfers have always been a core instrument of state authority, and federalism bristles when oversight starts resembling supervision. This is what happens when states abuse discretion long enough for the Centre to step in. The real question isn't whether Delhi is overreaching, but whether states have earned the right to complain. Unless this exercise leads to consequences — not just reports — it will become another case of central monitoring without central courage. And the babu transfer culture will survive yet again: bruised, documented, and fundamentally unchanged.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades, dilipcherian@hotmail.com.

The Statesman
Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India -founded 1818

Fractured ties

Relations between India and Bangladesh are entering one of their most fragile phases in decades, not because of a single diplomatic dispute but due to the dangerous interaction of street violence, political uncertainty, and hardening narratives on both sides of the border. What is unfolding is less a breakdown of policy than a collapse of trust. The immediate spark has been a brutal killing during protests in Bangladesh, an act that has resonated deeply in India because it touches raw concerns about minority safety. Yet, focusing only on that horror risks missing the larger picture. Bangladesh is in the middle of a profound political transition following the fall of Sheikh Hasina, and transitions create vacuums. Into that vacuum have stepped radical groups, opportunistic actors and unrestrained street politics that thrives on grievance rather than governance. For India, the instinctive response has been moral outrage mixed with political mobilisation. That is understandable.

No democracy can remain unmoved when violence appears to target minorities in a neighbouring country with which it shares history, culture, and blood ties. But when outrage spills onto the streets, hardens television narratives and turns into symbolic protests at diplomatic premises, it begins to blur the line between principled concern and political signalling. In Dhaka, such scenes are easily repackaged as proof of Indian interference. Bangladesh's interim leadership, headed by Muhammad Yunus, faces an unenviable task, one it has so far made a hash of. It must restore law and order, reassure minorities, and prepare the ground for elections, all while lacking an electoral mandate. Its condemnations of violence sound right, but repeated failures to prevent mob attacks and protect institutions have weakened its authority. Each lapse strengthens extremist elements who portray pluralism, secularism, and even independent journalism as foreign-imposed ideas. The deeper danger lies in the narrative war now taking shape.

In Bangladesh, labelling critics as "pro-India" has become a shortcut to dehumanisation. In India, portraying Bangladesh as sliding wholesale into religious extremism ignores the many citizens who are resisting that very trend. Both narratives flatten complex realities and make diplomatic repair harder. Strategically, India cannot afford a destabilised Bangladesh. Its eastern and north-eastern security, trade routes and regional connectivity depend on a stable neighbour. Bangladesh, too, cannot escape geography; hostility with India would compound its internal stresses rather than resolve them.

The way forward lies in restraint and realism. Street anger must not be allowed to dictate foreign policy. India should lower the rhetorical temperature while maintaining quiet, firm engagement on minority protection and diplomatic security. Bangladesh's interim authorities must act decisively against mob violence, not just rhetorically, to reclaim the state's monopoly over order. Ultimately, a credible elected government in Dhaka offers the best chance to reset ties on institutional, not emotional, foundations. Until then, both sides must remember that neighbours do not get replaced. They either learn to manage turbulence ~ or allow it to define the relationship for years to come.

Defining Aravallis

The renewed debate over the Aravalli hills exposes a familiar fault line in India's environmental governance: the tension between ecological complexity and administrative simplicity. What appears, on the surface, to be a technical redefinition of hills is in fact a decision with profound implications for land use, climate resilience, and the survival of fragile ecosystems in north-western India.

The Aravallis are among the oldest mountain systems on Earth, but their importance today lies not in dramatic peaks or dense forests. Much of their ecological value resides in low, scrub-covered ridges and shallow undulations that slow desertification, recharge aquifers, and act as a climatic buffer against the advancing Thar. These understated landscapes rarely fit popular notions of "hills," yet they quietly sustain agriculture, groundwater and habitability across Rajasthan, Haryana, and Delhi.

By tying protection to a minimum elevation threshold, policymakers risk mistaking visibility for value. A hill system is not a stack of discrete high points; it is a continuous geological and ecological fabric. Once that continuity is broken on paper, it becomes easier to fragment it on the ground ~ through mining, construction and infrastructure projects that may individually seem minor but collectively erode the system's resilience. Environmental damage in such landscapes is rarely sudden or spectacular. It accumulates slowly, revealing its costs only when groundwater tables fall, heatwaves intensify and dust storms grow more frequent.

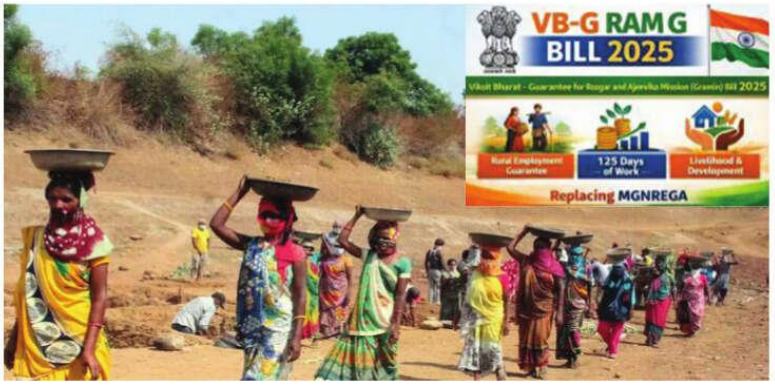
The government argues that a uniform, objective definition brings regulatory clarity and does not automatically open the floodgates to mining. In principle, consistency across states is desirable. Yet environmental regulation is not the same as taxation or land records. Nature does not conform neatly to round numbers or legal thresholds. A definition that prioritises ease of enforcement over ecological function may simplify files but complicate the future.

Public protests signal a deeper unease: that environmental decisions are increasingly framed through narrow technical lenses, with insufficient weight given to cumulative impact and local knowledge. Farmers, residents, and activists are not merely opposing development; they are questioning a model that treats landscapes as interchangeable once they fall outside a formal category. Their insistence that the Aravallis be defined by geology, hydrology and their ecological role reflects a demand for science-led policy rather than checklist governance.

The involvement of the Supreme Court of India adds gravity to the issue. Judicial endorsement confers legitimacy, but it also places a responsibility to ensure that definitions do not unintentionally weaken environmental safeguards. Courts have historically played a crucial role in protecting common natural assets; this moment tests whether that tradition can adapt to subtler, less visible forms of ecological risk. Ultimately, the Aravalli controversy is not just about hills. It is about how India chooses to value landscapes that are ecologically vital but aesthetically modest. Protecting them requires moving beyond height-based formulas toward a functional understanding of nature ~ one that recognises that what looks insignificant today may be indispensable tomorrow.

Recalibrating MGNREGA

The VB-G RAM G Act responds to these structural problems by reshaping how rural employment is guaranteed, planned, and financed. The move to norm-based budgeting replaces an open-ended, reactive regime with one that ties allocations to execution capacity and observed demand, reducing the mismatch between promises and delivery. Far from signalling withdrawal, funding levels remain substantial, and the statutory wage-employment guarantee has been expanded from 100 to 125 days per rural household per year as a standard entitlement rather than an exceptional ceiling



The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act (VB-G RAM G), which replaces the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), received the President's assent on Sunday, 21 December, marking the formal transition to a new rural employment framework. The allegation that these changes amount to the "dismantling" of MGNREGA stems from an unwillingness to distinguish sentiment from performance. Welfare laws do not enjoy moral immunity because of their vintage or their acronym; they must be assessed by whether they deliver what they promise, at scale, in the conditions that actually obtain rather than those that policymakers nostalgically invoke.

The performance and governance gaps in MGNREGA must be studied. The programme's most basic assurance of guaranteed employment had steadily drifted from its statutory intent. Data from the Ministry of Rural Development show that in FY 2024-25 only about 7-8 per cent of registered households completed the full 100 days of work, while average employment per household remained under 50 days, virtually flat across phases of stress, recovery, and growth. This was not a function of tight budgets as annual allocations had crossed Rs 1 lakh crore in recent years, but of design and delivery failures, where a legal entitlement repeatedly failed to become lived access for most beneficiaries.

Those gaps were compounded by governance weaknesses. Repeated observations by the Comptroller and Auditor General and social audits documented a pattern of irregularities: inflated muster rolls, payments against non-existent works, unauthorised use of machinery in violation of labour norms, and weak recovery of detected fraud. In FY 2024–25 alone, officially recorded financial irregularities were close to Rs 200 crore, while recoveries remained negligible, eroding the credibility of what was conceived as a rights-based safety net.

What does the new law change? The VB-G RAM G Act responds to these structural problems by reshaping how rural employment is guaranteed, planned, and financed. The move to norm-based budgeting replaces an open-ended, reactive regime with one that ties allocations to execution capacity and observed demand, reducing the mismatch between promises and delivery. Far from signalling withdrawal, funding levels remain substantial, and the statutory wage-employment guarantee has been expanded from 100 to 125 days per rural household per year as a standard entitlement rather than an exceptional ceiling. The intent is to narrow the persistent gap between what the law states on paper and what the administration can reliably provide on the ground.

The economic case for reform is equally important. Rural India in the mid-2020s is structurally different from rural India in 2005. Recent surveys point to a pronounced decline in rural poverty relative to the early 2010s, higher levels of household consumption, and a decisive shift towards formal credit channels. Periodic Labour Force Survey data show a gradual but steady rise in non-farm rural employment, particularly in construction, manufacturing, and services, even as agriculture remains the single largest employer.

Within the employment guarantee framework itself, demand for work now peaks during lean agricultural periods and falls sharply when local non-farm opportunities expand, indicating that the programme functions primarily as a counter-cyclical buffer rather than the central pillar of rural livelihoods.

GOURAV VALLABH

The writer is a part-time Member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister and a Professor of Finance. The views expressed are personal

Recognising this transition, the new Act deliberately reorients employment towards assets with durable economic value. A larger share of expenditure is now directed to water conservation and irrigation, rural roads, sanitation, storage facilities, and climate-resilient works, all of which generate stronger long-term income effects than scattered earthworks. Irrigation lifts farm productivity, roads cut market-access costs, and storage reduces distress sales, so linking wages to such assets converts short-term relief into sustained livelihood support. Technology and governance reforms underpin this reorientation. Aadhaar-based seeding covers virtually all active workers, enabling near-universal direct benefit transfers; wage payments are overwhelmingly routed through electronic modes, reducing delays and discretion.

Geo-tagging has brought crores of assets under physical verification, and women's participation now approaches 58 per cent, deepening inclusion and enhancing household resilience. Even the provision allowing states to pause works during peak sowing and harvest seasons reflects this logic: sequencing public employment outside these windows avoids competing with farm labour, protects agricultural output, and stabilises rural wages, without altering the annual entitlement itself.

Resistance to these changes is often anchored in a static view of rural poverty and the presumption that any departure from MGNREGA's original architecture is ipso facto a retreat. The evidence suggests the opposite: expanding the legal guarantee, tightening delivery mechanisms, improving asset quality, and aligning employment with a changing rural economy amounts to adaptation, not dilution.

A separate line of criticism has focused on the very name Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act (VB-G RAM G). In a government that has set Viksit Bharat 2047 as a national horizon, the presence of "RAM G" in the title ought to be a matter of welcome rather than grievance. The reverence for a Pujya Bapu past, present, and future does not rest on acronyms, but on whether public policy advances dignity, self-reliance, and protection for the weakest. Ultimately, if the law succeeds in deepening rural security and opportunity, there is every reason for citizens to say with pride: G RAM G.

THE KATHMANDU POST

Disaster after disaster

This Christmas Day marks 21 years since the terrifying Indian Ocean tsunami. As we remember the hundreds of thousands of lives lost in this tragic event, it is also a moment to reflect on what followed. How do communities rebuild after major events such as the tsunami and other disasters like it? What were the financial and hidden costs of reconstruction? Beyond the immediate human toll, disasters destroy hundreds of thousands of buildings each year. In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan damaged a record 1.2 million structures in the Philippines. Last year, earthquakes and cyclones damaged more than half a million buildings worldwide. For communities to rebuild their lives, these structures must be rebuilt. While governments, non-government agencies and individuals struggle to finance post-disaster reconstruction, rebuilding also demands staggering volumes of building materials. In turn, these require vast amounts of natural resource extraction.

For instance, an estimated one billion burnt clay bricks were needed to reconstruct the half-million homes destroyed in the Nepal earthquake. This is enough bricks to circle the Earth six times if laid end to end. How can we responsibly source such vast quantities of materials to meet demand? Sudden spikes in demand have led to severe shortages of common building materials after nearly every major disaster over the past two decades, including the 2015 Nepal earthquake and the 2019 California wildfires. These shortages often trigger price hikes of 30–40 percent, which delays reconstruction and prolongs the suffering of affected communities. Disasters not only increase demand for building materials but also generate enormous volumes of debris. For example, the 2023 Turkey ~ Syria earthquake produced more than 100 million cubic metres of debris ~ 40 times the volume of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Disaster debris can pose serious environmental and health risks, including toxic dust and waterway pollution.

But some debris can be safely transformed into useful assets such as recycled building materials. Rubble can be crushed and repurposed as a base for low-traffic roads or turned into cement blocks. The consequences of poor post-disaster building materials management have reached alarming global proportions. After the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, for example, the surge in sand demand led to excessive and illegal sand mining in rivers along Sri Lanka's west coast. This caused irreversible ecological damage to two major watersheds, devastating the livelihoods of thousands of farmers and fisherpeople.

Similar impacts from the overextraction of materials such as sand, gravel, clay and timber have been reported following other major disasters, including the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China and Cyclone Idai in Mozambique in 2019. If left unaddressed, the social, environmental and economic impacts of resource extraction will escalate to catastrophic levels, especially as climate change intensifies disaster frequency. This crisis has yet to receive adequate international attention. Earlier this year, several global organisations came together to publish a Global Call to Action on sustainable building materials management after disasters.

Based on an analysis of 15 major disasters between 2005 and 2020, it identified three key challenges: building material shortages and price escalation, unsustainable extraction and use of building materials, and poor management of disaster debris.

Although well-established solutions exist to address these challenges, rebuilding efforts suffer from policy and governance gaps. The Call to Action urges international bodies such as the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction to take immediate policy and practical action.

After a disaster hits, it leaves an opportunity to build back better. Rebuilding can boost resilience to future hazards, encourage economic development and reduce environmental impact. The United Nations' framework for disaster management emphasises the importance of rebuilding better and safer rather than simply restoring communities to pre-disaster conditions.

Disaster affected communities should be rebuilt with capacity to cope with future external shocks and environmental risks. Lessons can be learned from both negative and positive experiences of past disasters. For example, poor planning of some reconstruction projects after the Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004) in Sri Lanka made the communities vulnerable again to coastal hazards within a few years. On the other hand, the community-led reconstruction approach followed after the Bhuj earthquake, India (2001), has resulted in safer and more socio-economically robust settlements, standing the test of 24 years.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

MGNREGA

Sir, It is hard to think of a scheme more beneficial to the country's impoverished multitudes than the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in post-Independent India.

Yet for some inexplicable reason the Modi government deemed it unfit for continuation and brought in the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (VB ~ G RAM G).

The prime and positive features of the 'old' scheme have not been incorporated into the new scheme. The new law puts the central government, as against Gram Sabhas and the rural poor at the centre of the scheme. In terms of alleviation of rural distress and financial security there is no comparison.

How long the new scheme will last is anyone's guess. There is no guarantee that

the scheme won't fall through or come to a halt because of the inability of States to finance their share.

The new scheme won't meet the demand for work as it cannot exceed the limits of a fixed budgetary allocation. The denial of work for 60 days during 'peak agricultural season' will deprive the rural poor of bargaining power and put them at the mercy of landowners.

Also the removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name from the scheme is an ideological attack on his legacy and the foundational values of the programme. The MGNREGA was not just a welfare programme. It was one of the country's most pioneering democratic interventions.

While economically it empowered deprived and vulnerable sections of the society, socially it advanced democratic participation and social justice, as around 50 per cent of beneficiaries were women and members of marginalized communities.

Preserving MGNREGA in both letter and spirit is essential to safeguarding federalism and social justice.

A republic which is committed to justice, equality and fraternity cannot afford to abandon its rural poor, silence their demands, and centralize power at the cost of democracy itself.

Yours, etc., Ranganathan Sivakumar,
Chennai, 22 December.

The Modi government's lack of commitment and will to support the rural poor explains why it chose to bring in a new scheme considered to be of dubious benefit to them. We urge the central government to make a gesture towards public opinion and roll back VB ~ G RAM G and restore MGNREGA.

Yours, etc., G. David Milton,
Maruthancode, 23 December.

Poor abandoned

Sir, The dismantling of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and tyrannous passing of the new legislation systematically weakens the core principles of the original scheme. Sadly, the new bill converts employment from a legal, rights-based, and demand-driven guarantee into a discretionary and budget-dependent government scheme.

A vital step to fuel power needs

B K SINGH

India has pledged to increase its nuclear power capability from 8.8 GigaWatt today to 100 GigaWatt by 2047. When the attention of scientists turned towards harnessing the power of an atom and converting the heat generated into electricity in the 1950s, the concern of accidents was foremost in their minds. The accidents over a period of nearly a century in civil aviation, chemical and oil and gas industries have made the design and operations more safe and secure.

Nuclear power has very high energy density and can be more hazardous, but the design of the plant is meticulous and addresses all concerns. In the 60 years' history of civil nuclear power generation, there have been three accidents; Three Mile Island, USA, 1979; Chernobyl, Ukraine, 1986, and Fukushima Daiichi, Japan, 2011. The Fukushima accident caused radiation exposure to workers, while the Chernobyl accident impacted the health of the workers. The Three Miles accident did not cause any harm. There has not been any accident in India so far.

Bengaluru's tech park and Chennai's automobile industries face peak-hour power deficit, despite Kaiga and Kudankulam generating 2000 MW. Our dependency on fossil fuel must be cut to arrest the warming of the planet. Transitioning towards green energy like solar and wind is going to take decades to achieve scale and speed. Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Chennai are emerging hubs for Microsoft, Google and Amazon and a data centre boom leads to surge in power demand. A single large data centre requires 50 to 100 MW of uninterrupted power and with the growing workloads of AI in India, we must step up generation of clean energy quickly.

Sustainable harnessing and advancement of nuclear energy for transforming India (SHANTI) bill has been passed by Parliament and the sector has been opened for private players, though opposition members strongly opposed it due to safety and liability concerns. The rising demand of power from sectors like data processing, health care and industries needed the expansion of the nuclear sector.

Minister Jitendra Singh has clarified in Parliament that the public sector undertaking, Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) will expand its activities to generate 58 Giga Watt (GW) of power, while the private and joint sectors will generate the remaining by 2047. Further, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. (NPCIL) is setting up four reactors each of 4 Giga watt capacity with Russian collaboration and another 17.6 GW capacity in collaboration with other countries as part of a road map to reach the target of 54 GW by 2047.

National Thermal Power Corporation has entered into a joint venture with NPCIL, named Anushakti Vidhyut Nigam Ltd. The joint venture has already approved 700 MW Mahi Banaswara project. At present there are 24 nuclear power plants generating 8,780 MW of power and eight nuclear reactors with a total generating capacity of 6,600 MW are at various stages of construction.

The bill's four-tier dispute resolution framework addresses safety and security concerns. It begins with Atomic Energy Regulatory Boards' grant of license to the enterprise and technical supervision of activities on the site. The next is the Atomic Energy Redressal Advisory Council empowered to take up independent review of regulatory decisions. The statute provides a time limit of 60 days to resolve regulatory conflicts. This would cut all project stalling delays.

The third stage is the Appellate Tribunal for Electricity. This tribunal too is bound by the time limit of 60 days. The technical member of the Tribunal will be an expert in Nuclear Science, radiation safety and reactor Physics. Finally, the Supreme Court would ensure constitutional oversight.

The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010 ensures suppliers' accountability and the SHANTI bill sets a Rs 3,000 crore per incident liability cap. The operator is fully liable for this amount and the Central government covers any amount in excess of this, under the Convention on Supplementary Compensation. Further, the vendor's participation is feasible as compensation is backed by sovereign guarantee.

Opening the sector for private companies brings investment and hastens the process of clean power generation needed for our growth and development. Nuclear projects have enormous front loaded capital costs and long construction periods. Finland's Olkiluoto-3 reactor took an additional 12 years to open. The UK's Hinkley Point C reactor has faced cost overruns and has ended up producing electricity at higher cost. The French 1600 MW EPR reactor, with most advanced technology also ended up with massive cost overruns and delays.

One should not be alarmed by such historical backgrounds. These experiences should be considered for our planning and implementation of nuclear projects. Even private companies might be hesitant to invest in the sector, but the government should come forward to assure tariffs, sovereign backing, fuel supply support and liability protection. Sometimes the project may have to be subsidized to make it bankable.

Nuclear fuel comes from mining and so also the components of solar panels and wind turbines. Solar panels primarily use silicon cells, protected by glass, framed with aluminum, and connected with copper; while wind turbines rely on steel towers, fiberglass/carbon fiber blades and rare earth magnets (neodymium, dysprosium) in their generators. Both technologies increasingly need critical minerals, like copper, silver and rare earths, and face supply challenges.

Separation and processing of critical minerals and rare earth elements are environmentally hazardous and have potential to generate waste water leading to health risks for the communities around. Manufacturing steel, silver, copper etc. also have heavy carbon footprints, as these are carbon intensive products. Fuels for nuclear reactors are relatively less carbon intensive.

In the process of making a hydroelectric power project operational, we need to sacrifice forests which are a known sink for carbon. Losing forests on hilly terrains can also have disastrous consequences like landslides, flooding etc. We have seen how communities as well as tourists suffer in the hills, when there are sudden cloud bursts. To achieve the speed and scale of transitioning away from fossil fuel, nuclear energy along with solar, wind and hydropower must be developed concurrently. Opening the nuclear sector for private investors is a welcome step.

(The writer is former Head of Forest force, Karnataka.)

Labour codes must look at the invisible workers

SATYAKI DASGUPTA AND BASIT ABDULLAH

The government's decision to bring the four consolidated labour codes into effect from 21 November 2026 marks the most significant overhaul of India's labour law framework in decades. The Centre has notified the Code on Wages (2019), Industrial Relations Code (2020), Social Security Code (2020) and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020). The government has declared that the four labour codes will now take effect, a step that replaces old rules on factories and workers.

A press release from the Ministry of Labour and Employment notes that the labour codes aim to provide "Better Wages, Safety, Social security & enhanced welfare for India's workforce." The provisions extend the right to minimum wages to workers in both the organised and unorganised sectors, while also expanding social-security access to a much larger share of the unorganised workforce.

However, most trade unions across the country are protesting these laws. Unions claim that these laws are anti worker since they will enable easier hiring and firing practices. Companies with up to 299 employees can now lay off staff without the approval of the government. This threshold previously was at 100. Unions claim that this shift alters the balance of power at the workplace in favour of employers.

An additional concern is the implementation of these policies. Translating these provisions into practice will not be straightforward in a country where an overwhelming majority of the workforce is employed as informal workers. The limits of the new framework appear more sharply in sectors whose employment patterns lie outside the assumptions that guide the codes.

For instance, the press release from the Ministry of Labour & Employment claims that beedi and cigar workers will now receive minimum wages, an 8-12 hour workday within a 48-hour week, and overtime only with consent at twice the normal rate. It also mandates timely wage payments and extends bonus eligibility to anyone who has completed 30 days of work in a year. Estimates place the beedi workforce between seven and eight million once leaf collection and trading are included. According to a study based on NSSO data, 96 per cent of all beedi workers are home-based and only 4 per cent work in factories; 84 per cent of these home-based workers are women.

They work within long subcontracting chains that deliver raw materials to their homes and collect finished beedis in return for piece-rate payments. Most live in rural areas with low literacy and limited mobility, and they typically have no written contracts or employment records. In the absence of documentation, enforcement agencies cannot verify work duration, delays in payment or eligibility for bonuses, making the workforce largely invisible to the law.

Women and children are heavily employed in the process of collection of leaves and rolling the beedis. These women are generally home-based workers who are connected to the larger production chain through the subcontractors. Subcontractors or mahajans supply the leaves, tobacco and thread, and then pay workers by output. The rate at which these workers are paid is not uniform and can vary greatly among and even within states. Increase in competition can create a race to the bottom where these workers are paid very low rates.

When workers are paid at piece rate, implementing a policy which caps the working day is not very meaningful. Piece rate, as a process, incentivises workers to produce more and increase their working day. This process has been historically used to bypass legally mandated working hours. The organisation of production and the labour process involved in the process of beedi making needs to be taken into cognizance for policies to significantly impact these sectors.

Past laws illustrate the difficulty in implementing policies to improve the working conditions of beedi workers. The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966 and the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act, 1976 aimed to regulate working conditions and require employers to issue identity cards and maintain registers. These obligations rarely entered practice. Only around 15 per cent of workers are unionised today. Workers often lack written contracts, wage slips or proof of days worked. Legal entitlements that depend on documentation - such as timely wages or bonus eligibility - remain difficult to claim in the absence of records.

The organisation of production also changed in response to these earlier laws. Beedi rolling moved from factories to homes, partly to avoid compliance with labour legislation. When obligations increase without corresponding administrative reach, industries often alter their structure in ways that place workers further out of sight. The same outcome may arise under the new codes.

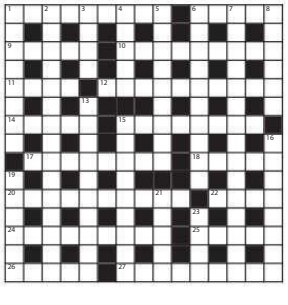
The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code states that it secures the interests of beedi and cigar workers. However, inspection and safety norms depend on identifiable workplaces. Beedi rolling happens inside private homes scattered across large rural areas. There is no establishment where inspectors can verify hours, safety conditions or compliance with wage rules.

Effective labour policy ultimately depends on implementation, not just legislation. India's experience with child labour and manual scavenging shows that prohibitions fail when enforcement cannot reach the sites where violations occur. A similar challenge arises in the beedi sector. Production systems like beedi rolling have long reorganised themselves to avoid regulation, and a uniform labour code that ignores such realities will miss most of the workforce it intends to protect.

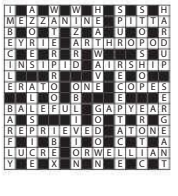
Many unorganized workers, similar to beedi rollers, lack clear work locations and formal employer-employee relationships. This invisibility means it is unclear whether they will receive any of the protections the labour reforms promise. Unless the state builds mechanisms that can reach these sites of production, and does so in negotiation with worker organisations, the new labour codes will struggle to change the conditions of those they claim to protect.

(The writers teach at, respectively, Christ University, Bangalore and the Institute of Management Technology, Hyderabad.)

Crossword | No. 293331



Yesterday's Solution



ACROSS

1 Skills of adult bisexual inside of slip knots (9)
6 Hard black varnish containers – one not closed (5)
9 Popular European student accommodation (5)
10 As 1D might be – odds on very sunburnt (9)
11 Smooth clue Mev wrote – satisfaction finally (4)
12 Opening broken relic`s hollow cavities (10)
14 80s computer game`s typeface size is best (5)
15 Vacant podium has not dispelled visions (8)
17 Starfish formed by a biochemical compound (8)
18 Puzzle surrounding Mev`s oil supplier (5)
20 Extraordinary hesitations over Midlothian following Drink Aware notices initially (10)
22 Roy Orbison`s book promoted without article in African language (4)
24 Accommodation of a point about Gilbert and George? (9)
25 Morning person builds city (5)
26 Rate of ocean`s retreat (5)
27 Flipping American cricket club gets five points and wins (9)

DOWN

1 Herath let Eskinazi reveal sportspeople (8)
2 Tie French plaits up originally (2,3,5,5)
3 Passage on the radio could be key (4)
4 Tons redacted from paper publication (5)
5 Dash north to translate symbols (9)
6 Method of delivery of magazine supporting Welby (4-2-4)
7 Apple`s magic army on the rampage in active competitions (10,5)
8 One without kit frequently found double-dipping a shirt (6)
13 Extolled being famous (10)
15 Overseers of audio staff in dark red clothes from Rhodes (9)
16 Protagonists drug gutless enemies (8)
19 SAS orated short pieces (6)
21 Revolutionary occupants of illicit tavern`s high chamber ... (5)
23 ... and the rest rising not soon enough (4)

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

100 YEARS AGO

News Items

CHRISTMAS EVE IN CALCUTTA

TRAFFIC PROBLEM: CONGESTION SCENES IN CHOWRINGHEE

Calcutta last night was a thoroughly happy city. Never were there bigger, and, as far as one could judge, more care-free crowds. The evening, however, left two distinct impressions on the mind of the observer — firstly, that the traffic problem is getting very seriously out of bounds, despite all that the police do in the way of control; and, secondly, that price-cutting invariably leads to increased trade. To deal with the traffic question, Chowringhee during the early hours of the evening presented an amazing spectacle. On the pavements were jostling crowds, among which naval uniforms were conspicuous, while the road was picked with hundreds — thousands in the course of the evening — of motor cars. At important junctions like the Bristol. Corner, Chowringhee-Corporation Street, Lindsay Street and Park Street, the congestion was at times appalling. To cross the street anywhere was an adventure. Truly the life of the pedestrian in Calcutta is a hard one. The city has no problem, despite the claims of water and drainage, that calls for more urgent attention. Private cars are ever increasing in number, and a new peril has been added in the shape of a sudden and heavy influx of motor buses of the widest variety as regards size and design. Fortunately, it was a sheer impossibility to "scorch" owing to the density of cars. Under normal circumstances the stretch between Lindsay Street and Park Street appears to create in a certain type of motorists an irresistible desire to "open out." Subways for foot traffic appear to a dire necessity during the busy hours the pedestrian is literally driven off the streets, and it is something of a nightmare to watch little groups of children being conducted across by panicky ayahs. This is something of a digression, but the most unobservant last evening must have been struck with the serious proportions that Calcutta traffic is assuming. Possibly because they enjoy the bustle, experience never teaches people to purchase early. Shops during the afternoon were busy without being rushed, but with the influx of the tremendous crowd that saw the races shopping after dusk became a task, if a pleasurable one. So considerable was the final stream of customers that some of the principal establishments had to exercise a mild system of control. To a representative of the Statesman the manager of an important House said: "The number of people passing through our premises has beaten all records. People appear to have more money to spend this Xmas, but there is no tendency to extravagance. Prices, too, must be rock-bottom in order to attract customers who have an unerring instinct for discovering where the best value for money can be obtained We have cut our prices, and the result (with a wave of the band at the busy throngs of shoppers in the premises) is obvious."

SIR B. N. MITRA

ENTERTAINED AT INDIA CLUB

The Hon. Sir Bhupendra Nath Mitra, Member for Industries and Labour of His Excellency the Viceroy's Executive Council, was entertained by Mr K. O. Roy Chowdhury, Labour Member, Bengal Council, at an afternoon party at the India Club yesterday afternoon. In the course of his reply to the speeches of welcome, Sir Bhupendra Nath said he had recently inspected mines and factories, and he believed that the conditions of labour were really not so gloomy as they were generally painted to be. Globe trotters might come and say something after a few days' holiday inspection but the lessons of experience pointed the other way. He assured them that he would try to do his best in the office to which he had been called.

BRAVERY REWARDED

VILLAGERS CAPTURE ARMED DACOITS

The Government of Bengal have sanctioned a reward of Rs. 500 each to Kadu Shaik and four of his brothers and of Rs. 100 each to two other villagers in recognition of the bravery displayed by them in resisting a number of armed dacoits, one of whom was captured at once while four others were arrested subsequently. According to an official statement, a dacoity was committed in the house of Loke Nath Rudra Pal in village Saturia in the district of Dacca on the night of December 3, 1924. The dacoits were armed with guns and daos. Hearing the cries of the inmates, Kadu Shaik and his four brothers ran to the scene of the dacoity followed by other villagers, and Kadu and his brothers barred the passage of the dacoits along the only path which leads to the house. A free fight ensued in the course of which Kadu Shaik and his brothers, Nasu Shaik and Aisali Shaik, received severe injuries. Notwithstanding his injuries, however, Nasu succeeded in capturing a dacoit with the aid of other villagers, with the result that four others were subsequently arrested.

CONVERT TO ISLAM

PLEA FOR DISSOLUTION OF MARRIAGE

Chinsurah, Dec.

A young woman of village Konnagar, filed an application to-day before the District Judge of Hooghly praying for dissolution of her marriage with her first Hindu husband. She stated that formerly she was a Hindu and was married to a Hindu. Some time back she, with her cousin, went to Darjeeling where both were converted to Mohammedanism and were married. The application was made in her new name of Ayeslia Bibi.

OUR VIEW

MINT

RBI's liquidity infusion only relieves a symptom

To address liquidity tightness in the banking system, we need a proper diagnosis followed by remedial action. A temporary balm may just be glossing over a deep structural problem

Banking," says Section 5(b) of the Banking Regulation Act of 1949, is "accepting for the purpose of lending or investment, of deposits of money from the public, repayable on demand or otherwise, and withdrawable by cheque, draft, order or otherwise." In plain language, this means that the lending or investment activity of banks must be based on deposits mobilized from people. But the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) frequent moves to infuse banks with large quantums of liquidity on a nearly systemic basis seems to fly in the face of that premise. True, all central banks are charged with managing the level of liquidity in an economy such that it is neither too much nor too little, but just sufficient to keep the economy humming, given the expected level of activity. This entails their engaging in what are known as 'open market operations' (OMOs), mainly the buying and selling of securities to infuse and withdraw liquidity respectively, depending on the underlying macroeconomic conditions.

But is that the case today? In early December, system liquidity had been in surplus of an average ₹1.5 trillion during the period since RBI's Monetary Policy Committee met in October 2025. Despite this, in its policy announcement of 5 December, the central bank said it would conduct OMO purchases of government securities (G-Secs) amounting to ₹1 trillion this month, apart from 3-year dollar-rupee buy-sell swaps of $5 billion—only to double the quantum of both within a space of less than three weeks. Last Tuesday, RBI announced OMO G-Sec purchases of ₹2 trillion and a forex swap auction of $10 billion for a tenor of 3 years to be held on 13 January 2026.

While bankers say liquidity typically tightens as the year nears its end, RBI has not explained what has changed to make it literally double down on infusion. Yes, like other central banks, RBI is expected to function as a lender of last resort. So, while the call money market takes care of temporary gaps in liquidity among banks, they may need to turn to the central bank to tide over an exceptional crunch that cannot be resolved by borrowing overnight funds from each other. But when RBI becomes the lender of first resort instead of last, as seems to be the case now, we need to pause and ponder.

Is RBI treating the symptom rather than the cause of the problem? Is our liquidity tightness structural—i.e., due to a failure of bank deposits to keep pace with the money that banks need? As noted earlier, lenders are supposed to use deposits for lending. If they are not doing so, it could be either because they are overlending (or over-investing) or not paying high enough interest rates on deposits to compete with other forms of investment. RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra has said that the share of savings flowing into bank deposits has been falling steadily; it has dropped from 43% to 35% over the past nine years. Either way, frequent liquidity infusions suggest a worrisome dependence of banks on RBI money, rather than deposits, for lending and investment. The central bank has often assured banks that it will be "nimble" in its management of liquidity. But this has begun to sound like a version of the 'Greenspan put,' which referred to an unstated assurance in the US of a Fed bailout. We need a proper diagnosis of our liquidity gaps, followed by remedial action. Balms only tend to gloss over structural problems.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

A weakened job guarantee may exacerbate distress in rural India

This employment scheme's revision is likely to push market wages down and slow a rural revival

HIMANSHU
is associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and visiting fellow at the Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi.

Last week, Parliament repealed the two-decade old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and passed the Viksit Bharat—Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act. This Act, which replaces MGNREGA, effects not just a change in nomenclature but a fundamental shift in India's approach to the provision of public employment as a means of livelihood security.

Public employment schemes have long been part of livelihood security and poverty alleviation initiatives; a form of job guarantee has existed in Maharashtra since the 1970s. What made MGNREGA different was its rights-based approach that was justiciable and unconditional for every rural household. It was far from a full right to employment or livelihood, with the maximum days of employment restricted to 100 for a household. But it was universally acknowledged to have played an important role in improving rural infrastructure, raising agricultural productivity and reducing poverty. The biggest evidence of its success emerged during the covid pandemic, when it became the lifeline not just for many poor rural households, but also millions of migrants who returned to villages.

What made MGNREGA so important for the rural economy were not just its tangible benefits, but its existence backed by law. Its universal and unconditional nature made it a lifeline for many. When the government tried to scuttle the programme in West Bengal, the Supreme Court ruled that the programme cannot be stopped on mere technicalities. The availability of alternative work at government-specified wages meant that it had an indirect impact by tightening the labour market. There is also sufficient evidence to suggest that MGNREGA helped push up rural wages and reduce poverty from 2004-05 to 2011-12. Over the years, MGNREGA has seen many of its provisions diluted, with restrictions imposed by state and central governments. Wages under MGNREGA, which were higher than market levels initially, are now only two-thirds of market wages. But it continued to witness demand for work, with an overwhelmingly large number of workers being women and those from marginalized communities.

The new law dismantles this very foundation of MGNREGA. It takes away the rights-based approach where every worker can demand work within the maximum limit. The VB-G RAM G Act now requires funding allocations to be made by the Centre based on 'objectives' determined by it. It also has a provision to suspend the guarantee during the peak agricultural season, aggregating 60 days. Most households do not seek MGNREGA work during India's peak farming season when farm employment is available, but the fact that guaranteed work was available helped rural workers bargain for better wages.

MGNREGA helped raise wages, but more importantly, it acted as a cushion by providing back-up income during drought periods, policy shocks or other times of scarce agricultural work. With wages below market levels in 22 states, the guarantee had been diluted anyway. Prohibiting its implementation during peak season will pressure wages lower at a time agricultural wages have been stagnant and real non-farm wages have been declining for almost a decade. The promise of increasing the maximum number of guaranteed workdays to 125 from 100 is hardly any solace, given that in the last two decades, the average number of days utilized has been less than 50, with barely 2-3% of households availing the maximum allowance.

The VB-G RAM G Act also changes the financial allocation for the programme. It was mostly centrally-funded, with the central government bearing 90% of its cost. Now, the Centre will bear only 60% of the cost for large states, with exceptions for some small states and Union territories. Unlike MGNREGA, which was meant to provide employment and income opportunities for households in poorer states, the new law will penalize the states with weak fiscal capacity. In a way, it dismantles the entire edifice of the law, which was designed to provide social security through guaranteed employment everywhere, including India's poorest districts. Inequality will rise across states, hurting those with low productivity and per capita income.

MGNREGA was the only social protection available to a majority of the poor, with almost one-third of rural households participating in the programme. Diluting this basic minimum will exacerbate rural distress and slow the revival of India's rural economy.

QUICK READ

Any suspension of the scheme during peak agricultural season, as the new law enables, will act as a dampener of market wages, which have anyway been too weak for a prolonged period.

The new law's extension of maximum workdays from 100 to 125 is mere tokenism, since few workers sought that much work. Overall, India's job guarantee is set to weaken significantly.

10 YEARS AGO


mint
Modi's diplomatic dare revives hopes for peace

JUST A THOUGHT

"The outstanding characteristic of the economic system in which we live is its failure to provide for full employment.

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

THEIR VIEW

Artificial intelligence does not destroy jobs—CEOs do

RAVI VENKATESAN

is a chair of the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet and a former chairman of Microsoft India.

Every major technological shift triggers the same fear: this time, jobs will disappear for good. We heard it with mechanization, computers, the internet—and now with artificial intelligence (AI). But history is clear. Technology itself does not determine outcomes. People with power do. Leadership does. Guns don't kill people; people do. AI doesn't destroy jobs; CEOs do.

Right now, far too many leaders are using AI in the most crude and unimaginative way possible—as a chainsaw to cut costs, automate roles and discard people. Layoffs are announced as "efficiency gains." Stock prices jump. Executives congratulate themselves for being "AI-first."

And then the real costs begin to surface. Consider cases like Klarna, which publicly celebrated replacing thousands of customer service roles with AI, only to later acknowledge that customer experience had suffered and human support had to be rebuilt. This is becoming a familiar pattern: automate aggressively, hollow out capability and then, as problems surface, quietly reverse course. This is not strategic leadership. It is short-term cost engineering and opportunism masquerading as innovation. Used carelessly, AI will trigger two crises at once.

The first is within organizations. When employees see AI deployed primarily as a job-destruction tool, trust collapses. Fear replaces initiative. Creativity gives way to compliance. The very people companies will need most—adaptable, committed, high-judgment talent—either disengage or leave.

The second crisis is societal. Large-scale job displacement without reskilling, redeployment or dignity will deepen inequality and fuel a backlash—political, cultural and economic. We have seen this before with globalization and automation. AI will simply accelerate the consequences.

The irony is that companies using AI purely to reduce headcount are often weakening themselves. They trade long-term capability for short-term margin improvement—and call it progress.

Fortunately, some companies are showing there is another way. Take Ikea. It has deployed AI to support—not shrink—front-line roles, using it to improve personalization, inventory accuracy and decision support, while shifting employees towards higher-value customer interaction. The goal is not fewer humans, but more effective ones. The payoff is higher productivity and stronger customer loyalty.

Schneider Electric embeds AI directly into the daily workflows of engineers, plant managers and sales teams—using predictive insights to improve uptime, energy efficiency and customer outcomes. AI becomes a force multiplier for human expertise, driving innovation and sustainability—not a substitute for judgment and experience.

DBS has paired automation with large-scale reskilling, upgrading thousands of roles. So AI replaced tasks, not people. The result is one of Asia's most resilient financial institutions, often described as a "tech company with a banking licence."

ServiceNow captures this philosophy in a simple phrase: put AI to work for people. Its platforms are designed on a clear principle: remove drudgery but not judgment, ownership or accountability—so humans can focus on problem-solving, creativity and service.

Then there is Zoho, which has built world-class AI capabilities alongside internal talent development and job creation, including in smaller towns. It demonstrates that long-term competitiveness in technology can be built through talent development rather than periodic waves of layoffs.

These companies are not being idealistic or charitable. They are being smart. They understand that sustainable advantage comes not just from cost structures, but culture and capabilities—from people who trust the organization, understand the business and are empowered by technology rather than threatened by it.

AI is not merely a technology decision. It is a leadership decision. Boards and CEOs must ask better questions than, "How many jobs can we automate?" The more important questions are: How can AI make our people dramatically more effective? How do we reinvent our business model using AI? How do we reskill and redeploy people at scale? How do we deploy AI in a way that strengthens trust with employees, customers and society?

Using AI responsibly requires imagination, patience and moral courage. It means resisting the temptation to impress markets with headline-grabbing layoffs and instead investing in long-term capability-building. This is harder than cutting costs. But it is the work leaders are paid to do.

Twenty years from now, how will we be judged? Will people look back and admire the additional profits we extracted? Or are they likely to ask a different set of questions:

Did the leaders of today get AI right? Did they use this extraordinary technology with wisdom—or with fear and haste? What kind of companies did they build? What kind of world did they leave behind? These are not philosophical questions, but of leadership. So let's not just implement AI, we must humanize it. Create organizations where AI amplifies people and not replace them; where people are trusted, reskilled and empowered to do work of greater value.

The real measure of leadership will not be how much we optimized or automated. It will be how much we uplifted people.

QUICK READ

Job-loss anxiety caused by AI mirrors the fears that arose during past tech shifts. But it isn't technology that takes jobs. It is the decisions taken by leaders as they adapt their businesses.

AI should be viewed not as a tool to cut jobs but as an enabler of higher-value tasks so that trust replaces fear among employees. Examples abound of companies that have adopted AI well.

THEIR VIEW

Notes from a quiet Goa beach on getting our tourism act together

India must exit its 'soft state' trap, effect a mindset shift in governance and make the most of its low-cost tourism potential

SUDIPTO MUNDLE
is chairman, Centre for Development Studies.

ISTOCKPHOTO

As a climate refugee from toxic Delhi temporarily in Goa, I cannot help wondering: if cities like Tokyo, London, Beijing and others that had high levels of pollution were able to clean up their air, what prevents Delhi from doing the same? In his voluminous tome, *The Asian Drama*, Gunnar Myrdal introduced the concept of the 'soft state.' He was really writing about South Asia, especially India, with barely any mention of the 'miracle economies' of East Asia. He characterized the Indian state as a 'soft state,' implying a government with limited capacity, unable to unwind a gridlock of competing interests that sucked up and dissipated scarce resources. This pre-empted the high growth necessary for reducing widespread poverty. India is now a fast-growing economy and poverty is much reduced, but regulatory failure to clean up the air in Delhi under successive governments suggests that the 'soft state' still prevails.

Of late, the soft state has also been very visible in the awful tragedy in Arpora, Goa, where a fire at an unauthorized night club, Birch by Romeo Lane, killed 21 persons. The blaze was set off by fireworks in a closed structure on a sandbank in a water body without adequate exits. An order to demolish the structure issued months earlier was ignored with impunity, as were a range of other required clearances. The night club was operating without permits on the basis of just an excise licence. As reported, even this licence was issued on a forged No Objection Certificate from a local health officer. The club's owners, the Luthra brothers, and their associates had reportedly sliced through compliance requirements like a knife through butter, using a combination of bribery and browbeating. They were backed, allegedly, by powerful politicians and bureaucrats.

The Arpora case is unfortunately not the only instance of regulatory failure that impacts tourism in Goa. Several other unauthorized tourist establishments are being closed in the wake of that disaster. Unsafe facilities, poor quality services and high costs are driving tourists away to destinations in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Croatia, Georgia and other countries where services are better and costs lower. All this is killing the goose that has laid Goa's golden eggs for decades.

Goa is a highly visible illustration of how service providers and the government have failed tourism. However, it is symptomatic of a much wider malaise that ails tourism in India. In a *Mint* column last year (28 June 2024), I had pointed out that India was ranked 39th in a World Economic Forum Global Tourism ranking, though it is the world's fourth largest economy. Tourism accounts for a mere 0.9% of GDP, down from a pre-pandemic peak of 2.7%. In comparison, tourism accounts for 20% of GDP in a small country like Croatia (population: 4 million) and as much as 11% of GDP in China, the world's second largest economy, at the other end of the spectrum. In a recent *Hindustan Times* article (19 December 2025), Amitabh Kant points out that a four-star hotel room in India costs ₹12,000-15,000 per night, while it costs half or less in Phuket or Danang. India's coastal length is thrice that of Thailand and its national park area is twice that of Kenya's, but it has fewer tourist destinations with decent accommodation. Kant's plea is to rationalize our Kafkaesque regulatory framework. It not only deters investment, but also generates the rent-seeking opportunities that lead to disasters like Arpora.

It is very unfortunate that tourism has been so neglected, since it is a highly employment-intensive sector with strong multiplier effects. The sector accounts for only 0.9% of India's GDP, but its employment share is much higher at 5.5%, according to recent Periodic Labour Force Survey data. Thus, if its GDP share could be raised back to its pre-pandemic level of 2.7% in, say, the next three years, direct and indirect employment would go up from 76 million to 95 million. If the share could be doubled to 5.4% in another three years, the consequent employment would go up to 195 million. But setting these goals, even if feasible, would require a mindset change. Bureaucrats are not the best candidates for such out-of-the-box thinking, though civil-service officers like Kant have been exceptions. Politicians too may not be sufficiently induced by the potential employment impact, since organic job generation seems to have limited electoral mileage.

QUICK READ

A horrific blaze in Goa's Arpora was symptomatic of India's weak capacity to enforce rules. This must change. So must a mindset that has held us back from fulfilling our tourism potential.

The sector's high employment intensity demands that we let no opportunity go. Budget tourism, especially religious travel, could yield huge gains if we devote attention to this segment.

However, what is important here is not high-end tourism, but low-budget tourism, especially the religious kind that accounts for the bulk of India's tourism revenue. These are tourists who travel by second or third class compartments in trains, look for rooms at ₹1,000-2,000 per night and meals for ₹150-200 per head. Most Indians are devout. The huge number of religious tourists who travel to destinations like Hardwar, Vaishno Devi or Tirupati and the hardships they are prepared to bear in the process are remarkable. Equally popular destinations of minority faiths include Ajmer Sharif Dargah, the Bodh Gaya-Rajgir-Nalanda Buddhist circuit or the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa. Providing cheap but safe travel facilities, cheap but clean hotels and budget meals for such religious tourists on a vastly expanded and improved scale could interest political leaders. The revenue and employment impact of such a mindset change would be phenomenal.

These are the author's personal views.

MINT CURATOR

The big global lesson of 2025: Do not underestimate China

An economy that was expected to falter has emerged as a winner

SHULI REN
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asian markets.

Western elites may have let their political view of China colour their analysis. REUTERS

From US President Donald Trump's trade war to AI developments, 2025 has been full of dramatic twists and turns. One consequential takeaway is to never, ever underestimate China.

At the onset of the year, the world's second-largest economy was left for dead. Economists were predicting lost decades akin to what Japan experienced in the 1990s and its dominance of manufacturing was being challenged by Trump's second term and the drive by exporters to diversify their supply chains and move operations abroad. Global investors had largely fled, seeing that the country's '3D' problems—deflation, debt and demographics—were structural and insurmountable.

By year-end, the perception couldn't be any more different. President Xi Jinping was [among the few leaders] who stood up squarely to Trump's bullying tactics on trade. Xi forced him to back down by weaponizing Beijing's control of rare earth materials. It has kept its status as the world's most vibrant factory, so much so that some are lamenting that Europe, for one, has nothing to sell to China. As for global money flows, foreign investors are returning as an AI boom has lifted the Hong Kong bourse to a four-year high.

How did China manage to shake off its malaise and dazzle the world with DeepSeek moments in tech, biotech and even defence? Were the seeds of success always there and elites in the West simply chose not to see them? It's a bit of both.

First, Xi's focus on higher education is finally paying off. These days, roughly 40% of high-school graduates go to university, versus 10% in 2000. Engineering is by far the most popular major for post-graduate studies. As a result, the nation's talent pool has greatly expanded: Between 2000 and 2020, the number of engineers ballooned from 5.2 million to 17.7 million in China; in 2022, 47% of the world's top 20th percentile AI researchers finished their undergraduate studies in China, well above the 18% share from the US.

What this means is that by the law of large numbers, innovative breakthroughs are bound to happen and that China still has a cost advantage in advanced manufacturing. Those under the age of 30 account for 44% of the total engineering pool, versus 20% in the US; compensation for researchers is only about one-eighth that of their American counterparts. Therefore, even if the likes of Apple want to quit China, they can't.

Second, China is pragmatic. The AI arms race offers a good illustration. Whereas the US seeks the holy grail of artificial general intelligence, Xi is pushing the industry to be "strongly oriented toward applications," locking in any advantages that AI might bring to sharpen the nation's edge in manufacturing. Across the country, industrial robots operate in so-called dark factories, where automation is so efficient that work happens with the lights dimmed. Companies are also using AI to speed up logistics and product-design cycles.

Productivity gains from AI and automation are for all to see: China's trade surplus hit a record $1 trillion this year, beating rival export powerhouses like Germany and Japan, with the fastest growth coming from advanced manufacturing, such as cars, integrated circuits and ships.

Third, deflation cuts both ways. Investors dislike it because companies have no pricing power. On the flip side, local brands capable of charging premium prices at home have hit consumers' soft spot, giving them export prospects as well. The prime example is Guangzhou-based Pop Mart International Group. The company's gross profit margin of 70% is more than twice what a generic toymaker can make, thanks to the wickedly cute and viral Labubu.

Going forward, Chinese brands will be increasingly known globally for their design and aesthetic flair. Shoppers will get to appreciate silent air-conditioners, quiet luxury designer bags, fragrances that rival Le Labo and even gelatos that taste as good as those in Italy, as my Sicilian calisthenics trainer proclaimed. 'China chic' is coming to wow the world—okay, perhaps anywhere but in the US, a market to which Chinese exports tumbled 19% this year.

The nagging question is how thought leaders in the West got the world's second-largest economy so wrong. Of course, Beijing doesn't make it easy—the country didn't open up from pandemic-related lockdowns until the end of 2022. But some of it, I suspect, is an aversion to visiting an autocracy whose political values are different from the Western elite's core beliefs. Making money off China isn't as easy as a decade ago, and some worry that, once there, they might get an exit ban.

But, amid all this, one thing is for sure: It would be a huge mistake to write off China, the world's only other economic superpower that matters. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

As 2026 dawns, let us ring the bells that can still ring

ALOK SHEEL

is a retired Indian Administrative Service officer and former secretary, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council.

At the end of each year, I search my soul to draft a New Year message for near and dear ones, among others, assessing the year gone by and looking forward to the coming year with hope and expectation.

While global economic growth has settled at a little above 3% over the last few years after recovering from the covid crisis, uncertainty arising from US President Donald Trump's tariffs hangs over the global economy, haunted as it is by the century-old ghost of America's Smoot-Hawley tariffs. Indeed, the fate of the entire post-war order currently hangs in the balance.

Man doth not live by bread alone. There has also been a growing unease for some time and a somewhat sombre state of mind. There was a sense that the core values I have cherished since my growing-up years—of individual freedom of expression, social equality, humanism, harmony and religious universalism—were under threat.

Despite their outsized potential, recent advances in technology like social media and AI have created new challenges. They have accelerated socio-economic inequalities and created a growing disgruntled underclass that enabled populist demagogues to ride to power on a form of belligerent nationalism that has divided rather than united people.

These new technologies created new means of control and made civil society more divided, angry, combative and disrespectful, often within the same family. Trump and the 'Make America Great Again' ((MAGA) phenomenon were symptomatic of these developments that had echoes all over the democratic world, including India.

In the wake of such developments, I wrote an opinion piece in *Mint* a decade ago under the ominous headline 'Is the history of the 1930s repeating itself?' that concluded with: "History is unlikely to be repeated in the same manner, but with capitalism in crisis, and both the Centre and organized Left in retreat, human tragedy of indeterminate magnitude is likely. Whether the post-war liberal order will survive the right-wing onslaught is moot."

Developments over the last decade only fuelled my fears. I nevertheless looked at the positives in each subsequent New Year message, or at what economists are wont to call 'green shoots.' I likened each new year to a new dawn that heralded the end of darkness. Arthur Clough's poem, *Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth*, was almost a constant in my New Year messages. While drawing an analogy between the new crop of global leaders and the 'four horsemen of the Apocalypse' of the biblical book of Revelation, I also referred to their fiery eyed nemesis mounted on a white steed.

Indeed, the defeat of the Taliban and ISIS, and of Trump in 2020, made it seem that the tide was coming in through 'creeks and inlets' and that one need not look only at the sunrise in the east, for with it the west looked bright as well. The Taliban, however, fought its way back and the past year saw the triumphal return of a more virulent version of Trump's MAGA politics. The famed institutional checks and balances of the world's oldest democracy are faltering. Similar figures seem to be on the ascendant all over the democratic world.

Green shoots are no doubt also visible in the world's oldest democracy. The second Trump presidency is less than a year old and already piling up electoral losses. But while Trump might go, Trumpism and the MAGA movement that spawned it are not going anywhere.

Meanwhile, the resolve to fight global warming weakens by the day. Hot on the heels of unending strife in Africa and the endless war that is destroying Ukraine came the horrific genocide in Gaza.

These disheartening developments make it difficult to look at 2026 with renewed hope.

It is a conundrum of history that despite long-term progress, people are always dissatisfied with the present. Golden Ages all lie in the past. We also need to be cognizant that humans are imperfect beings, with the capacity for both good and evil. The philosopher and thinker Isaiah Berlin called this the 'crooked timbre' of humanity. Prophets and spiritual leaders have over the years endeavoured to draw out the good within us. The spirit of the current age, or *zeitgeist* as Germans might put it, is not heart-warming as baser instincts are seemingly ascendant.

But we have been there before and individual acts of kindness are everywhere. Our belief in the basic goodness of humans need not waver despite this crooked timber.

To paraphrase the urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, though the night seems long and dark, it is after all only night, and dawn will surely break through.

But people also make their own history and it is for us to do our bit to amplify the light by drawing out the best not just in ourselves, but in others. So,

Ring, ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget that perfect offering;
For there's a crack, a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

With that message from singer-poet Leonard Cohen, here is wishing readers a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

QUICK READ

Will the post-war liberal world order survive? We have kept looking for 'green shoots' amid hardened politics and wars but developments over the past year have been quite disheartening.

What Isaiah Berlin called the 'crooked timbre' of humanity seems on the ascendant. There's always hope, though, thankfully. Dawn must follow darkness and every crack could let in light.

> "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind."
> -Rudyard Kipling

The Hitavada

They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three
Lowell

Nakshatra Shatatarka 08H 59M
Moon Kumbh upto 27H 10M (Rajandekar Panchang)
Paush Shukla Paksha Tithi Shashthi 13H 43M
Muslim Rajjab 5th Hijree 1447

SHIELD THE HILLS

AMID growing protests against a recent Government Resolution accepting new definition of the Aravalli hills as laid down by the Supreme Court, the Centre has embarked upon a firefighting job issuing directions to States for a complete ban on granting new mining leases in the eco-sensitive region. The new direction has come after fears of destruction of the country's oldest mountain range are being aired vehemently by environmentalists and people living in the Aravalli hills region. Imposing complete ban on new mining leases in the Aravallis is a welcome step but the larger issue of the new definition threatening its very existence remains unsolved. The hills need protection, not only from illegal mining but also from the possibility of losing its status as the Green Wall that protects multiple States.

The Aravalli hills are one of the world's oldest geological formations spanning across Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat, and Delhi-NCR region. It acts as a climactic agent for these States by standing as a barrier between the Thar desert and Gangetic plains and also helping in charging groundwater for northern parts of the country. Its importance is immense in India's ecological ecosystem and the movement to save it from rampant exploitation is a reality that must be addressed without any biases by the Centre.

The Union Government has sought to allay fears about the new definition of the Aravalli hills which says "Aravalli Range is a collection of two or more hills of 100 metres elevation within 500 metres of each other". The new criteria, accepted by the Supreme Court in its November order, says only landforms at an elevation of 100 metres or more should be considered as part of the mountain system. However, the new definition has come totally in contrast with the Government's earlier stand in the apex court based on Forest Survey of India's estimates made in 2010. According to that estimate, over 90 per cent hills would be out of that ambit of the 100-metre height filter. The FSI assessment had further stated that if all Aravalli hills are considered as per the 100-metre definition, then over 99 per cent do not meet the criteria. The fears are real while the truth remains wrapped in the numbers game.

The Supreme Court must intervene into the matter yet again and weed out the ambiguity surrounding the "local relief" clause. It stokes apprehensions that height of a hill will not be measured from the lowest elevation of a State but from the immediate surroundings of the hill. It automatically changes the geographical contours for various hills situated at different points of a slope. If the "local relief" criteria is applied to define the Aravallis, then majority of the hills will not qualify as part of the mountain range and will be open for other activities including mining. It is a major issue which must not be allowed to become only a political ping-pong.

The Centre has ruled out new mining leases in the Aravalli range but it hardly addresses the bigger issue. Illegal mining is rampant in many parts of the range in Rajasthan while construction projects are in full swing in NCR. There is just too much human intervention while the respective governments struggle to check it due to lack of man-power and surveillance equipment. New permissions as per the changed definition will only swell the problem and sound death knell to the eco-sensitive zone. The range is a biodiversity hotspot. Human greed must not allow destruction of their natural habitat. It will cause a massive imbalance and irreversible damage.

All the stakeholders must take lessons from the natural disasters striking the Himalayan ranges due to climate change. Wanton construction in many fragile ecological zones has led to situations where things have gone out of human control. The country has already seen the face of disaster in the Western Ghats which are still paying the price of human insensitivity. The Aravalli Hills must get a proper shield, formed by humans.

Inspiration

THERE is so much that must be done. And although you may not get it all finished today, you can get something done, so go ahead and do it. Some tasks will likely take longer than you anticipated, and that can be frustrating. Yet even when the progress is slow, you are indeed making progress, so choose to be more thankful and less frustrated. Instead of complaining about what you can't do, put all your focus and energy into what you can do, and into what you are doing. Little by little, bit by bit, work your way forward.

One of the biggest enemies of persistence is discouragement. So refuse to be discouraged, and congratulate yourself on making one step at a time.

Plenty of things can slow you down, yet you don't have to let anything stop you completely. Even if it's just in a small way, you can find a way to keep going.

It feels great to know you're making a difference, so do a little bit, and feel a little better. Keep going, and you'll soon be amazed at how far you've come. Give good thought and consideration to what you're about to do. But don't overthink it.

It pays to make good use of your intelligence. Take care, however, that you don't substitute thinking for doing.

If your thinking gets in the way of making a decision, you're probably overthinking it. If your thoughts wander off from whatever you're working on, you're overthinking it.

Look at what you're doing now, and aim your thoughts at doing it well. Think and analyze enough to do your best work, but not so much that you get hopelessly distracted by those thoughts.

You have the amazing ability to think, and it gives you great power. Apply that power in a positive, effective, and consistent direction.

INDIA'S BAHUBALI

BY R. SURYAMURTHY

BY any technical measure, India's successful launch of the BlueBird Block-2 satellite should have been routine. Rockets lift satellites into orbit every week now. SpaceX alone has normalised spaceflight to the point of near banality. And yet, the LVM3-M6 mission — which placed a 6,100-kg US-built communications satellite into low Earth orbit — deserves closer scrutiny, not for what it achieved, but for what it quietly signals.

This was not a flag-waving demonstration of national pride, nor merely another commercial launch in an increasingly crowded market. It was a carefully calibrated statement about cost, capacity, and the future balance of power in the global space economy — one that Washington and Western launch providers would be unwise to overlook.

At its core, the mission highlights an uncomfortable truth: the economics of space launch are changing again, and not necessarily in ways that favour established players. BlueBird Block-2, built by AST SpaceMobile, is the largest commercial communications satellite ever deployed in low Earth orbit. Its purpose is ambitious: to enable direct-to-smartphone 4G and 5G connectivity without reliance on ground-based cellular infrastructure. For US telecom and satellite strategists, that alone is significant. But the more revealing choice was how the satellite got there.

AST SpaceMobile turned to India's Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and its heavy-lift LVM3 rocket — not SpaceX, not Europe's Ariane 6, and not a US government- backed launcher. The reason was not technical capability; all three could have carried the payload. The reason was economics and availability.

Industry estimates place the cost of an LVM3 launch at roughly $55–60 million. That figure matters. In an era when satellite constellations are no longer experimental but commercial infrastructure, launch cost is no longer an ancillary expense. It is a business determinant.

For constellation operators, shaving $10–20 million per launch can decide whether a network scales, stalls, or collapses under capital pressure. ISRO understands this. And with the LVM3-M6 mission, it has made clear that it intends to compete not on spectacle or cadence, but on price discipline. None of this diminishes SpaceX's dominance. Falcon 9 remains unmatched in launch frequency, reliability, and reusability. Starship, if it succeeds, will likely reset cost curves again. But dominance breeds concentration risk — and customers know it.

SpaceX's manifest is congested. Priority often goes to Starlink, internal missions, or government contracts. For commercial operators with non-standard payloads or tight deployment windows, flexibility can come at a premium.

India is offering something different: a state-backed launcher with fewer internal conflicts, predictable scheduling, and lower upfront costs — even if it lacks reusability or rapid cadence. For some customers, especially those launching fewer but heavier satellites, that trade-off is acceptable. In this sense, ISRO is not trying to out-SpaceX. It is exploiting the gaps SpaceX leaves behind.

The LVM3 was not designed as a commercial workhorse. Originally known as the GSLV Mk-III, it was built to support India's own geosynchronous satellites and, eventually, human spaceflight. Its recent transformation into a commercial platform was forced as much by geopolitics as by strategy. When Russia withdrew from Western launch markets following the invasion of Ukraine, and Europe retired Ariane 5 before Ariane 6 was ready, India stepped into the vacuum. The OneWeb launches in 2022 and 2023 were the turning point. BlueBird Block-2 builds on that momentum. What is changing now is intent. ISRO is no longer an emergency substitute. It is positioning itself as a permanent, lower-cost option — especially for customers seeking heavy-lift capability without premium pricing. This has implications far beyond India. A more competitive launch market compresses margins for incumbents, reshapes procurement decisions, and weakens the assumption that space access must flow through a small club of Western providers. For US policymakers accustomed to thinking of space as a domain of technological superiority, this diffusion of capability should prompt reassessment. India's advantage is not technological novelty. It is structural cost efficiency. Lower labour costs, vertically integrated development, state subsidies, and a long tradition of engineering austerity allow ISRO to deliver complex systems at prices Western agencies struggle to match. Critics argue this is an uneven playing field — and they are right. But markets rarely reward fairness; they reward efficiency. What makes this especially potent is that ISRO's cost discipline is reinforced by national priorities. The LVM3 is also the vehicle for India's Gaganyaan human spaceflight program and for future space station modules. That pipeline of government missions helps amortise development costs across commercial launches.

In effect, commercial customers are benefiting from a launcher whose economics are underwritten by state ambition — a model that Western governments once perfected, but have gradually diluted through privatisation and fragmented procurement.

Space is no longer just a technological frontier. It is an industrial one. Launch vehicles are infrastructure, not icons. And infrastructure follows economics.

The BlueBird Block-2 mission was not about a satellite. It was about signalling that access to orbit — once the preserve of a few — is becoming a negotiable commodity. In that negotiation, India has entered the room not as a junior partner, but as a disciplined, cost- conscious competitor.

(IPA)

Abuse of power

MIDDLE SPACE
BY AR. ASHWINI V. LOTHE

IT was nearly 2.00 am, and we had just landed at the Mumbai International Airport. It was a long flight from Cairo, and we were looking forwards to another flight for Nagpur, eager to reach home. To our dismay, we got a message that our flight had got cancelled, and now it was supposed to fly the next day. Tired and exhausted, we marched towards the airline counter, where already a great crowd had gathered, all of them suffering due to various cancelled flights. We didn't know it yet, but this was just the beginning of the huge meltdown that was to follow in the coming days.

There came a man who demanded the reason for cancellation, and started arguing with the official managing the counter. The official, having no fault of his, tried to explain patiently, but the man started shouting. His voice boomed over all the passenger noise, and people around him started looking uncomfortable. All of them were suffering the same fate, yet they were handling the situation with poise; however this man refused to give up. Finally he let go only when he was promised a stay and meals from the airline, a promise that was given to us and others too.

At sunrise, we managed to reach the hotel, and plopped straight into our beds. By 9.00 am, we went to the breakfast area, and found everything in disarray. The hotel, full of people from cancelled flights, was simply not equipped to handle the crowds, and so the breakfast table just had only remaining tidbits. And to top it all, the same man at the airport sat on a chair, shouting at the staff, a young boy who stood with his head hung in shame.

The man kept telling the boy that he should resign immediately on account of his inefficient handling of the situation. The poor boy called his manager, told him that once again the breakfast needed to be prepared, and went inside, on the verge of crying. We were equally famished, but we just sat there, hoping to get something to eat. And we did, because in a few minutes a fresh batch of hot Poha was ready, accompanied with bread, butter, and ginger tea. We thanked the boy and told him he was doing a wonderful job, even as the man kept eating in a huff. We hoped our few good words were enough to raise the self-esteem of the hard working young man.

It was evening, and we went out at a mall, just to pass the time. As we sat in a food court, a family of four came and sat besides us. The daughter, hardly five year old, kept calling her dad.

Finally he got frustrated and just slapped her. Me and my college going daughter immediately looked at horror at one another, and both our faces fell at the same time watching the little girl go quiet. Her mom was cradling a very spic and span year old son while the little girl had unkempt hair and untidy look, in spite of a very obvious good background. And both the parents had eyes only for their son while the girl simply sat beside, totally ignored.

As I sat there with my spoilt mood, I wondered what the crime of the little one was.

Nothing at all. Just like the man at the Airline counter, or even the young hotel staff. They were just doing their duty, handling the situation that was out of their control too. Yet people held them responsible, vented their frustration and ill-treated them with full authority. Within a day I had seen how people abused their positions to hold power over others. And I truly wished that someday they may get a dose of their own bitter medicine. I did reach home the next day, albeit a little more conscious of the less privileged.

Every Man in his Humour | Letters to the Editor

Inclusive governance

Sir,

Under the aegis of the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Government of India "Good governance week" was observed recently across the country from December 19 to 25.

The nationwide "Prashasan Gaon Ki Ore" campaign as a part of this week-long administrative outreach was a focused and action oriented initiative aimed specifically at boosting grassroots service delivery and further strengthening citizen centric administration apart from as always promoting accountability & transparency. The event also honours former Prime Minister late Atal Behari Vajpayee's vision of citizen-centric and inclusive governance. That gives us the measure of utmost seriousness with which the Government views the matter. Our focus must continue to be also on protecting & preserving the environment even while constantly striving to make a better utilisation of the available resources at the disposal and in effectively meeting the needs of the society for sustained economic development/development goals. Good overall governance in well directed and coordinated manner at all operational levels of working will translate into good performance. Good performance means quality outcome/better productivity and effective service delivery to realise the intended objectives in mind of inclusive growth. The benefits of all social welfare schemes must reach the poorest of the poor that makes life better for everyone. There is a famous quote "Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success". Effective participation of everyone in the developmental affairs of the nation in various ways is a key and collectively, we can work more wonders.

India today is on the threshold of another major transformation after a series of structural reforms witnessed in the recent past covering all the vital sectors of the economy. The country is a significant driver of global growth consistently ranking as the world's fastest growing and major economy.

Srinivasan Umashankar

TIME & TIDE

STILL COMPLEX

THE peace deal between Russia and Ukraine initiated by the United States is still stuck in issues of trust even as American President Mr. Donald Trump insists consensus on some key issues aimed at ending the long war. In talks with Ukraine President Mr. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the US showed that it has hammered out consensus on a 20-point plan but the fact remains that Ukraine would not agree to territorial disputes surrounding some of its regions. The negotiations are stuck on the points of territorial control of Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland and the Donbas region. Russia has continued to assert its control over the Donetsk and Luhansk region forming the Donbas but Ukraine is vehemently rejecting this maximalist demand. This bone of contention is unlikely to be removed soon despite the push by the impatient Mr. Trump. The peace deal is too complex and needs a patient handling from America. Russia is a tough nut to crack while Ukraine has remained defiant in the war despite its small size and limited resources. Mr. Trump's way of bulldozing negotiations is not going to work in this conflict. There have been suggestions of the disputed territories turning into a free economic zone but any such arrangement will be fraught with danger. The trust deficit between Russia and Ukraine weighs too heavy for such an arrangement. The wait for peace might get longer.

RUN-WAYS!

THERE was a massive difference between quality and skills of the teams playing against each other in the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy in some games but the amount of runs being scored even in the battle of equals makes one wonder whether domestic cricket is still caught in the idea of laying out shirt-front pitches. The tournament saw a plethora of batting records on Wednesday as top stars ticked their presence with big centuries. Rohit Sharma feasted on the mediocre bowling of Sikkim while Virat Kohli hammered Andhra bowlers with disdain. Elsewhere, young Vaibhav Suryavanshi walked into the record books with a daddy hundred and Bihar amassed 574 in 50 overs. The numbers are bewildering, making one feel for the bowlers. But the question to ask here is why the BCCI has gone for such a one-sided contest where the bat dominates heavily and bowlers are paraded like lambs for slaughter. If fours and sixes make great viewing then a good spell on a competitive pitch is also a compelling show. Unfortunately, the domestic one-dayers have been turned into a runathon where no total looks safe. Such games only give a false confidence to batsmen and beat the morale of the bowlers for no fault of theirs. All the talks of an equal battle cannot remain only on paper for the BCCI. The bowlers deserve a kind eye, if not a largess.

ATTENTION **Readers please note the change in e-mail address.** The**Hitavada** welcomes Middles (upto 550 words), letters for this page, and contributions to other sections also by e-mail at: ***maindesk@thehitavada.com; editor@thehitavada.com.*** **The editors may rephrase letters for clarity of thought and constraints of space.**

Editor's TAKE

India's coming of age in space

What sets ISRO apart is its ability to achieve more with less, to innovate under constraint, and to democratise access to space-derived benefits

If there is one Indian institution that has consistently delivered excellence and steadily raised benchmarks, it is ISRO. What began as a modest space agency has today evolved into one of the world's most respected space organisations, bringing pride to the nation and tangible benefits to every Indian. From accurate weather forecasting and disaster management to communication and surveillance, ISRO's contributions quietly underpin daily life. Its journey has been all the more remarkable because space research and development is an unforgiving arena, fraught with technological risks and setbacks at every stage-challenges that ISRO has repeatedly met with resilience, innovation, and resolve.

With the successful launch of BlueBird Block-2 aboard the LVM3-M6-aptly nicknamed Baahubali-the Indian Space Research Organisation has once again reaffirmed its place among the world's serious space powers. Lifting off from Sriharikota with a 6,100-kg payload, the heaviest ever placed into Low Earth Orbit by an Indian rocket, the mission marks not merely a technical triumph but a decisive moment in India's evolving space journey-from capability to credibility.

The significance of the launch lies as much in what was carried as in who carried it. BlueBird Block-2, developed by US-based AST SpaceMobile, was launched under a commercial agreement facilitated by ISRO's commercial arm, NewSpace India Ltd. What is important here is not only the feat but also the trust and respect the Indian space agency commands across the world. That a foreign private entity entrusted its most ambitious next-generation communication satellite to an Indian launcher speaks volumes about the capabilities of ISRO. Indeed, ISRO has matured into a reliable service provider and a money-spinner. The LVM3 rocket itself stands as a symbol of ISRO's quiet maturation. Standing 43.5 metres tall and powered by indigenous cryogenic technology, it is a dependable heavy-lift vehicle capable of complex commercial and strategic missions. From Chandrayaan-2 and Chandrayaan-3 to LVM3, it has demonstrated consistency-an attribute that matters as much as innovation in the unforgiving realm of space.

Commercial launches translate into revenue and strengthen India's strategic autonomy by ensuring that critical launch capabilities remain sovereign. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted, the mission reflects the spirit of Aatmanirbhar Bharat-self-reliance anchored not in isolation, but in global competitiveness.

ISRO's growing technological depth also finds resonance beyond civilian space. The recent successful test launch of an indigenous missile system-enabled by advances in guidance, propulsion, and tracking technologies developed with ISRO's support-highlights the agency's broader contribution to national security. While ISRO has been pivotal in strengthening India's growth and strategic capabilities, satellites launched by ISRO power weather forecasting, disaster management, navigation, agriculture, telecommunications, and education across India, quietly improving the lives of every Indian citizen.

PIC TALK

Lions inside an enclosure at the Alipore Zoological Garden in Kolkata. PHOTO: PTI

A substantive reading of VB-G RAM G

The VB-G RAM G Act deserves to be judged not by the volume of protest it has generated, but by its design logic and implementation outcomes. It attempts to reconcile social protection with fiscal responsibility, and employment assurance with developmental purpose

HEMANGI SINHA | PRAVIN KUMAR SINGH

When the Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 finally received Presidential assent, it arrived amidst considerable political clamour. Parliamentary disruptions and social media outrage quickly framed the law as either an ideological rupture or a cosmetic rebranding of the rural employment guarantee. In this din, however, the most important aspect of the Act has been largely missed: its substantive attempt to recalibrate rural employment policy through fiscal prudence, normative funding, and developmental alignment.

Public discourse has focused disproportionately on symbolism and legacy, leaving little room for a serious examination of what the law actually does and why it has been designed the way it has. Yet, for a country aspiring to become a Viksit Bharat, the question that should matter most is not who claims ownership of past programmes, but whether new legislation meaningfully strengthens state capacity, improves outcomes, and remains fiscally sustainable.

From Entitlement Expansion to Responsible Design

At first glance, the Act appears to be an expansion rather than a contraction of the rural employment guarantee. The statutory assurance of work has been enhanced from 100 to 125 days per rural household annually. This is not a trivial change. In regions prone to agrarian distress, climate variability, or seasonal unemployment, the additional 25 days provide a critical buffer against income volatility.

But the real shift lies not in the number of days guaranteed, but in the architecture of the guarantee. Unlike its predecessor, which operated largely as an open-ended, demand-driven entitlement with contingent fiscal liabilities, the new Act consciously embeds employment assurance within a more structured and predictable financing framework. This design choice reflects a sober recognition of macroeconomic constraints and the necessity of balancing welfare commitments with fiscal responsibility.

Far from diluting the guarantee, this recalibration seeks to protect it from the very risks that plagued earlier models-chronic delays in wage payments, mounting arrears, and periodic budgetary shortfalls that undermined credibility at the grassroots level.

Why the Earlier Model Became Unsustainable

What is often forgotten in the current debate is that the earlier model of rural employment operated under an open-ended, demand-driven fiscal architecture that, over time, revealed serious structural limitations. While the intent was to provide a justiciable right to work, the absence of predictable annual allocations converted the programme into a contingent liability on the Union exchequer. In practice, this led to chronic under-budgeting, repeated supplementary demands, accumulation of wage arrears, and delayed payments to workers-undermining the very dignity the scheme sought to guarantee. Fiscal uncertainty also weakened planning at the state and panchayat levels, encouraging reactive execution rather than purposeful asset creation.

Normative Funding as Fiscal Prudence, Not Retrenchment

Perhaps the most misunderstood provision of the Act is its move towards normative funding. Under the new framework, the Central Government determines annual state-wise allocations based on objective criteria, with a clearly defined cost-sharing formula-60:40 between the Centre and the states (and 90:10 for special category states). Expenditure beyond these allocations must be borne by the states themselves.

This has been criticised as an erosion of the demand-driven principle. Yet such criticism overlooks the fiscal logic underpinning normative funding. Open-ended guarantees, while morally appealing, often translate into uncertain liabilities that strain public finances and ultimately weaken implementation. Normative allocations, by contrast, introduce predictability, incentivise planning, and allow both tiers of government to align employment provisioning with broader development priorities.

Crucially, the Act retains the statutory obligation to provide unemployment allowance where work is not offered within the stipulated time. The guarantee, therefore, is not abandoned; it is embedded within a framework that encourages states to plan works efficiently rather than rely on perpetual fiscal overruns.

In an era where public resources are finite and competing demands-from health to education to climate adaptation — are growing, such fiscal discipline is not ideological parsimony but responsible governance.

The shift to normative funding under the Act must therefore be read not as a dilution of commitment, but as a corrective-one that seeks to preserve the employment guarantee by anchoring it in budgetary realism, planning discipline, and long-term sustainability.

> THE VB-G RAM G ACT DESERVES TO BE JUDGED NOT BY THE VOLUME OF PROTEST IT HAS GENERATED, NOR BY THE SYMBOLISM ATTACHED TO ITS NAME, BUT BY ITS DESIGN LOGIC AND IMPLEMENTATION OUTCOMES. IT ATTEMPTS TO RECONCILE SOCIAL PROTECTION WITH FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND EMPLOYMENT ASSURANCE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL PURPOSE. WHETHER IT ULTIMATELY SUCCEEDS WILL DEPEND ON EXECUTION, POLITICAL WILL AT THE STATE LEVEL, AND CONTINUOUS COURSE CORRECTION. BUT TO DISMISS IT AS MERE REBRANDING IS TO IGNORE THE SUBSTANTIVE RETHINKING IT EMBODIES

Employment with Purpose: Linking Wages to Assets

Another substantive departure under the Act is its renewed emphasis on asset-linked employment. Rural works are explicitly tied to the creation of durable assets: water conservation structures, rural connectivity, land development, and climate-resilient infrastructure. This marks a deliberate shift away from employment as a purely consumptive transfer towards employment as a means of building productive capacity. This orientation responds to long-standing critiques that rural employment programmes, while valuable for income support, often failed to generate assets with lasting economic value. By anchoring wage employment in projects that enhance agricultural productivity, ecological resilience, and rural infrastructure, the Act attempts to extract greater developmental returns from every rupee spent. In doing so, it reframes rural employment not as a residual safety net, but as an integral component of local economic development. Employment generation and development are no longer parallel objectives; they are explicitly fused.

Decentralisation with Accountability

The Act also places renewed emphasis on decentralised planning through Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas, reinforcing the constitutional vision of local self-government. Local bodies are entrusted with identifying works, preparing annual plans, and ensuring implementation aligns with local needs.

Yet decentralisation here is not romanticised. It is accompanied by strengthened accountability mechanisms-digital attendance systems, social audits, transparency requirements, and clearer administrative ceilings. These measures aim to address one of the most persistent challenges of large-scale welfare programmes: leakage and inefficiency.

By combining local discretion with systemic oversight, the Act seeks to strike a balance between empowerment and accountability. This is an important, if underappreciated, institutional refinement.

Seasonality, Agriculture, and Rural Realities

A particularly pragmatic feature of the new law is its sensitivity to agricultural cycles. The Act allows for the suspension of works during peak sowing and harvesting seasons, recognising that rural labour markets are not static and that public employment should complement, not distort, agricultural productivity. This acknowledgement of rural economic rhythms reflects a maturation of policy thinking. Rather than treating employment generation as an abstract entitlement detached from local economies, the law situates it within the lived realities of rural livelihoods.

Beyond Ideological Binaries

Much of the criticism directed at the Act stems from an ideological framing that views any departure from earlier models as inherently regressive. Such binaries-rights versus prudence, welfare versus discipline-are analytically unhelpful.

The truth is that unsustainable welfare architectures ultimately undermine the very rights they seek to protect. Delayed payments, uncertain funding, and administrative overload erode trust and reduce programme effectiveness. By contrast, a fiscally grounded, normatively funded framework enhances credibility and longevity.

A Quiet but Significant Pivot

In the larger narrative of India's development journey, the Act may not lend itself easily to slogans. It lacks the dramatic flourish of sweeping announcements or headline-grabbing fiscal expansions. Yet its significance lies precisely in its restraint.

By expanding employment guarantees while tightening fiscal design; by decentralising planning while strengthening accountability; and by linking wages to assets rather than mere transfers, the Act signals a quiet but consequential pivot in welfare governance.

As India charts its course towards becoming a developed nation, such policy choices matter more than rhetorical battles. Development is built not on noise, but on institutions that endure, finances that sustain, and programmes that deliver.

Judging the Law by Its Substance

The VB-G RAM G Act deserves to be judged not by the volume of protest it has generated, nor by the symbolism attached to its name, but by its design logic and implementation outcomes. It attempts to reconcile social protection with fiscal responsibility, and employment assurance with developmental purpose.

Whether it ultimately succeeds will depend on execution, political will at the state level, and continuous course correction. But to dismiss it as mere rebranding is to ignore the substantive rethinking it embodies.

In a time when public policy debates are increasingly reduced to slogans, the Act invites a more demanding exercise: to read, to analyse, and to engage with substance over sound.

Hemangi Sinha is Project Head & Pravin Kumar Singh is Senior Project Associate, World Intellectual Foundation
dailypioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
The Pioneer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HEIGHT-BASED ARAVALLI CRITERIA ENDANGERS ECOLOGY AND JUSTICE

The recent verdict on the Aravalli range has raised serious environmental concern, chiefly because it relies on a height-based definition to decide legal protection. Such a narrow test may exclude long stretches of this ancient mountain system, despite repeated scientific warnings about its fragility. The Aravallis recharge groundwater, moderate local climate and slow the creep of desertification — functions that cannot be captured by elevation alone. The ruling also appears to dilute earlier judicial intent that treated the range as a continuous ecological and geological entity. Fragmenting protection by height invites loopholes for construction, mining and land-use change, and weakens conservation in practice.

The criteria therefore deserve reconsideration through wider consultation with geologists, environmental scientists, planners and local administrations. Transparent, updated mapping of the entire range is essential to avoid ambiguity and misuse. Public access to maps, along with periodic review, would strengthen accountability. Equally important is rigorous monitoring and enforcement on the ground, for laws have little value if violations persist. It should be treated as a national priority.

Protecting the Aravallis does not mean stopping development; it means ensuring that development is carefully regulated, environmentally sensitive and legally defensible. A balanced, science-led approach can safeguard this vital ecosystem while still addressing legitimate developmental needs.

A MYILSAMI | TAMIL NADU

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

Leaders who shaped India

December 25 is no ordinary date in India's civilisational calendar. It marks the birth of two visionaries — Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Atal Bihari Vajpayee — whose lives, though separated by decades, converge in their commitment to a sovereign, self-respecting and spiritually rooted nation.

Malaviya, the "Mahamana", was more than a freedom fighter; he was a cultural architect. Through Banaras Hindu University, he imagined education not merely as utility, but as a means to awaken national consciousness. His advocacy of unity, free expression and social reform blended moral clarity with institution-building.

Vajpayee inherited that mantle in independent India. As Prime Minister, he balanced economic liberalisation with national dignity, strengthened infrastructure and asserted nuclear sovereignty. Yet it was his poetic restraint, belief in dialogue and deep civilisational awareness that distinguished him. His politics was defined not simply by power, but by dignity, discourse and destiny. Their lives remind us that India's journey is not only about GDP or geopolitics; it is about rekindling a civilisational flame. Malaviya gave it form; Vajpayee gave it voice. Let December 25 be not merely remembrance, but recommitment.

AMARJEET KUMAR | HAZARIBAGH

A Tribute to Vinod Kumar Shukla

With the passing of Vinod Kumar Shukla, the nation has lost not merely a writer, but a way of seeing. Poet, novelist and chronicler of the ordinary, he spent five decades shaping the emotional grammar of Hindi literature and expanding its global reach.

For the first time, Hindi prose began to enjoy sustained international readership and meaningful royalties. His translations, including *Naukar Ki Kameez* and *Deewar Mein Ek Khirkee Rehti Thi*, quietly changed the economics of literary work. Yet Shukla never wrote for markets. He wrote for attention — to small towns, clerks, teachers, widows and households whose heroism lay in endurance.

His fiction resisted spectacle. In *Deewar Mein Ek Khirkee Rehti Thi*, the professor's elephant ride arrives like a passing thought, turning daily life into meditation. He did not escape reality; he inhabited it more deeply.

Shukla refused ideological enlistment. His fidelity was to lived experience, where silence often spoke louder than slogans. In doing so, he widened Hindi's expressive range and proved that literature need not shout to last. He leaves not a void, but a lens through which the world remains quietly illuminated.

VIJAY SINGH ADHIKARI | NAINITAL

When politics chokes the air

Delhi's pollution crisis cannot be separated from political dysfunction. For decades, governments have relied on quick fixes — odd-even schemes, smog towers, school closures and work-from-home advisories — while deeper structural change remains neglected. The Graded Response Action Plan escalates restrictions as the AQI worsens, yet improvements are fragile and temporary. Courts have grown impatient. The Supreme Court has condemned reactive measures as ineffective, while the High Court's call to reduce GST on air purifiers reflects an unsettling reality: clean air now feels like a commodity rather than a right. Purifiers may help indoors, but they cure nothing outdoors.

Into this atmosphere came the Lieutenant Governor's strongly worded letter accusing prolonged neglect, followed by political counter-attacks blaming the Centre, neighbouring states and one another. Instead of cooperation, citizens witness accusation and evasion.

Delhi's air is poisoned not only by dust and smoke, but by indecision and partisanship. Technical, infrastructural and behavioural solutions are essential — yet without political will and accountability, they will fail. If politics is polluting the city, then a political solution is indispensable.

O PRASADA RAO | HYDERABAD

Tanzania's diplomatic balancing act after a contested mandate

As Tanzania seeks to recalibrate its global engagements in a multipolar world, the success of this outward-looking diplomacy will ultimately hinge on whether internal legitimacy and democratic stability can be restored

FIRST Column

SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI

The recent general elections held in Tanzania saw a landslide victory for President Samia Suluhu Hassan. Official returns indicated she secured over 97 per cent of the vote. But the electoral process itself was marred by serious controversy, as the key opposition challengers were barred from standing, the main opposition party was disqualified, and many candidates and activists were already detained.

In the aftermath, large-scale protests erupted across major cities. Police and security forces, according to multiple observer reports, responded with excessive force: tear gas, live ammunition, and crackdowns. There were credible allegations of deaths and mass arrests. There was an internet shutdown for several days, including during and after the voting, making independent reporting and transparent communication difficult.

Internationally, observers condemned the election. The African Union (AU) said the 2025 election "failed to comply with democratic standards", citing ballot-stuffing, curbs on free information (internet blackout), excessive use of force, and "a climate not conducive to peaceful conduct and acceptance of electoral outcomes". The European Union (EU), among others, threatened sanctions and a funding freeze over post-election abuses. Charges of treason were filed against dozens of protesters and opposition figures, and national civil society organisations demanded transitional justice and fresh elections.

It is against this background that President Hassan's turn toward a diversified foreign policy becomes especially interesting - and, arguably, necessary. As major and middle powers compete for influence across Africa, Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan is attempting to chart an approach that is neither confrontational nor passive — but deliberately plural. Since taking office, she has repositioned Tanzania not as a country aligned with any single external actor, but as one that seeks strategic autonomy through diversification. Her emerging foreign policy is built on the simple premise that no nation should place all of its geopolitical eggs in one basket. For Tanzania, a country of immense natural wealth and strategic geography, the stakes of overdependence are too high and the world too fluid for narrow alignments.

AS MAJOR AND MIDDLE POWERS COMPETE FOR INFLUENCE ACROSS AFRICA, TANZANIAN PRESIDENT SAMIA SULUHU HASSAN IS ATTEMPTING TO CHART AN APPROACH THAT IS NEITHER CONFRONTATIONAL NOR PASSIVE — BUT DELIBERATELY PLURAL

The writer is President of the Chintan Research Foundation and former Director of WTO, with extensive experience in international trade, finance, and industry

dailypioneer
@priyadarshi_crf
shishir-priyadarshi-crf

The starting point for understanding this shift is the legacy she inherited. Under President John Magufuli, Tanzania enjoyed strong but uneven external relationships - particularly a heavily China-centric orientation in large-scale infrastructure and investment. While these delivered substantial benefits, they also created perceptions of imbalanced dependency. One of Hassan's first moves, therefore, was to widen Tanzania's diplomatic bandwidth. She neither abandoned the Chinese relationship nor embraced an alternative bloc; instead, she began systematically broadening the country's engagement with India, Japan, the US, the EU, the Gulf states, and multilateral financial institutions. This reset was not cosmetic — it signalled a recalibration of Tanzania's place in an increasingly multipolar world.

A crucial pillar of this approach has been Hassan's outreach to Western partners. Relations with the US and the EU, strained in earlier years due to governance and investment concerns, were quickly revived. This shift became visible in 2025, when Tanzania and the US moved to finalise major investment agreements in Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), nickel, and graphite, building on a commercial landscape where over 400 US companies already operate in Tanzania. At the same time, the EU deepened its economic partnership with Dar es Salaam, anchoring cooperation through a €585 million development package focused on green transition, governance reforms, and digital and transport infrastructure under the Global Gateway framework. These renewed development compacts, business missions, and governance dialogues reflect a deliberate strategy to re-anchor Tanzania within the global trade and financial networks. By expanding Western economic footprints alongside those of Asian partners, Tanzania gains negotiating leverage and reduces the risk of any single external actor becoming indispensable.

Yet diversification does not mean dilution of existing friendships. Tanzania has maintained and deepened its partnership with China — but on more balanced and interest-driven terms. The most emblematic moment in Tanzania's rethinking of its China relationship actually came even in 2019, when it suspended the US$10 billion Bagamoyo port project, one of the largest planned Belt and Road investments in Africa. Tanzania publicly denounced its proposed terms as "exploitative and awkward", including a 99-year lease and sweeping tax exemptions for the Chinese operator. However, the decision did not sever Tanzania-China ties, but it sent a clear message: while Chinese capital would be welcomed, Chinese control would not. Bagamoyo has since resurfaced periodically in negotiations, including under President Samia, but always with the explicit caveat that the terms must be revised to protect national interests.

At the same time, Tanzania has not walked away from China. President Samia paid a high-profile state visit to Beijing in 2022, upgrading bilateral relations to a "Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership" and signing agreements across trade, infrastructure, agriculture, and the digital economy. This illustrates the calibrated nature of her strategy: Tanzania continues to engage China as a major development partner, but within a broader foreign-policy framework that prioritises diversification and avoids the structural overexposure that has constrained many other African economies.

Nowhere is the pluralistic foreign-policy orientation more visible than in Tanzania's growing ties with India. New Delhi has quietly become one of Dar es Salaam's most significant partners: India was Tanzania's second-largest trading partner in 2024-25, with bilateral trade reaching about US$8.6 billion, covering pharmaceuticals, machinery, consumer goods, and more, and Indian companies are among the top investors in sectors such as telecommunications, energy, steel, and agro-processing in Tanzania. Defence cooperation, ranging from capacity-building to maritime security, has expanded as both countries recognise the importance of the Western Indian Ocean. Therefore, India's rise in Tanzania's external matrix is not accidental; it reflects Hassan's calculus that a diversified Asia policy strengthens national resilience.

Rhetoric matters in foreign policy — and Hassan's messaging reinforces her strategic direction. Her consistent emphasis on "economic diplomacy", "diversified partnerships", and "strategic autonomy" is not mere wordplay; it is a declaration that Tanzania intends to navigate the great-power competition on its own terms. In a world where external pressure can easily skew national choices, articulating a strategic diversification approach gives Tanzania a conceptual anchor for policy continuity.

But if Tanzania wants to project stability and credibility abroad and avoid becoming isolated or reliant on a single partner, it must first settle its internal affairs, as internal stability and diversified external engagement must go together. A stable domestic environment underpins external credibility. International partners, investors, and multilateral lenders will be wary of deep cooperation while reports of rights abuses and political repression dominate headlines. For diversification to work, concerns regarding governance and rule of law must be addressed. Diversified diplomacy can provide an external buffer and leverage, but only if domestic legitimacy is restored.

At present, the overriding priority for Tanzania should therefore be domestic healing and institutional reform, ideally alongside a recommitment to political pluralism, press freedom, and independent scrutiny. Only then will Tanzania's broader diplomatic ambitions stand on a solid footing.

If and when that happens, Hassan's diversified foreign-policy approach could yet emerge not as a distraction or a payoff for international capital, but as a genuine path toward a resilient, independent, globally engaged Tanzania — one whose foreign policy rests on stable domestic governance, not on transactional expedience.

How a Christmas celebration marks an elephant calf's fight back from a train tragedy

SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

The trees are decorated with bells, stars, and miniature Santa ornaments. Maya, Phoolkali, Emma, Tara, and Suraj wait patiently nearby. But little Bani cannot hide her excitement. The moment she is given her surprise box with her favourite nutritious and colourful fruit feasts, there is no stopping her. The Christmas party has begun for the rescued elephants at India's first Elephant Hospital run by Wildlife SOS, a not-for-profit, in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh.

The idea behind these celebrations is to support both the physical and psychological well-being of rescued animals, both at the Elephant Hospital and the Elephant Conservation and Care Centre, while creating a nurturing environment, says Kartick Satyanarayan, co-founder, Wildlife SOS. Just how important this fostering environment is for the elephants can be seen in the remarkable progress made by Bani, the two-year-old who defied all odds to stand up on her own feet, 18 months after she was hit by a speeding train in Uttarakhand, leaving her with severe spinal injuries and little chance of survival.

Train hits have been the second-highest cause of the death of elephants, the first being accidental electrocution, according to the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. On 21 December 2025, seven wild Asian elephants, including four calves, were tragically killed when a high-speed express train collided with a herd crossing the tracks in Assam. Already classified as endangered, the number of elephants in India has been on the decline, according to a 2024 assessment by the Wildlife Institute of India and various State Forest Departments, with over 200 elephants killed in train collisions between 2010 and 2020. Though 150 elephant corridors have been validated by the government across 15 elephant-range states, train collisions caused the death of more than 50 elephants in the last four years.

In Uttarakhand, where a train collision critically injured Bani and instantly killed her mother, the population of elephants has shown a decline of 2.6 per cent between 2017 and 2023, many of whom have died due to critical injuries and a lack of adequate medical care.

Bani, too, was precariously close to becoming another statistic on the death list. In January 2024, when Uttarakhand forest officials found Bani, then a nine-month-old elephant calf, lying with grievous multiple injuries near her dead mother, they were convinced the orphan wouldn't survive. However, they were unwilling to give up. Determined to take their chances, officials reached out to Wildlife SOS, running a state-of-the-art Elephant Hospital in the neighbouring State of Uttar Pradesh. This was to be a life-changing decision for Bani.

When the Wildlife SOS team led by Dr Ilayaraja Selvraj, Deputy Director, Veterinary Services, assessed Bani's condition, they found she was unable to stand, with complete loss of movement in her right hind limb. Her condition was critical. Unless she received more intensive and long-term treatment, it was clear to the team that Bani was unlikely to survive. Uttarakhand forest officials also agreed that this would only be possible collaboratively at the Wildlife SOS hospital. So, after all transfer protocols were completed and the team ensured she was stable enough to travel, their ambulance was specially modified in keeping with her severe injuries. The floor was layered with soft hay for cushioning. Gunny sacks filled with hay served as pillows to support her legs to prevent sores. Blankets to keep her warm and bananas, papaya, and sugarcane leaves, along with milk and water bottles, were stocked to ensure she remained nourished during the 10-hour journey to Mathura.

Based on the advice of orthopaedics, neurosurgeons, and Ayurveda practitioners, Bani's initial treatment at the hospital included photobiomodulation therapy, laser therapy, hydrotherapy, and Ayurvedic hot-oil massages. However, it was the brainwave to provide acupuncture that led to the breakthrough. Dr Porrakote Rungsri, veterinary acupuncture specialist from Thailand's Chiang Mai University, flew in to share expertise and give hands-on training to the hospital team. Interestingly, a stuffed toy of the exact size and shape of Bani was used to demonstrate the exact points to insert the needles.

Given for the first time to any elephant in India, the innovative acupuncture therapy has been administered to Bani over the past 20 months as part of a comprehensive veterinary care programme tailored to Bani's specific paralytic condition. Acupuncture needles are gently put in to stimulate nerve function, reduce pain, and support the healing of her hind legs. Electro-acupuncture therapy promotes nerve regeneration, diminishes inflammation, and speeds up the healing process after injuries through electrical stimulation. The two-hour electro-acupuncture therapy, reduced now to once a fortnight for 120 minutes, varies in intensity under close supervision and monitoring to ensure it doesn't cause any discomfort or pain.

Bani's tenacity, resilience, and determination to stand on her feet surprised the hospital team. Now they are hoping that the success of electro-acupuncture in Bani's inspiring recovery will help to save the hundreds of others of this endangered species, critically injured in train collisions.

The writer is journalist writing on development and gender

dailypioneer
@majumdar_swapna
The Pioneer

The future of growth lies with small borrowers in small towns

DEEPAK AGGARWAL

India's economic narrative has long been dominated by metropolitan centres — Bengaluru's tech campuses, Hyderabad's new projects, Pune's IT prowess, Mumbai's financial hubs, or Delhi's corporate corridors. These cities drove growth through concentration of capital, talent, and infrastructure, yet the model seems to have reached saturation. The next growth story is not coming from the metros but the small villages where Bharat thrives.

Small But Impactful

Nearly 65 per cent of India's population lives in small towns and rural areas, yet they contribute only 45 per cent to GDP, showing massive untapped potential. Credit growth in tier-2 and tier-3 cities rose 14-17 per cent year on year in FY24 versus 9 per cent in metros (RBI). Micro and small enterprises now generate over 30 per cent of manufacturing output and 40 per cent of exports. Studies show that for every ₹1 lakh in microcredit there is the creation of 1.5-2 local jobs. With digital penetration at 75 per cent and UPI transactions exceeding ₹19 lakh crore monthly, small borrowers in smaller towns are driving the next wave of inclusive economic expansion.

There is also growing evidence that rising costs and competitive intensity are compressing returns in the metros. And on the other side of the demography? Well, there are themes that indicate a resurgence in small towns.

A recent BCG report highlights that 50 per cent of online shoppers were located in small cities, a number anticipated to reach 60 per cent by 2030. In smaller towns and semi-urban centres, rising aspirations, improving connectivity, and untapped entrepreneurial energy are creating fertile ground for expansion.

The next wave of sustainable growth will emerge not from further densification of metros but from distributing capital and opportunity across India's smaller towns, where small borrowers represent the engine of tomorrow's economy. Small borrowers in these contexts are not marginal actors; they are the economic backbone of local communities.

Capitalising the Unbanked

In a country with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, the RBI's latest Financial Inclusion Index highlights that barely 64.1 per cent have access to essential financial services. This means that two-fifths of the country do not have access to essential services. And if that is the case, how does the system enable the person at the last mile — or the town or the district? Contemporary data also points out why there is a need for new-age start-ups and fintechs to plug the gaps. In addition to vast segments that are unbanked, more recent microfinance data indicates a decrease in gross loan portfolio. The data shows that banks and financial institutions are pulling back on loans below ₹50,000. Overall disbursements have reduced by nearly 16 per cent in FY25. On the positive side, there is a trend of a rising share of loans above ₹1 lakh.

Why Microfinance?

The unbanked and unfinanced include vast segments such as provision-store owners, neighbourhood essential-service providers, tailors, repair-shop operators, dairy farmers supplying cooperatives, and transport operators connecting villages to towns. These entrepreneurs possess market knowledge, customer relationships, and operational skills. What they lack is access to affordable, timely credit.

Microfinance has served this segment partially, but gaps remain — particularly in the ticket sizes between microloans and small-business lending. Digital adoption is rising rapidly in tier-2 and tier-3 towns. But as formal credit availability lags behind, it constrains businesses that could otherwise scale, hire, and contribute to local prosperity. When credit reaches these borrowers, multiplier effects follow. Credit acts as a catalyst, setting off chain reactions that strengthen entire ecosystems. Each transaction generates income and tax revenue.

Microfinance studies have repeatedly documented how access to credit correlates with entrepreneurship rates, employment growth, and poverty reduction. The mechanism is straightforward — capital deployed productively generates returns that circulate through local economies. The lending landscape serving these borrowers is evolving rapidly. Digital platforms have dramatically reduced the cost of origination and servicing. Where physical bank branches struggle to justify operations in smaller towns, mobile-first lenders operate efficiently at scale. Peer-to-peer lending models connect urban capital with rural borrowers, bypassing intermediaries. Banks themselves are adopting new underwriting approaches, using transaction data, GST returns, and utility payments to assess creditworthiness without requiring extensive documentation. Real-time risk scoring enables faster approvals and more flexible terms.

Please read the complete article online at https://www.dailypioneer.com

The author is Co-founder and Co-CEO of Moneyboxx Finance Limited

dailypioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
The Pioneer

MUMBAICORE
THE PACE OF THE CHASE IN A LIMINAL SPACE

Genesia Alves
mirrorfeedback@timesofindia.com

An anonymous love note to this city

New experiences are hard to come by, but not all cost money

FILE PIC

The most culturally appropriated week in the Mumbai calendar is here

You can say 'Happy Holidays' but most of Mumbai is working. Only irony takes a break during this, the most culturally appropriated week in the entire Mumbai calendar. There's an almost charming naïveté to our public celebrations of the festival-that-must-not-be-named. Euphemisms like 'Winter Fest', 'Wonderland' or 'Xmas' are deemed acceptable. Giant plastic trees erected across the promenades erupt into lurid lighting at sunset. Over-festooned malls will give you Santa Claustrophobia. Mariah Carey on the speakers insists she doesn't want a lot for Christmas even as your debit card threatens to catch fire. If it does, there's a song about roasting chestnuts over it. (Chestnuts: Rs 1,200/kg, out of stock.)

This is also the weigh-in week. And not just because that spangly outfit you have for NYE would have fit perfectly if you'd stuck to 2025's resolutions. The real reckoning is that January is the Monday morning of the year, making late December like Sunday evening. 2025's weekend is almost over and you didn't really manage to declutter the 'miscellaneous drawer', digitise the fading family photographs, write that thank you note, get 10,000 steps in, tell someone you love them, or save enough money for a short trip. (Economy flights to Goa this week: Between Rs 5,000 and Rs 23,000.)

But where did the time go? Martin Wiener, Department of Psychology, George Mason University, Virginia, is an expert in time perception and temporal processing. Simply put, he explains why time flies, whether or not you're having fun. His research suggests that time can 'dilate' or feel slower when viewing images that are awe-inspiring and vast. Time can also seem to 'contract' or speed up in ambient clutter, or when stimuli have less contrast with the background. In a city where the vast sky must squeeze through skyscrapers, where there's a generic background of disrepair, debris, clutter and crowds, it makes sense that time goes too quickly. Wiener suggests new experiences to render the past more varied and therefore longer. Paying attention to time also slows it down. Tell that to the city, which distracts itself from the grimness with five hours of smart-screen time a day. (Nokia 105 Classic phone: Rs 949 – Rs 1,249.)

New experiences are hard to come by in Mumbai. Of course, this year, padel and pickleball courts have exploded. If you haven't been schooled yet in the differences between the two, you've not made a new friend in a while, have you? Far less sweaty, but as social, is the mahjong renaissance seeping in from the Malablahblah Hills into the Bougie Burbs. The tiles have generated a tidal wave of teachers and tournaments. By Mumbai-Thanksgiving 2026, we can bet you'll be invited to a game. But not all new experiences will cost money. A recent irony is, as the air quality deteriorates more people seem to take up running. It doesn't matter if they're usually beaten by that one guy with a heavy school bag as he races to the bus stop. They're just happy to participate and take a run-club selfie at the end of it. If their lungs still need more of a challenge, they can buy a weighted vest that simulates the paradox of the heaviness of the emptiness within. (Decathlon weighted vest: Rs 4,599 – Rs 6,249).

Today is Boxing Day, observed in some countries on the first working day after Christmas. Traditionally, it was the opportunity to make 'boxes' for staff. These boxes would contain food and treats from the home tables but would also feature money and presents in appreciation of the help provided. Especially after the excesses of the festivities. (Average Christmas meal, between 3,000 and 7,000 calories.)

We're used to appropriating other cultural to-dos (I'm looking at you, Halloweeners). Boxing Day should also come easily down the chimney. Whether it's your local clean-up crew, the building staff, your favourite vegetable vendor – a little treat is in order. Let's not forget those kind strangers who spend this festive week in service – in police stations, retail, restaurants and hospitals.

Last week in a clinic, I watched a woman stare at another gaunt, impoverished looking older woman. When she went in, the first woman quietly asked if she could pay for her x-rays but anonymously. The receptionist smiled kindly, "Her madam will pay ma'am. And thank you, but even the doctor serves needy folk for free." Being the 'stranger' in the 'kindness of strangers' may be a great way to honour the reason for this season. It could become part of the new experiences that slow time down and make you feel good. It can be your anonymous love note to this city. (Cost: Up to you, but the value is priceless.)

Happy New Year.

Genesia Alves is a journalist and Mumbai is her ancestral village

LAUGHINGSUTRAS
THE NOT-SO-INNER-VOICE OF A COMMON MUMBAIKAR

Shiv Shambale
shiv.shambale@timesofindia.com

Life in a Metro

It all began, as most Mumbai adventures do, with good intentions and a ticking clock. I had just dropped a relative at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, the railway station where time stands still but trains do not, and had to dash to Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport Terminal 2 to receive a friend flying in from Delhi.

Any delay, I knew, would expose my friend to Mumbai's most feared predators: Airport auto and taxi drivers who can smell an outsider from 200 metres away and quote fares based on accent, confusion and fear. A friend offered sage advice. "Metro le. Simple. Fast. No tension."

And since I was feeling unusually progressive that day, I had already downloaded the Mumbai Metro app and, brace yourself, bought my ticket two hours in advance. Preparation, after all, is the illusion we cling to before reality intervenes.

The journey began with a 10-minute walk from CST to the underground Metro security check. This is not a walk. It is a warm-up exercise thoughtfully designed by the system to test your commitment.

At the gate, the Metro welcomed me with a non-functional escalator, a gentle reminder that in Mumbai even infrastructure believes in fitness. Down the stairs I went, lugging my backpack, my optimism, and my remaining knee strength.

Then came the moment of truth. I pulled out my phone, stood tall, and attempted to scan my pre-purchased ticket. At that precise second, my app logged me out. Underground. Zero network. Zero login. Zero dignity.

Panic followed naturally. I rushed to the supervisor, who looked at me with the calm empathy of someone who has seen many careers and many apps collapse at access gates. He asked for proof of payment. I had paid via Google Pay. Google Pay, unfortunately, also worships the god of network connectivity, which was conspicuously absent.

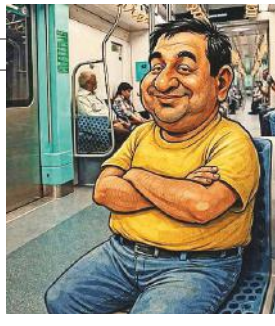
After some checks, balances, and an admirable amount of human trust, I was granted manual entry. The supervisor assured me the network would return en route and exiting at the airport would be seamless. I nodded earnestly, forgetting that I also had a bank SMS confirming payment. Memory, as always, is the first casualty of stress.

The train arrived in five minutes. Clean. Efficient. Blissfully unaware of my personal crisis. Announcements were clear, seats plentiful till BKC, where at around 5.41pm Mumbai entered collectively and every seat disappeared as if pre-booked by destiny. I waited anxiously for network, not to check WhatsApp, but to ensure I could exit before my friend was financially traumatised. One branding highlight stood out. "HDFC Life Mahalaxmi Metro" was announced so often that even HDFC's marketing team might have blushed.

At the airport exit gate, confidence restored, I walked up, only to be told by the machine that I had never checked in and so cannot check out. According to the system, I had materialised mid-journey from thin air. Another supervisor appeared, the access card was traced, and I was finally released into the outside world.

For Rs 60, I reached the airport on time, received my friend safely, and spared him the trauma of inflated fares. Better still, we took the same Metro back home to Dadar, saving him several hundred rupees and restoring his faith in public transport.

Yes, there were glitches. Yes, I sweated. Yes, I learned that leather shoes are not commuter friendly. But the larger truth is undeniable. The Mumbai Metro works. It saves time, money and sanity. Traffic jams



are slowly turning into folklore, beginning with, "Once upon a time Mumbai was in a mad rush to beat Bengaluru, not in startups or salaries, but in traffic jams."

Infrastructure matters. And when it supports the common man, it deserves not cynicism, but applause.

Readers may please write to me at shiv.shambale@timesofindia.com with their views on how the Mumbai Metro has changed their 'Life in a Metro', how traffic jams are becoming things of the past, and how we must welcome infrastructure that genuinely works for the people.

YUGMARG

CHANDIGARH

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2025

Opinion

The greatest day in your life and mine is when we take total responsibility for our attitudes. That's the day we truly grow up.

John C. Maxwell

EDITORIAL

Live and let 'live-ins' live

The right of adult individuals to choose their partners and decide on the nature of their relationship is inviolable. It must be seen as being integral to the right to life and liberty. Unfortunately, in India, the idea of a couple living together without marriage is largely frowned upon. Many see it as an immoral act and an affront to cultural values. A live-in relationship is branded as a violation of traditions and cultural values. Marriage is widely seen as a life-long commitment, while live-ins are seen as an abdication of responsibilities. Against this backdrop, the Allahabad High Court's recent ruling that live-in relationships are not illegal and that the state is bound to protect every citizen is a heartening development. Maintaining that the consenting adults have the constitutional right to live together with dignity and safety, irrespective of marital status, the court directed the Uttar Pradesh police to provide protection to 12 live-in couples facing threats from their families. The court rightly emphasised that Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees the right to life, dignity, and personal freedom to all individuals, including those in live-in relationships.

The fundamental rights of citizens cannot be eclipsed by social disapproval or hollowed out by stigma. It is a welcome development that the court places individual autonomy above majoritarian morality or inherited anxieties. The Allahabad court judgment comes at a time when there is a growing tendency to police intimacy, with inter-faith and inter-caste couples frequently facing hostility, coercion and violence from families and communities, often with no help from institutions meant to safeguard their freedoms. In several rulings in the past, the Supreme Court had pushed back against moral vigilantism, affirming the right of consenting adults to choose their partners without intervention from society or the state. Despite this, there is a legal vacuum regarding the rights of parties who cohabit informally. There is no law to ensure the protection of rights for the parties in a live-in relationship, and for the status of children born to such couples. Ideally, the law must recognise adults as rights-bearing citizens, not wards to be steered towards socially approved choices. In many countries, there is a legal recognition of prenuptial agreements, cohabitation, civil unions, and domestic partnerships. But, in India, live-in partners face a plethora of problems, including difficulties in having joint accounts, insurance and visas.

There is no specific law about live-in relationships, nor is it recognised by the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. In June 2018, the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) barred couples in a live-in relationship from adopting a child, after its Steering Committee held that cohabitation without marriage is not considered a stable family. Partners in a live-in relationship do not enjoy a right of inheritance to the property of their partner. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, does not specify the succession rights of the partners in a live-in relationship.

Denying fuel won't give us clean air

From December 18 onwards, a Delhi commuter may pull into a petrol pump as usual, only to be silently refused fuel: No argument, no explanation, no warning. A camera will scan the vehicle, detect a missing Pollution Under Control (PUC) certificate, and the nozzle simply won't turn on. In the midst of a pollution emergency, Delhi has opted for automation over judgment, restriction over reform. The intention is understandable.

Delhi's air is dangerous, and vehicular emissions are part of the problem. But policies that look efficient on paper can still fail in practice, especially when they ignore how people actually move, work, and live in a city of over 30 million. PUC-based fuel denial assumes three things: that PUC certificates accurately reflect real -world emissions, that compliance is easy and accessible, and that people denied fuel have viable alternatives. None of these assumptions holds. PUC testing in India is widely recognised as inconsistent.

Certificates are issued based on brief, stationary tests that fail to capture emissions from congestion, idling, poor fuel quality, or engine stress in real driving conditions. A car can pass a PUC test and still pollute heavily in stop-and-go traffic. Using such a blunt proxy to determine access to fuel risks penalising formality rather than pollution. Then there is the issue of scale.

Over eight lakh vehicle owners in Delhi reportedly lack valid PUC certificates. Giving them one day to comply is not an environmental urgency; it is administrative shock therapy. For gig workers, delivery drivers, tradespeople, and small business owners, a vehicle is not a lifestyle choice; it is a livelihood. Denying fuel does not clean the air if it simply pushes economic activity into chaos or informality. This approach also confuses enforcement with outcomes. If denying fuel were enough, Delhi's air would have improved long ago. The city already cycles through GRAP restrictions, construction bans, work-from-home mandates, and vehicle limits every winter. Yet the crisis returns, because the underlying system has not changed. A useful comparison comes from cities that reduced traffic emissions not by sudden cut-offs, but by implementing gradual reforms.

Tokyo reduced vehicle emissions not through blanket bans, but by removing dependence on personal vehicles. Extensive and efficient public transport, strict inspection standards, and long-term planning reduced traffic organically. Restrictions were embedded within a system that already worked for consumers. Cleaner air followed not from sudden cut-offs, but from sustained investment in alternatives. Delhi, by contrast, is still catching up. Bus availability remains insufficient. Last-mile connectivity is unreliable. EV adoption is encouraged rhetorically but constrained by charging gaps and policy uncertainty. Instead of making cleaner choices easier, policy keeps narrowing choices altogether. There is also a risk policymakers underestimate: displacement.

When compliance becomes unpredictable, behaviour does not disappear; it adapts. Vehicles refuel outside city limits. Certificates become a paperwork game. Pollution shifts rather than shrinks. Clean air cannot be enforced like a toll booth. None of this argues for leniency toward polluters. It argues for smarter design. If the goal is to reduce polluting vehicles, then invest first in mobility alternatives, upgrade testing to reflect real-world emissions, and use pricing and incentives that reward cleaner behavior. Enforcement should reinforce reform, not replace it. Automation can deny fuel. Only policy can deliver clean air. Delhi needs less autopilot and more consideration of how consumers actually navigate the city. If Delhi wants cleaner air, it should start by making buses and metros frequent, PUC testing credible, and electric vehicles cheaper, not by turning petrol pumps into punishment booths.

Charles Babbage: The Visionary Who Laid the Foundation from the Mechanical Age to the Digital Revolution

In today's digital era, when we speak of computers, artificial intelligence, and data processing, it is hard to imagine that the roots of this technological revolution were sown in the 19th century—a time when there was no electricity, no transistors, and no electronic circuits. The visionary who planted the seeds of this transformation was Charles Babbage , now widely regarded as the Father of the Modern Computer . Born on December 26, 1791, in London, Babbage's contributions to science, mathematics, and mechanical engineering continue to form the bedrock of computer science even today.

Babbage was born into a wealthy banking family, which afforded him access to quality education. He studied mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge, and soon impressed his professors and peers with his extraordinary intellect. His proficiency in mathematics earned him membership in the Royal Society—one of the highest honors for a scientist of that era.

Babbage's most renowned invention was the Difference Engine, which he designed to eliminate errors in mathematical tables. At the time, calculations were done manually, often leading to inaccuracies that had serious consequences in fields like astronomy, navigation, taxation, and engineering. Babbage envisioned a mechanical device that could perform calculations automatically and deliver error-free results.

This machine operated using gears, levers, and shafts, much like the steam-powered engines of the time.Although the construction of the Difference Engine remained incomplete due to financial constraints and technological limitations, Babbage did not give up. He went on to conceptualize a far more advanced machine—the Analytical Engine. This device was not only capable of performing calculations but also featured components such as input, memory, processing unit, and output—fundamental elements of modern computers. Instructions were to be fed into the machine using punched cards, laying the groundwork for future computer programming.The task of writing programs for this mechanical computer was undertaken by Ada Lovelace, who is now recognized as the world's first computer programmer. Ada understood the workings of Babbage's machine and developed mathematical algorithms for it, offering an early glimpse into what would later become software development. The scientific collaboration between Babbage and Ada remains a landmark chapter in the history of computer science.

Charles Babbage was not just an inventor; he was also a philosopher and social reformer. He authored several books and essays to make science accessible to the general public. He believed that the purpose of science should not be confined to laboratories but should benefit all sections of society. He also proposed reforms in industrial production, railway scheduling, postal systems, and statistical analysis.

His scientific foresight was so profound that he predicted the possibility of machines replacing human labor in the future. He warned that if machines were used solely for profit, it could lead to increased social inequality. This insight is strikingly relevant today, as we grapple with the challenges of automation and artificial intelligence.

Babbage's life was filled with struggles. He did not receive the governmental support he needed to bring his ideas to fruition. Many of his projects remained incomplete, and in his later years, he faced frustration and financial hardship. He passed away on October 18, 1871. However, decades after his death, as computer science began to take shape, the world finally recognized his contributions and honored him with the title "Father of the Computer."Today, as we explore supercomputers, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing, it is essential to remember that this journey began with a scientist who imagined a machine made of wood and metal that could think like the human brain. Charles Babbage's life symbolizes innovation, perseverance, and scientific curiosity. On his birth anniversary, we not only pay tribute to him but also reaffirm our belief that the greatest strength of science lies in imagination and vision.

Dr. Prashant Sharma (Lecturer English) PM Shri GSSS, Jathlana Yamunanagar

Private banks lead small business lending; PSBs lost share in last 2 years

Private banks continue to dominate enterprise lending to small businesses in India, closely followed by public sector banks (PSBs), though the latter have seen a decline in their market share over the past two years, according to a report by Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) and CRIF High Mark, India's first full-service credit information bureau.The report noted that while private banks remain the primary lenders to enterprises, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) are steadily gaining share,

particularly among sole proprietors, where they now command over 41 per cent of the lending share.In the study, "small business" is defined as enterprises with an aggregated credit exposure of not more than Rs 5 crore from the formal lending system.

It stated, "As of Sep'25, private banks remain the primary lenders to enterprises, though their share shows minor volatility. Public sector banks follow closely, but their share declined from 39.3 per cent in Sep'23 to 37.8 per cent in Sep'25."The report highlighted that the reduced share of PSBs has largely been absorbed by NBFCs, reflecting a gradual shift in the lending landscape.Aggregate credit exposure to small businesses reached Rs 46 lakh crore as of September 2025, registering a robust 16.2 per cent year-on-year growth. On a quarter-on-quarter basis, growth stood at 1.5 per cent. Active loan accounts also rose strongly, increasing 11.8 per cent year-on-year to 7.3 crore accounts.The report attributed this sustained momentum to comprehensive policy initiatives for the MSME (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) sector, including the implementation of several government-backed credit schemes, which have played a pivotal role in supporting credit expansion.However, the pace of growth has moderated compared to the previous quarter, when year-on-year growth stood at 19.3 per cent. This moderation may reflect more cautious underwriting by lenders as well as seasonal variations, the report said.Despite this, the faster growth in credit outstanding compared to loan volumes indicates steady expansion in average ticket sizes.In terms of product mix, working capital loans dominate enterprise lending, accounting for around 57 per cent of the portfolio outstanding, while term loans continue to support capital expenditure needs. For sole proprietors, loans against property (LAP) form the largest component, followed by business loans and commercial vehicle loans.The report also shared that the unsecured lending also recorded strong momentum, with unsecured loans growing 31 per cent year-on-year despite concerns around stress in certain segments.

POEMS

Christmas Away from Home

Her sickness brought me to Connecticut.
Mornings I walk the dog: that part of life
is intact. Who's painted, who's insulated
or put siding on, who's burned the lawn
with lime—that's the news on Ardmore Street.

The leaves of the neighbor's respectable
rhododendrons curl under in the cold.
He has backed the car
through the white nimbus of its exhaust
and disappeared for the day.

In the hiatus between mayors
the city has left leaves in the gutters,
and passing cars lift them in maelstroms.

We pass the house two doors down, the one
with the wildest lights in the neighborhood,
an establishment without irony.
All summer their putto empties a water jar,
their St. Francis feeds the birds.
Now it's angels, festoons, waist-high
candles, and swans pulling sleighs.

Two hundred miles north I'd let the dog
run among birches and the black shade of pines.
I miss the hills, the woods and stony
streams, where the swish of jacket sleeves
against my sides seems loud, and a crow
caws sleepily at dawn.

By now the streams must run under a skin
of ice, white air-bubbles passing erratically,
like blood cells through a vein. Soon the mail,
forwarded, will begin to reach me here.

By Jane Kenyon

2025: A year of decisive big ticket governance reforms by Modi govt

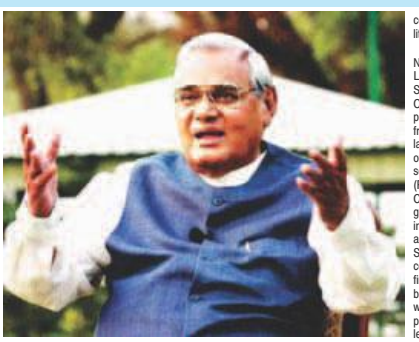
As India celebrates former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birth anniversary as Good Governance Day, it is worth noting that 2025 has witnessed some of Modi government's most decisive, big-ticket governance reforms. These reforms only reinforce PM Modi's commitment to raise the governance bar and expedite India's 2047 goals.

Good Governance Day, marked every December 25 since 2014, honors the legacy of former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, one of India's most revered leaders and a founding figure of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Vajpayee, born in 1924, exemplified principles of accountability, transparency, and inclusive growth during his tenure as Prime Minister from 1998 to 2004. His administration pioneered initiatives like the Golden Quadrilateral highway project and telecom reforms, setting a benchmark for efficient governance.

The same ethos of "Sushasan" (good governance) have underpinned the Modi government's reform agenda, transforming abstract ideals into concrete policies that prioritize citizen welfare, economic resilience, and systemic efficiency.

2025 emerged as a year of "reform blitz" for the Modi government, with over a dozen major bills passed in Parliament to turbocharge the economy amid global challenges like potential US tariffs and geopolitical uncertainties. These reforms, spanning nuclear energy, insurance, securities markets, labour laws, rural employment, and Waqf property management, were designed to unlock hundreds of billions in investments, simplify compliance, and position India as a global economic powerhouse. By consolidating outdated laws, enhancing transparency, and opening sectors to private and foreign participation, the government aimed to boost GDP growth, create jobs, and achieve the targets of "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) by 2047. Critics argued some changes diluted worker rights or increased government oversight, but proponents hailed them as decisive steps to correct historical wrongs, formalize informal sectors, and shield the economy from external shocks. A decoding of some of these reforms only underscores their importance in the country's journey ahead.

One of the most contentious yet corrective reforms of 2025 was the Waqf (Amendment) Act, passed in April, which overhauled the Waqf Act of 1995 and its 2013 amendments. The 1995 Act had granted Waqf Boards unchecked powers to declare properties as Waqf, often leading to arbitrary claims on government, private, and even non-Muslim lands. The 2013 amendments exacerbated this by introducing "Waqf by user"—a provision allowing properties to be deemed Waqf based on historical usage, without formal documentation, enabling illegal land grabs estimated to affect millions of acres. The 2025 Act rectifies these wrongs by abolishing "Waqf by user," ensuring only properties with valid deeds or explicit dedication can be classified as Waqf, thus preventing retrospective claims on government lands. This formalization paves the way



for transparent management, including digitization of records and inclusion of non-Muslims in Waqf Councils for broader oversight. By ending unchecked encroachments, the reform safeguards heritage while promoting socio-economic utilization of Waqf assets, potentially unlocking value for community welfare and reducing litigation.

Implemented nationwide from November 21, 2025, the four new Labour Codes—on Wages, Social Security, Industrial Relations, and Occupational Safety—consolidated 29 previous laws into a streamlined framework of four comprehensive labour codes, marking a historic overhaul. These codes enhance social security by mandating Provident Fund (PF), Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC), insurance, and gratuity for all workers, including those in unorganized sectors. A boon for gig and platform workers, the Social Security Code requires aggregators to contribute to a welfare fund, providing first-time coverage like accident benefits and pensions. To boost women's workforce participation, provisions include extended maternity leave, creche facilities, and flexible work hours, addressing barriers that have kept female labour force participation below 40%. Uniform minimum wages across industries and simplified compliance (reducing forms from hundreds to a few) make it easier for businesses to hire, potentially creating millions of jobs while protecting vulnerable workers from exploitation. The codes' focus on inclusivity positions them as a catalyst for a more equitable labor market

Enacted in December 2025, the VB–G RAM G Bill replaced the 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with a modernised framework aligned with India's 2047 development goals.

MGNREGA's 100-day guarantee often suffered from delays, corruption, and limited focus on asset creation; the new Bill expands it to 125 days of wage employment per household, introduces Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Cards for seamless access, and raises administrative spending to 9 percent for better tech-driven monitoring. It emphasises livelihood security through skill-linked works and infrastructure projects, with seasonal pauses to align with agricultural cycles.

DECCAN Chronicle
26 DECEMBER 2025

New elected Dhaka govt must for India ties' reset

As events in Bangladesh tend to spiral out of control whenever student protests are further impelled by Jamaat-e-Islami fundamentalism, India has the unenviable task of trying to set right the ties that shaped one of its most fruitful partnerships for nearly two decades in the region. Considerable loss of jobs in a plunging economy in which poverty is growing by leaps and bounds has created volatile conditions that may have added to the restlessness which the former microfinance banker has not the wherewithal to help control.

Attacks on Hindus leading to insecurity among the minorities not seen since Sheikh Hasina Wazed flew into exile in India in August 2024, targeting of student leaders of the so-called revolution and a chief adviser in Muhammad Yunus who is more of a wrecker who has lost the ideological plot thanks to his penchant for mending ties with Pakistan, historically the oppressor of East Pakistan, while invariably kowtowing to the Jamaat and its radical student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir, are problems that plague our neighbour to the east.

To blame India for all ills has been his playbook and it is not a fanciful conspiracy theory that has led to the slain student leader Hadi's kin pointing fingers at Mr Yunus who may facilitate his hanging on to power by putting off the polls scheduled for February 12. With the legitimacy of his government always in grave doubt, India has no one to reach out to at a time of severe anti-India sentiment exploiting the unrest. Waiting for the poll results and then reaching out to a legitimate new regime is the only recourse available to India.

On the political front, a significant event has taken place with the return on Thursday from self-imposed 17-year exile in the UK of Tarique Rahman, son of Khaleda Zia and potential leader of the troubled country after the polls from which Sheikh Hasina's Awami League may be excluded. The same US voices that protested Ms Hasina's anti-democratic moves in driving Khaleda Zia's BNP to boycott the January 2024 polls are now protesting the anticipated exclusion of the Awami League.

It reeks of irony as it was the intervention of US liberals that saw the ousting of Ms Hasina's government and the foisting of Mr Yunus that did lead to Bangladesh jumping from what was or wasn't quite the frying pan straight into the fire. Dhaka may never again return to open electoral democracy as in India. Even then, it is India's task to try and restore ties that have mutually benefited the two nations — Bangladesh with considerable help for its economy by way of trade, energy and water and India with easy access to its own northeastern states via the land route.

Given the current slide in ties with embassies shut and the visa process suspended in both nations, dealing with the Yunus regime does not seem possible. More tumultuous events may take place between now and the polls, which are just over a month away, but it is important from decisive control of the law-and-order situation point of view that an elected government be in place soon to rein in the extremists and stabilise conditions for order to prevail and the economy to repair itself and catch up again.

A giant punch by Isro

The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) scripted another record by launching the 6.1-tonne satellite — the heaviest launched from India — aboard Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM3). It was a defining moment for the Indian space agency, its scientists, engineers and technicians. It highlights India's arrival as a spacefaring nation with credible heavy-lift launch capabilities, which are essential for deep-space exploration and human spaceflight.

The LVM3, which was earlier known as the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle Mark-III, is the most powerful rocket that Isro ever had. It was designed to place large payloads into Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit and Low Earth Orbit, and represents years of India's indigenous engineering in structural design, mission integration and cryogenic propulsion.

India is only the sixth country to have a rocket that can carry a payload of up to 10 metric tonnes. The BlueBird Block-3 satellite — weighing 6.1 tonne — that Isro launched on December 24 was the heaviest satellite ever carried by an Indian rocket. Apart from enhancing Isro's standing in the space community, it will also help the country to emerge as a key player in the commercial launches.

For a country like India, where satellite services underpin everything from weather forecasting and disaster management to banking, navigation and rural connectivity, heavy lift capability has direct developmental implications. It will also help India in its human spaceflight under the Gaganyaan programme. The LVM-3 will ferry India's proposed space station modules.

The insertion of BlueBird Block-3 in Low Earth Orbit — which Isro chief described as the most accurate — strengthens Isro's confidence that it can independently support these ambitions without relying on foreign launch systems and without extravagant spending.

While Isro is on the right path, it still has a long way to go because 10 tonne payload is the lowest lift capacity that six space majors — the US, Russia, Europe, China, Japan and India — have. The government must support Isro with all that it requires to make India proud.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

KAUSHIK MITTER
Editor

K. SUDHAKAR
Printer & Publisher

R. MOHAN
Resident Editor

DECCAN CHRONICLE offices are located at:
Chennai: SP 3 Developed Plot, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai 600032. Phones: (044) 22254750 , 22254751
Coimbatore: No. 2/22 Sengalipalayam Road, N.G.G.O. Colony Post, Kurudampalayam Village, Coimbatore-641022. Phone: (0422) 2231255, 2231256
Hyderabad: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Secunderabad 500 003. Phone: (040) 27803930-4. Fax: (040) 27805256.
Visakhapatnam: Survey No. 1/3A Beach Road, Near Kailasagiri Ropeway, Sector-9 MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam - 530 017. Phones: (0891) 2552333/2552334, Fax (0891) 2755285
Vijayawada: No. C 3 & 4, Patamata, Industrial Estate, Auto Nagar, Vijayawada (A.P.). Phones: (0866) 2555284/ 2555287, Fax (0866) 2555234
Rajahmundry: Vemagiri, Dhawleswaram Rd, Rajahmundry 533125. Phones: (0883) 2417208, 2417618
Anantapur: Thapovan Colony, Bangalore Bye-Pass Road, Anantapur 515004. Phones: (08554) 276903, Fax: 08554-276904
Nellore: Survey No. 527/2, Burranpur Village, Venkatachalam (M), Chemudugunta Panchayat, Nellore. Phone: (0861) 2348581/ 82, Telefax (0861) 2348580
Karimnagar: H .No. 1-21-12/1, Cheralabhutkur Road, Mugudhumpur Village, Karim Nagar - 505186
Phone : 9121181123

Subhani

Why is India still so dirty and polluted?

Mohan Guruswamy

Keeping public conveniences working and clean is the job of the state. The PM should turn his focus on why the government fails to deliver services in India. Only then can he make a Swachh Bharat.

Eleven years after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the Swachch Bharat Abhiyan with much fanfare, it is apparent that we cannot clean up the rotting trash that has become so common on our streets all over the country. Men can be seen all over the country peeing on walls or into the air. It is almost impossible to find any pavements in our towns and cities, and when there are some, they are strewn with trash and wet with urine. Simple logic tells us that we need a lot more trash bins and public toilets. But that is the easier part. Keeping them clean and usable is the more difficult part. Clearly, we are failing. We have a system of high-cost government with low returns. We need a newer and better way of managing ourselves.

Visiting the Banaras Hindu University on February 4, 1916, Mahatma Gandhi in his address said: "I visited the Vishvanath temple last evening. If a stranger dropped from above on to this great temple, would he not be justified in condemning us? Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temples should be as dirty as they are? If even our temples are not models of cleanliness, what can our self-government be? We do not know elementary laws of cleanliness. We spit everywhere. The result is indescribable filth."

In the 1,110-odd years since then, things have only worsened. We not only spit everywhere, we piss everywhere, we shit wherever and dump our garbage anywhere. India is easily the most dirty, unhygienic and filthy country in the world.

Picking up from here, our Prime Minister had rightly launched the Swachh Bharat campaign to clean up India. He has announced an ambitious campaign to build home toilets for 12 million urban households, 25 million public toilets, and 30 million community toilets. In all, over 300 million will be helped with "solid waste management practices", and this was to be achieved by 2019 and will cost the nation Rs 62,009 crores. This is not a sum that we cannot afford. Will India become a cleaner, healthier and more hygienic nation, less offensive to sight and smell? I didn't think so then, and by now it is apparent that the Swachh Bharat campaign has so far been more of a failure than a success.

But even if we find the money, where is the public administration to do it? We now have a highly centralized system more suitable to governing India than serving India. The structure of our public administration, with its preponderance at the national and state capitals, and with a tiny fraction left to interface with citizens at a local level, and even these not being answerable to citizens is at the root of our inability to transform this country.

When India became independent, our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, advocated disbanding the civil service structure inherited from the British, and wanted a new system of public administration that will not just preserve order to facilitate extraction, but will drive change and equitable development. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, however, was against such a radical transformation of government, and preferred India to be administered by an elite civil service such as the ICS.

This led to the creation of the IAS and IPS as the main instruments of administration. But the system remained as before, a system to maintain control rather than transform. The consequences of this are still apparent. The three levels of government together employ about 185 lakh persons. The Central government employs 34 lakhs, all the state governments together employ another 72.18 lakhs, quasi-government agencies account for a further 58.14 lakhs, and at the local government level, a tier with the most interface with ordinary citizens, we have only 20.53 lakh employees. This simply means we have five persons ordering us about, for every one supposedly serving us. What this translates into is that if you build toilets, you won't have enough people to clean them. Ditto for sewage systems. As it is, garbage pick-up is selective, tardy and the signs of failure can be seen in all our cities and villages.

The Ashok Mehta committee in 1977 was tasked with evolving an effective and decentralised system of development administration. The committee held that development would only be deep and enduring when the community was involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation process and suggested an early establishment of elected local bodies and devolution to them of necessary resources, power and authority. Its core recommendation was that the district must be the basic building block and envisaged a two-tier system, with the Mandal Panchayat at the base and the Zilla Parishad at the top.

This structure did not develop the requisite democratic momentum and failed to cater to the needs of rural development. There are various reasons for such an outcome, which include political and bureaucratic resistance at the state level to share power and resources with local level institutions, domination of local elites over the major share of the benefits of welfare schemes, lack of capability at the local level and lack of political will. Consequently, no rural area in India has any worthwhile local government.

For that matter, nor does any city or town in India have a truly independent municipal administration autonomous of the state governments. It is as if the ordinary people have lost control over their lives and are now victims of the whims and fancies of distant masters.

The Prime Minister has done well by impressing on people the need to keep their surroundings clean. While people must not litter and dispose them at convenient appointed places, the job of lifting the garbage from there for disposal is that of the appropriate tier of government. While people are expected not to defecate everywhere, the responsibility of providing sanitation is that of the state. Building toilets at public places and institutions and impressing on people to use them is laudable, but keeping them working and clean is the job of the state. The condition of most public conveniences, including in the Central Secretariat, will tell you that the government is not working. The Prime Minister should turn his focus on why the government fails to deliver services in India. Only then can he make a Swachh Bharat.

A clean India will automatically generate an additional one to two per cent GDP growth and we can truthfully account for public administration as services for national income accounting.

Mohan Guruswamy is a scholar and author. The views expressed here are his own.

LETTERS

EQUAL TREATMENT

The government's decision to initially regularize a 1000 contract nurses and to do the same for the remaining nurses through the subsequent phases along with paid maternity leave for non-regular staff is a step forward in the nurses' dispute. It must, however, be understood that most of the frustration is due to there being no equal pay for equal work for most contract nurses. addressing this and providing the equal pay or even salary hikes for the contract nurses of the subsequent phases will ease the process of regularisation which could take years. This dispute reflects broader structural concerns in public employment and highlights the promises vs delivery in government recruitment.

Kohin B
Chennai

SAVE ARAVALLIS

The new definition raises concern as height-based measurements could leave large parts of the Aravalli range outside legal protection, despite well-documented scientific warnings. Such a narrow criterion weakens the original judicial intent to safeguard this fragile ecosystem and ignores its geological continuity and ecological role. A more inclusive definition, grounded in scientific mapping rather than arbitrary thresholds, is essential. The Court would do well to revisit the criteria after wider consultation with expert agencies and local authorities..

A. Myilsami
Coimbatore

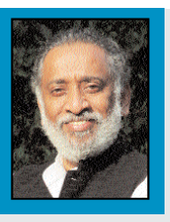
RUNS RAIN IN VHT

In the Vijay Hazare Trophy, Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Delhi and Tamil Nadu have put up huge totals. The high-scoring batting decks do not offer any scope for the bowlers. Why are such batting paradises prepared for the domestic 50-over competition? There should be lively tracks that should aid both batters and bowlers. Scoring 574 runs in a limited overs competition, breaking all records, will not serve the real purpose of identifying talent.

S.Sankaranarayanan
Chennai

Mail your letters to
chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu



Gujarat babus get a message and a deadline

Deadlines in government are famously elastic, especially when they run into land disputes, contractor delays, or inter-departmental buck-passing. But this time, the subtext feels sharper. The mood currently hanging over Gujarat's babus is one of quiet desperation after a message from the chief minister's office: stop explaining, start finishing. And the PMO is also leaning in.

On paper, this looks like routine governance, review meetings, status reports, and coordination memos. In reality, it signals something deeper: a system under pressure to show delivery, not just intent. When departments are asked to account for both completed and ongoing projects, and unfinished works are given a hard March deadline, it's rarely about curiosity. It's about urgency, optics and ticking political clocks.

The issues being flagged aren't new. Land acquisition bottlenecks, traffic choking urban centres, industrial growth rubbing up against environmental limits, roads and bridges that seem perpetually "under renovation" — this is Gujarat's long-running to-do list. What's changed is the tone. The insistence on quality, ministerial coordination, and cross-departmental alignment suggests that silos are no longer being indulged. Or at least, not publicly.

With the 2026-27 budget looming in February, this push smells suspiciously like pre-budget housekeeping. No finance minister wants to present a fresh slate of promises while last year's commitments are still stuck in the files or, worse, on the ground. Action plans, acceleration strategies, completion targets: these are the bureaucratic equivalent of a government tightening its shoelaces before a sprint.

The real test, of course, lies beyond review meetings and deadline-driven emails. Will this pressure translate into smoother roads, cleaner air, faster approvals, and less finger-pointing? Or will March arrive with the familiar chorus of "procedural delays" and "unforeseen constraints"?

For now, Gujarat's babus know one thing for sure: the comfort of slow drift is over. Someone, somewhere, is counting.

FULL BENCH, BUT CIC'S REAL TEST BEGINS NOW

After years of drifting in institutional limbo, the Central Information Commission (CIC) is finally back at full strength. Raj Kumar Goyal's appointment as Chief Information Commissioner, along with eight new Information Commissioners, closes a vacancy cycle that should never have been allowed to stretch this long. But before applauding too loudly, it's worth asking whether numerical strength automatically translates into institutional spine?

The CIC's problem was never just about empty chairs. It was about delays that quietly hollowed out the Right to Information Act. Appeals languished for years, penalties were rarely imposed, and public authorities learned that stonewalling carries few consequences. Vacancies merely made this decay visible; they didn't cause it.

Mr Goyal, a former law secretary with a long résumé, brings administrative gravitas. That helps. But the CIC doesn't need another well-run secretariat as much as it needs a commission willing to annoy ministries, question routine denials, and restore urgency to a law that was designed to be citizen-centric, not file-centric. RTI jurisprudence isn't about elegance of orders alone. It's about signalling that delay is not a neutral act, but it's denial by other means. The commission has been "fully staffed" before, without becoming fully effective. Unless this new team prioritises backlog clearance, enforces penalties, and reasserts the CIC's independence, the reboot risks becoming cosmetic. So, the real test is whether it remembers how and when to bite. Transparency, after all, doesn't fail dramatically. It erodes quietly, one unanswered appeal at a time.

BEYOND THE TRANSFER RAJ

The Centre's recent directive to states regarding the transfer of IAS, IPS, and IFS officers pertains not only to administrative procedures but also raises important questions about the governance and oversight of the civil services. By demanding annual reports on how Civil Services Boards manage postings, New Delhi has told the states that *your transfer business is now our business too.*

Formally, this is sold as compliance with Supreme Court guidelines — fixed tenures, institutional oversight, fewer whimsical reshuffles. Fair enough. But everyone in governance knows the real problem isn't ignorance of the rules; it's the routine decision to ignore them. Civil Services Boards exist in many states largely as constitutional décor. They are often assembled under pressure, sidelined for convenience, and rarely allowed to interfere with political priorities.

Seen through that lens, the Centre's move is less reformist and more corrective. A constantly shuffled bureaucracy doesn't just hurt officers; it sabotages delivery. Projects stall, files reset, responsibility dissolves—and when outcomes disappoint, fingers point conveniently upwards to Delhi.

States will, predictably, cry foul. Transfers have always been a core instrument of state authority, and federalism bristles when oversight starts resembling supervision. This is what happens when states abuse discretion long enough for the Centre to step in. The real question isn't whether Delhi is overreaching, but whether states have earned the right to complain. Unless this exercise leads to consequences — not just reports — it will become another case of central monitoring without central courage. And the babu transfer culture will survive yet again: bruised, documented, and fundamentally unchanged.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades, dilipcherian@hotmail.com.

ISRO deserves more kudos than what it has received

IN a way, amid tall claims and media blitzkrieg revolving around the supposed 'world-conquering' potential of several organisations and entities, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is almost like the unsung hero. This becomes crystal clear when one wonders why the lofty achievements of ISRO, which came into being on August 15, 1969, hardly figure in speeches of the rulers of the day and quite ironically even the 'ever vibrant' media shies away from keeping it in the spotlight, except when it launches a mission or scales a milestone.

These so-called proponents of the country's champions across segments, hardly, if ever, highlight about its ongoing projects and future endeavours, while they take delight in eulogizing about cricketers, film personalities and the likes, even when they are not in the news and past their prime. The IQ standards are so dismal that today, when one conducts a random nationwide test, the chances are that many people, including the Gen X, may know the names of the incumbent Chief Election Commissioner or the RBI Governor but they will be caught on a sticky wicket if asked about the current ISRO chief.

Perhaps, it works well for the precision-oriented Team ISRO as they can silently go about firming up their projects while the media glare is seemingly more focused on Elon Musk's space X endeavours. Right now ISRO is the toast of the nation for achieving an extraordinary double, which nobody would have expected a few decades back.

Wednesday's successful launch of LVM3-M6 rocket as part of its BlueBird Block-2 mission marks a historic landmark. Barely 15 minutes into the 8.55 am lift-off from Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, it placed the largest commercial communications satellite in low earth orbit, while the BlueBird Block-2 satellite became the heaviest payload (6,100 kg.) to be launched by LVM3 from Indian soil.

The accomplishment was doubly sweeter as ISRO accomplished two milestones with this mission. In its moment of glory, ISRO Chairman Dr V Narayanan's joy knew no bounds. As he put it, "LVM 3 Bahubali rocket M6 launch vehicle has successfully and precisely injected the BlueBird Block-2 communication satellite in the intended orbit. This is the first dedicated commercial launch for a customer from the USA. This is one of the best performances of any launch vehicle in the global arena. With this mission India has successfully launched 434 satellites for 34 countries." Apparently, this calls for celebration!

However, to the space scientists the world over, ISRO's consistent performances will not come as any surprise. Backed by a team of dedicated scientists, the best of infrastructure, government support, and the wherewithal, ISRO has been scaling dizzy heights, as perhaps envisioned by its pioneering founder Dr Vikram Sarabhai. Quite unknown to the common man, it has been setting records at a remarkably consistent pace. Little wonder, that in a bare 56 years, the organisation, which boasts of skilled workforce, and leverages space technology to address various socio-economic challenges in India and collaborations with space agencies and organisations worldwide for joint missions, satellite launches, and expertise sharing, it has been establishing benchmarks of the highest order. Clearing 200 milestones and all geared for Gaganyaan in these few years is a statistical wonder. Yet, the general public hardly speaks of the silent progress of ISRO but takes delight in speaking about Sachin Tendulkar's centuries and the blockbusters of Rajnikant and Shah Rukh Khan. It should surprise no one in particular if the nation's torchbearer, ISRO, is pushed into oblivion by the country's rulers and the media till the run up to Gaganyaan. Incredible India! Indeed.

The challenges of gender reservation in Bar Council elections

Chittarvu Raghu

The Bar Council elections have traditionally relied on a preferential voting system, specifically the Single Transferable Vote (STV). This system is designed to ensure that every vote is utilized to its maximum potential, allowing voters to rank candidates in order of preference

THE legal profession in India stands at a historic crossroads as the Bar Councils of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana prepare to implement the transformative directive of the Supreme Court of India. By mandating a 30 per cent reservation for women in State Bar Council elections, the judiciary has taken a definitive step toward correcting a long-standing gender skew within the governance of the legal fraternity.

However, as the implementation phase commences, the legal community, led by seasoned practitioners and senior counsel, finds itself grappling with a series of intricate procedural and rational questions. The mandate, which bifurcates the 30 per cent quota into a 20 per cent elective component and a 10 per cent co-option mechanism, introduces a layer of complexity that challenges the traditional framework of the single transferable vote system and raises fundamental questions about the criteria for professional representation.

Central to the current discourse is the dual-layered structure of the reservation. The Supreme Court has directed that 20 per cent of the seats be filled through direct election, while the remaining 10 per cent are to be filled via co-option. This bifurcation is accompanied by a specific procedural requirement: the 20 per cent elective quota must be facilitated through a separate ballot, or at the very least, a distinct voting process that ensures the earmarking of these seats for women candidates.

While the intent—to guarantee a minimum threshold of female representation—is laudable and long overdue, the underlying rationality behind the 10 per cent co-option carveout remains conspicuously opaque. The judicial order does not explicitly delineate the objective to be achieved by reserving this specific percentage for co-option rather than direct election.

It appears that the Hon'ble Supreme Court may have been operating under a pragmatic, albeit unstated, impression that a sufficient number of women candidates might not be immediately available or willing to contest in a high-stakes elective process. This inference is strengthened by the Court's further direction that, should the 20 per cent elective quota remain unfulfilled due to a lack of candidates, the resulting deficiency must be bridged through additional co-option.

This "fallback" mechanism suggests a cautious approach to gender parity, yet it creates a significant administrative vacuum. To date, no formal guidelines have been framed to govern the selection of these co-opted members. In any democratic or semi-democratic body, co-option without clearly defined criteria risks falling into the trap of subjectivity or patronage.

Although the Supreme Court has directed that the names of the co-opted members must be placed before it for review, this oversight does not replace the need for a transparent, merit-based framework that justifies why certain individuals are selected outside the ballot box. Without such guidelines, the 10 per cent co-option quota stands as a procedural anomaly, leaving the Bar Councils of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in a state of uncertainty regarding the "rationality" of its application. If the goal is to empower women, one must ask whether a co-opted seat carries the same representative weight and mandate as one won through the rigours of an election.

The complexity intensifies when one moves from the "who" to the "how" of the electoral process. The Bar Council elections have traditionally relied on a preferential voting system, specifically the Single Transferable Vote (STV). This system is designed to ensure that every vote is utilized to its maximum potential, allowing voters to rank candidates in order of preference.

The introduction of a 20 per cent reserved quota into this existing mathematical model presents what are arguably the most intricate questions currently facing the Bar. The foremost concern is whether the formulation of a new voting procedure will have an "adverse impact" on the integrity of preferential voting. In a standard STV system, the transfer of surplus votes and the redistribution of votes from eliminated candidates follow a precise logical flow. Integrating a reserved category into this flow requires a sophisticated recalibration of the "quota" required for election. A pivotal question arises: would a single ballot be sufficient, or is there a functional necessity for a separate ballot for the 20 per cent women's quota? The arguments for each side are balanced on a knife-edge of legal and practical considerations. A single ballot would maintain the unity of the electorate and the seamless nature of preferential ranking. Under this model, all candidates—regardless of gender—would appear on one sheet, and the reservation would be enforced during the counting stage by ensuring that the top-ranking women candidates are seated until the 20 per cent threshold is met.

However, this risks "wasting" preferences if a voter's top choices are all women who are already seated, or if the transfer mechanism becomes so convoluted that it confuses the average voter. Conversely, a separate ballot for the 20 per cent elective quota would provide clarity and ensure that the reserved seats are filled through a dedicated contest. Yet, this approach effectively splits the electorate and could be seen as an infringement on the principle of a "single" Bar. If a voter is forced to choose between exercising their preference on a general ballot versus a reserved ballot, the "single transferable" nature of their vote is fundamentally compromised.

Furthermore, if a separate ballot is adopted, the Bar Councils must address the question of "inter-se" preferences. Can a preference expressed on the reserved ballot influence the outcome of the general seats, or vice versa? If the two are kept strictly compartmentalized, the Bar risks creating a two-tiered system of representation that may not have been the intent of the Supreme Court's mandate for inclusion. These are not merely technical or clerical concerns; they are foundational issues that go to the heart of the "constitutional ethos" that the Court seeks to protect. The transition from a 2 per cent female representation in Bar Councils to a 30 per cent mandate is a leap of faith that requires a robust and mathematically sound bridge.

As the legal fraternity in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana moves toward these elections, the absence of a clear explanation for the 10 per cent co-option and the lack of a standardised voting procedure for the 20 per cent elective quota remain significant hurdles. The rationality of the 10 per cent co-option is likely a contingency plan against the perceived unavailability of contesting candidates, but this must be reconciled with the actual enthusiasm shown by women advocates in recent years. The Bar must ensure that in its haste to implement the letter of the Supreme Court's law, it does not sacrifice the spirit of the preferential voting system which has served as the bedrock of its professional democracy.

The challenge now lies in drafting rules that are as refined and logical as the legal minds they govern. Only through a transparent, well-reasoned, and technically sound procedure can the Bar Council ensure that this 30 per cent reservation leads to a truly representative and empowered leadership, rather than becoming a source of procedural litigation. The eyes of the national legal community are now on these states to see how they navigate these "intricate questions" and set a precedent for the rest of the country.

(The writer is a senior advocate)

The Rs 3,000-cr swindle: How 'digital arrests' paralyze the gullible

Nomula Srinivas Rao

In what the Supreme Court of India has termed a "shocking" revelation, a silent epidemic has drained nearly Rs 3,000 crore from the bank accounts of Indian citizens. This is not a stock market crash or a corporate default; it is the result of a sophisticated psychological weapon known as the "Digital Arrest."

As the winter session of Parliament debates economic reforms, millions of Indians—particularly the elderly and the financially prudent—are falling prey to transnational syndicates that have turned fear into a billion-dollar industry. The staggering scale of the loss has exposed gaping holes in India's banking system and telecommunications infrastructure, forcing the judiciary to intervene and demand accountability.

The anatomy of a digital arrest

The modus operandi is terrifyingly simple yet effective. It typically begins with a phone call. The caller, posing as an official from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) or a courier company like FedEx, informs the victim that a parcel addressed to them has been seized. The contents? Narcotics, forged passports, or illegal weapons.

Within minutes, the call is transferred to a "police officer" or "CBI official" via Skype or WhatsApp video. The victim sees a man in uniform, sitting against a backdrop that mimics a police station or a courtroom. They are told they are under "digital arrest"—a term that has no legal basis in Indian law but carries enough weight to paralyze a law-abiding citizen with fear.

For hours, sometimes days, the victim is kept on a video call, isolated from their family, and coerced into transferring their life savings into "secret supervision accounts" for "verification." By the time the screen goes black, the money is gone.

The banking system: A silent accomplice?

While the fraudsters operate from the shadows, their gateway to Indian money is the formal banking system. The Rs 3,000 crore figure cited in recent Supreme Court hearings did not vanish into thin air; it flowed through "mule accounts"—bank accounts rented or hijacked to launder dirty money.

The failure of the banking system is two-fold:

* The mule account menace: Fraudsters actively recruit poor individuals to "rent" their accounts for a commission. However, a more disturbing trend is the misuse of Current Accounts. Shell companies are set up solely to open high-limit bank accounts that funnel crores of

rupees abroad within hours. The banking system's Know Your Customer (KYC) protocols, designed to stop money laundering, are failing to flag these erratic high-value transactions in real-time.

- The freezing lag: The "Golden Hour" is critical in cybercrime. When a victim reports a fraud to the 1930 helpline, the I4C (Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre) alerts the banks. However, the response time from banks often lags. In the digital age, money moves in milliseconds, but freezing orders often move at the speed of bureaucracy. The Supreme Court recently flagged this delay, remarking that banks could be held liable for "deficiency of service" if they fail to secure customers' funds despite timely alerts.

The SIM card explosion: Selling indiscriminately

If banks provide the getaway car, telecom operators provide the disguise. The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) recently blocked over 1.7 crore mobile connections to curb cybercrime, yet the hydra grows new heads daily. The root cause is the indiscriminate sale of SIM cards.

- Point of Sale (PoS) negligence: Local SIM vendors often activate multiple SIM cards using a single person's biometric data without their knowledge—a practice known as "silicon thumb" fraud.
- Corporate loophole: Fraudsters exploit "corporate connections," which allow bulk issuance of SIM cards without stringent individual verification.
- Sim box farming: Recent raids have uncovered "Sim Boxes"—devices that hold hundreds of SIM cards to route international calls as local calls, masking the caller's true location.

Despite the launch of the Sanchar Saathi portal and the Chakshu facility for reporting suspected fraud communication, the sheer volume of active, unverified SIMs remains the fraudsters' greatest asset.

The international connection: Cyber slavery

The trail of the Rs 3,000 crore does not end in Jharkand or Mewat; it crosses borders. Intelligence agencies have confirmed that the masterminds operate from "scam compounds" in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos.

In these lawless zones, thousands of Indians—lured by promises of IT jobs—are held captivity in "cyber slavery" camps. They are forced to make scam calls to their countrymen under the threat of physical violence. This transnational nature makes investigation difficult. While the Indian police can freeze a mule account in Mumbai, they have no jurisdiction over the puppet master sitting in Phnom Penh.

Global lessons: How others are fighting back

India is not alone in this battle. The "pig butchering" scam (a variation of investment fraud) has plagued the world. However, other nations have adopted aggressive countermeasures that India could emulate:

- Singapore: The city-state has introduced a "Kill Switch" for banking customers—a feature that allows a user to instantly freeze all their accounts and credit cards if they suspect a scam, without waiting for a bank representative. Furthermore, Singaporean banks are now co-sharing liability for losses in specific phishing scams, incentivising them to upgrade security.
- Australia: The National Anti-Scam Centre (NASC) facilitates real-time data sharing between banks, telcos, and digital platforms to block scams at the source. They have also mandated that telcos block SMS messages that look like scams using alphanumeric sender IDs.
- The UK: Under the new reimbursement rules by the Payment Systems Regulator (PSR), banks are required to reimburse victims of authorized push payment (APP) fraud, shifting the financial burden from the victim to the institution. This forces banks to implement better fraud detection AI.

The way forward

The loss of Rs 3,000 crore is a wake-up call. Tackling this requires a "whole-of-government" approach:

- Banking liability: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) must strictly enforce penalties on banks that harbor mule accounts. If a bank opens an account without proper diligence that is later used for fraud, the bank should bear partial liability.
- Telco accountability: The penalty for issuing SIM cards on fake documents needs to be prohibitive, not just a slap on the wrist.
- International diplomacy: India must leverage its diplomatic weight to pressure Southeast Asian nations to raid these scam compounds and repatriate the Indian nationals held there.

Until these gaps are plugged, the "digital arrest" will remain a lucrative business, and the common man's hard-earned money will continue to be just a video call away from disappearing.

(The author is former OSD to former Union Civil Aviation Minister)

LETTERS

BRS should persist with defection issue

THE Assembly Speaker Gaddam Prasad's rejection of petitions to disqualify the defected MLA's came as a blessing in disguise for BRS. In spite of presenting concrete evidence about the MLAs joining Congress the speaker has rejected the petitions. He has washed his hands off to avoid contempt of the Supreme Court.

The BRS should take the fight to the logical end. Defections have made mockery of democratic process of elections and deceit of electorate. There is need for strong anti defection law to punish the turn coats. If the BRS succeeds in the Supreme Court, the ruling of the apex court would become law of the land and compel central govt to rewrite anti-defection law

Dinanath Shenolikar, Hyderabad

'SHANTI' or Ashanti?

THE Union Government passed a number of Bills of crucial nature in a very casual manner during the Winter session of Parliament that sat only for 15 days.

It introduced a Bill called SHANTI to amend the two existing Acts-Atomic Energy Act 1962 and Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage 2020. It aims at creating an over-centralised, pro-private nuclear regime with a highly diluted liability for nuclear damages, avoiding overcrowding in courts and a regulatory system that functions as a government department instead of being independent organisation. Opening up nuclear energy sector to 'any other company' or 'any person expressly permitted by the Central government are eligible to apply for license increases the level of potential and dangerous risks. This Bill has provisions to allow single composite license for multiple nuclear related activities. Such concentration of control in the hands of an oprator of a group over a chain of nuclear activities has its heightened level of risks.

Nuclear energy is always seen, despite its benefits, as a potential mass killer. Naming it as SHANTI is numbing the people even before it pains. The intention of enacting SHANTI looks more to quench the profit mongering private players thirst for multiplying wealth without any risk under the regime of Ease of doing business' than ensuring 'ease of living' for the people who have rested their entire hope on the ruling dispensation.

A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

Money matters

THIS has reference to Dr Mohan Kanda's wonderful write-up "There are more important things in life than money" (Dec 25). I doubt how many readers can concur with his thoughts. Is this theme applicable in all proportions? Money can bring down a monkey from the hill. Quotations are numerable that money is not important all the time but applications are minute in the journey of life.

Poverty drives people to end their lives. Families are committing suicides for want of money. There are occasions that an average well to do people invested in corporate hospitals in lakhs for treatment and became poor. Unable to bear the brunt of moneylessness, shutting the eyes permanently shows the only way. Many such horrific incidents are being observed sporadically. Conclusively, money is more precious than many things.

N Ramalakshmi, Malikipuram

Carry Sudoku on Sundays too

While I am thankful to you for your Daily Sudoku, I wish very much to provide the relevant difficulty rating at its bottom which still adds as a motivating factor for the budding solver-aspirants. Further, it may be continued on Sundays as well unlike as now.

Seshagiri Rao Karry, Hyderabad

Protect farmlands

THE recent amendments to Karnataka's land conversion rules, allowing easy non-agricultural use of farmland, may bring more harm than good. While the government claims it promotes ease of business, the policy risks encouraging real estate expansion, misuse of fertile agricultural land, and a decline in food production. Auto-conversion and removal of permissions could become a loophole for land grabbers. Farmland must be protected as a vital resource, not seen merely as land for commercial exploitation. Development should never come at the cost of farmers and food security.

K R Gagan, Tumakuru

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

30,000 cases of power theft in Bengaluru despite Gruha Jyothi Scheme in 3 years

BENGALURU: Despite the implementation of welfare schemes such as Gruha Jyothi and stricter enforcement measures, power theft continues unabated in the state capital. In the last three years, Bengaluru city district alone has recorded 30,735 cases of electricity theft, including 3,568 serious (cognizable) offences, according to data from the Bangalore Electricity Supply Company (BESCOM).

Between 2023–24 and 2025–26 (up to October), BESCOM's vigilance wing detected 3,568 cognizable and 27,167 non-cognizable cases of power theft in Bengaluru city district. Penalties amounting to ₹107.99 crore have been collected from these cases. Across the entire BESCOM jurisdiction, a total of 67,677 cases were registered during the same period, resulting in penalty collections of ₹177.25 crore. Officials said electricity theft is being carried out through various deliberate methods, including meter bypassing, tampering, unauthorized power connections, and illegal load extensions. In several industrial areas, factories have been found stealing electricity without proper licences or approvals. There have also been instances in the city's outskirts where buildings under construction have obtained illegal power connections. While domestic power theft has reportedly reduced after the introduction of the Gruha Jyothi free electricity scheme, BESCOM officials noted that misuse of the scheme is common in commercial areas.

Read more at https://epaper.thehansindia.com

Printed and Published by K. Hanumanta Rao, on behalf of Hyderabad Media House Pvt. Limited, Flat.No.609, 6th Floor, Kirti Shikhar Building, Plot.No.11, Dist.Center, Janakpuri, New Delhi- 110058. and Printed at M/s. Marutinandan Printers & Publishers, A-15, Bara Bagh, G.T Karnal Road, Industrial Area, New Delhi - 110033. **Chief Editor:** P Madhusudhan Reddy. RNI No: DELENG/2017/74095

You will Get access to these 3 channels in just 19 rupees

♦ **Indian Newspaper**

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

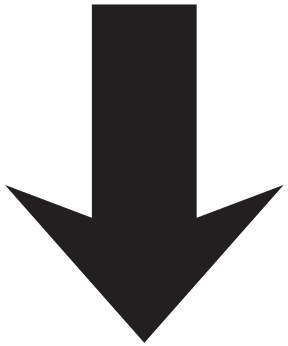
And more Newspapers

♦ **International Newspapers channel**

[Europian, American, Gulf & Asia]

♦ **Magazine Channel**

National & International
[Genaral & Exam related]



Click here to join

📍You will be given lifetime Validity📍

No Monthly subscription

DECCAN HERALD
ESTABLISHED 1948

Fare hikes without course correction

The Indian Railways, in its latest fare revision announced this week, has kept the hikes moderate and largely limited to the higher classes. Travel in AC coaches and non-AC coaches in mail and express trains will become costlier from Friday. The hike of 2 paise per km in these classes does not look very high, but this is the second revision in the year, and trains are no longer the cheap travel option they once were. There is no increase in fares for suburban services and monthly season tickets, which cover the largest segment of passengers. Ordinary-class travel has been spared – there is no hike in fares for up to 215 km. It is estimated that the Railways would earn about Rs 600 crore during the current year from the fare revision.

The Railways has cited rising operational costs as a reason for the hike. It has significantly expanded its network and operations in the last decade, leading to an overall increase in expenditure. Manpower costs have increased to Rs 1.15 lakh crore, and pension liabilities to Rs 60,000 crore. The total operational costs are estimated at Rs 2.63 lakh crore in 2024-25. There has been a focused effort to meet the increased costs by raising the volume of cargo movement and avoiding hikes in passenger fares. There is logic in the policy – as a public service organisation, the Railways has to provide the cheapest form of transport. Crores of people, including the poorest, travel by train every day on a network that links regions across the country.

Rising costs force modest train fare hikes, but safety and services remain outside the scope of change

With raised fares, however, comes greater scrutiny of passenger amenities. The Railways should significantly improve its delivery of services and ensure that the prescribed safety standards are met. Complaints about hygiene, scheduling and delays, and mismanagement have persisted for decades. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), train accidents of one type or another cause 60 deaths every day. This is an alarming number that calls for a deep review of safety protocols. Kavach, the indigenous railway safety system, has coverage of a mere 3% of the routes; the system is active in less than 1% of the trains. Training and human resources development have suffered – over three lakh vacancies are to be filled. While the allocations are not fully utilised, the wastage of funds extends the crisis. Years of inaction have resulted in a situation that warrants comprehensive change across operations. A year that saw two fare revisions can be a good place to take the turn.

BDA's plea undermines citizen rights

Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar's statement in the Assembly that the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) will appeal against the Karnataka Real Estate Regulatory Authority's (RERA) order directing it to register its housing projects under the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act is deeply troubling. At a time when public confidence in the authority is already low, the government has chosen to defend bureaucratic privilege rather than uphold the rights of thousands of long-suffering homebuyers. The dispute arose from complaints over the much-delayed Nadaprabhu Kempegowda Layout (NPKL). Before K-RERA, the BDA argued that it should be exempt from the Act as it is a statutory body constituted under the Bangalore Development Authority Act, 1976, and not a commercial 'promoter'. It contended that RERA's requirements – particularly rigid timelines, financial disclosures, and compensation for delays – would cripple its functioning, given the complexities of land acquisition and prolonged litigation.

These arguments were rightly rejected. In its order, K-RERA held that under Section 2(zk) of the RERA Act, any body that develops land or buildings for sale to the public qualifies as a promoter, irrespective of whether its stated objective is profit or public welfare. Crucially, the authority invoked Section 89 of the Act, which gives RERA an overriding effect over inconsistent state laws, including the BDA Act. The BDA was, therefore, directed to register the NPKL and disclose details of progress and finances. BDA's concern that RERA compliance would impose an unsustainable financial burden on it is fundamentally flawed.

In the defence of bureaucratic immunity, buyers are denied transparency and accountability

If the authority cannot compensate allottees for delays stretching close to a decade, it points to chronic mismanagement. RERA's requirement that 70% of buyer funds be kept in an escrow account exists precisely to prevent the diversion of allottee money to unrelated works, an accusation that has dogged the BDA for years. There is no rational basis for excluding the BDA from RERA's ambit. In substance, it operates no differently from a private developer: it advertises layouts, collects large sums from citizens, and promises basic infrastructure such as roads, water, and electricity.

While recent administrative changes under the current BDA commissioner, P Manivannan, have shown some promise, backing the appeal against RERA signals a move to preserve bureaucratic immunity and shield entrenched corruption. Bengaluru's urban governance will improve only when its principal development authority is subjected to the same standards of transparency, discipline, and legal consequence as any other promoter. Compliance with RERA is not optional; it is non-negotiable.

STATE AND SOCIETY

Rethinking governance, with citizen at the centre

Good governance is more than scheme outcomes. It is about being transparent, inclusive, and responsive

SANTOSH NARGUND

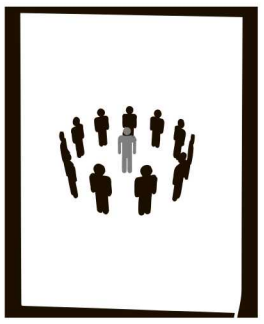
Who is governance truly designed for? As India observes the National Good Governance Day, this is the fundamental question before a rapidly transforming country aspiring to become a developed nation. Good governance can no longer be assessed only by the scale of schemes or the speed of execution. There is an urgent need to place the citizen at the centre of governance systems. A national resolve to enhance the lived experience of citizens in their interactions with the State – from panchayat to parliament, and across the life cycle, from birth to old age, spanning daily needs as well as pursuits of entrepreneurship, innovation and leisure – is the way forward. A citizen-centric governance model is key to delivering a quality of life that citizens truly deserve in a Viksit Bharat.

Over the past two to three decades, India has made significant progress in improving efficiency and citizen satisfaction in service delivery and development programmes. The adoption of citizen charters and social audits, the enactment of consumer protection measures, the Right to Information and the Right to Services, as well as digital service delivery platforms and grievance redressal forums, have all aimed to empower citizens. Yet, these initiatives have largely addressed individual dimensions of citizen experience in isolation. Neither transparency alone, nor rights-based service delivery, nor post-facto audits can, by themselves, secure sustained trust in governance. Nor can digitisation compensate for deeper structural deficiencies that inhibit citizen-centricity.

What India now needs is a systemic model of citizen-centric governance – one that applies holistically across the full spectrum of government functions, including policy framing and regulation, service delivery, and development, and across all tiers of government – from the Union and states to municipalities and panchayats. Citizen centricity is the measure of a government's ability to design, implement, and continuously improve governance initiatives to enhance quality of life and build enduring citizen trust.

Citizen-centricity cannot be introduced only at the implementation stage. It needs to be embedded across the programme lifecycle, from conception and needs assessment to design, execution, and evaluation. It must be informed, continuously, by feedback from citizens and other stakeholders. A comprehensive citizen-centric governance framework rests on five interlinked pillars: transparency, participation, accountability, responsiveness, and continuous improvement.

Transparency enables informed engagement. It requires governments and their agencies to proactively inform and educate citizens about initiatives in ways that enable meaningful participation, feedback, and oversight. Before designing any programme or policy, basic questions must be asked: Is the information to be shared comprehensive and coherent? Are dissemination channels



accessible to the affected communities? Information asymmetry remains one of the greatest barriers to trust. Transparency is not merely about dashboards or disclosures; it is about making information intelligible, accessible and actionable so citizens understand who decides, on what basis, and with what consequences.

Participation goes far beyond consultation meetings or feedback forms. It implies engaging citizens at every stage of the governance cycle: problem identification, planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring. Global experience and Indian practice both show that token participation breeds cynicism, while institutionalised participation builds ownership and trust. Governments must move decisively from treating people as mere beneficiaries to recognising them as partners. Ease of participation must be consciously designed into governance systems. Technology can enable participation, but it cannot substitute place-based forums such as gram sabhas, ward committees, and area sabhas, which remain indispensable.

Accountability is the bedrock of trust. When responsibilities are fragmented across multiple agencies and tiers, citizens are left unsure of who is answerable for outcomes. True accountability requires clearly defined service standards, time-bound delivery, and mechanisms through which citizens can hold both officials and elected representatives to account. Citizen-centric policies and programmes must therefore guarantee professional, timely and data-protected services that are independently verifiable.

Transformation beyond targeted programmes

Responsiveness adds a human dimension to governance. A responsive system listens early, corrects quickly, and treats citizens with dignity. Broken grievance redressal portals, unresponsive helplines, and opaque processes point to systemic design failures. Ease of access, respectful communication, effective grievance redressal, and user-friendly service design are not luxuries. As citizens experience increasingly professional services elsewhere in the 21st century, expectations from public institutions inevitably rise.

The fifth pillar – continuous improvement – ensures that citizen centricity is sustained rather than episodic. Governance systems must be capable of learning, adapting, and improving through robust evaluation frameworks that go beyond financial and output metrics to assess service quality, citizen experience, and trust. Feedback loops, citizen-led monitoring, independent performance evaluations, and outcome-based reviews must inform course correction. Good governance cannot be a destination; it must be a discipline.

These five pillars cannot stand alone unless viewed through four essential lenses: inclusion, decentralisation, institutionalisation, and technological enablement. Inclusion ensures that governance reaches the most marginalised, not merely the most vocal or digitally connected. Decentralisation brings decision-making closer to the first mile of governance: towns, villages, neighbourhoods, and workplaces.

Institutionalisation embeds citizen-centric practices in laws, rules, charters, and forums, rather than individual leadership. Technology, finally, must serve as an enabler, expanding access, reducing discretion, and strengthening transparency and participation.

India's governance reforms have largely been incremental and programme-specific, delivering short-term gains without transforming the underlying relationship between the State and the citizen. A holistic citizen-centric governance paradigm is therefore essential to anchor development in world-class quality of life and citizen trust, as much as economic growth.

(The writer is the Director of Policy Engagement at Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A Christmas angel in tweeds

I love this time of the year for all the joy it brings

PADMA SASTRY

Auntie Miss. A petite lady, immaculately dressed in a black skirt and a crisp white blouse and often a tweed jacket, with closely bobbed hair with silver streaks in her otherwise dark hair, held neatly in place by a hair net. I saw her every school day, six days a week.

She would greet every child at their first stop, in front of the two big wrought iron gates that stood wide open, where I often imagined being swallowed into a world called school. She never ever addressed a child by their actual name but always by an endearment of sorts. She would first inspect the uniform, the shoes for a proper shine and the socks with no gaping holes, and further ensure its intended use of full coverage to the kneecap. She would then gently ask us to stretch out our hands. She would squint at the little nails for their length and presence of any unwanted matter underneath. Next came the inspection of the hair. If for boys, it was to be clipped to reveal full ears. And for girls, if the hair was not bobbed and just under the ears, it would have to be braided and pinned up. No fashion statement this was, and no ordinary disciplinarian was she either.

I came to know her by her real name many years later. Mrs Paul.

I unfailingly remember her every Christmas because it was she who lit the spirit of Christmas in me. A tradition that she and her family, who immigrated to the Bengaluru Cantonment many generations ago, followed in its entirety. That the Lord's Prayer was sung at our daily school assembly did not in any way ebb the freshness of Christmas Day at school. The day meant festivities, including singing familiar carols, a skit depicting the story of Christmas and a party sweetened with cake and biscuits. A Christmas tree stood majestically in the corner of the principal's office.

Auntie Miss strutted around excitedly dressed in red and green, a bright gold angel pinned on her lapel that, she would tell me upon my enquiring look, was always there to spread mercy. She would transport me to her own church as she animatedly described the mass, the prayers, the delicious food, and the gifts they exchanged among the family. These stories were to become real to me after my first visit to a church with her and many more to follow.

I fell in love with her from my first day of kindergarten. With the generous, perfect-white pearly smile, her gentle yet firm reassuring hug and that unforgettable sing-song greeting, she welcomed me. She was there for me every single day.

I love this time of the year, for all the joy it brings me straight from the heart of Auntie Miss to mine. A blissful warmth melding with the dancing flames of my own fireplace, the gently flickering candles, and the swaying shadows floating with my own happy memories.

Merry Christmas, Mrs Paul!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bangladesh turmoil: India's response falls short

The situation in Bangladesh is a matter of grave concern. The atrocities against minorities have become a daily occurrence, and the lynching of a Hindu by a frenzied mob for alleged blasphemy is extremely alarming. The country is in a state of anarchy, with the interim government of Muhammad Yunus either unable or unwilling to handle the volatile situation. The government's lack of legitimacy is exacerbating the problem. The atrocities in Bangladesh are having a ripple effect in India, with demonstrations in various parts of the country. The Indian leadership has not responded adequately to the situation. India has options to protect minorities in Bangladesh, including extending the Citizenship Amendment Act to grant citizenship to persecuted minorities.

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Measured action vital

The escalating tensions between India and Bangladesh require calm reflection and measured action. Any deterioration in bilateral ties will inevitably create opportunities for external actors to exploit divisions. Both sides should manage protests peacefully and maintain security, public services, and people-to-people connections. Historical bonds and shared interests demand de-escalation and rebuilding trust.

Q A Qasmi, Mumbai

Strengthen eco governance

The Supreme Court's intervention in the Aravalli mining issue highlights the persistent failure of environmental governance. Judicial intervention becomes necessary due to weak enforcement of environmental laws. Courts can temporarily halt damage, but science-based policy-making is needed. Environmental protection requires political will, institutional clarity, and accountable enforcement.

Vismaya Vivek, 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

The state also has certain responsibilities; the central government can't give everything. In Karnataka, they are looting central funds, so why should the Centre give more?

H D Kumaraswamy, Union Minister

Power lacks moral or principles. It only has interests.

Horacio Castellanos Moya

TO BE PRECISE

IN PERSPECTIVE

A green switch in China's energy order

Grid reform and increased endorsement of renewables are set to steer the country's energy transition

BHUMIKA SEVKANI

China's 15th Five-Year Plan (FYP) comes with a strong vision for greening the economy. In the recommendations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, green development has been mentioned as a 'defining feature of Chinese modernisation', and priority will be given to reducing pollution at source. Non-industrial sectors will increasingly move towards phasing out the use of coal, aimed at reducing the dependence on imports to meet the energy consumption demand.

Renewable energy sources that are likely to see increased investments are wind and solar plant installations, as well as pumped-storage hydropower (PSH). In terms of future technologies, hydrogen energy and nuclear fusion energy will be explored. However, the recommendations do not mention green hydrogen specifically.

Solar has been leading RE installations since 2020 in China. The installed capacity of solar power plants has increased from 253.86 GW in 2020 to 887.10 GW in 2024. Wind energy, on the other hand, has only seen an increase of about 85%. While solar energy's share went up from 28.32% to 48.81%, the share of wind energy installations reduced from 31% to 28%. This can be attributed to relatively higher costs, longer lead times, and higher curtailment rates for wind energy projects. Amid the low installation rates and an oversupply of wind turbines, key Chinese firms in the sector faced losses in 2023, until the leading firms agreed to consolidate the industry.

During the upcoming FYP period, the wind energy industry is expected to pick up pace as the solar equipment suppliers face overcapacity. Chinese firms have also been leading in wind turbine innovation and project implementation. Additionally, wind power firms collectively published a Beijing Declaration on Wind Energy 2.0 in October, setting a target of 1.3 TWh installed capacity by 2030. This is a significant increase from the previous target set for 2030 – an installed capacity of 800 GW. China has also set a new NDC target for 2035: a combined installed capacity of wind and solar at 3.6 TW. The consolidation of the industry and an increased focus on grid infrastructure will favour the growth of wind energy in the FYP period.

The Central Committee directs that plans be developed for PSH to increase the safety and resilience of the power grid. PSH can fill in the supply gap when variable sources are not able to meet the demand, stabilising the grid and the market as well. It saw an increase in installed capacity from 31.49 GW in 2020 to 58.69 GW in 2024.

Lastly, broad directions on energy transition focus on improving transmission infrastructure to cover regional demands. This includes connecting both small and distributed energy resources, and large RE farms to the grid and consumers. Energy backbone corridors are included to 'boost high-quality development of clean energy' that can connect renewable-rich provinces to nearby economic clusters.

Market reforms for RE projects will also be accelerated, which will impact different RE sources unevenly. The reforms will reward fast-delivering, flexible sources that are proximate to demand centres. Therefore, large onshore/offshore wind farms will experience losses or require pricing support, whereas distributed, small wind or solar producers, and PSH producers will stand to benefit in times of higher demand.

Smart grids and microgrids remain a continued priority, carrying over their emphasis from the 14th FYP. The State Grid Corporation budgeted $88.7 billion for power grid investment in 2025. As of May 2025, China's industrial sector has approximately 300 RE-powered microgrids operational or under construction. China's RE growth will continue, with better grid integration. However, the move to market pricing creates uncertainty for new projects, and specific targets will be crucial for guiding advancements in RE technology and demand.

India's takeaways

For India and the world, this transition will mean an increased dependence on Chinese RE equipment. As China accelerates domestic deployment and reduces its fossil fuel dependence, it is also positioning itself at the centre of RE supply chains. This was evident in solar panels, and now, increasingly witnessed in wind turbines.

The focus of Chinese policy on a specific technology not only accelerates decarbonisation and lowers cost for the global supply chain, but also subsequently reshapes energy trade. If successfully implemented, Chinese policies and implementation standards can also shape global norms in RE deployment. For India, the challenge lies in balancing technological advancement while ensuring the competitiveness of domestic RE industries against Chinese imports and maintaining the economic viability of RE projects.

(The writer is a research analyst with the Indo-Pacific Studies Programme at the Takshashila Institution)

Does renaming MGNREGA address rural distress?

STEVENSON JACOB AND KARAMALA AREESH KUMAR

The Union government's move to rename the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and increase the number of guaranteed workdays has resurfaced an old debate: What does renaming a welfare programme truly accomplish for the people it is meant to serve? When political contestation is stripped away, the main concerns lie in social acceptance, financial effectiveness, and the quality of service delivery. Replacing the current framework, the parliament has passed the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission [Gramin] (VB-G RAM G) Bill.

The primary objective of this bill is to provide wage employment through public works in rural areas. With this action, a "demand-driven framework" will give way to a "supply-driven scheme". The original National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, announced in 2005, was conceived as a rights-based protection system for rural households willing to perform unskilled manual labour.

The proposed renaming fits a longer pattern. The Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan was earlier rebranded as the Swachh Bharat Mission, accompanied by new branding and expanded sanitation goals. Rural LPG connections, initially offered under the Rajiv Gandhi Gramin LPG Vitrak project, were subsequently included in the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, with a change in name and emphasis. In the housing sector, Indira Awaas Yojana was renamed Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin, once again combining design modifications with a new title. A large share of central initiatives has followed this trajectory, shifting from names associated with particular leaders or generic sectoral terms to flagships carrying the "Pradhan Mantri" brand.

Renaming schemes, even when budgets for benefits are maintained or enhanced, has clear financial implications. A nationwide change in terminology necessitates new workplace signage, redesigned logos, revised letterheads and forms, and modifications to management information systems, mobile apps, and portals. Panchayat offices, block development offices, banks, and post offices must invest time and administrative effort to update records and software entries and retrain employees where necessary. These are not striking expenses, but they are real, because every rebranding exercise diverts funds and personnel time away from activities such as social audits, payment processing and project supervision.

There is also a government dimension. Disagreements between the Centre and states over how scheme names and logos appear on signboards and official materials have, in recent years, hindered approvals and even triggered fund stoppages. In 2023, the Union government issued a warning that if states rebrand centrally sponsored schemes such as Ayushman Bharat or PM Awas Yojana under their own names, central releases would be suspended until the original branding and terminology were restored. When this happens, projects and payments on the ground are delayed, as implementing agencies must redo utilisation certificates and compliance reports. From an economic perspective, every renaming cycle carries an opportunity cost, as resources spent on rebranding could otherwise be deployed for better technology, wider coverage, or improved infrastructure.

Large programmes also depend heavily on years of established name recognition. "NREGA *ka kaam*", which stands for dependable work under a legally guaranteed programme, has been a part of village vocabulary for nearly two decades. Renaming such a familiar scheme inevitably creates a transition period. During this phase, workers may be uncertain whether the earlier programme continues, whether rules have changed, or whether re-registration is required. In low-literacy settings, even small ambiguities can discourage participation.

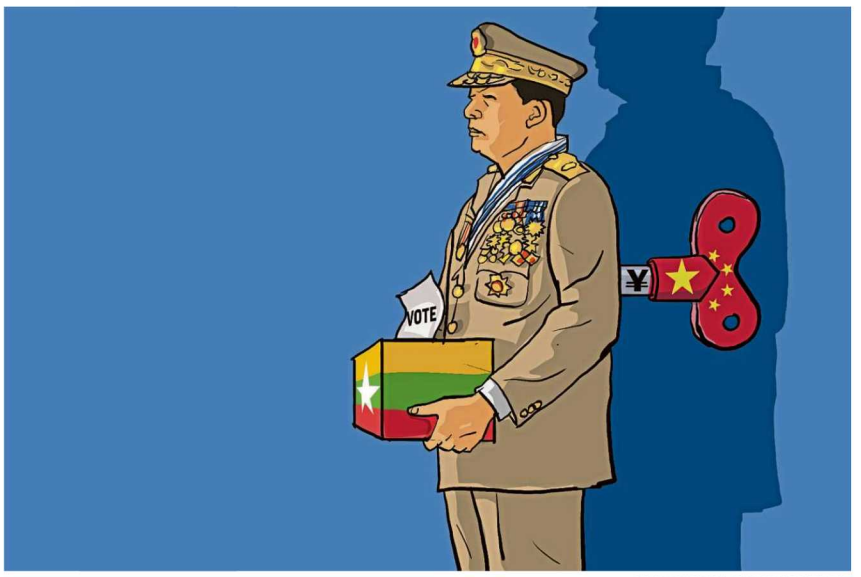
Official concerns over the scheme names highlight a real issue. Inconsistent titles across states can weaken accountability and reduce understanding of entitlements. When some states attempted to rename Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres, the Union minister cautioned that such changes could lead to closure if people did not recognise the service. Schemes like health insurance, scholarships and others are sensitive to this kind of misunderstanding and can lower participation. Renaming also strains the administrative capacity because digital systems and financial agreements all link centrally sponsored programmes to specific titles. Any changes would cause approvals and payments to be delayed while officials make adjustments. This increases coordination costs if the deeper problems of underfunding and delays are not addressed.

The MGNREGA debate reinforces one basic notion: outcomes depend on designs; not labels. If adequately funded and implemented, the increase in the number of guaranteed workdays can significantly enhance rural earnings. Changing the acronym does not increase employment or wage payments. Timely payments, practical and climate-resilient assets, improved planning, and complementary programmes for urban and green jobs are more important. For communities, the core question is: Are jobs available, are wages paid on time and are services easily accessible? Names only matter if they help people utilise their rights, and performance alone counts.

(Stevenson is a research assistant, and Areesh is the head, Department of International Relations, Peace and Public Policy, St Joseph's University, Bengaluru)

The vote in Myanmar, widely seen as a sham, is a bid for legitimacy by the military government. It is also a way for Beijing to exert its influence there

SUI-LEE WEE AND DAVID PIERSON



DH ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

Why China is backing elections in Myanmar

Five years ago, the United States played a pivotal role in Myanmar's general election. Washington assisted with voter education programs, supporting civil society in the name of strengthening global democracy and countering China's influence in the region.

It was one of the few truly contested elections in Myanmar, which has largely been ruled by its military since independence from Britain in 1948. Voters delivered a decisive win for the civilian leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, but within months the generals again seized power, and Washington downgraded diplomatic ties with the nation.

Now election season has returned in Myanmar, as voters start casting ballots on Sunday. The polls, which will not include many politicians opposed to the junta and will only be held in areas controlled by the military, have been called a sham by the United Nations. But they have a surprising backer — China, a one-party state.

For Beijing, Myanmar is a crucial link to the Indian Ocean. China has committed funds worth billions of dollars for infrastructure projects in its smaller neighbour, including highways and a deep seaport. But the coup in 2021 and an ensuing civil war that has wracked Myanmar have threatened those plans.

In a remarkable statement last year, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, called on Myanmar to achieve domestic peace with an end to the fighting and "national governance based on the will of the people."

China has promised to provide technological assistance and funding so that the junta can compile voter lists. The irony of a one-party state promoting elections is not lost on observers. Beijing views the poll as the best way to establish a semi-legitimate government in Myanmar that some countries may agree to grit their teeth and negotiate with. China, along with Belarus and Russia, are some of the handful of countries sending election observers.

"It's a little bit of a joke to think that the Chinese are trying to shepherd election observation missions," said Yun Sun, director of the China Program at the Stimson Centre in Washington. "But that just attests to the Chinese effort to window-dress this election, to make it look as pretty and as legitimate as it can."

Beijing has supplied arms to both the warring junta and the rebel armies to balance its interests. It has also used its leverage over some armed groups to pressure them to hand back territory to the military. Now its hope is that the election will lead to a semblance of stability that would allow it to revive its stalled deep-sea port and oil and gas pipelines on Myanmar's coast. These projects were meant to reduce China's reliance on the Strait of Malacca, which Beijing fears the United States could someday blockade.

Ko Ko Gyi, the chair of the People's Party in Myanmar, said Chinese officials told him in Beijing last year that "Myanmar's peace and stability directly affect China's interests." His political party was one of many in Myanmar invited to China for all-expenses-paid "study tours" in recent years.

Ko Ko Gyi, once one of Myanmar's most prominent pro-democracy activists, said that even though China is clearly pursuing its own interests, it is "close, influential and willing to engage, while the U.S. remains on the fence."

"Washington talks about values, but Beijing brings leverage," he said. "That is why Myanmar keeps leaning toward China, because America offers rhetoric, not commitment."

But ballots will only be cast in junta-controlled areas, or less than half of the country. Some rebel groups as well as the shadow National Unity Government, a pro-democracy movement, have urged a boycott of the election.

"It is absolutely impossible for Myanmar to become stable or for any meaningful political space to emerge simply by holding an election, as China appears to expect," said Nay Phone Latt, a spokesperson for the shadow government. "Even if a so-called civilian government were to emerge through such an election, it would still be the same military coup leaders in civilian clothes who would continue to rule."

Members of the pro-military party that is expected to win the elections, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, have travelled to China five times since 2021 for meetings with Communist Party officials.

"They explained how they systematically built that one-party system, enabling them to govern the country without rivals," said Thaung Shwe, the director-general of the Myanmar party. "They also discussed how to achieve desired outcomes in elections and how to manage the process to ensure a favourable result.

"They shared ideas on how a democratic system can still function under centralised control."

While Myanmar's military will still control the levers of power, the elections could lead to a return to a nominally civilian government or a shake-up among the military elites. It is uncertain what role the junta chief, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, will play after the elections.

"Even if those who form the next government are the same individuals from the current military government, the system they operate in will change," said Thet Thet Khine, founder of the People's Pioneer Party, which comprises former military officials and businesspeople. "That means there will be a shift toward a more democratic path."

China, she said, is helping Myanmar "move one step closer toward the democracy that our people desire."

Peng Nian, director of the Hong Kong Research Centre for Asian Studies, compared this election to the 2010 poll, which was seen as a facade to cement military rule but eventually paved the way for the West to engage with Thein Sein, a former general who enacted reforms.

"Regardless of what the West thinks, it is at least a democratisation process," Peng said.

Ultimately, the veneer of legitimacy that China provides in this election could help the Myanmar junta entrench its power and further the military's idea of a so-called "disciplined democracy."

"The last thing China wants is for there to be a full-scale revolution that advances systemic change and pushes the Myanmar military out," said Jason Tower, the former country director for Myanmar at the United States Institute of Peace, a nonpartisan research organisation.

But despite the apparent bonhomie, the Myanmar generals remain suspicious of China. They dislike China's role in funding the rebel armies in Myanmar's borderlands and are wary of over-reliance on its giant neighbour. The country that Min Aung Hlaing has visited the most is not China but Russia.

China has also signalled its displeasure with the general, given the instability on the border, the junta's failure to shut down the scam centres that have ensnared thousands of Chinese victims, and an attack on the Chinese consulate in Mandalay last year.

Analysts say these factors provide an opening for the West to engage with Myanmar, where many want to balance relations between the world's two major superpowers.

"The international community needs to do something differently in Myanmar," said Morgan Michaels, a research fellow for Southeast Asian security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank. "But if they keep waiting and doing nothing, then the country is going to continue to fragment and be pulled closer and closer into China's orbit."

Myanmar's coming election lays bare a reversal of roles and a vacuum of resolve. As Washington stays cautious and value-heavy but leverage-light, China's transactional engagement fills the space — despite mutual mistrust and competing interests. The result is an election that is unlikely to bring peace or democracy, but may still harden Myanmar's drift into a "disciplined democracy" shaped more by geopolitical convenience than by the consent of its people.

The New York Times

A retreat from disability jurisprudence

ARUSHI SINGH

Courts often lean on and develop existing jurisprudential principles to shed light on matters of public significance. Every now and then, when such issues are thrust into mainstream public discourse, one hopes for a deeper judicial engagement with the questions at stake. Failure to do so risks disrupting the existing legal framework and creating inconsistencies. A recent incident did just that, undermining the court's past wisdom.

This deviation was reflected in a recent Supreme Court order, underscoring the significance of adhering to and building upon established jurisprudential principles. The case made headlines when comedian Samay Raina made offensive jokes targeting persons with visual disabilities and infants with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA), a rare genetic disorder. In the matter, the Court directed the drafting of guidelines "which would adequately protect the interests of all parties, without impinging upon the individual rights, dignity, honour, and respect." More recently, the Court addressed the creation of a fund to provide financial aid for persons with SMA. While the respondents agreed to raise funds, the Court remarked that through genuine remorse and commitment, they could leverage their platform to boost publicity for the cause.

Though hailed as a symbol of retributive justice, upon closer scrutiny, this order suffers from numerous incoherencies and legal pitfalls. It addresses disability justice only at a surface level, which is ironic considering the thorough examination of such concerns by the Supreme Court earlier.

Last year, the court navigated similar challenges in the case of *Nipun Malhotra v. Sony Pictures Films India Pvt Ltd* and made strict observations about the depiction of persons with disabilities (PwDs) in the media.

Malhotra eloquently distinguished between disabling humour, which demeans and perpetuates stereotypes about PwDs, and disability humour, which challenges conventional notions and societal perceptions of disability. The Court reiterated that speech and expression further marginalising and disenfranchising PwDs, will not enjoy the full protection of Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution. Although the Court stopped short of issuing guidelines to restrict content contravening the RPwD Act and the Constitution, stating that it could not enter the domain of policymaking, the Bench created a nine-point framework on the representation of PwDs in media. This landmark judgment, authored by then CJI Justice Chandrachud, established jurisprudence on the imagery of persons with disabilities in media and the use of humour that entrenched attitudes toward marginalised social groups.

The *Malhotra* judgment was the first of its kind to bring the issue of stigmatisation of persons with disabilities in the media into sharp focus.

Conversely, the order in *Raina*'s case raises concerns on numerous counts. A deeper engagement with the framework laid down in the *Malhotra* judgment could have fostered greater judicial coherence towards the drafting of the guidelines.

In *Malhotra*, the court recognised the need to prevent discrimination against PwDs, due to its disproportionate impact on their dignity and identity, subjecting them to social ostracisation. From that standard, the *Raina* order is a disturbing disappointment. Here, the court appears to diverge from the rationale of *Malhotra*, framing discrimination based on disability as a matter of charity rather than a deep and pervasive societal issue. Rather than deliberating upon the systemic and structural exclusion faced by persons with disabilities on a daily basis, the courts' insistence on creating and sustaining funds for persons with SMA regrettably treats the issue as a one-off incident.

In *Raina*, the respondents sought court's permission to invite persons with SMA on their platform to raise awareness and showcase their stories. The court granted the same. However, such appearances reinforce the charity model, situating persons with disabilities as objects of inspiration or sympathy, directly subverting the dignity-based jurisprudence articulated in *Malhotra*.

Ultimately, *Samay Raina* neither builds upon nor adheres to the path laid down in *Malhotra*. On the contrary, it alarmingly undermines the law established there.

Disability jurisprudence is still in its infancy in India, with courts continually dispensing new interpretations and clarifications of the barely decade-old legislation. The present scenario thus necessitates interconnectedness with the existing legal principles and established frameworks. *Ad hoc* adjudication of matters strung together with threads of similar shades will not further the purpose of the law.

(The writer teaches law at the O P Jindal Global University, Sonipat)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 1975

'Grihalakshmi' scheme inaugurated

New Delhi, Dec. 25
A new life insurance policy, the "Grihalakshmi" policy, aimed at providing lifelong financial support to housewives, was inaugurated here today by Finance Secretary H. N. Ray. In a message on the occasion, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi welcomed the idea of introducing the Grihalakshmi policy specifically for non-earning married women and hoped that women in large numbers would take advantage of the new scheme.

25 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 2000

Vajpayee launches poverty alleviation schemes

New Delhi, Dec 25
On the occasion of his 76th birthday, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today launched three programmes from his house here. They are the Rs 60,000-crore Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana; Antyodaya Anna Yojana, an ambitious scheme for ensuring food security involving an annual subsidy of Rs 2,300 crore; and the Netaji Subash Saksharata Mission aimed at eradicating poverty and illiteracy.

OASIS | MEERA SESHADRI

Sparkling sunshine in sunset years

This stunning human, with singular qualities, is now just seventy-five years young! He was our chemistry professor, who had a profound penchant for his subject, when I was pursuing a degree in pure sciences at NMKRV Women's College, Bengaluru. There was diligence and delightful precision with which he delivered his lectures. In fact, his knowledge was so deep that he could incessantly go on and on, imparting all possible information involved in the day's topic. Beyond the syllabus, one would also see him spearheading other sundry college activities, seamlessly managing them, sans even small glitches. He had such a sonorous voice that whenever there were some silly squabbles among students snowballing into severe scuffles, he'd, within seconds, have them all silenced and subdued by his stentorian tones.

Cut to the present. Ten days ago, while talking to him over the telephone, I could tacitly sense, by his tone and tenor, even today, he has the same tenacity and tonnes of verve in living a totally holistic life. Successfully running his own tutorials in his spare time, he simply basks in being swamped by sheer bliss amidst his sprawling farmland, surrounded by spectacular nature.

And, with a circle of close friends constantly calling him on his cell phone, he cherishes having cosy chats, exchanging copious info centred around countless current matters. Once he gets home, with all gusto, he revels in glorious moments with his grandchildren, having enormous fun. Being massively fit, he has managed to keep myriad physical and mental ailments at bay. His heart of titanium, high-octane energy levels, and humongous zest to enjoy life to the hilt—all highly belies his age.

It is often said that "age is just a number." The inference here being, if the inner mind/body is incredibly fit, then the age becomes inconsequential. Well, regardless of one's age, when we try treading on hitherto untravelled tracks, taking part in all terrific activities, and bestowing titanic joy, only then can we testify to the truth in the above tenet. After all, adding years to life is miserably ageing, while adding life to years is marvellously growing!

OPINION

My best Christmas gift

By David McGrath

I was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of a voice. It was 3 a.m.

Nothing good usually happens at that time of the night, as even F. Scott Fitzgerald opined when he wrote, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning."

But the voice calling out "Mimi!" and then "Grampy!" was that of my 9-year-old granddaughter, Summer, who was staying with us overnight.

She probably wanted a glass of water or was maybe overhyped, as a lot of children are the closer it gets to Christmas. I turned on a light, grabbed a robe and rushed to her room. I found her sitting up in bed, blue eyes not quite teary but full of worry.

In our household, my wife is her go-to person, but Marianne — whom she calls "Mimi" — is not as light a sleeper as I am.

Summer managed a brave smile, making me feel loved, even though I was the backup adult.

"I'm afraid, Grampy."

"Did you have a bad dream?"

"It's too dark."

A night-light cast a soft glow in the bedroom. I stood and turned on the bathroom light and left the door partly open.

"Is that better?" She nodded but continued sitting up.

"Grampy?"

"What, honey?"

"Can I have a hug?"

Since infancy, she has stayed with us

Author David McGrath's granddaughter Summer Allen, circa 2024. **DAVID MCGRATH**

almost every Saturday night. Nine years' accumulation of toys line the walls in two rooms, from the miniature kitchen set to stacks of stuffed animals.

Summer is our only grandchild, and before her birth, I had absolutely no idea what a difference she'd make in our lives. I had been sufficiently happy with my loving and disquisitive wife who reads a hundred books a year and my grown children who still seem to enjoy visiting us.

But this new love came with bonus amazements, from Summer's rapidly expanding vocabulary — "Focus on the horn, Grampy," she told me at age 3 when I incorrectly called her stuffed unicorn a horse — to her surprising questions — "Do you think Grandma Dunne would have loved me?" referring to Marianne's mother whom Summer knew only from the photograph she studies on our wall.

I thought that after 450 weekends spent with her, our love and awe would naturally wane. I was stupefyingly wrong. It grows and grows.

But now that she's in fourth grade, and music, dance and piano lessons; Taylor Swift; swimming; and "Wicked," the film and merchandise, are high on the list of her favorite things, it is inevitable that Mimi and I, more wrinkled, more sedate and more familiar, would slip lower on the list, if not to the bottom.

Her impatience that morning was telling.

She wanted to play dodgeball on the front lawn or hockey with the tennis ball on the driveway or lacrosse — any one of the things she does outdoors with me. But I asked her to wait 15 more minutes since I was working on the laptop to finish a Christmas story.

She huffed, sat on the floor at my feet and started doing some sort of yoga exercise. She stopped after a minute.

"Grampy, are you finished?"

"No."

"What is the story?"

I told her it's about something that happened before she was born when I was a high school teacher and how my students gave me the best Christmas gift ever, though it was not a toy or anything you could put in a box. Instead, it was ...

"The end!" Summer said.

"What?"

"Too long, Grampy. And boring. May I have the computer?"

I was amused, and I complied. Her mother is an English teacher and her father an actor and a writer, so Summer is at ease with a keyboard.

After a few minutes, she handed the laptop back to me, saying she had written an ending, so could we please go outside?

I read the paragraph she typed to finish my story. She had commandeered two of the characters and involved them in something poop-related, which is pretty typical of a fourth grader, or of an Adam Sandler movie.

And then this: "He-heh says SUMMER ALLEN in her mom's Belly. He-heh. I cant (sic) wait to meet my grandfather."

"What's the matter, Grampy?"

"Nothing." Nothing at all. "Let's get the hockey sticks."

We got our gear and headed out the door. But I knew that when we were through playing, I'd have to make a correction to the essay I was working on about the best Christmas gift I had ever received.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of "Far Enough Away," a collection of Chicagoland stories. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Light into darkness

Thank you so much for the refreshing commentary by Willie Wilson on Dec. 18, "What Christmas and the birth of Jesus Christ mean to me." We are bombarded with heartbreaking news almost daily. We need to remember that Jesus is the light of the world and he brings light into darkness.

In John 16:33, Jesus says "You will have suffering in this world. But take heart, I have overcome the world." He will be with us through all pain and suffering.

As always, Wilson ends his op-ed with some excellent application points on making Christ's love visible. I especially appreciated: "Do more listening than talking."

How important, as we enter the holidays, to listen and remember to respect others by giving them our full attention. Also, "express kindness and love toward someone." Just as Jesus does for us every day.

Merry Christmas.

— Cathy Rennau, Oak Park

Christians attend a prayer on Wednesday at St. Mary Cathedral in Yangon, Myanmar. **THEIN ZAW/AP**

Immigrant's story

Christmas and Easter are the two most important Christian holidays of the year. Many may not know that the two popular holiday songs "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade" were both written by a Russian-born Jewish immigrant named Israel Baline, better known as Irving Berlin.

Berlin was 5 years old when his family's village in Russia was burned to the ground by Cossacks. He and his family immigrated to America, where Berlin later wrote the American classic "God Bless America" to express his deep gratitude to the country that took his family in.

In Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, white "Christian" nationalists chanted, "Jews will not replace us." I wonder if they realize that three of the most popular American songs of all time, fully embraced and cherished by many Christians in our American culture, were all written by a Jewish immigrant.

We might do well to remember that, with the exception of Native Americans, we are all immigrants or their descendants. Amen.

— Bob Chimis, Elmwood Park

Bring back kindness

I ask everyone to start their New Year's resolutions with "Be kind." To family, friends, co-workers, other drivers, pedestrians, workers on the street, those not as fortunate as you and, yes, those who might have a different opinion than you do.

Some believe that kindness is an act of weakness. The opposite is true. Great leaders lead with kindness, which is actually leading with strength.

Kindness is lacking in the world today, and we need to get it back as everyone's top priority.

— Fred Hausmann, Tinley Park

Everyone contributes

Professor Dawn S. Brown's op-ed really resonated with me ("Who gets invited to the table? Holiday gatherings offer a lesson in leadership," Dec. 22). In order for family, charitable and professional gatherings to be meaningful, invitations should be inclusive, and each individual should bring something or add something to the success of those assembled. It's "ownership" and civil participation that make them meaningful, productive and/or fun.

— Ronnie Jo Sokol, Chicago

Ring the doorbell

In response to the editorial about porch piracy ("Porch piracy is costly and frustrating. And Chicagoland is a hotbed of parcel theft," Dec. 14), I have a modest proposal for reducing such thefts: All those delivering packages should ring the doorbell so we can retrieve them before they're stolen.

The post office generally does ring doorbells. But commercial companies don't always do so, particularly not Amazon. I have requested this in my account profile. I try to complain about it in feedback request emails. But Amazon doesn't provide a way to complain specifically about this issue. (You only get to check the "other problem " box.)

Amazon apparently expects us to continuously check our email to discover that a package has been delivered. I have better things to do.

This is one of several reasons why I avoid buying from Amazon when I can.

— Judith Alexander, Oak Park

Theft of packages

The convenience of having items shipped to our front doors is a plus and a minus for shoppers. The impact of package theft is a major bummer for victims of this type of crime, especially during the holiday season. Small businesses are also among the many victims.

However, some things can be done to safeguard home deliveries.

- A well-placed security camera is one of the most effective deterrents for would-be package thieves, or "porch pirates." The mere presence of a security camera can make a potential thief think twice.
- Always use package tracking. Most carriers enable customers to check the status and approximate time a package will be delivered.
- Require a signature for delivery. This will ensure that a package will be safely delivered.
- People who frequently use a package delivery service should seriously consider package delivery insurance.
- A lockbox is another good tool to protect deliveries. All delivery services are familiar with the use of a lockbox.
- Request deliveries be sent to another location that is convenient. For instance, a workplace or the home of a relative or a neighbor is a good alternative because someone will be there to receive them safely.
- People living in multidwelling buildings should never buzz anyone into the building unless they are absolutely sure they know the person. Also, when entering a building that requires buzzer access, never allow anyone else inside unless the person's identity is known.
- Never leave packages in an automobile where they can be seen from the outside. Never place purchases inside a vehicle in order to continue shopping in other stores. Thieves are always watching.
- Upon entering a vehicle after shopping, never delay in starting the vehicle. Don't idle while talking on the phone or checking messages. After entering a vehicle, lock it immediately and always be alert to your surroundings. Most stores will provide an escort to a customer's vehicle upon request.

The holidays are always a time to celebrate, but they're also a time to be careful.

— Bob Angone, retired Chicago police lieutenant, Austin, Texas

Law enforcement

I hope that in the new year, people realize that the men and women in law enforcement are the good guys. They knock on your door because you called for help, and they pursue those who break the law. Nothing more, nothing less.

— Roberto L. Garcia, Chicago

RSV vaccination

The recent Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services (HFS) announcement regarding the removal of prior authorization requirements for a respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccine marks a significant victory in our ongoing efforts to protect vulnerable populations from respiratory disease.

HFS has taken an essential step toward improving vaccine access for those who need it most by removing the requirements for additional documentation of informed consent and prior authorization for the Abrysvo vaccine. This important change will undoubtedly improve access to care and save lives.

This new policy will particularly benefit high-risk populations, including pregnant individuals during weeks 32 through 36 of pregnancy; adults ages 50 to 74 at increased risk of severe RSV disease; and all adults age 75 and older.

RSV is a common yet potentially severe virus that affects the lungs, leading to cold-like symptoms. While it typically resolves on its own, RSV can lead to serious complications for high-risk groups, including young children, the elderly and individuals with compromised immune systems. RSV is the most common cause of pneumonia and bronchiolitis in infants. It is critical that these groups are protected from this virus.

By streamlining access to the RSV vaccine, we can address the alarming disparities in vaccination rates that currently exist in Illinois. Recent data indicates that immunization coverage among high-risk groups is shockingly low — only 33.6% of infants under 8 months and 30.6% of adults over 75 have received the vaccine. These figures highlight a pressing need for targeted efforts to increase vaccination rates, particularly among non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic adults, as well as those with lower income and education levels. While this is an important step forward, there is still more to be done. We must continue to advocate for equitable access to health care resources and ensure that all communities, especially the most vulnerable, are informed about the benefits of RSV vaccination. Having better access to vaccines is a significant step forward.

However, we need to go further to work alongside health care providers, community organizations, and public health officials to promote vaccine literacy and outreach.

Now, let's build on this success by continuing to educate the public with the truth about vaccines.

— Erica Salem, Respiratory Health Association, Chicago

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.

Ukrainian children are led in a Christmas parade Wednesday in downtown Lviv, Ukraine.
MYKOLA TYS/AP

Ukraine

from Page 1

said Wednesday that Moscow would decide its position based on information received by Russian presidential envoy Kirill Dmitriev, who met with U.S. envoys in Florida over the weekend. Peskov declined to share further details.

American negotiators have engaged in a series of talks with Ukraine and Russia separately since U.S. President Donald Trump presented a plan to end the war last month — a proposal widely seen as favoring Moscow, which invaded its neighbor nearly four years ago. Since then, Ukraine and its allies in Europe have worked to pull the plan closer to Kyiv's position.

Zelenskyy said figuring out control of the Donbas region is "the most difficult point."

Meanwhile, on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the U.S. has proposed creating a consortium with Ukraine and Russia, in which each party would have an equal stake.

Zelenskyy countered with a proposal for a joint venture between the U.S. and Ukraine, in which the Americans would be able to decide how to distribute their share, including giving some of it to Russia.

Zelenskyy acknowledged that the U.S. has not yet accepted Ukraine's counterproposals.

"But we have significantly brought most of the positions closer together," Zelenskyy said. "In principle, all other consensus in this agreement has been found between us and them."

Creating the demilitarized economic zone in the Donbas would require difficult discussions on how far troops would be required to move back and where international forces would be stationed, Zelenskyy said, adding that it should discussed at the leaders level.

The working U.S.-Ukraine draft also proposes that Russian forces withdraw from the Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Sumy and Kharkiv regions. Zelenskyy envisions that international forces could be located along certain points of the contact line within the zone to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

The working draft ensures that Ukraine will receive "strong" security guarantees that would require Ukraine's partners to act in the event of renewed Russian aggression. That would mirror NATO's Article 5, which says an armed attack on one member of the alliance is an attack on all.

Zelenskyy said a separate document with the U.S. will outline these guarantees. It will detail the conditions under which security will be provided, particularly in the event of another Russian assault, and it will establish a mechanism to monitor any ceasefire. The document will be signed with the main agreement to end the war, Zelenskyy said.

"The mood of the United States of America is that this is an unprecedented step towards Ukraine on their part. They believe that they are giving strong security guarantees," he said.

The draft contains other elements, including keeping Ukraine's army at 800,000 during peacetime and making Ukraine a member of the European Union by a specific date. Limiting the size of Ukraine's military is a key Russian demand.

The document also proposes accelerating a free-trade agreement between Ukraine and the U.S. The U.S. wants the same deal with Russia, Zelenskyy said.

Ukraine would like to receive short-term privileged access to the European market and a robust global development package that would include the creation of a development fund to solicit outside investment in Ukraine's industries.

Other points include raising funds for Ukraine's reconstruction, with the goal of attracting $800 billion through equity, grants, loans and private-sector contributions.

Ukraine is also asking that all prisoners taken since 2014 be released at once, and that civilian detainees, political prisoners and children be returned to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, an explosion in Moscow on Wednesday killed three people, including two police officers, Russian investigators said, days after a car bomb killed a general not far away.

Chicago Daily Tribune

ON DEC. 25 ...

In 336, the first recorded celebration of Christmas on Dec. 25 took place in Rome.

In 1066 William the Conqueror was crowned king of England.

In 1223 St. Francis of Assisi assembled one of the first Nativity scenes, in Greccio, Italy.

In 1642 physicist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton was born in Woolsthorpe, England.

In 1776 Gen. George Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River for a surprise attack against Hessian forces at Trenton, N.J.

In 1818 "Silent Night" was performed for the first time, at the Church of St. Nikolaus in Oberndorff, Austria.

In 1821 Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, was born in Oxford, Mass.

In 1868 President Andrew Johnson granted an unconditional pardon to everyone involved in the Southern rebellion that resulted in the Civil War.

In 1918 Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who won the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating a peace treaty with Israel, was born in Mit Abu al-Kum, Egypt.

In 1926 Hirohito became emperor of Japan, succeeding his father, Emperor Yoshihito. (Hirohito was formally enthroned almost two years later.)

In 1941 during World War II, Japan announced the surrender of the British-Canadian garrison at Hong Kong.

In 1946 comedian W.C. Fields died in Pasadena, Calif.; he was 66.

In 1977 comedian Sir Charles Chaplin died in Corsier-sur-Vevey, Switzerland; he was 88.

In 1989 ousted Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, were executed following a popular uprising. Also in 1989 former baseball manager Billy Martin died in a traffic accident in Fenton, N.Y.

In 1991 Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev went on television to announce his resignation as the eighth and final leader of a communist superpower that had already gone out of existence.

In 1995 singer Dean Martin died in Beverly Hills, Calif.; he was 78.

In 1998 British mogul Richard Branson, American millionaire Steve Fossett and Per Lindstrand, of Sweden, gave up their attempt to make the first nonstop, round-the-world balloon flight seven days into their journey, ditching off Hawaii.

In 2000 a fire in central China killed 309 people inside an unlicensed disco.

In 2002 Katie Hnida became the first woman to play in a Division I football game when she attempted an extra point for New Mexico against UCLA in the Las Vegas Bowl.

In 2003 Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf survived a second assassination bid in 11 days, but 17 other people were killed. Also in 2003 Europe's Mars Express was supposed to go into orbit around the Red Planet, but the craft was lost.

In 2006 James Brown, the "Godfather of Soul," died in Atlanta; he was 73.

In 2007 a tiger at the San Francisco Zoo escaped its enclosure and killed a park visitor; two brothers were also mauled but survived. (The tiger was killed by police.)

In 2008 Eartha Kitt, the sultry singer, dancer and actress born of humble roots who become an international symbol of elegance and sensuality, died in Connecticut of colon cancer; she was 81.

In 2009 a Nigerian man, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, 23, allegedly tried to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit. The explosives did not ignite properly and quick acting passengers subdued the suspect.

In 2012 Chicago mobster Frank Calabrese Sr., serving a life sentence after his conviction in seven slayings, racketeering, extortion and illegal gambling during the Family Secrets trial in 2007, died in federal prison in Butner, N.C.; he was 75.

In 2013 Egypt's military-backed government branded the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

In 2016 George Michael, who rocketed to stardom with WHAM! and went on to enjoy a long and celebrated solo career, died at his home in Goring, England; he was 53. Also in 2016, 92 passengers and crew on board a Soviet-built Tu-154 airliner died when the craft operated by the Russian military crashed into the Black Sea two minutes after taking off in good weather from the southern Russian city of Sochi; among the dead were members of the Red Army Choir bound for Syria for a New Year's concert.

In Memoriam

Bernard Avello
Nights are the hardest since you left, I miss your warmth beside me. I love you still. More than I show.
Sign Guestbook at chicagotribune.com/obituaries

Death Notices

Weiss, Floretta Adler

Floretta (Flo) Adler Weiss (January 10, 1929 – December 23, 2025) was described throughout her life as "the nicest person". Cherished for her kindness, sharp wit and hosting prowess, she was passionate about opera and symphony and served for decades on the women's boards of Louis A. Weiss Memorial Hospital, the Lyric Opera and Ravinia Festival.

Flo's greatest passion, though, was her beloved husband Robert George Weiss. The two began dating when they were 16 and have remained deeply in love and dedicated to one another. This past February they celebrated 75 years of marriage amidst their children and grandchildren and their spouses and great grandchildren.

Flo is survived by her husband Robert, children Louis Arthur ("Skip") Weiss and his wife Kathleen Aharoni, the late John David Weiss and his wife Janis, Robert Alan Weiss and his wife Ofra; grandchildren Benjamin Weiss and his husband Yoni Gorfinkel, Nicholas Weiss and his wife Juliana Piza Caballero, Jacob Weiss and his wife Jessica Druxman, Sarah Weiss and her wife Rachel Sietz, Charlotte Weiss, Loren Weiss, Evan Weiss and his wife Katherine Warther, Richard Weiss and his wife Anna Voutyras, and the late Meryl Suzanne Weiss. Flo leaves eight precious great grandchildren and many beloved nieces and nephews.

A lifelong resident of Chicago and Glencoe, IL, Flo was the youngest child of master furrier David Adler and Jane DeVere Adler who together in 1913 emigrated to Chicago from Ukraine.

A funeral for Flo will take place on Friday, December 26th, at noon, at The Mausoleum at Memorial Park Cemetery, Skokie.

In lieu of flowers, donations are invited to the Women's Board of The Lyric Opera. Services provided through **Weinstein & Piser Funeral Home**.