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—Rammath Goenka

CIVILIAN HONOURS: CONTINUITY WITH A WIDER EMBRACE

At a time of deep political polarisation, India's civilian honours have quietly emerged as a rare space of continuity and consensus. The Padma awards and the Bharat Ratna, often scrutinised for political signalling, have in recent years shown a discernible effort to rise above partisan divides, even as they have expanded their social and regional reach.

The honours list has cut across ideological lines, recognising leaders from rival political traditions for their public contributions. This year's posthumous Padma Bhushans for former Jharkhand Chief Minister Shibu Soren and Padma Vibhushan for Left veteran V S Achuthanandan underline that trend. Earlier, Mulayam Singh Yadav was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2023, while Ghulam Nabi Azad and Tarun Gogoi received the Padma Bhushan. Leaders such as Sharad Pawar, P A Sangma, S C Jamir and Tokheho Sema have also figured on the list, even as CPI(M) leader Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee chose to decline the honours. The 2019 Bharat Ratna for Pranab Mukherjee alongside Nanaji Deshmukh and Bhupen Hazarika reinforced this bipartisan arc. That approach reached a symbolic high in 2024, when five Bharat Ratnas were announced. The selection—Karpoo Thakur, L K Advani, P V Narasimha Rao, Chaudhary Charan Singh and M S Swaminathan—spanned ideologies, eras and professions.

Yet, the more consequential shift has unfolded at the grassroots level. The Padma Shri, in particular, has undergone a quiet democratisation. Recent lists have foregrounded unsung heroes who are social workers, doctors, artists and educators from remote regions, many drawn from Dalit, tribal and backward communities. From Anke Gowda, a former bus conductor who built one of the world's largest free-access libraries, to Tulasi Gowda, a Halakki community member revered for her encyclopaedic knowledge of plants, from the Godbole couple delivering healthcare in conflict-hit Bastar to professionals working with the disabled and burn victims, the idea of merit has been widened.

This dual emphasis on recognising towering public figures as well as individuals whose impact is felt far from the national spotlight has, over time, added to the Padma awards' sheen. Any honours system invites hard scrutiny and disagreement over the political nature of choices often spills into the public domain. But India's recent selections indicate an effort to broaden the idea of merit through greater inclusion, regional representation and social diversity. In this sense, the Padma awards are beginning to reflect a more layered understanding of national service.

GEOLOGICAL SHADOW ON CRICKET BAD FOR SPORT

There is no doubt that sport today has become more politicised than ever before. If the Paris Olympics in 2024 became one of the most geopolitically-charged games, the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka from February 7 is turning into a regional slugfest. Bangladesh's decision to not travel to India made sporting drama out of the souring relationship between the neighbours.

The Bangladesh women's team did travel to India near the end of 2025, when diplomatic disagreements were already playing out. But the issue of Mustafizur Rahman, picked by Kolkata Knight Riders before being asked by the Board of Control for Cricket in India to drop him over 'recent developments', exposed cricket's inextricable, worrying link with subcontinental politics. That the BCCI is yet to offer a proper explanation for Rahman's ouster—despite the IPL allowing Bangladesh players at the auction—beggars belief. The answers may not be forthcoming. While Bangladesh used to pull out when their demand to play elsewhere was not met, the fallout was brutal—Scotland were brought in in their stead.

With the International Cricket Council headed by Jay Shah, former BCCI secretary, this was not an unexpected outcome. The ICC did arrange a few meetings to convince the Bangladesh Cricket Board, but to no avail. A sad reality of the time we live is that Bangladesh's lack of commercial leverage—millions of fans, but little sponsorship support—also went against them. There are multiple reasons for the ICC decision, but BCCI's financial clout is the foremost. Meanwhile, the Asia bloc within the ICC—that former BCCI president Jagmohan Dalmiya had built along with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh—has become redundant.

With Pakistan spewing cricketing hostilities on and off the field, and now Bangladesh grumbling about unfairness, the lopsidedness of cricketing power in the subcontinent is made even more apparent. This is not a forward stride for the sport of cricket. At a time when other sports are continuously seeking newer pastures for growth, cricket is continuing to look in, gatekeeping at the say-so of a few elite nations.

QUICK TAKE

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

One would think that a country perennially facing infrastructure inadequacy would treasure what it has built. But years of crumbling bridges and potholed roads have belied the hope that we can ensure such care for precious new constructions. But when a 60-foot, 30-tonne iron bridge gets 'stolen' overnight, we must admit that our sense of looking after public goods is glaringly absent. This is true for the administration, which in Chhattisgarh's Korba could not ensure the bridge's safety or the quick capture of the culprits, as well as the public, who could not stay vigilant enough to stop the theft of the 40-year-old structure that was meticulously dismantled and carted off. If the value of common goods is not inculcated at an early age, individual greed will always be able to hoodwink the law.

At a time when the international system is marked by flux, ambiguity and shifting alignments—when yesterday's partners appear transactional and today's adversaries selectively cooperative—the coming together of India and the European Union carries particular significance. The convergence of two mature political systems, each accustomed to strategic restraint and long-term calculation, is not incidental.

That the EU leadership has been invited as a collective to India's Republic Day—an invitation New Delhi extends with deliberate care—signals a mutual recognition that stability, reliability and strategic autonomy are emerging as valued currencies in an uncertain world. The leaders' presence should be read less as ceremonial symbolism and more as a reflection of converging strategic compulsions. This convergence is not driven by ideological alignment or historical intimacy, but by necessity—economic, geopolitical and systemic—on both sides.

India today operates in a far more fragmented global environment than even a decade ago. Its strategic engagements across regions remain active, but increasingly constrained by competing priorities and structural limits. Russia continues to be significant for India, not as an ideological partner, but as a critical defence supplier and a long-standing balancer in the China equation. Even as India diversifies defence procurement, the depth and legacy of this relationship cannot be wished away without incurring strategic risk.

West Asia, meanwhile, presents a different complexity. India has successfully built parallel relationships with competing regional actors—Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. This balancing act has served Indian interests well, but it also limits the scope for deeper strategic alignment with any single regional bloc. West Asia is an arena of engagement, not anchorage, and it's changing at a dynamic speed. The challenge thrown up by the issue regarding the Gaza Board of Peace exemplifies the type of complex choices India faces.

In the Indo-Pacific, the picture is subtly changing. While the region remains central to India's maritime and economic interests, the US itself appears to be recalibrating its threat perception, particularly with regard to China. Strategic signalling has softened, emphasis has shifted toward risk management rather than confrontation, and the urgency that once amplified India's strategic value in this theatre has somewhat

India and EU are coming closer because of imperatives on both sides. The collective weight of India's relations with individual European countries may be more than that with the bloc

CONVERGENCE BY NECESSITY, NOT CONVENIENCE



LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN

Former Commander, Srinagar-based 15 Corps; Chancellor, Central University of Kashmir

diluted. India remains important—but less indispensable than before.

It is against this backdrop that Europe acquires renewed relevance.

For India, the EU represents a rare strategic space where cooperation is possible without intense competition or coercive alignment. The EU is not seeking military alliances in Asia, nor is it attempting to draw India into zero-sum geopolitical contests. Its interests lie primarily in economic security, technological resilience, supply chain diversification, climate transitions and rule-based stability—all areas where India's rise complements European needs.

From Europe's perspective, the attraction is equally pragmatic. The EU today faces a prolonged security crisis in its eastern neighbourhood, uncertainty about the long-term reliability of American security guarantees, and an uncomfortable dependence on China across critical economic

sectors. India offers Europe scale, market depth, skilled manpower, democratic legitimacy and strategic autonomy—with out the unpredictability that increasingly characterises other major powers.

This makes India-EU convergence fundamentally different from India's engagements elsewhere. It is non-adversarial, non-hierarchical, and structurally compatible. That said, the relationship cannot be understood purely through the EU as a monolithic entity. Individual European countries—France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands among them—enjoy deep, mature and often highly productive bilateral relationships with India. In defence, energy, technology, education and innovation, these ties have advanced far more rapidly than India's engagement with EU institutions.

This creates a paradox. The cumulative weight of India's bilateral relationships with European states is often

CAN AI HELP INDIA BREATHE EASIER?

AIR pollution in India is not only a cause for episodic panic; it is a systemic failure whose costs are staggering. In lost lives, lost productivity, rising healthcare expenditure and irreversible damage to children's cognitive development. And despite decades of regulation, monitoring stations and court orders, the outcomes remain grim.

The uncomfortable truth is that we are trying to solve a 21st-century problem with 20th-century tools. This is where artificial intelligence-led technology can offer India not a miracle cure, but something far more valuable—governance intelligence at scale.

India's pollution control architecture suffers from three structural weaknesses. First, data poverty masquerading as data abundance. Most cities rely on handful of regulatory-grade monitoring stations to represent millions of people. These stations are sparse and often provide averages that hide hyperlocal realities. Pollution does not distribute evenly. A school near a traffic junction, a construction site or an industrial boundary may experience pollution levels several times higher than a city-wide average.

Second, reactive enforcement. Action is triggered only after pollution crosses thresholds. By the time bans are imposed, the damage is already done. Pollution control boards act like post-mortem examiners rather than preventive physicians.

Third, institutional silos. Transport departments do not speak to health departments; urban local bodies lack real-time feedback loops; citizens remain passive recipients of advisories rather than active participants in solutions.

AI-led systems directly address all three failures. Hyperlocal sensing using low-cost, calibrated sensors allows pollution to be mapped at street, ward and neighbourhood levels—sometimes down to a few hundred metres. When combined with AI-driven calibration, sensor fusion and anomaly detection, these networks can achieve accuracy that is decision-grade, not merely indicative.

But sensing alone is insufficient. The real leap comes from predictive intelligence. AI models trained on historical pollution data, weather patterns, traffic flows, industrial activity and land-use changes can forecast pollution spikes days in advance. This allows city administrators to act before air quality deteriorates—rerouting traffic, re-

scheduling construction, modifying industrial operations or issuing targeted health advisories. One of the least discussed advantages of AI is its ability to depoliticise enforcement. When pollution hotspots are algorithmically identified, violations can no longer hide behind averages or excuses. Construction sites exceeding dust thresholds, industries breaching emission norms, or roads generating abnormal particulate levels become visible in real time.



Artificial intelligence can fill gaps in anti-pollution efforts by providing predictive tools and corrective mechanisms. Trained on Indian data, AI-enabled systems can provide hyperlocal and national environmental intelligence. The tech exists, but political will is needed to stitch it together at scale

AI-enabled dashboards can automatically trigger inspections, fines, or corrective actions—reducing discretion, delay and rent-seeking. Over time, this creates a culture where compliance is cheaper than violation.

For municipal bodies struggling with manpower constraints, this is critical. AI does not replace officials; it amplifies their reach.

Air pollution is not only a regulatory problem; it is a civic one. AI-led platforms can democratise access to environmental intelligence. Citizens can receive personalised exposure advisories based on local air quality, and even get route suggestions based

on cleaner air pathways. Parents can make informed decisions about outdoor activities for children; patients with respiratory illnesses can plan their day with precision. More importantly, citizens can become sensors and stakeholders, not just sufferers. Crowdsourced data, grievance reporting, and behavioral nudges—powered by AI—create feedback loops that strengthen governance rather than weaken it. This is where technology meets trust.

The biggest gains from AI-led pollution control may lie outside the environment department. Health systems can anticipate spikes in respiratory admissions. Schools can adjust schedules proactively. Employers can redesign work hours during high-exposure periods. Insurers can price risk more accurately and incentivise preventive behaviour.

Cleaner air is not a luxury—it is a productivity multiplier. Even marginal reductions in pollution translate into billions saved in healthcare costs and lost workdays. AI enables these cross-sector linkages by acting as a shared intelligence layer across government.

India does not lack pilots; it lacks platforms. Across the country, innovative pollution-tech solutions exist—some built by startups, some by academic institutions, some by civic entrepreneurs. But they remain fragmented, localised and often dependent on individual champions. What India needs is a national environmental intelligence backbone—interoperable, open and scalable—where states, cities and agencies plug in. Just as digital public infrastructure transformed payments and identity, environmental intelligence must become a public good.

Crucially, this system must be Indian by design—trained on Indian data, adapted to Indian urban forms and governed by Indian institutions. Outsourcing our environmental intelligence would be as dangerous as outsourcing our defence intelligence.

AI cannot substitute hard decisions on urban planning, energy transition or public transport. But it can remove excuses and make inaction a choice.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Responsible journalism

Ref: Aadhaar-less pregnant Telangana woman's endless search for hospital care (Jan 24). This newspaper's report on the plight of Ubaid Rehman, a pregnant 23-year-old, was timely. It prompted the CM's office to intervene, and led the Government General Hospital to assure treatment and care for childbirth. I laud the newspaper for its impactful and responsible journalism.

Anand Mohan, Hyderabad

Dikshit's diversity

Ref: Shankarabharanam's grace (Jan 25). Muthuswamy Dikshit had also composed Nattu Swaras in raag Shankarabharanam based on Western compositions, using the C Major scale. The compositions were influenced by military band music Dikshit had heard during the colonial days. An 'English Note' in this raga was popularised by the legendary Madurai Mani Iyer.

N Rama Rao, email

Chronicler's passing

Ref: Tully, who saw India grow as a nation, dies at 90 (Jan 26). In Mark Tully's death, we have lost an erudite and passionate writer, perhaps one of the last few of the past generation. He wrote extensively on India in a pure chronicler's style that deeply touched the Indian conscience.

Sanath Kumar TS, Thrissur

Next Nobel

Ref: Trumpism triumphs multilateralism (Jan 25). Donald Trump has a quixotic habit of imposing tariffs on countries as if he is the monarch of all he surveys. It remains to be seen whether he will impose tariff on Norway or sanction the Norwegian Nobel Committee if the next Peace Prize is not awarded to him.

C G Kuriaikose, Kothamangalam

UPSC help

Ref: Budget 2026 must Trump-proof India's economy (Jan 25). As an UPSC interview candidate, I found the suggestions in the article new and inspiring. It will help me in my preparation. So I wanted to convey my sincere thanks for the amazing article.

Monishka K, email

Individual values

Ref: Mumbai professor killed at platform for trivial argument (Jan 26). While the administrative lacuna need filling, it is also crucial to introspect as humans on our plummeting values. Playing blame games only leads to denial. Real solutions must begin at the individual level.

Anvesha, Bhadrak

Brain drain of a different kind is happening globally

Like the rest of the developing nations hitched on to the globalisation bandwagon, India found itself as part of the transnational group which had its own rhythm and language to direct how its citizens should be leading their lives. Of course, the technological transfer and seamless merger with bigger nations who found India valuable and attractive made an entire generation adapt to varied lifestyles which ultimately began taking its toll. What was considered impossible given the complex nature of Indian society, was suddenly face-to-face with a whole new set of young corporate employees, who battled depression, stress and

many severe neurological issues. Reduced sleeping hours is still considered a badge to be worn with pride in a few sections of the corporate world. This has been proven many times that it is far from the truth. As a University of Pittsburgh neurologist recently wrote: Among all forms of rest, sleep is the most powerful. Sleep is the brain's night shift. While you rest, the brain takes out the trash through a special cleanup system called the glymphatic system.

And importantly, sleep is when essential repair work happens. Growth hormone surges during deep sleep, supporting tissue repair, while immune cells regroup

and strengthen their activity. During REM sleep, the stage of sleep linked to dreaming, the brain replays patterns from the day to consolidate memories. This process is critical not only for cognitive skills like learning an instrument but also for physical skills like mastering a move in sports. On the other hand, chronic sleep deprivation impairs attention, disrupts decision-making and alters the hormones that regulate appetite and metabolism. This is why fatigue drives sugar cravings and late-night snacking. Sleep is not an optional wellness practice. It is a biological requirement for brain performance. It might come as a surprise to learn that the brain

responds to training in much the same way as our muscles, even though most of us never think about it that way. Clear thinking, focus, creativity and good judgement are built through challenge, when the brain is asked to stretch beyond routine rather than run on autopilot.

That slight mental discomfort is often the sign that the brain is being trained. Think about walking the same loop through a local park every day. Your senses are alert. You notice the hills, trees and the changing light. But after a few loops, your brain checks out. You start planning dinner, replying to emails or running through your to-do list. The walk still

feels good, but your brain is no longer being challenged. Routine feels comfortable, but comfort and familiarity do not build new brain connections. Various studies put out on this subject in our country have graphic details about how sleeplessness and overworked brains have wreaked havoc on public health, especially among the young who constitute more than 65 per cent of Indian population today. What will we expect if we have the so-called 'demographic dividend' laden with psychosomatic issues take over critical areas of our lives. Should we not raise awareness levels immediately on this serious matter?

LETTERS

Voting against UNHRC sending mixed signals

A PROPOS "India's vote against UNHRC is incomprehensible" (THI, Jan 26). The editorial raises a valid concern about India's vote against the UN Human Rights Council resolution on Iran's crackdown on protests. While the government's stance likely stems from principles of non-interference, sovereignty and avoiding selective mechanisms—in addition to bilateral ties with Tehran—such positions can sometimes appear at odds with India's own advocacy for human rights and democratic values elsewhere. It risks sending mixed signals on our commitment to universal principles. A balanced way forward would be for the Ministry of External Affairs to explain these decisions more transparently, through statements that highlight both our principled objections and continued support for dialogue on rights issues. This could help maintain credibility without compromising diplomatic space.

A Mylswami, Coimbatore-641402

India needs Iran's support at Chabahar port

IT is with reference to the editorial page article "India's vote against UNHRC is incomprehensible". By voting against UNHRC's recent resolution condemning Iran for its violent crackdown on public protest and extended investigative mandate to prove the alleged violations, India is maintaining its independent standing in international politics, which is a welcome decision. India has in the past also voted against similar 'country specific' resolutions, following the principles of non-interference in internal affairs of other nations. Moreover, India needs Iran's goodwill to maintain its interests in Chabahar port, which is critical for India's connectivity to Afghanistan and central Asia. Meanwhile, Iran should fulfil human rights obligations and immediately restore internet access, though the resolution was opposed by seven nations, including India.

P Victor Svaraj, Tirunelveli-627002

Pragmatism marks vote against UNHRC

INDIA's vote against the UNHRC resolution on Iran is rooted in a consistent diplomatic principle rather than endorsement of any alleged human rights violations. New Delhi has long opposed country-specific resolutions, arguing that such measures are often selective, politicised, and counter-productive. India maintains that naming and shaming through targeted resolutions undermines state sovereignty and weakens the credibility of the Human Rights Council itself. It prefers dialogue, engagement and cooperation as more effective tools for improving human rights, instead of externally imposed investigative mechanisms focused on individual states. The vote also reflects New Delhi's broader commitment to strategic autonomy, ensuring its foreign policy decisions are not aligned automatically with any geopolitical bloc. Additionally, India has important bilateral and regional interests with Iran, including connectivity and energy considerations. The vote signals India's independent judgment at multilateral forums.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Oppn must focus on human rights advocacy

THIS refers to your editorial "India's vote against UNHRC is incomprehensible". The Opposition has sought to re-tailor India's UNHRC vote into a moral indictment of the government by selectively detaching it from established foreign-policy practice. The narrative being pushed frames the vote as a departure from India's democratic values, while conveniently ignoring India's long-standing scepticism of country-specific resolutions perceived as politicised. This reframing relies on moral absolutism rather than institutional context, portraying diplomatic autonomy as ethical compromise. Media amplification further simplifies the issue into a binary of "rights versus realpolitik", erasing precedent across successive governments. Notably, the Opposition avoids acknowledging that similar votes or abstentions were routine under earlier administrations. The strategy thus hinges less on substantive human-rights advocacy and more on converting a complex multilateral decision into a domestic political vulnerability for the government.

K R Venkata Narsimhan, Madurai

Temples as centres of spirituality

TEMPLLES and other pilgrimage centres should be treated as centres of spirituality where people learn to find ways to understand God. Although they are divine destinations, many people are seeing them as tourist hubs. The administrators should be given free hand to test the spiritual knowledge and eagerness of devotees. One notices that those without any sense of spirituality or devotion are visiting temples and making them seem like tourist hubs and business centres. This is one of the reasons why almost all temples have reached saturation levels and are unable to manage the huge turnout and serpentine queues. These factors need to be looked into and duly addressed so that the 'genuine' devotees can realise the purpose of their visits like appropriate darshan and getting divine blessings.

M Chandrasekhar, Kadapa

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Raj Bhavan Chalo to save MGNREGA: Dy CM
BENGALURU: Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Monday said Raj Bhavan Chalo would be organized on Tuesday to save MGNREGA scheme. Speaking to reporters at the KFC office, he said, "Besides the Raj Bhavan Chalo, a 5-km padyatra would be organized in each taluk. Protests will be held at each panchayat levels. It is shocking that the Centre is trying to destroy a scheme like MGNREGA which came into being 20 years ago under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh. It guaranteed employment for rural people." "We were to gear up the BJP party office, but we have decided to do a Raj Bhavan Chalo instead. All legislators must participate in this mandatorily. District in charge ministers, legislators, panchayat members will participate in the padyatra along with MGNREGA beneficiaries," he added.

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<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Politics of Advocates: Need for restoration of democratic governance



PROF. MADABHUSHI SRIDHAR ACHARYULU

tion of women in legal leadership.

Can they reduce the fee?

Elections are being held under new guidelines to curb malpractices and ensure fairness. Towards this, the Supreme Court has proposed that elections be overseen by independent panels headed by retired High Court judges to ensure transparency and increase inclusivity. In fact, the court recently ordered a reduction in nomination fee for specially-abled advocates from Rs. 25 lakh to Rs. 5,000.

One bar One vote:

This principle is strictly enforced to prevent advocates from voting in numerous associations, ensuring that only regular practitioners of a specific court influence its leadership, while BCI rules that were amended late last year bars candidates with two or more serious pending criminal cases from contesting.

Court's directions:

The high-powered Election Supervisory Committee, headed by Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia, former judge of the Supreme Court of India, will oversee the process after taking into consideration views of all stakeholders.

The Committee shall consider the viewpoints of the Bar Council of India and State Bar Councils before issuing appropriate directions. The 30 per cent reservation for women members shall come into effect from the ensuing elections to the Bar Council of India and Haryana.

The BCI has been directed to ensure the process after taking into consideration views of all stakeholders. The Committee shall consider the viewpoints of the Bar Council of India and State Bar Councils before issuing appropriate directions. The 30 per cent reservation for women members shall come into effect from the ensuing elections to the Bar Council of India and Haryana.

30% women's quota:

A landmark reform in the 2026 election cycle is the Supreme Court's directive to ensure 30 per cent reservation for women across State Bar Councils. This move aims to address the historically low representation



supply a soft copy of the complete paper book and all previous orders to the offices of the Attorney General for India and the Additional Solicitor General. They are to list the main writ petition along with pending interlocutory applications for further hearing on February 6.

Democratic governance:

It is said that lawyers, who know the Constitution of India and the law, must go to the Supreme Court to restore democratic governance and implement significant electoral reforms in Bar elections. In such a scenario, how can they help in general elections to uphold the democratic governance in India? We need to reform the elections to the Bar Association to uphold the standards of advocates and democratic functioning.

There are many problems that clients face. Do we need 'reservations' for the intellectual underclass? What are the critical issues in the Telangana Bar Association elections? Similarly, some of the clever clients are causing mischief and sometimes commit scandals. How to stop them. What is the duty of a contesting member of the Bar Council of India and the states? What are the differences between members of the National Bar Council and the State Council? And the difference between the Council and the association.

in general elections by:

Legal literacy: Educating the public on the sanctity of the vote and the implications of the "One bar One vote" principle as a microcosm for "One person One vote".

Election monitoring: Acting as observers and filing PILs to check electoral malpractices.

Integrity screening: By strictly following the 2025 BCI amendments (disqualifying candidates with serious criminal cases), they set a higher ethical standard that challenges the "criminalization of politics" in general elections.

2. Standards of advocates and client problems:

The restoration of the Bar elections directly impacts clients. A functioning Council ensures:

Accountability: Clients currently suffer when Bar Councils are in "extension mode" because disciplinary committees often become dormant. Timely elections reactivate these committees to hear complaints of misappropriation or professional negligence.

Professionalism: Higher entry barriers and strict ethical codes for Bar contestants (as reiterated this month by the SC) ensure that the leadership consists of individuals who respect the rule of law, ultimately protecting the client from "deceit but unscrupulous" practitioners.

3. Reservations and Telangana specifics:

The SC noted that out of 441 elected members across 18 councils, only nine were women (barely two per cent). This isn't just about "wisdom"; it's about representation in a profession that governs diverse citizens.

Critical issues in TG:
The January 31 deadline: The

The January 31 deadline: The

K S Vyas-The lion that roared till the last breath

DR HYMA MOORTHY

January 27 (1993) marks the 1974 IPS Batch officer's martyrdom

If you strive to become an officer of the law you must know how to work well with others to uphold respect for people and law, and to have the mental, emotional and physical capacity to serve your people and the country. Having a broad conceptual knowledge of the agency you work for is of course, important. But a strong, sincere officer should always be aware of the details, such as which person is best at what type of assignments.

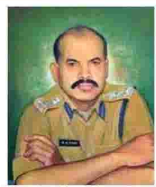
As a revered law enforcement IPS officer, the late K S Vyas mastered this skill to build crucial relationships within the agency and the public to enhance the performance of the organisation and build legitimacy.

From childhood he possessed this quality, whether playing cricket, in which he was an all-rounder and commanded his team to victory many a times, or playing marbles with the boys of his colony, pocketing all the marbles and sending the opponent empty-handed or at kite flying where he was always the winner. Everything was strategically planned before presenting material or an assignment to a group or an individual. He was ready with details and a methodically evolved plan that could answer all potential

questions. Vyas believed that demonstrating attention to detail sends a message to the subordinates and those around that their officer is equipped to handle the issues at hand and success is guaranteed. He believed that effective communication is important to be understood. The ability to communicate in a clear, confident and most important, consistent manner speaking with a citizen, at a public event, they must be able to deliver information clearly, accurately and effectively.

He strongly believed that a police officer's duty is to protect and serve others. This means they must also have great respect for and understanding of people of different backgrounds, cultures, attitudes, opinions and beliefs. An officer must always be able to work under pressure, maintain composure and possess sound judgement and decision-making skills during times of need.

Vyas felt that an officer must be able to reason, to weigh the consequences, and to consider alternatives before deciding on the most logical course of action. Without sound judgement, rationalisation and composure, situations can escalate and cost lives. Facing an escalation in life with courage, for



Vyas, from his early teens, was the most important of all virtues because devoid of courage, one cannot practice any other virtue consistently.

One of the painful traumas for any human being is the tragic loss of loved ones. Losing a loved one is never easy and losing a loved one in tragic circumstances can make the grieving process even more difficult.

When he was in his early twenties, Vyas lost his eight-year-old brother Uday Shankar, the youngest of six siblings, the one he loved the most, to brain tumor. That was a day prior to his IIS (Indian Forest Service) exam. Despite being told to stay home by his father, he joined in the last rites, standing next to his beloved father like a rock. The next day he appeared for the exam and succeeded though later he appeared for UPSC exam and opted for the

Indian Police Service. Nobody can understand the ways of the Creator. I wish he had continued in forest service, but who can go against destiny? Sometimes you write your own destiny, which was proved in his case.

Policing for him was a childhood dream. Becoming a police officer is a competitive feat. It takes one's prime time. For a person like him, admired for his courage, commitment, outstanding achievements and with noble qualities practicing the job can be risky at times. Policing for him was not a 'job' it was a 'calling', it was a way of 'life'.

A police officer who can evolve and adapt to the ever-changing times is an officer that others want to emulate. Vyas had the ability to evolve and adapt and had a loyal following in the rank and file because of this particular trait. Being resourceful, clever and innovative is particularly important when it comes to solving complex or tedious projects. He could lead his team creatively to accomplish objectives despite potential obstacles. He always had an observant eye and recognized the follower's full potential by maximizing their performance skill sets and encouraging

them to think outside the box. People need to be praised, appreciated and motivated in public for a job done well so that they continue pursuing outstanding performance and successfully scale goals. He used to discover the strengths of individuals and helped them utilize those strengths, thus increasing performance and boosting their morale. Putting people first was something that he couldn't overlook and something that he carried to his grave. He believed that if an officer is a people's person and remains humble, the officer's role becomes exponentially simpler.

Humor is perceived and delivered differently by everyone, and Vyas was naturally witty than others around him from childhood. This social skill worked wonders whenever executed in an appropriate, timely manner. It sparked enthusiasm, delivered an honest message in a good-natured way, boosted productivity, put people at ease, brought teams together and saw the lighter side of a situation. He was not a big man, but he had a big heart that overflowed with love for everyone around him. With his wit and humor and warm-hearted smile, he could illu-

minate any room on the darkest of days. A police officer is an ordinary person facing extraordinary circumstances and acting with courage, honour and self-sacrifice. Vyas was recognized for his bravery, professionalism and dedication. He touched the lives of countless individuals and families in ways that cannot be expressed by mere words. He was the hero, of many, who risked his life every day to protect the world around him and make it a better place to live in. Bravery is not the absence of fear but action in the face of fear. An everyday hero is the one who is placed under extraordinary circumstances and acts with heroic qualities. While lacking the talent of a classical hero, a police officer exhibits courage, sound moral judgement and selflessness in the face of adversity. Often, law officers place themselves in harm's way to protect society and, for the most part, these acts go unnoticed and unsung. The outpouring of support and grief from society and its leaders is a great source of comfort to our law enforcement family.

All cops for the selfless acts they are willing to do are de facto heroes, the Knights in shining armour. In valour there is hope for us all. It is the greatest quality of mind next to love. The martyred lion's roar will continue to echo.

(The writer is the younger sister of K S Vyas)



Opinion

TUESDAY, JANUARY 27, 2026

Jobs as growth push

Employment should be the Budget's central theme; the key solution is a competitive economy

AS THE GOVERNMENT stated in a press communique in October last year, "employment carries both economic and social weight (and) higher job levels signal a stronger economy, stimulate consumption, and fuel sustained growth". This fits in well with the fact that at a structural level, the country, with its fast-rising working-age population and low dependency ratio, is uniquely placed to leverage potentially high jobs growth for economic advancement. However, the much-vaunted demographic dividend is not yet being satisfactorily realised, and a misalignment of the workforce with the needs of a rapidly digitising economy is apparent. On the one hand, the future of work is already here, with digital, artificial intelligence (AI), and green tech leading the charge, but the labour market is constrained by a "skill gap" and "jobless growth" remains a common refrain. This is a paradoxical situation.

To be sure, 7-8 million people enter the employment market every year, and only a small fraction of them manage to get decent jobs. The demographic dividend was best reaped in the early part of the second decade of the millennium. Though this peak period is already behind us by over a decade, the dividend continues to be under-exploited. But there is still a window to take residual benefit of the country's youthful demography, before it closes in another two decades. On a cautionary note, unless job seekers acquire the right specialised skills which potential employers are looking for, they will increasingly manifest themselves as a burden on the labour market.

Going by official data, the employment scenario, however, is not that grim. Anecdotal evidence, and some of the independent databases suggest otherwise. According to the ministry of labour and employment, employment rose to over 643 million in 2023-24 from 475 million in 2017-18. Also, in 2024-25 itself, over 12.9 million net subscribers were added to the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation, more than double the additions in 2018-19, signifying a high pace of employment formalisation. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), on the other hand, has estimated the monthly unemployment rate (UR) at 6.91% in December 2025, significantly higher than the corresponding official Periodic Labour Force Survey figure of 4.8%, though methodologies of the two do differ. Annual UR for 2024-25 was estimated by the CMIE at 8.07%. That official employment figures include "self-employment" with low or little income and "rising" employment in the farm sector cannot be glossed over. Contract work is rising and accounts for 42% of the workforce in organised manufacturing. The phenomenal rise of the gig workforce—estimated to grow from 10 million in 2024-25 to 23.5 million by 2029-30—also supports official data. The sector indeed offers respite to the young and desperate job seekers, but long working hours and wages below minimum thresholds are the norm here.

Indeed, many job schemes have been rolled out in the last decade. Instead of resting on its laurels, the government should employ policy vehicles like the Budget more effectively to ensure that millions of well-paying jobs are produced. High-value roles in AI, product design, and finance should be complemented by new blue-collar tech jobs, and remunerative manufacturing and service-sector jobs in conventional sectors with higher employment elasticity. Designing more schemes that could prove to be unequal to the task may not be of much help. A more efficacious employment policy would be to take decisive steps that would make the economy structurally more competition-driven.

Want that bargain Rolex? Better act fast

TIME'S UP FOR the slump in second-hand watch values.

After five years of ups and downs, prices for used timepieces are now steadily on the upswing. Progress from here depends on whether two trends can continue: new watch prices rising and equity markets melting up. While there's a good chance of the former, the latter looks less certain.

The rollercoaster in secondary-market watch prices started during the pandemic, when consumers flush with crypto gains and stimulus payments started snapping up pre-loved models online. But the bubble burst in spring of 2022, as Bitcoin slumped and rates rose, forcing speculators who'd borrowed to fuel their collections to sell. The Bloomberg Subdial Watch Index, which is based on the 50 most-traded timepieces by transaction value, has reached its highest level in more than two years.

This inflation point reflects the trend in the cost of new timepieces. Tariffs have forced watchmakers to raise prices in the US, with some also adjusting them globally. Rolex SA joined in this month, with an estimated 6% escalation. As prices climb, more buyers are turning to the secondary market, where—aside from the top three privately held names: Patek Philippe, Rolex, and Audemars Piguet—most brands trade below retail. Add in the Bitcoin rally and the fact that global equities set a record in 2025, and it's little wonder that secondary prices rose 4.9% in 2025.

The current recovery looks to be broader than the improvement we saw earlier in 2025. At that point, increases were led by Patek Philippe, Rolex, Ciel Financier Richemont SA's Cartier and Swatch Group AG's Omega, while prices continued to fall for other names. But in the final quarter, they gained for 21 of the 35 brands tracked by Morgan Stanley and WatchCharts.

Charging more played a part. But the volume sold also increased, with demand spread across brands and geographies, particularly the US and the Middle East. Strategic moves likely helped too. Richemont is applying the playbook that helped Cartier become Gen-Z's favorite timepiece by relaunching Jaeger-LeCoultre's best-known model, the Reverso, and it may be working.

Can the recovery in the secondary market be sustained? That new watches are getting more expensive is one factor that could continue to strengthen second-hand values. While the tariff-related hikes shouldn't be repeated this year—Switzerland's levy fell from a punitive 39% to 1.5% in November—watchmakers face escalating costs from pricier gold and the dollar's weakening against the Swiss Franc, which means they must sell more watches in the US or raise prices to generate the same value of sales.

There are also some quirks of the market that might contribute to keeping prices and interest high. Take Cartier's Panthere, which has led the vogue for smaller, mostly gold, timepieces. Its popularity is helping boost other models, such as Rolex's 6mm Lady Datejust, which was discontinued in 2015. The diminutive Rolex can be picked up for around half the price of a similar newstyle.

For watchmakers, a stronger secondary market is a double-edged sword. While price increases are a good indication of brand desirability, consumers buying used models siphons sales away from new releases. One way to counter that trend is for watchmakers to move into the resale business themselves, as Rolex has done. Sales through its so-called Certified Pre-Owned Program exceeded \$500 million in 2025, up from \$319 million in 2024, according to Morgan Stanley and WatchCharts.

Still, the strength of the used market remains fragile. While a fresh trade spat has been avoided, the jolts to stocks and bonds last week are a reminder that buyers' confidence can quickly be shattered by economic and political turbulence. And even amid the resurgence, watch bros are less gung-ho than a few years ago, when many bought timepieces to flip at a profit. Scared by the collapse four years ago, more buyers are nervous about overpaying.

So, if you are contemplating investing in some serious wrist candy, there are still some bargains to be had. But the clock is ticking.



ANDREA FELSTED

Bloomberg

IN THE SPAN of a few years, what was once considered a novel productivity aid for programmers has evolved into something far more consequential—a generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) system capable of producing real, production-grade code. The leaders of some of the world's largest software companies have publicly acknowledged this transformation. Microsoft's CEO has noted that between 20-30% of the code in certain parts of the company's repositories is now generated by AI tools. Google's leadership has shared similar estimates, placing AI-generated code at over a quarter of its new codebase. Meta has gone even further, suggesting that within a relatively short time, generative systems could be responsible for half of its coding output, particularly in areas connected to its language model development. Industry observers and CTOs now forecast that by the end of this decade, a significant majority of the code written inside large engineering organisations may originate from or be heavily shaped by AI systems.

These figures are not just technical trivia. They represent a tectonic shift in how software is written and by whom. In place of painstakingly crafted logic by human developers, much of today's code is now co-authored by AI. But this shift is not a simple story of automation. It introduces an entire new layer of engineering complexity—one that demands oversight, correction, and contextual intelligence. As GenAI takes over more of the initial coding effort, a new class of coders is emerging—engineers whose primary job is not to write code from scratch, but to vet, validate, and refine what the AI has produced.

To understand why this role is necessary, one must appreciate the difference between producing code and ensuring its correctness. A defining principle of reliable software is determinism—the property that a program, when given the same inputs under the same conditions,

will always produce the same outputs. Deterministic behaviour is foundational to trust in computing. It enables engineers to debug systematically, allows systems to be tested exhaustively, and supports compliance regimes in regulated industries. Determinism ensures that software systems are predictable and transparent, qualities that are critical when the software is responsible for financial transactions, healthcare data, or mission-critical infrastructure.

GenAI, however, operates on a different logic. It is probabilistic, not deterministic. These models generate code by learning from vast libraries of text and code, identifying statistical patterns, and predicting likely next pieces of code based on prompt input. This is not based on logical, deterministic code, which is how a human would produce code. The result is code that often works but lacks guarantees. Even small changes in prompts or random seeds can result in different code, and the models themselves have no internal concept of correctness. They cannot reason logically or understand program intent in the way a human does. The result is a body of code that can look polished and syntactically valid, but which may contain semantic errors, edge-case vulnerabilities, performance bottlenecks, or security flaws. Worse, these flaws may not be visible until the code is deployed in the real world, operating under unforeseen conditions.

For firms that have built their business models on labour-intensive coding work, automation of that labour poses an existential question

This is where the new coder enters the scene. Instead of writing every function by hand, this engineer works to ensure that what the AI generates actually does what it is supposed to do—and nothing else. This involves more than testing individual functions. It requires writing comprehensive test suites, performing code reviews with an eye for logical consistency, and integrating formal methods where needed. These methods might include model checking, symbolic execution, and even mathematical proofs, especially for systems where correctness must be guaranteed under all conditions. In many cases, this work will be more intellectually demanding than writing the original code, because it involves understanding both the output and the limitations of the generative model that produced it.

Auditability is another major concern. In many industries, particularly those involving safety, regulation, or public accountability, code must be traceable. When a human writes code, the intent behind each decision can be captured in design documents, commit logs, or in-line comments. When code is generated by an AI system, that trail becomes harder to reconstruct. To maintain auditability, engineers will need to record the full context of code generation—what model was used, with what prompt, under what configuration, and with what subsequent modifications.

Without this kind of provenance, debugging and liability attribution become nearly impossible, and regulatory compliance may be jeopardised. The growing reliance on GenAI in coding also raises strategic implications for software engineering organisations. For firms that have historically built their business models on labour-intensive coding work, the automation of that labour poses an existential question. Indian IT services firms, in particular, are at a crossroads. The category of low-level, repetitive coding work—which once formed a significant part of their export revenue—is rapidly being absorbed by AI. Competing on volume or cost efficiency in this domain will become increasingly unsustainable.

But this does not mean obsolescence. On the contrary, Indian IT services firms have a timely opportunity to reposition themselves as specialists in AI code governance, reliability engineering, and software validation. By investing in capabilities around deterministic verification, prompt engineering, model auditing, and compliance tooling, they can deliver higher-value services that sit atop the AI-generated code layer. These firms can also build integrated platforms that combine GenAI with verification tools, enabling clients to not just generate code quickly, but to also do so in a way that is provably correct and auditable.

The companies that succeed in this new environment will be those that recognise that code, by itself, is no longer the product. Trustworthy code—understandable, verifiable, repeatable—is the new deliverable. Indian engineering talent, with its scale, systems expertise, and ability to adapt quickly to global shifts, is well-positioned to play a leadership role in this transition. But it will require a shift in mindset—from code as craft to code as consequence, where the value lies not in how quickly software is written, but in how rigorously it is made to work.

SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist
By invitation

COMPANIES THAT SUCCEED WILL BE THOSE WHICH RECOGNISE THAT CODE, BY ITSELF, IS NO LONGER THE PRODUCT

Correcting code written by GenAI

The US, India and the world

NIRVIKAR SINGH

Professor of Economics, University of California, Santa Cruz



VERY FEW PEOPLE alive now will have experienced and evaluated the full horrors of World War 2. US President Donald Trump was born the year after the war's end and grew up in a world where US leadership was clear to everyone, in the West at least. The horrors of the war led to the formation of a set of international institutions where US leadership was also front and centre. The US helped to rebuild Western Europe and Japan, and, while pursuing its own strategic interests and ideological leanings, laid the groundwork for a period of remarkable growth in Western Europe and many parts of East Asia. Strategic and ideological competition with the Soviet Union and China, and some imperialist tendencies of its own, led the US into transgressing its own ideals on multiple occasions, but those ideals remained strong, leading to significant improvements in civil rights and openness to immigrants of many types.

It is truly remarkable how quickly Trump and his collaborators and followers have upended 80 years of progress and global order. Neither progress nor order were perfect, but in a larger historical perspective, they were unusual, leading to significant improvements in civil rights and openness to immigrants of many types. It is truly remarkable how quickly Trump and his collaborators and followers have upended 80 years of progress and global order. Neither progress nor order were perfect, but in a larger historical perspective, they were unusual, leading to significant improvements in civil rights and openness to immigrants of many types.

The fact that these actions are regularly violating cherished constitutional rights, and are accompanied by a disregard for, even hostility to, the truth, is unprecedented in recent decades in the US. Voting rights, fair electoral representation, and the integrity of electoral processes are all being undermined, often with the complicity of the US Supreme Court. In 2020, the fact that states had their own officials, whose integrity stood as a bulwark against Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the presidential election, has led to targeting of individual states, to remove such checks and balances of decentralisation. The mainstream media, too, have been bullied or bought, while social media titans have been happy to accelerate the production of a 1984-type Orwell nightmare.

The above picture may seem alarmist, but recall what happened in Germany in the 1930s. A politics of grievance, scapegoating, and propaganda quickly led to the horrors of World War 2. It is surprising how Trump and those around him have embraced this model so wholeheartedly. Their grievances seem minor compared to the problems of inter-war Germany, but perhaps one has to

remember that the kind of phenomena that the US is experiencing are driven by the creation of alternate "realities" with little or no connection to the facts on the ground. Trump's advisor, Kellyanne Conway, coined the term "alternative facts" two days after his first inauguration to justify blatant falsehoods. According to such a perspective, the US-led global

While many countries have been treading the same path of authoritarianism that the US is racing down, India, despite its own failings, has seemed to hesitate in rushing in that direction

order and its many institutions of cooperation were mere instruments of progress that benefitted a large fraction of the world's population, but simply the rest of the world taking advantage of the US. Immigration, trade, and international cooperation are all viewed through this lens by Trump and his collaborators and followers.

While India is still a relatively poor country, the current situation in the US gives it an opportunity to provide global leadership in ways that it has aspired to ever since independence. While many countries have been treading the same path of authoritarianism that the US is racing down, India, despite its own failings, has seemed to hesitate in rushing in that direction. The country's size, heterogeneity, and some degree of pluralistic traditions have helped check authoritarianism. Embracing

diversity and openness at this particular juncture in history would be welcomed by many, not just in India. India suffered invaders and conquerors, but also created universities and curious travellers. It is not in a position to finance the development of other countries, be a leader in enforcing global rules, or welcome large numbers of immigrants, but it can be a role model in many other ways, for a world that is at risk of falling into chaos and conflict.

World War 2 was the last stage of European imperialism, and while the Cold War era featured a different type of great power competition, the US became more or less a hegemon for the post-war global order. Donald Trump and his collaborators have been dismantling that order, and it is uncertain what will replace it. Will it be a 1984-type world, as they seem to be pursuing, or one where truth and decency matter? Russia and China made their own choices at various points in the 20th century, ones which were very different from India's choices in 1947. They will not change easily. But India, including its global diaspora, has an opportunity to back up its ideals in ways that it lacked the capacity for in the decades after independence. In India, backing up ideals is still a choice that its people can make, directly and through the leaders they choose. The choices made can make a difference for the whole world.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mark Tully's legacy

The passing of Mark Tully marks the end of a rare chapter in Indian journalism. At a time when reporting often feels hurried and performative, Tully belonged to a slower, more demanding tradition—one that valued listening over pronouncing, understanding over judging. For generations of Indians, his voice on the BBC was not foreign but familiar, carrying reassurance rather than

drama. He reported India not as an observer passing through, but as a witness who returned repeatedly, allowing places and people to reveal themselves over time. That patience earned him trust—in cities, in villages, and especially in troubled regions where credibility was a matter of survival. In remembering Mark Tully, we are reminded that journalism is not merely about speed or volume, but about humility, curiosity, and respect. His legacy endures as a benchmark—

one today's media should revisit.
—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Clearing the air

Apologies of "Right to breathe" (FE, January 26), Delhi's clearer skies after recent rain are a welcome relief, but they only underline how much we still depend on weather instead of steady policy action to control predictable winter pollution. Practical steps that can make a real difference include better coordination with Punjab,

Haryana, and UP to curb stubble-burning; promoting effective composting methods; stricter monitoring and dust-suppression rules; accelerated rollout of electric and CNG buses; and consistent penalties for industries exceeding emission norms. Firm, year-round enforcement can turn clean air into a reliable right for every citizen.
—A Mylsami, Tamil Nadu

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India should mend ties with Dhaka after polls

India had decided quite some time ago that trying to build bridges with the interim government in Bangladesh was not worth the trouble since Muhammad Yunus who heads the government was tasked with facilitating the handing over of power to an elected government soon. Even so, it was quite an extraordinary attack on Yunus that Sheikh Hasina was allowed to address an event in the capital's press club last week.

Given the fact that the elections slated for February 12 are not far away, allowing Hasina to speak up on her grievances over how her regime was toppled by forces operating from outside Bangladesh as well as in the country where the student-led violent uprising may not have been the most temperate course towards mending ties with a nation with which India shares its longest land border.

The way in which Hasina's taped speech was taken to an audience carried the signs of official Indian approval for her diatribe against the microfinance banker who was handpicked by certain liberal forces in the USA to head the government and restore peace. That he went way beyond his remit and played politics in caving in with extremist elements with a distinct anti-India bias and allowing polls that will exclude the Awami League means India had all but declared him persona non grata.

Hasina minced no words in describing Yunus, with "murderous fascist" perhaps being the mildest of descriptions she had for an opportunist who had come to head a nation, albeit temporarily. The events in Bangladesh where law and order may have broken down for there to be a violent murder a day of members of the minority community hardly inspired confidence in Yunus' abilities to govern a nation after a cataclysmic change of regime that may have been engineered.

Since the legitimacy of the regime with Yunus as its chief adviser was always in doubt, India saw no reason to deal with it and there was never a question of the extradition request for Hasina being considered as there are humanitarian grounds on which it could be summarily refused. However, it is also true that India would have to deal with Dhaka at some point to restore ties to find a new norm of inter-state relationship.

The path to finding that new normal in ties with Dhaka may be that much harder after Hasina's explosive outburst, but India's approach had always been to wait for an elected government, which would probably be one headed by the BNP since the path to winning the polls and gaining power seems to have been cleared in the backlash against Hasina's rule for a decade and a half.

Hasina's last election itself had been smoothed by BNP boycotting the polls, which means that Bangladesh elections have not always been an ideally open avenue for all participants. With a sprinkling of student and extremist elements likely to be in the fray, the polls are certain to be fraught with interest. India must hope that a clear verdict will throw forth a leadership with which it should be possible to begin a dialogue.

In pulling out of the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka that begins in February, the nation is only likely to hurt its own cricket system, besides losing the money for participation that would have been valuable to support its infrastructure. To say there were security concerns about playing in India was an absurd argument considering it is Bangladesh that is unsafe for certain sections of its people as murder and mayhem persist. Principally, Bangladesh must understand that it had problems that were bordering on anarchy and that it must first set its house in order before looking to win arguments in international affairs. To conduct the polls fairly should be the priority as much as handing over governance to elected leaders.

Gold soars on dollar doubts

As prices blasted through the once-unimaginable milestone of \$5,100 an ounce—a level that bested the previous record set in 2013—gold's momentum was unstoppable. Similarly, silver surpassed \$100 an ounce for the first time. Though bullion markets were closed in India for the Republic Day, 10 grams of gold in rupee terms is priced at ₹1,64,837 and one kg silver is ₹2,53,721.

The yellow metal soared 64 per cent in 2025, its biggest annual gain since 1979, driven by safe-haven demand, US monetary policy easing, robust central bank purchases, including China's 14th straight month of gold buying in December, and record inflows into exchange-traded funds.

The latest spike in the prices of precious metals could be attributed to US President Donald Trump's threat to slap a 100 per cent tariff on French wine after French President Emmanuel Macron criticised Trump's demand for Denmark to forego its claim on Greenland and threatened counter-measures and retaliatory tariffs against the United States. Both the incidents show rifts in two key alliances—North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) and Trans-Atlantic security alliance Nato.

The ramifications of these ruptures could be seen far beyond geopolitics. Countries and investors have lost faith in fiat currencies, especially the US dollar, and conventional assets like equities and sovereign bonds. On the other hand, gold and silver are skyrocketing to stratospheric levels, with analysts predicting the yellow metal would cross \$6,000 this year in continuation of extended financial uncertainty in the world.

The world's largest gold producer, South Africa, has seen a sharp decline in demand for its gold bars, as investors have shifted to gold coins and bars. The country's gold mining industry is facing a crisis of confidence, with investors questioning the country's ability to produce high-quality gold bars. The industry is also facing a shortage of skilled workers, which is further exacerbating the crisis.

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After this week the Rajasthan government is all set to pass a segregation law modelled after one in Gujarat. It is unlikely that most Indians will come to know of its existence because it is unlikely that the media will report it. Let us look at what it is intended to achieve.

Poor people who are forced to live cluttered together is what we know as a slum. An ethnic group forcibly relegated to certain neighbourhoods is a ghetto. The former really do not have the means to go anywhere else. The latter have no choice even if they do have the means. Apartheid means separate-ness and refers to the policy of South Africa of forcing the black Africans into ghettos. They could only live in fixed spaces by law.

When segregation in the United States was legally ended in the 1960s, the government passed laws that sought to integrate the races, like the Fair Housing Act. It prevented discrimination in the buying and selling of properties, which was keeping the races separate. All across Gujarat, in all major cities and in several towns, the BJP government has done the opposite. Muslims are deliberately forced into ghettos through a law called the Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provision for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act. The law requires citizens in particular parts of cities to seek permission from the



Modernise agriculture for a more prosperous India



Chandrajit Banerjee

Agriculture and allied sectors continue to anchor India's economic and social stability, sustaining livelihoods for nearly half the population while contributing significantly to food security, rural employment and export earnings. Over the past several decades, India has achieved remarkable success in enhancing food production and ensuring availability at scale. However, as the economy evolves and aspirations rise, the next phase of agricultural growth must move beyond volume-led expansion toward a model that emphasises productivity, competitiveness, value addition and resilience.

As part of its recommendations for the Union Budget 2026, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has championed for a comprehensive modernisation of India's agricultural ecosystem. This transformation must reduce policy distortions, strengthen value chains, and accelerate the adoption of technology-driven, market-linked systems. Unlocking this potential requires a coherent shift toward higher productivity, stronger markets, and more resilient livelihoods—supported by modern practices, diversified value chains and sustainable growth pathways.

A first and critical priority is addressing long-standing market distortions and strengthening agricultural supply chains. While Minimum Support Prices (MSP) procurement has played an important role in stabilising farmer incomes and ensuring food security, its concentration on a limited set of crops and geographies has weakened broader market signals, reduced crop diversification, and imposed restrictions on stock limits, price controls and ad hoc export requirements further amplify uncertainty, discouraging private investment in storage, processing and higher-value crops.

A calibrated transition toward market-linked pricing mechanisms is therefore essential. This shift should be accompanied by robust risk-mitigation instruments and transparent information systems. In this context, CII has proposed the creation of a National Market Intelligence Grid that provides real-time data on demand trends, price movements, weather risks and

export opportunities. Such a platform would enable farmers, Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), processors, and traders to make informed cropping and investment decisions, align production with demand, and reduce volatility across the value chain.

Equally urgent is the modernisation of post-harvest storage, processing and distribution infrastructure, where inefficiencies continue to erode farmer incomes and inflate consumer prices. Post-harvest losses remain unacceptably high across fruits, vegetables, and perishables, reflecting gaps in storage capacity, logistics and quality management. Mandatory registration of warehouses under the Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority (WDRA), wider adoption of electronic negotiable warehouse receipts (e-NWRs), and recognition of these receipts as negotiable securities can significantly improve transparency, standardisation and access to institutional credit. By enabling farmers to store produce and access finance, these reforms can reduce distress sales and strengthen price realisation.

Building on this, CII has recommended the creation of an "One India Food Grid"—an integrated national system connecting storage facilities, village-level collection centres, cold-chain infrastructure, logistics networks and digital tracking platforms. Modelled on the success of the electronic National Agriculture Market (e-NAM), such a grid would improve traceability, enhance food safety, reduce wastage, and stabilise prices by smoothing supply-demand mismatches across regions.

Secondly, Farmer Producer Organisations must be leveraged more effectively as engines of rural transformation. While the number of FPOs has increased significantly in recent years, many continue to face constraints related to scale, capital access, professional management and market integration. Strengthening FPOs with deeper financial and institutional support is therefore critical to making agriculture more inclusive and commercially viable.

Extending NABARD's ₹2,000 crore credit scheme to all food processing units—both within and outside the formal food parks—would allow FPO-linked enterprises to access long-term, affordable finance. In addition, a dedicated Support Fund to onboard FPOs onto platforms such as the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), eNAM, and commodity exchanges can dramatically expand their market reach. Integrating FPOs into formal value chains not only enhances farmer bargaining power but also improves quality, traceability, and compliance with domestic and export standards.

Thirdly, research and development must become a central driver of innovation across seeds, biotechnology, precision agriculture and post-harvest systems. As climate variability intensifies and resource constraints deepen, India's agricultural future will increasingly depend on science-led solutions. A predictable regulatory environment, strong intellectual property protection, and market-based pricing mechanisms are essential to attract sustained investment in agricultural R&D.

Encouraging innovation in climate-resilient seeds, biologicals, digital advisory platforms, and precision input application can significantly improve productivity while reducing environmental footprints. When coupled with large-scale farmer training and awareness programmes, these innovations can accelerate technology adoption, enhance incomes, and position India as a global hub for agri-innovation.

India must also strengthen its global competitiveness in agro-chemicals and seeds. Despite strong manufacturing capabilities, the agrochemical sector faces challenges from import dependence and low-cost dumping. A dedicated Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for agrochemicals, coupled with export incentives, can boost domestic manufacturing, promote scale efficiencies and enhance export competitiveness. Similarly, India's share in global seed exports—currently around one per cent—remains well below potential. A focused PLI scheme supporting seed research, advanced plant breeding, and export-oriented

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seed production can unlock new growth avenues while reinforcing India's leadership in tropical and climate-resilient varieties. Finally, India must significantly scale its presence in global agricultural trade. Rising global demand for organic, clean-label, and processed agri-products presents a major opportunity for Indian farmers and agri-enterprises. To capture this potential, income support mechanisms must be aligned with export competitiveness. A Price Deficiency Payment model linked to acreage under export-oriented crops—rather than price-based MSP interventions—can safeguard farmer incomes while allowing exports to remain price-competitive.

Strengthening village-level infrastructure for grading, testing, storage, and organic certification is equally important. Establishing a national Clean Label accreditation system would enhance credibility, traceability and consumer trust in Indian products. Moreover, access to pre- and post-shipment credit at internationally benchmarked interest rates is essential if Indian exporters are to compete effectively with global peers.

A structured modernisation push is also required in agri-processing, a sector that holds immense promise for value addition, employment generation, and export growth. CII has recommended the establishment of a dedicated Agri-Processing Financial Institution (SAPFI) to provide tailored, end-to-end financial solutions spanning sourcing, processing, logistics, branding, and exports. Such an institution would address long-standing financing gaps, particularly for MSME enterprises, and enable the sector to upgrade technology, improve quality standards, and integrate with global value chains.

Modeling the agricultural value chain—from markets and logistics to technology, processing and finance—has the potential to substantially lift productivity, resilience and farmer incomes. Given agriculture's central role in sustaining millions of livelihoods, higher growth generation in this sector will deliver strong multiplier effects across manufacturing, services and the rural economy. The Union Budget 2026 represents a critical opportunity to accelerate this transformation and build a more resilient, competitive, and future-ready agricultural ecosystem for India.

The writer is the director-general of the Confederation of Indian Industry

LETTERS

INDIA THRASH KIWIS

India made a mockery of the modest target of 154 set by New Zealand in the third T20I by blasting the runs in 10 overs, virtually reducing the game to a T10. Surya Kumar Yadav being among the runs is a good sign for India. With the kind of form the Indians are in, they are expected to perform well in next month's T20 World Cup. Barring a couple of injury concerns and lack of form of Sanju Samson, it seems the Indians are fully geared up for the global tournament.

S.Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

VOICE OF INDIA

Eulogised as the BBC's "voice of India", Mark Tully won the hearts and minds of millions in India and around the world. His was an easily recognizable face with a broad and disarming smile. He studied theology to become a clergyman but ended up becoming world-famous journalist. He adhered to the golden rule of journalism, "Facts are sacred, comment is free". His reporting was authoritative, sensitive and free from "sermonizing" and reflected India's vibrancy and diversity. His on-the-spot reporting of tumultuous events was relied on for its authenticity. His coverage of the Bhopal disaster, the siege of the Golden Temple, the assassination of Indira Gandhi won him popular acclaim. The famous journalist's expulsion from India soon after the imposition of Emergency in 1975 and his narrow escape from mob fury while reporting the demolition of the Babri mosque, described by him as "the gravest setback to secularism in 1991 themselves became news stories in their own right."

G. David Milton, Marthandacherry

RAIL HOPES GATHER STEAM

TN voters expect new projects and schemes as they raised in other states during election year. In fact, it would have been appropriate for PM Modi if he had announced something on this in the Madurai meeting. Since the opposition party is ruling the state currently, he might have avoided saying anything. The TN voters expect lot of schemes without fail in the ensuing Union budget.

R.Ganesan, Chennai

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Aakar Patel

Rajasthan follows Gujarat's lead in creating ghettos, segregating cities

After this week the Rajasthan government is all set to pass a segregation law modelled after one in Gujarat. It is unlikely that most Indians will come to know of its existence because it is unlikely that the media will report it. Let us look at what it is intended to achieve.

Poor people who are forced to live cluttered together is what we know as a slum. An ethnic group forcibly relegated to certain neighbourhoods is a ghetto. The former really do not have the means to go anywhere else. The latter have no choice even if they do have the means. Apartheid means separate-ness and refers to the policy of South Africa of forcing the black Africans into ghettos. They could only live in fixed spaces by law.

When segregation in the United States was legally ended in the 1960s, the government passed laws that sought to integrate the races, like the Fair Housing Act. It prevented discrimination in the buying and selling of properties, which was keeping the races separate. All across Gujarat, in all major cities and in several towns, the BJP government has done the opposite. Muslims are deliberately forced into ghettos through a law called the Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provision for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act. The law requires citizens in particular parts of cities to seek permission from the

government before selling their property or changing their tenant and filters them by religion. The application must list the name of the buyer and the seller and includes an affidavit that the sale has been without coercion and at market price.

The law was passed initially by the Congress, and in 2009, the Narendra Modi government in the state amended the legislation act to give discretionary powers to the collector to hold an inquiry and to take possession of property under the law. In July 2019, another change was introduced. Previously, property sellers had to apply for permission to transfer their property and register their consent on affidavit. Now, it would not matter even if the sale was with free consent and the fair value was paid to the owner. The collector could stop a sale of property if he felt in his discretion that there was any sort of "disturbance in the demographic equilibrium" or "improper clustering of persons of a community" or the "likelihood of polarisation," if the transfer took place.

The collector could reject an application for the legal transfer of a property after making an assessment on these grounds. The punishment for transferring property without clearance was raised to six years in jail (it was six months when the law was first introduced). The law now also allowed the state government to form a "Monitoring and Advisory

Committee" to keep a check on the demographic structure in neighbourhoods. This committee would advise the collectors on whether or not the sales could be permitted. This law is currently in force in large parts of the state's three largest cities—Jaipur, Udaipur and Bikaner. There are also the places where Gujarat's Muslims are concentrated, effectively ghettoising them permanently with "improper clustering" would be targeted. The transfer of immovable properties in these areas without permission of the government would be void.

Like the other laws persecuting minorities, this one is also given a benign name—the Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provisions for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Bill, 2026.

Its effects will of course be the same as we have seen in Gujarat. It criminalises social and commercial intercourse between communities, in much the same way as Nazi Germany did. Any violation of the Rajasthan law's provisions are non-bailable and

cognisable, and punishable with imprisonment of up to five years and a fine. You could go to jail for renting a property. The Congress in the state opposes the passing of the law, but it lacks the numbers and will not be able to stop it. Its state chief said: "Demographic imbalance is not a legal term. There is no mention of the basis on which an area will be declared disturbed. The BJP wants to remain in power by following the Gujarat model."

This is true. India under Narendra Modi has followed out the Constitution's secularism through a slew of laws that have found no resistance. The courts have looked away, the Opposition is politically too weak and the media is complicit. Criminalisation of the possession of best was introduced in 2015, starting with Maharashtra and Haryana. Criminalisation of inter-faith marriage came in 2018, starting with Uttarakhand. Criminalisation of Muslim divorce came in 2018, as did their specific exclusion from the Citizenship Amendment Act. The Rajasthan law carries this progression forward. Step by step, law after law, we have entered New India, a majoritarian state that has shed its carapace of constitutional secularism. Something ugly, angry and dangerous has emerged.

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{ OUR TAKE }

Of the people, for the people

Padma awards do have political undertones, but they are also about honouring service to the nation

Like every prestigious State honour anywhere in the world, the Padma awards have always had a political angle and a national facet—as they did this year. Three of the five laureates in the Padma Vibhushan category, India's second-highest civilian honour, hailed from Kerala, a state that goes to the polls this summer and where the BJP has never gained more than a toe-hold. Tamil Nadu, another state that votes this summer, netted 13 awards in all; and West Bengal, which is expected to see a fierce contest, got 11. Maharashtra, which delivered a blockbuster victory to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), received 15. Many of the people who featured on the list hailed from communities and regions that might play a crucial role in the upcoming polls. The awards list attempted to cross the political spectrum with laureates for a founding leader of the CPM and former Kerala CM VS Achuthanandan and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha patriarch Shibu Soren. The families of both leaders have welcomed the awards, marking an interesting turn in Opposition politics, and possibly allowing a senior Communist leader to be felicitated for the first time in decades. To be sure, the list also included a number of people who were ideologically aligned to the ruling dispensation—as they have over the decades.

But beyond the political messaging, the awards are also important for they honour ordinary Indians who have made extraordinary, if somewhat little-known, contributions to public life. This year, this cohort of people included a neonatologist who established Asia's first human milk bank, a former railway guard who became a distinguished Dalit author, a guardian of Bundelkhand martial folk traditions, a Karbi folk singer, a renowned painter who revitalised a 3,000-year-old art form, and a former bus conductor who set up India's largest free personal library, among others. The prestige of these awards is uplifted by the toil and zeal of these everyday Indians, many of whom have worked tirelessly for decades, struggling against the vicissitudes of both life and systemic discrimination. They epitomise the dedication of the ordinary Indian whose commitment to democratic values has not just built the Republic but ensured that it has endured every challenge thrown its way over the past seven decades. Away from politics, the Padma's true legacy resides in their lives.

In China, the party takes on the army

China's senior-most general, second in the pecking order only to President Xi Jinping, has become the subject of an investigation as the country's most powerful leader continues his purge of military officials suspected of graft or disloyalty. A statement from China's defence ministry only said that General Zhang Youxia, a vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) that controls the armed forces—and a childhood friend of Xi—was being investigated for "grave violations" of discipline and the law. Leaking to the media suggest Zhang is accused of sharing technical information on China's nuclear weapons programme with the US, building his circle of influence within the CMC, and accepting bribes for official acts such as promotions. Xi's current purge amounts to one of the biggest changes in the Chinese military's leadership since the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989. This points to Xi's assertion of his will over the military to consolidate his own power, and his willingness to sacrifice even a confidant he himself elevated to a high position. It is an open secret that a Chinese leader who controls the People's Liberation Army (PLA) also has the final say in the Communist Party of China.

The opacity surrounding the PLA—from its funding to its operations and massive build-up of capabilities over the past decade—and the decision-making by its leadership means that the implications of the development will be closely studied in countries such as India. Last year, the leadership cleared a 7.2% hike in defence spending, taking China's official defence budget to almost \$246 billion. India continues to harbour serious concerns about the lack of progress in de-escalation along the Line of Actual Control. The latest developments will hardly reduce these worries, even though Xi, in his greeting to India on its 77th Republic Day, referred to relations between Beijing and New Delhi as the "dragon and the elephant doing tango" and called for strong regional partnerships between "good neighbours, friends and partners".

{ SIMPLY ECONOMICS }

Pramit Bhattacharya



The Economic Survey needs to be reimaged

The Survey has to be made more useful for citizens, firms, investors, and public servants. It also must be made more participatory to encourage inputs from academic researchers and policy practitioners

In the early years of India's independence, the country's most important policy documents were the five-year development plans published by the Planning Commission. As the Commission lost clout, and the finance ministry gained in importance, the ministry's pre-budget Economic Survey began garnering more and more eyeballs.

Over the years, the Survey has come up with several useful policy ideas and provocations, reshaping public discourse on key economic issues. For instance, the 2023-24 Economic Survey questioned the efficacy of trade and investment restrictions on China at a time when Sino-Indian relations were still frosty. The Survey argued that it might be better for India to let China firms manufac-

ture in the country rather than import manufactured goods from China. The commerce ministry initially dismissed the idea, before accepting the need for a rethink.

In earlier years, the Survey helped draw attention to India's leaky welfare systems, arguing for the need to shift to direct cash transfers. The idea was extremely controversial when it was first aired (in the Economic Surveys of 2009-10 and 2010-11). But direct cash transfers—to farmers, women, and other intended beneficiaries—have become part of India's conventional policy toolkit since then. All political parties—cutting across regional and ideological divides—have warmed up to the once-heretical idea. If anything, cash transfers are among the most overused policy tools now.

At its best, the Survey can serve up innovative policy ideas, and indicate areas where course-correction is required. But for every policy idea that has been debated and acted upon, the Survey contains at least ten others that are forgotten the day after they are aired. Most of the tables and charts presented in the Survey don't have any novel insight. Worse, policy assessments presented in the Survey sometimes read like policy advertisements.

How could the Survey be made more useful for citizens, firms, investors, and public servants?

First, make it count. The Survey should provide analysis that is not easily available elsewhere. For instance, the Survey could outline the various scenarios that may unfold globally over the course of the next fiscal year, and the likely policy responses that different ministries and regulatory agencies may consider in each of those scenarios.

Such scenario analysis would help small businesses draw up their own contingency plans for the coming months. When the external environment changes, and government policy shifts gears, they will be prepared.

The finance ministry could work with the National Statistical Office (NSO) to develop short-run and medium-run forecasts using a range of alternative assumptions, and use those estimates for scenario planning. These estimates can then be updated on the finance ministry's website every quarter. The Survey was conceived in the analogue era. It need not remain in that era anymore.

Most Indian businesses can't afford to hire their own economic and geopolitical advisors. By providing timely guidance on key economic questions, the Survey team can help fill that gap.

Second, keep it short. Most decision-makers don't have the time to read a lengthy yearbook on the Indian economy. A concise docu-



The Economic Survey should provide analysis that is not easily available elsewhere.

ment focused on critical economic challenges is likely to be more valuable for them. A short executive summary followed by two to three chapters would help improve the Survey's insight-to-text ratio. One of those chapters should be dedicated to the probable macroeconomic scenarios and likely policy responses.

Third, make it participatory. The Survey team could seek inputs on the most pressing problems faced by different economic ministries and state governments, and organise a policy hackathon on those subjects. Those who are able to provide the most compelling policy proposals on those subjects should be awarded short-term grants to prepare policy notes.

The hackathon should be open to both academic researchers and policy practitioners. The only restriction worth considering is that of age limits—to encourage young people to contribute to the policymaking process. Having an open contest would mean that the final selections are taken seriously.

The top policy notes could then be published online, and the Survey could feature some of the key policy recommendations from them. The

Survey would be able to highlight interesting policy ideas from different parts of the country, without necessarily endorsing any of them. Those interested in the details could download the policy papers from the ministry's website.

India is too complex an economy to be governed by a few wise men and women. And most policymakers tend to seek outside help in an ad hoc manner. A well-designed policy hackathon could provide a structured platform for seeking inputs from academics and policy researchers.

If policymakers know that those proposing new policy solutions do not represent vested interests, and that they have been selected through a competitive process, they are more likely to consider the policy solutions favourably. Even if some of the policy solutions are not entirely feasible today, they could still be useful tomorrow. And a young hackathon winner today might become a senior policymaker in the years to come.

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When liberty is no more a constitutional guarantee

Sonam Wangchuk's continued detention since September 26, 2025, is a matter of serious concern. The trajectory of the *habeas corpus* case filed by his wife, Gitanjali Angmo, before the Supreme Court poses several significant questions that reveal the nature of the legal process in India, touching on personal liberty. The inadequacy of resorting to conventional legal tools alone while criticising such judicial events leads to an incomplete understanding of the process. A discourse over the text of the judgments or orders, separating it from their political context, turns deceptive, as it assumes that legal processes are intrinsically neutral and unconnected with the contemporaneity of politics.

The recent pronouncement of the Supreme Court in *Gulfisha Fatima v. State* which denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, while granting it to five other petitioners, is a case in point that could be compared and contrasted. Many courses adopted by the top court in these cases, both in theory and in practice, remain antithetical to the traditional understanding of the principles of law and their working. This deviation would call for a discourse on the court's adjudicative behaviour during critical times, rather than on the mere content of the judgments.

Khalid and Imam were arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the provisions of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code and other statutes. They sought bail after incarceration for about five-and-a-half years. In the case of Wangchuk, by asking for a writ of *habeas corpus* under Article 32 of the Constitution, his wife demanded the release of the renowned climate activist. Beyond the glaring distinction in the legal processes and technicalities, certain commonalities exist in these cases. In both cases, there has been a fragile narrative about the alleged complicity of the activists who dared to challenge the regime at the Centre. In both, the court's role resulted not in ensuring individual liberty, but only in prolonging incarceration. The very process that was supposed to expedite the release of the petitioners resulted in delaying it or even denying it.

In the Khalid-Imam bail judgment, the court's expansive interpretation of section 15 of the UAPA, defining a terrorist act, ultimately meant that even a roadblock amidst the protest against the Centre's divisive policies would amount to an act of terrorism. The two-judge bench in *Gulfisha Fatima*, essentially overruled the three-judge bench judgment in *Union of India v. K.A. Najeeb* (2022), which said that long incarceration and the resultant violation of fundamental rights could be a ground to grant bail even under UAPA. The two-judge bench did not even refer to the earlier decision in *Sheikh Javed Iqbal v. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2024) that said that the prosecution cannot even oppose the bail plea when the trial is prolonged.

THE GLOBAL CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY MANIFESTS THROUGH THE PROCESS OF LAW AS WELL, WHICH IRONICALLY NEGATES THE VERY IDEA OF THE RULE OF LAW

More astonishingly, the court has, in *Gulfisha Fatima*, practically forbidden Khalid and Imam from filing a fresh application for bail for another year. This judicial moratorium happened in the appeals that they filed. An outcome which the applicants in a criminal appeal neither sought nor expected is patently unfair. This is particularly so when the Supreme Court has repeatedly underlined the right of the accused to file repeated bail pleas when there are changes in the circumstances. (See, for example, *Pravindar Singh v. State of Punjab* (2003) and *Karmal v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (2025)).

The trajectory of the Sonam Wangchuk case also exposes a series of improbabilities. Despite the petitioner showing the court that Wangchuk's detention was legally vitiated, the Centre could postpone the adjudication of the *habeas corpus* writ, thereby meaning that Wangchuk's detention continued for more than 120 days. The case was taken to the

Supreme Court immediately after his arrest. The *habeas corpus* petition is intended for the quick production and release of the detainee. The grounds of challenge included non-supply of the videos to Wangchuk, based on which the authority resorted to his "preventive detention". Clear violation of Articles 21(a) and 22(2) of the Constitution, mandating intimation about the grounds of arrest with full particulars and the videos was pointed out. An opportunity to make a representation against the order of detention to the Centre was pleaded. It was shown that many materials relied on by the authorities included first information reports against unknown persons and other outdated documents. It was contended that the district magistrate, while ordering his detention, did not issue any independent order reflecting the application of mind. Pertinently, a video of Wangchuk's speech calling for peace was played in court.

Despite the apparent clarity in the contentions for release of the climate activist whose track record and social commitment are demonstrated in the public domain, the Supreme Court has been indecisive so far and has generously granted adjournments to the Centre, even an adjudication on the points indicated above, and other related issues, would need only a few days, if not hours. Yet, the process took an incredibly long route.

In *Anatomy of the State* (1974), the liberal thinker Murray Rothbard lamented that "of all the numerous forms that governments have taken over the centuries, of all the concepts and institutions that have been tried, none has succeeded in keeping the State in check". Rothbard talks about the coercive, parasitic, and predatory nature of the State that takes in the legal system within its structure. In *The Politics of the Judiciary* (1977), JAG Griffith questioned the idea of judicial neutrality. Constitutions and the judiciary across the globe have tried to overcome this pessimism of the 1970s, but without success when it comes to political prisoners. The global crisis of democracy manifests through the process of law as well, which ironically negates the very idea of the rule of law. Like certain draconian statutes, judicial processes also create a chilling effect on the citizens' freedom.

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Kaleswaram Raj

{ URSULA VON DER LEYEN | PRESIDENT, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

A successful India makes the world more stable, prosperous and secure. And we all benefit

Extending greetings on the 77th Republic Day of India



Reporting India for the world and Bharat

I was often said that once upon a time, people across vast swathes of rural India did not believe the news of election results until they heard it from Mark Tully on BBC Radio. The legendary broadcaster and journalist died in New Delhi a day before India's 77th Republic Day at the age of 90, having covered most of the country's seminal events in the decades before. Generations of Indians held him in great respect, even reverence, for his authentic journalism, the reports delivered on BBC radio in his calm, reassuring voice and his unwavering commitment to deliver the news as it was. No screaming and screaming, hyperbole or showmanship, his was journalism as it should be, direct, in-depth and grounded in facts. During his storied career, Sir William Mark Tully, often called Tully saab by villagers, covered a considerable part of modern India's history.

His top-drawer coverage of the Bhopal gas tragedy, Operation Blue Star, the shameful destruction of the Babri Masjid, the horrific riots that followed and before that the Emergency and its excesses, showed him for the extraordinary journalist that he was. For his Emergency coverage, he was expelled from India for a while.

Tully was born in Calcutta in 1935 during the Raj, and it was his interest in local languages that led to his fluency in Hindi, the envy of other foreign correspondents in Delhi. Tully studied history and theology at Cambridge and was on his way to join the clergy. His change of heart was to be journalism's great gain. In 1965, he came to India as an administrative assistant at the BBC, and there was no looking back for him.

Having spent the greater part of his life in India, after he retired from active reporting he was nowhere more happy than being in the India International Centre or the Delhi Gymkhana discussing the evils of caste and communalism, on which he had very strong views that he was only too willing to express. These views came from his travels across India to remote villages and hamlets by local transport, a true newsman of the masses.

For 20 years, Tully headed the Delhi bureau of the BBC in the golden era of that institution, from where he covered not just developments in India but in the neighbourhood—the creation of Bangladesh, the occupation of Afghanistan, the upheavals in Pakistan, the civil war in Sri Lanka and many more. He had a deep understanding of the Indian ethos and was empathetic to the peo-

ple he spoke to. His journalism was informed by the vast array of people he interacted with on the ground. He wrote several books on India, the most famous perhaps being *No Full Stops in India* (1988). Other works include *The Heart of India* (1995), *India in Slow Motion* (2002, co-authored with Gillian Wright) and *The Road Ahead* (2011). Sharp and succinct, his literary output made him a favourite at seminars and discussions in the Capital and outside and at the literary festivals which have now sprung up. Though sought after by the powerful in the Capital's elite circles, he remained untouched by the adulation that was often heaped on him. He neither sought nor accepted any favours from the powers that be, despite living in the courtier-like culture of Delhi for so many years.

Much as he was respected in India, his relationship with the BBC began to waver thin, and he eventually left the organisation in the early nineties. He was unhappy with what he regarded as too many compromises made by the BBC, and the BBC found his candour and criticism uncomfortable.

However, he did not leave India and stayed fully engaged in Indian politics, culture, literature and art, among other things, along with his partner Gillian Wright, herself a formidable scholar and fluent Urdu speaker. There was no dearth of awards for Tully, among them a knighthood from Britain, the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Shri from India, his adopted homeland. He was a valued columnist for this newspaper, his lucid raconteur-style prose winning him a vast following. He enriched our pages on Sunday with his easy, freewheeling way of writing, and we had all hoped that he would recover from his bout of ill-health and restart his remarkable contributions to our pages again. That was not to be.

He wore his immense achievements lightly, was respectful but never subservient to authority, was generous with his time and knowledge to younger journalists and students and was famous for his sparkling wit and humour. A voracious and eclectic reader, Tully once spoke to me about his admiration for the works of Thomas More, the theologian-monk author, it was Merton who said, "We must make the choices that enable us to fulfil the deepest capacities of our real selves." Tully made those choices, and we are all the richer for it.

The views expressed are personal



March of the Republic

While celebrating achievements, the government must not ignore challenges

President Droupadi Murmu reflected on India's democratic and development journey on the eve of India's 77th Republic Day. Her emphasis was rightly on the self-reliance of the country in all fields and India's role as a messenger of peace and stability in a world that is increasingly fractious. Ms. Murmu highlighted recent national achievements and touched upon political and cultural themes that are currently the priorities of the Centre. She noted that the national song, Vande Mataram, was a "lyrical national prayer" even as the country celebrates the 150th anniversary of its composition, and also paid tribute to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, whose 150th birth anniversary was celebrated recently, for his role in unifying the nation. The commander-in-chief also hailed the success of Operation Sindoor, which involved precision strikes against terror infrastructure, and credited it to India's growing self-reliance in defence. The President said India's progress towards becoming the third largest global economy was well on track, and commended economic reforms such as the GST and the new Labour Codes. She noted the great strides achieved by the country's women in fields ranging from agriculture to space, and their critical role as voters. Farmers, sanitation workers, teachers, scientists, and healthcare professionals also found special mention in the President's speech.

The President invoked the idea of constitutional nationalism. Republic Day celebrations are an annual occasion to revisit the ideals of the Constitution and to review its progress in principle and practice. Cataloguing the achievements of the country is motivating, but also essential on such occasions is self-reflection. Economic growth or military prowess are not the sole markers of progress for any nation. Singing paeans to the Constitution is one thing, but delivering on its principles by protecting the rights of citizens and discharging the duties of the state is quite another. The state in its self-congratulatory posture, as reflected in the President's speech, must not ignore the many struggles of the citizenry that persist even in the eighth decade of the Republic. Civilisational pride cannot be a ruse to overshadow the material questions of the present. Republic Day celebrates the ideals of the Constitution. Secularism, the weakening of the federal character of the Republic, and corruption should not be allowed to undermine those ideals.

Mind the time

India needs public-funded geriatric care to take care of its elderly

While India is often celebrated for its demographic dividend, its States are undergoing a significant but uneven demographic transition. According to a new RBI report, Kerala and Tamil Nadu will be "ageing States" by 2036 because their elderly populations will exceed 22% and 20%, respectively. On the other hand, the working age populations of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand will continue to rise beyond 2031. Karnataka and Maharashtra occupy the middle ground, balancing growth with the onset of ageing pressure. In response, the RBI has advised ageing States to "rationalise" their subsidies to afford rising pension costs and youthful States to "invest heavily in human capital". But how mindful is the RBI's fiscal advice of the political undertones? Southern States, having successfully tamed population growth, face a double whammy: lower Central tax devolution because population weightage in Finance Commission formulae favours the populous northern States plus lower parliamentary representation due to the upcoming delimitation exercise. On the other hand, while the youthful States have a "window of opportunity" to boost growth using a larger workforce, the share of their spending on education has stagnated or declined, and the question of employability persists. These people will also enter the workforce at a time of manufacturing automation and AI in industry, so the RBI's suggestion to "boost labour-intensive sectors" may leave these States vulnerable to the possibility of ageing before they get rich.

Research has shown that ageing in India disproportionately affects women, who often live longer but with fewer financial assets. The RBI's focus on "workforce policy" overlooks the majority of elderly women who were never in the formal workforce and thus have no pension. The RBI model also assumes some level of family support, but with migration and nuclear families becoming the norm, the informal safety net is collapsing. Ultimately, the demographic transition cannot be managed by fiscal changes alone. First, a new industrial policy is needed to create jobs en masse in new sectors such as green energy and the care economy. Second, the youthful States must build healthcare and pension services now to avoid fiscal shocks if and when the replacement fertility rate drops. Third, for most of India's elderly, the future looks less like "graceful ageing" and more like financial dependency, unless the state drastically expands social pensions; but this directly contradicts the RBI's call for fiscal consolidation. Finally, without a massive expansion of public geriatric care, the "graceful ageing" that the report envisions will be available only to the wealthy.

Playing hide and seek on employment guarantee

The oddly named Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act (VB - G RAM G Act) has attracted a torrent of criticisms in recent weeks. A few commentators have defended it. Most of them are associated with the Central government. Still, their arguments are worth considering.

Union Minister for Rural Development Shivraj Singh Chouhan took the lead with two articles in national dailies. He did a great service to the public by presenting the case for the VB - G RAM G Act on behalf of the Central government. Alas, the case is not impressive. Mr. Chouhan claimed that the VB - G RAM G Act provides the same work guarantee as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005, with an enhanced entitlement of 125 days per household per year instead of 100 days. However, as others have already pointed out, this claim overlooks the "switch-off" provision embedded in Section 5(1) of the Act, which states that the employment guarantee applies "in such rural area in the State as may be notified by the Central government". This discretion defeats the purpose of an employment guarantee. It is like providing a work guarantee without a guarantee that the guarantee applies.

Conditional on the guarantee being in place, the VB - G RAM G Act does extend it for 125 days. But this could have been done under MGNREGA, without even requiring an amendment of the Act. It is no justification whatsoever for the VB - G RAM G Act. Indeed, a few States are already guaranteeing 125 days under MGNREGA.

The disemployment saga

Amplifying the claim that the VB - G RAM G Act is an expansion rather than a restriction of MGNREGA, Mr. Chouhan played up the removal, in the VB - G RAM G Act, of earlier "disemployment provisions". In the absence of any explanation, most readers must have wondered what this is about. Since the same point was made by other champions of VB - G RAM G, it is worth clarifying.

When MGNREGA was drafted, a mild concern arose about the possibility of frivolous work applications - that is, applications from people who have no intention to work. Some of them, for instance, might do this in the hope of getting the unemployment allowance instead of a work offer. By way of protection against frivolous applications, a provision was inserted to the effect that if someone turns down a work offer after applying, then they will lose eligibility to the unemployment allowance for a period of three months. This is a weak protection against frivolous work applications, but it does not do any harm. For some reason, this clause was called "Disentitlement to receive unemployment allowance in certain circumstances".



Jean Drèze

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As it turns out, frivolous work applications are an imaginary problem. This problem has never arisen in a serious way in the last 20 years. The disentitlement clause has never been used, and indeed it is quite useless (unlike the separate provision stating that no unemployment allowance is due to someone who turns down a work offer after applying). The fact that the VB - G RAM G Act omits this provision is neither here nor there. Mr. Chouhan's claim that the VB - G RAM G Act removes "disentitlement provisions" that had the effect of denying workers their due" is little more than hot air.

Normative funding

Turning to better arguments, one of VB - G RAM G's main selling points is the "shift to normative funding as opposed to an archaic demand-driven approach", as Dr. Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Group Chief Economic Advisor at State Bank of India, puts it. Here, the pretence that VB - G RAM G preserves the principle of employment guarantee is quietly abandoned. Indeed, if there is an employment guarantee, then funding must be "demand-driven". Instead, the assumption here is that most States will not spend beyond the "normative allocations" determined by the Centre. That, indeed, is a sensible assumption. The normative allocations are likely to become de facto budget caps, as the critics of VB - G RAM G have argued from the word go.

The advocates of "normative funding" make a virtue of these budget caps. They claim, in particular, that normative funding will help to ensure a more equitable distribution of expenditure across States. This concern arises from an alleged imbalance of MGNREGA expenditure in favour of better-off States. As a matter of fact, there is no statistical correlation, across States, between MGNREGA employment per rural household and baseline poverty rates or per capita expenditure. High levels of per household MGNREGA employment can be found in poor States (for example, Chhattisgarh) as well as in relatively well-off States (for example, Tamil Nadu), just as low levels of employment can be found in poor as well as better-off States (for example, Bihar and Gujarat, respectively).

Of course, one might still wish for a strong positive correlation across States between baseline poverty and MGNREGA employment. It would certainly be useful if poor States such as Bihar and Jharkhand accounted for a larger share of MGNREGA employment and expenditure. But the imposition of budget caps and cost-sharing is hardly going to help them. A much better approach would be to raise MGNREGA wage rates in the poorer States. That is long overdue.

Employment guarantee is a bold idea that holds much promise not only for India but for the world. There is nothing surprising in the fact that

some of India's better-governed States are making more effective use of it than the rest. Many social programmes in India, from school meals to maternity benefits, began in south India and were extended to the whole country in due course. If MGNREGA is also doing better in south India for the time being, there is no reason to press the panic button and slap budget caps. After all, the MGNREGA budget is not very large - barely 0.25% of India's GDP as things stand.

Stray arguments

Another common pitch for VB - G RAM G is that this new Act will eliminate corruption. How so? The provisions for transparency, social audits and so on are much the same as in MGNREGA. The main innovation is relentless insistence, within the Act, on the use of advanced digital technology. But digital technologies are already being used with abandon in MGNREGA. Further, these technologies have a mixed record, to put it mildly. Some have undermined workers' rights and sapped their interest in MGNREGA, often fuelling corruption in the process. When workers are fed up with technical glitches (like their wages being diverted to Airtel wallets, as happened in 2017), it is tempting for them to stop working by the rules and to cooperate instead with a corrupt middleman who uses their job cards and bank accounts to siphon off MGNREGA funds in exchange for a share of the lot. Instead of learning from these failures, the VB - G RAM G Act perpetuates blind faith in digital technology.

I have tried to be generous to the advocates of the VB - G RAM G Act by focusing on their serious arguments. Some of them, however, also indulge in platitudes and fallacies. For instance, they try to credit the VB - G RAM G Act for provisions that are actually copy-pasted or paraphrased from MGNREGA. To illustrate, consider this statement of Tuhin Sinha, national spokesperson for the Bharatiya Janata Party: "Delayed wages were among the most corrosive failures of MGNREGA, undermining trust in the system. VB - G RAM G addresses this head-on by mandating weekly wage payments, with an outer limit of a fortnight." Surely, he knows that this "head-on" provision is copied from MGNREGA? Similarly, when Mr. Chouhan claims that Section 20 of the VB - G RAM G Act "strengthens social audits", he must know that it is more or less identical to Section 17 of MGNREGA.

In short, there is little substance in recent arguments for the replacement of MGNREGA with the VB - G RAM G Act. The main purpose of the new Act seems to be to enable the Modi government to run the show and steal the credit, as happened when the National Food Security Act was repackaged as a bunch of Prime Minister's schemes. Employment guarantee and workers' rights are on the back seat.

India's biggest climate gap could be language

If there is one serious gap in science communication, it is the language and communication based on clearly understandable language that people can relate to and contextualise, science will always be either poorly understood or misunderstood.

The meaning of loss and damage

At recent United Nations climate conferences, few phrases have been repeated as often as 'Loss and Damage'. It has been invoked at negotiations, stitched into drafts, and debated in press briefings as if its meaning were universally understood. But Loss and Damage is not simply a diplomatic vocabulary; it refers to climate impacts that communities cannot adapt to: the destruction of crops and homes, but also the loss of identity, land, traditions, ecosystems, and the quiet erosion of cultural memory. It is meant to capture not just what is broken, but what can never be restored. And yet, somewhere between the global negotiation table and the governance realities on the ground, the meaning collapses.

In India, the language shifts sharply as it moves downstream. Loss becomes *naksan aakhan* - an assessment to be filled after a disaster. Damage becomes *haani purti* - compensation calculated through established norms. The broader crisis becomes *apda*, *apda rahat*, or *apda prabandhan* - administrative categories shaped by decades of disaster response, not by the complex realities of climate change.

So, when global actors speak of 'Loss and Damage finance', it is often understood locally as a little more than post-disaster relief - a far narrower understanding than the international framing, which also encompasses slow-onset impacts, biodiversity loss, the disappearance of ancestral lands, and the erosion of social fabric.

The fuller spectrum of irreversible climate loss collapses into what can be counted,



Flavia Lopes

Programme Officer, UNEP India. Views are personal



Balakrishna Pisupati

Head, UNEP India. Views are personal

compensated, and closed. This is not a minor semantic problem; it is a governance gap. When climate language narrows, so do the policy responses it enables - even the most ambitious global commitments risk becoming abstractions.

Over the past decade, India's climate science has advanced rapidly. We now have district-level heat projections, urban flood models, crop yield simulations, and attribution studies capable of tracing the fingerprints of climate change on specific extreme events. Yet, this capacity has not been matched by investment to make the science usable for decision-makers and communities. The result is a paradox: we have more data than ever, but less clarity on where it matters most.

A district magistrate may receive a vulnerability assessment packed with indices and statistical language, but struggle to translate it into tomorrow's decisions. Communities, meanwhile, also encounter climate messaging through fragmented channels, each using different vocabulary and urgency. Too often, climate communication assumes that more information leads to better decisions. But this approach rarely holds. People don't act simply because they know more; they act when information feels relevant, doable, and aligned with their lived reality.

This is why communication is not a "soft" add-on to climate policy but a core enabler of delivery. Heat advisories that tell people to "stay indoors between 12 and 3 p.m." assume the privilege of being able to stop work. Flood warnings delivered by SMS assume literacy and smartphone access. Meanwhile, risk dashboards proliferate across States and cities, often technically impressive yet underused because they are too complex and not designed around how real decisions are made under pressure.

When climate information is clear, trusted, and grounded in everyday realities, the entire climate ecosystem shifts: policy becomes sharper,

communities respond faster, and investments flow towards solutions that work. For instance, Odisha's cyclone preparedness model shows that evacuation success does not come from technology alone. It comes from years of building public confidence in the credibility of alerts issued by the state. Trust becomes a form of infrastructure as critical as shelters or sensors.

Clear communication can similarly strengthen heat preparedness, guide flood response, and help governments justify climate investments by translating risk into everyday consequences: school closures, labour shortages, hospital admissions, labour productivity, and crop loss.

What climate communication must deliver

Effective communication begins with us. It turns projections into decisions: not just 'heat index rise', but what it means for school timings, outdoor work, and public health preparedness; not just 'flood return intervals', but how flooding will affect commute routes, household safety, and service delivery in specific neighbourhoods. And it works best when co-created with frontline workers, panchayat leaders, farmers, fisherfolk, teachers, and local journalists.

If we are serious about turning climate science into climate action, it needs a communication framework as intentional as its forecasting systems and policy mechanisms. That means simplifying climate information, localising it for real contexts and languages, humanising science through lived realities, institutionalising communication capacity within government systems, and strengthening media partnerships so risk narratives are understood, trusted, and acted upon.

When communication fails, science stays locked in reports, policies don't translate into practice, and preparedness remains uneven; and when it succeeds, resilience becomes a shared social and political possibility.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Farewell, Tully

Sir William Mark Tully arrived in India as a young BBC reporter and chose to remain here, immersing himself as a careful listener rather than as a passing witness ("Veteran journalist and author Mark Tully passes away at 90", Jan. 27). Over decades, he reported on India's most turbulent chapters - the 1971

Bangladesh war, the Emergency, Operation Blue Star, the assassinations of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, and the Babri Masjid demolition. He engaged with villagers, clergy, politicians, sceptics, and believers, grasping India's silences and contradictions. Through works such as 'No Full Stops in India' and 'India in Slow Motion', he challenged

Western stereotypes, writing with empathy, balance and restraint. His death marks the loss of a rare chronicler who explained India with depth, dignity, and insight.
R.S. Narula
Patiala

Recognised after death

Actor Dharmendra lived till the age of 89. Former Chief

Minister of Kerala V.S. Achuthanandan lived for 101 years ("Nation honours 131 personalities with Padma awards", Jan. 27).

Did it not occur to this government or any of the previous governments to honour them during their lifetime with the Padma

Vibhashan?
T. S. Sanath Kumar
Thrissur



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Corrections & Clarifications

In the 'Ground Zero' report, "Trial by social media" (January 24, 2026), the reference to Section 109 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita was incorrect. It should have been Section 108 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, relating to abetment to suicide.

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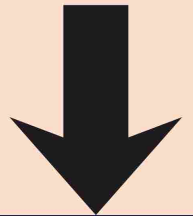
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Cybercrime and a global governance crisis

Late last year, the United Nations (UN) convened a signing ceremony for the seminal new Convention against Cybercrime, the only multilateral criminal justice instrument to be negotiated in over two decades. India was among the many large member states that didn't sign the convention, along with the United States, Japan and Canada, indicating fractures in the global governance of cyberspace. The text adopted by the General Assembly in December 2024 received support from 72 countries.

Conceived through a resolution proposed by Russia in 2017, the Convention represents the culmination of negotiations among the UN members, with inputs from civil society experts and private sector actors. It took eight formal sessions and five inter-session consultations for the UN to generate some consensus. This saga underlines challenges in global governance which implicate India. An uncertain global order, coupled with a widening gulf between international legal principles and their practice, may lead to a polycentricism that the country is not fully equipped to handle.

Uncertain allegiances

Russia and China collaborated to bring the UN Convention to fruition. Theirs was a united front to reshape the status quo of global cyber governance frameworks, which so far hinged on the 2001 Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, a European effort with 76 parties, not involving either Russia or China. The Budapest Convention limits accession to only invited states and is therefore inherently non-inclusive, and India fittingly stayed out of it.

Conversely, the UN Convention is open to all, but still saw a lot of division. The Europeans signed it because it borrows definitions and even substantive procedure from their Budapest Convention. It



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The emerging global order

relegates multilateralism to high-level principles, and depends on smaller groups for consensus on operating clauses

would seem incongruent for them not to join. A July 2025 EU Council document justified this decision as a means to ensure that it has a "meaningful voice early in the implementation" of the new framework.

The Americans were sceptical of the Sino-Russian effort. Several of their civil society groups also warned that the Convention's broad definition of serious crimes, could enable prosecution of journalists, activists, or political opponents of authoritarian leaders.

India's reluctance to sign perhaps represents a different calculus. Unlike in the case of the Budapest Convention, New Delhi actively engaged in the negotiations of the UN Convention. But its proposals, such as those aimed at retaining greater institutional control over its citizens' data, were not retained. The country has not got its way in global rulemaking over the last two decades, eroding gains made in the early days of the climate change conventions where it united a group of 77 developing countries.

Russia and China perhaps see a weakened UN as worthy platform to legitimise an otherwise cynical worldview, the Europeans and other receding powers clinging on to the high-table, a revivalist U.S. doesn't want to hand over the keys to the kingdom, and an ever-cautious India does not want to give up institutional control. The divisions seen in Hanoi even cut across plurilateral groups such as the Quad and the Five Eyes and underscores that the intricate geopolitics of today.

Principles-practice rift

The UN Convention also exposes a widening gap between international legal principles and on-ground realities. The definition of cybercrime in the Convention is not precise enough to limit it to areas of consensus. Instead, it allows signatories to stretch the scope of criminal offences, potentially to the detriment of

human rights. Standard procedural safeguards, such as the need for judicial review in criminal law, are tethered to the prevailing domestic frameworks of the signing parties.

Consensus on principles masks large divergences in practice. India's rulemaking efforts on watermarking of AI-generated content on social media is an example. It anchors on the universally accepted principle of user-safety. But the draft rules envision a potential mandate that social media companies carry labels that cover 10% of the body of any AI-generated content, an exceptionally prescriptive means of implementing an accepted principle.

Polycentricism

Global governance is facing a serious crisis that is no cause for celebration. The U.S. has significantly curtailed its financial contributions to the UN. The impotence of the Security Council is evident in modern conflicts from Ukraine to Gaza. The World Trade Organization's dispute-settlement system has been paralysed since 2019.

The emerging global order relegates multilateralism to high-level principles, and depends on smaller, plurilateral or bilateral groups for consensus on operating clauses. But this leads to polycentricism, with institutional overlaps and interactions that continually test state-capacity. Attempts at international governance of cross-border data flows has seen this play out, and so now will cybercrime. The idea that data should flow between trusted partners is near universal, but mechanisms to realise this are not.

India will struggle to retain its much-cherished institutional autonomy in global governance unless it builds technical capacities to engage on several levels all at once. Domestically, the canvas for regulatory and administrative reforms is vast, and the hour of action is here.

When politics met policy shortcuts

Pragmatic approach, not rhetoric, will resolve water woes of A.P. and Telangana

STATE OF PLAY

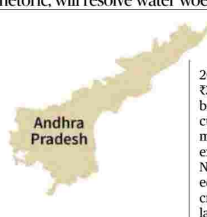
G.V.R. Subba Rao
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A single statement by Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy in the State Assembly has ignited a major political controversy in Andhra Pradesh. Mr. Reddy's claim that Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu halted the Rayalaseema Lift Irrigation Scheme (RLIS) at his request has transformed what was originally a technical and environmental project into a potent symbol of alleged political capitulation, regional betrayal, and inter-State manoeuvring over Krishna river waters. Former Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has seized upon the reported remark to accuse Mr. Naidu of "selling out Rayalaseema" for vested interests.

From Telangana's perspective, the statement burnishes Mr. Revanth Reddy's image as a leader capable of protecting his State's water interests. From Andhra Pradesh's vantage point, however, it has reopened an old wound, reinforcing a long-standing fear that Rayalaseema remains a negotiable terrain in inter-State politics.

This controversy cannot be dismissed as a mere political escalation of what was otherwise a technical disagreement over environmental clearances, statutory norms, or tribunal procedures. At its core lies a deliberate silence by the political leadership of both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana on binding legal constraints that they find inconvenient.

Crucially, both governments have chosen to keep under the carpet Government Order No. 69, issued during



the undivided Andhra Pradesh regime, as well as the explicit provisions of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014. The Act leaves no room for selective memory: all Government Orders issued by successive governments of the combined State are binding on both Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

GO 69 clearly restricts water drawal below the minimum draw down level (MDDL) of the Srisailem reservoir exclusively for drinking water purposes. Despite this, both States have pursued ambitious lift irrigation projects – RLIS in Andhra Pradesh and the Palamuru-Rangareddy Lift Irrigation Scheme (PRLIS) in Telangana – pushing against these legal constraints while publicly accusing each other of impropriety. By design, both projects violate the provisions of GO 69 and the Reorganisation Act, revealing a shared pattern of selective compliance that erodes inter-State trust and political accountability.

The PRLIS in Telangana lifts water at around the 800-foot level of the Srisailem reservoir to benefit drought-prone districts such as Mahabubnagar and Rangareddy, while the RLIS projects drawal at about the 840-foot level. At the heart of the dispute lies a fundamental question: who lifts how much water, from where, and under what legal sanction?

The RLIS, conceived in 2020 at a projected cost of ₹3,825 crore, advanced at breakneck speed without securing mandatory environmental clearances – a gamble exposed in July 2021 when the National Green Tribunal halted construction. By then, 883 crore had already been spent, largely through loans.

Official records of the Andhra Pradesh government contradict claims that the RLIS has been abandoned. Government Order No. 44, issued in July 2025, which lists all pending irrigation projects in the State, does not indicate that the RLIS has been shelved.

The RLIS case presents two defensible policy choices. The first is for the Andhra Pradesh government to secure all statutory, environmental, and inter-State clearances and complete the project. This would protect the substantial investment already made through interest-bearing loans, prevent waste of public funds, and deliver tangible benefits to farmers and residents.

The second option is to prioritise the completion of long-pending, legally sanctioned irrigation projects in Rayalaseema as it would ease water stress without triggering fresh inter-State disputes or legal complications.

The RLIS episode underscores the dangers of subordinating law, regulatory compliance, and sustainable planning to political optics or engineering ambition. The choice before Andhra Pradesh is stark: either ensure compliance with legality and accountability or perpetuate a cycle of delay, inefficiency, and political theatre. Rayalaseema's water security will ultimately depend not on rhetoric, but on policy clarity and administrative courage.

Venezuela's oil collapse is plunging Cuba into crisis

The U.S.'s invasion of Venezuela has triggered power cuts, fuel shortages and food supply disruptions in Cuba

DATA POINT

Devyanshi Bihani
Srinivasan Ramani

Among the nearly 100 people who died during the U.S. military incursion in Venezuela that led to the abduction of President Nicolas Maduro, there were 32 Cubans who were part of Mr. Maduro's security detail. Their presence reflects the intricate relations shared between Havana and Caracas.

Ever since Venezuela has been ruled by the Bolivarians, a movement led by former President Hugo Chavez, it has forged close ties with Cuba. Caracas has served as Cuba's main source of imported oil under the "oil-for-doctors" scheme – Venezuela supplying subsidised crude in exchange for medical services, technology, and military assistance. (Chart 1) This was a major save for a country starved of power supplies because of years of an economic embargo, called a blockade by the Cubans, imposed by the U.S.

But the recent U.S. seizures of Venezuela-linked oil tankers has cut off deliveries to Cuba almost entirely since December 2025. This triggered a chain reaction of shortages – prolonged power cuts, fuel shortages, and transportation and food supply disruptions.

Cuba's oil dependency is structural. Oil accounts for 83% of total power generation. The power generated from oil rose steadily from about 12,700 GWh in 2000 to 16,500 GWh in 2023. (Chart 2) Notably, oil products make up 56% of Cuba's total energy consumption, feeding industry, transport, agriculture, and households.

The energy crunch does not just dim the lights; it disrupts Cuba's food supply chains. The country imports roughly 80% of its food, and prolonged blackouts interrupt refrigeration that are vital for preserving perishables.

In 2022, Venezuela supplied

75% of Cuba's crude oil imports, with Russia accounting for the remaining 25%. But by 2023, Cuba began diversifying: Venezuela's share dropped to 58%, Mexico emerged as a significant supplier at 31%, and Russia's share fell to 11%. (Chart 3)

By 2025, oil imports from Venezuela had shrunk drastically. Reuters reporting shows Venezuela sent roughly 26,500 barrels per day to Cuba in 2025, covering about one-third of its daily needs. Mexico supplied about 5,000 bpd, while Russia and other allies contributed only limited amounts. Moreover, the Mexican President has explicitly said that the country is not scaling up output to meet Cuba's escalating needs.

The dire situation Cuba faces is largely a result of the long-running U.S. embargo, which began in 1962 following the Cuban Revolution and nationalisation of industries, including foreign-owned ones. The U.S. tightened the embargo significantly with multiple legislations in the 1990s.

The embargo has also resulted in Cuba's financial exclusion from world trade, since all dollar transactions must clear through American banks. The U.S. redesignation of Cuba as a "State Sponsor of Terrorism" in 2021 deepened this isolation; Cuban authorities have documented over 1,000 instances of foreign banks refusing services between 2021 and 2024.

UNCTAD data shows Cuba sliding from modest trade surpluses in the mid-2000s to deep and persistent deficits. By 2022, the trade deficit stood at \$4.4 billion; it further deteriorated to \$13.9 billion in 2023, the worst figure in the series. (Chart 4)

With no purchasing power and restricted access to credit markets, Cuba cannot simply buy oil on commercial terms. The collapse of the Venezuelan arrangement following the U.S. invasion has exacerbated Cuba's foreign exchange crisis and severely crippled its economy.

Cuba's energy crunch

The data were sourced from the International Energy Agency, the U.S. Energy Information Assessment, UN Trade and Development, the World Food programme and the American Economic Association



Supply severed: The Liberian-flagged oil tanker sails through Havana Bay after departing Mexico's state-owned oil company Pemex terminal in Veracruz to deliver refined fuel for Cuba.

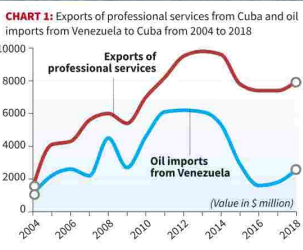


CHART 3: Cuba's crude oil import sources in 2022 and 2023

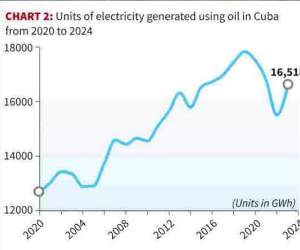
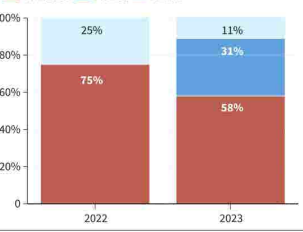
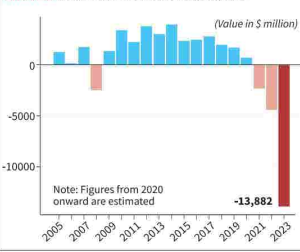


CHART 4: Cuba's trade balance from 2005 to 2023



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 27, 1976

IAS candidates may have to sit for screening test

New Delhi, Jan. 26: The Union Public Service Commission is thinking of streamlining the whole scheme of examinations for the Indian Administrative Service and other Central services so as to make it more fool-proof and ensure that only the right type of candidates finally get into the posts.

From a little over 11,000 who appeared for the IAS and allied services in 1970, the figure has swelled to nearly 30,000 in 1975. The increase has become more pronounced in the last three or four years.

Though the vacancies and the jobs for which the examinations are held have also risen, the Commission is faced with the problem of having to select the right type of persons from a very large number of young men and women. It has also become a little difficult to get the required number of suitable examiners to value the scripts.

One of the many suggestions that have been considered is that there should be a preliminary screening examination especially for the IAS. Those who qualify in the first test alone will be entitled to take the final examination. The details of this proposal, which is likely to be finally accepted by the Commission, are being worked out.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 27, 1926

Robbery in Nizam's palace

Secunderabad, Jan. 26: A daring robbery was committed in Falaknuma Palace of H. E. H. the Nizam a few days ago. It was discovered that two very ancient sets of chess made of Zahr Mohra and Sung Shub (very precious stone) and glass made of ancient bidar were missing from Sandalki Mahkan of Falaknuma Palace.

On information being sent to the Police, Mr. Venkataramana Reddy, City Kotwal, and Nawab Mohammad Nawaz Jung, Director of the District Police, visited the scene and concluded the theft might have been committed by guards. Further investigation showed that a guard named Syed Ismail was absent from duty since the incident.

The Police traced him to his native place Kohlr in Bidar district and caught him while he was trying to dispose of Bidar glass and arrested him. Some pieces of chess were recovered from his house and one piece from the Musi river under Chadarghat bridge.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Maoists killed in Jharkhand police operations last year

32 The Jharkhand Police killed 32 Maoists in encounters in 2025 as part of intensified operations to curb left-wing extremism. During the same period, 326 Naxalites were arrested and 38 surrendered. The DGP said the force remains committed to making the State crime-free. PTI

Death toll in Iran protests according to rights group

5,848 A U.S.-based rights group said it has confirmed the deaths of 5,848 people in protests across Iran. The toll includes protesters, minors, security personnel and bystanders, according to the Human Rights Activists News Agency. AFP

Number of 'illegal' foreigners repatriated from Assam

467 Only 467 of the 1.7 lakh declared illegal foreigners have been repatriated to their respective countries from Assam to date. Assam has referred almost 4.35 lakh cases of suspected nationality to the Foreigners Tribunals till October 31 last year. PTI

Number of people missing in a deadly landslide in Java

80 Nineteen members of Indonesia's elite marine force are among 80 people missing in deep mud after they were swept away or buried by a weekend landslide that tore through a mountainside in West Java province, killing dozens, officials said on Monday. PTI

The real Gross State Domestic Product growth of Meghalaya

9.66 In per cent. Meghalaya has emerged as the second fastest-growing State in the country after Tamil Nadu, recording a real Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) growth of 9.66% in 2025. PTI

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How will U.S. exit affect solar alliance?

When was the International Solar Alliance first set up? Where is it based? Will U.S. actions affect India's solar module manufacturing capacity? What about investments in solar power projects? How will it affect African nations and other poorer developing countries?

EXPLAINER

Kunal Shankar
Shikha Kumari, A

The story so far:

In January 7, the U.S. government announced that it would withdraw from 66 international organisations. The reason given was that these bodies no longer served American interests. Among them were major climate platforms, including the International Solar Alliance (ISA), an organisation headquartered in India and jointly led by India and France.

What is the ISA?

The ISA was set up in 2015 to make solar power cheaper and easier to adopt, especially in developing countries. While it doesn't build solar plants itself, it helps countries access finance, reduce risk for investors, and speed up solar adoption. Today, the Alliance has over 120 member countries and works across Africa, Asia, and island nations. The U.S. joined fairly late, in 2021. Over three years, it has contributed around \$2.1 million.

How will U.S. exit affect the ISA?

The U.S. exit will not really harm the alliance financially. U.S. contribution made up only about 1% of the Alliance's total funds. Indian officials have already said that the ISA's day-to-day work will continue, and that ongoing programmes will not be shut down. Moreover, training and capacity-building efforts are still in place.

But economics is not only about budgets, it's also about confidence. And that's where the ripple effects begin.

What about India's solar industry?

As India does not depend on the U.S. for solar panels or key equipment, solar power will not become more expensive. In fact, India now makes a large share of solar components on its own. As of late



A stress factor: President Droupadi Murmu addresses the inaugural session of the Eighth International Solar Alliance Assembly, in New Delhi on October 28, 2025. ANI

2025, India's solar module manufacturing capacity was close to 144 gigawatts. Solar cell manufacturing was around 25 gigawatts and is growing fast, with Indian companies investing across the entire supply chain.

Moreover, China is by far the largest producer of high-efficiency mass market solar modules and cells, with 70% of the global cell producing capacity. In fact, India imported about \$1.7 billion worth of Photovoltaic (PV) modules from China in FY25, as per a Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) report in Parliament.

This makes it clear that the recent U.S. decision does not push up project costs in India. It does not affect electricity tariffs either. For consumers, nothing changes.

Will investments slow down?

Again, unlikely. Most solar projects in India are driven by domestic demand. They are backed by long-term contracts with state utilities and central agencies. Investors look at India's power demand, policy stability, and growth potential.

The U.S. is not the main source of funding for Indian solar projects. Indian banks, global funds, and development institutions continue to invest based on India's market fundamentals. So the pipeline of projects inside India remains intact. Even with respect to jobs, India is relatively well-protected. Solar jobs in India come mainly from manufacturing, installation, and operations within the country. Since India is rapidly building a strong local manufacturing capacity,

these jobs are not affected by U.S. climate policy. There is even a possible upside. As the U.S. becomes more inward-looking and slows renewable approvals at home, it may still need clean energy equipment. With the U.S. having supply tensions with China and Mexico, Indian manufacturers could find openings, either through exports or by setting up units that meet U.S. standards. A lot however, hinges on the ongoing talks for a bilateral trade agreement between New Delhi and Washington.

Where is the real economic risk?

Mostly outside India. The ISA works extensively in Africa and poorer developing countries. These regions depend heavily on cheap loans and international cooperation to build solar projects. When a large economy like the U.S. steps back from climate engagement, lenders can turn cautious; projects can slow down; and decisions can take longer. If solar growth slows in these regions, Indian companies looking to expand abroad may feel the impact.

The ISA is also one of India's key tools for climate leadership and diplomacy in the Global South. It helps India build influence, open markets, and support Indian companies overseas. While the U.S. exit removes one influential partner and some technical expertise, it does not change who leads the alliance. India still does. That leadership now comes with more responsibility.

What next?

Solar power in India does not become costlier, domestic projects are not threatened, and jobs inside India remain secure. The real challenge then is a more divided global climate landscape, where cooperation is harder and emerging markets need to work harder to attract finance. For India's solar industry, this is not a shock. It is a stress test. And compared with where it stood a few years ago, India appears to be better prepared to handle it.

THE GIST

▼ The U.S. exit will not really harm the alliance financially. U.S. contribution made up only about 1% of the Alliance's total funds.

▼ Most solar projects in India are driven by domestic demand. They are backed by long-term contracts with state utilities and central agencies.

▼ The ISA works extensively in Africa and poorer developing countries. When a large economy like the U.S. steps back from climate engagement, lenders can turn cautious

How is China framing its Antarctic ambitions?

What is the proposed Antarctic Activities and Environmental Protection Law?

Lekshmi M.K.

The story so far:

In December 23, 2025, media houses reported that China was proposing a draft legislation titled the 'Antarctic Activities and Environmental Protection Law'. The draft has been submitted for first reading to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. The proposed legislation seeks to regulate China's activities in Antarctica.

What does the draft legislation say?

The draft legislation consists of seven chapters and 57 articles. It seeks to establish a comprehensive domestic legal framework governing all Chinese-related activities in Antarctica. It applies not only to Chinese citizens and organisations but also to foreign entities that organise Antarctic activities from within China or depart from Chinese ports. It also drafts rules aimed at regulating expeditions,

scientific research, fisheries, tourism, and shipping. A central feature of the draft is its emphasis on peaceful use and environmental protection in line with the Antarctic Treaty System (a collection of international agreements which govern the southern continent). The draft prohibits military activities, and only allows its limited use if it is to support peaceful objectives. It does not permit combat operations, weapons testing, troop deployment, or strategic military activities. Mineral resource exploitation is banned except for scientific research. The draft also introduces environmental impact assessments, supervision mechanisms, and post-incident accountability. Governance challenges on Antarctic tourism, waste management, and marine pollution are also addressed.

What about China's presence in the Antarctic?

In 1984, China conducted its first scientific expedition to Antarctica. Later it became

a consultative party to the Antarctic Treaty in 1985. It has since then expanded its scientific and logistical footprint in the continent over 40 years. Currently, China operates five research stations in the Antarctic, namely the Great Wall Station, the Ongshan Station, the Taishan Station, the Kunlun Station, and the Qiling Station. This well-established network of research stations in different parts of the Antarctic allows China to conduct year-long scientific research. It can conduct research across key climatic, glaciological, atmospheric, and astronomical zones. China also operates advanced polar icebreakers such as the Xuelong and Xuelong 2, strengthening its logistical capacity.

What are China's Antarctic goals?

China's official statements emphasise scientific research, climate studies, environmental protection, and international cooperation. Antarctic research supports China's understanding

of the global climate challenge, sea-level rise and polar-atmospheric interactions. This has implications for domestic environmental planning as well. Its ambitions are framed around science, governance, participation, and long-term strategic presence rather than territorial claims. At the governance level, China seeks to move from being a participant to a rule-shaping actor within the Antarctic Treaty System. Moreover, sustained polar operations contribute to advancement in ice-breaking, satellite navigation and extreme-environment engineering.

What does it mean for the Antarctic treaty?

China's draft Antarctic law signals its move towards formalising and strengthening its Antarctic presence. It places Antarctic activities within a clear domestic legal and regulatory framework rather than relying only on policy guidelines. It also reflects a broader pattern among major consultative parties using national legislation to ensure better compliance with Antarctic Treaty obligations. China's legislative initiative reinforces the need to monitor how major powers organise and regulate their Antarctic engagement, as domestic laws increasingly shape behaviour within a treaty-based governance system.

Lekshmi M.K. is pursuing a postgraduate degree at Madras Christian College, Chennai and is a Research Assistant at NIAS, Bengaluru.

THE GIST

▼ The draft legislation seeks to establish a comprehensive domestic legal framework governing all Chinese-related activities in Antarctica.

▼ China's ambitions are framed around science, governance, participation, and long-term strategic presence rather than territorial claims.

▼ Currently, China operates five research stations in the Antarctic, namely the Great Wall Station, the Ongshan Station, the Taishan Station, the Kunlun Station, and the Qiling Station.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Black lives and the experiment called America

Dr. King's words, 'Riots are the language of the unheard', are incessantly invoked by pundits trying to illuminate why peaceful marches by day, devolve into volatile scenes of vandalism, arson, and looting by night

Ronnie A. Dunn

U.S. President Donald Trump has been employing the forces of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, at a much larger scale, to conduct raids and searches in order to find, arrest and deport undocumented or "illegal aliens". In the days since, several news reports have reported on the excesses of ICE agents against undocumented migrants and sometimes even U.S. citizens. Things came to a head when ICE agents shot and killed Renée Good, a 37-year-old American citizen, on January 7 in Minneapolis. This has led to huge protests in Minneapolis against ICE. On January 24, another U.S. citizen, ICU nurse Alex Pretti, was shot and killed by ICE agents. In this article dated June 13, 2020, Ronnie A. Dunn analyses protests surrounding the death of George Floyd. Here the author analyses how white populations, due to video evidence and eye-witness accounts, were actually able to see how Black people as well as other minority groups are treated in the country. A parallel can be drawn between the protests when one sees how white majority populations have responded to the incident.

In response to the protests and racial unrest that have spread across the United States and around the world in the wake of the May 25 video-recorded murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American father of five, by white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds until he stopped breathing, the words of Dr. Martin Luther King have been cited frequently, as they often are in times of racial tension in America.

Words that resonate

"Riots are the language of the unheard," are Dr. King's words that are incessantly invoked by pundits trying to illuminate why peaceful marches and protests by day, devolve into volatile scenes of vandalism, arson, and looting by night. There is another quote from Dr. King given in a speech to the American Psychological Association, at its annual meeting in Washington DC in 1967, seven months prior to his assassination, that is equally, if not more relevant for this current moment. In that speech Dr. King stated, "White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism and the understanding needs to be carefully documented and consequently more difficult to reject." And in a challenge to his audience he added, "...Negroes want the social scientist to address the white community and 'tell it like it is'. White America has an appalling lack of knowledge concerning the reality of Negro life."

With America just re-emerging from a nationwide three-month, COVID-19 imposed house arrest, with no sports and little on television to serve as a distraction, the nation was held, both captive audience and unwitting witnesses, to arguably the most egregious, depraved, and inhuman police use-of-deadly-force ever visually recorded in American policing history.

Additions to a brutal history

This video, carefully documented by 17-year-old Damella Frazier using her



Growing violence: Mourners gather at a makeshift memorial in the area where Alex Pretti was shot dead by federal immigration agents in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on January 25. AFP

cellphone, of Floyd's murder exposed white America to the reality of, in essence, the state-sanctioned racial violence that blacks and people of colour in the United States have decried since its founding. Floyd's death is the third unarmed black citizen who has died at the hands of white police in a four-month period.

There was the case of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, an African-American, who was chased and shot by a former law enforcement officer and his son and another white male, as Arbery jogged near his New Brunswick, Georgia neighbourhood. The other case was of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African-American emergency medical technician living in St. Louis, Missouri, shot eight times while lying in her bed by undercover narcotics detectives. They were attempting to execute a "no-knock search warrant" on a suspect who was already in police custody, and entered the wrong residence. These recent killings are but the latest in America's long brutal history of the taking and brutalisation of black bodies, from slavery, through Jim Crow, the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements, to the War on Drugs and the present era of mass incarceration.

The 349-year period, from 1619 when the first Africans were brought to American shores, to 1968, the year blacks in principle gained their full citizenship rights with passage of the Fair Housing Act which culminated in the enactment of the modern Civil Rights legislation (i.e., 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act). This represents 87% of Blacks'

401-year experience (from 1619 to 2020) in what is now the United States, which was defined by crushing racial oppression. Thus, it has only been in the last 56 years, within this writer's lifetime, that African-Americans have ostensibly been afforded the rights and freedoms that accrue from American citizenship. Yet, the brutal murder of blacks in America continues, unabated.

Then and now

However, this moment feels conspicuously different than those that followed in the wake of the deaths of other unarmed blacks killed by white police or self-appointed vigilantes invoking spurious claims of self-defence under the increasingly permissive provisions of "Stand-Your-Ground-Laws", now found in a majority of American States. It feels different because unlike all of the protests and riots that have ensued after the deaths of other unarmed blacks in the past, even those of the late 1960s, where all of the protesters were primarily black, this time was different. The protesters, including peaceful demonstrators, agitators, and looters, who took to the streets of Minneapolis, a city that is 64% white and 19% black, in the aftermath of George Floyd's death were a multiracial amalgam of people from all backgrounds.

The demonstrators this time reflect a diversity that more closely mirrors that of America. And as the protests and demonstrations spread to cities and towns, big and small across America, the images that emerged were the same.

White protesters carrying "Black Lives Matter" signs in white middle class suburbs and small rural towns, as demonstrations continue across the country and now around the world, clearly indicate this time is different.

Striking a chord, globally

And yet, the demands while at their core, are the same that they have been for generations of black folks, they too are different. At their core, the demands are for society to value a black life as much as that of a white life, or any other, in every regard. Thus, the simplicity and elegance of the phrase, "Black Lives Matter," which captures the true essence of the now 401-year, blood-stained, struggle for freedom and racial equality and justice in America. But these protests also differ in that, they have not only transcended racial lines but they also have traversed borders and oceans as protests have spread to Canada, the United Kingdom, South Africa, New Zealand, China, the Philippines and many others, in solidarity with the "Black Lives Matter" Movement, demanding an end to police brutality and systemic racism both in America and abroad.

Why have white Americans reacted differently to this video of a defenceless black person brutalised and killed by the police, unlike those of 12-year-old Tamir Rice (2014), Eric Garner (2014), or Philando Castile (2016) and countless others before? Perhaps, as with the social scientists Dr. King challenged in his speech, who would employ the scientific method in their research, this video provided a sufficient sample size of evidence to convince a sceptical white mainstream that the hypothesis that the black subjects in this experiment in democracy called America, are in fact the victims of treatment by the police and the criminal justice system that is the polar opposite of their experiences with law enforcement and the criminal justice apparatus in this country.

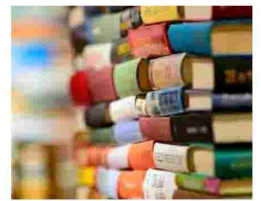
On injustices

Just as COVID-19 has exposed the glaring racial inequities that make blacks disproportionately vulnerable to the deadly disease, so has George Floyd's murder exposed to the world the centuries-old, state-sanctioned and extra-legal, racial violence and injustices that blacks have been subjected to in America. Yet, the deadly encounters that African-Americans have with the police – the most ubiquitous agent of the state and that in which the average citizen is most likely to have direct contact in their daily lives, at least for people of colour – is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

These interactions between blacks and the police are emblematic of the deep, structural, racial inequalities that permeate every aspect of American society. And while it affects black, brown, indigenous, and Asian people of various intersectional social identities, in America it is most evident in the marginalised status of the black male.

I submit that it is the historical, economic deprivation, incarceration, and social stigmatisation of the black male as the symbolic assailant in the American psyche that prevented a vast segment of white America from acknowledging the stark reality of black life in America. And now that not only white America but also the world has awoken to this reality, it is incumbent upon society to reject the null hypothesis that the cataclysmic criminal justice and socioeconomic outcomes affecting blacks, and by extent people of colour, is the result of their own personal failings. For if we do not, as is possible with any experiment, the one called America will ultimately fail.

Ronnie A. Dunn is Chief Diversity Officer and Associate Professor of Urban Studies, Cleveland State University, Ohio



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"Is it O.K. to say, 'I ain't coming tomorrow'?" (P. Vijay, Hospet). The word "ain't" which rhymes with "faint", "paint" and "taint" is frequently used in some dialects of British and American English. African-Americans, for example, use it quite often in their speech. It is the short form of "am not", "is not", "are not", etc. Here are a few examples: I ain't coming home. (I am not coming home) He ain't good looking. (He is not good looking). As to the question whether one can say "I ain't coming tomorrow", it depends on the context. You can probably get away with it in informal contexts, but not in formal ones. Many native speakers frown on those who do use this word. Do not use "ain't" in your writing. As some people put it, "Ain't ain't a word, cos it ain't in the dictionary!"

What is the meaning and origin of "to beat about the bush"? (G. V. Vamsi, Korukanda, Andhra Pradesh). This expression owes its origin to the cruel sport of batfowling. In this sport, people went into the forest at night and killed birds. The killing was done in a very cruel manner. The "batfowlers" – that is what these bird killers were called – woke up the sleeping birds and stunned them by shining bright light into their eyes. They then proceeded to kill the birds with bats and clubs. The people who indulged in this sport were called "batfowlers" because they used bats to kill fowls (i.e., birds). If the bushes in which the birds were sleeping were thick, it was the job of the servant boys who accompanied the "batfowlers" to awaken the sleeping birds. They did this by beating the bushes that were adjacent to the thick one. The sleepy birds, dazed and confused, flew straight to the bright lights where they were beaten to death. The servant boys were not interested in the bushes they were beating; they were interested in the birds that were sleeping in the adjacent bush. So when a person beats about the bush, he/she conceals the real thing that interests him/her. He/she doesn't come straight to the point; he/she approaches the subject cautiously in a roundabout way. A person who beats about the bush avoids answering questions directly. Here are a few examples: I wish you would stop beating about the bush and tell me what happened. Stop beating about the bush. Tell me how much money you need.

What is the difference in meaning between "fare" and "price"? (J. Suresh, Kurumandapam, Tiruchy). A fare is usually the amount of money that a passenger pays to be conveyed a certain distance by train/bus/plane/taxi, etc. When you pay a "fare", a journey is usually involved; it may be short or long. Train fares keep going up every year and nobody protests. The fare came to Rs. 50. My cousin spends Rs. 2,000 a month on taxi fares alone. The "price" of something is the amount of money that you must pay in order to buy it. It may be a shirt, a bicycle, a television set, a ticket, etc. The price of the car was Rs. 3,00,000. The price of the plane ticket to Mumbai is Rs. 5,000; that is, the air fare from Hyderabad to Mumbai is Rs. 5,000. Published in The Hindu on June 1, 1999.

THE DAILY QUIZ

The new Syrian government's attack on Kurdish forces has dealt a heavy blow to their territorial rights and aspirations for a future homeland. A quiz on the Kurds

Mohammed Hidayat

QUESTION 1

Name the four countries where the ethnic group is primarily found.

QUESTION 2

Which religious minority among the Kurds was targeted by the Islamic State?

QUESTION 3

Which post-World War I treaty promised Kurdish autonomy but was never ratified?

QUESTION 4

Abdullah Ocalan abandoned principles of Marxist-Leninism in prison and replaced it with

this alternative model. Name it.

QUESTION 5

Which large-scale chemical attack did the Baathist regime carry out against the Iraqi Kurds in the 1980s?

QUESTION 6

Which Kurdish militant group was suspected of assassinating the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme?

QUESTION 7

In which year was a decree granting the Kurds national language status for Kurdish; holiday for Nowruz; and restoration of citizenship issued?

QUESTION 8

Which all-female Kurdish militia gained global attention during the fight against IS?



Visual question:

Which medieval Kurdish commander became a central figure in Islamic resistance to the Crusades (Hint: The character was famously featured in this film Kingdom of Heaven). YOUTUBE

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1.

The last time there was more than one guest at the Republic Day parade. **Ans: 2018 when 10 Heads of ASEAN States were invited**

2. In 1956, this guest became the first non-Asian to be invited. **Ans: Rab Butler, U.K.'s Chancellor of the Exchequer**

3. Sir Malik Ghulam Muhammad and Rana Abdul Hamid have been guests from Pakistan in these years. **Ans: 1955 and 1965**

4. These 3 members of the same family from this country that have had the honour of being guests at the Republic Day parade. **Ans: Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, Jigme Singye Wangchuck and Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the three kings of Bhutan**

5. The only U.S. President to have been given the honour. **Ans: Barack Obama in 2015**

6. In 1961, this guest became the first woman to be invited as the Chief Guest. **Ans: Queen Elizabeth**

Visual: Name this European leader who has been invited twice as the chief guest. **Ans: Jacques Chirac of France (1976 and 1998)**

Early Birds: Tamal Biswas| Ambarin Aslam| Parimal Das| Sunil Madhavan| Dodo Jayaditya

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

Word of the day

Schmooze:

an informal conversation; talk idly or casually and in a friendly way

Synonyms: chat, confabulation

Usage: We had a wonderful schmooze about the old days.

Pronunciation:

newsth.lives/schmoozepro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/ʃmu:z/

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

thehindubusinessline.

TUESDAY • JANUARY 27, 2026

Switching on reforms

Electricity (Amendment) Bill moots major changes

The Draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, expected to be tabled in the Budget session, contemplates some landmark measures in the distribution sector. It unveils three major steps; the first two are aimed at reducing the cost of power for productive sectors, while the third attempts to relieve discoms of an operational burden. The moves are salutary, provided they are implemented well.



First, discoms will charge 'cost reflective' tariffs in a broad sense. The big shift here is that cross subsidies being coughed up by industry and railways will be phased out in five years. This will have a positive macroeconomic impact. Power Minister Manohar Lal recently explained that cost reflective tariffs will help discoms make a profit, even as the subsidy to the rural sector continues. Simply put, the subsidy shows up in the books of the State governments, not in that of the discoms. In fact, under the Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS), this is already happening. As a result, State finances have become more transparent. Discoms have begun to show profits. The second big step is allowing multiple distribution companies in a single area to promote competition. And third, discoms may also be relieved of the obligation to supply high load consumers with a demand exceeding 1 MW.

The initiatives raise implementation issues. Cost-reflective tariffs are fine, provided the costs themselves are properly assessed. Discoms may be saddled with high costs where generators and transmission companies enjoy pricing power. Meanwhile, coal dispatched by rail could be expensive because of the Railways' policy of subsidising passenger services. Therefore, a holistic view of power costs that takes upstream entities' operations into account becomes important. The move to allow multiple distributors in one area, where each can set up its own network or use another network, can increase efficiency, and even give a fillip to rooftop solar. But certain issues arising from Mumbai's experience should be kept in mind. Disputes over network rollout or in meeting consumer demand (with litigation going up to the Supreme Court in Mumbai's case) are a real possibility. There could be overcapacities, or excessive dependence on short-term power. Cherry picking of consumers too can crop up. Therefore, a pendulum swing from one distributor to multiple ones is best avoided. Limiting the numbers is a better way forward.

The move to liberate discoms from supplying high load users is welcome. At present, they are forced to have stranded assets to deal with sudden requirements. But moving away from discom dependency calls for a transition period so that all stakeholders benefit. The open access, short-term power market is still evolving, even as it accounts for about 15 per cent of generation. Overall, the sector is transforming rapidly with decentralised power likely to bring down discom costs of supply in remote areas. Centre-State coordination can make a big difference in keeping all this going.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Europe's payments problem: sovereignty starts at the till
When the centre-left French politician Aureole Laluc posted a warning last Wednesday that Donald Trump could cut off Europe from international payment systems, the clip went viral. To many, her message made sense. After all, if Mr Trump was prepared to test allies' boundaries over Greenland, it is not far-fetched to imagine Visa and Mastercard becoming used against a recalcitrant Europe. The US can turn off payment systems it controls. Given such talk, Ms Laluc, who chairs the European parliament's economic and monetary affairs committee, is not wrong in calling for an "Airbus of European payments" to protect the EU. If the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, is serious about the bloc's "independence", then during her visit to India this week she might ask New Delhi for advice. LONDON, JANUARY 25

The New York Times

The World Will Remember Trump's Greenland Outburst
The free world exhaled on Wednesday when President Trump retreated from his administration's threat to invade Greenland. That relief, however, masks the damage that Mr. Trump has done to America this week. Mr. Trump's apologetic ass disavowed his bullying of Greenland as an attempt at humor. Instead, it has been something far darker. His immoral threats against a loyal NATO ally have escalated a crisis in U.S.-European relations, weakened one of history's most successful alliances and hurt American interests in tangible ways. NATO has been an important force for global stability and for the democratic values that our nation champions. It has made the world safer, more prosperous and better able to work together in common purpose. NEW YORK, JANUARY 24



Internal audit and its role in corporate governance

CORP GOVERNANCE. Given the expanding scope of internal auditors, companies must keep up with the evolving environment



PS KUMAR

Internal auditors could be in-house or an outsourced entity; except for banks and certain Non-banking Finance Companies, risk-based Internal audit (IA) is required to be conducted by in-house internal auditors. Per section 138 of Companies Act, 2013 (the Act), all listed companies, irrespective of their size and other companies meeting certain criteria are required to appoint an internal auditor.

However, IA should be conducted by a chartered accountant or a cost accountant although the internal auditor need not be a firm of chartered accountants or cost accountants. While section 138 does not define what an IA is, Companies (Accounts) Rules, 2014 lays down that the audit committee or the board of directors shall in consultation with the internal auditor formulate its scope, functioning, periodicity and methodology. As good governance requires, management has no role in this and quite rightly, the Act stays away from it rather than micromanage. This raises the issue that since the statute has left the manner of designing the IA to the discretion of directors, how should they address the issue.

Looking at some of the current practices, there is a need for companies to examine whether they are getting the scope of IA right. Notwithstanding the absence of a statutory definition, there are some pointers as to what could be the minimum acceptable level for section 138 as noted below:

To start with, to have an idea as to how onerous a director's responsibility is,

one should take a look at the Directors' Responsibility Statement referred to in section 134(3)(c) which is included in the report of the board of directors to members of a company.

Section 134(5) lists some specific matters for which directors accept responsibility. Considering that the directors of a company are giving a positive assurance with respect to these matters, it would serve the best interests of the directors as well as the company to have them examined by internal auditors for a positive assurance.

The matters that would figure in the Directors Responsibility Statement are briefly: (i) preparation of financial statements that give a true and fair view and that the financial statements were prepared on a 'going concern' basis; (ii) safeguarding the assets of the company, prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities; (iii) in the case of listed companies, the company had laid down effective and adequate internal financial controls (IFC). Per section 143(3)(i), there is a corresponding responsibility placed on the auditors to confirm whether the company has adequate IFCs with reference to financial statements and whether such controls are operating effectively.

Secondly, per section 177(4)(vii) The role of Audit Committee includes 'evaluation of internal financial controls

Directors' responsibilities, role of audit committees, size of the company, and governance of internal audits are some of the key factors that need to be taken into accounting while framing a structured internal audit

and risk management systems'; and per sub-section (5) 'The Audit Committee may call for the comments of the auditors about internal control systems, the scope of audit, including the observations of the auditors and review of financial statement before their submission to the Board and may also discuss any related issues with the internal auditors and auditors (appointed per section 139) and the management of the company.'

Thirdly, Companies Auditor Report Order, 2020 (CARO) requires the auditors to answer 'whether the company has an internal audit system commensurate with the size and nature of its business; The 'Guidance Note on CARO 2020 (Revised 2022)' issued by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) states as follows (there is more, however, limited for brevity) 'Generally internal audit function includes the following activities with regard to the entity:

(i) Evaluation of internal controls.
(ii) Examination of financial and operational information.
(iii) Review of operating activities.
(iv) Review of compliance with laws and regulations.

(v) Evaluation of risk management and governance practices.
Fourthly, Standard on Audit (SA) 610 (Revised) 'Using the Work of Internal Auditors' defines Internal Audit as follows: 'A function of an entity that performs assurance and consulting activities designed to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the entity's governance, risk management and internal control processes.'

Lastly, Introducing the Standards of Internal Audit (SIA), the 'Framework Governing Internal Audits' issued by the ICAI, Paragraph 3 defines internal audit as follows: 'Internal audit provides independent assurance on the effectiveness of internal controls and

risk management processes to enhance governance and achieve organisational objectives'. Although there is a slight difference between SA 610 and the Framework of SIA, the central theme of IA is on the assurance of effectiveness of internal controls and risk management.

Although the Act is silent about the scope of IA having left it to the discretion of audit committees and board of directors, when it comes to reporting on the adequacy and effectiveness the auditors of the company have been bestowed a special status and have been charged with a responsibility by the CARO and SA 610 (Revised) dealt with above. There is a preponderance of intent even if not expressed within the Act pointing out the direction of an IA.

Therefore, before designing the IA, audit committees and the directors should take a close look at the matters discussed above. This is the minimum expectation and in practice, several companies extend the scope to other areas which are considered relevant and required as circumstances may warrant. The National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA) has been giving guidance to auditors in the manner of dealing with the IA. A formal and structured IA built around the subjects mentioned above would give a company a very effective IA ensuring that it fits into the corporate governance structure.

Also, compliance with Section 138 demands it. Going forward, as new thoughts are emerging in information dissemination to the stakeholders, and with non-financial information including sustainability and ESG demanding more attention, IA would need to keep up with the changing environment with a corresponding responsibility on the directors to be current.

The writer is a Chartered Accountant

When welfare leads to workforce confidence

Social security must no longer be static or fragmented; it must be portable, digital, and inclusive

Shobha Karandlaje

Workers today rarely frame their demands in the language of policy. They demand something more fundamental: Will my job last? Will my family be secure? Will my skills remain relevant tomorrow? These questions speak not just of employment, but of confidence in the future.

India's journey towards Viksit Bharat is not only about creating jobs — it is about creating confidence among workers. Confidence that effort will be rewarded. Confidence that mobility will not mean loss of security. Confidence that change will bring opportunity, not vulnerability.

For a long time, labour policy in India was largely about welfare delivery and dispute resolution. While these remain important, they are no longer sufficient for a fast-changing economy. Today, the role of the Labour Ministry is evolving — from being a regulator of the past to becoming an enabler of the future workforce.

Years of engagement with people at the grassroots has deeply shaped this

perspective. I have spoken to young people entering the job market for the first time, uncertain whether degrees will translate into livelihoods. I have met migrant workers who want to move for opportunity without losing access to social protection. I have interacted with platform workers who seek fairness and recognition in new forms of employment. Their aspirations point to a simple truth: workers do not want dependency; they want predictability and dignity.

This is where reform becomes meaningful. Our efforts are focused on building systems that travel with the worker — across jobs, locations, and life stages. Social security must no longer be static or fragmented; it must be portable, digital, and inclusive. Employment frameworks must encourage formalisation without discouraging enterprise. Most importantly, policy must keep pace with how work itself is changing.

The world of work is being reshaped by technology, global supply chains, and evolving employer-employee relationships. Gig work, remote employment, automation, and international labour mobility are no



WORKERS. For a secure future

longer future concepts — they are today's reality. The challenge before us is to ensure that flexibility does not come at the cost of fairness, and innovation does not weaken protection.

COMPASSIONATE REFORMS

The Labour Ministry's approach is guided by a clear principle: reform with compassion, growth with inclusion. Labour reforms are being pursued not as isolated legal exercises, but as instruments to expand coverage, reduce uncertainty, and create an ecosystem where enterprises grow and workers feel

secure. Dialogue and trust are central to this journey. Sustainable reform cannot be achieved through directives alone. It requires continuous engagement with workers' organisations, employers, and state governments. Consensus may take time, but it ensures durability — and durability is essential for long-term confidence.

Ultimately, the success of India's growth story will be measured not only by economic indicators, but by the confidence with which workers plan their future.

A confident workforce is more productive, more innovative, and more resilient. It is also the strongest foundation of social harmony.

The Ministry of Labour & Employment is actively working to translate this vision into action — strengthening institutions, modernising systems, and aligning policy with the realities of a 21st-century workforce. The goal is clear: to ensure that every worker feels secure enough to aspire, skilled enough to compete, and confident enough to move forward.

The writer is Union Minister of State for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, and Labour and Employment

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 fertilizer subsidy

It is with reference to the news report 'Govt plans Fertilizer Mission to cut imports, chemical use' (January 26).

Fertilizers provide essential nutrients for plants. Every year the Centre spends crores to import chemical fertilizers.

Derived from natural sources such as animal manure, compost, green manure, plant residues enrich the soil with essential nutrients. The proposed Fertilizer Mission must aim to improve the sustainable alternatives to chemical fertilizers.

P Victor Selvaraj
Palayamkottai

This refers to 'Govt plans Fertilizer Mission to cut imports, chemical use' (January 26). Promoting bio-fertilizers, organic inputs and other natural alternatives is important to make the proposed Mission on Fertilizers effective.

Direct subsidies to reduce farmers' costs, along with tax benefits, research support for companies, and public-private partnerships, can strengthen the plan. In addition, digital tools can help farmers understand soil health and fertilizer needs. A proper monitoring system to track fertilizer use, soil quality and crop trials will help meet goals.

Field outputs across regions and active

farmer participation are essential to reduce imports and maintain agricultural productivity and food security.

S Balasubramanian
Villupuram (TN)

For 'bumper' certainty

Apropos the Editorial 'Robust rabi' (January 26), the reported 652 lakh hectares of rabi sowing is a welcome sign of agricultural recovery, fuelled by timely MSPs and strategic fertilizer management. Yet, record acreage is merely a promise, not a payout. While the prospect of cooling food inflation and a GDP boost is enticing, the IMD's forecast

of a dry winter and a fading La Niña serves as a sobering reality check. True food security shouldn't rely on the 'luck' of a monifluent monsoon. We must pivot from celebrating sowing statistics to fortifying against climate volatility. As we enter the final leg, the real test isn't the quantity of seeds in the ground, but our ability to mitigate heat stress and water scarcity. A bumper crop should be a policy-driven certainty, not a seasonal surprise.

K Chandanand Kumar
Kudalur

Budget agenda

Apropos the article 'Reformist,

strategic focus likely in Budget' (January 26), there is an urgent need to ramp up our investments in semiconductor and critical minerals in the upcoming Budget.

Compared with the US, Taiwan and China, India's chip design and manufacturing is still at the nascent stage of fabricating chips in the range of 28nm to 110nm. India needs to invest quickly in semiconductor research and development and should be able to transition to manufacturing smaller cutting-edge chips in the range of 5nm to 2nm.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

More funds for farm R&D

This is vital for productivity, climate challenges

Shupinder Singh Hooda

With the Budget for 2026-27 approaching, farmers across the country are mobilising, underscoring that many agrarian problems remain unsolved. The years of neglect have forced farmers to take to the streets. Their protests point to deeper issues in the sector, especially low income, climate challenges, and the ongoing lack of investment in agricultural research and development.

Farmers want lasting solutions that improve their knowledge, resilience, and income security, especially as input costs rise, weather becomes more unpredictable, and landholdings shrink. Productivity growth has slowed, costs keep rising, and climate shocks are happening more often. Tackling these issues requires science-based solutions, which highlight the importance of agricultural research. Despite numerous policy statements, public investment in agricultural research and development remains insufficient. Almost 85 per cent of the R&D budget goes to salaries and running costs, leaving little for core research. This problem happens every year. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) says most of its budget is spent on salaries. At the same time, State agricultural universities across India are short of funds, limiting their ability to conduct research and support farmers.

MARGINAL RISE IN FUNDING

Recent budgets have shown only slight increases in funding. The Department of Agricultural Research and Education (DARE), which includes ICAR, got ₹10,466 crore for 2025-26, up from ₹10,156 crore in 2024-25. At the same time, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare received ₹1.32 lakh crore in 2024-25 and about ₹1.37 lakh crore in 2025-26, a 2.5 per cent drop from the revised 2024-25 estimates. Only a small share of this money goes to research and innovation, indicating that agricultural science remains a low national priority.

With R&D spending stuck at just 0.3-0.7 per cent of agricultural GDP, India is far behind countries like the US, China, Israel, and South Korea, which invest 2-4 per cent. This shows how urgently India needs to step up its commitment. There can be no consequences. India operates one of the



FOOD SECURITY. Investment in agrarian science essential

world's most extensive agricultural research systems, employing nearly 27,500 scientists and over 100,000 support staff. Despite this expansive infrastructure, critical challenges remain unresolved, including reducing cultivation costs, closing yield gaps, managing water scarcity, improving market access, and climate shocks are happening more often. Tackling these issues requires science-based solutions, which highlight the importance of agricultural research. Despite numerous policy statements, public investment in agricultural research and development remains insufficient.

Previous solutions improved food security but were region-specific and input-intensive, often excluding rainfed areas, smallholders, and landless labourers. Currently, nearly 50 per cent of Indian agriculture is rain-dependent, and climate change has rendered traditional practices increasingly unreliable. Research priorities must therefore shift towards dry land farming, climate-resilient crops, affordable technologies, and diversified livelihood systems that mitigate risk and enhance income security.

Investment in agrarian science should be recognised as essential for food security, rural livelihoods, climate resilience, and national stability. To effectively translate these recommendations into practice, the Budget should include specific policy actions, such as earmarked R&D funds dedicated to sustainable agricultural initiatives, the introduction of performance-linked grants to encourage breakthroughs in agricultural science, and the establishment of a national agrarian innovation task force to prioritise critical research areas.

The principle of 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Vigyan, Jai Anusandhan' remains relevant, underscoring the interconnectivity of farmers' welfare, scientific advancement, and national self-reliance. Budget 2026 presents a critical opportunity to translate this vision into effective policy measures.

The writer is (State) Leader of Opposition and former CM Haryana; headed the Congress Committee on Agriculture & Farm Welfare

CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHA MISHRA

Will BRICS lead to a multi-polar energy order or creation of a fresh cartel? Who will take the lead in energy space — China or Russia? Where does India stand? These questions are being increasingly discussed in the global geopolitical space.

A cursory assessment points to a multipolar order, where both China and Russia will play a significant role in it. For India, BRICS energy cooperation is broadly advantageous but not without constraints.

BRICS cooperation spans hydrocarbons, renewables, critical minerals, and energy infrastructure, with growing emphasis on local-currency trade and alternative payment mechanisms. India assumed the BRICS presidency on January 1, succeeding Brazil. It will lead the 11-member bloc with a focus on 'Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation, and Sustainability'. There are 10 partner countries too.

Over the years, energy cooperation has evolved into a strategic pillar for the bloc, which, according to reports, accounts for nearly 50 per cent of global energy production and consumption. This year, the alliance is increasingly focused on balancing energy security with a just and inclusive transition to a low-carbon future.

The bloc has a Roadmap for Energy Cooperation (2025-2030). Its Nuclear Energy Platform, established in late 2024, was expanded in 2025. It facilitates corporate-level cooperation on nuclear projects as a clean energy source, with financial support from the New Development Bank (NDB).

Then there is an issue of Energy Transition Financing. According to reports, member-states are actively pushing for the use of local currencies in energy trade. As the chair, India has invited BRICS nations to participate in the upcoming energy gathering, scheduled for later this year.

Power Minister Manohar Lal, at the BRICS Energy Ministers' Meeting 2025, highlighted energy security as one of the most pressing challenges and emphasised the need to strengthen BRICS cooperation to promote equitable access to energy resources globally.

The bloc supported open, fair and non-discriminatory international energy markets, and encouraged the use of local currencies in energy trade. The members also emphasised on the importance of resilient infrastructure, diversified energy sources, and critical minerals for clean technologies.

"From my perspective, BRICS energy



It should emerge as a more multipolar order, with Russia and China shaping the energy agenda. However, for tangible outcomes, bilateral relations will play a decisive role

cooperation reflects a strategic shift towards a more multipolar energy order rather than the creation of a unified cartel. The initiative is driven by shared interests in energy security, supply diversification, and reducing exposure to Western-dominated institutions and financial systems." Umud Shokri, energy strategist and senior visiting fellow at George Mason University.

"The recent expansion of BRICS to include energy-rich states such as Iran and the UAE strengthens its resource base, but internal diversity in energy profiles and political priorities mean the bloc functions more as a coordination platform than a tightly integrated alliance," he said.

He agrees that geo-politically, BRICS energy cooperation could accelerate the fragmentation of global energy governance. "By facilitating trade outside dollar-based systems and Western regulatory frameworks, it weakens the leverage of sanctions and challenges institutions like the IEA and Bretton Woods-linked mechanisms," he said, adding that "this trend is already visible in Russia's restriction of oil and

As a fast-growing energy importer, India benefits from diversified supply options, discounted hydrocarbons, and access to alternative financing and technology channels

gas exports to Asia and in experiments with non-dollar settlement. While this may enhance resilience for participating states and stabilise supplies for emerging economies, it also deepens competition with G7 countries and could intensify rivalry in energy-rich regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia."

WHO WILL DOMINATE?

Further, a debate is emerging as to who will become a dominant player in BRICS energy order — China or Russia. According to Shokri, "In terms of dominance, China and Russia are likely to shape the BRICS energy agenda. China's role stems from its position as the world's largest energy consumer, its financial capacity, and its leadership in clean-energy manufacturing and deployment. Russia, despite sanctions, remains a critical supplier of oil, gas, and nuclear technology and uses energy as a strategic tool in foreign policy."

"Other members contribute in more specialised ways: Brazil through biofuels, Gulf states through capital and reserves, and Iran through hydrocarbons under sanctions pressure. Without strong institutional constraints, this asymmetry suggests a *de facto* Sino-Russian leadership rather than equal influence across members," he said.

Amidst all these one also needs to remember that among the BRICS members themselves the bilateral relations vary — for example, India and China *vis-a-vis* India and Russia.

"Bilateral relations will play a decisive role in translating BRICS energy cooperation into tangible outcomes. Given the bloc's loose institutional structure and divergent national interests, most progress is likely to occur through bilateral or mini-lateral deals nested within the broader BRICS framework," he said, adding that examples include Russia-India crude trade, China-Brazil renewable investment, and potential China-Gulf infrastructure financing.

"These arrangements offer flexibility and speed but also limit the emergence of a unified BRICS energy policy, reinforcing the view that the grouping amplifies bilateral leverage rather than replacing it," he said.

INDIA'S POSITION

Where does India stand in all this? "As a fast-growing energy importer, India benefits from diversified supply options, discounted hydrocarbons, and access to alternative financing and technology channels. Participation strengthens its bargaining power and reduces vulnerability to price shocks and geopolitical pressure. At the same time, India must manage China's outsized influence and avoid strategic over-dependence on any single partner," Shokri said.

Though BRICS provides India with greater strategic autonomy in energy diplomacy, New Delhi will need to up its scale when dealing with China, particularly as India too is giving a push to its green energy business.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 27, 2006

Banks can now offer loans, accept deposits thru agents

Banks are now allowed to outsource lending and deposit-taking activities to enable them to reach remote areas. They can now collect deposits from public and deliver credit to borrowers through agents appointed by them. The RBI has permitted banks to appoint NGOs, microfinance agencies, post offices and NBFs (not accepting deposits) to act as Business Correspondents.

Govt targeting \$10-b FDI in '06-07: Kamal Nath

The Government is targeting an overall foreign direct investment (FDI) inflow of \$10 billion during the next fiscal and expects around \$7.5 billion in the current financial year, the Minister for Commerce and Industry, Mr Kamal Nath, said. The actual FDI inflow till October this fiscal stood \$2.59 billion.

Flexible labour law for textiles on anvil

In a bid to introduce labour law flexibility for the textiles sector, the Government is considering a proposal whereby firms could be given the go-ahead to employ "non-permanent" workers if they furnish bank guarantees against the names of these workers, earmarking their salaries against a specified minimum period of employment during a year.

The looming threat of antimicrobial resistance

CK Mishra
Siddhartha Bhattacharya

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently made a strong appeal for the responsible use of antibiotics. Referring to a recent report, he cautioned that antibiotics are becoming increasingly ineffective against common infections such as pneumonia and urinary tract infections. His message to citizens was clear: medicines require proper guidance, and antibiotics, in particular, should always be consumed under medical supervision. This public intervention reflects growing concern at the highest levels of government about AMR and its far-reaching implications. According to data from the WHO, around 1.27 million deaths are directly attributed to antimicrobial resistance (AMR) annually.

The economic cost of AMR is substantial and rising. Globally, AMR

has already increased healthcare expenditure by an estimated \$66 billion. If resistance rates increase at the pace observed in the bottom 15 per cent of countries, AMR-related health costs could escalate to \$325 billion, while the global economy could be \$1.7 trillion smaller by 2050.

Conversely, providing high-quality treatment to everyone with bacterial infections and funding innovation in new antibiotics could, by 2050, reduce health costs by \$97 billion. Addressing AMR requires coordinated action across sectors. One such opportunity lies in creating coalitions of willing countries to establish common funding pools for research and pooled procurement of innovative antibiotics.

Public awareness remains a critical pillar of the response to AMR. A national campaign — similar to those undertaken for HIV, polio and tuberculosis — should be developed to educate patients and consumers about

the dangers of antibiotic misuse. Training programmes for doctors should be mandated by ICMR to raise awareness about AMR, including correct dosing, frequency and duration of antibiotic treatment.

A dedicated platform that brings together central and State implementing agencies alongside industry stakeholders would enable structured discussions on the implementation of ICMR AMR guidelines. A defined list of essential diagnostic tests should be formulated, and laboratory infrastructure must be established at the district level to support timely and accurate diagnosis. Finally, monitoring and auditing must become routine.

The Prime Minister's call for responsible antibiotic use should serve as a catalyst for sustained action.

Mishra is former Health Secretary, and Bhattacharya is Secretary General, NATH HEALTH

On businessline.in

Perils of expansive gender provisions in FTAs

Taking gender commitments in FTAs with little domestic regulatory and implementing capacity is nothing short of a recipe for disaster, says

Sangeeta Godbole

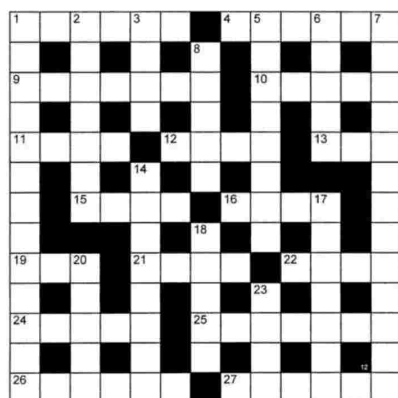
https://tinyurl.com/59sk6zhs

The bricks and steel trap

Deepanshu Mehan looks at why India's government capex-spending surge isn't igniting a private sector investment fire

https://tinyurl.com/murak4uf

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2605



EASY

ACROSS

- Ill repute (6)
- Dug-out (6)
- Maintenance for divorced partner (7)
- Air raid warning (5)
- Footway (4)
- Cry loudly (4)
- A woman's (3)
- Study print (4)
- Puts question (4)
- Putrefy (3)
- Return sound (4)
- Faithful (4)
- Dwelling-place (5)
- Proving deficient in test (7)
- Lay bare (6)
- Iterate (6)

DOWN

- Not fitting (13)
- Squander piecemeal (7)
- Meeting; old administrative assembly (4)
- Never still (8)
- Towards top of world (5)
- Twentieth of ton (13)
- Daman, dassie, rock-rabbit (5)
- Robot-like; with identity concealed (8)
- Waiting at table (7)
- Move, budge (5)
- Body of soldiers (5)
- Collection of papers, dossier (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Public disgrace if many are turned out (6)
- Silt in the ground where fish goes round river (6)
- Support for estranged spouse mainly consists of nothing (7)
- Fascinating woman is going back to Rouen where French left (5)
- It's the way pathology can be cut short (4)
- Loud cry from first bandit to break the law (4)
- A lady's principal man has dropped the ring (3)
- Study the words that make up the abomassum (4)
- Invites one to remove the top of the barrels (4)
- Without a vehicle donkey's encouragement will decay (3)
- A sound coming back in one Chopin piece (4)
- Starts the race under-exercised, to be honest (4)
- Dwelling might consist of a bed with nothing in it (5)
- Having a weakness for ploughing (7)
- Let the film see the light to show one up (6)
- Another showing may not suit one's digestion! (6)

DOWN

- It isn't suitable to be at home and filch it (13)
- Waste one's money on food fried in batter (7)
- Tom held nothing up that was debatable (4)
- Can't stay still so must do with a smaller amount of sleep (8)
- Direction taken from noble PM (5)
- 7, 112 pounds and under height WD ordered (13)
- A dassie may be hairy without one before ten (5)
- Don't have to confront so much that is unidentified (8)
- Performance of religious worship at the start of play (7)
- Transfer a woman's undergarment (5)
- Show the colour of pot or its variant (5)
- Go one behind another to make it smooth (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2604

ACROSS 1. Hammocks 7. Crime 8. Between 9. Derange 10. Link 12. Excited 14. Partake 17. Ech 18. Confine 21. Retires 22. Linen 23. Myrmidon
DOWN 1. Hobbie 2. Mutineer 3. Open 4. Kindle 5. Sign 6. Defend 7. Goracle 11. Station 13. Tortured 14. Pickle 15. Energy 16. Chosen 19. None 20. Stem

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Don't get bedazzled by gold's latest price peak

Its dizzying uprun past \$5,000 per ounce reflects a fear of the future as Trump rattles the world. Anxiety levels may change as responses emerge to the risk of a big financial rupture

The price of gold has scaled yet another historic peak, leaping above the mark of \$5,000 per ounce to reach \$5,100 on Monday. About a year ago, it was at \$2,770, but experts now expect the yellow metal to go past \$6,000 by the end of 2026. This surge can safely be pinned on the safe-haven effect of US President Donald Trump's erratic policies, which have eroded confidence in both the dollar's stability and its ability to retain its post-World War II crown as the anchor currency of global finance. However, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing, and once the real world becomes less volatile, some investors who fled regular assets like stocks and bonds could return, which could see the price of gold descend from these heights. In other words, gold is not a buy-and-forget-it store of value, despite its dizzying rise over the past year.

Gold was once the bedrock of global finance. Under the Bretton Woods system adopted in 1944, countries agreed to run currencies that were convertible into the US dollar and the US agreed to convert dollars presented by foreign governments and central banks into gold at a rate of \$35 per ounce. This gave stability to exchange rates, but also gave the US a unique opportunity to run its mint to create money accepted around the world. An oversupply of dollars abroad, particularly in Europe, eventually forced the US to abandon its promise to convert dollars into gold. This was in the early 1970s. After that, most currencies began to float on global demand and supply, while some sought to peg theirs to the dollar. On its part, the International Monetary Fund created Special Drawing Rights to let countries borrow

funds from it for forex payments, offering a cushion to those struggling to pay. Currency values reflect economic performance; they capture the demand for and supply of national currencies for trade and investment, internal price stability relative to other economies and also productivity changes. Ultimately, thus, a currency's exchange value is determined by macro management, rather than a hoard of forex reserves piled up to defend it in case of a sudden capital-flight crisis. The most trusted reserve currency has been the dollar. In 2011 and 2023, after credit rating agencies downgraded US debt a notch, its currency actually strengthened as panicky capital fled to the safety of US government bonds. However, Trump's rejection of the world's rules-based order of trade and security, coupled with his threat to the independence of America's central bank, the Fed, has shaken the globe's trust in the US dollar and Treasury bonds. At the start of 2020, over 60% of global forex reserves were held in dollars. That share had fallen to 56% by the end of 2025's third quarter. Granted, central banks have diversified their holdings and been buying bullion since the West's Great Recession, but that trend stands amplified. Last May, when Moody's notched down its rating of US bonds, capital fled the dollar, unlike in the past. Should a future Fed prove unable to tighten money supply in the face of US fiscal overruns, worse might follow.

If the price of gold also turns volatile at some point, as seems probable, investors and central banks may have to look farther afield. Perhaps they will raise their share of non-financial, non-bullion, non-commodity holdings, for which they'll need to deploy sophisticated tools of risk management. AI would help, of course.

AI is not UPI: Trying to apply the same model will doom progress

The template for India's most celebrated digital success won't work in a field that differs drastically



SRINATHI SRIDHARAN & ANAND VENKATANARAYANAN are, respectively, a corporate advisor and author of 'Family and Dharma'; and a strategic security and digital policy researcher.

Within minutes of almost any policy discussion on digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) in India, one reference inevitably surfaces: UPI, or the Unified Payments Interface. It has become the default analogy, a governing metaphor and increasingly even a policy instinct. If a state-backed, no-fee payment system could unlock scale and low-cost innovation, the argument goes, why not replicate that model for AI?

This reasoning is flawed. The proposed analogy usually unfolds along familiar lines. AI development demands significant compute infrastructure—most notably high-end graphics processing units (GPUs), dominated today by Nvidia. These are scarce and largely unaffordable for Indian startups and research labs. Capital, therefore, is framed as the binding constraint. The solution, it is argued, is for the state to step in: procure GPUs at scale, create a shared compute pool and rent access at nominal cost. Remove capital as a barrier and innovation will follow—just as it did with UPI.

But AI is not a payment system and cannot be governed through a compulsory licensing regime. It is a complex, evolving global supply chain that has been in the making for decades. Unlike UPI, AI did not emerge through a linear process of state-led design followed by private adoption. AI evolved through

intersecting layers of code, data, labour, frameworks and compute power—each progressing at different speeds. Capital alone did not determine outcomes, nor did scale or state backing.

Until recently, it was widely believed that training competitive models required access to tens of thousands of GPUs, effectively restricting serious AI development to a handful of capital-rich firms. That belief shaped global policy thinking, including sweeping semiconductor export controls imposed by the US on China. These controls were premised on the belief that AI could be placed under a form of compulsory licensing through chip access.

That assumption proved misplaced. While sanctions raised costs and altered pathways, they did not confer durable control. Chinese firms responded by re-configuring the supply chain—they sought sovereignty not merely over models, but over data, frameworks and silicon itself. Frameworks like PyTorch remained central, even as efforts accelerated to reduce dependence on Nvidia hardware through adapters and alternative chips such as Huawei's Ascend series. The supply chain adapted because it was neither shallow nor centralized.

This matters for India's AI policy debate. It demonstrates that even the most powerful state, acting with allies, cannot place AI under a compulsory regime. The reason is structural: AI's supply chain is both deep and broad. Compute is one input among many. Optimizing—or subsidizing—only that variable does not produce breakthroughs; it merely distorts incentives.

UPI, by contrast, worked precisely because the problem was narrow. Payments could be standardized. Interoperability could be mandated. Participation could be licensed. The institutional architecture—spanning the regulator, operating entities and the banking system—made this possible.

India's policy record shows a recurring tendency to identify 'national

champions,' channel subsidies towards them and align regulatory and administrative resources to ensure their success. Over time, this creates a symbiotic relationship in which the boundary between state and firm blurs, even if formal separation remains intact.

Such an approach may be defensible in sectors characterized by stable technologies and scale-driven economics. In AI, it is far more problematic. Models succeed not because they are favoured, but because they are useful. When utility surges and commercial success follows, protected national champions face an uncomfortable reality: they are preferred at home, but struggle to compete abroad—the arena where AI competitiveness is ultimately revealed.

The response historically has been predictable. Firms either petition the state for mandates, restrictions or bans to sustain relevance or pivot away from frontier innovation into adjacent niches. The result is familiar: national champions become local heroes but globally irrelevant.

None of this is an argument for state withdrawal. Public investment in research, skills, data and access is essential. But AI sovereignty cannot be manufactured through administrative tools or central allocations. It emerges from participation in global supply chains, not insulation; from diffusion of capability, not concentration of control.

Compute availability is the most visible input, but also the easiest to misprice, misallocate and overemphasize. When access is centrally provisioned, incentives shift from problem selection to resource consumption, privileging entities adept at navigating committees over those with technical know-how. In a field where progress often comes from small teams pursuing unfashionable ideas with limited resources, such an approach biases the system against the kind of exploratory work that moves AI forward. AI is not UPI. Designing policy as though it were would be an expensive misreading of both.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

When paper money systems begin to crack at the seams, the run to gold could be explosive.

HARRY BROWNE

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

Let's heed a warning from Davos on pollution in India

AJIT RANADE



is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

When Harvard Professor Gita Gopinath told a Davos audience that pollution costs India more dearly than tariffs, she wasn't being provocative. She was making a strictly economic point: pollution is a continuous tax on productivity, public finances and human capital—unlike tariffs, which are episodic and negotiable. Hence tackling pollution 'on a war footing' should be a top national mission.

Days earlier, Indore—celebrated as India's 'cleanest city' year after year—was forced into a humiliating reckoning. At least eight people died after allegedly drinking contaminated water in one locality, while hundreds were hospitalized. The cause may have been a local civic failure: an ageing pipeline network, poor safeguards and ignored warning signs. But the deeper lesson is national. How can rankings of 'cleanliness' coexist with deaths from drinking water? The imagery was almost allegorical: residents queuing at tankers and bullhorn announcements warning against piped

water while walls nearby still had slogans boasting of Indore's cleanliness.

If Davos was the global mirror, Indore was the domestic shock. These two remind us that pollution should be one of India's top developmental priorities, not as a niche 'environmental' concern, but as a public health emergency and growth constraint.

The most dangerous feature of air and water pollution is that they kill quietly. Their effects accumulate through everyday exposure, burdening normal life with chronic risks. A recent multi-city study reported that across 10 major Indian cities, about 33,627 deaths per year were attributable to short-term PM2.5 exposure above the World Health Organization's 24-hour guideline (55µg per cubic metre). The sting is that even cities that meet our national standard show significant mortality impact. The same study pointed out that large health gains can be made by improving the quality of even 'moderately polluted' air. This also means that complacency based on meeting Indian thresholds can be deadly.

This is where the familiar AQI debate misleads. The Air Quality Index is a communication tool; PM2.5 is a biological hazard. You can have 'acceptable' headline indices and still inflict damage through fine particulates.

In Delhi, the toxicity is visible and therefore politically salient. But the crisis affects us across the country.

Pollution is a classic example of a negative externality. Private actions impose a high public cost. The poor are worst affected. The affluent respond by buying packaged water, installing RO systems and air purifiers, or by shifting consumption. The poor queue at tankers and borrow money for treatment, often pawning jewellery to pay hospital bills while waiting for promised reimbursements. Pollution punishes those with the least capacity to escape it.

A World Bank report's analysis notes several channels: low-income workers are more likely to work outdoors; low-income homes are likelier to be close to industrial plants, transport corridors and other sources of pollution; and as pollution rises, property values fall, reinforcing the concentration of poverty in the most exposed areas. So pollution doesn't just make people sick—it can harden inequality over time.

This is not about 'trees versus jobs.' Framed this way, development projects can trump environmental hazards. We also have a peculiarly Indian phenomenon of *ex post facto* green clearances, despite the fact that polluted air and water destroy livelihoods, productivity and household savings.

Gopinath's point was that we must not obsess over tariffs while ignoring a health- and productivity crisis. While local pollution is often visible, we don't see a sustained countrywide agitation. Perhaps the political economy and psychology can explain this. There seems widespread resignation to the problem, reinforced by a feeling of powerlessness. A weak or inconsistent government response can discourage mobilization and protests are often frowned upon. This is why we need a 'mission mode' approach. Action without a let-up.

An environmental burden is inseparable from social deprivation. India's insistence on climate justice is based on the fact that industrialized countries grew by burning

cheap carbon for two centuries and are now linking trade with climate conditionality. Yet, grievance cannot be an excuse for inaction at home. The Indore episode shows what happens when governance focuses on optics over public health systems and safety. A pro-poor pollution agenda would first reduce pollution where it can deliver instant welfare gains: clean cooking fuels, electrified public transport, dust control at construction sites, waste burning, industrial compliance and reliable municipal water systems. Second, enforce the polluter-pays rule; do not penalize the poor commuter, street vendor or informal worker. Third, we must focus on data and measurement, stronger monitoring and institutions. And fourth, the national conversation must shift from episodic panic to continuous governance. Pollution makes news every November when Delhi chokes and fades by February. If India can run 'missions' for roads, toilets and more, it can run one for clean air and safe water.

Back to Gopinath. Yes, India should negotiate hard on tariffs, standards and carbon barriers. But it must also negotiate with itself—to stop accepting mass exposure as normal, stop confusing rankings with safety and stop letting the poorest pay for what they did the least to create.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Our pitch at Davos amid global flux: Reliable India is a safe bet

India has made a robust case for itself as a dependable partner for economic progress in a world gripped by uncertainty



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At a time when the world appears increasingly fragmented, anxious and unsure of its economic direction, India's presence at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2026 in Davos carried a significance far beyond symbolism. As leaders and investors reshape supply chains for resilience and diversify trade links, they are directing capital allocations towards economies that offer stability, scale and policy predictability.

The mood this year was sombre at Davos, overshadowed by geopolitical tensions, trade fragmentation, the disruptive advance of artificial intelligence (AI) and a palpable fear that the rules-based global order is fraying. Amid all the uncertainty, India stood out as a stabilizing force and a shaper of the next phase of global growth.

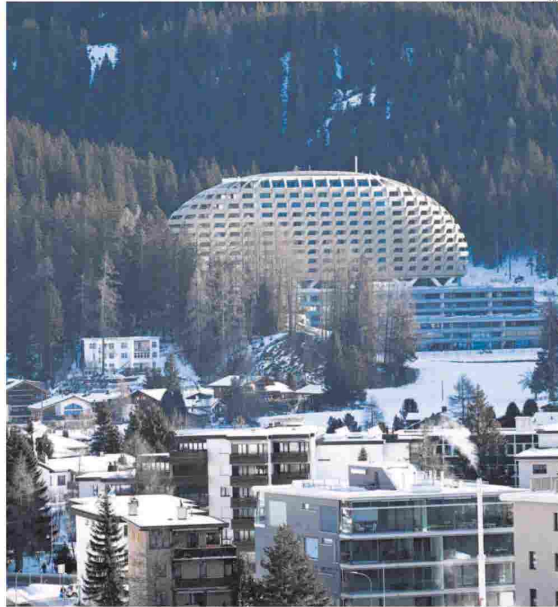
Global interest has heightened in India's economic trajectory, innovation ecosystem and governance capabilities. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) led a strategically-coordinated campaign to present India as a reliable, resilient and reform-driven economy, fully aligned with the gathering's theme, 'A Spirit of Dialogue'. In a world marked by shrinking trust and rising unilateralism, dialogue anchored in credibility and delivery matters more than ever.

Amid the uncertainty, EU President Ursula von der Leyen's speech provided a silver lining. She announced that soon after the event, she would be visiting India and that India and the EU were on the cusp of signing a historic trade agreement, one that would create a market for 2 billion people, accounting for almost a quarter of global gross domestic product.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's statement that middle powers such as Canada are not powerless in the evolving global order and have the capacity to help shape a new international framework rooted in shared values evoked a positive response.

Discussions at Davos centred on global trade patterns that have revealed a high dependence on a limited set of regions for several essential commodities, particularly agricultural food crops. Disruptions along key shipping corridors such as the Black Sea, Red Sea, Suez Canal and Southeast Asian maritime routes could, therefore, rapidly translate into scarcity and inflation.

The contrast between the global mood and India's message could not be sharper. Broadly, Davos discussions reflected concerns over a crumbling world order, tensions between the US and its European allies, and anxieties around the impact of AI on jobs and productivity. Political overhangs have been unmistakable, with geopolitics looming over social-media interventions. Against this backdrop, India's narrative was refreshingly grounded:



it was focused on solutions, scale and execution.

India made a high-impact start at Davos with thought-provoking discussions on technology and AI, sustainability and civil aviation-related matters led by Ashwini Vaishnaw, Union minister for electronics and information technology, railways and information and broadcasting, Prahalad Joshi, minister for new and renewable energy and consumer affairs, and Kinjarapu Rammohan Naidu, minister of civil aviation.

What emerged was heartening. India belongs firmly to the group of AI-ready nations, with steady progress across all five layers of AI architecture—applications, models, chips, infrastructure and energy. Crucially, India's AI strategy prioritizes real-world deployment and return on investment rather than an exclusive obsession with ever-larger models. This pragmatic, value-driven approach holds resonance at a time when many economies are struggling to translate AI's promise into broad-based productivity gains.

Sustainability is no longer a peripheral concern but a central driver of competitiveness, resilience and long-term growth. The defining question of this decade is not whether the world should transition, but how sustainability can be delivered at scale, with speed and in a manner that strengthens economies instead of weakening them. India's experience in balancing growth, inclusion and climate responsibility offers lessons for others.

This year marked one of CII's most substantive delegations to Davos, with over 100 participants spanning government, industry, startups, social enterprises and media, and more than 200 attend-

ees overall. Three Union ministers led the Centre's delegation, underscoring the seriousness with which India views this global platform.

States too were well-represented. Six chief ministers, representing Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and Jharkhand, participated to woo investors.

Underlying all these engagements is a consistent theme: of a Reliable India. India stands at the intersection of trust, scale and innovation. Trust, rooted in stable democratic institutions and predictable policymaking, scale, enabled by a vast market and deep talent pool; and innovation, driven by digital public infrastructure and a flourishing technology ecosystem. While India is projected to become the world's third-largest national economy in a few years, sustained real GDP growth of 6-8% and nominal growth of 10-13%, supported by moderate inflation, positions it as one of the few major economies offering both stability and momentum.

At Davos, where nearly 3,000 participants from over 130 countries gathered to debate the future, India is no longer defined merely as an 'emerging economy'. It is becoming essential to the global economic order—poised to meet the world's future needs of talent, innovation and knowledge. In a fractured world searching for anchors, India offers something increasingly rare—credibility backed by capability, ambition tempered by pragmatism and growth aligned with inclusion.

In uncertain times, the world does not just need dialogue, it needs dependable partners. At Davos 2026, India made a compelling case that it is ready to be one of them.

India's coal power generation looks unlikely to hit its target

Renewables are increasing but thermal plants are on a slow track



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Thermal power output in both China and India dropped last year.

Almost everywhere on the planet, the great surge of coal power that fuelled two centuries of industrialization is receding. In rich countries, consumption peaked two decades ago and has since fallen by about half. China managed to suck up every tonne that the developed world spurned since then, but that tide is now turning too. Coal-fired power there fell about 1% last year, despite a 5% jump in electricity usage.

As recently as 2024, the International Energy Agency (IEA) predicted Chinese coal demand would keep breaking records for the next three years. It now reckons it's heading into decline, and will lose 180 million tonnes through 2030—which is like closing all the coal power stations and blast furnaces in Japan.

There's one remaining bright spot—India. But even there, coal's defences are crumbling. Indian consumption will rise by about 200 million tonnes through 2030, according to the IEA, offsetting all the decline from China, much as China once offset the decline from rich countries. The government in New Delhi is promising to build 97 gigawatts (GW) of additional coal power by 2035, nearly 50% more than is currently in place. Expansions might keep going as late as 2047 under proposals currently being discussed.

There's just one problem with all this. One of the strongest arguments for coal's continued relevance in India in the face of cheaper, cleaner renewables—the relative ease with which it can be built—is looking badly out of date.

Take that proposed 97GW to be built over the next nine years. Just 35.5GW of the total has received financial sign-off so far, and of that only 16.3GW has actually broken ground. The remainder is stuck in regulatory, political or financing tangles. Some 22GW has been abandoned.

It's a similar picture with non-power uses, such as producing chemicals—a sector the government is trying to support with nearly \$10 billion in subsidies. Talcher in the eastern state of Odisha was expected to be the country's first coal-gasification plant when completed in 2024. Instead, 11 years after it was announced, it's still only about two-thirds built.

How long does it take to construct a coal power plant in India? Based on the 24 facilities that have broken ground and have scheduled completion dates, it's about seven years between financial closure and first electron to the grid. To hit the government's 97GW target, that means another 60 gigawatts must get signed off in the next

two years—equivalent to approving one new plant every 10 days.

That seems a stretch. Private capital has been wary of investing in an Indian economy that's heavily dependent on stimulus from a debt-laden state sector. Some 80% of coal plants under construction are government-owned.

It's unlikely that India's government will hit its targets on new coal. SBI Capital Markets wrote this month, Solar, by contrast, should easily install 50GW this year, SBI noted. That should put the country on track to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi's promise that 500GW of clean power will be operating by 2030.

An India generating that much renewable energy won't even need additional coal plants. Current rates of clean power build-out on their own should be sufficient to cover about 97% of demand growth between now and 2030. Anything else can be met by increasing the operating rates of existing fossil generators, which are underutilized and unprofitable as a result.

We are already seeing what this will look like. Coal power fell by about 3% in India last year, according to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, a pro-energy transition group. Some 44% of this decline was caused by growing clean generation, with 36% attributed to unusually cool and wet weather and 20% from an economic slowdown. Last year represents the first time in half a century that coal-fired power generation in both China and India dropped simultaneously.

It's too early to get out the champagne. When you're trying to hit a peak in fossil-fuel consumption, each year is a fresh race. Power consumption in emerging economies is growing at a headlong pace, so renewables have to move at breakneck speed just to keep up. Eating into the market share of fossil fuels is even harder. Still, renewables are proving to be more nimble than the fossil-fuel incumbents at actually getting new electrons flowing.

Almost all of the increase in global emissions over the past decade came from the electricity grids of Asia's two biggest economies.

Look past the cavalcade of headlines coming out of Washington and you can glimpse that mega-trend heading into reverse right now. **©BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

Insights from ancient times echo in a turbulent world

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Recently, Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada delivered a talk on rupture to rapturous applause. At Davos, Carney's attention-getting point was about the end of the international "rules-based order" and its replacement by "might is right." In his view, this rupture is real and irrevocable and demands both individual and collective action by "middle powers." Deserving, he has been praised for his courage and clear-headed reading of realpolitik. Carney suggested that Thucydides's aphorism that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" need not be considered inevitable in this new order.

Writing about 2,400 years ago, Thucydides, a historian and general in ancient Greece, offered profound insights into the nuanced interplay of national power and human nature. In his work, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, he delves into the conflict between Athens (a naval great power) and Sparta (a land-based great power). Through a series of dialogues and debates, he shows

cases the nature of discourse between Athens and other Greek city-states of the time. In the Melian dialogue, for instance, he presents Athens as an unapologetic hegemon and the neutral state of Melos as a principled though naïve city-state. The Melian debate features two Athenian politicians with differing points of view arguing about whether to eliminate the entire population of Melos.

A critical and deep reading of Thucydides reveals that he had a nuanced view of the use of power. He did believe that fear, honour and self-interest were the primary drivers of human nature and international relationships. He also believed that the consequences of disregarding moral imperatives led to conflicts, humanitarian crises and a loss of credibility.

In his speech, Carney invited all middle powers to form a coalition that would join together to deal with the rupture he spoke of. This affords a pragmatic middle-ground between pursuing national self-interest and international relationships based on values. This notion is a page drawn directly from Thucydides. Sparta leveraged its military capabilities and also formed a coalition called the Peloponnesian League with formidable allies to defend against Athenian expansion.

Thucydides believed that these types of alliances were critical and the only way to effectively counter a great power; he also considered them subject to shifting loyalties.

Thomas Hobbes, who wrote the famous book *Leviathan*, is cut from the same cloth as Thucydides. In 1639, Hobbes produced the first English translation of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Echoing Thucydides, Hobbes suggested that human nature was driven by fear, glory and competition. Both see strength and power as necessary but ultimately self-defeating when they go unchecked.

As the US declined to rule out the use of force in its attempted takeover of Greenland, the middle powers of Denmark, France, Germany and Canada backed its territorial integrity. Going beyond rhetoric, many of them also moved military forces to Greenland. If push had indeed come to shove, they were ready to invoke Article 5, the collective defence clause of Nato. The rest of Nato against America would indeed

have ruptured the trans-Atlantic alliance. At Davos, however, Trump climbed down. For now, Nato survives.

Carney asserted that we have entered a world of great power rivalry with few constraints. To be sure, we are in a period of 'manthan' or churn. While the old order may

indeed be dead, it is unclear what the character of the new one will be. US President Donald Trump in Greenland and Chinese President Xi Jinping with rare earth metals are discovering that the threat of the use of power is more effective than its actual use. But once this leverage is used, it tends to lose its potency.

Carney has warned against being complacent about this, but one possibility is that we do indeed return to a modified multilateral world order. This may involve stricter rules on immigration and a greater tolerance of self-interest. Some institutions like the International Monetary Fund and United Nations Security Council could reform and continue, while others like the

World Bank and International Court of Justice could wither or die. An alternative is that we move fully into great power rivalry with middle powers aligned as they each deem fit on issues. Most post-war institutions would no longer be needed. Several specialized agencies of the UN, such as those set up for health, labour and food and agriculture, would lose their relevance. Uncertainty would surround the cost of trade. Will there be relief from frictions? Would they settle at a more benign level, even if that is higher than the base of recent decades?

For quite some time, India has fashioned its foreign policy as a swing power in the same way as Carney described. It has aligned with the Global South including China on issues of agricultural trade for instance and with the West on issues of military strategy in the Indo-Pacific. India has friendly relations with both democratic countries and non-democratic ones like the UAE, Russia and Iran. It is a founding member of Brics and an enthusiastic member of the G-20. Contrary to what Carney said, in the event of full-blown great power rivalry, middle powers like India may not have the luxury of retaining their issue-based alignment.

P.S: "History is philosophy teaching by example," said Thucydides.

Carney's Davos speech invoked Thucydides but history does not reward unchecked power

Demographic shift

State finances reflect the rapid transition

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) latest report on state finances, released last week, shows that the consolidated fiscal deficit of the states widened to 3.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024-25 after three years of consolidation. Factors responsible for this are slower revenue growth and higher capital expenditure. States have budgeted for the same level of fiscal deficit this financial year too. While the quality of expenditure has improved with the capital outlay rising and revenue expenditure compressed, this adjustment has relied on central support and borrowing. Revenue vulnerabilities persist due to the narrow concentration of the states' own tax bases. It will also be worth watching how the reduction in rates of goods and services tax plays out. A variety of cyclical and structural factors drive state finances. One such factor with long-term implications is demographics. The RBI has done well to focus on this aspect.

Nationally, the working-age population is expected to peak around 2031, but several states have already crossed that point. By 2036, more than half the Indian states will have over 15 per cent of their population aged 60 and above. Kerala is projected to cross 22 per cent, with Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh close behind. These states are ageing faster than their finances can adjust. Ageing is beginning to show up in fiscal outcomes. States with an ageing population face weaker revenue prospects with a gradual erosion in the tax base. However, expenditure pressures are rising. Pension spending has become a dominant component of social-sector expenditure in ageing states, accounting for close to 30 per cent in several cases. This has reduced the fiscal space for health, education, and capital investment, even as health care needs rise sharply with age. The debt position also reflects demographic stress. Ageing states tend to have a higher ratio of debt to gross state domestic product (GSDP) and heavier interest burdens because slower revenue growth and rising committed spending. These pressures could become more binding over time.

Younger states face a different challenge. States such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan will continue adding to the working-age population well beyond 2031, in some cases into the 2050s. However, these states remain fiscally weaker, with lower own-revenue capacity and higher dependence on central transfers. States face different kinds of challenges. Younger states, for instance, bear the cost of educating and skilling future workers. Migration partially offsets labour shortages in ageing states and absorbs surplus labour from younger ones, but fiscal systems do not reflect this reality. The costs of urban infrastructure, housing, health care, and transport fall on destination states, while source states lose part of their future tax base. As the report suggests, existing fiscal frameworks may not be well suited to these divergent demographic trajectories.

Further, simply increasing expenditure on skilling or human capital will not resolve the structural fiscal effects of ageing. Policy responses need to be explicit and targeted. Transfers by Finance Commissions can incorporate ageing and old-age dependency alongside population and income criteria. Pension systems require firm institutional rules that prevent the accumulation of unfunded future liabilities. Migration, female labour force participation, and longer working lives could address the problem to some extent. More broadly, both the Union and state governments need to create the fiscal capacity to deal with emerging challenges, including ageing. The debt stock of the states is expected to increase to 29.2 per cent of GDP this year. A high cost of debt servicing limits state capacity and can be a drag on long-term growth.

Strategic alliance

Pax Silica can reshape global tech supply chain

The newly appointed United States (US) ambassador to India, Sergio Gor, has said that India will soon be invited to join Pax Silica. Launched in December last year, Pax Silica is a US-led strategic bloc aimed at securing resilient supply chains for silicon, semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructure, and critical minerals. With founding members including Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom (UK), Israel, and Singapore, and the recent additions of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) this month, the initiative extends beyond chipmaking to include trusted access to energy, capital, and financing for advanced technologies, reflecting Washington's broader effort to diversify dependencies away from China. For India, the attraction is clear. The pandemic and subsequent trade disruption exposed the risks of over-reliance on a single supplier. China's recent restrictions on rare-earth exports have affected Indian automobile and electronics manufacturers, underlining these vulnerabilities. Despite having an estimated 8.5 million tonnes of rare-earth reserves, India still imports about 93 per cent of its requirements from China. India's rare-earth production accounts for less than 1 per cent of global output even as it holds one of the world's largest reserve bases.

The bloc brings together complementary strengths. The US and Japan can provide technological leverage while South Korea dominates chip manufacturing. The Netherlands anchors advanced lithography, and Australia supplies critical inputs such as lithium and rare earths. The UK, Israel, and Singapore add depth in AI software and cybersecurity while recent entrants Qatar and the UAE contribute deep pools of sovereign capital to finance AI systems. India is also laying the foundations of a semiconductor ecosystem. Under the India Semiconductor Mission, the government has approved 10 projects with investment worth ₹1.6 trillion, supported by incentives of around ₹76,000 crore. These include fabrication units, compound semiconductor plants, and 23 chip-design projects aimed at building local capabilities. Global firms such as Micron have announced investment while Indian companies, including the Tata group, are entering chip manufacturing.

These efforts, though still at an early stage, align well with Pax Silica's objectives of building trusted and diversified supply chains. India's value proposition is not limited to manufacturing. Its digital public infrastructure, large domestic market, and rapidly expanding AI ecosystem give it scale that many existing members lack. Tighter US visa regimes could push many highly trained Indian engineers back home, potentially boosting the domestic AI and semiconductor industries if the ecosystem can absorb them productively. India would also be the first developing economy in the bloc. The larger challenge lies in converting geopolitical alignment into real industrial capability. Semiconductor fabrication and rare-earth processing require large capital, a stable power supply, water resources, and strong environmental safeguards. Membership in Pax Silica can provide access to technology, finance, and markets, but it cannot substitute for domestic reforms, faster project execution, and regulatory clarity. As global supply chains gradually bifurcate between China-led and Pax Silica-led systems, India will need to navigate expectations carefully by protecting its industries through calibrated support while remaining compatible with the bloc's rules and norms. Strategic alignment may open the door, but sustained competitiveness will ultimately depend on execution at home.

What the Budget must present

Its primary drivers should be the difficult global environment, inadequate manufacturing growth, and the urgency of job creation

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Principal borrowings of the central government*

As a percentage of	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
GDP	2.9	4.3	8.7	5.8	5.6	5.4	4.8	4.2
Net household financial savings	37.2	55.8	74.0	79.7	112.8	105.0	NA	NA
Central govt capital expenditure	111.2	165.7	262.3	163.5	143.5	130.0	119.4	96.7

*Market borrowings and securities against small savings actuals as 24-25RE/25-26BE
Source: Budget at a glance & National Accounts Statistics

A few days from now, Nirmala Sitharaman, in her seventh year as Minister for Finance, will present the Union Budget. Judging by the past, a long part of the presentation will be a narration of programmatic changes in schemes that are not the direct responsibility of the finance ministry but of other ministries. What really matters are the decisions presented in the Budget about the overall expenditure of the government, how it will be funded, and the proposed changes in taxation. That part of the presentation — the macroeconomic and fiscal impact — is what truly matters.

One crucial decision of macroeconomic significance is the scale of the budget deficit. How it is financed determines the accumulated liability of the government. In the past Budget presentations, the focus has tended to be on the fiscal deficit as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). The government has now shifted its goal from the annual rate of fiscal deficit to the overall debt-to-GDP ratio.

The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act of 2003 specified a 2024-25 goal for the overall debt-to-GDP ratio of 60 per cent, of which 40 per cent would be for the Centre and 20 per cent for the states. As against this, the overall debt-to-GDP ratio at present is around 80 per cent, with the Centre's share at around 57 per cent as of March 2024 and remaining around this level since then. Note also that the asset-to-liability ratio of the Central government, which had reached 100 per cent in the mid-60s and the early '80s, is now around 45 per cent.

Part of the explanation lies in the sharp rise in the Covid year; the debt-to-GDP ratio rose to 87.7 per cent by March 2021. But do note that the pre-Covid year level in March 2020 was 75.1 per cent, which was already well above the FRBM target. Hence, a crucial element in the Budget is the Central government's debt-to-GDP ratio set for 2026-27, as well as a medium-term goal for 2030, which would indicate a decisive step towards the FRBM targets.

The shift of emphasis from the annual fiscal deficit to the stock of debt-to-GDP is understandable. However, the annual fiscal deficit still matters because the manner in which it is financed has a significant impact on the private sector. The principal device used by the Central and state governments is market borrowing, and most of it is purchased and held by banks, insurance companies, and other financial institutions. The other major device used is a set of small savings schemes. The direct and indirect source of finance for both these devices is essentially households. Hence, one should look at how much of the net financial savings of households are absorbed by the Central and state governments to cover their deficit.

The table shows some relevant percentages in recent years. There was sharp upward shift in market and small savings borrowings by the Central government in the years leading up to the pandemic. Since then, there has been a decline as a percentage of GDP, but it still remains higher than the level in 2018-19.

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NITIN DESAI

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More power to 'People India' and Middle India

India's superpower is her people. Flawed as we all are — loud-talking, rule-breaking, system-gaming, hierarchy-creating — Indians are super hard-working. Of course, disguised unemployment exists, but people work sincerely, even at jobs that don't need to exist — like three people and a handheld scanner at a toll booth, as backup for system malfunctions. Household savings and consumption propel the economy but Indians are generally uncomplaining (different from grumbling), despite the many daily challenges and discomforts from below-par public goods and living conditions. They are very optimistic about the future, which blunts the metric of "optimism about the future," a staple in consumer confidence surveys.

Our study, *Drivers of Destiny*, among the lower-income youth that popular media excludes in its celebratory reporting of Gen Z, says: "Your-Alpha-India showed that the paucity of regular and steady-income jobs with real career paths is not blamed on government failure but accepted as caused by 'the market', and responded to by learning more skills and finding more earning avenues, even as they keep studying for the illusory pot of gold on the horizon, the government job."

The authors of the book *A Sixth Humanity* say that India is a self-aware, even self-flagellating state, but not always self-correcting one. While the state has its limitations, Indian people continuously self-correct, even if the self-correction is to adjust aspirations downwards or expand time horizons for goals or craft a portfolio that works, like balancing household budgets or prioritising children's education over their own needs.

Credit must also go to the state for showing continuous forward movement on some count or the

other. New physical and blockbuster digital infrastructure, (in part by telcos who have chosen to serve the mass market), a modernised and expanded welfare state offering more individual dignity, e-government services, all achieved in less than one generation. Even education has had its moments.

All this with steady economic growth has now created a group that merits special attention — the "have-somes", comprising 20 to 30 per cent of households above the poorest 20 per cent and ripe for accelerating its own progress and aiding India's propulsion. Increasingly evident are its smarts, learnability, energy and relentless pursuit of improvement in life conditions. The top half of India's socio-economic pyramid is well integrated into the market economy and harbours many tiers of middle class. The poorest 20 per cent are the target of these highly feted medical practices, coming through instances of even basic medicines, equipment, and bed charges being marked up exorbitantly. When patients are presented with mind-boggling, itemised bills at the end of the stay, it is nearly impossible to decode or contest them. And yet many

ownership between the lowest 20 per cent and the next 20 per cent (Household Consumption Expenditure Survey data). This jump in percentage points, for urban (U) and rural (R) India is 25U/17R for TVs, 14U/14R for two-wheelers, 8U/11R for refrigerators (the ultimate productivity- and savings-improving item), 5U/3R for washing machines, and 27U/20R for pucca housing.

While recent data on education levels by income is not available, anecdotally, a lot of the increase in college enrolment that official data shows (with women students equalling men in number) is from the gen-next of this group, "pandav mein padh rahi hai" parents say. They see education as critical for moving children to a

higher orbit of life. Women's importance as contributors to income is higher in this group and it decreases as household incomes increase. There are also microentrepreneurs and own-account workers, who, unlike in the past for this group, have higher levels of school education, aided tremendously by digital literacy and a new business acumen. We see them more in urban India where the opportunities are greater. The dog walker who mines his customer base offering grooming for an extra fee, the tailor who can alter anything to specs, the gig workers who have skilled themselves in multiple cuisines, beauticians who know the latest buzz words, delivery folk who source customers through the bigger platforms, and then run mini services themselves with WhatsApp and a friend's network.

Even in rural India, as the data shows, this group is swapping casual labour for own-account work or micro business. They do not need teaching on what to do or government-driven skill improvement programmes, or business education programmes, or government-created marketplaces. They have figured that out themselves, and there is a Lilliput supply catering to their demand. What they need is financial enablement, innovated for this non-collateral, service-business, self-employed world. Loans for continuing education, as they need to continuously upskill, durables for more productivity, house improvement loans in frequent small tranches. Better public transport, more amenities, improved physical infrastructure are cost-saving, productivity-enhancing, and hence, earnings multipliers. The genuine and pseudo middle classes have powered India's growth so far. Now, Middle India is the child that needs attention.

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Unhealthy truths about private medicine



NEHA BHATT

It is a truth universally acknowledged that seeking private medical care in India, much like in countries that rely heavily on corporatised healthcare, can be deeply injurious to one's financial health. This is hardly surprising in a system where government health expenditure remains below 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), while a significant share of total health spending is paid out of pocket by patients desperate to beat illness.

As a society, we have become so accustomed to shelling out large sums of money for healthcare that few protest or

ask questions. Meanwhile, the public-private partnership (PPP) model is only becoming more pervasive, extending its influence into medical education as well. *Games Hospitals Play: Decoding Your Private Healthcare Experience*, by Abantika Ghosh, a health journalist and public policy professional, is a call to action for everyone who believes health should not be treated as a commodity.

We live in a time when nearly every hospital visit is a reminder that the side-effects of inflated bills are often long-term, with stories of patients reeling under medical debt crushing common, and no cure in sight. It is this all-too-familiar insecurity that people feel about private hospitals that inspired the book, Ms Ghosh writes.

We know that India operates in a complex space where public health infrastructure is unable to keep pace with its population, and the wide leash given to private players to fill that void, despite repeated calls for stronger regu-

lation, has sent costs spiralling out of control. This Covid-19 pandemic exposed this reality even more starkly.

Meanwhile, the government insurance scheme to rope in private hospitals in public healthcare, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY), is fraught with problems. Over 400 million Indians — the missing middle — have no health insurance.

The book tracks questions that are familiar, but remain important: Can I trust private hospitals? How does insurance really play out? Why do we end up paying far more than initially imagined? How much of it is legal, and how much of it unethical? There are no easy answers here, and while Ms Ghosh does not provide a ready prescription, she meticulously exposes the corrupt and shadowy workings of the industry.

Mining court documents, insider accounts and investigative reports, she unpacks the ways in which the medical ecosystem has been shaped by market

forces and profit-driven modern practices, where luxury healthcare of the highest order can be bought with deep pockets even as millions suffer for lack of access to proper medical care.

In a slim volume, the book examines key aspects of the role private hospitals play in a country with a steadily rising disease burden. It is part playbook — offering a helpful guide on how to navigate the complex web of medical care and what to be watchful for — and part revelation, with dozens of voices exposing dubious business practices, including patients, doctors, hospital officials and medical experts.

The devil, as always, is in the details. Ms Ghosh examines hospital billing practices, coming through instances of even basic medicines, equipment, and bed charges being marked up exorbitantly. When patients are presented with mind-boggling, itemised bills at the end of the stay, it is nearly impossible to decode or contest them. And yet many

do. Ms Ghosh brings together some of the landmark cases that have helped spark a wider conversation around this long-standing issue.

Going deep into the more complex issue of how surgeries are billed to serve the interests of private hospitals, including "surge pricing," a urologist confirms what we have long believed: Handsomely paid surgeons are often under pressure from hospital administrators to meet high targets by pushing for unnecessary and "emergency" surgeries. She also examines the phenomenon of the "star doctor" as the proverbial golden goose, with patients charged a premium for the expertise of these highly feted medical professionals who may not even be present during the said surgery, but it serves as the perfect business model that hospitals profit heavily from.

Over treatment, preventive health check-ups as money spinners, tricky referrals from one doctor to another, and



Games Hospitals Play: Decoding Your Private Healthcare Experience by Abantika Ghosh Published by Bloomsbury India 199 pages ₹699

The reviewer is a Delhi-based independent journalist

the popular "multidisciplinary approach" — which sounds like a sensible strategy, but is far less straightforward in practice — all come under scrutiny.

She also analyses how hospital packages, over-testing, monitoring and post-hospitalisation at-home care have emerged as tools to draw patients deeper into the system. The book is most engaging when it cautions the reader with behind-the-scenes accounts and insider perspectives. Where it stumbles is in pulling these strands into a cohesive narrative that remains consistently compelling, without being bogged down by details that distract from the central issues. That said, for anyone curious about how hospitals actually work, beyond what's visible to patients, this is well worth reading.



A thought for today

I am an expression of the divine, just like a peach is, just like a fish is. I have a right to be this way

ALICE WALKER, The Colour Purple

Messaging The Temple

U'khand govt & state BJP must nix Badri-Kedar committee's idea of banning access to non-Hindus

Badri-Kedar temple committee (BKTC) chairman and Uttarakhand BJP spokesperson Hemant Dwivedi's proposal to bar non-Hindus from two of Hinduism's most venerated temples, Kedarnath and Badrinath, is dangerous. Here's why.

For context, priests' communities have upped the ante on their longstanding demand to wrest control of Hindu places of worship from state jurisdiction. Recall that in 2021 Uttarakhand govt junked its Char Dham Devasthanam Board Act, passed in 2019 - that sought to bring 51 temples under a single management board - following stiff opposition from Hindu clergy, individual temple managements and VHP. In the first place, state control on Hindu shrines was exerted to counter casteism in temples in independent India - exactly to counter this kind of bar to access, as suggested by orthodoxes such as BKTC's. Access for all in Hindu temples is a battle-hard-won.

Given this, now for a state-controlled body *conservatoire* to Uttarakhand govt to make a considered announcement to ban non-Hindus multiplies the seriousness of what's at stake. It is an unconstitutional proposal. In the name of 'tradition', as was argued for the proposal to bar non-Hindus from Haridwar's ghats days ago, the state cannot allow a return to hoary segregationist practices, and remain wilfully blind to law and constitutional morality.

BKTC is baiting govt at a time UCC is an experiment in Uttarakhand. And at a time when pilgrimages are central to its cultural and political messaging, neatly folded into Hindutva politics. Pilgrimage tourism is a red hot growth sector, and Uttarakhand is a major player. That should prompt the state, and all states hosting major pilgrimage centres, to open temple doors wider still. The fight over Sabarimala is a case in point. But when a rich temple trust wants to turn back the clock by centuries, it is detrimental to the big tent idea of a 'developed India'. Kedarnath hosted almost 18L pilgrims in 2025, Badrinath 16L. Foreign arrivals, PIOs & NRIs included, were fewer than 2,000 - that should increase, dollar spends mean more bang per buck.

Supreme Court, were it to hear the constitutionality of this proposal, would surely strike it down. But it shouldn't come to that. Uttarakhand govt and state BJP should nix the temple committee's proposal - and send a message.

VonDerful Trade Deal?

We'll have to see. But that EU's finally so close to a pact with India shows how much Trump has rattled it

Chief guest at R-Day parade, EU's chief bureaucrat, Ursula von der Leyen, remarked yesterday that a successful India would be the world better. Only recently, EU was dissing India for buying Russian energy, while buying it itself. And, BTW, it took EU and India 18 years - a very long time even for two entities infamous for their bureaucracies - to get close to a trade deal, expected to be finalised today.

To basics: at \$136.5bn in 2024-25, EU is already India's largest goods trading partner. The deal, per some reports, may see India cutting tariffs sharply on EU-made cars. India may get zero-duty access for its labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, apparel and gems.

Even EU's trade barriers - CBAMs aka green export rules - are apparently in final stages of resolution. If pushed over the finishing line, this would be a pretty big deal, with plenty for both parties to be happy about. It may goad Trump - to rage about India and Europe or to do a deal with India or both.

But give credit to Trump for being the reason the deal may get done. As Davos showed, the Euro-Atlantic alliance is strained like never before, forcing the European bloc to wake up and smell the coffee and chai. Gone are those comfy days when American military muscle would backstop Europe, while Brussels elite would sip wine and admonish the Global South - sometimes India included - for failing on democracy and human rights. Russia's war in Ukraine, and now the Trump jolt, have finally got EU to start thinking of an independent strategic security and foreign policy.

But is this a passing phase to weather a Trump White House? Time will tell. Barring the Viktor Orbans, EU's clear there cannot be any truck with Russia in the foreseeable future, while China is now on the suspect watchlist. Interestingly, EU is willing to look past India's ties with Russia, because Brussels now needs some wins, as does India, of course. Welcome to realism EU, and do note that there's plenty of grey here. You always knew this. But pragmatism can now replace preaching.

Manali trance

Indian tourists mistake bad weather forecast for a welcome sign

Anil Abraham



Kamala is upset with me because we were the only ones without holiday plans. "Everyone is going somewhere - you don't have any get-up-and-go!" I got up to go. Because I knew one of those Trump-type rambling rants was about to begin - a lot of incoherent words and no valid point. She had set her mind on Kullu-Manali even though I had read the weather report and told her that inclement weather was predicted. Storm clouds were gathering now, but in our living room instead.

To save my skin I scrolled through social media and showed her posts of long snaking queues of cars stuck in the snow on the highway between Kullu and Manali. Bored stiff and irritable people upset that their promised weekend was quite literally a road trip, with no hope of reaching the destination. "It's about the journey, not the destination!" she informed me, peeping at the philosophy forward from Gud Morning Govindappa.

I'm very intolerant of the milling masses - but Kamala refuses to be cowed by crowds. The more the merrier, is her motto. And so every long weekend we find ourselves standing in a queue to pay our respects to one more over-worked god or weary hill station or bored beach - all filled with like-minded hapless hundreds trying to get a wow moment for an Insta pic. Sitting in a cubicle in front of a screen fulfilling the 70-hour week as a corporate minion is apparently not enough - the new trend is to sit in a car frozen in a traffic jam staring at another window. Elon Musk just needs to get a travel influencer to post pictures from Mars with a catchy caption like 'Mars-Set Destination' and the insatiable Indian will land there carrying *thepalas* and *chakhis* and hoping to find a *masala* chai stall.

Even with dire predictions of snow, the Indian tourist heads to destinations where all men have boldly gone before. Even ICE in America res not deter him from wandering into Trump territory. We need to learn lessons from one lone penguin who decided to break away from the tribe and head to a less crowded destination. Now that Sunita Williams has been grounded, there is space for the Great Indian traveller to discover unsullied territory, then proceed to clutter it with chaos and confusion.

Letter To Finance Minister

Among things that budget can fix, are rules for capital gains tax & withholding tax. FM must make these simple & predictable. Foreign investors, who have been taking their money out, value clarity

Duvvuri Subbarao



Dear finance minister, I know you are drowning in advice from a billion Indians on what to do in the budget. I am wary of adding to your burden, but having made this intrusion an annual habit, I am unable to resist the temptation. So, please bear with me.

Before I get into business, let me congratulate you on becoming the longest continuously serving finance minister in independent India. You can justifiably be proud of this accomplishment. Longevity in such a politically demanding office is no mean feat. The knowledge, wisdom and political antennae that come with experience are undeniable assets.

But I must also offer a gentle caution: longevity can breed routinisation. Budgets risk becoming incremental exercises - competently managed and fiscally prudent, maybe, but lacking out-of-the-box thinking or bold ideas.

Indeed, a recurring criticism of your budgets has been precisely that: they lack zing. Each budget is a stand-alone piece - some familiar shibboleths and a sprinkling of initiatives, but without a compelling unifying vision. There is sound arithmetic, but no animating idea. Allow me, therefore, to offer a suggestion.

FM has set the grand aspiration of Viksit Bharat: India becoming a developed country by the centenary of Independence in 2047. It is an evocative phrase, but so far it has remained just that - a phrase. We've heard little about what goes just by "developed", how it proposes to get there, or what trade-offs that journey might entail.

Why not seize the opportunity of this budget to lay out the big picture of Viksit Bharat and situate your annual budgets within the overarching roadmap to that goal?

Having set that big picture, you can then move on to the business at hand: the budget for fiscal year 2026-27.

To paraphrase Charles Dickens, this is the best of times, this is also the worst of times. On the positive side, macroeconomic numbers look reassuring. Growth is upwards of 7%, inflation is benign, external deficit is low, and corporate and bank balance sheets

are healthier than they have been in a long time. That is cause for cheer.

On the flipside, there are concerns about the quality of growth. Productivity growth is disappointing. Private investment is sluggish. Employment generation remains slow, especially for the youth. Manufacturing has not emerged as the labour-absorbing engine we had hoped it would become. High and rising tariffs sit awkwardly with our ambition to integrate into global value chains. Add to this a world fractured by geopolitical tensions, protectionism and supply-chain realignments, and the comfort offered by headline numbers begins to dissipate.

The task before you, therefore, is to use today's relative macroeconomic comfort to address structural vulnerabilities and make the economy more robust.

One early warning signal you should not ignore is capital outflows. Foreign investors have been taking money out of India, driven by both push and pull factors. Higher interest rates in advanced economies and the allure of investment in AI are pulling capital away.

But it is the push factors that should concern you more. Our own policy choices matter. Repeated tinkering with capital gains taxation, combined with a complex and often unpredictable withholding tax regime, has eroded policy credibility. Investors value not just returns, but clarity and stability. If India wants stable, long-term capital rather than volatile flows, it may be time to rethink both capital gains and withholding taxes - not to offer concessions, but to restore simplicity, predictability and trust.

On the fiscal front, your decision to shift the policy anchor from the fiscal deficit to a debt-to-GDP ratio is conceptually sound. Debt sustainability is, after all, what ultimately matters. But in making this transition, please do not lose sight of an older, and still very relevant,

metric: revenue deficit. For reasons that are not entirely clear, it has fallen off the radar.

A govt that borrows to invest is very different from one that borrows to consume. Reducing revenue deficit remains the most credible signal of fiscal responsibility and intergenerational equity. Debt targeting without attention to the composition of expenditure risks missing the wood for the trees.

Let me return to Viksit Bharat. As a trained economist, you know that becoming a developed country is not just about crossing a per capita income threshold. It is about creating productive jobs, raising human capital, improving state capacity, reducing inequality and ensuring that growth is both sustainable and inclusive. None of this will happen by accident, and none of it will happen through annual budgets that are disconnected from a longer-term plan.

Why not announce in this budget your intention to publish a medium-term fiscal and growth strategy explicitly aligned with the goal of Viksit Bharat? Such a framework will serve two purposes. It will impose coherence and discipline on successive budgets, including this one. And it will allow us, the public, to hold govt to account - not on one-off announcements, but on progress along a clearly articulated path.

Madam, I recognise the tough fiscal and political constraints under which you operate. You have the unenviable task of making hard choices to secure the economy's long-term health, yet you must even if it entails short-term costs. But that is precisely why we elect leaders - to make difficult choices.

The Indian economy has promise. It is your task to make it deliver on that promise. My best wishes. Ma'am, for every success.

former governor, RBI



The Golden Rule: Those With The Gold Make The Rules

Bharat's ancient epics also spell out what Mark Carney's speech at Davos did. If India operates without illusions and keeps its options open today, that's not fence-sitting, but management of uncertainty

Ashwin Sanghi



The Mark Carney speech at Davos hit like a bombshell. In what felt like a rare moment of straight talk from a Western leader, Canada's PM admitted something that India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar has been pointing out for years: The so-called "international rules-based order" has a big dose of hypocrisy baked in.

Carney put it plainly: "We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves while conventionally, law applied with varying rigour, depending on the identity of the accused or the victim."

This statement was rich coming from a country that had been part of the cozy club that enjoyed the lopsided order's fruits. But Carney was merely spelling out the golden rule: Those with the gold make the rules. If any country gets this instinctively, it's India.

Erstwhile colonies like ours have been living under varying shades of this so-called "rules-based order" for centuries. British Raj used to sell its conquests as a noble mission: it was "civilising" the backward natives, modernising society, bringing law and order, railways, and Enlightenment values.

Same story with the Spanish in the Americas: They wrapped their land grabs and exploitation in the language of spreading Christ's salvation. Every empire needs a pretty alibi to make the ugly reality palatable.

India does not of course need modern geopolitics to learn how rules are bent by the powerful. Bharat's ancient epics hit this truth hard and straight. In the Mahabharata, there were supposed rules of conflict - dharma on the

battlefield. But when winning mattered more, those rules got tossed aside.

Bhisma was tricked by Shikhandi, Dron was broken by a lie about his son, Karn was hit while helpless fixing his wheel, and Duryodhan was finished with an illegal high strike. Bottom line? Rules last only until the powerful find them inconvenient. Then force wins, and the codebooks or breaks.

Ancient Indian history too is replete with such examples. Invaders rarely announced themselves as plunderers; they arrived bearing a so-called higher purpose. Mahmud of Ghazni styled himself a champion of faith to his biographers, even as his repeated raids were meticulously aimed at temple treasures.

Even Ashok - now remembered as Ashoka the Great - ascended the Mauryan throne by eliminating numerous rival claimants. The Kalinga carnage was just a culmination of his power grab. Only after attaining uncontested dominance did Ashoka turn to dharma, renegeing conquest as remorse and empire as moral guardianship.

"What's new?" you may ask. What's new is the discarding of pretence.

And for that candid war should thank Donald Trump.

George W Bush sent his team to lobby hard at UN, waving the WMD card and rounding up a "coalition of the willing" to make the Iraq invasion look legit. It was a charade - deeply misleading - but he played the game, pretending that international approval mattered.

Trump? He just

skips the whole script. No UN speeches, no coalition-building, no diplomatic theatre. He doesn't ask permission or try to convince anyone. He simply does what he wants. And this includes sharing personal communication from foreign leaders like Macron - messages that reveal Europe's hypocrisy of looking away in Syria and Iran while worrying about Greenland.

In the Trump world, Venezuela and Iran are mere oil reservoirs, not polity issues. Greenland is simply a mineral-rich Arctic chessboard. Gaza is reduced to a PowerPoint presentation of beachfront potential. The weaknesses of neighbours and Nato allies are leveraged in a strategic calculus. The vocabulary has shifted decisively - from values to valuation. This bluntness unsettles many because it punctures a comforting illusion of principles. They forget that the only unwavering principle of power is to shut acting on principle.

For India, this is neither a moment for outrage nor for romantic nostalgia about a fairer global order that never truly existed. Bharat understands - instinctively and historically - that moral language usually follows power rather than restrains it. This is civilisational memory. Chanakya articulated it with unsparring clarity in the Arthashastra, where alliances are provisional, treaties are tools, and ethical claims are subordinate to the survival of the state.

India's foreign policy must continue to reflect this absence of illusion. India must continue sourcing cheap Russian energy despite Western discomfort, engage Israel while calling for restraint in Gaza, and avoid binary alignments over Ukraine. It must continue signing FTAs while political cycles play out in Washington, manage its border even as it talks to China, and deepen partnerships in West Asia while strategically evaluating Trump's Board of Peace. It will simply be India operating without illusions - aware that power sets the terms and that rules are negotiable.

And no, this is not fence-sitting but the management of uncertainty. India must keep its options open because experience tells us that commitments harden faster than principles. In a world where rules dissolve under pressure, flexibility is the only durable advantage.

Sanghi is author of several works of fiction

Calvin & Hobbes



Anger And Hatred Are Habits, Not Our True Selves

The XIV Dalai Lama

Among the emotions that disturb our peace of mind, few are as harmful as anger and hatred. These powerful feelings not only cause suffering within but often hurt those around us. They cloud our judgment, damage relationships, and strip away the calm and clarity needed to respond wisely to life's challenges.

Anger arises when our desires are blocked, our pride is wounded, or our expectations go unmet. In those moments, the mind narrows. We exaggerate faults of others and distort reality. Anger can feel justified - even righteous - but it blinds us to what is truly helpful.

Ask yourself: when you are angry, are you at peace? Of course not. Anger agitates the heart and unsettles the mind. It brings discomfort to the body and disturbs emotional balance. Yet sometimes we cling to it, imagining it

gives us strength. But real strength lies in patience, clarity, and compassion. Anger is easy - it's a reaction. Responding with calm understanding requires discipline and courage.

People often ask, "But what if someone treats me unfairly? Isn't anger natural?" Yes, anger may arise - but that does not make it helpful. Reacting with anger usually adds fuel to conflict rather than resolving it. We can train the mind to respond with compassion and insight. Often, those who hurt others are themselves hurting - trapped in ignorance or fear.

Indian sage Shantideva said, "If something can be remedied, why be upset about it? And if it can't be remedied, what is the use of being upset?" This wisdom reminds us that anger is not necessary to take effective action. We can confront injustice with courage - without hatred.

Anger and hatred are habits, not our true selves. They arise from misunderstanding and ego-clinging. With mindfulness and effort, they can be reduced and even transformed. The goal is not to suppress anger, but to understand it.

When we shine the light of awareness on it, it begins to dissolve. This is the heart of inner development: turning the mind from a source of suffering into a source of peace.

Patience is one of the most powerful antidotes to anger. It is not weakness. It is inner strength. It allows us to remain composed even when provoked, to pause rather than react, and to act with wisdom rather than impulse. Through patience, we begin to see others with compassion. We realise their unkind actions may come from their own struggles. With this insight, forgiveness becomes possible.

Another remedy is loving-kindness. It is the practice of directing thoughts of goodwill toward others, starting with ourselves. It softens the heart and helps us see the shared humanity in everyone. When we cultivate love, anger naturally fades away.

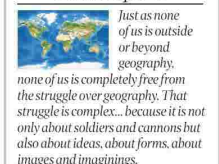
When we wish others well - even those who have harmed us - anger begins to lose its grip. This does not mean we condone bad behaviour; it means we choose to respond from heart rather than from hurt.

Loving-kindness reveals our shared humanity. Everyone seeks happiness and fears pain. Everyone makes mistakes. Seeing others through this lens, they cease to be 'enemies' and become fellow travellers on life's path.

Meditation is a powerful tool. By observing our thoughts and emotions without reacting, we create space in the mind. Meditation gives us the freedom to respond with wisdom, even in difficulty. Over time, it nurtures the inner peace that allows compassion to grow. If we want peace in the world, it must begin in our hearts. We cannot control others, but we can train our own minds. When anger arises, we can pause, breathe, and respond with awareness.

As told to Raju Mehrotra

Sacred space



Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex... because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, forms, norms, about images and imaginings.

Edward W Said

Every Indian is proud on Republic Day

Today we are celebrating the country's 77th Republic Day. During this time, the country has witnessed many phases, endured many struggles, and achieved immense accomplishments on the world stage. On this 77th Republic Day, the nation pledges that we will not rest on our laurels but will continue to move forward. Undoubtedly, the achievements are significant. Today, a grand military parade will be held on Kartavya Path, and it's worth remembering that our army is rapidly progressing on the path of self-reliance. The Indian Army is the fourth largest army in the world. Our army has the strength to crush enemies who threaten the country's security and peace, even in their own territory. The government and military leaders have sent a clear message that Operation Sindoor is still underway, and whenever there is a terrorist act, Operation Sindoor will strike like a hammer blow against those who harbor terrorism. This warning on Republic Day is for Pakistan as well as Bangladesh. The country's development journey indicates that our achievements so far are merely a milestone. In the next stages, India will move forward with high standards, profound responsibility, and innovation. Our goal is to be at the forefront. We also pledge that the country will prioritize progress in those areas where it is most needed. This means that progress will no longer be limited to the betterment of a few families, but will also focus on the transformation of every underprivileged and marginalized person. So far, the country has achieved many glorious milestones in its development journey. We have risen from the fifth largest economic power to the fourth largest economic power in the world. The day is not far when we will become the third largest economic power in the world. Our goal is to become fully developed and reach the top by the centenary of our independence. For this, we have included the cultural aspect in our development framework. In a turbulent global environment where bitterness is increasing and wars are causing bloodshed, India is the only country that speaks of morality and cultural awakening, and advocates for the path of peace and harmony. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sent a message to the world that "today, dialogue is needed, not war." Authoritarian leaders equipped with strong military power want to undermine the goal of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is one family), but India will always safeguard this goal, embracing non-alignment and diversity. Even in today's Republic Day celebrations, India has extended a hand to the European Union. Efforts to move away from the dominance of the dollar are underway, yet India's message remains: we will not offend anyone, nor are we anyone's enemy, but our aim is to avoid wrongdoing and remain committed to what is right. This Republic Day is a day for Indians to feel proud, knowing that India has reached a position where no major global decision can be made without its counsel. There is now a growing collective voice suggesting that India, which is leading the developing world, should be granted veto power and made a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This is undoubtedly a recognition of India's strength. India's power is now also expanding into space. Our proud ISRO will further strengthen India's position in the future. Today, every Indian is proud on this Republic Day.

—**Abhishek Vij**

UGC's new policy: Prioritizing students' mental health

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the regulatory body for higher education in India. The UGC has announced a new policy that aims to make it the responsibility of educational institutions not only to foster the academic development of students and young people but also to monitor and properly address their mental health. Statistics show that 10.6 percent of people in our country suffer from mental health problems. 7.3 percent of young people aged 18 to 29 are affected by serious mental health issues. In this country, where a large proportion of the population consists of young students, 7.6 percent of all suicides each year are committed by students. The new policy mandates that every higher education institution establish mental health and wellness centers. These centers will be staffed by professional mental health specialists. One faculty mentor will be appointed for every 500 students. To monitor students' mental health, the policy requires the appointment of one senior teacher for every 500 students and one student support assistant for every 100 students. A helpline number will also be available to provide students with 24/7 support. The UGC has also asked each institution to develop an action plan to prevent suicides. Students showing signs of depression or suffering from mental health issues should receive immediate and effective help. The policy suggests training institution staff, teachers, and students to recognize warning signs and take necessary steps promptly. All higher education institutions have been asked to provide practical suggestions for implementing this policy. The Supreme Court has also called for a unified policy on this matter. Now, let's consider the reality. Educational institutions already lack sufficient teachers. They are relying on temporary staff. Now, several new wings need to be established: One for digital education, another to implement the new policy of integrating arts and science education, and now an order to provide almost clinical-level mental healthcare. But where will the budget for all this come from? Recently, it has been observed that the UGC (University Grants Commission) is reducing its contribution and asking states to increase theirs. How can such ambitious programs be launched without securing the necessary funds? While the decision to prioritize mental health care is certainly welcome, this welfare initiative can only be successful if substantial financial resources are allocated to it.

How urban India is redefining the meaning of home

For decades, the idea of "home" in urban India followed a predictable script: ownership, permanence, and family inheritance. A home was not just shelter but security, status, and an asset meant to last generations. Today, that idea is undergoing a quiet but profound shift.

Across India's major cities, younger residents are redefining what home means. Rising property prices, changing work cultures, and evolving personal priorities are pushing urban dwellers away from traditional ownership models toward flexibility, mobility, and shared living.

One of the most visible changes is the growing acceptance of renting as a long-term choice rather than a temporary compromise. Millennials and Gen Z professionals, especially those working in technology, media, healthcare, and startups, increasingly prioritise location, commute time, and lifestyle over ownership. For many, the idea of committing to a 20-year housing loan feels restrictive in an economy defined by frequent job changes and relocation. This shift is also driven by affordability. In cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Delhi, property prices have far outpaced income growth. Even dual-income households struggle to afford centrally located homes. As a result, renters are choosing smaller, well-connected spaces closer to workplaces instead of distant suburbs that demand long commutes and social isolation.

Co-living has emerged as another response to these pressures. Once associated mainly with students, co-living spaces are now attracting young professionals



In cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Delhi, property prices have far outpaced income growth. Even dual-income households struggle to afford centrally located homes. As a result, renters are choosing smaller, well-connected spaces closer to workplaces instead of distant suburbs that demand long commutes and social isolation.

and even freelancers in their 30s. These arrangements

offer furnished rooms, shared amenities, and flexible leases, reducing both financial burden and emotional isolation in dense urban environments. Work-from-home and hybrid work models have further reshaped housing preferences.

The pandemic demonstrated that productivity does not always require physical offices, prompting many urban residents to prioritise space, ventilation, and neighbourhood quality. Homes are no longer just places to sleep; they now double as workspaces, fitness zones, and social hubs.

Interestingly, this evolution has also influenced architecture and interior design. Developers are experimenting with compact, multi-functional layouts, shared community spaces, and environmentally conscious materials. Balconies, natural light, and soundproofing have become selling points, reflecting

changing daily routines.

At a social level, the redefinition of home has softened traditional expectations. Marriage, family size, and cohabitation norms are shifting alongside housing choices. Single living, shared flats among friends, and delayed homeownership are no longer viewed as failures but as legitimate lifestyle decisions. However, challenges remain. Rent insecurity, lack of tenant protections, and unpredictable lease terms continue to affect urban renters. Policy frameworks have yet to fully adapt to this new reality, often favouring ownership over rental stability.

As India's cities continue to expand, the concept of home will likely become more fluid. Ownership may still hold emotional value, but flexibility, comfort, and accessibility are increasingly shaping how urban Indians define where — and how — they belong.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Freedom is not just the absence of fear, but the courage to stand for what is right.

—Rabindranath Tagore

The silent rise of digital fatigue and why it matters

In an age of constant connectivity, exhaustion is no longer just physical. Digital fatigue — a state of mental, emotional, and cognitive overload caused by prolonged screen exposure — is quietly becoming one of the defining challenges of modern life. Unlike burnout, which is often linked to excessive work hours, digital fatigue stems from uninterrupted interaction with screens, notifications, and online demands. Smartphones, laptops, tablets, and smart devices blur the boundaries between work, leisure, and rest, leaving little room for mental recovery. The signs are subtle but widespread. Difficulty concentrating, frequent headaches, eye strain, irritability, disrupted sleep, and a persistent sense of restlessness are increasingly common. Many people mistake these symptoms for stress or lack of discipline, unaware that constant digital stimulation is the underlying cause. Remote work has amplified the problem. Virtual meetings, emails, instant messages, and collaborative platforms have replaced in-person interactions, creating an environment where employees feel compelled to remain "available" at all times. The absence of physical cues — such as leaving an office — makes it harder to mentally disconnect. Social media further compounds digital fatigue. Endless scrolling exposes users to curated lives, breaking news, opinions, and advertising in rapid succession. The brain processes far more information than it evolved to handle, leading to emotional numbness or anxiety rather than engagement. Young people are particularly vulnerable. Students juggle online classes, assignments, social interaction, and entertainment on the same devices. Without clear boundaries, digital spaces dominate waking hours, reducing attention spans and affecting learning outcomes. Ironically, the tools designed to increase efficiency often reduce it.

Multitasking across apps and platforms fragments attention, lowering productivity and increasing mental strain. Studies suggest that frequent task-switching can significantly reduce cognitive performance while increasing feelings of exhaustion.

Why slow travel is gaining ground in a fast

For years, travel was measured by speed and volume. More destinations, tighter itineraries, quicker checklists. The modern traveller was expected to see everything, photograph everything, and move on. That model is now quietly giving way to something slower, deeper, and more intentional. Slow travel, once considered a niche preference, is steadily gaining mainstream appeal. It is not about luxury or laziness but about immersion — spending more time in fewer places, understanding local rhythms, and valuing experience over accumulation. Several factors are driving this shift. One is fatigue. The pressure to "make the most" of short trips often leaves travellers more exhausted than refreshed. Long airport queues, packed schedules, and constant movement reduce the very joy travel promises. Slow travel offers an antidote by prioritising rest, reflection, and connection. Another driver is the rise of remote work. Digital nomads and hybrid professionals are no longer bound by short leave windows. They can stay weeks or months in one location, blending work with exploration. This flexibility allows deeper engagement with local culture, food, language, and daily life.

Economic considerations also play a role. Extended stays often reduce costs through long-term rentals, local transport, and home cooking. Instead of spending heavily on tourist-centric services, slow travellers contribute directly to neighbourhood economies — small cafes, local markets, and family-run accommodations.

Environmental awareness is another factor reshaping travel habits. Frequent flights and over-tourism have raised concerns about sustainability. Slow travel reduces carbon footprints by limiting movement and encouraging land-based transport. Travellers



are increasingly conscious of their impact on fragile ecosystems and communities. Destinations benefit as well. Overcrowded cities and popular landmarks struggle under mass tourism, straining infrastructure and displacing residents. Slow travel spreads economic benefits more evenly and reduces seasonal pressure. Smaller towns and rural regions, often overlooked, gain visibility and income. Culturally, slow travel changes how stories are told. Instead of landmark photos, travellers share narratives — conversations with locals, routines discovered, traditions observed. These stories foster empathy rather than envy, curiosity rather than comparison. However, slow travel requires a mindset shift. It demands patience, openness, and a willingness to embrace uncertainty. Not every moment is curated or Instagram-ready. Language barriers, unfamiliar customs, and everyday inconveniences become part of the experience rather than obstacles. Technology plays a paradoxical role. While constant connectivity can distract, digital tools also enable slow travel through local discovery apps, community forums, and flexible booking platforms. Used intentionally, technology supports rather than dominates the journey.

As global mobility continues to evolve, slow travel reflects a broader cultural change. In a world obsessed with speed, choosing to move slowly is a deliberate act. It suggests that travel's true value lies not in distance covered, but in understanding gained.

Why public spaces matter more than ever in modern

Public spaces — parks, streets, libraries, markets, and plazas — form the social backbone of cities. They are the places where daily life unfolds outside private homes and workplaces. As cities grow denser and faster, the importance of these shared spaces has become increasingly clear. Well-designed public spaces promote inclusion. They are among the few environments accessible to everyone regardless of income, age, or background. A public park offers children a place to play, elders a place to rest, and workers a place to pause. These shared experiences foster social cohesion in otherwise fragmented urban environments. Public spaces also support mental and physical health. Access to open areas encourages walking, exercise, and outdoor activity. Exposure



to greenery reduces stress and improves mood, offering relief from the pressures of urban living. Cities with accessible public spaces often report higher

levels of community wellbeing. Economically, public spaces contribute more than is often acknowledged. Vibrant streets and squares attract foot traffic,

supporting local businesses and informal economies. Markets and public events create opportunities for small vendors and artists, strengthening local

livelihoods. Culturally, public spaces serve as stages for expression. Festivals, protests, performances, and everyday interactions shape collective identity. These spaces allow citizens to engage with democracy, culture, and community in visible ways. Without them, civic life becomes confined to digital platforms or private venues. The pandemic underscored their value. During periods of isolation, access to open public areas became essential for mental health and social connection. Cities that invested in pedestrian zones and open streets adapted more effectively to changing needs. Despite their importance, public spaces face growing challenges. Commercialisation, neglect, and unequal distribution limit access, particularly in low-income neighbourhoods. Security concerns and restrictive policies can also

discourage use, undermining their purpose. Urban planners increasingly recognise that public spaces are not luxuries but necessities. Designing inclusive, safe, and flexible spaces requires community participation and long-term investment. Small interventions — seating, lighting, shade, and accessibility — can dramatically improve usability. The future of cities depends not only on infrastructure and technology, but on how people experience everyday life. Public spaces shape those experiences. They create room for connection, rest, and expression in environments defined by speed and density. As urban populations continue to grow, protecting and expanding public spaces is essential. They are where cities become more than collections of buildings — they become places where people belong.

The changing relationship between work and identity

For much of the twentieth century, work was more than a means of income — it was identity. People introduced themselves by their professions, planned lives around careers, and measured success through job titles. That relationship is now being renegotiated.

Across industries and age groups, individuals are questioning how much of their identity should be tied to their work. This shift is not a rejection of ambition but a response to changing economic realities and personal priorities. One catalyst is instability. Automation, restructuring, contract work, and economic shocks have made lifelong employment increasingly rare. When jobs are uncertain, defining oneself solely through work becomes risky. Many people are diversifying their sense of purpose beyond professional roles.

The pandemic accelerated this reassessment. Forced pauses and remote work blurred boundaries between professional and personal lives. People began evaluating how much time, energy, and emotional investment work deserved. For some, this led to career changes; for others, to redefining success itself. Younger generations are particularly vocal about this shift. Surveys consistently show that many prioritise flexibility, mental health, and meaning over traditional markers like hierarchy or salary alone. Side projects, creative pursuits, volunteering, and community involvement now coexist alongside formal employment. This does not mean work has lost importance. Rather, its role has become more contextual. Work is increasingly viewed as one component of a balanced life, not its sole defining feature. This perspective encourages boundaries — fixed working hours, digital detoxes, and clearer distinctions between

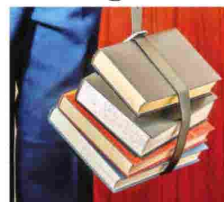


professional and personal time. Organisations are adapting, sometimes reluctantly. Employers face rising expectations around well-being, autonomy, and values alignment. Companies that ignore these shifts risk disengagement and attrition, while those that respond thoughtfully often see improved retention and morale. There are challenges to this transition. Not everyone has the privilege to detach identity from work, especially in insecure or low-wage sectors. Financial pressures still compel many to prioritise survival over self-actualisation. The conversation, therefore, must acknowledge inequality rather than universalise experience. Culturally, the shift reshapes language. Phrases like “work-life balance” are giving way to “work-life integration” or simply “life design.” Success stories increasingly highlight fulfillment, resilience, and adaptability rather than linear advancement. Education systems are also responding by emphasising transferable skills — critical thinking, communication, adaptability — over narrow specialisation. The goal is to prepare individuals for evolving careers rather than fixed professions. As societies navigate economic and technological change, the relationship between work and identity will continue to evolve. Redefining that relationship does not diminish the value of work; it restores agency to individuals. In doing so, it allows people to be more than what they do — and to do their work with greater clarity and intention.

Why lifelong learning is no longer optional

For much of modern history, education followed a linear path. People studied when young, worked for decades, and retired with the skills they had acquired early in life. That model is rapidly becoming outdated. In today's world, lifelong learning is no longer a choice but a necessity.

Technological change is one of the biggest drivers of this shift. Automation, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms are transforming industries at unprecedented speed. Skills that were valuable a decade ago can become obsolete within years. Lifelong learning allows individuals to adapt rather than be displaced. This does not mean constant formal education. Learning now takes many forms — online courses, workplace training, peer learning, and self-directed study. Short, targeted learning modules often prove more effective than long academic programmes. Flexibility is key, especially for working adults balancing responsibilities. The benefits extend beyond



employment. Continuous learning improves cognitive health, problem-solving ability, and confidence. Studies show that people who engage in learning throughout life maintain sharper mental function and greater emotional resilience. Learning fosters curiosity, which keeps individuals engaged with the world around them. Employers are increasingly recognising the value of adaptable workers over narrowly specialised ones. Skills such as communication, critical thinking, and digital literacy remain relevant across roles. Lifelong learners are better positioned to shift careers or take on evolving responsibilities.

Access, however, remains uneven. Not everyone has the time, resources, or support to pursue learning opportunities. Digital divides, cost barriers, and lack of guidance can limit participation. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated efforts from governments, institutions, and employers. Education systems are slowly adapting. Universities are offering micro-credentials, certification courses, and flexible schedules. Online platforms provide affordable access to knowledge, though quality and accreditation vary. The challenge lies in ensuring learning opportunities are credible and inclusive.

Culturally, the perception of learning is also changing. Returning to education later in life is becoming more accepted. Failure and experimentation are increasingly viewed as part of growth rather than setbacks. This shift encourages individuals to view learning as an ongoing process. Lifelong learning also supports social cohesion. As societies age and work patterns change, continuous education helps bridge generational divides.

How small daily habits quietly shape long-term wellbeing

When people think about health and wellbeing, they often imagine dramatic changes — strict diets, intense workouts, or complete lifestyle overhauls. In reality, long-term wellbeing is shaped less by grand resolutions and more by small, repeated habits that quietly influence daily life.

These habits rarely attract attention because they seem ordinary. Drinking enough water, getting sunlight in the morning, walking short distances, or maintaining regular sleep times may appear insignificant. Yet, over months and years, they accumulate into powerful determinants of physical and mental health. One of the most overlooked habits is sleep consistency. Many people focus on the number of hours they sleep while ignoring timing. Going to bed and waking up at irregular

hours disrupts circadian rhythms, affecting mood, concentration, and immune function. Consistency, even more than duration, plays a key role in restoring balance. Movement is another area where small choices matter. Modern life encourages long periods of sitting, whether at desks, in vehicles, or in front of screens. Short, frequent movement breaks — standing, stretching, or walking — help circulation and reduce fatigue. These actions require no equipment or gym membership, yet significantly impact energy levels.

Mental wellbeing is similarly shaped by daily practices. Regular exposure to nature, even for a few minutes, lowers stress and improves focus. Limiting constant news consumption and social media scrolling helps reduce anxiety and mental overload. Quiet moments of reflection or journaling provide mental clarity in a fast-paced world. Nutrition often becomes complicated by trends

and conflicting advice. However, simple habits such as eating meals at regular times, including whole foods, and paying attention while eating can improve digestion and satisfaction. These practices foster a healthier relationship with food rather than imposing restrictive rules. Social habits also influence wellbeing. Brief conversations, expressions of gratitude, and maintaining personal connections support emotional health. Loneliness, increasingly recognised as a public health concern, is often addressed not by grand social events but by small, consistent interactions. The strength of daily habits lies in their sustainability. Unlike short-term challenges, they do not rely on motivation alone. Once integrated into routine, they require less effort and deliver steady benefits. Behavioural research shows that habits anchored to existing routines are more likely to persist.

The psychology behind our obsession with productivity

Productivity has become a defining value of modern life. From time-tracking apps to self-help books promising peak performance, the pursuit of doing more in less time dominates personal and professional spaces. But beneath this obsession lies a complex psychological dynamic worth examining.

At its core, productivity offers a sense of control. In uncertain environments, measurable outputs provide reassurance. Completing tasks, ticking checkboxes, and meeting deadlines create tangible proof of progress, even when broader outcomes feel unclear. Technology amplifies this drive. Digital tools enable constant optimisation — tracking steps, monitoring sleep, measuring focus. While these tools can improve efficiency, they also blur the line between healthy motivation



and relentless self-monitoring. The pressure to perform extends beyond work into personal life. Social comparison plays a powerful role.

Online platforms showcase curated success stories, making productivity appear synonymous with worth. People begin to equate busyness with

importance, leading to guilt during rest and downtime. Rest becomes something to “earn” rather than a basic need.

This mindset has consequences. Chronic overwork increases stress, reduces creativity, and impairs decision-making. Ironically, the obsession with productivity often undermines the very outcomes it seeks to improve. Mental fatigue lowers quality, even as output increases. Psychologists note that productivity culture often masks deeper fears — fear of falling behind, of being replaceable, or of losing relevance. In competitive environments, doing more becomes a survival strategy rather than a choice. There is growing recognition of these costs. Concepts such as “sustainable productivity” and “deep work” emphasise focus over volume. These approaches prioritise

meaningful tasks, rest, and recovery as essential components of performance. Organisations are beginning to reassess expectations. Flexible schedules, outcome-based evaluation, and mental health initiatives reflect a shift away from constant activity toward intentional work.

However, cultural change remains uneven. On an individual level, redefining productivity requires separating self-worth from output. Valuing rest, relationships, and creativity alongside achievement fosters a healthier balance. Productivity then becomes a tool rather than an identity. As societies continue to navigate this tension through efficiency, understanding the psychology behind productivity is essential. True progress lies not in doing more, but in doing what matters — with clarity, balance, and purpose.



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

Manipur's peace hinges on political intent

It will soon be three years since Manipur plunged into a state of conflict and turmoil, and there is still no credible sign of a return to normalcy. More than 260 killings and large-scale displacement of people have been reported during this period, marked by intense distrust between the Meiteis and the Kukis, the state's two dominant communities. The killing of a Meitei man, Rishikant Singh, who was visiting his wife, a Kuki, in the Kuki-dominated Churachandpur district, is a comment both on the past and the present of Manipur. Their marriage is a reminder of the state's past, when the two communities could live together. But his killing, followed by the circulation of a video showing the act, sends out a chilling message on the deadly turn the estrangement has taken.

The video footage of the killing was circulated along with a message: No peace, no popular government. The question of whether peace or popular government should come first has been debated for a long time in the state. It was a popular government under Chief Minister N Biren Singh, a Meitei who identified himself with the community, that mishandled the situation, aggravated it, and made peace more difficult to achieve. Before the crisis, relationships involving people from the two communities did not lead to violence. Now, it is difficult to imagine such relationships after an extended period of strife and bloodshed. The first step towards enduring peace will be to eliminate the lack of trust among the communities. Only a popular government that can reach out to both camps with a credible intent for peace can make a difference. The President's Rule, which was imposed in February last year, has not provided an administration that the people could trust. Over the 11 months, events in the state have shown that the interim arrangement has failed, while efforts to establish a representative, popular government have not made headway either.

Legislators belonging to the two communities met in Delhi last month, but there was no agreement. The meeting, however, signals progress which should be extended, but its continuance should not hinder efforts to arrive at a political consensus that will, eventually, shape a popular government. The killing of Singh calls for greater caution from the administration—it should not be allowed to ignite a fresh phase of unrest in the state. Vigil must be intensified to prevent retaliatory action that risks extending the crisis and derailing efforts towards a political resolution.

Meitei man's killing calls for urgent, credible processes to establish peace through a popular government

Bike taxis and the road to regulation

The Karnataka High Court's order lifting the ban on bike taxis deserves to be welcomed because it restores a vital mobility option in Bengaluru—a city choking on traffic gridlock and public transport gaps—while safeguarding the livelihoods of drivers. The division bench held that motorcycles fall within the definition of transport vehicles under the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, and ruled that a blanket ban amounted to *ad hoc* prohibition on the constitutional right to practise a profession. The ban, earlier upheld by the single bench, threw lakhs of riders, mostly gig workers, into uncertainty. At the same time, commuters lost an affordable option for quick connectivity. With auto-rickshaws notoriously unreliable, bike taxis have emerged as a practical necessity, filling a glaring structural gap.

The background to the ban reveals a deeper governance failure. Although the state notified an Electric Bike Taxi Scheme in 2021 and the Centre later issued guidelines encouraging states to permit such services, Karnataka chose not to translate them into a regulatory framework. The government also failed to take a clear stand before the court, arguing that it had no policy on bike taxis and did not intend to frame one either. Now, with bike taxis back on the road, the policy paralysis has left a vacuum, forcing commuters to avail these services with no safety protocols in place.

The court order does not grant bike taxis or aggregators immunity from the law, and the government must now frame a comprehensive regulatory framework without delay. This should include mandatory commercial registration, clear permit conditions, and insurance that explicitly covers pillion riders. Verified rider identification, police background checks, real-time digital tracking, and visible permit display must be non-negotiable. Equally important is institutionalised rider training. Structured programmes covering road safety, defensive riding, passenger etiquette, gender sensitisation, and basic first aid should be mandatory before permits are issued. Aggregators should be held accountable for compliance and grievance redressal, while the government must ensure a level-playing field through uniform rules that apply equally to bike taxis, autos, and cab operators. The High Court has cleared the legal roadblock. It is now for the state to prove that it can regulate a modern mobility solution that its overstretched cities urgently need. What the state needs now is not obstructionist policy or bureaucratic red tape, but a vision that recognises bike taxis as a vital component of an integrated urban transport ecosystem rather than a threat to outdated monopolies.

Lifting of the ban restores a crucial mobility option, but this is also the time to frame a strong policy

Why gridlocked Bengaluru must rethink its streets

MAPPING MOBILITY

Solutions should pivot on integrated planning, prioritise right-of-way, and treat streets as shared public assets

MADHAV PAI AND
PAWAN MULKUTLA

Bengaluru, a city of about 14 million people, is poised to grow into a 20-million-plus metropolis within the next decade. As the city expands and rural-urban boundaries blur, the need for smart, responsive, and accountable transport systems that enable people to move safely, efficiently, and equitably has never been more urgent.

Bengaluru today has an estimated 12,800-km road network, including about 1,345 km of arterial and sub-arterial roads that form the backbone of its economy and daily life—connecting people to livelihoods, education, healthcare, and opportunity. A majority of Bengalurens walk at some point in their journeys, whether for the entire trip, the last mile to public transport, exercise, or everyday errands. On average, about 2,000 vehicles are registered in Bengaluru every day, with many of them occupying valuable street space as on-street parking.

Streets continue to house shops, vendors, and an active public life. However, the institutions and systems responsible for designing, operating, and maintaining this vast road network have not kept pace, struggling to manage escalating vehicle ownership, growing parking pressures, and increasingly complex patterns of street use.

The result is visible every day: frequent gridlock, unsafe conditions for pedestrians and cyclists, fragmented footpaths, and streets that fail to perform their most basic function—moving people reliably and efficiently through common space for belonging. These pressures will only intensify unless Bengaluru shifts from reactive fixes to institutionalised, system-level management of its road network. The challenge Bengaluru faces is not merely one of road capacity. It is a challenge of governance: of how public road space is treated, managed, and held accountable as a public asset. Addressing this requires strengthening three interlinked pillars: right-of-way (RoW), network design and management, and road asset management.

Streamlining the right of way Often overlooked, but a critical component of mobility infrastructure is the right-of-way management. Streets are not just strips of asphalt; they are shared public spaces extending boundary to

boundary, accommodating vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists, public transport, utilities, vendors, trees, and drainage infrastructure.

In Bengaluru today, RoW management is largely *ad hoc*. Encroachments, parking spillover, and informal activities often erode space meant for walking and cycling. While traffic police manage vehicle movement on the carriageway, no single agency is responsible for the RoW end-to-end—from footpath continuity to regulating/monitoring activities within the corridor.

This gap has real consequences. Footpaths disappear, signals prioritise vehicles over pedestrians, and bus stops and crossings are poorly integrated. The



city ends up managing traffic symptoms rather than street performance.

Recognising this, Bengaluru has begun to articulate better standards. The *Namma Raste Kaipidi*, adopted as a guiding manual by city agencies, provides practical guidance on street design, footpaths, junctions, and safety. We need RoW management to be institutionalised—with clear responsibility for protecting pedestrian space, coordinating utilities, enforcing encroachment norms, and maintaining service levels across the corridor.

Network design and management

Street networks should be designed and optimised to move people, vehicles and goods efficiently. Today, what we have is a set of isolated projects spanning roads, tunnels, and underpasses. Network design currently occurs only at the master planning stage when RoWs are earmarked on city paper.

What we need instead is a scientific, data-driven network analysis conducted at regular intervals—every five years, annually, or whenever major disruptions occur (such as large infrastructure works or significant road closures). This approach would allow the city to proactively manage mobility demand, ensure resilience, and optimise street perfor-

mance in real time.

Cities need to address this through efficient network design and management; defining street hierarchies, arterial and sub-arterial roads, prioritising movement of people over vehicles, coordinating signals along corridors, and managing demand through pricing, parking, and access controls. There is a need to create an institution with responsibility for network design aligned with the objectives of safety, reliability, and equity.

Roads as life-long public assets

Roads must be treated as life-long public assets that are not only planned, funded, and developed but also systematically managed and maintained over their entire life cycle. A Road Asset Management System (RAMS) can help enable this shift. Such a system maintains a comprehensive inventory of every road corridor and its elements, including carriageways, footpaths, drainage, junctions, signage, and lighting—assigning each a condition rating, performance standard, and maintenance timeline over 10-20 years. Instead of quick fixes, the city must invest in preventive maintenance, drainage upkeep, pavement strength, and utility coordination so failures occur less frequently and cost less to fix.

Globally, cities that have adopted asset management approaches have demonstrated lower life-cycle costs, better service quality, and greater transparency. For Bengaluru, this approach also supports public transport, walking, and cycling, because the carriageway, footpath, drainage, and safety features are managed together rather than as disconnected works.

Tools exist to support this shift. With geospatial mapping, satellite imagery, OpenStreetMap data, and field surveys, a citywide road inventory can be created relatively quickly. What is missing is not technology, but institutional ownership and accountability to use this data consistently in budgeting and decision-making. There are positive signs which indicate a turn in policy and practice. The newly established Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA), with its citywide mandate, is well-positioned to anchor a more integrated approach. Recent efforts to build in-house urban design and planning capacity signal the acknowledged need of issues and a willingness to address root causes and not just the symptoms. What remains is to tie these elements together through formal mandates, defined responsibilities, performance metrics, and, of course, collaboration.

(Madhav is CEO and Pawan is Executive Director, Integrated Transport, Clean Air and Hydrogen, Sustainable Cities Programme, at WRI India)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Where the Common Man still stands

A goat in specs and an angry neighbour marked the birth of R K Laxman's genius

MAYURNATH GANTI

With one stroke of his pencil, R K Laxman (RKL, for short) could achieve what a hundred words could seldom accomplish. His caricatures of the world and its affairs, seen through the observant eyes of the 'Common Man', made him the past master of socio-political satire.

It is common to erect statues to perpetuate the memory of someone who lived in flesh and blood. But not so for an imaginary character. Pune has one for the Common Man—an uncommon tribute to RKL's fecundity.

Any avid follower of RKL's caricatures has many to remember. If I were to recollect one at random, it would be the one that appeared immediately after the death of Dr Salim Ali, our revered ornithologist. RKL drew a bird perched on a treetop, looking down at Dr Ali standing below, binoculars

dangling from his neck. The caricature was so sharp that the curiosity in the bird's eyes seemed to ask, "Who is this man taking such an interest in me?"

It did not Dr Salim Ali's own scientific inquisitiveness—this time, in the bird, RKL was a good writer too. I distinctly remember reading an article he wrote in the early 1980s, recounting how he became a caricaturist—almost unintentionally. What follows is a paraphrase.

During his childhood in Mysuru, his parents subscribed to several newspapers and magazines, which lay on a table in the veranda. A neighbour—a retired government employee—would visit every morning at a fixed hour to read and quietly leave after reading.

One day, little RKL came across a picture of a goat in a magazine that fired his imagination. In a fit of childish pranks, he drew a pair of spectacles on the goat's face and left the magazine on the table before going to school.

At the appointed hour, the old man stepped in. Everything seemed normal, calm and quiet—until he exploded like a

volcano, shouting and drawing the elders into the veranda. He berated them for not bringing up their children with propriety, hurled the magazine to the floor, and stormed off, swearing never to step into the veranda ever again.

Everyone was aghast. An uneasy air filled the veranda. Why was he angry? Nobody knew. Little RKL, summoning some pluck, picked up the magazine. To everyone's astonishment, the goat with spectacles bore a striking resemblance to the old man. Serendipity—if this is not it, what else could it be?

He ended the article with these words: "Thus stumbled across the key to caricature, unintentionally." It was a defining moment—the future RKL was in the making.

In the English common law tradition we share, there is an attractive personality called the 'Ordinary Reasonable Man'. Where do we find him? Not essentially on the streets of London, but very much so in our home-spun Common Man.

It is fitting to remember R K Laxman today, 11 years after he passed away on January 26, 2015.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Karnataka should work for inclusive prosperity

Appropos 'Karnataka's road to a trillion' (Jan 26), the vision of a trillion dollar economy sounds powerful on paper, but its real success will be seen in everyday lives. Growth should not only be reflected in GDP numbers or global rankings, but in whether ordinary citizens feel a difference. While Bengaluru continues to drive services and investment, many parts of Karnataka still struggle

with uneven infrastructure, job access, and agricultural uncertainty. For a young workforce, growth must mean stable employment, affordable living, and opportunities beyond the capital. A trillion-dollar economy should translate into better roads, reliable public services, and dignity of work for all Kannadigas.

Kavita Tewari, Bengaluru

Guiding the future

The recent CBSE circular dated 19th January 2026, mandating the appointment of career counsellors in its schools, addresses a pressing need. However, are there enough trained career counsellors in the country? There are about 30,000 CBSE schools in the country. Where a career counsellor is not available, the notification provides for the appointment of teachers who must

acquire the competencies of career counselling. There is therefore an urgent need for capacity building. If career counsellors are to be effectively delivered, the schools must have provisions in the timetable for at least 20 to 25 periods over the year dedicated exclusively to career guidance. Gideon Arulmani, Bengaluru

Peace or politics?

Appropos 'Board of Peace lacking in

credibility' (Jan 26), the US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace, envisaged to be a new international energy nations, does not augur well for the working of the UN. India will do well to take a cue from the UK and France and stay away from this. M Basavaraj, Davanagere

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

India has become such a powerful country that other countries are astonished... This is an India that provides free rations to 80 crore people.

Dinesh Sharma, BJP MP

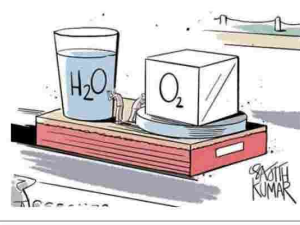


Welfare's purpose should be to eliminate, as far as possible, the need for its own existence.

Ronald Reagan

TO BE PRECISE

The Republic Day tableau that wasn't



IN PERSPECTIVE

State of budgets: Repair to redesign

Fiscal strategies cannot stay uniform; they need to be customised to address the states' changing demographic realities

RAJESHWARI U R

The fiscal position of Indian states in 2025-26 reflects relative stability rather than comfort. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s *State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2025-26* indicates that while states have recovered from pandemic-era fiscal stress, the nature of pressures has shifted from short-term deficit control to deeper structural challenges. Policymakers now face the task of redesigning state finances to manage demographic transition, rising social expenditure, and limits to conventional revenue mobilisation. At the aggregate level, fiscal discipline has largely been maintained, with the consolidated gross fiscal deficit rising from below 3% of GDP in the previous three years to 3.3% in 2024-25 and budgeted at the same level for 2025-26. This deviation reflects higher capital expenditure and the accounting treatment of the Centre's 50-year interest-free loans for capital investment, rather than fiscal laxity.

The quality of state spending has shown significant improvement. Revenue expenditure, which peaked at 14.9% of GDP in 2020-21, declined to 13.3% in 2024-25 before being budgeted to rise moderately to 14.6% in 2025-26, without any significant compression of social sector spending, suggesting a rationalisation of non-essential outlays rather than welfare retrenchment. Simultaneously, capital expenditure increased sharply from 2.3% of GDP in 2020-21 to a budgeted 3.2% in 2025-26, raising its share in total expenditure from 13.4% to 18%. Most notably, the share of revenue deficit in the gross fiscal deficit fell from over 46% to below 7%, signalling a structural shift from consumption-oriented borrowing towards an investment-led fiscal strategy.

Yet, this improvement masks vulnerabilities. Outstanding liabilities of states stood at 28.1% at the end of March 2024 and are budgeted to rise again to 29.2% by March 2026. While debt sustainability indicators remain favourable due to softer interest burdens and longer maturity profiles, the absolute level of debt constrains future fiscal flexibility, especially as interest-free central loans taper off. The RBI report repeatedly flags contingent liabilities and guarantees as latent risks that could crystallise in an adverse macroeconomic environment.

On the revenue side, states face a more structural challenge. Revenue receipts declined as a share of GDP in 2024-25, largely due to the sharp fall in grants-in-aid following the end of GST compensation and post-devolution revenue deficit grants. While tax revenues have shown re-

silience, driven mainly by state GST, excise duties, and stamp duties, these sources remain highly concentrated, with four taxes accounting for nearly 90% of collections, making state revenues vulnerable to sector-specific shocks and cyclical downturns.

Tailoring the approach

The most compelling argument in the report, however, comes from its focus on demographic transition. States are moving along sharply divergent demographic trajectories. Youthful states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh enjoy expanding working-age populations, while ageing states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu face rising old-age dependency ratios and shrinking tax bases. The report shows that the old-age dependency ratio ranges from around 14 in youthful states to over 30 in ageing states, with direct implications for pension liabilities, healthcare spending, and long-term fiscal sustainability. A uniform fiscal strategy is, therefore, increasingly untenable.

This demographic divergence fundamentally alters the priorities for the upcoming budgets, both at the Union and state levels. For youthful states, the fiscal window of opportunity is narrow and time-bound. The RBI's analysis indicates that unless higher spending on education, skill development, and health translates into productive employment, the demographic dividend could easily turn into a demographic liability. For intermediate states, the challenge is to sustain growth while preparing fiscally for ageing through pension reforms and health system strengthening. For ageing states, the emphasis must shift towards revenue augmentation, healthcare efficiency, and workforce participation reforms, including greater female and elderly labour force participation.

The implications for the next budget are clear: the focus must shift beyond aggregate deficit targets towards differentiated fiscal strategies aligned with demographic realities. While continued support for state capital expenditure remains essential, it must be complemented by stronger incentives for human capital investment, institutional reforms, and efforts to broaden states' revenue bases through improved tax administration, digital enforcement, and rationalisation of user charges, rather than reliance on volatile transfers.

The RBI's study makes it evident that India's state finances are no longer in crisis but are entering a phase of structural stress driven by long-term forces. Fiscal repair has largely been achieved; fiscal re-engineering is now unavoidable, and the success of the 2025-26 budget will hinge on whether policymakers respond with forward-looking demographic insights, and institutionally grounded strategies rather than incremental adjustments to an increasingly strained fiscal architecture.

(The writer is an associate professor at the Department of Economics, Christ University)

As neighbours move on, India must recalibrate its foreign policy

K S TOMAR

India's increasing isolation in its immediate neighbourhood is not a sudden development but the cumulative outcome of diplomatic complacency, strategic under-reaction, and a persistent failure to translate political intent into credible delivery. While New Delhi continues to project itself as South Asia's natural leader, it has struggled to convert goodwill into lasting influence, allowing China to occupy the strategic space with speed, coherence, and purpose.

The erosion of India's regional standing is therefore less about hostile neighbours and more about self-inflicted gaps in policy execution, follow-through, and political sensitivity. The limitations of India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy', conceived in 2008 and intensified post-2014, however, are not solely the result of external disruptions; they are rooted equally in structural and political shortcomings.

The contrast with China is stark and instructive. Through the 'Belt and Road Initiative', defence diplomacy, sustained political engagement, and aggressive nar-

rative management, Beijing has woven deep economic and political dependencies across South Asia. India, by comparison, has relied on episodic outreach, delayed project implementation, and an assumption of automatic primacy rooted in geography and history. That assumption no longer holds. Smaller neighbours today act with sharper strategic agency, leveraging India-China rivalry to maximise benefits, and New Delhi has been slow to adapt to this new realism.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has further complicated India's neighbourhood calculus. His transactional foreign policy, marked by abrupt shifts, selective engagement, and a preference for short-term leverage, has unsettled regional equations. Renewed tactical engagement with Pakistan—driven by counterterrorism optics, Afghan spillovers, or episodic bargaining—undercuts India's effort to diplomatically isolate Islamabad on terrorism. At the same time, Washington's inconsistent signalling on China and reduced commitment to multilateral frameworks have encouraged South Asian states to hedge more aggressively. As US posture oscillates, India's leadership space narrows, forcing it to manage uncertainty

generated far beyond the region.

These external pressures make an internal course correction unavoidable. The first requirement is sustained high-level political re-engagement. Visits by the Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister to Dhaka, Colombo, Kathmandu, Naypyidaw, and Male' must resume with intent rather than symbolism. India must also consciously abandon perceptions of partisanship in domestic political contests across the region and reaffirm a posture of principled neutrality, especially during elections and political transitions.

Second, long-pending deliverables must move beyond memorandum-level diplomacy. The Teesta water-sharing agreement, cross-border connectivity projects with Nepal and Bhutan, and infrastructure commitments in Myanmar require time-bound execution. India should also establish a South Asian Economic Assistance Corpus rooted in grants rather than loans to clearly differentiate itself from China's debt-driven model and to restore confidence in Indian commitments.

Third, military diplomacy must be reevaluated as an instrument of reassurance rather

than dominance. Joint exercises, officer training programmes, intelligence sharing, and the supply of affordable defence hardware can help reassert India's credentials as a dependable security partner, particularly for Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives. Fourth, the SAGAR initiative must acquire operational depth. By aligning with Quad partners, India can co-develop transparent infrastructure in ports, logistics, maritime surveillance, and undersea cables, offering credible alternatives to opaque Chinese projects.

Soft power remains India's most underutilised asset. Scholarships, youth exchanges, cultural diplomacy, Bollywood, yoga, and cricket can reconnect India with civil societies and emerging political classes across South Asia. Equally critical is reclaiming narrative space. From FATF to BIMSTEC and BRICS+, India must lead coalitions while consistently exposing Pakistan's terror infrastructure. A modern media strategy using local languages, regional digital platforms, and independent journalism support is essential to counter China-Pakistan propaganda in real time. Missed opportunities underline the costs

of drift. In Myanmar, India's cautious disengagement after the 2021 coup weakened its leverage even as China and Russia moved swiftly. In Sri Lanka, early assistance during the 2022 economic crisis generated goodwill, but delayed infrastructure execution allowed China to reassert control over strategic assets such as Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City.

Bangladesh, once a close partner, is quietly recalibrating. The unresolved Teesta issue, perceived political alignment with the Awami League, and the fallout of CAA-NRC legislation have eroded bipartisan goodwill, while China continues its economic expansion. The Maldives reflects another available setback, where delayed engagement enabled the 'India Out' narrative and the withdrawal of Indian troops, emboldening Chinese ambitions in the Indian Ocean.

Nepal remains a diplomatic sore point. The legacy of the 2015 blockade, unresolved boundary disputes, and tone-deaf responses to internal political churn alienated public opinion, particularly among youth. Even Bhutan is cautiously diversifying its diplomatic options, signalling discomfort with India's perceived paternalism. In Afghani-

stan, India's complete withdrawal after the Taliban takeover erased years of soft-power investment, unlike China, Iran, and Russia, which retained engagement channels.

China's encirclement strategy has thrived amid this inertia. Through BRI projects, arms supplies, and dual-use maritime facilities, Beijing has expanded its footprint across South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Its sharp power—media penetration, elite capture, and digital infrastructure—has steadily eroded India's informational and cultural influence. In multilateral forums, China continues to block India's ambitions while shielding Pakistan.

India's setbacks are not irreversible, but they are instructive. The assumption of automatic leadership has been challenged by China's methodical strategy and India's uneven performance. Military deterrence without diplomatic consensus has clear limits. India must shed the illusion of primacy and become a dependable regional partner that listens, delivers, and shares prosperity. Only then will its neighbourhood stop hedging and begin embracing its leadership. (The writer is a strategic affairs columnist and senior political analyst based in Shimla)

Across global scenes of violence, masked power and "fire, ready, aim" politics are corroding democratic legitimacy

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Every day now, I sit at my computer and ask myself: What is there left to say about the two new stories I care about most? One is unfolding in my hometown, on the banks of the Mississippi River; the other is unfolding on the West Bank of the Jordan and on both banks of the Wadi Gaza.

Which video should I linger on longest? The footage of Renee Good, shot in the face by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer in Minneapolis while she was clearly trying to evacuate the scene? Or the video from Saturday of federal agents shooting Alex Jeffrey Pretti, an intensive care nurse, after he tried to help a woman who was being pepper-sprayed? Or perhaps the video from Wednesday showing the aftermath of Israeli strikes that killed three Palestinian journalists, among others, in the Gaza Strip? The journalists had been working for a committee providing Egyptian aid and were documenting its distribution at a displacement camp. Or perhaps the videos of Hamas executing rivals and refusing to yield, despite the fact that the war the group ignited October 7, 2023, has resulted in nothing but catastrophe for Palestinians?

These stories have much more in common than you might think. All are driven, in my view, by terrible leaders who prefer easy, violent solutions to the hard work of negotiated problem-solving. These leaders see an iron-fisted approach as the best way to win their next elections: President Donald Trump in the 2026 midterms; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, who is expected to call elections around the same time; and Hamas, in its desperate effort to lead the Palestinian movement in the postwar era, despite having lost the war.

Hamas and ICE also share one very visible trait that I never thought I'd see in the United States: Almost all of their foot soldiers wear masks. My experience as a reporter in the Middle East taught me that people wear masks because they are up to something bad and don't want their faces captured on camera. I saw it often in Beirut and in Gaza. I never expected to see it in Minneapolis. Since when have America's domestic policing forces, charged with defending the Constitution and the rule of law, felt the need to hide their identities?

I understand why Hamas fighters wear masks—they have both Israeli and Palestinian blood on their hands and fear retribution. But if you placed a photo of an ICE officer next to a Hamas militiaman in a news quiz, I would defy you to tell them apart. Memo to the homeland security secretary, Kristi Noem: That is not a good look. What are you hiding?

Good and Pretti were both clearly present as observers—and trying to defend others—yet both were drawn into the chaos and shot at close range by agents who should never have pulled a trigger. Yet the Trump team insists that ICE is blameless. That is not how you build legitimacy for a government effort to track down and deport immigrants



Federal agents deploy tear gas to disperse protesters in Minneapolis, near the site where federal agents shot and killed Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old ICU nurse, on January 24. AFP

Minneapolis and Gaza now share the same violent language

lacking permanent legal status.

That same instinct for "fire, ready, aim" is one of the morally corrupting legacies of Israel's war in Gaza. One of the Palestinian journalists killed by the Israeli airstrike Wednesday, Abdel Raouf Shaath, had worked for years as a cameraman for CBS News and other outlets; the others were local journalists Mohammad Salah Qishta and Anas Gheini. They were reportedly on assignment to film aid distribution by the Egyptian Relief Committee when their vehicle was targeted.

Really? Was that the only way to handle the situation during a ceasefire? Immediately launch an airstrike and ask questions later? Israel can assassinate nuclear scientists in Iran in the dead of night from 1,200 miles away, yet it can't distinguish a journalist from a combatant in broad daylight next door? It's shameful. This comes only months after Israeli forces killed Reuters journalist Hussam al-Masri on the stairs of Gaza's Nasser Hospital in August.

Netanyahu apologised for that earlier killing. But regarding the three journalists killed last week, the Israeli military released a boilerplate statement saying troops identified "several suspects who operated a drone affiliated with Hamas" and "struck the suspects who activated the drone." The military added that details are being reviewed. That is what it always says. That is how a nation and an army loses its soul.

Here is what is really happening: Netanyahu is running for reelection. Israel cur-

rently occupies approximately 53% of the Gaza Strip, with Hamas holding the other 47%. Trump—with help from Egypt, Qatar and Turkey—is pushing for Hamas to disarm, for its military leaders to leave and for the organisation to become a purely political entity. In return, Trump expects Israel to begin a withdrawal toward its own border.

Netanyahu knows that if he runs for election with Hamas still holding political influence in Gaza and the Israeli military pulling back, he will be savaged by the far-right extremists in his coalition. Those allies don't just want to stay in Gaza; they want to annex the West Bank. So Netanyahu wants the war to continue; he wants to provoke Hamas into fighting so he never has to withdraw.

Meanwhile, Hamas is clinging to its weapons to maintain control on the ground. Even if forced to become a political entity, it will do everything in its power to hijack the technocratic Palestinian government the Trump administration is trying to install.

Back at home, Trump seems to believe the chaos in Minneapolis will work for him in November—even though polls show a majority of Americans disapprove of ICE's tactics. He is betting he can run on a "law and order" platform fuelled by anti-immigration sentiment.

There is, however, another view inside the White House. Vice President J.D. Vance visited Minneapolis last week to urge local officials to cooperate with fed-

eral agents to "lower the temperature and lower the chaos." Suddenly, the cynical Vance—of all people—was the voice of calm and reason. I suspect he was channeling the fears of Republican lawmakers who worry that ICE's activities could lead to an electoral disaster in the midterms. To my friends and family in Minnesota: Stay proud of the way you are documenting abuses and standing up for your neighbours—those with legal papers and those without them—who abide by the law, work hard and enrich our city.

But it is vital that this campaign be accompanied by a loud commitment to immigration reform that both controls the border and creates a legal pathway to citizenship.

The winning message remains: high wall, big gate. Control the border, but increase legal immigration. Democrats must never forget that one reason Trump returned to power was the previous administration's failure to control illegal immigration. Independent voters still care deeply about that.

Trump, Netanyahu and Hamas each have their eyes on the prize: the 2026 elections. The people of Minnesota, Israel and Gaza must keep that in mind. Because if Trump maintains control of Congress, if Netanyahu wins reelection and if Hamas seizes control of the Palestinian movement, all three societies will head into a darkness from which recovery will be agonisingly difficult. The New York Times

State as censor: Where does Karnataka stand?

PRANATI A S

When the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in recent years—particularly after 2014—screened films like *The Kashmir Files*, *The Kerala Story*, and *The Bengal Files*, and even placed them in competition alongside some of the best films from across the world, it raised questions about the festival's curatorial direction. These films have been widely called out by critics and cinephiles not only for their ideological leanings aligned with that of the ruling dispensation at the Centre but also for their cinematic quality, with several describing them as propaganda and poorly made.

When the Ministry of External Affairs denied permission to screen about 14 films from various countries, including Palestine, at the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan took a strong stand supporting the festival's stated ideological and political position—solidarity with Palestine. He asserted that the festival could continue screening the films irrespective of exemptions.

Now, the Bengaluru International Film Festival (BIFF) begins Thursday, there is once again no clarity about the screening of Palestinian films. Will CM Siddaramaiah take a stand?

As of Monday, according to the festival organisers, five films—*All That's Left of You*, *Palestine 36*, *The Voice of Hind Rajah*, *Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk*, and *Yes—Are Yet to Receive*—are apart from these, no other Palestinian film has been cleared so far.

All That's Left of You, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, follows a Palestinian family across three generations amid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *The Voice of Hind Rajah*, which premiered in Venice, documents Red Crescent volunteers' attempts to rescue six-year-old Hind Rajah, trapped in a car under fire in Gaza. *Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk* follows an Iranian filmmaker in exile who travels to Cairo in an attempt to cross into Gaza; stopped at Rafah, she documents the war through video-call interviews with a photojournalist and her family in devastated northern Gaza. In *Yes*, Israeli filmmaker Nadav Lapid makes a critical commentary about his homeland in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attacks.

These films are well-discussed internationally and were also

part of the IFFK's curation. *The Voice of Hind Rajah* has also received an Oscar nomination. The organisers at BIFFs say the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of External Affairs have sought more details about the films. Given that these films have already been widely screened and discussed, the request essentially meant running out the clock, with no clarity on clearance.

Film festivals are not merely platforms to screen hundreds of films or host workshops. They are political spaces that reflect the ideology of the State, and for most government-run festivals, the State's support is vital, they are spaces where people come together for larger causes. At the 82nd Venice International Film Festival, for example, pro-Palestine demonstrations took place with the participation of organisers, filmmakers and artists. At the BAFTA awards in 2024, filmmaker Ken Loach called for a ceasefire in Gaza. In recent years, film festivals have witnessed people and celebrities come together in support of Palestine. And like all forms of art, cinema is political: screening Palestinian films in today's political situation is very important.

In Karnataka, despite a Congress-led government, there has been little visible assertion on such matters by the government. In 2024, Kesari Haravoo's *Kisan Satyagraha*, a documentary on farmers' protest against the farm laws, and the Ukrainian film *20 Days in Mariupol*, which followed Ukrainian journalists trapped in Mariupol and documented the images of war, did not receive clearance from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. BIFFs proceeded without screening these films. Congress leader Rahul Ganai, in recent years, has spoken out on issues ranging from farmers' rights to Palestine and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza; questions remain about how far these positions translate into action.

Will CM Siddaramaiah take a stand this time? If the state government chooses to take a stand, avenues to screen these films may yet be found. Every year, BIFFs screens its opening film at the Vidhana Soudha after the inaugural function. This year, a Palestinian film could serve as that opening film. Even making a statement can be loud enough. If Pinarayi Vijayan could do so, could Siddaramaiah—provided the Congress-led government is in solidarity with Palestine and is against the divisive politics of the BJP-led central government.

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1976

South India's first rural bank opened

Bellary, Jan. 26
Finance Minister M. Y. Ghorpade on Sunday opened the first rural bank in South India, the Tungabhadra Gramine Bank, Banapur branch, and its head office here. The bank was historic in the rural economy of Bellary and Raichur Districts. Though the two districts are rich in natural resources, they have remained poor and hence the resources should be exploited, he said. He said the bank would benefit economically weaker and backward sections in rural areas.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2001

Over 1,500 killed as quake rocks Gujarat

Ahmedabad, Jan. 26
Over 1,500 people were killed in Gujarat in the worst ever earthquake that devastated the state on Thursday morning. The quake, which measured 6.9 on the Richter scale with its epicentre 20 kms north-east of Bhuj, ravaged large areas of the state demolishing buildings, injuring hundreds, and snapping telecommunication links. A UNI report has put the toll at 2,000 and is likely to increase. The quake, India's worst in its history in the last 50 years, triggered tremors that were felt across the country.

OASIS | CHANDER GUPTA

How positive words transform relationships

Choice of words helps us avoid hurting people while at the same time conveying what we have in mind. It's about taking control of your words, a friend recently remarked. Once I was having a discussion with a colleague over how to build a consensus amongst our team members on an issue; we thought there could be divergence of views. He completely dismissed me with a flustering fiat. 'Will let you take that lead.' Had the phrasing been 'Will you take that lead?' the listening impact would have been rather negative. How the insertion of a small word, 'let', in the sentence changed the colour and

flavour of the meaning. The tone also varies with the text. The utterance of positive words automatically assumes positive tone. I recall another instance of positive speaking. A friend seemed annoyed over a remark I casually made. Realising that it did not go down well, I asked, 'Are you offended?' To the credit of my friend, he simply said 'sort of.' Instead of flatly saying 'yes,' sort of took away the bluntness that a 'yes' would have inflicted. We commonly believe that thinking influences speaking. However, the

hypothesis can be true vice versa also. Positive speaking is also likely to induce positive thinking. If we consciously cultivate positive speaking and weigh our words before uttering them, it would gradually germinate positive thinking also. Positive speaking will yield positive results as it strikes the right chords with the target audience. The purpose of communication is to convey what you have in mind. It is not to hurt or offend others. Words should not be used as barbs. Words become weapons in the mouths of couples indulging in

intercine warfare. Nobody likes to hear accusations. Instead of saying 'you haven't done this' or 'you haven't done that,' try to say, 'Please do this.' Words can either be like flowers you are offering to or like stones you are throwing at your listeners. Whatever you offer, the same staff bounces on you eventually. The art of communication lies in speaking what you have in mind without sounding like you are accusing or being sarcastic. Positive Speaking is bound to yield positive outcome. Words are a potent tool. It is preferable to sound cool rather than like a fool.

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Dial down, Bangladesh should play in India

AN UNSPORTING spectacle is playing in the cricket arena, involving bans and ultimatums and brinkmanship. That this is unfolding between two nations and two neighbours with overlapping histories and cultural intimacies that have contributed to regional stability makes it even more of a self-goal for India and Bangladesh. Sports is not always insulated from politics, and it is true that India-Bangladesh ties are currently in a fragile moment. Even so, the ICC, which has forced Bangladesh out of the upcoming T20 World Cup, and the events that led up to it, showcase the takeover of an escalatory reactivity and a paralysis of long-term diplomacy. This is more so in India, the much larger player, on and off the field.

Bangladesh's exclusion from the tournament comes after its government reiterated that its players would find it difficult to play in India because of "security concerns" after the BCCI asked the Kolkata Knight Riders to — unreasonably — remove Bangladesh seamer Mustafizur Rahman from its squad. The BCCI decision pointed to "recent developments", that is, the attacks in Bangladesh on religious minorities. The targeting of minority Hindus amid a weakening state authority on the watch of the Mohammad Yunus-led interim government is a serious concern. New Delhi has done well to flag this — loudly and clearly. But the real, and perhaps the most dangerous, when the BCCI, the behemoth, targets an individual player who has nothing to do with law enforcement or state policy, and when it is seen to be pandering to online troll brigades. In effect, this has only narrowed one of the few remaining spaces for people-to-people engagement, while reinforcing perceptions in Bangladesh of a heavy-handed Delhi.

Ever since the events of August 2024, when a students' uprising toppled the Sheikh Hasina government, India-Bangladesh ties have yet to recover their footing. Now, the February elections in Bangladesh offer a chance for both Delhi and Dhaka to turn the page. Even as Sheikh Hasina continues to find refuge in India — and she should — External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka to attend Khaleda Zia's funeral, and his meeting with Tarique Rahman, her son and BNP chief, acknowledged that imperative. A Delhi-Dhaka reset will depend on both sides moving carefully — the "ghuspathi" rhetoric aired of elections in Assam and West Bengal, and anti-India posturing by parties ahead of polls in Bangladesh, will be watched closely. In this precarious time, both countries must, both cricket. The Delhi-Dhaka relationship is too valuable to be hijacked by grandstanding or by letting hardliners run play with the ball. If both sides dial down and a Bangladesh XI plays in India, it will be a win-win.

Trump's foot soldiers unleash domestic terror

THE KILLING of Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old nurse, in Minneapolis by US Border Patrol agents — less than three weeks after the killing of Renee Good in the same city by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent — is shocking. Videos make it clear that a scuffle began when an agent pushed a woman and Pretti tried to intervene. He was pepper-sprayed, after which another officer fired 10 rounds into him. The Trump administration's defence — that Pretti intended to "do maximum damage" and "massacre law enforcement" — is contradicted by the video evidence. Equally disturbing is the speed with which officials labelled Pretti a "domestic terrorist" even before an investigation began. Good, shot dead at point-blank range, was also accused of "domestic terrorism".

Donald Trump returned to power on an aggressive anti-immigration platform, and over the past year, a hardline federal enforcement strategy seems to have handed agencies like ICE and the US Border Patrol a blank cheque. Although they are legally mandated to enforce immigration laws in the interest of national security, the expansive powers they have been granted, in a climate of impunity, have led to a record number of detentions and deaths in ICE custody in 2025 — the most in two decades. The overreach of federal agents is now claiming US citizens with no criminal history as its victims.

Even though he said on Monday that he is "reviewing everything", the alacrity with which Trump has defended the federal agents suggests that accountability will be evaded. An independent probe is the only way forward. The federal government has prevented investigations by the state of Minnesota. The fatal shooting has brought the already fragile relationship between the federal and state governments to a tipping point. Under pressure from Democrats, the media and a handful of Republicans, Trump may yet call ICE and other agencies off. But if the culture of impunity persists, it will lead to a severe erosion of trust between citizens and the government — a trust that is fundamental to the social contract that sustains a democracy.

When spirituality goes clubbing

IN HIS first "Mann Ki Baat" of the year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned the trend of bhajan clubbing. It is the name given to a new wave of spiritual expression, where bhajans are being performed in a contemporary, club-style format — in the PM's words, it is about "spirituality and modernity merging beautifully".

Every generation interprets culture in ways that it can recognise and respond to. Bhajan clubbing is a modern twist to the call-and-response format, engineered for maximum crowd participation, especially from the young and the restless. In a world measuring its life by the gloss of social media, one that is rolled by political turbulence, bhajan clubbing appears like a tether, a way to connect with oneself, an attempt to reach one's roots. Sold-out shows by international Kirtan artists such as Krishna Das and Radhika Das and the proliferation of bhajan-clubbing concerts across the country seem to attest to the fact that it has struck a chord with India's young.

For an older generation, bhajan clubbing is a throwback to the global counterculture movement of the Sixties that looked to the religious and cultural traditions of the East — yoga, meditation, classical music — for inspiration. The Beatles' famous retreat to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram in Rishikesh in 1968 to come to terms with their dizzying fame and find their way to inner peace was a turning point in their careers. It marked a shift in their music — captured most effectively in their *White Album* — and in how they thought of fame, nature, spirituality and creativity. Can bhajan clubbing, too, motivate something similar? Are engagement with traditions beyond the spectacle, a moment of cultural shift once the novelty wears off? That remains to be seen.

The Editorial Page

As rules-based order crumbles, only reforms can shield the economy

2026 HAS BEGUN with a sense of cautious optimism that the economy is experiencing a cyclical upswing. Recent GDP prints have surprised to the upside, credit growth is accelerating and some surveys reveal business sentiment may be firming. Near-term buoyancy should not be surprising. The economy has benefited from a raft of supports in 2025: GST and income tax cuts, monetary and regulatory easing, positive terms-of-trade impulses from lower crude prices, and a second successive strong monsoon. Together, these tailwinds are driving a cyclical lift. The real question is: What will it take for growth to remain strong once the cyclical impulses fade? To do so, the economy must successfully navigate two rotations.

The first rotation is of demand drivers. Post-pandemic growth was driven by a surge in public investment, a revival of the real estate sector, and strong service exports. But several of these impulses are fading. Central capex grew 30 per cent annually for four years post-pandemic but this pace was always going to strain the economy's absorptive capacity. So, central capex has downshifted to around a 10 per cent annual pace even as state capex risks being cannibalised by competitive populism. Meanwhile, residential real estate has slowed sharply over the last year, unsurprising because it was being driven narrowly by the upper echelon, who have likely reached some saturation point. For the recovery to sustain, demand needs to rotate towards the post-pandemic laggards of private consumption and private investment. What will this entail?

Urban and rural consumption have been in a game of whack-a-mole since the pandemic. Can they finally grow in unison? Rural consumption has lifted sharply in re-

cent quarters. Can urban consumption complement it? Autos have picked up nicely post the GST cuts, but the rest of urban consumption looks more tentative. Consumer durables production has lifted only modestly in recent months and much of the pick-up in personal credit growth is gold loans — underpinned by rising collateral from surging gold prices — suggesting it is more supply-driven than strong demand. Meanwhile, growth of the wage bill of listed companies has slowed from 15 per cent in 2022 and 2023 to mid single digits in 2025. The breadth and durability of the consumption recovery will, therefore, come down to whether household balance sheets and employment can strengthen enough in 2026.

Goods exports have been resilient in the face of punitive US tariffs, with exporters finding alternative markets. That said, non-oil export growth rates slowed to 3 per cent (in nominal dollars) by the end of last year. Exports therefore have their work cut out in 2026.

What does all this imply for private capex? In a world floating with Chinese excess capacity and riddled with US policy capriciousness, a broad-based private investment recovery will require both strong domestic demand visibility and animal spirits. It is unsurprising, therefore, that cash flow statements of listed companies reveal capex slowed in the first half of this fiscal year compared to last year, in contrast to market expectations. Instead, the fate of private capex hinges on the strength of the consumption and exports recovery. Can a durable recovery of the latter finally crowd in the former? That remains the \$4-trillion question for 2026.



SAJID Z. CHINYOI

The second rotation is the cyclical making way for the structural. The space for more cyclical support is exhausted. Rampant Chinese excess capacity is likely to keep inflation contained but also pull nominal GDP growth into single digits. Assuming 9 per cent nominal growth for the foreseeable future, the combined (central and state) fiscal deficit will need to be reduced by another percentage point of GDP just to keep public debt/GDP at 80 per cent. There is no further space for fiscal support. Parenthetically, lower nominal GDP prospects also accentuate perceptions that India's equity market is expensive and explains why foreign portfolio flows have been reluctant. Meanwhile, low inflation can keep monetary policy in play but with real rates already down to 1.25 per cent, the space for more support, if any, is very modest.

The implication: Cyclical supports must make way for structural underpinnings. Policymakers must be commended for jumpstarting this process both by bringing reforms back on the table (GST rationalisation, new labour codes, 100 per cent FDI in insurance) and not succumbing to export pessimism (by signing a slew of free trade agreements). But the structural ask is long. Over the last two decades, growth has become pre-maturely capital-intensive and there is an urgent need to reverse this drift. Only labour-intensive growth will generate the household incomes to drive sustained consumption growth. But this will require the labour force to become more employable — as it competes with capital — through a mission-like focus on education, skilling and health. Human

In a world floating with Chinese excess capacity and riddled with US policy capriciousness, a broad-based private investment recovery will require both strong domestic demand visibility and animal spirits

capital augmentation is India's biggest imperative over the next decade. If industrial policy is to be exercised, it must be in labour-intensive sectors and formalisation must not push up the marginal cost of labour to the point that businesses, paradoxically, turn more capital-intensive.

Meanwhile, the export push must be taken to its logical conclusion by joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a large free trading block that accounts for 15 per cent of global trade. The upcoming budget is the perfect opportunity to simplify, rationalise and liberalise customs duties, import tariffs and non-tariff barriers such as QCOs. The old adage — an import tariff is an export tax — has never been truer in a world of global supply chains.

There is no time to waste. Over the last 10 years, per capita GDP growth in US dollars has clocked 5.9 per cent. To reach \$15,000 per capita by 2047, the asking rate of per capita growth in dollars is 8 per cent for the next 22 years, at a time when India's working age population growth — which averaged 1.5 per cent over the last decade — will progressively go to zero. The quantum of labour productivity growth needed in these circumstances, will require a relentless pace of reform.

The task before us is clear and daunting but not impossible. At a time when the rules-based global order is falling apart and being replaced by the law of the jungle, only sustained economic reforms will induce investment, attract capital flows, create jobs, and thereby create a protective sheath around the economy against a hostile and precarious global backdrop.

The writer is head of Asia Economics at JP Morgan Chase Bank

Amid ICE crackdown, missing in action: Democrats



KSHAMA SAWANT

DONALD TRUMP'S ICE is terrorising American cities. Thousands are being snatched off the streets, and drivers are being pulled over by masked and warrantless ICE agents in unmarked cars. Peaceful activist and mother Renee Good was brutally murdered by ICE agents in Minneapolis. The public approval rating for ICE has plummeted since Trump took office, and a majority of Americans now disapprove of ICE. Trump's own popularity has cratered to an unprecedented low. Yet, the Democratic Party has refused to fire Trump and the Republican Party. This is because creating and funding ICE and super-exploiting immigrant workers for Wall Street's greed have always been a bipartisan agenda.

The Democrats control the governor's office and majorities in both houses of the legislature in 16 states. They control the mayor's office in 67 of the 100 largest cities, many of which have experienced some of the most shocking attacks by ICE. These Democrats could declare today that their cities will stop all collaboration with ICE, and follow through. Data reveals that ICE arrests are substantially greater in states where police and other departments cooperate with and share data with ICE. Democratic mayors and city councils could pass emergency legislation banning local agencies from sharing data with ICE and enforce the law with serious penalties, including firing, for agency heads. Local Democrats could pass emergency legislation banning ICE and all other law enforcement officers from wearing masks. They can use their public platforms, which can reach millions of working people, to launch mass protests and civil disobedience.

The Democratic Party has failed to carry out a single one of these actions. In Minneapolis, the Democrats, led by Mayor Jacob Frey and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, have allowed ICE to launch its dreaded Operation Metro Surge, which has unleashed 3,000 agents in the city. The Democratic Party controls Washington state, where I reside. Chillingly, the state's agencies allowed federal agencies such as ICE and Homeland Security to query the state's Department of Licensing database nearly 2.7 million times in 2025 alone.

Trump's ramping up of deportations is horrendous and dangerous. But it is part of a long-term agenda shared by Republicans and Democrats. The 4.4 million deportations plus border expulsions under Joe Biden and years since President Joe Biden's presidential term since Republican George W. Bush's second term. During the eight years of Barack Obama, over 3 million people were deported, more than all 20th-century presidents combined, earning him the title "Deporter-in-Chief". The Democratic Party is not a "lesser evil". Both parties are responsible for brutal attacks on immigrants and working people, atrocities around the world, imperialist wars, and the plundering of resources worldwide, which itself drives immigration.

Attacks on immigrants are endemic to this system, not only in the US, but globally. The capitalist class impoverishes indigenous communities and creates refugees and immigrants. Once the immigrants arrive in the economically advanced nation, it is in the capitalists' interests to oppress them to keep the working class divided. By keeping immigrant workers marginalised, paid lower-tier wages, and always fearful of deportation, the bosses can set the (low) bar for wages and working conditions. They pit native-born workers against immigrant workers in a continual race to the bottom. This is why we need international working-class solidarity against this anti-immigrant agenda.

In the US, we urgently need mass protests, peaceful civil disobedience, and strike actions. When Trump instituted his abhorrent Muslim travel ban in January 2017 during his first term, my socialist Seattle City Council office led the SeaTac airport shutdown, disregarding the objections of many Democratic politicians and operatives who opposed our mass civil disobedience. We need to bring that back to defeat Trump and both parties of the American billionaire class. Working people need to fight to win historic victories such as free healthcare for all by taxing the rich, national rent control, a \$25-an-hour minimum wage, and a permanent end to all US military aid to Israel.

The writer is a former Seattle City Council member who is now running for US Congress as an independent antiwar socialist

Who decided 2016 was the last 'best year'?



SONAL GUPTA

IMAGINE IF the algorithm were a person, or well, a bunch of people, sitting in a backroom sifting through online content to curate your "For You" feed. They'd know you the best. One of them would chuckle at a particularly "dank" meme, maybe an inside joke that only you two share, before projecting it onto your screen. It's a person, but a machine that has learned to identify the content you like and react to.

So, who decided it was time to revisit memories from 2016, the algorithm or us? Snapshots from a decade ago have reappeared everywhere on social media. It was the era before we had "lookmaxxed", "aura-farmed", or "late". 2016, now wearing Retrica's yellow tint, appears like a simpler time.

The trend itself isn't new. Humans love to reminisce, and the algorithm has figured out that looking back keeps us scrolling. In 2019, we posted photos from 2009. In the early 2010s, #throwbackThursday became a weekly ritual. Instagram resurfaces photos from "Story" archives, while Google Photos compiles heartwarming videos from your old photos.

And as we generously romanticise the past, many assert that 2016 was the last "best year" — a claim contested by the politics of that year. Donald Trump came to power in the US. The UK left the European Union. And the Indian government decided to demonetise ₹500 and ₹1,000 banknotes.

So, why does 2016 feel simpler than the equally tumultuous 2026? The answer may lie in what changed about social media that year. The algorithms that now feed us this nostalgia are the same ones that, in 2016, transformed the internet into a hyper-optimised, engagement-baited ecosystem.

Facebook changed its News Feed in 2009 to prioritise "relevance" over chronological order, and soon, other platforms followed suit. In 2016, Instagram announced it would abandon chronological feeds in favour of algorithmic curation to show "moments we believe you will care about the most". Twitter, now X, introduced a similar feature to show "best tweets first". The effects of this shift have been measurable and profound. Research shows algorithmic curation can funnel users into echo chambers. Ragebait, moral panics and hot takes elicit strong reactions that spill offline. And the prioritisation of short-form video content has demonstrably impacted attention spans.

In the years since, the algorithm has received countless makeovers and AI-powered upgrades. Social media transformed from the town's message board into a parallel virtual space, and now, as bots and AI slop proliferate, it increasingly looks less human. When a trend goes viral now, it's nearly impossible to tell: Is this organic? Did the algorithm push it?

The nostalgia for 2016 seems to be driven by both. There's no denying that when you post your 2016 photo, it feels like an act of shared cultural experience. We choose to find connections on platforms designed to be isolating. And the algorithm? It may not have created the longing for 2016, but it recognised, packaged it, and sold it back to us as a trend. Perhaps in 2036, we will look back at 2026 as the best year.

The writer is deputy copy editor, The Indian Express. sonal.gupta@indianexpress.com

40 YEARS AGO

January 27, 1986



Punjab-Haryana talks fail

THE SECOND joint meeting of the chief ministers of Punjab and Haryana and the Union Home Minister, S B Chavan, failed to produce a solution to the problem of identifying villages to be transferred to Haryana in lieu of Chandigarh. The two chief ministers, Surjit Singh Barnala and Bhajan Lal, had a 75-minute meeting with Chavan. The chief ministers stuck to their positions taken by them earlier before the Mathew Commission.

Punjab seeks 1,000 villages

PUNJAB WILL claim 1,000 Punjabi-speaking

ing villages of Haryana before the second territorial commission to be set up under the memorandum of settlement between the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and Har Chand Singh Longowal, the state Chief Minister, Surjit Singh Barnala said. These villages were located in Sirsa, Hissar, Kurukshetra and Ambala districts. Barnala told a news conference.

Rebels take over Kampala

UGANDA'S REBEL National Resistance Army (NRA) has taken the capital, Kampala, after a nine-day offensive on the city, Western diplomatic sources said. The

NRA, led by one-time defence minister Yoweri Museveni, was "clearly in control", one source said. The sources, in radio contact with their counterparts in the city, said that the guerrilla takeover was greeted with jubilation by residents and that Kampala was quiet overnight except for some sporadic shooting.

Budget session

THE BUDGET session of Parliament will commence on February 17, it was officially learnt in New Delhi. The President, Zail Singh, will address the joint session of both the Houses on the opening day.

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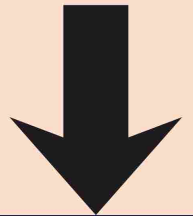
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Let's recover lost meanings of ganarajya to face political challenge of our times



YOGENDRA YADAV

GANARAJYA OR *ganatantra*? Our passport and the Indian Constitution name our republic as *ganarajya*. But our Republic Day is officially called Ganatantra Divas. A small discrepancy, you might think. Perhaps an oversight. Or, maybe a nuance. That is what my publisher thought, when I pressed him to change the title of my recent book from the proposed *Ganatantra ka Swadharma* to *Ganarajya ka Swadharma*.

This seemingly minor difference invites us to search deeper. These two terms allow us to distinguish between two different concepts for which the English language has just one word — “republic”. Once we extricate the concept of *ganarajya* from the more familiar and dominant concept of *ganatantra*, it opens the way to recovering the lost meanings embedded deep in the idea of a *ganarajya*. This recovery, in turn, sets us on a path to face the political challenge of our times.

I am not suggesting that one of the two usages is wrong. Unlike these days, the makers of our Constitution and the early guardians of our republic were very careful with their words. They must have had good reasons to call it “Ganatantra Divas” and not “Ganarajya Divas”. I am not saying that one of these words is more authentic. Sanskrit scholars tell us that both these words are pretty recent, 19th- or 20th-century, coinages. The “republics” in ancient India were called “*gana*” or “*sangha*”, not “*ganarajya*” or “*ganatantra*”. Nor do I claim a direct link between these words and the historical reality of ancient Indian *ganas*. Historians warn us against comparing these older political formations with modern democratic republics. The politics of Vaishali or Lichhavi are best described as lineage-based oligarchies rather than democracies in our sense of the term.

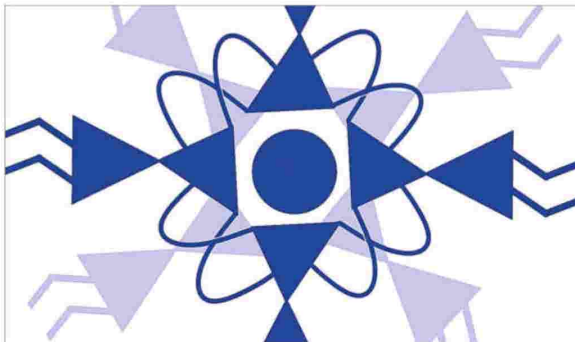


ILLUSTRATION: CR SAKSHAM

My point here is to underline the distinctiveness of these two terms and uncover their different political possibilities.

Ganatantra refers to a negative and very narrow meaning of a republic. Political Science textbooks tell us that a republic is a form of government where the head of state is not hereditary. Britain is ruled by a king, so it is not a republic. Nepal has done away with the king, so it is now a republic. This is simple and clear-cut. But it also renders the idea pretty much useless. Except for a handful of titular monarchies, virtually every country — democratic or otherwise — is a republic these days. An adjective that applies to nearly everyone is redundant. So is this concept of the republic. That is why students of Political Science do not use this concept in any meaningful way. We learn about it in our textbooks and forget about it.

Sometimes, *ganatantra* is used in a broader sense. It is used not just negatively to refer to the absence of monarchy but also positively to refer to the mechanism of popular sovereignty, the *tantra* of *gana*. Thus, it means the

We have to go deeper and ask: Why must we believe in these constitutional values?

An answer to this would take us beyond the Constituent Assembly

institutional structure of electoral democracy through which popular sovereignty is exercised. In this broader usage, *ganatantra* is a near synonym of *lokatantra* or electoral democracy. Here again, *ganatantra* is repetitive and superfluous. No wonder *ganatantra* is a decorative expression that does very little in our political imagination.

Ganarajya takes us to deeper and positive meanings embedded in the idea of a republic. Here, the republic is a normative political order. The public is not just a collection; it is a community of equals. This community evolves its own norms, its distinct *dharma*. These norms are upheld by inculcating civic virtues. The people exercise these norms by holding the rulers accountable. The people are not just the source of power; they are also a check on power. In the European tradition, “republicanism” stood for the radical meaning of republic. In recent years, academic revival of “republicanism” in Western political theory has defined a republic not just as absence of monarchy but as absence of domination of any kind. This radical concept of a re-

public is very much the republican idea upheld by the Indian national movement. The ancient Pali expression *‘samanna-raja’*, a polity where sovereignty is shared by equals, is close to this. In modern usage “*Jan-Gan-Man*” captures the spirit of our *ganarajya*. “*Jan*” stands for the people, the fountain head of sovereignty. “*Gan*” requires the people to be a political community where everyone exercises equal decision making power. “*Man*” is about the collective conscience. It is not mere public opinion at any given point of time, but the ethical ideas that the public upholds on deeper reflection. A radical republicanism informs the Indian Constitution.

Understanding this Indian concept of republic leads us to a question: What are the ethical ideals that inform the Bharat *ganarajya*? One could turn to the Preamble to the Constitution to unpack these ideals. But this may not work at a time when the Constitution itself is under assault. We have to go deeper and ask: Why must we believe in these constitutional values? An answer to this would take us beyond the Constituent Assembly. For our Constitution was not written in two years; the ideas that went into its making were forged over at least 100 years. It would take us beyond the freedom struggle, as the national movement was not just a movement to liberate the country from British colonial rule. It was also a movement for the reconstruction of India. It was an encounter between our civilisational heritage and Western modernity.

A search for the ethical ideals embedded in the idea of *ganarajya* invites us to uncover the *swadharma* of our republic. This is what the oft-quoted phrase “the idea of India” must mean. And that would lead us to a stark conclusion: What we confront today is not just a backsliding of our democracy, not just a mutilation of our Constitution. We face nothing short of a determined onslaught on the *swadharma* of our *ganarajya*. Defining and defending this *swadharma* must be our collective Republic Day resolve.

Yadav is the author of *Ganarajya ka Swadharma* (Setu Prakashan, 2026)

Don't bash Davos. Some things work, like this alliance for women



SMRITI IRANI

OVER the past few days, we have seen some content bashing Davos. It needs no reminding that Davos is not, and should not be mistaken for, an end in itself. It is a catalyst. It is a moment — brief, concentrated, and intensely visible — where global attention converges. What matters is not the convergence alone, but what institutions, governments, and leaders choose to build in its wake.

It was in this spirit that, three years ago, on the sidelines of the Forum, I established the Alliance for Global Good as an independent platform focused on advancing women's economic participation, inclusive growth, and cross-sector collaboration. The intent was clear: To move beyond episodic interventions and towards systems-level solutions grounded in research, partnerships, and institutional accountability.

Since then, the Alliance has engaged with over 5,000 international delegations and collaborated with more than 12,000 industry stakeholders. Its work has been anchored in evidence, through over a dozen policy papers examining public health systems, climate transition economics, the care economy, and the structural barriers limiting women's participation in growth. These findings have travelled across international platforms and have informed national discourse, including their reflection in India's Economic Survey through our work on the care economy.

A defining principle of the Alliance has been the recognition that policy coherence and delivery capacity are inseparable. This understanding shaped SPARK — the 100K Collective, an initiative designed to enable 1,00,000 women entrepreneurs across 300 locations in India. Its focus is not charity, but capability — connecting women-led enterprises to skills, capital, markets, and regulatory systems that allow them to grow, formalise, and compete. Equally important has been attention to the less visible, but deeply consequential, systems that shape women's lives. In the area of maternal health, the Alliance encouraged the ICMR to develop a clinician usage protocol for an affordable postpartum haemorrhage drape. Developed at a cost of under \$1, this drape and the corresponding usage protocol show how institutional leadership, paired with frugal innovation and system adoption, can deliver life-saving impact at scale.

The Alliance has built four collaborations in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the US. Each is shaped by local context and unified by a commitment to women's economic participation and inclusive growth.

This year's engagements in Davos reflected continuity and expansion. The WE Lead Lounge, now in its third year, has evolved into the Alliance's flagship convening platform. Across 14 structured conversations, 65 global leaders engaged with over a thousand participants on issues spanning health security, climate resilience, economic participation, and workforce transitions.

Several milestones marked this year's engagement. The unveiling of Laila Nutraceuticals' women's wellness initiative signalled a \$40-million commitment to integrating research with market delivery. The announcement of the \$100-million SPARK Fund, with early commitments already mobilised, is intended to accelerate women-led enterprises at scale. The report ‘Unlocking Her Wealth: The Untapped Economy’ combined original analysis with evidence to deepen understanding of the undervaluation of women's work and its implications for economic participation.

This was my fourth consecutive engagement with the Forum. My earlier journeys were shaped by the responsibilities of ministerial office. This year's engagement — as chairperson of the Alliance for Global Good — was different. It was less about voice and more about architecture. How ideas are translated into systems, how evidence informs collaboration, and how dialogue matures into delivery.

The strength of Davos lies not merely in who attends, but in how it reflects the state of the world. Heads of government, CEOs, and institutional leaders shared the global stage with civic groups, practitioners, youth collectives, and ordinary citizens. This plurality matters. Global attention is a finite resource, and when it gathers, it must be used to surface complexity, not flatten it.

As the conversations from Davos recede, one principle remains clear: Progress is sustained not by momentary alignment, but by institutions that are designed to endure. The enduring value of Davos lies in how global attention is stewarded. When engaged with intent, it serves as a bridge between dialogue and design.

The writer is a former Union minister

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Nuclear ambition

EXPANDING NUCLEAR capacity without parallel investment in domestic fuel security and research would create fresh dependencies (‘Nuclear power expansion is an R&D challenge’, *IE*, January 26). The government must prioritise sustained funding for thorium-based technologies, strengthen university-industry research links, and build a skilled nuclear workforce. Clear timelines, safety, transparency, and public communication are equally vital if nuclear power is to gain trust and deliver reliable, low-carbon energy.

S M Jeeva, Chennai

Rare chronicler

I WAS fortunate to have met Sir Mark Tully (‘The gift to India that was Mark Tully’, *IE*, January 26), and have him inaugurate a book I wrote on my experiences as an Indian Railways official, *The Boy Who Loved Trains*. His affection for steam locomotives was particularly heartfelt. He lamented their disappearance. For him, the steam engine was a living creature — breathing, panting, sweating, yet always moving forward. His writing and commentary often returned to trains, not merely out of nostalgia but because they represented the India that's constantly evolving: Vast yet intimate, chaotic yet enduring, modernising yet deeply connected to the past. As I mourn the passing of a kind and remarkable individual, I will carry the spirit of Sir Mark Tully whenever I ride a train: Curious, open, patient and endlessly in love with the journey.

Deepak Sapra, via email

THROUGH WORKS like *No Full Stops in India* and *India in Slow Motion*, Mark Tully challenged Western stereotypes, writing with empathy, balance and restraint (‘The gift to India that was Mark Tully’, *IE*, January 26). His death marks the loss of a rare chronicler who explained India with depth, dignity and enduring insight.

R S Narula, Patiala



MRINAL PANDE

KASHI is a city used to treating the world as a theatre for celebrating the timeless cycle of Life and Death. And Death, as Walter Benjamin says, is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. The storytellers of Kashi are spread over various *ghats*, the oldest being Manikarnika Ghat. On the steps of these *ghats*, and at the tea shops and kiosks that line the roads leading to them, sit the garrulous denizens of this timeless city, ready with a story that, you later discover, was the preface to a deeper philosophical point. Or not. Because Kashi also has a great, somewhat brackish sense of humour.

The renovation of Manikarnika Ghat keeps the storytellers busy these days. But the rebuilding, and renaming of *ghats*, has been going on for a long time. The mercurial eastern rivers often wash away the earth under the structures, so the steps and bathing areas begin to show cracks and crumble. This holy work was mostly financed by rich pilgrims, such as the 18th-century trader Vachchhraj and Raja Man Singh of Amber in the 16th century. In the 19th century, the famed Jaganmohi Ghat was restored by Meer Rustam Ali, the police head for Kashi, and renamed Meer Ghat.

The recent furor over the rebuilding and expansion of the area around Manikarnika Ghat arose over the removal of several small temples and the statue of

A densely packed pilgrimage centre began surrounding what was once a secretive and sacrosanct space haunted only by sadhus, relatives of the dead waiting for cremation and, of course, the restless souls of the dead

Maratha queen Ahilyabai Holkar, who built and restored many holy sites and temples, including the present-day Kashi Vishwanath temple. Ahilyabai's statue was shown in some widely circulated clips as lying among the debris. The Holkar family of Indore sent a note of protest and other groups, alleging the desecration of several temples, also jumped into the fray. The Chief Minister then visited the site and told the media that the queen's statue and some other were safe and would be reinstalled after the ‘Manikarnika Teerth Corridor’ was rebuilt. He also asserted that the original demand for expanding and rebuilding the cremation grounds and the *ghats* had been made to the Prime Minister by the Dom Raja whose family has controlled the area for generations.

The area where the cremation grounds and sundry temples stand, the storytellers tell you, predates history. Once upon a time, it was a dark place where the river banks ended and a dense forest began. The forests have since disappeared. A densely packed pilgrimage centre began surrounding what was once a secretive and sacrosanct space haunted only by sadhus, relatives of the dead waiting for cremation and, of course, the restless souls of the dead.

Till the time of Alauddin Khilji, Hindus were free to build temples to various manifesta-

tions of Lord Shiva. Later, when under the Lodhis of Delhi and the Sharqi sultans of Jaunpur, assertive Islam knocked at Kashi's doors, there was considerable destruction of old buildings. But the city had a great power to bounce back and rebuild. By the 17th century, a sort of ceasefire was declared.

During the decline and fall of the great Mughal Empire, the court of the Maharaja of Benares, his Nagar Kotwal Meer Rustam Ali, and later the British Resident's house, became centres of classical discourses on oriental culture among the pandits, the Muslim nobility and the British orientalist. By 1734, the Marathas began a furious rebuilding of Kashi's holy *ghats* and temples. At the same time, quarrels and litigation over sharing taxes levied at the cremation *ghats* were common. One Kashmiri, miffed by the greed of the Doms of Dashashwamedha Ghat, brought his mother's body for cremation to Manikarnika and by way of gratitude rebuilt the Ghat and started paying regular wages to the keepers.

Those days are gone. As one old singer, Pyare Ustad, sang: ‘*Nahin rahi woh Dara Sikandar, do din ki fasare rahi Chale gaye sub Mulk-e-Adam ko, na khilki rahi, na taree nahin*’ (Those great stalwarts are no more, their rule lasted but two days. Ultimately all left for Adam's final abode, after their things have been neither dry nor wet).’

The writer is former chairperson, Prasar Bharati

Beijing purge shows risk of being last man standing



ANUSHKA SAXENA

THE CHURN in the Chinese military is not over — this was the message that reverberated through the halls of the Bayi Building in Beijing on January 20, during the plenary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. Missing in action at the meeting was the second-in-command of China's highest defence and security decision-making body, Central Military Commission vice chairman Zhang Youxia. Four days later came the unprecedented announcement by the Chinese Ministry of National Defence, that Zhang, along with CMC member Liu Zhenli, have been placed under investigation for ‘serious violations of discipline and law’.

In the past few years, under the garb of corruption, it seems a factional war has played out within the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It likely pitted the ‘Shaanxi Gang’ — led by Zhang Youxia and erstwhile discipline czar (now CMC vice chairman) Zhang Shengmin — against the ‘Fujian Gang’ of naval and Taiwan Strait war-planners. For a time it appeared the Shaanxi clique had won. They wielded the hammer of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive, potentially systematically targeting rival sources of power. But the latest signals from Beijing suggest a twist that few saw coming — the rule of the Zhangs is itself in jeopardy.

Corruption in the PLA is a feature, not a bug. It is baked into a system where state-owned monopolies practise ‘scientific gatekeeping’ that is anything but

scientific. The ‘say it, do it’ ethos that underpins Xi's legitimacy — the promise that the Party delivers results, whether in bringing back blue skies or poverty alleviation — was undermined by a procurement system defined by big rigging, favours in personnel appointment, and *guanxi* (referring to interpersonal military-industry relations).

A highly likely theory is that Xi's response was the unleashing of the Zhangs.

Corruption in the PLA is a feature, not a bug. It is baked into a system where state-owned monopolies practise ‘scientific gatekeeping’ that is anything but scientific

Zhang Shengmin, as secretary of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, led the charge. The targets were specific: The likes of He Weidong, Miao Hui, and former Eastern Theatre Command leader Lin Xiangyang, who rose together in the erstwhile Fujian-based 31st Group Army as well as the PLA Navy — the very men entrusted with the Taiwan invasion plans. Their downfall was swift, prompted by allegations of ‘major duty-related crimes’ and political disloyalty. This seemed to leave the Shaanxi faction, with its roots in the Army and the Rocket Force, as the last man standing. But in Xi's China, being the last man standing is a liability.

This perpetual churn has profound implications for global security. A military that is constantly looking over its shoulder cannot effectively prepare for

war. The dismantling of the Fujian gang has decapitated the leadership most familiar with the Taiwan Strait. Now, if Youxia is purged, the PLA will be left with a paralysed command structure, and the highest defence and security decision-making body — the CMC — will be the smallest it has ever been in decades, in terms of operational strength.

As one watches the dominoes fall, one thing is clear — that in the new era of the PLA, there is no safety, no immunity, and no end to the churn. The rule of the Zhangs may have looked absolute yesterday, but in Beijing, the ground is always shifting.

The writer is staff research analyst, Indo-Pacific Studies Programme, Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru

DEFENCE

India to expand its hypersonic arsenal with LR-AShM missile



DRDO's Long Range Anti Ship Missile during the R-Day parade.

Sushant Kulkarni
Pune, January 26

ONE of the many highlights of the 77th Republic Day Parade was the Defence Research and Development Organisation's (DRDO) Long Range Anti-Ship Hypersonic Missile (LR-AShM), showcased for the first time. We explain the features and capabilities of this hypersonic glide missile, and also what other hypersonic missiles India is developing.

LR-AShM: The hypersonic glide missile

The missile system is designed to meet the coastal battery requirements of the Indian Navy. The LR-AShM is capable of engaging static and moving targets and is designed to carry various payloads to a range of around 1,500 km.

This missile follows a quasi-ballistic trajectory with hypersonic speeds starting at Mach 10 (multiples of speed of sound) and maintaining average Mach 5 with multiple skips. Ballistic missiles are boost-powered initially and then travel unpowered on a high, arched trajectory. Quasi-ballistic missiles begin ballistically but fly lower and manoeuvre in flight to change course and evade interception. As this missile flies at low altitudes with high speed and manoeuvrability, enemy ground and ship-based radars cannot detect it. The LR-AShM is configured with a two-stage solid propulsion rocket motor system. These propulsion systems boost the missile to the required hypersonic velocities. Stage 1 of the vehicle is separated after it is spent. After Stage-II burnout, the vehicle performs an unpowered glide with required manoeuvres in the atmosphere before engaging the target, the DRDO has said.

DIFFICULT TO DETECT

● The missile can be detected by enemy radars, as it flies at low altitudes with high speed and manoeuvrability.

● The missile has a range of up to 1,500 km, which it can cover in 15 minutes.

Its significance

The obvious advantages of the hypersonic speed is it makes it difficult for missiles to be detected. It can cover its

range around 1,500 kilometers in 15 minutes. Versions with higher ranges up to 3,500 kilometers are currently at various stages of development. A senior DRDO scientist said, "All classes of warships can be neutralised with the missile. This variant and the upcoming ranges will be a key asset for sea denial operations, which prevent an adversary from using a maritime area for military or commercial purposes. This capability will be crucial for the strategically significant Indian Ocean region. Army and Air Force versions of these missile and ship-fired versions for the Navy are also said to be either under consideration or under development. With its versatility, it could well place India in the hypersonic arms domain."

One of the known successful tests of the missile was done by DRDO on November 16, 2024 off the coast of Odisha. As part of the further development cycle, the missile warhead and sensor mechanisms will be integrated soon, before its induction into the Navy in two to three years.

Other hypersonic cruise missiles

Amidst cutthroat global competition in hypersonic weapons, DRDO is working on two key hypersonic technologies. One is hypersonic glide and another is hypersonic cruise. LR-AShM is a hypersonic glide vehicle and includes in itself major achievements in indigenous technologies like materials and control systems needed for sustained hypersonic flight. Hypersonic cruise missiles fly within the atmosphere at hypersonic speeds using scramjet engines for sustained powered flight and manoeuvrability.

Ramjets are air-breathing engines that compress incoming air using forward motion, with fuel igniting in a combustion chamber; they require an assisted take-off and work best around Mach 3, losing efficiency at hypersonic speeds. Scramjets improve on ramjets by keeping airflow supersonic in the combustion chamber, enabling efficient operation above Mach 5, but are far more complex to design and operate.

GLOBAL

In China's series of purges, why latest one stands out



RISHIKA SINGH

FOR MONTHS now, reports of China purging senior military officials have frequently made headlines. Even then, the investigation into the only remaining Vice Chairman of China's apex military decision-making body — for "suspected serious violations of discipline and law" — marks an unprecedented development.

Zhang Youxia, 75, is a veteran leader. He joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the military arm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in 1968. Zhang was not only professionally associated with Chinese President Xi Jinping, but is also known to share personal ties with him. Their fathers were senior party leaders who knew each other.

The *Wall Street Journal* claimed Sunday that he was accused of "leaking information about the country's nuclear weapons program to the US". If true, this would be an extraordinary charge. There are also other theories floating around his removal. Officially, past purges have been justified as cracking down on corruption. Past incidents also indicate that repressive is unlikely after an investigation begins, and Zhang will be removed from his post.

This effectively means that the seven-member Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) now has only two people: Xi Jinping himself, as the CMC Chairman, and Zhang Shengmin, the other CMC Vice Chairman. Shengmin was appointed to the post just three months ago, when his predecessor, He Weidong, was also purged.

Why this probe is noteworthy

First, there is the seniority of the people involved. Zhang Youxia holds the senior-most army rank, that of general. He was also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party Central Committee, which is among the top political bodies in China. Apart from Zhang, the investigation will also include fellow CMC member Liu Zhenli, 61, the chief of the CMC's Joint Staff Department.

A *South China Morning Post* report said that both Zhang and Liu are "decorated war heroes" and participated in PLA campaigns against Vietnam in the late 1970s.

Anil Sasi

New Delhi, January 26

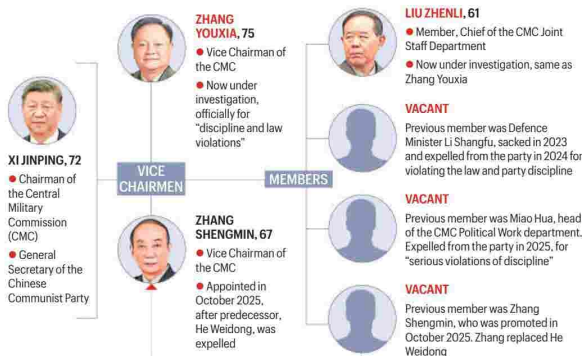
OVER THE weekend, China's most senior army officer, General Zhang Youxia, was reported to be under official investigation. A report from *The Wall Street Journal* stated that it stemmed from allegations of leaking information related to the country's nuclear weapons programme to the US.

The Pentagon's most recent annual report on China's armed forces specifically flagged the removal of senior officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) having "caused uncertainty over organisational priorities" and "reverberated throughout the ranks of the PLA". The report, published in December, said corruption in Chinese defence procurement had led to "observed" capability shortfalls, such as malfunctioning lids on missile silos.

"These investigations very likely risk short-term disruptions in the operational effectiveness of the PLA... Alternatively, the PLA could emerge as a more proficient fighting force in the future if it uses the current campaign to eliminate systemic issues enabling corruption," the Department of Defence's annual report on military and security developments relating to the People's Republic of China had said.

AND THEN THERE WERE TWO

China's top military decision-making body, the seven-member Central Military Commission, now has only two people left — one of them being Xi Jinping himself.



An editorial in the official newspaper *PLA Daily* framed the decision as the Communist Party's commitment to weeding out corruption — something Xi also emphasised when he first assumed power in 2012. He vowed to go after corrupt officials, stating that the targets would range from the top leaders to the lowest-ranking people (what he called "tigers and flies").

Since 2023, the list of those purged, including civilian leaders, has rapidly accumulated top names in defence, including former Defence Minister Li Shangfu, former Foreign Affairs Minister Qin Gang, and PLA Rocket Force generals. The editorial said the latest move showed a "clear attitude of zero tolerance, no forbidden zones, and full coverage in punishing corruption," adding that "Rome wasn't built in a day."

On the two men, it said they "seriously betrayed the trust and expectations of the Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission, severely trampled on and undermined the Chairman of the Central Military Commission's responsibility system (referring to Xi Jinping), seriously fostered political and corruption

Control panel

With Zhang out of the picture, few challengers to Xi remain.

For the next Party Congress in 2027, Xi could be re-elected as party leader for a record fourth term, and a new set of loyalists could be assembled.

problems that undermined the Party's absolute leadership over the military."

The language used in this portion is the second reason why the investigation has raised eyebrows. Apart from the usual terminology of "discipline", which indicates corruption, there is a perception that Zhang may have done something that Xi deemed as a threat to his authority. Bill Bishop, a US-based journalist and longtime China watcher, wrote in his newsletter 'Sinocism' that the text "makes it sound like Xi saw them as undermining him in the military, at least."

The third reason concerns the CMC itself. Lyle Morris, a Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy and National Security at the Asia Policy Center for China Analysis, recently posted a photo showing its current status on X. Thanks to the purges, the CMC is at its lowest-ever strength (see box).

The CMC oversees key aspects of the military, including procurement and combat preparedness. The removals have sparked concerns about the health of the military.

Many theories in Youxia's case

Several analysts have noted that at this

Zhang Youxia, 75, was China's top army officer. His removal leaves the CMC at its lowest-ever strength and raises questions about the PLA

stage, most theories surrounding the episode are just that, but they are based on an understanding of the systems at play.

The *SCMP* reported that Zhang was accused of "failing to rein in his close associates, family members and relatives. He was also blamed for not flagging problems to the party leadership at the first instance."

The *Wall Street Journal*, apart from talking about a "leak" of nuclear secrets, reported that Zhang was accused of "accepting bribes for official acts, including the promotion of an officer to defense minister". He was also being investigated for "allegedly forming political cliques".

The nuclear leak charge is significant, concerning a highly sensitive issue, but many of the other charges have echoes in past purges. Anushka Saxena, a researcher focusing on the PLA at the Bengaluru-based think tank Takshashila Institution, earlier told *The Indian Express* that corruption was indeed a serious issue and that Xi had, of late, removed even his loyalists under such charges.

The logic goes that for China to project itself as a major global power, inefficiencies in war planning are not affordable, particularly concerning Taiwan.

What it says about Xi

Do all of these changes point to Xi's waning authority, or a potential change in leadership? Not necessarily. In fact, one argument is that Xi purging those close to him could project his image as a leader singularly devoted to fighting corruption. It could point to a man who is capable of making major political changes without facing a challenger.

But the changes may not herald a new and improved PLA, just yet. Questions could be raised internally about Xi's picks, about no one being safe, and could ultimately impact the forces' morale.

Saxena told *The Indian Express*, "One cannot possibly imagine that the Chinese military is the same beast as even most of its most experienced commanders are purged or constantly replaced."

She added that while activities such as military flybys around Taiwan will continue, as will skirmishes with the Philippines in the South China Sea or with Japan, "war is a different game."

Writing in her newsletter 'Eye on China', Saxena said, "As you chairman goes away, war planning becomes tougher, and the show of face vis-à-vis actors in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and even the Himalayas becomes tougher," she wrote.

Month ago, Pentagon flagged PLA 'disruption' from removals

Anil Sasi

New Delhi, January 26

OVER THE weekend, China's most senior army officer, General Zhang Youxia, was reported to be under official investigation. A report from *The Wall Street Journal* stated that it stemmed from allegations of leaking information related to the country's nuclear weapons programme to the US.

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Top general under lens

Zhang is the vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's supreme military command body, serving as the second-most senior officer under President Xi Jinping, and has long been regarded as Xi's closest ally within the armed forces. China's defence ministry said it had opened an investigation into the country's highest-ranking general over "grave violations of discipline and the law", without any further details about accusations against General Zhang. In its announcement, the ministry said another senior military officer, General Liu Zhenli, was also under investigation.

Their removal follows the expulsion of nine top generals in October: one of the largest public crackdowns on the military in decades. With the latest purge, the CMC is now down from the original seven members to just two: Xi, who is the chair, and Zhang Shengmin, who is responsible for the military's disciplinary affairs.

Early into its annual report on military and security developments of China, the

Cause and effect

● The recent removals reflect Chinese leaders' decreased confidence in the reliability of the PLA leadership.

● The number of personnel removed likely has implications for the PLA's progress towards its 2027 modernisation goals, which include a Taiwan plan.

Pentagon inserted a section titled 'PLA Corruption Developments'. "The PLA has continued to experience corruption-related investigations in every service, which have led to the removal of dozens of general officers. By late 2024, corruption issues had again reached the level of the CMC. Additionally, multiple senior officers and defence industry executives have not been seen attending public events, suggesting that additional corruption investigations remain in progress," the Pentagon report said.

According to the WSJ report, the allegations were outlined during a closed-door briefing on Saturday attended by senior military officers, shortly before China's Ministry of National Defence announced an investigation into Zhang Youxia. The Ministry said Zhang was suspected of serious violations of party discipline and state law, without elaborating on the charges.

CMC members' purge

Beijing has detained or suspended multiple members of its Central Military Commission. In March 2025, CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong was reportedly detained and has not made any public appearances since the end of the National People's

Congress in early March last year. As one of two CMC vice chairmen, he shared responsibility with Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia for direct oversight over the 15 departments, commissions, and offices of the CMC.

He's likely detention indicates how over a decade into Xi's anti-corruption campaign, corruption still extends to even the most senior officers who have been promoted during Xi's tenure. In November 2024, Admiral Miao Hua — head of the CMC Political Work Department (PWD) and the PLA's top political officer — was publicly suspended from duty on suspicion of "serious violations of discipline". Miao had authority over political education, party organisations within the military, and had overall responsibility for "maintaining loyalty within the PLA".

Investigations into these military leaders indicate Beijing is willing to purge the military of perceived disloyalty, regardless of the disruptive impact on the PLA.

The total number of PLA leaders removed for corruption or other unprofessional conduct is hard to assess, but expulsions from party and state bodies are a barometer for measuring the extent of the removals.

TRANSPORT

India has most road accident deaths in the world. Can 'talking cars' curb these?

Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, January 26

THE UNION government is planning to launch a "vehicle-to-vehicle (V2V)" safety system to prevent road accident deaths and reduce traffic.

V2V communication is a wireless technology that enables vehicles to communicate, or "talk", with one another. This essentially means that vehicles can share real-time information such as speed, location, acceleration and braking with each other.

At a meeting of the Parliamentary consultative committee on January 22, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari said the Department of Telecommunications has allocated the 30 GHz radio frequency for the development of such communication systems.

The V2V system is similar to the aviation sector technology where aircraft broadcast their position, speed, altitude, and the nearby aircraft and ground stations receive it. This system has been a crucial part of the aviation sector across the world. In the roads

sector, however, it is still a work in progress. The V2V system is in place in only a few countries, mostly developed ones.

How will the system work?

According to officials from the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways (MoRTH), an On-Board Unit (OBU) will be installed in cars so that they can exchange data with nearby vehicles wirelessly. This unit will alert the driver about black spots, obstacles, parked vehicles on roadways, fog or any potential threats.

Usually, V2V systems can detect vehicles in a 300-metre range. For instance, if a car applies brakes suddenly, nearby vehicles will get an alert to slow down. This could help in reducing crashes.

India ranks first in the world in total road accident fatalities, far ahead of second- and third-ranked countries. China accounts for just 36%, and the US 25%, of India's road deaths. MoRTH Secretary V Umashankar said the OBUs will cost between Rs 5,000 and Rs 7,000. These will be first installed in



Usually, V2V systems can detect vehicles in a 300-metre range. PHOTO

new vehicles. "This will have a significant impact on road safety. Many times, trucks and cars are parked on the roadside, and the speeding vehicles collide with them, which

leads to casualties. We will be able to reduce such accidents, since OBU will automatically issue the warning," said Umashankar at a press conference on January 8.

When will it be rolled out?

The government has not yet announced a specific date for rolling out this system. However, it is the ministry's key initiative as part of its road safety programme for the year. The secretary said the ministry is setting standards for it in collaboration with original equipment manufacturers (OEMs). A joint task force has also been constituted with the telecom department.

"After the decision on the standards, we will issue a notification. Initially, the new vehicles will be required to install these on-board units. After that, the old vehicles will be fitted with this. Under the National Frequency Allocation Plan, the Department of Telecommunications will provide free spectrum. So the OEMs will be able to use this spectrum and get it installed in the vehicle. Our aim is to get it implemented this year," said the MoRTH secretary.

What are the challenges?

The V2V system has some limitations and privacy concerns. The frequency band

allocated for the system might not support all vehicles. This means that incorrect information can lead to accidents and deaths.

Another issue is that it will store a large amount of data — about the vehicles, their location, details about the driver, etc. This puts the whole intelligent transport infrastructure at potential risk of being misused. It would require strict government regulations and rules to implement. Cyber attacks are another concern for this system.

Which countries use V2V?

The US is the leader in V2V communication systems research and its implementation, with strong regulation. Models like the Volkswagen Golf 8 and the Cadillac models in the US come with this tech.

European countries such as Germany, France and the UK, too, are incorporating V2V into new vehicles and smart city projects. China is another major adopter of V2V. Countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Brazil and Mexico are in early pilot stages to roll out V2V systems.



A thought for today

I am an expression of the divine, just like a peach is, just like a fish is. I have a right to be this way

ALICE WALKER, The Colour Purple

Messaging The Temple

U'khand govt & state BJP must nix Badri-Kedar committee's idea of banning access to non-Hindus

Badri-Kedar temple committee (BKTC) chairman and Uttarakhand BJP spokesperson Hemant Dwivedi's proposal to ban non-Hindus from two of Hinduism's most venerated temples, Kedarnath and Badrinath, is dangerous. Here's why.

For context, priests' communities have upped the ante on their longstanding demand to wrest control of Hindu places of worship from state jurisdiction. Recall that in 2021 Uttarakhand govt junked its Char Dham Devasthanam Board Act, passed in 2019 - that sought to bring 51 temples under a single management board - following stiff opposition from Hindu clergy, individual temple managements and VHP. In the first place, state control on Hindu shrines was exerted to counter casteism in temples in independent India - exactly to counter this kind of bar to access, as suggested by orthodoxes such as BKTC's. Access for all in Hindu temples is a battle-hard-won.

Given this, now for a state-controlled body *conservatoire* to Uttarakhand govt to make a considered announcement to ban non-Hindus multiplies the seriousness of what's at stake. It is an unconstitutional proposal. In the name of 'tradition', as was argued for the proposal to ban non-Hindus from Haridwar's ghats days ago, the state cannot allow a return to hoary segregationist practices, and remain wilfully blind to law and constitutional morality.

BKTC is baiting govt at a time UCC is an experiment in Uttarakhand. And at a time when pilgrimages are central to its cultural and political messaging, neatly folded into Hindutva politics. Pilgrimage tourism is a red hot growth sector, and Uttarakhand is a major player. That should prompt the state, and all states hosting major pilgrimage centres, to open temple doors wider still. The fight over Sabarimala is a case in point. But when a rich temple trust wants to turn back the clock by centuries, it is detrimental to the big tent idea of a 'developed India'. Kedarnath hosted almost 18L pilgrims in 2025, Badrinath 16L. Foreign arrivals, PIOs & NRIs included, were fewer than 2,000 - that should increase, dollar spends mean more bang per buck.

Supreme Court, were it to hear the constitutionality of this proposal, would surely strike it down. But it shouldn't come to that. Uttarakhand govt and state BJP should nix the temple committee's proposal - and send a message.

VonDerful Trade Deal?

We'll have to see. But that EU's finally so close to a pact with India shows how much Trump has rattled it

Chief guest at R-Day parade, EU's chief bureaucrat, Ursula von der Leyen, remarked yesterday that a successful India would be the world better. Only recently, EU was dissing India for buying Russian energy, while buying it itself. And, BTW, it took EU and India 18 years - a very long time even for two entities infamous for their bureaucracies - to get close to a trade deal, expected to be finalised today.

To basics: at \$136.5bn in 2024-25, EU is already India's largest goods trading partner. The deal, per some reports, may see India cutting tariffs sharply on EU-made cars. India may get zero-duty access for its labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, apparel and gems.

Even EU's trade barriers - CBAMs aka green export rules - are apparently in final stages of resolution. If pushed over the finishing line, this would be a pretty big deal, with plenty for both parties to be happy about. It may goad Trump - to rage about India and Europe or to do a deal with India or both.

But give credit to Trump for being the reason the deal may get done. As Davos showed, the Euro-Atlantic alliance is strained like never before, forcing the European bloc to wake up and smell the coffee and chai. Gone are those comfy days when American military muscle would backstop Europe, while Brussels elite would sip wine and admonish the Global South - sometimes India included - for failing on democracy and human rights. Russia's war in Ukraine, and now the Trump jolt, have finally got EU to start thinking of an independent strategic security and foreign policy.

But is this a passing phase to weather a Trump White House? Time will tell. Barring the Viktor Orbans, EU's clear there cannot be any truck with Russia in the foreseeable future, while China is now on the suspect watchlist. Interestingly, EU is willing to look past India's ties with Russia, because Brussels now needs some wins, as does India, of course. Welcome to realism EU, and do note that there's plenty of grey here. You always knew this. But pragmatism can now replace preaching.

Manali trance

Indian tourists mistake bad weather forecast for a welcome sign

Anil Abraham



Kamala is upset with me because we were the only ones without holiday plans. "Everyone is going somewhere - you don't have any get-up-and-go!" I got up to go. Because I knew one of those Trump-type rambling rants was about to begin - a lot of incoherent words and no valid point. She had set her mind on Kullu-Manali even though I had read the weather report and told her that inclement weather was predicted. Storm clouds were gathering now, but in our living room instead.

To save my skin I scrolled through social media and showed her posts of long snaking queues of cars stuck in the snow on the highway between Kullu and Manali. Bored stiff and irritable people upset that their promised weekend was quite literally a road trip, with no hope of reaching the destination. "It's about the journey, not the destination!" she informed me, peeping at the philosophy forward from Gud Morning Govindappa.

I'm very intolerant of the milling masses - but Kamala refuses to be cowed by crowds. The more the merrier, is her motto. And so every long weekend we find ourselves standing in a queue to pay our respects to one more over-worked god or weary hill station or bored beach - all filled with like-minded hapless hundreds trying to get a wow moment for an Insta pic. Sitting in a cubicle in front of a screen fulfilling the 70-hour week as a corporate minion is apparently not enough - the new trend is to sit in a car frozen in a traffic jam staring at another window. Elon Musk just needs to get a travel influencer to post pictures from Mars with a catchy caption like 'Mars-Set Destination' and the insatiable Indian will land there carrying *thelaps* and *chiklis* and hoping to find a *masala* chai stall.

Even with dire predictions of snow, the Indian tourist heads to destinations where all men have boldly gone before. Even ICE in America does not deter him from wandering into Trump territory. We need to learn lessons from one lone penguin who decided to break away from the tribe and head to a less crowded destination. Now that Sunita Williams has been grounded, there is space for the Great Indian traveller to discover unsullied territory, then proceed to clutter it with chaos and confusion.

Letter To Finance Minister

Among things that budget can fix, are rules for capital gains tax & withholding tax. FM must make these simple & predictable. Foreign investors, who have been taking their money out, value clarity

Duvvuri Subbarao



Dear finance minister, I know you are drowning in advice from a billion Indians on what to do in the budget. I am wary of adding to your burden, but having noted this intrusion an annual habit, I am unable to resist the temptation. So, please bear with me.

Before I get into business, let me congratulate you on becoming the longest continuously serving finance minister in independent India. You can justifiably be proud of this accomplishment. Longevity in such a politically demanding office is no mean feat. The knowledge, wisdom and political antennae that come with experience are undeniable assets.

But I must also offer a gentle caution: longevity can breed routinisation. Budgets risk becoming incremental exercises - competently managed and fiscally prudent, maybe, but lacking out-of-the-box thinking or bold ideas.

Indeed, a recurring criticism of your budgets has been precisely that: they lack zing. Each budget is a stand-alone piece - some familiar shibboleths and a sprinkling of initiatives, but without a compelling unifying vision. There is sound arithmetic, but no animating idea. Allow me, therefore, to offer a suggestion.

FM has set the grand aspiration of Viksit Bharat: India becoming a developed country by the centenary of Independence in 2047. It is an evocative phrase, but so far it has remained just that - a phrase. We've heard little about what goes just by "developed", how it proposes to get there, or what trade-offs that journey might entail.

Why not seize the opportunity of this budget to lay out the big picture of Viksit Bharat and situate your annual budgets within the overarching roadmap to that goal?

Having set that big picture, you can then move on to the business at hand: the budget for fiscal year 2026-27.

To paraphrase Charles Dickens, this is the best of times, this is also the worst of times. On the positive side, macroeconomic numbers look reassuring. Growth is upwards of 7%, inflation is benign, external deficit is low, and corporate and bank balance sheets

are healthier than they have been in a long time. That is cause for cheer.

On the flipside, there are concerns about the quality of growth. Productivity growth is disappointing. Private investment is sluggish. Employment generation remains slow, especially for the youth. Manufacturing has not emerged as the labour-absorbing engine we had hoped it would become. High and rising tariffs sit awkwardly with our ambition to integrate into global value chains. Add to this a world fractured by geopolitical tensions, protectionism and supply-chain realignments, and the comfort offered by headline numbers begins to dissipate.

The task before you, therefore, is to use today's relative macroeconomic comfort to address structural vulnerabilities and make the economy more robust.

One early warning signal you should not ignore is capital outflows. Foreign investors have been taking money out of India, driven by both push and pull factors. Higher interest rates in advanced economies and the allure of investment in AI are pulling capital away.

But it is the push factors that should concern you more. Our own policy choices matter. Repeated tinkering with capital gains taxation, combined with a complex and often unpredictable withholding tax regime, has eroded policy credibility. Investors value not just returns, but clarity and stability. If India wants stable, long-term capital rather than volatile flows, it may be time to rethink both capital gains and withholding taxes - not to offer concessions, but to restore simplicity, predictability and trust.

On the fiscal front, your decision to shift the policy anchor from the fiscal deficit to a debt-to-GDP ratio is conceptually sound. Debt sustainability is, after all, what ultimately matters. But in making this transition, please do not lose sight of an older, and still very relevant,

metric: revenue deficit. For reasons that are not entirely clear, it has fallen off the radar.

A govt that borrows to invest is very different from one that borrows to consume. Reducing revenue deficit remains the most credible signal of fiscal responsibility and intergenerational equity. Debt targeting without attention to the composition of expenditure risks missing the wood for the trees.

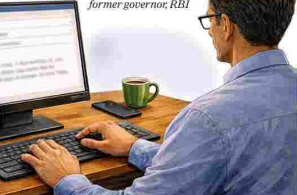
Let me return to Viksit Bharat. As a trained economist, you know that becoming a developed country is not just about crossing a per capita income threshold. It is about creating productive jobs, raising human capital, improving state capacity, reducing inequality and ensuring that growth is both sustainable and inclusive. None of this will happen by accident, and none of it will happen through annual budgets that are disconnected from a longer-term plan.

Why not announce in this budget your intention to publish a medium-term fiscal and growth strategy explicitly aligned with the goal of Viksit Bharat? Such a framework will serve two purposes. It will impose coherence and discipline on successive budgets, including this one. And it will allow us, the public, to hold govt to account - not on one-off announcements, but on progress along a clearly articulated path.

Madam, I recognise the tough fiscal and political constraints under which you operate. You have the unenviable task of making hard choices to secure the economy's long-term health, even if that entails short-term costs. But that is precisely why we elect leaders - to make difficult choices.

The Indian economy has promise. It is your task to make it deliver on that promise. My best wishes. Ma'am, for every success.

former governor, RBI



The Golden Rule: Those With The Gold Make The Rules

Bharat's ancient epics also spell out what Mark Carney's speech at Davos did. If India operates without illusions and keeps its options open today, that's not fence-sitting, but management of uncertainty

Ashwin Sanghi



The Mark Carney speech at Davos hit like a bombshell. In what felt like a rare moment of straight talk from a Western leader, Canada's PM admitted something that India's foreign minister S Jaishankar has been pointing out for years: The so-called "international rules-based order" has a big dose of hypocrisy baked in.

Carney put it plainly: "We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that international law applied with varying rigour, depending on the identity of the accusers or the victim."

This statement was rich coming from a country that had been part of the cozy club that enjoyed the lopsided order's fruits. But Carney was merely spelling out the golden rule: Those with the gold make the rules. If any country gets this instinctively, it's India.

Erstwhile colonies like ours have been living under varying shades of this so-called "rules-based order" for centuries. British Raj used to sell its conquests as a noble mission: it was "civilising" the backward natives, modernising society, bringing law and order, railways, and Enlightenment values.

Same story with the Spanish in the Americas: They wrapped their land grabs and exploitation in the language of spreading Christ's salvation. Every empire needs a pretty alibi to make the ugly reality palatable.

India does not of course need modern geopolitics to learn how rules are bent by the powerful. Bharat's ancient epics hit this truth hard and straight. In the Mahabharata, there were supposed rules of conflict - dharma on the

battlefield. But when winning mattered more, those rules got tossed aside.

Bhishm was tricked by Shikhandi, Dron was broken by a lie about his son, Karn was hit while helpless fixing his wheel, and Duryodhan was finished with an illegal high strike. Bottom line? Rules last only until the powerful find them inconvenient. Then force wins, and the codebooks or breaks.

Ancient Indian history too is replete with such examples. Invaders rarely announced themselves as plunderers; they arrived bearing a so-called higher purpose. Mahmud of Ghazni styled himself a champion of faith to his biographers, even as his repeated raids were meticulously aimed at looting treasures.

Even Ashok - now remembered as Ashoka the Great - ascended the Mauryan throne by eliminating numerous rival claimants. The Kalinga carnage was just a culmination of his power grab. Only after attaining uncontested dominance did Ashoka turn to dharma, recasting conquest as remorse and empire as moral guardianship.

"What's new?" you may ask. What's new is the discarding of pretence.

And for that candid warning, we should thank Donald Trump.

George W Bush sent his team to lobby hard at UN, waving the WMD card and rounding up "coalition of the willing" to make the Iraq invasion look legit. It was a charade - deeply misleading - but he played the game, pretending that international approval mattered.

Trump? He just

skips the whole script. No UN speeches, no coalition-building, no diplomatic theatre. He doesn't ask permission or try to convince anyone. He simply does what he wants. And this includes sharing personal communication from foreign leaders like Macron - messages that reveal Europe's hypocrisy of looking away in Syria and Iran while worrying about Greenland.

In the Trump world, Venezuela and Iran are mere oil reservoirs, not polity issues. Greenland is simply a mineral-rich Arctic chessboard. Gaza is reduced to a PowerPoint presentation of beachfront potential. The weaknesses of neighbours and Nato allies are leveraged in a strategic calculus. The vocabulary has shifted decisively - from values to valuation. This bluntness unsettles many because it punctures a comforting illusion of principles. They forget that the only unwavering principle of power is to shut acting on principle.

For India, this is neither a moment for outrage nor for nostalgic nostalgia about a fairer global order that never truly existed. Bharat understands - instinctively and historically - that moral language usually follows power rather than restrains it. This is civilisational memory. Chanakya articulated it with unsparring clarity in the Arthashastra, where alliances are provisional, treaties are tools, and ethical claims are subordinate to the survival of the state.

India's foreign policy must continue to reflect this absence of illusion. India must continue sourcing cheap Russian energy despite Western discomfort, engage Israel while calling for restraint in Gaza, and avoid binary alignments over Ukraine. It must continue signing FTAs while political cycles play out in Washington, manage its border even as it talks to China, and deepen partnerships in West Asia while strategically evaluating Trump's Board of Peace. It will simply be India operating without illusions - aware that power sets the terms and that rules are negotiable.

And no, this is not fence-sitting but the management of uncertainty. India must keep its options open because experience tells us that commitments harden faster than principles. In a world where rules dissolve under pressure, flexibility is the only durable advantage.

Sanghi is author of several works of fiction

Calvin & Hobbes



Anger And Hatred Are Habits, Not Our True Selves

The XIV Dalai Lama

Among the emotions that disturb our peace of mind, few are as harmful as anger and hatred. These powerful feelings not only cause suffering within but often hurt those around us. They cloud our judgment, damage relationships, and strip away the calm and clarity needed to respond wisely to life's challenges.

Anger arises when our desires are blocked, our pride is wounded, or our expectations go unmet. In those moments, the mind narrows. We exaggerate faults of others and distort reality. Anger can feel justified - even righteous - but it blinds us to what is truly helpful.

Ask yourself: when you are angry, are you at peace? Of course not. Anger agitates the heart and unsettles the mind. It brings discomfort to the body and disturbs emotional balance. Yet sometimes we cling to it, imagining it

gives us strength. But real strength lies in patience, clarity, and compassion. Anger is easy - it's a reaction. Responding with calm understanding requires discipline and courage.

People often ask, "But what if someone treats me unfairly?" Is anger worth it? Yes, anger may arise - but that does not make it helpful. Reacting with anger usually adds fuel to conflict rather than resolving it. We can train the mind to respond with compassion and insight. Often, those who hurt others are themselves hurting - trapped in ignorance or fear.

Indian sage Shantideva said, "If something can be remedied, why be upset about it? And if it can't be remedied, what is the use of being upset?" This wisdom reminds us that anger is not necessary to take effective action. We can confront injustice with courage - without hatred.

Anger and hatred are habits, not our true selves. They arise from misunderstanding and ego-clinging. With mindfulness and effort, they can be reduced and even transformed. The goal is not to suppress anger, but to understand it.

When we shine the light of awareness on it, it begins to dissolve. This is the heart of inner development: turning the mind from a source of suffering into a source of peace.

Patience is one of the most powerful antidotes to anger. It is not weakness; it is inner strength. It allows us to remain composed even when provoked, to pause rather than react, and to act with wisdom rather than impulse. Through patience, we begin to see others with compassion. We realise their unkind actions may come from their own struggles. With this insight, forgiveness becomes possible.

Another remedy is loving-kindness.

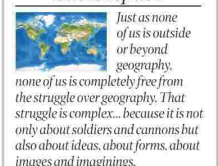
When we wish others well - even those who have harmed us - anger begins to lose its grip. This does not mean we condone bad behaviour; it means we choose to respond from heart rather than from hurt.

Loving-kindness reveals our shared humanity. Everyone seeks happiness and fears pain. Everyone makes mistakes. Seeing others through this lens, they cease to be 'enemies' and become fellow travellers on life's path.

Meditation is a powerful tool. By observing our thoughts and emotions without reacting, we create space in the mind. Meditation gives us the freedom to respond with wisdom, even in difficulty. Over time, it nurtures the inner peace that allows compassion to grow. If we want peace in the world, it must begin in our hearts. We cannot control others, but we can train our own minds. When anger arises, we can pause, breathe, and respond with awareness.

As told to Raju Mehrotra

Sacred space



Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex...because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, forms, norms, about images and imaginings.

Edward W Said

Opinion

Latin America is swinging right. It might stick.

Voters aren't looking for social utopias; they're worried about crime and bills.

Michael Reid

Not so long ago, a U.S. military operation to oust the leader of a Latin American country, like the one the Trump administration conducted against President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela on Jan. 3, might have unified the continent in anti-imperialist outrage. Not today. While some leaders, like President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and President Claudia Sheinbaum of Mexico, were quick to condemn the intervention as a dangerous precedent of U.S. military intervention, others in the region's new right-wing vanguard welcomed the move. "This is excellent news for the free world," said President Javier Milei of Argentina.

The split has been long in the making. For years, the chaos of Venezuela's collapse and the resulting exodus of nearly eight million people have hung like a specter over the Latin American left. The region's politics have been shifting to the right, in part as a result. For millions of voters across Latin America, fear of a failed left-wing dictatorship next door has become a more potent electoral force than fear of an authoritarian right — or, for that matter, than the memory of 20th-century coups.

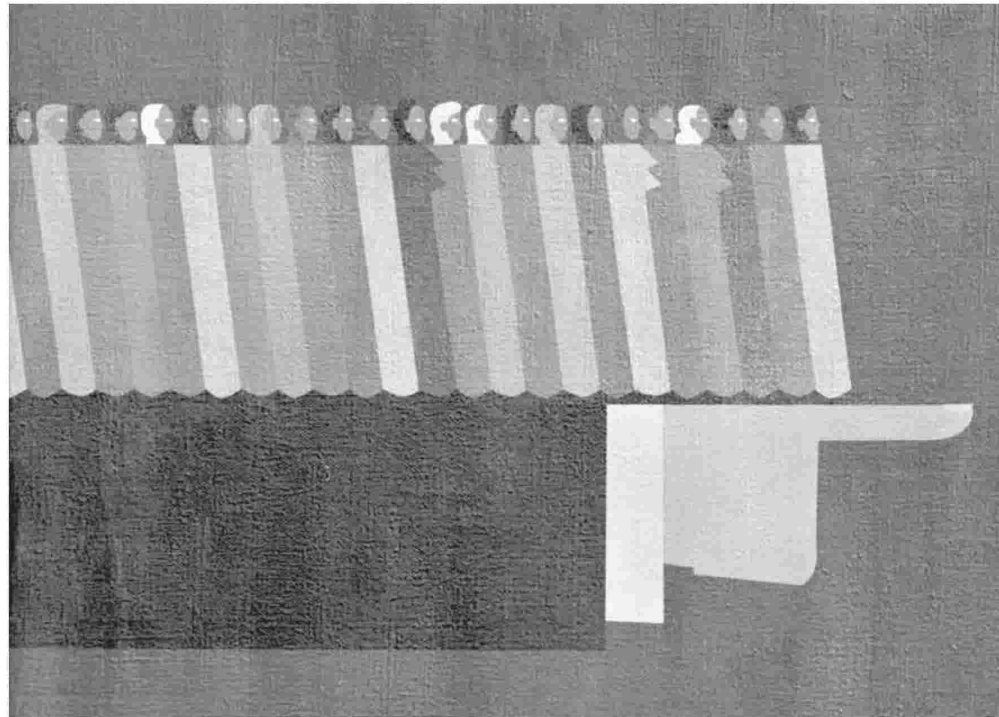
The turn began in 2023 with the victories of figures like Mr. Milei, a chain-saw-wielding, self-professed libertarian, and President Daniel Noboa of Ecuador, a Miami-born banana-fortune heir. Since then, the right has triumphed in around

two-thirds of Latin America's electoral contests. Right-wing candidates look well placed to win elections this year in Peru and Colombia, while in Brazil Mr. Lula faces a tight contest against conservative challengers in his bid for a fourth term. Voters are no longer looking for social utopias; they're worried about crime and making ends meet.

President Trump has of course put his thumb on the scale, he conditioned a \$20 billion bailout on the victory of Mr. Milei's party in midterm elections in Argentina, endorsed a right-wing candidate in Honduras and tried to pressure Brazil into dropping a criminal case against the former president Jair Bolsonaro.

But his regional meddling is only one factor among many. Nor can the rightward turn be attributed merely to Latin America's chronic habit of anti-incumbency. The primary circumstances behind this ascendant generation of right-wing leaders — economic stagnation, criminal expansion, Venezuela's terrible example — suggest that the current turn might prove more durable than past swings of the pendulum.

To understand this shift, look first at what it replaced. The turn of the century heralded a wave of left-wing populists who capitalized on a desire for change after the free-market economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, whose results often disappointed. This original so-called pink tide was fueled in part by a commodity boom set in motion by China's industrialization; Latin America's economies grew at an average annual rate of around 3.5 percent be-



AMERICA ESTRELLA

tween 2000 and 2014. Governments had money to throw around, and so they did, with leaders like Mr. Lula, Evo Morales of Bolivia and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela spending lavishly on social programs and public payrolls.

When the boom faded, centrists and conservatives rose once again in some places like Argentina, Chile and Brazil. But stagnating incomes and weak economic growth swiftly rendered those governments unpopular. The late 2010s brought a wave of social explosions — street protests driven by generations of young people who were more educated than their parents but had found few opportunities to get ahead. Inequality and social justice became the issues of the day. Between 2018 and 2023, voters took their revenge, ousting the incumbent in 20 of 23 free elections and bringing leftist figures like President Gabriel Boric of Chile and President Gustavo Petro of Colombia to power. But that second, weaker pink tide proved short-lived.

The issues that most worry Latin Americans have evolved in ways that favor the right. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit the region hard, voters' focus has changed to the basics of life: finding stable work, putting food on the table and, perhaps above all, keeping safe. Before 2000, the drug business

was mainly confined to Colombia, Mexico, and isolated regions of Bolivia and Peru. Now, gangs stage deadly turf wars for control of the retail drug market across the hemisphere. They have diversified into extortion, human trafficking and illegal mining, especially of gold. They have penetrated politics and exercise cruel control over the lives of many poorer citizens — people who, as their purchasing power has diminished, often yearn for more capitalism rather than more state regulation.

The two figures who most embody this new right, Mr. Milei and President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, offer solutions to these problems that might be more alluring than exportable. On the one hand, by locking up over 1.5 percent of his country's adult population, Mr. Bukele has slashed the murder rate and won the support of millions of Salvadorans. But El Salvador is a small country that suffered specifically from a problem of armed youth gangs. In the sprawling megacities and gang-governed territories in South America or Mexico, fighting crime requires more sophisticated tools, from better intelligence to better coordination between the police, the courts and the prisons.

Mr. Milei, on the other hand, has promised an economic boom to Argentines by pledging to slash the fiscal

deficit and liberate the animal spirits of business. "After years of the political class shackling individual freedoms," he said in 2024, "today we're here to shackle the state." José Antonio Kast, who won his own sweeping victory in Chile's presidential election last month, has hailed Mr. Milei as "an inspiration and a model to follow to take Chile out of stagnation." But Argentina has a uniquely idiosyncratic set of problems, namely the pathological mismanagement of the country's economy by Mr. Milei's Peronist predecessors, in which a bewildering battery of controls and subsidies produced high inflation, corruption and clientelism. Some of his fixes would not especially apply to Chile — nor to many other countries in the region.

Latin America's new right may be growing, but it remains loosely heterogeneous. Mr. Milei is a foul-mouthed libertarian; Mr. Bukele is a millennial authoritarian; Mr. Kast is a Catholic arch-conservative. What most unites them, other than populist appeal and a desire to make deals to please Mr. Trump, is a shared anti-woke ideology: hostility to abortion, women's and gay rights, and what they see as the international human rights industry. Hardly a foundation for a coherent movement.

Venezuela will continue to cast a long

shadow over the hemisphere's politics. If the initial reaction to Mr. Trump's regime-change efforts in Caracas was muted, it is most likely because the majority of Latin Americans would be relieved to see an end to Venezuela's rotten dictatorship. If U.S. intervention leads to a stable, prosperous Venezuela, it could bring right-wing leaders even closer to the Trump White House and cement their regional dominance. But the consolidation of Madurismo without Mr. Maduro, with the apparent backing of Mr. Trump, could force these leaders to choose between their patron in Washington and their desire to excise what remains of left-wing autocracy from the continent.

In the end, the durability of Latin America's latest shift will turn on how successful these leaders are in improving the lives of ordinary citizens, in making them safer and less poor and offering them better services like health care, education and public transport. They may have mastered the art of the political stage, but now, the curtain rises on the far less glamorous theater of good governance.

MICHAEL REID is a former Americas editor at *The Economist* and the author of "Forgotten Continent: A History of the New Latin America."

The binary logic of the Carney doctrine

Can middle powers like Canada exist between America and China?



Ross Douthett

As Donald Trump rampaged about in his first term, leadership of the free world was transferred, by general liberal acclamation, to Angela Merkel of Germany. She was cast as the embodiment of internationalist virtue: prudent, broad-minded, diplomatic, multilateralist and expertise-driven above all.

Then Trump left office, Merkel left office, and suddenly it was possible to notice that her leadership of Germany had been well-nigh disastrous.

The mismanaged eurozone crises that followed the crash of 2008 and her open door to Middle Eastern migrants both contributed mightily to the collapse of the very firewall against far-right parties she was supposedly maintaining. Much worse, she accepted, for enlightened environmentalist reasons, her country's deindustrialization and an ever-increasing reliance on Russian oil and gas. And when Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, it suddenly became clear that Merkel's legacy wasn't a strong alternative to Trump's America; it was a weak European core threatened by and dependent upon an au-

thoritarian rival to its east.

The lessons of the Merkel era came to my mind last week watching the praise for Mark Carney, the prime minister of Canada, after his speech in Davos declaring partial independence from an American-led order.

There was much to admire in the speech. Carney's words were remarkably free of the cant upon which most politicians nowadays depend. He told some important truths, stressing especially the ways in which the liberal international order was always defined by power and self-interest as well as idealism. He was correct to cast Trump's recent return to power as part of a "rupture" with the post-Cold War order and to emphasize great-power competition as a key feature of this age.

Finally, his not-so-veiled threat to the United States, the suggestion that middle powers like Canada need not be constrained by their traditional American alliance, is an understandable response to some of the absurdities that Trump has visited upon our northern neighbor — the "51st state" jibes (Canada, of course, will bring at least 10 new states when, I predict, it joins with us someday), the excessive trade warring and the Greenland gambit.

But as with Merkel, it's worth considering where the logic of Carney's vision of world order might lead. Certainly middle powers can sometimes work together against greater ones. In crucial areas, though, the new world order is not truly multipolar, and its middle powers are ill equipped to bandwagon.



CARLY ORRICO/REUTERS

Rather, they often face a binary choice, in which the more independence they assert from the United States, the more they risk subordination to China.

In the military arena, for instance, on paper Europe and Canada are rich enough to rearm and form some kind of third force between the Trumpian United States and the Sino-Russian quasi-axis. In practice, though, path dependency and old age are powerful forces. Disentangling from the American alliance is incredibly technically difficult, and ramping up spending while your welfare states cope with aging populations is incredibly politically difficult. And achieving the first

without achieving the second leads, in most scenarios, to increased accommodation with Moscow and Beijing.

In the realm of artificial intelligence the choice is even starker. American companies and their Chinese competition dominate the tech frontier, and it's very hard to imagine a future where the architecture of A.I. isn't forged by either American nerd-kings or Communist scientist-apparatchiks. It is possible that either A.I. future could lead to our destruction. But there is not more third, nonaligned A.I. path, and I don't think Ottawa is going to find one.

Finally, and most controversially, I suspect the same "if not America, then

China" logic applies to political ordering as well. The United States under Trumpian conditions has allowed populism to come to power, bringing chaos and authoritarian behavior in its train. Recoil from that by all means — but recognize that it happened through democratic mechanisms, under free-wheeling political conditions.

Meanwhile, the modes through which Europe and Canada have sought to suppress populism involve harsh restrictions on speech, elite collusion and other expression of managerial liberalism. And what is China's dictatorship if not managerial illiberalism in full flower? When European elites talk about China as a potentially more stable partner than the whipsawing United States, when they talk admiringly about its environmental goals and technocratic capacity, they aren't defending a liberal alternative to Trumpian populism. They are letting the magnet of Chinese power draw them away from their own democratic traditions.

Or one might counter, they're being pushed in that direction by Trump himself. World leaders are flesh and blood, and it's hard to ask them to keep faith with America when the American president is insulting and threatening them, not just telling impolite truths.

So even though I am still betting on the American future, I wouldn't ask Mark Carney or any other leaders to simply keep the faith. I would just ask them to consider every step away from us in light of the potential destination and the powers waiting there.

OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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There's a peculiar magic in a winter snowstorm

Megan Craig

During the past several weeks, the ground in Bethany, Conn., where I live, has been pocked with wildlife tracks, a ledger of activity made visible by snow. Unlike last year, when hardly a flake fell or stuck, this year we wake to white drifts and forecasts of more on the way. Significant snowfall arrives overnight into days as hushed as prayer. The blanketed evergreen boughs hang heavy, and the twinkling lights winding up the driveway eke out their glow from under milk domes. The dog wakes early to bark at a dry ball of hydrangea blowing across the white canvas of the lawn.

After snowfall, for a moment, everything is different than it was the day before. Each shape softens, as if the world has been converted from all caps to lowercase. The outdoor palette simplifies into fewer hues; the muddy footprints and paw prints and the buried doorman on the front step are marred, as if erased. A blanket of forgiveness.

Philosophers have not had much to say about snow. In a short essay about the cold from 2011, the poet Charles Simic writes, "If only Plato and Socrates had to scrape the ice off their wind-

shields... "How different might things be if, instead of lazily under a plane tree with Phaedrus at high noon in the Grecian summer, Socrates and the beautiful boy had trudged through knee-deep snow. Would they have talked, as they did, about love, language and memory, about the myth of the Muses who were so moved by humans singing that they turned them into cicadas? I doubt it, but we'll never know.

Snow never lasts. But, notwithstanding Western philosophy's infatuation with the infinite and the unchanging, the finite and the ephemeral are no less divine. In the rare moments when philosophers have mentioned snow, it seems as if they are actually talking about something else: Nietzsche's "snow-bearded winter sky" standing for a vast, concealing silence, Thoreau's wintry morning for "sturdy innocence" and "Puritan toughness." The Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard has a book titled "Winter," in which he describes the season as a transient, ignoble trickster trying (and failing) to compete with spring, summer and fall. It's true that snow yields almost immediately to brown slush and icy walkways that can wreak havoc for those trying to go places. But the transience of snow is part of its magic. Thick drifts of white last for only a day or so. The sky confetti, a hush descending.

Poised between solid and fluid, snow shares the poignancy of anything that lives only in what Emerson calls "a narrow belt," a special zone between rigid geometry and chaotic sensation. A child's innocence, poetry, toast before it goes cold, amaryllis blooming. They exist in just the right space at just the right time, precariously balanced on an edge. Catching them in that glorious

moment in which they are fully themselves is lucky and rare, like catching snowflakes in your eyelashes before blinking them away.

Whenever it snows, I think not of philosophers but of William Kenridge and a gummy eraser going over a charcoal drawing, pushing light into the dark. Most of the best writing about snow has come from poets and novelists: Wallace Stevens urging us to listen in the snow for the "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," James Joyce describing the snow "falling faintly" and "faintly falling" in the last lines of "The Dead," Ezra Jack Keats's beloved Peter storing a snowball in his pocket in "The Snowy Day," Jack London reminding us of the difference between knowing a fact and acknowledging a reality in "To Build a Fire," William Steig teaching us about heroism in "Brave Irene."

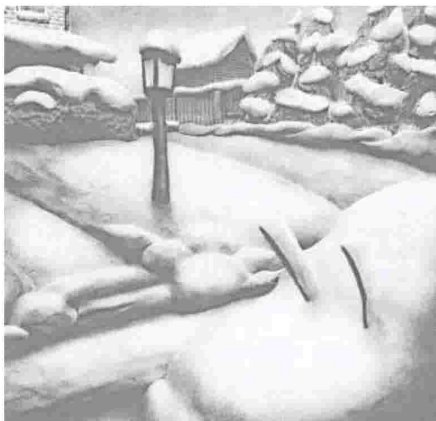
The last one, in particular, has a special place in my heart. The story, in case you don't know it, is about a little girl, Irene, whose mother, a seamstress, falls ill after completing a dress for a duchess. Irene puts her mother to bed with blankets and tea and sets off on foot in a snowstorm to deliver the dress herself. I read it aloud to my daughter on a snowy night several years ago, just before she outgrew the ritual of bedtime stories.

Irene gets caught in a fierce storm. The wind howls and eventually snaps the tree limbs around her and blows the dress right out of the box and out of her arms. She's too far away from home to turn back, and she presses on with the empty box, ashamed and upset. Snow falls as Irene trudges through deep drifts. Night descends, and Irene twists her ankle. After several pages showing Irene freezing and alone, everything getting harder and worse, Steig changes course. Irene sees the duchess's mansion aglow through the trees. She uses her box as a sled and flies down the slope toward the light, finding (remarkably) the pink dress played against a tree just outside the door. She folds it in her box and delivers it just in time for the start of a party.

After we finished the story, I remember, my daughter looked visibly relieved, if unconvinced. She had questions: Isn't the dress wet and cold? Isn't Irene scared to knock on the door? Doesn't she need a doctor? The book, which was meant to lull her to sleep, instead left us debating the details with our heads pressed into a pillow. I didn't have the answers. Still, the ending is happy. The child is cozy. The mother gets well. How unusual. How blessed. The snow falls gently in fat flakes, settling into the grooves of everything like mortar mending all the cracks.

The French philosopher Jean Wahl coined a term, "trans-descendence," to describe how spiritual things descend. They fall sometimes like snow, coming all the way down to earth. Maybe not forever. But it's good to be reminded, however briefly, that the short, dark days of winter include pristine quiet, epic cold, the equanimity of nature, the sun rising, visible breath, icy limbs, rosy cheeks, and every now and then, light falling out of darkness to blanket a rough world. Let it snow.

MEGAN CRAIG is an essayist, a visual artist and an associate professor of philosophy at Stony Brook University.



SAM MACKAY

Lucky Karim

If you've heard of my people, the Rohingya, it is probably as faraway, faceless victims of violence, displacement and possible genocide — a people defined by their suffering.

Yes, we are in crisis. We are a predominantly Muslim minority from western Myanmar who have been persecuted for decades. In 2017, the country's military began a campaign that drove hundreds of thousands of us across the border into Bangladesh, where a generation of Rohingya is growing up in refugee camps with no end in sight.

Global indifference prolongs our plight. Humanitarian crises from Gaza to Ukraine to Sudan are debated, condemned and covered extensively by the media. Yet if the Rohingya are noticed at all, it is as part of a distant "forgotten" crisis — not as the people living within it.

But we are not just victims. We are a people with a long, distinctive history, defined by faith, resilience and a determination to shape our future — a people worth fighting for.

At last, there is a sliver of hope for us.

This month, the International Court of Justice opened hearings in The Hague on whether Myanmar committed genocide against the Rohingya — something the country denies — finally opening a potential path toward accountability and recognition of what we've endured. The first full genocide case brought before the court in more than a decade, it will also set a wider precedent for how an increasingly conflict-ridden world responds to large-scale violence and impunity.

But for the Rohingya, real change could take years — time we don't have as cuts in aid by the United States and other countries bring new hardships.

The refusal to see the Rohingya begins in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar itself, where the military junta denies that we have a place. This ignores the fact that for centuries our home has been Myanmar's Rakhine State — a coastal crossroads between South Asia and Southeast Asia, where Buddhist and Muslim communities lived alongside one another long before colonial borders were drawn. Generations of Rohingya have grown up under constant fear — when my mother wanted me to stop crying she would say the words sure to quiet any Rohingya child: "The military is coming."

In August 2017, when I was 14, we hid at home for days as the sound of

gunfire rang out in our village. The army was attacking again. My parents decided that we should flee for our lives. I haven't seen my home since.

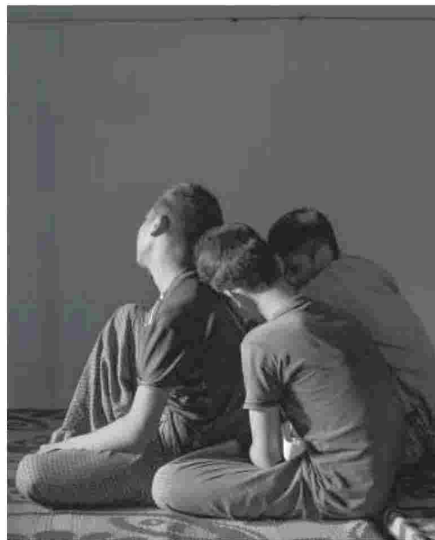
Along with thousands of others driven from their homes, we walked for a week, crossing mountains on waterlogged roads during the rainy season, to Bangladesh. We ended up in the vast refugee camps at Cox's Bazar, where more than a million Rohingya live and where I spent the next six years in a shelter made of bamboo and tarp.

We lived with mosquitoes and frogs, floods that swept away our shelters, chilly winters and sweltering summers. We had no formal schooling or jobs. Every day, more Rohingya streamed in. Yet we've clung to who we are. Neighbors shared what little they had, drawing on traditions of village kinship and generosity. We women drew flowers or wrote our names on our hands with henna during the Eid holidays. Children all around us played games. And my mother planted banana trees that seemed to embody our will to survive and grow.

I taught myself English by downloading YouTube videos of Ellen DeGeneres's talk show, then watching them on my phone. I was helping visiting delegations, humanitarian activists and journalists who needed a translator. A year later, I enrolled in college in the Bangladeshi city of Chattogram and regularly traveled back to the camp — six hours by bus — to visit my family and persuade other Rohingya parents to send their girls to school. They often resisted, fearing that their daughters might be targeted for being Rohingya, or because in the camps education felt meaningless. I told them how it had transformed my life. Many parents changed their minds, and their girls are now studying.

Everything changed for me in 2022 when my family was selected for resettlement in the United States under a State Department program launched during the Biden administration. In December of that year, we arrived in Chicago — the hometown of my role model Michelle Obama — to start a new life.

Americans have welcomed us with kindness. We speak Rohingya at home and eat spicy Burmese food as the snow falls outside. We are thousands of miles from Rakhine, but we are holding on tightly to our language, customs and memories of a distant home that we hope to return to someday.



Rohingya refugee teenagers at a camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, in 2024.

More than a million refugees remain in these camps. Some of my friends have had children there. I visited the camps twice in recent years. Children asked me the same questions I once asked: Why are we still here? When can I go to school? When can we go home? I had no answers, and it broke my heart.

Time is running out for the Rohingya as U.S. cuts in foreign aid cascade through the global effort to help us, though the Trump administration has subsequently pledged to continue providing targeted support.

The United Nations' response program is far short of its financial targets; the World Food Program has warned that funding constraints threaten its ability to provide food aid, raising the risk of increasing hunger and malnutrition; and last year thousands of schools in the camps had to shut down, affecting more than 200,000 Rohingya children.

Bangladesh's government has said that it, too, is running out of resources

to help the Rohingya, and has called for urgent international action. The U.N.'s refugee agency and aid groups have warned that worsening conditions in Myanmar and Bangladesh have driven desperate refugees to undertake dangerous sea journeys to neighboring countries.

If the International Court of Justice rules that genocide occurred, it could strengthen global pressure on Myanmar to prevent further genocidal acts and make it harder for countries to continue to trade with or otherwise engage with the junta.

But a ruling could take months, or longer. In the meantime, without sustained international support, Rohingya exile and dispossession will continue. We may be stateless and marginalized, but we know who we are. The world needs to see us, too.

LUCKY KARIM is a Rohingya human rights advocate, the founder of Refugee Women for Peace and Justice and a Rohingya International alumni fellow.

It's the end of NATO as we know it

MENON, FROM PAGE 1

something, you must possess it.

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

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

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

Europeans are doubtless relieved that the dispute over Greenland didn't boil over. But they are wrong if they think that Mr. Trump isn't the problem. Even if he doesn't seek an unconstitutional third term, his "America first" worldview and antipathy toward Europe resonate within MAGA's ranks, one of whose leaders could well succeed him. And if a Democrat wins the



ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHITNEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

next presidential election, the United States is likely to be increasingly focused on China, the only plausible challenger to its global dominance. Either way, Washington's strategic priorities will continue to shift elsewhere.

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

The continent certainly has the wherewithal to do so. Standard measures of military power — population, gross domestic product, technological advancement and the caliber of defense industries — show that Europe can attain security on its own. What it

lacks is the political will. Because Europe consists of many sovereign states, acting in unison is inherently difficult. And some, particularly Poland and the Baltic trio, remain wedded to American protection for deeply rooted historical reasons.

Yet these obstacles, while undeniable, aren't insuperable. The European Union, itself an ensemble of states, has achieved astonishing economic and political integration, including supranational institutions with substantial power. Back in the 1950s, when European integration began, the federation of today was unthinkable. Europe's own history shows what can be done.

In any case, its leaders don't really have a choice. They can either retreat into fatalism or opt for political agency. The latter will require rethinking their America-centered security strategy and making changes to modernize and improve the continent's military hardware and infrastructure. It will also

require revising their defense industries' habit of duplicating production, instead dividing up tasks based on where is best placed to do them.

There's much work to be done, including increasing investment in rapid-maneuver armored formations, air power, integrated air defenses, drones, and command and control systems. Change, at least, is afoot. NATO countries, America aside, have significantly increased defense spending. Only two allocated 2 percent of G.D.P. to defense in 2014; by 2025, all had reached that threshold and six were spending 3 percent or more. Their combined military spending totaled \$608 billion — more than four times Russia's expenditure.

For all its hybrid high jinks and bluster, Russia doesn't pose an unmanageable military threat. Just look at President Vladimir Putin's shambling invasion of Ukraine. Nearly four years into a war against a far weaker country, Russia's armed forces have suffered staggering losses in troops and materiel, for meager gains, and are in no condition to march on the rest of Europe.

The war's direct and indirect economic costs, an estimated \$2.4 trillion so far, mean that Russia will spend many years in recovery.

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

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

RAJAN MENON is a professor emeritus of international relations at the Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership at the City College of New York.

OPINION

Ro and Our New Health Sherpas



INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

Sometimes you just have to break the cycle of crazy—from ObamaCare subsidies to high list prices and rebates for drugs. “Prices went from \$1,300 to \$149 in 18 months. This never before happened in healthcare, what regulators were trying to do for decades.” So explained Zach Reitano, a co-founder and CEO of telehealth company Ro, about what happened with weight-loss drugs Ozempic and Wegovy last year.

“Patients really, really want something covered,” Mr. Reitano says. “Insurers said no. What did pharma do? ‘OK, we’ll give it to you directly, and we’ll cut the price by 90%.’” That’s monthly, not including the Ro membership fee. Is this the new healthcare model?

At 18, Mr. Reitano had a congenital heart condition. His father, a doctor, guided him through the convoluted medical system. His prescribed heart medication caused erectile dysfunction.

At 25, with further heart issues, Mr. Reitano co-founded Roman (now Ro) to make buying drugs for erectile dysfunction and other medical issues easier and less embarrassing. “As cheesy as it sounds, I wanted to re-create my dad with software.”

Mr. Reitano may end up restructuring how healthcare

operates, “where patients are far more in control of their health. I think that the traditional healthcare system and providers really transition from gatekeepers to almost like Sherpas.”

Ro vertically integrated three currently separate components: “a national digital doctor’s office in 50 states and D.C.,” lab tests and its own pharmacy. Ro, as Mr. Reitano puts it, “abstracts away the complexity for the patient.”

Earlier this month, Novo Nordisk launched Wegovy in pill form, sold through Ro and others. “There’s no PBM or insurance company in that discussion. There’s no wholesaler in that discussion. There are three or four stakeholders in the healthcare system that don’t participate in that integration. And as a result, you see the innovators of the product in Novo and Ro in the distribution channel being able to seamlessly integrate and lower the price for patients.”

The circle of crazy is collapsing. “Once the net prices are clearly presented to people, you see competition with that clarity.”

Ro isn’t a pharmacy-benefits manager (PBM). Ro is direct to consumer. Erectile-dysfunction and weight-loss drugs may be its camel’s nose in the massive healthcare tent. Ro’s sneaky value is all the data it collects and stores in its own healthcare records, which patients control and can even export.

Artificial intelligence plays

a big role. The first thing Ro did was to “automate entire phone calls with AI,” driven by its internal health data. And more. If a patient messages about side effects, by using AI, Mr. Reitano explains that Ro can “pull it out, structure it, create a task and create an urgent response where needed, and reduce the response time to a side effect by 70%.” Elsewhere, good luck getting a doctor to respond.

Direct-to-consumer medical companies could revolutionize the industry.

The true power is turning healthcare from a reactive system (I have a sore throat) to a proactive one. Mr. Reitano envisions a future interaction: “You didn’t sleep well, and I’ve also noticed that your heart rate’s been elevated the last few days. Are you stressed? Are you taking any new medications? What’s going on at work? Did you have drinks the night before? What food did you consume?” The Sherpa emerges. New sources of data have emerged to help: iPhones counting steps. Apple watches doing EKGs. Oura rings rating your sleep. DoorDash receipts. Blood-pressure devices. Blood tests. Body scans. Chatbots reading moods. Next-generation toilets with sensors.

Or, Mr. Reitano suggests, documenting “the food that

you order from Amazon to your pantry and dinner.” Maybe this is the excess of all these annoying people in restaurants who take photos of their food. It’s for their health records! The more data the better. No doctor has ever asked about my In-N-Out 4x4 burger indulgences, but I might volunteer this to my telehealth provider after it has built up enough trust and surprised me by explaining why, for example, I was so tired last month.

Who owns the customer? CVS would like to. So would insurers. And doctors and hospitals. Pharmaceutical companies are beginning to go direct to consumer—what some call “Pharma to table.” But Ro and competitors like Hims are providing valuable one-touchpoint data-absorbing shops.

There are growing pains. Ro, which has helped millions, has received pushback on privacy, fees and even its decision to use Serena Williams as an influencer to promote GLP-1s without mentioning side effects.

“We want to help patients achieve their health goals,” Mr. Reitano says. “That’s what my dad did for me.” But it’s a harder move, they fight harder, and they take the longest view in the room. That’s the healthcare platform we’re building for patients. “No matter who wins, consumers will be better off and have more control over their own health. That’s welcome progress.”

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By D.G. Hart

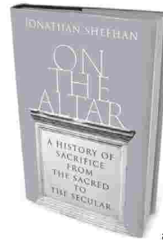
Sacrifice Across The Centuries

On the Altar

By Jonathan Sheehan
Princeton, 608 pages, \$39.95

One of the most shocking poems in Protestant hymnbooks is William Cowper’s “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” A 1772 meditation about the crucifixion by a man who struggled with depression all his life, the hymn dwells on Christ’s gory death and evokes the metaphor of sinners basking in blood. “There is a fountain filled with blood, / Drawn from Immanuel’s veins; / And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, / Lose all their guilty stains.” The hymn, reprinted in hymnbooks since the late 18th century, is still sung by many Presbyterian and Baptist congregations in the U.S. and the U.K. So abrasive are its words and affecting its tune that the agnostic and irreverent journalist H.L. Mencken recalled it as a favorite of Sunday school kids in his boyhood.

The Cowper hymn reminds us of the powerful grip human sacrifice has had on Western culture from its beginning till now. For two millennia Christians have featured the Romans’ execution of Jesus of Nazareth as a formative part of devotion for children and adults alike. As traumatic as such piety might seem, Jonathan Sheehan’s “On the Altar” shows convincingly that human sacrifice and its multiple meanings and practices have shaped the intellectual history of the West. Even when Sigmund Freud secularized the idea of sacrifice in “Totem and Taboo” (1913) by linking ritual killing to the formation of tribal clans, he was tipping his cap to the abiding power of sacrifice. “The lavish rites of the Hebrew Bible” and “the wild offerings of the ancient Greeks and Romans,” Mr.



Sheehan writes, “never really disappeared” but “lived their own afterlives in a dreamworld” of religious, political and anthropological creation.

“On the Altar” is a magnificent work of scholarship. Mr. Sheehan’s aim is simple—to prove the importance of sacrifice in the art, philosophy, politics and liturgy of the West. He succeeds by covering sources that run from Plutarch’s lives to 20th-century paintings such as Paul Klee’s “The Lamb” (1920) or Marc Chagall’s “Sacrifice of Isaac” (1966). Along the way, Mr. Sheehan, a professor of history at the University of California Berkeley, supplies close readings of scores of texts, paintings and sculptures whose beautiful reproductions almost qualify “On the Altar” for a place on the coffee table.

Western history is replete with disputes over sacrifice. Early Christian writers condemned pagan sacrifices—those of the Gauls, who killed children, or the Taurians, who sacrificed foreign visitors to satisfy the gods. The sacrifice of Jesus and its commemoration in the Mass became a major theological and sometimes military contest between 16th-century Protestants and Roman Catholics. Perhaps less familiar to most readers but no less absorbing is the book’s treatment of colonial Spanish missionaries’ encounter with Aztec rituals. The Aztecs’ system of rites, Mr. Sheehan observes, constituted “an active culture of sacrifice on a scale and complexity to rival that of Greece and Rome.”

Yet the theme of human sacrifice persisted as a subject for deep rumination even after advances in science, industry and wealth insulated the West’s creative classes from ancient and medieval rites. Early proponents of republicanism in both the U.S. and France, for instance, employed sacrifice as an ideal of genuine citizenship. One Connecticut pastor in 1784 preached a sermon that compared the Continental Army’s soldiers’ deaths to martyrs whose blood should “be ever treated as sacred.” Not much later, Maximilien Robespierre claimed to be ready “to trace with my blood the route which must lead my country to happiness and to

Early Christian writers condemned pagan sacrifices while debating among themselves the meaning of the death of Jesus.

Liberty.” Once the zeal of republican liberty cooled, 19th-century universities provided homes to such scientific sacrifice as ethnographers, philologists, sociologists, historians and anthropologists. In this academic setting a consensus emerged, as the legal scholar Henry Sumner Maine argued, that sacrifice had been the basis for social order and political association.

The author’s breadth of learning and command of sources is a wonder. If the narrative isn’t always easy to follow, the reason is that his time periods and characters keep changing. To say that “On the Altar” functions more like an encyclopedia than a monograph may sound like criticism. It isn’t. Mr. Sheehan accomplishes here what might otherwise take hundreds of scholars to produce in a standard reference work. This is a major scholarly achievement, all the more so because so much contemporary academic publishing pursues social justice and other predictable themes.

Some academic flourishes make the book at times less readable than necessary. One of its themes contrasts autonomy and heteronomy. Mr. Sheehan explains that Christian history is not a story of autonomy, a notion of self-control he borrows from Kant’s ethics. Instead, the history of sacrifice is one of heteronomy—that is, being subordinate to “forces that we do not control.” That framing may be clear in Mr. Sheehan’s mind, but it distracts from a straightforward account of how sacrifice functioned for religious and political leaders.

Unclear is Mr. Sheehan’s discussion of imagination, a concept he describes as “the ideational force that creates and make sense of the world around us”; imagination is a way of making and remaking the world by combining “jumbled inheritances” with new discoveries. This is not wrong, but it may leave readers struggling to keep up with the author’s ingenuity, even as they try to keep straight all Mr. Sheehan’s sources from the ancient, medieval and modern eras.

Had he provided more points of access like his quote from the 1970s rock star Patti Smith—“Jesus died for somebody’s sins . . . but not mine”—his book might be more approachable than it is. But for those who can supplement “On the Altar” with their own awareness of sacrifice, whether from Sunday school or Top 40 playlists, their encounter with this formidable book will be richly rewarded.

Mr. Hart, who teaches history at Hillsdale College, is the author of “Benjamin Franklin: Cultural Protestant.”

Meet Trump’s Partners in Venezuela



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O’Grady

Why does President Trump call Venezuela a dictator? Delcy Rodríguez “a terrific person,” despite her monstrous human-rights record and her reputation for corruption? It’s perplexing—until one considers that Chevron Corp. and Florida asphalt magnate Hargreave Hargreave have long lobbied the president for licenses to operate in Venezuela, and Ms. Rodríguez has been their counterpart in Caracas.

The Guardian reported last week that in October the U.S. began considering Ms. Rodríguez, right hand to then-dictator Nicolás Maduro, to replace him. The British newspaper said it learned from sources that she told the U.S. she was on board with the removal of her boss and ready to cooperate with Washington.

“One factor was her promise to work with American oil and her acquaintance with Americans in the oil business. ‘Delcy is the most committed to working with US oil,’ an ally of hers said.”

It’s no secret the fashion-conscious Marxist, who plays ping-pong when she isn’t running the narco-trafficking police state, has made inroads with foreign oil executives. Not all, of course. ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips left the country

years ago. But for those still making a buck off the repression of the Venezuelan people, she’s the ideal despot, more interested in power than ideology and therefore “flexible.”

Mr. Trump’s own obsession with oil might explain why he disparaged opposition leader María Corina Machado at a press conference the day the U.S. captured Mr. Maduro. He claimed the wildly popular Ms. Machado has neither “support” nor “respect” in Venezuela. That’s absurd. She is such a threat to the regime that it banned her candidacy for president in 2024. Edmundo González, who took her place, received 70% of the vote.

Ms. Machado’s real difficulty inside the administration is that she has opposed U.S. Treasury licenses for Chevron and Mr. Sargeant’s asphalt operation. Like most of the opposition, she wants to starve the regime of hard currency. For decades she has argued that Venezuelan economic development and a Caracas foreign policy that fosters peace in the region require democracy, open competition and the rule of law. She has been unwilling to trade her ideals for good reviews at Mar-a-Lago. As a result, according to my reporting, American friends of Delcy have branded her a “radical.”

After Ms. Machado presented her Nobel Peace Prize medal to Mr. Trump, he declared her a “wonderful woman,” and last week he said, “I am talking to her and

maybe we can involve her in some way” in Venezuela. That’s big of him. Then he gushed again about the much-hated Ms. Rodríguez. Flying back from Davos, Switzerland, last week, Mr. Trump again engaged in moral equivalence: “I get along well with both sides.”

Trump happy talk aside, Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello still controls the armed

Delcy Rodríguez is bad news. So are her brother and her rival Diosdado Cabello.

forces, police, intelligence and the paramilitary known as *colectivos*. His henchmen roam the streets to put down dissent.

The true measure of U.S. control isn’t the flow of oil out of Venezuela but how many political prisoners have been released. Some are out. But the U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States estimated last week that 1,000 remain behind bars. And many of those no longer in prison, like President-elect González’s son-in-law, are under gag orders.

There are rumors the pro-Russia Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López is ill and looking for an exit ramp. If that happens, Secretary of State Marco Rubio may put it

in the win column. But as long as Mr. Cabello remains the thug behind the throne, no such change would be cosmetic.

Ms. Rodríguez’s priorities go well with the Trump administration’s stated goals. She has agreed to ship oil to the U.S. for sale at market prices. The revenue will go into special accounts, with one domiciled in Qatar. Some proceeds are to go to Venezuela to cover production costs and pay for imports. Venezuela has already received \$300 million, according to press reports. Ms. Rodríguez is happy. The 28 million other Venezuelans, not so much.

Whether getting cozy with Delcy is a U.S. oil play—for a relatively small share of the global pool—or three-dimensional chess aimed at eventually transforming Venezuela into democracy, it’s a dangerous game. Ms. Rodríguez is evil and manipulative and so is her brother Jorge Rodríguez, president of the regime-controlled National Assembly. She is out to buy time, and Mr. Trump’s endorsement is helping her.

Mr. Cabello and Ms. Rodríguez are bitter rivals. It isn’t a bad idea to use her to check him and hold off any chaos until midlevel military officers, who are ready to restore democracy, can take command. But to frame her as a U.S. ally is foolish. She can’t be allowed to stick around.

Write to O’Grady@wsj.com.

New York City Robs Kids of a Snow Day

By Nicole Ault

A snowstorm headed for the city, local kids were told that all the rituals to induce a school cancellation wouldn’t do them a lick of good. Wear your PJs inside out, flush ice cubes down the toilet, pray—too bad. Monday is “not going to be a traditional snow day.” Mayor Zohran Mamdani told NY1 on Friday. Should the weather shut down the streets, it will be a “remote learning day.”

What a slip-up from the Big Apple’s new socialist chief. After the Covid-19 pandemic made remote instruction normal, city officials imposed it on one of childhood’s delights by making it the go-to recourse for snow days. Mr. Mamdani still could have opted to give kids a day off. But the state requires 180 days of instruction, and the school calendar, which is negotiated with the union, won’t budge.

“We are very tight on our schedule,” said United Federa-

tion of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew, “so the traditional snow days are gone.” He blamed the “number of holidays,” which run the religious gamut in New York City. Adding a day to the school year is presumably a union tussle that Mr. Mamdani doesn’t want. Easier to have students log in online and call it a school day.

Class will be remote on Monday. Blame the teachers union.

But the decision will find the mayor favor with few. “I would like to build a snowman, sled, and drink hot cocoa,” one first-grader told CBS News last week. In 2024, the last time the city enforced remote school on a snow day, parents expressed their displeasure to the New York Post. “During COVID we didn’t have a choice [but] I swore they would never do remote learning again,” said one

Upper East Side mother, who let her son go play outside. Another mom, in Staten Island: “Just because we have this technology, doesn’t mean we have to use it.” The 2024 experiment was a technical disaster. Many families were unable to log on. Service provider IBM blamed a flawed city contract.

Besides being a bummer, the policy also disservices education. “The cancellation of snow day policy is not in the interest of kids—after the pandemic, we all know that virtual instruction doesn’t work,” says the Manhattan Institute’s Danyela Egorov in an email. Seriousness about school means ensuring the in-person days happen, not pretending that online school does the job. Virtual school is a huge loss, but it facilitates the pretense that remote school is equal to in-person instruction. It also makes it easier to revert to virtual learning for other reasons.

Other states know better. New Jersey also requires 180

days of school, but it doesn’t allow remote school on snow days to count, despite legislative attempts several times over the years to change that. “Virtual school days, often utilized for inclement weather, do not adequately meet students’ needs,” Alaska’s education commissioner said in 2024.

One of the delights of snow is the surprise of it, interrupting the busyness of life with stillness and beauty. “New snow was falling!” discovers the little boy Peter, waking up on a wintry city morning, in Ezra Jack Keats’s “The Snowy Day.” How many adults, as well as kids, don’t feel that same joy?

Trust bureaucracy to wrangle a wonderful act of Providence to meet the stipulations of union contracts. Snow day is no law. But perhaps eventually Mr. Mamdani can show that in one regard at least, he doesn’t fit this big-government mold.

Ms. Ault is an assistant editorial page writer at the Journal.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Time for ICE to Pause in Minneapolis

When Donald Trump visited the Journal in October 2024, he was asked how he'd implement his mass deportation policy to avoid appearing to be cruel and inviting a political backlash.

His answer was surprisingly nuanced. He said he had to deport illegal migrants because "we can't handle these people coming in right now. But the interest from the heart, yeah, something's got to be done. I'm not going to do that [separate families]. I can't do that. Okay, thank you. Really good question. I mean, there's some human questions that get in the way of being perfect, and we have to have the heart, too. Okay?"

Fifteen months later in Minneapolis, there isn't much heart in Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The Saturday shooting of Alex Pretti, as he lay on the ground surrounded by ICE agents, is the worst incident to date in what is becoming a moral and political debacle for the Trump Presidency.

Videos of an event aren't always definitive, but this is how it looks to us. Pretti attempted, foolishly, to assist a woman who had been pepper-sprayed by agents. Multiple agents then tackled Pretti, and he had a phone in one hand as he lay on the ground. An agent discovered a concealed gun on Pretti, and disarmed him. An agent then shot Pretti, and multiple shots followed.

The Trump Administration spin on this simply isn't believable. Stephen Miller, the political architect of the mass deportation policy, called Pretti a "domestic terrorist." He was a nurse without a criminal record.

Kristi Noem, the Homeland Security secretary, said the fact that he carried a gun and (she said) two magazines, meant he "arrived at the scene to inflict maximum damage on individuals and to kill law enforcement."

But he had a license to carry a gun, which was legally concealed, not carried in his hand as some claimed. He was carrying his phone. To hear the ardent gun-rights advocates of the Trump Administration claim he had malicious intentions because he carried a concealed weapon is bizarre.

Pretti made a tragic mistake by interfering with ICE agents, but that warranted arrest, not a death sentence. The agents may say they felt threatened, but it's worth noting the comments over the weekend by police around the country who say that this isn't

how they conduct law enforcement.

Either many ICE agents aren't properly trained, or they are so on edge as they face opposition in the streets that they are on a hair trigger. Either way, this calls for rethinking how ICE conducts itself, especially in Minneapolis as tensions build.

After the shooting of Renee Good two weeks ago, both Minnesota Democrats and Mr. Trump had a chance to calm the furies. Mr. Trump instead sent 1,000 more immigration officers on top of the 2,000 already there. Minneapolis has only 600 police officers.

Gov. Tim Walz could have urged his citizens to avoid confrontations with ICE. Instead he made a video urging them to go into the streets with phones and film ICE agents, whether or not they are performing lawful searches under federal immigration law. His rhetoric is incendiary and describes ICE as a lawless terrorist operation. Another tragedy was inevitable, and there will be more if this continues.

Whether he likes it or not, most of the burden now lies with Mr. Trump as the President who controls ICE. He would be wise to pause ICE enforcement in the Twin Cities to ease tensions and consider a less provocative strategy. Yes, many on the left would conclude that their civil disobedience has paid off. But Mr. Trump can still pursue enforcement with a smaller force and a strategy aimed at criminals, not at hotel maids and gardeners.

Mr. Trump and his advisers could also help themselves, and the country, by explaining what they are trying to do and sounding conciliatory. Ms. Noem and Mr. Miller aren't credible spokesmen. Their social-media and cable-TV strategy is to own the libs, rather than to persuade Americans.

This is backfiring against Republicans. The violence in Minneapolis has erased the state's welfare fraud from the headlines, which no doubt pleases Mr. Walz. It's also given Democrats in Washington an excuse to shut down the government a second time over the Homeland Security funding bill.

Mr. Miller's mass deportation methods are turning immigration, an issue Mr. Trump owned in 2024, into a political liability for Republicans in 2026. Americans don't want law enforcement shooting people in the street or arresting five-year-old boys. The President who said you have to have a heart in enforcement ought to show some.

Alex Pretti made a mistake, but he wasn't a 'domestic terrorist.'

Thank Heaven for Coal Power

The weekend's arctic blast has put much of the U.S. grid through a stress test and served as another alert about the growing risks to electric-power reliability. Americans can be grateful the Biden crowd didn't succeed in forcing all coal plants to shut down.

The North American Electric Reliability Corp. warned in November that "extreme winter conditions extending over a wide area could result in electricity supply shortfalls." That's what happened. Frigid temperatures supercharged demand in areas where Americans use electricity for heating, especially in Texas.

In the Northeast and Midwest, where more people get heat from natural gas, less fuel was available for power plants. Add weather-caused plant outages, and you have all the ingredients for a grid emergency. Grid operators, the utilities and the Trump Energy Department had to pull out all stops to keep the lights and heat on for tens of millions of Americans.

Utilities in the Midwest on Saturday directed customers to lower thermostats, unplug "non-essential appliances," and reduce temperature settings on electric water heaters. Hope you enjoy lukewarm showers and curling up in a heavy coat with a book.

The Energy Department also waived emissions rules so fossil-fuel plants could run at

maximum capacity. Early Sunday morning, coal accounted for some 40% of power in the Midwest's MISO grid, 24% in the eastern U.S. PJM Interconnection and 18% in Texas, with most of the rest coming from natural gas and nuclear.

New York's blockade on gas pipelines has constrained the fuel supply for power plants across New England. Power plants in the region had to resort to burning oil, which accounted for 40% of electricity at times of peak demand. Get this—the region generated more power from burning wood and trash than from wind power.

The climate crowd claims that solar, wind and batteries can replace fossil fuels, but those sources contributed little power in most places over the weekend. Wind and solar aren't reliable during inclement weather. Batteries can discharge power only for a few hours at a time, which doesn't much help during a storm that stretches for a day or two.

The deep-freeze energy scare underscores why the Energy Department issued emergency orders in recent months to "stop the political closure of coal plants" in the Midwest. The grid needs all the coal power it can get when temperatures plunge or skyrocket. Environmental groups have challenged the department's orders. Is the goal to reduce carbon emissions by making Americans freeze?

The energy source Biden tried to shut down rode to the deep-freeze rescue.

What Paris Pays to Keep Le Pen at Bay

French voters last week saw what their politicians are prepared to pay, literally, to keep the insurgent-right National Rally out of power. Someone might soon start asking whether it's worth the cost.

That's how to read the budget plan Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu muscled through the National Assembly. Mr. Lecornu—whose boss, President Emmanuel Macron, was supposed to be an economic reformer—patched together a budget larded up with green projects, subsidized student meals and welfare benefits. Taxes on productive companies will go up, revenue is due to surge to 44% of GDP, and public debt may reach 120% of GDP next year.

Great job, guys. This isn't a plan for economic growth or fiscal rectitude (last year Mr. Lecornu also ditched Mr. Macron's earlier success in raising the retirement age). The sole purpose of this budget is to win enough support from the Socialist Party rump in the National Assembly to avoid triggering another government collapse and possibly a snap legislative election that Marine Le Pen's National Rally could win.

The latest budget is a growth-killing gimmick to avoid an election.

The last time Mr. Macron called an election in 2024, it backfired. He hoped to call voters' bluff after several election cycles in which they had delivered good results to Ms. Le Pen's party. Instead, voters elected a parliament split among the National Rally and a far-left bloc with Mr. Macron's centrists in the middle.

Mr. Macron has since abandoned any pretence of an economic-growth agenda. Successful budget proposals at best have modestly slowed the rate of increase of government spending while leaving entitlements untouched. It's all an attempt to peel away Socialist Party support from the rest of the left-wing contingent into a coalition of the losers. Anything to avoid another election.

Meanwhile, a National Rally election win is no longer the greatest risk facing France. Economic decline is. Ms. Le Pen's party probably can't do much better given its own welfareist predilections, but Mr. Macron has given up trying. It may take several election cycles for voters to sort out this mess, so the sooner they start, the better. More dumb budget gimmicks will rack up the costs of delaying the inevitable.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Responding to the Iranian Foreign Minister

Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi in his op-ed "Iran's Regime Defends Its Crackdown" (Jan. 21) employs the power of the creative imagination to deflect responsibility for the recent mass killings on the streets of Iran's cities by the Tehran regime.

Around 16,500 people are reckoned to have died in the recent unrest, along with a further 330,000 injured. In the foreign minister's account, "black-clad groups of masked terrorists" used "rifles and handguns" to "mow down innocent demonstrators on our streets."

Who were these mysterious "terrorists" who suddenly materialized, fully armed, and deployed en masse in the open, throughout the cities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the most heavily policed and surveilled countries in the world? Mr. Araghchi doesn't quite tell us, but it is fairly clear what he wants us to believe.

After President Trump warned, Mr. Araghchi suggests, that "Iran would face consequences if protestors were killed," a "horrible strategy" of "maximum bloodshed" by "plotters," was put into motion. Their intention? To "drag the U.S. into fighting another war on behalf of Islam."

But who were the plotters? The

foreign minister mobilizes an ironic tweet by former CIA Director Mike Pompeo about Israeli agents on street corners in Iran as evidence revealing the Israeli Mossad's "infiltration of street protests." Ah.

The foreign minister doesn't explain why, after a supposedly secret, murderous and successful mission, allies of Israel would then choose to compromise their friends by dropping hints pointing the finger at them to those capable of reading the tea leaves.

Beyond Mr. Pompeo's tweet, we must apparently take Mr. Araghchi's word for it that a mass deployment of armed, uniformed Israelis somehow contrived to appear in Iran's streets, slaughter protestors and then just as mysteriously vanish without a trace.

Logic, testimony of survivors and available footage would all appear to point in a different direction. About 16,500 Iranians have been murdered on the streets of the country's cities by "groups of [possibly] masked terrorists." The terrorists in question were members of the security forces of the brutal regime of which Mr. Araghchi himself is a servant.

JONATHAN SPYER
Middle East Forum
Jerusalem

The Left's Nonprofit Problem Goes Way Back

Barton Swaim is insightful as always in highlighting the influence of left-wing foundations on our politics ("Democrats' Nonprofit Problem," *Unruly Republic*, Jan. 22), but it's important to point out that the problem long predates his flashpoint date of 2010. In fact, Henry Ford II made front-page news by resigning from the Ford Foundation in 1977 over its assaults on capitalism, writing "that the system that makes the foundation possible very probably is worth preserving."

Even before that, presidents of both parties worried about the foundation's leftward drift. On April 10, 1968, Lyndon Johnson aide Joseph Califano wrote a memo suggesting that Johnson meet with "someone with a completely open mind," such as Ford Foundation head McGeorge Bundy. To this, Johnson responded, "Hal! Hal!"

And in 1971, Richard Nixon complained to Henry Kissinger about the

Ford Foundation's sponsorship of the travel of Nixon's potential 1972 opponent, Democratic Senator Edmund Muskie: "Did you know the Ford Foundation has financed all of Muskie's trips to Africa? Now that's a Presidential candidate. I traveled for eight years by myself. I paid it all out of my own pocket. I earned the money by writing for the Reader's Digest, Henry. And with a \$250,000 law firm practice, and I made \$250,000 on my book, I financed the whole goddamn thing. Did I ever hear a word from the Ford Foundation? How many foundations suggested, 'Look, Nixon, the former Vice President, is going to make this trip abroad. You're going on a non-partisan basis. We'd like to help?' No. They finance this son-of-a-b— Muskie."

TEVI TROY
Ronald Reagan Institute
Silver Spring, Md.

Strategic Gains Come Cheap With Greenland

Some foreign-policy analysts, seeking a more defensible alternative to President Trump's call for outright U.S. ownership of Greenland, have suggested a compact of free association ("Pacific Islands Reflect Potential U.S. Deal," *World News*, Jan. 20). A compact with Greenland would be expensive, unnecessary and strategically redundant, offering the U.S. little that it doesn't already have while creating new costs and risks.

The compact of free association with the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau were negotiated to resolve a specific historical reality. These islands had long been under U.S. administration. By the time of independence, the U.S. was deeply embedded in and paying for their daily governmental operations. The question wasn't whether the U.S. would remain involved, but how. The U.S. secured exclusive military access, basing and overflight rights—the importance of which were proved by the World War II Pacific Island-hopping campaign and remain critical today.

Greenland presents the opposite case. The U.S. already enjoys access to bases and overflight rights there, while Denmark bears the cost of governance, infrastructure and social services. A compact would shift those responsibilities to American taxpayers without delivering new strategic benefits. Nor would it secure access to Greenland's resources. Compact states retain full sovereignty and may accept investment

from any country. Greenland benefits from Denmark's robust governance and political ballast, making it less vulnerable to Chinese malign influence than it would be as a small independent country. The U.S. doesn't need a compact with Greenland. It already has what it needs, and Denmark is already paying the bill.

LAURA STONE
Falls Church, Va.
Ms. Stone is a former U.S. ambassador to the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

A Signature Is the New Bloat

Regarding Alan Blinder's op-ed "A Year In, Trump's Economy Is Worse Than the Numbers" (Jan. 22): Mr. Blinder writes that "the president's supporters point to the benefits (and ignore the costs) of deregulation."

The better argument against the president's policy isn't the cost of deregulation, but rather that while he has reduced administrative regulation, he imposes similar burdens through executive order or jawboning from the bully pulpit. Tariffs and other trade restrictions, limits on credit-card interest and a ban on institutional investment in homes and pharmaceutical price regulation are no less burdensome because they are imposed by executive order instead of administrative rule-making.

DAVID PETERSON
Orlando, Fla.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



OPINION

Is a Four-Year Degree Worth It?

By Sian Leah Beilock

Families across the U.S. are questioning whether a four-year degree is worth it. Student debt has soared. Recent graduates are struggling in a rapidly changing job market. Colleges can also be too ideological: On many campuses, students are exposed to a limited range of perspectives, signaling to them what rather than how to think.

American higher education has a trust problem. We shouldn't pretend otherwise, and it won't solve itself. In 2026 I'd like to see colleges and universities across the country take steps to restore trust. As president of Dartmouth College, I'm committed to this goal, and how to restore public confidence in higher education animates conversations among my presidential peers.

If colleges and universities want families to answer 'yes,' they'll need to make some changes on campus.

Assuming that most Americans value our mission is a recipe for irrelevance and decline. We must demonstrate to students and families—and to the broader public—that we've heard their criticisms and will address them. I see five areas where we can build back trust.

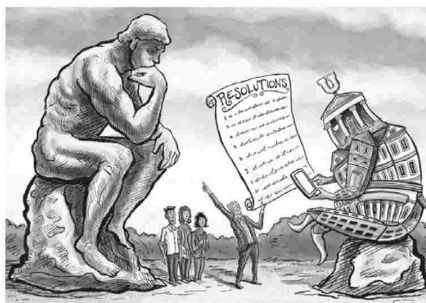
First, make college affordable. If the public no longer believes it is a good investment, that's a problem. Solving it starts with lowering the cost. Every leading university needs to demonstrate a measurable commitment to affordability. At Dartmouth, we have replaced loans with

a combination of scholarships, grants and work-study options in our financial-aid packages and now offer free tuition for families earning \$175,000 or less. This model is expensive, but it's worth every penny if we want lower- and middle-class families to see a four-year degree as within reach. Dartmouth is fortunate to have generous alumni who provide funding that makes programs like this possible.

Second, the return on investment matters. Affordability isn't enough. A college education is one of the largest investments a family will ever make, and there must be an undeniable return. Institutions should be held accountable for student outcomes: Are our graduates getting jobs, pursuing meaningful work, and contributing to their communities?

At Dartmouth, we're moving toward a guarantee: a paid internship or comparable experiential opportunity for any student who wants one, supported by four-year career- and life-planning programs that begin during freshman year. Other schools have different models. The University of Tulsa commits to making sure that students who participate in a career-development program either land a job or get accepted into graduate school. Curry College takes responsibility for its students' loans for up to 12 months or provides a paid internship or free graduate-school credits if graduates aren't employed. Colleges and universities should all embrace the same principle: We own the return on investment, not only the tuition bill.

Third, re-center higher education on learning rather than political posturing. Too often, colleges and universities have participated in the culture wars. The result is an environment in which students and faculty feel they must toe an ideological line rather than explore ideas



that fall outside prevailing norms.

Our institutions must reclaim a narrower, firmer sense of our role. That means embracing institutional neutrality—or restraint, as we call it at Dartmouth—on issues that don't directly affect our mission or core functions. When we, as institutions, rush to issue statements every time there's a national or global controversy, we signal there's a "right" position and that opposing views are unwelcome.

We must ensure that students can encounter the best arguments, assess evidence and reach their own conclusions. That requires a campus culture where controversial speakers are heard rather than canceled, where disagreement is expected rather than feared, and where people can explore ideas without being defined by them.

The infrastructure for this already exists—it's the classroom. Universities must double down on supporting faculty who provide structured opportunities for disagreement on complex issues and

provide clear protections for faculty, staff and students who voice unpopular views. On my campus, Dartmouth Dialogues promotes discussion across differences. Promoting healthy debate isn't a partisan project. It is the precondition for any serious education.

Fourth, emphasize equal opportunity, not equal outcomes. One quiet way we're undermining trust is by erasing meaningful performance distinctions. Grade inflation—especially at elite universities—reduces a transcript's significance. Employers notice; so do students. When an A is the default, it stops meaning "excellent." It means "I showed up."

We must be willing to reintroduce differentiation. That could include policies like forced medians, distribution guidelines or being transparent about grades given. Recently our faculty voted to keep median grades on students' transcripts because they believe that more information is better than less. Ours is the only Ivy League school that does this. At the same time, we must defend

a genuine meritocracy of ideas. Research funding, faculty hiring and academic recognition should be grounded in scholarly excellence, not ideological litmus tests.

Fifth, testing is important. Dartmouth was the first Ivy League university to reinstate an SAT/ACT requirement after a test-optional period during the Covid pandemic. We did so because a study conducted by our faculty showed that tests are a valuable tool for identifying high-performing students who might otherwise be overlooked. Yes, test scores are imperfect—all measures are. Test performance is correlated with family income, but it turns out that recommendation letters and summer experiences are even more so. Taken as part of a holistic applicant review, test scores help us fulfill the American promise of upward mobility based on talent and effort. Meritocracy and diversity aren't at odds.

Next month, I'll join other university presidents at a summit in Washington hosted by the Association of American Universities to continue the conversation about how universities can take responsibility and be held accountable for our actions. I hope we'll move beyond defensiveness and talk of federal compacts and instead take action.

We should leave the table having made specific commitments. We won't agree on everything. One size doesn't fit all. But we must agree that the status quo is untenable. If we're willing to reform ourselves—to listen, change and recommit to our core mission—we can again be a trusted engine of the American dream, scientific breakthroughs and the global economy. This work can't wait. It starts now, with us.

Ms. Beilock is president of Dartmouth College.

Scott Bessent and Gavin Newsom Feud Over a Dumb Idea



LIFE SCIENCE
By Allysia Finley

buying homes. Yes, seriously. Such are our puerile political times that (supposedly) grown men will trade childish barbs over anything.

Each is angry at the other for stealing his scapegoat for high housing prices. President Trump last week directed government agencies to restrict Wall Street investors from buying homes to rent. Mr. Newsom announced plans to do the same earlier this month. Opportunistic minds think alike. Both are wrong.

Institutional investors are a favorite piñata for politicians who don't want to tackle the real drivers of housing prices: government policies that constrain supply and goose demand. Wall Street investors bought homes at fire-sale prices after the collapse of the 2000s housing bubble.

The federal government encouraged them to do so to put a floor on prices. But since early 2024, they have been selling off homes on net.

In some places, institutional investors are buying homes from builders, which struggle to find individual buyers who can afford the higher down payments and monthly mortgage payments required today. If investors didn't buy these homes, many would be sitting empty or never completed in the first place.

Even so, institutional investors own roughly 1% of homes nationwide and, notably, a larger share in metro areas with lower prices—about 1.3% in Atlanta, Dallas and Nashville, Tenn.—than in more-expensive markets like Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco (around 0.2%). That's because rents in markets with higher prices produce paltry returns.

About 20% of single-family homes nationwide are owned by investors, but small businesses that own fewer than 10 properties manage three-quarters of rented homes. Mr. Bessent assured Fox Business's Maria Bartiromo that the president's order would exempt such investors: "Someone—maybe your parents, for their retirement, have bought 5, 10, 12

homes. So we don't want to push the mom and pops out, we just want to push everybody else out."

Progressives were quick to note that most Americans don't own a dozen homes to furnish their nest eggs. On the other hand, most mom-and-pop investors are small businesses. Mr. Newsom pounced on the inartful remark, tweeting out a sound bite from the interview with the caption: "Could this smug man be more out of touch?"

Institutional investors are a distraction from the real causes of high home prices—government policies.

The insult was rich from a governor who was caught during Covid lockdowns dining at Napa Valley's French Laundry, where one dinner can cost more than a monthly mortgage payment. It's also rich for Mr. Bessent—who previously managed a hedge fund and has personally bought and sold more than \$127 million worth of real estate—to scapegoat Wall Street investors.

Maybe Mr. Newsom's barb hit too close to home. The Treasury secretary hit back by likening the governor to Patrick Bateman from the movie "American Psycho" and to Sparkle Beach Ken, a Barbie doll companion. The feud devolved from there. Who won? Not the American people. The scuffle gave the governor the attention he craves and distracted from the real causes of high home prices.

The reason a two-bedroom shanty in Los Angeles can cost upward of \$1 million isn't speculation by Wall Street investors. Burdensome permitting, environmental laws and zoning regulations limit construction and constrain supply. Importantly, the flip side of supply is demand, which government policies have supercharged.

Low interest rates fueled a surge in home buying and refinancing. As a result, more than half of homeowners have mortgage rates of less than 4%, which has created a lock-in effect. Because of today's higher interest rates, needed to contain inflation, many can't afford to move. Fewer sellers means fewer homes available to buy.

Government agencies and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac also fueled demand by letting buyers qualify with down payments of as little as 3%—

which could include lender assistance—and to take out larger mortgages than they could qualify based on their incomes. As prices rose, Fannie and Freddie increased the limit on loans they would backstop (now \$12 million, up from \$726,525 in 2019).

In the name of expanding home ownership, government policies made homes less affordable. Then, as stretched borrowers missed payments, the government instituted myriad mortgage "relief" programs to prevent foreclosures. In the past year, payments on more than 800,000 government-backed mortgages have been modified or waived.

Were the government's de facto foreclosure moratorium to end, more homes would become available to Delinquent borrowers who are forced to sell might then rent—and prices might drop somewhat. But Mr. Trump says he doesn't want to do anything that could cause prices to fall because high home values have made Americans wealthier.

That's no doubt true and is why political leaders of both parties are loath to address the government policies that push up prices. Far easier to assail Wall Street and play Americans for suckers.

California Wealth Tax Backers Ignore Proposition 13 Lessons

By Jon Hartley
And Arthur Laffer

California is flirting with a new and destructive tax. A proposed ballot initiative, the 2026 Billionaire Tax Act, would impose a one-time 5% levy on the net worth of California residents with more than \$1 billion, calculated as of Jan. 1, 2026, with payment due in 2027 and an option to spread payments over five years at an added charge.

While the tax would be a "one-time event," nothing would prohibit similar initiatives in the future. Supporters call it a tax on billionaires, but in practice it would be a giant, government-mandated liquidation event for people whose wealth is often tied up in illiquid business equity. It also contains a feature that should make any taxpayer uneasy: It would be retroactive to the start of 2026.

California has seen this movie before, and the voters wrote the ending in 1978 with Proposition 13, a constitutional amendment that limited property-tax increases.

In the 1970s, inflation and rising home values pushed property assessments sharply upward. Many households, especially retirees, watched property-tax bills double over short reassessment cycles even though their cash incomes hadn't changed. That tax system was arbitrary and confiscatory because it treated asset appreciation on unrealized gains as if they were cash income.

Proposition 13 was a voter-initiated correction. It capped property tax rates at 1% of assessed value and limited assessment increases to 2%, restoring predictability and a sense that taxation should be tethered to economic reality. Whatever one thinks of Proposition 13's trade-offs,

its political logic was simple: A tax base that jumps with market prices rather than realized transactions or actual cash flow is particularly painful to taxpayers and thus will inevitably provoke a backlash. Its passage sparked a broader taxpayer revolt that reshaped fiscal politics nationally in the late 1970s.

The difference today is the margin of adjustment: Property taxes collapsed politically because housing is immobile and the burden affected millions of voters, while a wealth tax collapses economically because financial capital is highly mobile and high earners can move. The issue here isn't only mobility. It's also asset value deflation. After Proposition 13, California property values rose. After this initiative, California asset values will fall.

The California wealth-tax initiative revives the same core design mistake, but with faster consequences. It taxes ownership, not income. Even when labeled "one-time," it requires valuing hard-to-price assets and constructing the machinery needed to tax wealth directly. That turns volatility into fiscal policy and establishes a precedent that can easily be repeated. If California can impose a retroactive 5% charge on wealth today, it can do so again tomorrow.

When assets acquire a recurring carrying cost such as a wealth tax, markets reprice them downward. A perpetual bond worth \$600,000 paying \$48,000 a year (an 8% yield) subjected to a permanent 1% annual wealth tax would be repriced to roughly \$525,000 so that investors still earn an 8% after-tax return. To collect \$6,000 a year, the state de-

stroys about \$75,000 in private wealth. A 5% tax with no credible commitment to remain one-time would imply far larger valuation losses.

The effects would be felt broadly. The useful capital of the super-rich plays a large role in determining the overall level of employment and compensation in California. The pro-

Faced with an onerous levy on assets, taxpayers will vote against it at the ballot box or with their feet.

proposal would almost certainly face constitutional challenges, including over its retroactive application, its taxation of worldwide assets with tenuous ties to the state, and whether a levy on net worth functions as an impermissible property tax under California law.

Taxing highly mobile people who own wealth also makes the initiative likely to backfire. Even before the initiative qualified for the ballot, prominent founders and investors signaled sensitivity to the policy environment. High-profile figures such as Peter Thiel, Palmer Luckey, and Larry Page have already reduced their California footprint or relocated elsewhere, with the predictable knock-on effect that firms and employees reassess where to expand and where to hire.

Defenders of the initiative reply that billionaires are few and politically unpopular. But when a state relies heavily on a narrow and highly

mobile tax base, a small number of departures can have outsized budget consequences.

Europe's experience should further sober California voters. Over the past few decades, most countries that experimented with broad net wealth taxes abandoned them after discovering that they raised modest net revenue relative to their administrative burden while encouraging avoidance and relocation. Of the 12 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries that had broad wealth taxes in the 1990s, only Norway, Spain and Switzerland still do. Most recently, Norway's tighter wealth-tax regime coincided with an exodus: Nearly 500 high-net-worth individuals left the country in 2022 and 2023, illustrating how sensitive location decisions become when governments tax worldwide wealth and toughen exit rules.

California doesn't suffer from too little taxation. Its top marginal state income-tax rate is 13.3%, the highest in the U.S. Capital-gains taxes, corporate taxes and sales taxes are all at or near the highest in the nation as well. The wealth-tax initiative would amplify the problem of revenue volatility by taxing volatile paper valuations while assuming the tax base will sit still when the bill arrives.

Proposition 13 was a warning about what happens when government treats unrealized gains like income. California shouldn't try another tax revolt to remember it.

Mr. Hartley is a policy fellow at the Hoover Institution and an affiliated scholar at the Mercatus Center. Mr. Laffer is president of Laffer Associates.

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The uses and abuses of prediction markets

Insider bets and regulatory gaps impede efforts to turn wagers into financial tools

In business, uncertainty is usually a liability. But some companies are turning it into a product. Online platforms, such as US-based Polymarket and Kalshi, which allow users to make wagers on all sorts of binary public events, are thriving. In just two years, punts placed per month – on topics ranging from whether US President Donald Trump will acquire Greenland before 2027, to whether Taylor Swift will announce she is pregnant before the end of March – are estimated to have ballooned 130 times to over \$13bn. It is tempting to dismiss these activities as mere gambling, or as a symptom of a society that has pushed financialisation to its limits. But prediction markets could yet serve a useful financial function, with careful policing. In theory, they harness the wisdom of

crowds by forcing punters to put money behind their beliefs. In doing so, they can help to price risk in markets and provide investors and companies with unique opportunities to hedge against an array of events in real time. Their appeal for forecasting is particularly strong in an era of information overload and geopolitical upheaval. Polymarket, a crypto-based platform, for instance accurately predicted a decisive win for Trump in the run-up to the 2024 US election, while opinion polls portrayed a much tighter contest.

But prediction markets still have a long way to go if they are to become a trusted part of the financial infrastructure. For starters, the industry is plagued by issues of insider trading and manipulation. Hours before the US announced the exfiltration of Nicolás Maduro, an anonymous Polymarket user curiously bet that Venezuela's president would fall. They made more than \$400,000. Reasonably, some US lawmakers want to formalise con-

straints on platform use for officials, political appointees and executive branch employees.

The sector also needs coherent regulation. In the US, the Commodity Futures Trading Commission is its primary regulator. However, state gambling authorities argue that contracts tied to sports games are unlicensed bets and should be under their oversight. As for politics, a federal appeals court ruling in 2024 made bets on US elections legal, but internationally there are many restrictions around making wagers on political events. Event contracts also need clear definitions and standards. For now, investors in platform providers have been emboldened by the Trump administration's light-touch approach to financial regulation. But the patchwork of oversight leaves both operators and traders exposed.

A lack of liquidity is another limitation. While trading volume is growing, thin markets weaken price signals, facilitate manipulation and restrict hedging

Their greatest potential value lies in economic event contracts which can complement traditional finance, rather than whether a pop star is expecting or not

as major users cannot enter or exit positions without distorting prices. This undermines the platforms' usefulness as a risk-management tool. Unsurprisingly, major trading companies are hiring quantitative analysts to arbitrage fleeting price discrepancies between contracts in prediction markets.

Still, it would be a mistake to write off prediction markets. Their greatest potential value lies in economic event contracts which can complement traditional finance, rather than whether a pop star is expecting or not. Bets on inflation releases, interest-rate decisions or specific policy outcomes could offer targeted price signals and bespoke hedges which may be harder to replicate through existing derivatives markets. But if they are to mature, the online platforms will need deeper liquidity. That will, in turn, require clearer regulation and credible enforcement. Unless that happens, they will continue to feel more like noisy casinos than reliable financial instruments.

Opinion Society

How to get our kids to read books

Ben Hedges



Lee Child

Growing up in postwar Birmingham meant there was very little to do. My parents told the view that anything enjoyable was best avoided. But they gave me two precious gifts. The first was a constant supply of books – a basic staple in our house, usually sourced at a jumble sale and provided without question. The second was ready access to a public library, in Birmingham at first. When I exhausted its shelves we commuted to the next municipality and the mind-stretching bounty of a multistorey library. You could find pretty much any book you wanted. It was paradise. Books made me, so I think a lot about their place in the world. Do young readers have the same opportunities to dive into an infinite world of stories? Do books give them the confidence to imagine their own

sweeping cultural change we've lived through: access to education, social attitudes, immigration, diversity of our population and so much more.

Yet if you look at the English curriculum young people study today, it is stubbornly similar to the 1960s. The vast majority of authors still look a lot like me (though they don't write like me, you might be relieved to learn). While access to brilliant, imaginative authors like Malorie Blackman, Meera Syal and Bernardine Evaristo is now possible for GCSE and A-level classes, schools lack the support to get these texts into the hands of their students. There's nothing new in making the case for change. The national curriculum has failed to meet the needs of a "diverse multicultural and multi-ethnic society", argued the landmark 1999 Macpherson report after the murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence. A quarter of a century later, fewer than one in 50 GCSE students studies a writer of colour. More than one in three such students identifies as Black, Asian or from an ethnic minority background.

My publisher, Penguin Random House, is among those calling for a more representative curriculum. The Lit in Colour campaign has shown that studying texts by writers of colour can increase students' empathy, engagement in the subject and enjoyment of reading. These benefits apply to all students – not just those of colour. The classics will and should always have a vital role in the curriculum but teaching a more diverse range of texts can ensure all students feel included and visible. New literature is a portal to unfamiliar worlds and people. It makes sense to sample the lives of our fellow citizens and deepen our understanding of those around us.

Last year's government-commissioned review of England's school curriculum says it should "include stronger representation of the diversity that makes up our modern society, allowing more children to see themselves in the curriculum".

Rightly, it puts special emphasis on English, saying "the curriculum must also allow space for teachers to exercise autonomy in selecting from a broader range of texts and authors, so that students are able to see themselves in the curriculum, as well as be exposed to a wide range of perspectives to broaden their horizons".

This is not just about equity and belonging, vital as they are. Change is long overdue. Without it, we risk losing generations of young readers. The classics will and should always have a vital role in the curriculum but teaching a more diverse range of texts can ensure all students feel included and visible. New literature is a portal to unfamiliar worlds and people. It makes sense to sample the lives of our fellow citizens and deepen our understanding of those around us.

The writer is the author of the Jack Reacher novels

Letters

Canadian PM's Davos speech: the push back

I appreciate and understand Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's speech at Davos ("Carney warns of 'rupture, not transition' in the world order", Report, January 22). With Donald Trump talking about Canada as America's 51st state and threatening tariffs when Ontario used a quote from Ronald Reagan in a TV commercial, among so many other things, Canada has no choice but to look to broaden its export markets and to work with other countries on defence, foreign policy and more.

However, I would have appreciated a little humility from Canada's prime minister. President Trump's comments and threats are inexcusable, but Canada has had a pretty good deal, for a long time. The integration of its market with that of the US has been good for both countries. With respect to defence, Canada has got away with gross underspending for years; money it could spend for other things. Even now, with NATO agreeing that all countries should spend 5 per cent of GDP on defence by 2035, Canada is

only projecting to get to NATO's 2014 target of 2 per cent of GDP in 2030, four years from now.

While President Trump is treating Canada, and much of the rest of the world, shabbily, Canada has benefited from its relationship with the US over the years. I wish Prime Minister Carney, while understandably calling for a new policy in the future, would have acknowledged all that it got in the past.

Patrick J Allen
River Forest, IL, US

Barbarians behind Trump must have read Ayn Rand

Three pieces on your January 21 op-ed page truly capture the zeitgeist. First, Howard Lutnick, the US commerce secretary, trumpets US power and proclaims that America is in charge and will go it alone ("Why the Trump administration is going to Davos").

Alongside, Martin Wolf ("The world's past, present and future") observes that Washington is not bound by any "fundamental principles" (except Trump's own sense of morality). Edward Lane, meanwhile, correctly identifies Trump's lack of a "coherent ideology", and notes that America has taken a "deranged turn" in "mounting a war" on global institutions and global public goods ("The barbarians are inside the gates in America").

But the barbarians behind Trump do indeed possess a semi-coherent ideology, or at least a world view. They see co-operation and multinational institutions as a humiliating restriction on their freedom.

Wolf recognised this when he wrote that Trump wants to "break the EU" (Opinion, December 17). This world view is also seen in Trump's proposed "Board of Peace", which is clearly designed to bypass and weaken the UN.

These barbarians seem to have read Ayn Rand as teenagers and have never grown out of it. Truly the old order is nearly dead, and the reborn American ascendancy is frightful, nasty and brutish.

Sim Gurewitz
El Cerrito, CA, US

Greenland meltdown and the reasons it matters

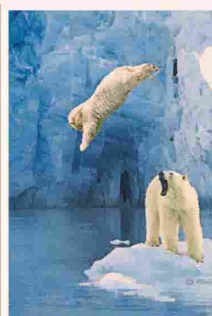
A prime reason for Donald Trump's interest in Greenland is to exploit its resources, as recognised by a Danish investment fund's "huge appetite" to invest in Greenland ("Denmark fund to beef up Greenland investments", Report, January 19).

However, treating Greenland as a resource prize while its ice sheet melts is reckless. Greenland's ice sheet holds enough ice to raise the global sea level by over 7 metres; a partial collapse could release over half a metre this century.

The dynamics of the planet mean that this meltwater would directly raise sea levels in Antarctica, causing glacier collapse and raising the sea level by well over a metre. Once started, further collapse would be impossible to stop.

The financial implications are staggering: a single metre of sea level rise could cost the world \$700bn per year according to one study. Even half a metre would devastate low-lying countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam, while several metres would obliterate coastal cities and agricultural areas globally.

This is not a distant environmental concern, but a material threat to everyone on the planet: a threat



Greenland ice sheet holds enough ice to raise global sea level by over 7m

currently ignored by nations competing for resources, sea routes and military advantage in the Arctic.

In 2012, I, alongside sea ice expert Peter Wadhams testified to the UK parliament's environmental audit committee regarding the urgency of protecting the Arctic. We warned that geoengineering was essential for Arctic preservation. Since then, Arctic temperatures have risen four times faster than the global average, intensifying the risks from critical "tipping elements", including the Greenland Ice Sheet.

A pressing need exists to start lowering the Arctic temperature while it is still just possible using the most powerful, available cooling technique: stratospheric aerosol injection (SAI). This technique mimics the cooling effect of large volcanic eruptions by injecting CO₂ into the stratosphere. Contrary to uninformed opposition, responsible research suggests that SAI could cool the Arctic with minimal risk of serious side effects, especially when compared to the risks from continued Arctic warming. The cost of such deployment has been estimated at around \$11bn per year.

While Trump remains determined to exploit Greenland rather than save it from meltdown, catastrophic sea level rise becomes inevitable.

John Nissen
Chair of the Planetary Restoration Action Group, London W5, UK

A March New Year is not such a new idea

Regarding Sarah O'Connor's column "Why we have the calendar all wrong" (Opinion, January 20), beginning the new year in March is not such a new idea, and one doesn't have to go as far back as Republican Rome to find it. For almost 600 years, from the mid-12th century until January 1, 1752, the English New Year began on March 25.

Michael Windless
Bangkok, Thailand

A sceptic's view of claims made for a digital euro

Olaf Storbeck reported that 70 economists voiced support for the digital euro ("Digital euro vital to avoid dependency on US, say economists", Report, January 22). A closer look suggests their argument reflects a misunderstanding of both central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) and economic history.

The economists claim that a CBDC, like the digital euro, would be "an essential safeguard of European sovereignty, stability, and resilience". But just look at the international experience. Where has this claim been true in practice? Certainly not in the Bahamas or Jamaica, where some of the longest-standing CBDCs have existed.

Even within Europe, the economists appear to misunderstand economic history. Warning of the dominance of non-European financial institutions, the economists claim that government intervention is the only defence. Yet such interventions are partly why European businesses have struggled to gain ground.

Rather than being free to serve customers, firms must navigate a maze of red tape: customer-surveillance mandates, extensive reporting rules, and regulatory fragmentation. Making matters worse, price controls – such as caps on interchange fees – prevent new entrants from generating the revenue needed to manage these compliance burdens. It's not a market failure if the source of the issue is government intervention.

If the economists are right about one thing, it's that the European parliament should be careful about whose advice it follows.

Nicholas Anthony
Policy Analyst, Center for Monetary and Financial Alternatives, Cato Institute, Washington, DC, US

New York comptroller is wrong to buy Israel bonds

In the article "NYC pension fund chief keeps options open towards Israeli bonds" (Report, January 20), New York State Comptroller Mark Levine, the person in charge of the state's public sector pensions, considers his decision to buy Israeli bonds a fiduciary one not politically motivated. I am the daughter of Holocaust survivors and believe he should think again.

Shouldn't he reconsider buying Israeli bonds when the International Court of Justice as well as other major organisations have unequivocally decided that Israel's killing and destruction of both the Palestinians and the infrastructure in Gaza is a genocide?

As a Jewish New Yorker, I consider the buying of Israeli bonds morally repulsive.

Jane Hirschmann
New York, NY, US

Why I see an irony in Carney's hegemon jibe

Wow, have times changed. Suddenly, the US is a "hegemon" in the words of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney. Yet, Carney, as governor of the Bank of England, was only too happy to have the first Trump administration use its influence to protect the City of London against an extraordinary attack a few years ago by a different hegemon: Brussels.

After British voters decided to leave the EU in 2016, a mad grab ensued as Brussels manoeuvred to seize pieces of the UK's wholesale financial services industry, especially the City's systemically important and lucrative clearing of Interest Rate Swaps (IRS). Brussels asserted that London could no longer conduct the clearing of IRS on European government and corporate bonds because post-Brexit Britain had no existing trading agreement with the EU. The City's clearing business would be forced to relocate to an EU financial centre along with its associated economic activity. Lacking an adequate countermove, Carney acknowledged: "A no-deal would be an economic shock for this country."

Concerned about growing market uncertainty and risk of financial instability, the Trump administration took action. With bipartisan US political support and that of the White House, the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) came up with a series of bilateral regulatory measures that, in the event of a hard Brexit, London's IRS clearing would relocate not to the EU, but to New York. Since the US had a long-standing trading agreement and recognised regulatory compatibility with the EU, Brussels could not stop it. Through back channels, Washington let Brussels know that it preferred that IRS clearing remain in London, but if the EU persisted, the US would gladly accept movement from London to New York. Once there, it was unlikely to ever decamp for Paris or Frankfurt.

On February 25, 2019, the US-led "bridge over Brexit" agreement was gratefully announced by Governor Carney, Philip Hammond, the Tory chancellor, Financial Conduct Authority chief Andrew Bailey and me as chairman of the CFTC. Not long after, the EU miraculously discovered in its previously ironclad rules some leeway to allow IRS clearing to remain in London.

Having preserved this valuable economic activity for Britain, the Trump administration asked for nothing in return. No one called the US a hegemon then.

J Christopher Giancarlo
Former Chairman, US Commodity Futures Trading Commission, New York, NY

Private debt is helping to deleverage global portfolios

The continuous negative bias in your reporting on private debt is puzzling and disconcerting (FT.com, January 21). I am not sure I understand the rationale I read in 2008, before the great financial crisis, you included collateralised loan obligations (CLOs) funds in the mess of asset backed securities subprime securitisations.

Now, 18 years later, it would be great if you could publish an article with the asset class performance so that readers can judge for themselves.

Private debt is a deleveraging factor in global portfolios, making banks' balance sheets more liquid, less leveraged, thus improving the stability of the financial system.

Alberto Avanzo
Milan, Italy

Opinion

Why people still matter in the AI era

ECONOMICS

Ruchir Sharma



Every tech revolution has inspired fears that innovation will destroy jobs. While those fears have never played out, artificial intelligence is cast as more disruptive because it has the potential to perform so many tasks the way people do – or better, is the threat to human labour that different and dire this time?

What the current obsession with AI overlooks is that another (counter) force is also advancing rapidly. In the past four decades, the number of countries in which the working age population is shrinking has risen from zero to 55, including most of the major economies. This collapse is accelerating now because families are having even fewer children than expected.

Last year, the number of babies born in China fell to the lowest level since the birth of the People's Republic in 1949, and in Japan to the lowest level since 1899. Compared to forecasts 10 years ago, the global fertility rate is on track to fall below the level required to stabilise the population 25 years earlier than expected. In 2050. As a result, the world's working-age population is predicted to peak 30 years earlier, in 2070.

There are signs AI is already raising output per worker, which could lower overall demand for human labour. But against a backdrop of rapid population decline, the marvels of AI are more likely to ease the coming labour shortages than trigger mass unemployment.

Tech revolutions of the past killed industries, not jobs. The 19th-century rise of machines drove workers from farms into factories, and from factories into services. In the 1910s, as the car displaced the horse, carriage drivers gave way to truckers and cabbies. In the 1970s, automated teller machines allowed banks to cut costs, open more branches and hire more human tellers. Starting in the 1990s, by one estimate,

the internet displaced about 3.5m US jobs but created 19m.

AI could well be far more disruptive. One forecast puts the maximum "addressable" labour market for AI and its offspring, humanoid robots, at 4bn jobs worldwide. So far, though, AI is hardly displacing humans at a jarring pace. The unemployment rate is near multi-decade lows both worldwide and

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in the US, the AI leader. In Japan, unemployment has been falling and labour force participation has been rising for years, despite the rapid increase in the country's robot population.

It's always easier to see which jobs are at risk now than to imagine the jobs of the future. About a third of new US jobs are of types that did not exist 25 years earlier. Today, the shift favours workers

who know how to build infrastructure for AI, or use it as a tool. Already, new job titles are multiplying for AI content creators, product managers, engineers and system designers, and appear to be more than compensating for losses in traditional job categories.

True, it's early days. More upheaval may be coming. But if AI triggers mass unemployment, will humans just sit by? During the 2000s, the "China Shock" displaced some 6m US factory workers in old industrial regions, and that was enough to fuel populist revolt.

Techno-optimists say AI will be very different because it will replace jobs with leisure. It will free people to live idly off the profits of AI labour, redistributed to them by increasingly parental governments. So long as work remains a pillar of human dignity, this vision is dystopian fantasy. The more jobs are threatened by AI, the more likely voters will demand that governments slow its advance.

Demographics have long been the most important driver of economic development. No economy has been able to grow rapidly without the tail-

wind of a growing labour force. Now, many nations are trying to get ahead of the adverse implications of population decline. Led by the most rapidly ageing societies, they are offering families cash to have more kids, but "baby bonuses" have a record of failure. States can't intervene effectively in a choice as personal as whether to have a child.

Immigration is one obvious way to expand a nation's workforce, but of late net immigration has plummeted in most western societies. Others include nudging more seniors to stay on the job by raising the retirement age, or encouraging more women to take jobs, especially since women are less likely to participate in the global labour force now than they were 30 years ago.

AI can arrive soon enough to help save the world from labour shortages, but it is not likely to unleash widespread joblessness. Not without a fight. People will still matter, as workers and as a political force, in the AI era.

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US president's TikTok deal is a gift to China

Jim Secreto

The deal to sign over TikTok's US operations to a joint venture led by American investors has ended a stubborn stand-off over one of the world's most popular apps – and spared US President Donald Trump from implementing a politically costly ban. In practice, however, it amounts to a victory for TikTok's Chinese owner ByteDance.

Trump first tried to ban TikTok in 2020 following concerns about China's collection of the personal data of US citizens. ByteDance, which operates TikTok alongside its Chinese sister app Douyin, has spent the past five years navigating questions about the extent of Beijing's leverage over its platform.

The uncertainty cast doubt over the company's access to one of its most important markets. Although Americans are estimated to account for less than a tenth of TikTok's near 2bn global audience, they generate a disproportionate share of its content. US creators shape trends that circulate beyond the American market and their engagement patterns help to train the company's recommendation engine.

For ByteDance, a US ban would have ended TikTok's ability to function as a single platform, making it less attractive to advertisers and creators. Worse, a forced divestment would have required the company to create a US competitor armed with the accumulated logic of how TikTok works.

But Beijing was never prepared to allow ByteDance to hand over this core intellectual property. It made that clear by placing recommendation algo-

Washington's compromise has stabilised one of Beijing's most important technology companies

gorithms under export controls in 2020. In the US, an outright ban of TikTok would have been deeply unpopular with users. The Trump administration has settled for a compromise, splitting governance from technology. Content moderation will sit with a new US entity, with Oracle hosting the data and auditing the algorithm's operation. ByteDance still owns the algorithm – licensing it rather than selling it outright – and continues to run TikTok's commercial activities. Instead of a clean break, the structure resembles a franchise.

For ByteDance, this outcome could hardly be more favourable. It lifts a persistent drag at an opportune moment. The company generated an estimated \$155bn in revenue in 2024 and about \$53bn in profit, according to investor estimates, outpacing China's older internet champions such as Alibaba and Tencent. In the first quarter of 2025 it even overtook Meta in quarterly sales, making it briefly the world's largest social media business by revenue.

With the US question settled, ByteDance now sits in the top tier of global technology companies and at the centre of China's tech ambitions. It is investing heavily in AI – its chatbot Doubao is the most widely used in China – supported by large spending on computing power. In recent years it has become a major buyer of Nvidia chips, planning roughly \$14bn in purchases this year.

Both the US and China rely on a few national tech champions with the scale, talent and capital to translate commercial success into strategic capability. ByteDance is now firmly in that category. Its ability to operate globally has been preserved with data flows and core technology intact.

Trump's deal solved a narrow political problem: keeping a popular app online without backlash. But he has also removed a restriction from a Chinese company that is moving quickly. Washington has stabilised one of Beijing's most important technology companies at a moment when both governments are leaning heavily on their private sectors to set the pace of innovation. ByteDance was constrained not by technical capacity but political risk. That constraint is gone. Whether securing TikTok's future in the US has made the country safer, or simply cleared the runway for a formidable global competitor, remains an open question.

The writer is a strategic adviser and former senior official for investment security at the Department of the Treasury during the Biden administration.

Trump is the wrong answer to right questions

WORLD AFFAIRS

Rana Foroohar



Donald Trump is a bad answer to good questions. Never has this been clearer than in the last two weeks.

Are Latin American drug cartels a scourge? Of course. Is forcibly deposing Venezuela's president and seizing the country's oil the way to get rid of them? Probably not. Would most of the world like to see regime change in Iran? Yes. Is a threat of military strikes against the country going to make that happen? Unlikely, particularly when there's no clear successor. Are Russia and China together an increasing threat to Arctic security? You bet. Is blowing up Nato by seizing Greenland the solution? I think we all know the answer.

One of the reasons that Trump rose as a political figure in the first place – and few elites saw it coming – was that he was willing to question anything and everything about conventional politics, economics and foreign policy: the liberal meritocracy, the Washington Consensus, the idea that free trade was an unfettered good. It was a tonic welcomed by a public disenchanted by centrists on both sides of the aisle who had for decades failed to acknowledge and address the problems of the old

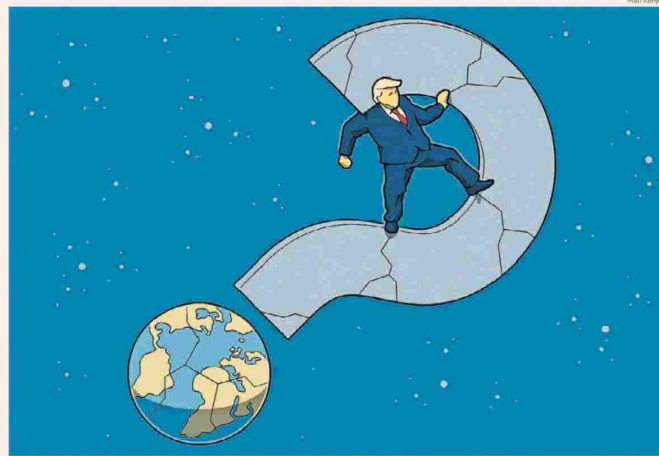
order that were hiding in plain sight.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney spoke about this "pleasant fiction" in his powerful Davos speech last week, and listed several examples of the problems of the old order, from "trade rules... enforced asymmetrically", to "international law applied with varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim", to the myth that America could continue to police the world, ensure a stable financial system and resolve global conflicts without more global burden sharing and better accounting for new great powers like China. Politicians globally, not just in the US, "avoided calling out the gaps between rhetoric and reality".

In lieu of honesty and a sensible conversation about how to transition to a new world order, we got Trump. He has no real answers, only ego, sharp animal instincts and a talent for turning the tables on adversaries at any given moment. Witness how the geopolitical turmoil of the last two weeks has wiped the topic of affordability, with which Democrats were gaining some political traction, from the headlines in the US.

While Trump has nibbled at solutions to affordability (a credit card interest cap, proposed limits on home ownership by large investors), his overall approach has been Autocracy 101. When there's trouble inside the nation, turn the public's attention to problems outside it.

Trump isn't the solution to any of the world's problems, but he does have an unerring ability to see where the fractures and faultlines in the old order



are, and to make hay with them. When Treasury secretary Scott Bessent mocks the ineffectuality of "European working group[s]", those of us who've spent time reporting in Brussels know exactly what he's talking about.

Yes, the European Union has needed to think more realistically about its own security and economic integration for a long time. It is too bad that it has taken a figure as destructive as Trump to bring these issues to a head.

Those who oppose the US president and are seeking a better way towards a new world order would do well to think about real answers to the questions he raises. Those questions resonate with people, which is the only reason he can gain traction. Domestically, for example, Democrats running in the midterm

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elections this autumn need strong ideas about how to craft a better immigration policy: Trump's ICE raids aren't the answer, but nor is a totally open border.

Democrats also need to get serious about addressing corporate power, rather than "calling up Elon Musk when he tussles with Trump and offering him whatever he wants if he'll come back to our side and kick in a few nickels to our candidates", as Senator Elizabeth Warren put it in a speech earlier this month, referencing how members of her own party court Big Tech.

Trump was able to grab working-class voters because Democrats became the party of the rich when they took a neoliberal, deregulatory turn in the 1990s under Bill Clinton. They need to disassociate themselves from Davos Man and the Epstein Class and reclaim the populist tradition that has been so distorted by the Mega movement.

The world as a whole also needs answers: to challenges of Chinese mercantilism, the falling labour share of GDP and the new threats of technology-based job destruction.

While it's smart that countries like Canada and many in Europe are looking to diversify their trade away from Trump's America, how is the world going to deal with the fact that China's global trade surplus is rising, not falling? Will Europe finally grab the low-hanging fruit of investors looking to diversify away from the dollar by deepening and further integrating its own capital markets? Or will the members of these working groups in Brussels keep wringing their hands?

I stopped going to Davos a few years ago because I couldn't stand the hypocrisy of it anymore (few people there really want to change the global order). But I must give Trump credit. By going to Switzerland and continuing to challenge the status quo, he has focused the minds of world leaders on the desperate need to create a new and better order.

Trump came to power by illuminating the hypocrisies of our system, even as he embodied them. We still need answers to the questions he has raised.

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Middle powers may miss the global order more than they think

EUROPE

Martin Sandbu



Václav Havel's essay "The Power of the Powerless" is probably not a set text in many, if any, high schools around Europe. It should be. A study of the importance of truth and reason in the face of reality-denying forces, it is a buttress to the edifice of Europe's Enlightenment tradition. It is also a powerful reminder of half-forgotten political memories of those who lived behind the iron curtain and whose role in enriching Europe's politics has yet to be given its due.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Canadian prime minister Mark Carney invoked Havel's parable of the greengrocer who displays a "Workers of the world, unite!" sign in his shop window – not because he believes in its

political message, but to live a "tranquil life". Havel's point is that when everybody pretends to consent, they give reality to the system that oppresses them. This is the case for dissent: to make the system vulnerable like a little boy does a naked emperor.

Many have applauded Carney's plea "for companies and countries to take their signs down" – that is, to stop the pretence. But we are likely to see very different interpretations of what this entails. In rich countries, it will be to admit that they and the US are no longer on the same team, and must find ways to protect liberal democratic values without America.

For much of the so-called global south, however, and in particular for emerging middle powers, no longer "living within the lie" may mean something quite different. Many of them have long chafed against a "rules-based" order they felt made some countries more equal than others. There were good reasons to feel that way, from the rich world's early decision to take the high road approach to Covid vaccine distribution to the wildly inconsistent application of

international law to different conflicts.

From this perspective, ending the pretence means dropping one's restraints. In addition to relief at the end of hypocrisy, some countries may welcome an amoral take on the global order. Rather than pushing for the rules to be applied with truly equal force to all, they will be tempted by the immediate freedom that comes with unashamedly pursuing one's national interests.

Even if you are not interested in the superpowers, they will soon be interested in you

This is understandable. But they risk finding that that freedom is worth little if another, stronger country has views about how they should exercise it. In the absence of a hegemon to co-ordinate or enforce the rules of the game, the naked pursuit of national self-interest is at best inefficient, at worst a recipe for conflict or subjugation. Even if you are not

interested in the superpowers, they will sooner or later be interested in you. Without even the veneer of rules to appeal to all that is left is power.

Canada itself illustrates the difficulty. Carney's Havelian appeal came the week after he signed a partnership with China. There are good reasons to have one. But in the context of China's support for Russia against Ukraine, it is hardly "calibrating our relationships so their depths reflect our values", as he put it in Davos.

Disorder or superpower dominance are both likelier outcomes than a "spontaneous order" of middle powers organised by occasional and varying overlaps of interest – unless such coalitions can be formed up by institutional arrangements and a strong community of values. Only these make long-term relationships so obviously beneficial as to overcome the yearning for seemingly unfettered sovereignty – the flames of which the Trump administration is energetically fanning.

Such an alternative – a reconstructed but still liberal and rules-based order – can only be offered by the EU. It alone is

big enough to be a pole of attraction. It still cares for the values the old order aspired to, at least in name. It embodies the order in how its members share their sovereignty.

But it will never serve as such a global anchor until it takes seriously the effort that this would entail. It means offering more tightly integrated relationships with countries that still think a liberal rules-based order is their best hope.

Instead, the EU itself is tempted to give up the pretence without taking responsibility for the system. Just in the past week, the European parliament triggered a judicial review to delay a new trade deal with South American countries, and the commission suggested it would abandon the most-favoured-nation principle at the core of the world trading system.

The point of telling the truth is not to throw real values out with the pretence, but to start taking them seriously again. Havel, who became his country's post-communist president, knew that dissent is essential but only the start.

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