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 IN 1932  
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## The Court's textbook lesson, much needed

**A** MIDDLE-SCHOOL classroom is a space for inquiry, not an arena for institutional power-play. That's why the new NCERT social science textbook for Class VIII invites questions of bad faith. After a report in this newspaper revealed its content, the Supreme Court led by Chief Justice Surya Kant rightly stepped up to red-flag this. It is reassuring that Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has expressed regret and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken of the need for accountability. The issue of public corruption is urgent and that of judicial corruption even more so. As the system's centrepiece, the judiciary is tasked with keeping all other institutions honest and committed to constitutional morality. Over the years, SC judges have themselves underlined the importance of judicial probity. Indeed, the section in the textbook in question quotes former Chief Justice BR Gavai: "...sadly, there have been instances of corruption and misconduct that have surfaced even within the judiciary... potentially eroding faith in the integrity of the system as a whole". The judiciary's seminal position and role also means, however, that any assessment of its institutional record must be made with due respect and responsibility. The NCERT has expressed regret but that isn't persuasive — given its own record.

For, the inclusion of judicial corruption is the latest in a dodgy list of politically driven deletions, erasures, and additions in the name of rationalising textbook content, on the watch of this government. References to the 2002 Gujarat riots have been purged and content relating to the Mughal era pruned, mention of caste discrimination has been diluted and references to the demolition of the Babri Masjid removed. The context of the current controversy is, also, this: In polarised times, the space for checks and balances seems increasingly constricted. The government repeatedly labels the Opposition as "anti-national", derides the media as part of an allegedly discredited "ecosystem" ranged against it. In times like these, the judiciary's check-and-balance role is even more salient and delicate and needs to be protected — while the SC is often accused of giving the government the benefit of doubt, it has reiterated that its mandate is adherence to the Constitution, not to play the role of the Opposition.

Certainly, then, CJI Surya Kant's anger is justified. That said, a blanket ban and notices of contempt do a disservice to the Court's reputation of having broad shoulders. It must step up to protect itself, but with due respect, it would be disappointing if it sounds like it countenances anything that resembles censorship. The Court has made its point, the NCERT has withdrawn the book. This should provide closure — and send a clear message to the government.

## On cervical cancer, vaccine & information

**O**NE WOMAN dies of cervical cancer every eight minutes in India. The country accounts for about a fifth of the global burden of the disease, close to 90 per cent of which is caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). Early screening and vaccination can prevent this cancer. However, lack of awareness and the relatively high price of the shots have come in the way of checking the disease. That's why the government's inoculation drive, to commence in about a month, could be a game-changer. A single dose of Gardasil-4, manufactured by Merck & Co, will be administered to 14-year-olds. In private clinics, the vaccine is given in two or three doses. However, the government's approach aligns with the WHO's 2022 findings, which underscore that a single dose, administered between the ages of 9 and 14, provides protection comparable to that provided by multi-dose regimens. It's also in consonance with the global health agency's cervical cancer elimination strategy.

Eligible women will need to book a slot at government health centres using the U-win portal. The government intends to ensure the vaccines reach 1.15 crore young women who turn 14 every year in the country. It's too early to link this drive with herd immunity. However, studies in Sweden, the UK and Australia are instructive. They show that a high vaccine coverage reduces the chance of cancerous lesions and other symptoms among the unvaccinated.

Government-sponsored HPV vaccination drives are underway in several states in the country. School-based cervical cancer vaccination projects in Sikkim and Punjab's high-burden districts have achieved significant coverage. Such initiatives have also taken off in Bihar and Tamil Nadu. In contrast, Delhi's programme, which required parents to bring children to a hospital, did not acquire much traction. In the coming months, the Centre should draw the right lessons from the successes and failures of these schemes. The record of centrally sponsored immunisation programmes, whether they be against Covid, polio or other ongoing projects, also testifies to the key role of awareness campaigns. The elimination of cervical cancer in India will hinge not just on the supply of vaccines; the efficacy of information drives will be as critical.

## Always connected, never present

**W**HEN AUGUSTE Rodin first conceptualised what would become *The Thinker*, the figure was intended to represent the poet Dante Alighieri, surveying the damned at the Gates of Hell. Over its many iterations through the early 20th century, however, the brass sculpture of a brooding male figure came to stand in for the modern man instead: Solitary, self-possessed, lost in contemplation. Over a century later, what might the search for a representation of the contemporary human condition yield? Would it involve a distracted figure, head bowed, shoulders rounded, face lit up by the glow of the device nestled firmly in the palm?

Take, for instance, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the State of the Union address on Wednesday. Moments after a shout-out by the American President, Rubio was caught on camera scrolling intently on his smartphone. Or, at the BAFTA awards earlier in the week, where actor Paul Mescal, all brooding charm and award-season glow-up, was found lost in the dopamine high of notifications when the host called out to him. No one, it appears, is immune to the temptations of the algorithm.

The appeal of other rooms, other wonders has pushed humans to great discoveries. But if Rodin's *The Thinker* wrestled with eternity and damnation, the tragedy of the Age of the Scroller is not that of distraction, but of perpetual absence — from the richness of curiosity, the fullness of human emotions, the push and pull of the here and now. To be always connected is increasingly to never be in the moment — to be always adjacent to one's own experience, the blue screen an interface with the world.

# Two democracies shaped by history, a partnership that helps global stability

**N**INE YEARS ago, I had the good fortune to be the first Prime Minister of India to visit Israel. And I am very happy to be here again, returning to a land to which I have always felt drawn. After all, I was born on the same day that India formally recognised Israel — September 17, 1950!

I carry with me the deepest condolences of the people of India for every life lost and for every family whose world was shattered in the barbaric terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7 (2023). We feel your pain. We share your grief. India stands with Israel, firmly, with full conviction, in this moment, and beyond.

India has also endured the pain of terrorism for a long time. We remember the 26/11 Mumbai attacks and the innocent lives lost, including Israeli citizens. Like you, we have a consistent and uncompromising policy of zero tolerance for terrorism, with no double standards. Countering terrorism requires sustained and coordinated global action, because terror anywhere threatens peace everywhere.

Some years ago, when you concluded the Abraham Accords, we applauded your courage and vision. It was a moment of new hope for a long-troubled region. Since then, the situation has changed significantly. The path is even more challenging. Yet, it is important to sustain that hope. The Gaza Peace Initiative endorsed by the UNSC offers a pathway. India has expressed its firm support. We believe it holds the promise of a just and durable peace for all the people of the region, including by addressing the Palestine issue.

In India, there is great admiration for Israel's resolve, courage, and achievements. Long before we related to each other as

modern states, we were linked by ties that go back more than 2,000 years. The Talmud records trade with India in ancient times. Jewish merchants travelled across sea routes that connected the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean. They came seeking opportunity and dignity. And in India, they became one of us.

Jewish communities have lived in India without fear of persecution or discrimination. The Bene Israel of Maharashtra, the Cochini Jews of Kerala, the Baghdadi Jews of Kolkata and Mumbai, and the Bnei Menashe of the Northeast have enriched India.

Edwyn Myers gave shape to the Films Division of India and was a towering figure in the history of Indian cinema. Walter Kaufmann composed the signature tune for All India Radio. David Sassoon built many institutions that still serve Indian society. The heroic contribution of Lt General JFR Jacob during the 1971 war with Pakistan is widely known. There have been countless others whose contributions are woven into India's rich fabric of life.

There was movement from India to Israel too, when many Indian Jews migrated to Israel in the mid-20th century. Today, a vibrant Indian-origin Jewish community lives here. They have contributed to the building of modern Israel, in laboratories and hospitals, in classrooms, and also on the battlefield.

India's connection to this land is also written in blood and sacrifice. During World War I, more than 4,000 Indian soldiers laid down their lives in this region. The cavalry charge at Haifa in September 1918 remains a significant chapter in military history. Major



NARENDRA MODI



When you concluded the Abraham Accords, we applauded your courage and vision. The situation has changed significantly. Yet, it is important to sustain that hope. The Gaza Peace Initiative endorsed by the UNSC offers a pathway

Thakur Dalpat Singh, remembered as the Hero of Haifa, symbolises this shared history.

The Holocaust stands as one of humanity's darkest chapters. Yet, even in those turbulent years, some acts of humanity stood out. The Maharaja of Nawanganar in Gujarat, also known as the Jam Saheb, offered refuge to Polish children, including Jewish children, who had nowhere else to turn.

After India's Independence, many Indian leaders felt a kinship with the people of Israel. India's parliamentary debates of the 1950s are witness to their admiration for Israel's efforts to develop agriculture in the desert. The Kibbutz movement of Israel inspired our leaders like Acharya Vinoba Bhave and Loknayak Jayaprakash Narayan.

In 2017, our two countries elevated their relationship to a Strategic Partnership. Since then, our engagement has expanded in scale and scope. For the last few years, India has been the fastest-growing major economy in the world. At the same time, Israel is a powerhouse of innovation and technological leadership. This creates a natural foundation for a forward-looking partnership. We are committed to expanding trade, strengthening investment flows, and promoting joint infrastructure development. The Bilateral Investment Treaty signed last year will provide confidence and predictability to our businesses. Our teams are working hard to negotiate an ambitious free trade agreement. Defence and security is another important pillar of our partnership.

At the heart of the India-Israel partnership are the ties between our peoples. Indian care-

givers and skilled workers in Israel contribute immensely to families and communities. They have displayed remarkable courage and dedication in times of crisis, including on October 7. As the Jewish teaching reminds us, "Whoever saves one life, saves the entire world."

We are both ancient civilisations. And it is perhaps no surprise that our civilisational traditions also reveal philosophical parallels. In Israel, the principle of *tikkun olam* speaks of healing the world. In India, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* affirms that the world is one family. Judaism emphasises *halakha*, guiding everyday conduct through law and practice. Hindu philosophy speaks of *dharma*, the moral order that shapes duty and right action. In both traditions, ethical life is lived through action, and faith expressed through conduct.

There is an endearing similarity in our festivals as well. You celebrate Hanukkah with the warm glow of candles. Around the same time, we celebrate Diwali with the gentle radiance of lamps. Soon, India will celebrate Holi. And around the same time, Israel will celebrate Purim.

Our shared ideals are the deep foundations that give strength to our modern partnership. We are democracies shaped by history and focused on the future. Our strong partnership not only serves national interests but also contributes to global stability and prosperity.

Let us ensure that the friendship between India and Israel remains a source of strength in an uncertain world.

*The writer is the Prime Minister of India. These are edited excerpts from his address to the Knesset in Israel on February 25*

## We need to talk about judicial corruption



PRASHANT BHUSHAN

**H**E NCERT's new Social Science textbook for Class VIII has introduced changes to the chapter on the judiciary in India. A major row has erupted over the additions, which list corruption and judicial backlog among the challenges faced by the judiciary today. Since then, the NCERT has issued an apology regarding the additions and reportedly withdrawn the textbooks from circulation.

These are concerning developments. Though several challenges face the judiciary, including access to justice, the nature and quality of judicial appointments, and the independence of the judiciary, there is little doubt that corruption is among them. This is not to say that corruption in other institutions of the state is a less serious challenge. There is undoubtedly corruption in the executive branch. Given that, corruption in the judiciary also remains a grave and deep-rooted problem, and one that is widely recognised by the public.

Transparency International, in its 2007 Global Corruption Report, found that 77 per cent of the people surveyed in India described the judicial system as corrupt. Since that time, there is little to suggest that corruption in the judiciary has reduced, as is clear from several recent cases. And this is when it is exceedingly difficult for judicial corruption to be exposed to public view on account of the fear of contempt of court and the virtual non-existence of any effective method of bringing corrupt judges to account. There exists no independent mechanism for the investigation of complaints against judges of the higher judiciary. The only constitutionally prescribed process is impeachment, which is in practice virtually illusory. Its initiation requires the signatures of at least 100 members of the Lok Sabha or 50 members of the Rajya Sabha, thereby making the process dependent on the prevailing political will, rather than the merits of the complaint. The supposed in-house mechanism created by the judiciary itself is virtually non-functional since many serious complaints are not acted upon with any examination or investigation.

In response to a starred question in the

Lok Sabha on the number of complaints received against judges of the higher judiciary, the Ministry of Law and Justice on February 13 responded that 8,630 complaints were received in the office of the Chief Justice of India against sitting judges during the last 10 years, which are handled under the in-house mechanism. However, we know that only a very few have led to the constitution of in-house inquiry committees. Consequently, even serious allegations may never reach the stage of formal inquiry, rendering these accountability mechanisms ineffective, further eroding public confidence in judicial integrity.

Judicial corruption may manifest in many forms other than financial corruption, including abuse of discretion, nepotism, conflict of interest, misuse of authority. Corruption at high levels has been acknowledged by several judges/Chief Justices of the Supreme Court. In fact in August 2020, during the proceedings against me in a contempt of court case, the then Attorney-General for India, K K Venugopal, in a hearing before the Supreme Court, stated that he had the names of "nine judges of the Supreme Court saying there is corruption in the higher judiciary...seven of them said so immediately after their retirement. I have extracts from all of them..."

Judicial corruption must be properly understood and openly discussed. Only through public discourse can meaningful corrective measures be implemented. The more the judiciary tries to suppress discussion or restrict access to information, the more distrust is likely to grow in the minds of citizens. As the judiciary is not above scrutiny and is accountable to the people, there is no doubt in my mind that the inclusion of references to judicial corruption and delays in the NCERT curriculum is in keeping with the constitutional values of transparency and accountability that surely must pervade the judiciary above all other institutions in the country.

*The writer is an advocate at the Supreme Court of India and convener of the Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms*

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## The story of a 'shirtless' protest



SHALINI LANGER

**I**F MEN in banyans were what got our goat, we would have been put out to pasture long ago. Before WhatsApp, the banyan was our national "good morning" greeting. After Salman Khan, the innerwear also got a life as outerwear. If the fact that Youth Congress protesters dared exhibit their singlets at the government's showpiece AI Impact Summit was the concern, surely we have more things to lose our mind over.

Days ago, a young man drowned near the Capital because water was allowed to accumulate at an abandoned site, and no means could be found to save him as he screamed for help for more than an hour. No one turned out to protest. Not long after, a man died after he fell into a pit in Delhi, again left unguarded by a government authority. No one turned out to protest. Delhi University banned demonstrations on its campus for a month. No one turned out to protest. Jawaharlal Nehru University saw violence during a demonstration against action taken on some students. No one turned out to protest. Our air is toxic, our water comes mixed with faecal matter, and from food to medicines, adulteration can strike anywhere. No one turns out to protest.

Much as we trumpet our status as the "Mother of Democracy", we are not a country that really believes that after the "festival of democracy", which is our vote, we get a government of, for and by the people. We are simply grateful for what comes our way.

Nor is Congress — and just as Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, we are not referring to "the Opposition" here — a party that can claim to be speaking for the people any more. Mostly, it is a party that cannot get even its own people to speak in its leadership's language.

The fact also is that the handful of Youth Congress men who managed to gain entry into the AI Impact Summit were unlikely to have caught much attention. That they are now being rounded up one by one from across the country, as part of a probe into "some great conspiracy", ensures they do.

Among the theories being offered is that the protest was a bid to stir up "Gen Z" unrest of the kind that recently toppled governments in neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal. It's doubtful even Congress had such expectations, not least because its youth wing leaders are hardly spring chickens. Chief Uday Bhanu Chib, who was arrested Tuesday, and who was not even present at the protest, is 39.

As for "shame" at the AI Impact Summit, there was a glaring one — the robodog showcased by a private university, which was exposed as a Chinese invention available on e-commerce sites.

The BJP, which has called the protest "*gandi aur nangi rajneeti* (dirty and naked politics)", however, is not the first to lose its shirt over a "shirtless" appearance, in all fairness. So "alarming" did Winston Churchill, then an MP, find Mahatma Gandhi's appearance at the 1931 Round Table Conference, that he remarked: "...it is nauseating to see Mr Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir... striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal Palace".

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### 40 YEARS AGO

February 27, 1986



### 62 hospitalised over gas leak

SIXTY-TWO persons, including 12 women and 11 children, were hospitalised after inhaling chlorine gas that leaked from the chlorination plant of the Bombay Municipal Corporation at Kishan Nagar in Bombay. While 60 were discharged after treatment, two have been kept under observation. The leak is reported to have occurred at 3 am when the automatic diaphragm of the plant gave way owing to excessive pressure.

### Rail fare hikes

A HIKE ranging from 5 to 7.5 per cent in second-class mail/express passenger fares and another increase of 12.5 per cent in all

upper-class fares have been proposed in the railway budget. No increase in freight charges has been proposed in the budget nor has any hike been sought in fares for second-class (ordinary) passengers. There will also be no increase in second-class and first-class monthly season tickets.

### Walk-out over Budget 'leak'

OPPOSITION MEMBERS belonging to the BJP, CPI-M, Lok Dal and Akali Dal walked out of the Lok Sabha protesting against the alleged leak of the railway budget when Transport Minister Bansilal rose to present it. Lok Dal member Mahfooz Ali Khan was the first to protest. Waving what he called a photostat copy of a newspaper, he alleged that the rail-

way budget had been leaked and there was no need for the minister to present it.

### Terrorists kill 2 in Punjab

TERRORISTS IN Punjab gunned down two more persons, looted a bank and snatched a car even as the state-level communal harmony committee at its meeting in Chandigarh expressed "grave concern" over the present situation in the state and suggested "stern measures" to tackle it. In the neighbouring state of Haryana, three Punjab terrorists arrested by the Haryana Police revealed during interrogation their "task" of attacking VIPs and killing Karam Singh, elder brother of Lt Gen R S Dyal, who was in charge of Operation Bluestar in Punjab in June 1984.



DIS/AGREE

THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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

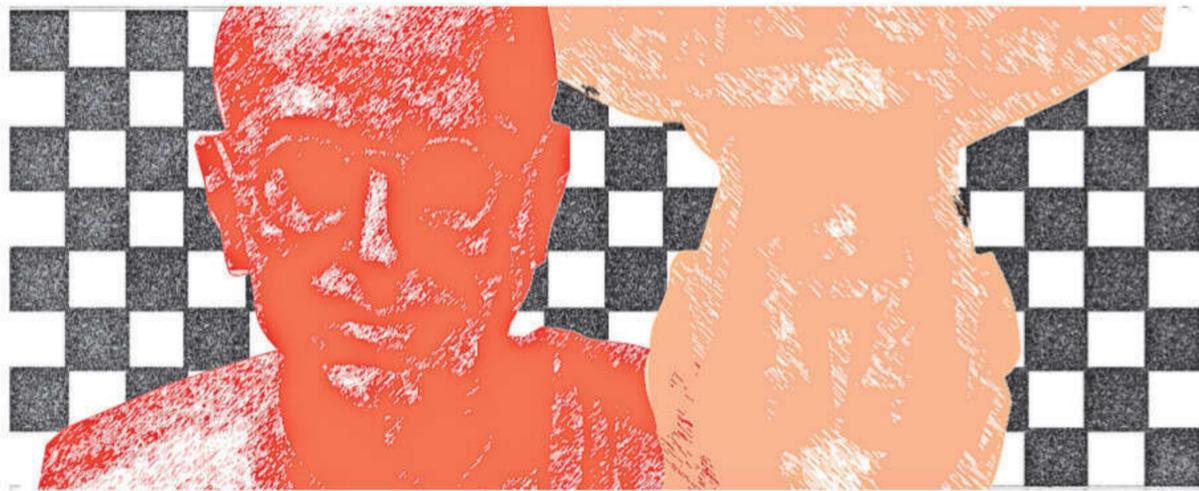


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

Removal of Lutyens's bust from Rashtrapati Bhavan invites questions about approach to decolonisation

## Sometimes, the colonial is Indian



SWAPNA LIDDLE

AS VICEROY'S House, which we now know as Rashtrapati Bhavan, was nearing completion early in 1929, its architect, Edwin Lutyens, wrote to his wife that he was happy with how good it looked, and that it was "original in that it is built in India for India, Indian".

In describing the building as "Indian", Lutyens was referring to the many ways in which it drew inspiration from the long and rich tradition of Indian architecture. Rashtrapati Bhavan's monumental dome is closely modelled on the ancient Buddhist Great Stupa at Sanchi. The *chhatris* (cupolas) that adorn the parapets are typically Indian forms, as is the prominent *chhajja* (drip stone) that extends right around the building. There are *jaalis* (carved pierced stone screens) that are near copies of those in the Mughal Red Fort. The sculpted elephants that guard the entrances could never have looked at home in the architect's native Britain.

To arrive at this moment in his creative journey, Lutyens needed to cover a considerable distance, metaphorically speaking. It was a long way from his initial conviction that imperial architecture in the new British India capital needed to be inspired by the classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome. A newcomer in India, he had to visit historic sites to overcome his initial reservations about Indian architecture. His talent as an architect lay in that ultimately he did not superficially graft on Indian features and decorative motifs, but adapted them creatively into an organic structure.

Lutyens is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest architects of his time, and within his large body of work, it is his buildings in New Delhi that are perhaps most admired for their striking originality. But we must not lose sight of the process through which this end was achieved, for it was not simply a product of Lutyens's genius. Lutyens was responding to the very specific demands of his clients — Charles Hardinge, Viceroy of India, and George V, the British monarch, who insisted that the town plan and architecture of New Delhi should pay

homage to Indian history and architectural traditions.

This imperative, in turn, was the outcome of political developments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which had led up to the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. The government had tried to stem the rising tide of the national movement, but its attempt to divide the people on communal lines through the partition of Bengal in 1905, or to suppress free speech through the Press Act of 1910, had failed miserably. Pushed to the wall, the authorities in India and Britain realised that they would have to give in to at least some of the demands of the Indian people, and to try and make the empire more acceptable in their eyes.

The colonial state, therefore, set out to rework the empire along new lines. One was constitutional — devolution of greater power to the provinces, and admitting more Indians to representative bodies. The other was powerfully symbolic — the transfer of the capital to Delhi, a city that had historically served as the capital of several successive dynasties that ruled over large parts of India. The British would build a new capital here, just as a series of Indian powers had. It was also decided that the town plan and architecture of this city would explicitly reflect the history and traditions of Delhi and India. To this end, New Delhi's main avenue, or Central Vista, was laid parallel to the main ceremonial avenue of the Mughal city — the street we know as Chandni Chowk. The Central Vista also connected Viceroy's House to Purana Qila, which was, in popular tradition, believed to be the site of ancient Indraprastha.

It was in this context that Lutyens, along with the architect Herbert Baker, was engaged and instructed to design the major government buildings in a style that was recognisably Indian. This political background is crucial to understanding how Lutyens, while working for a colonial government, nevertheless designed for Viceroy's House a building that he described as "Indian", a building that was later considered eminently suitable for the place of work and residence of the President of independent India.

Whenever I have passed by Lutyens's bust in Rashtrapati Bhavan, I have thought of this. The spirit of India is resilient and indomitable, and found expression even during colonial rule, through the work of a British architect.

The writer is a Delhi-based historian

## Imported ideas don't capture our reality



VAMSEE JULURI

THERE ARE two ways to think about decolonisation after the replacement of colonial architect Edward Lutyens's bust from Rashtrapati Bhavan with that of nationalist icon C Rajagopalachari.

One view is that it is merely a gesture calculated to please voters. Another holds that this is pure democracy in action. It represents a near-universal view among Indians that the European colonisation of India was not a good thing. Where there is controversy in some quarters, or at least some confusion, is in our relationship to colonial figures and to colonialism.

In the summer of 2020, the US saw a massive uprising against racism and colonialism, which brought down statues everywhere. With President Donald Trump's second term, though, Christopher Columbus is spoken of respectfully again, and "settler colonialism" is rejected as a valid concept by his supporters. Yet, a good portion of college-age Americans maintain that colonialism and racism are real and must be fought in the forms in which they still most persist.

In India, those who speak of decolonisation from a civilisational, indigenous, or Hindu view, and those who speak of it from a Nehruvian or Enlightenment sensibility, share some assumptions and differ on others. The RSS leadership and the BJP government's views seem to fall somewhere in between these two. All three groups seem to view European colonialism as a reality. They differ on the question of Islamic imperialism. There are also unlikely, and some might say opportunistic, convergences between Left and Right on issues like caste; British, Brahmins, Aryans, Indo-Europeans, a whole spectrum of unsorted identity-claims remain in play as well.

Another similarity is that both camps accuse the other of colonial inertia. BJP supporters accuse Nehru and Congress of presenting a snake-charmer image of India to the world. Critics of the BJP insist that Hindu nationalism rests on a colonial understanding of Hindu identity.

While political expediency may be a factor in both positions, and a resigned sense of scepticism the only appropriate response in the end, there is one key qualitative difference in the way in which a discourse on

decolonisation has been built in each of these "ecosystems". A Nehruvian idea of decolonisation has dominated Indian intellectual spaces for decades. This is mocked, derided, and sometimes reasonably critiqued by those in Hindutva circles.

Yet, there has been nothing close to a Hindu view of global decolonisation advanced either in India or abroad by the supposedly Hindu nationalist government of the past 12 years. Names are changed. Buildings and statues are swapped. Sometimes, even powerful words are uttered in speeches. Yet, if an intelligent Indian student had to honestly express to a group of peers abroad what decolonisation means to us today, it would not rise to the level of understanding, insight and elegance that an earlier generation of students like those we see in old viral video clips show us.

This, of course, is not their fault alone but that of our overall approach to learning today, especially in the humanities and social sciences. All we do is seemingly import categories for understanding our experiences and ourselves, and then export bodies which express the same. We are stuck arguing whether it was Brahmins, the British, or the Muslims who colonised us, and whether it is the Left or the Right that is better at decolonising us, while ghastly realities of wars on nature and culture grow around us and into us.

Air, water, land, labour, mind. Every one of these seems to tremble in fear before the new wave of supposed "opportunity" that is coming from the AI revolution gets here. *The Guardian* recently reported on how Indian women workers training AI models for content moderation were left traumatised by the violent and disturbing images they had to watch. Nightmares in real life, mirrored in the deserts of our digital lives. Is this not the colonialism of our time?

Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* remains a manifesto that the world can turn to for a deeper understanding of how and why things have got to where they are. In it, Gandhi warned of what would happen if we merely replaced the tiger without changing the "tiger's rule". Nehru did not quite understand this. Nor have Nehru's successors.

The harshest legacy of colonisation may well be our mental self-colonisation. Only a deep return to memory, intergenerational continuity, reverence for nature and culture — and the rise of a leadership respectful of intellectual investment in education and arts — can change, if at all, the way things are.

The writer is professor of Media Studies, University of San Francisco

## Why BJP is trying to pit minority against minority



ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O'BRIEN

AFEW days ago, as the Moon was sighted, text messages popped up on our over-scrolled mobile phones wishing us Ramzan Mubarak. Amongst all the warm greetings were two clips that the algorithm couldn't push down. First, the Chief Minister of Assam calling for a community to be harassed to such an extent that they are forced to leave not just the state, but also the country. Second, a 28-second video where the Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly responds to a question about infrastructure development with a call for religious segregation. We have strayed really far from any kind of constitutional morality.

With the upcoming assembly elections in five states, the rhetoric will only get more toxic. The Muslim community has frequently been the target of virulent communal attacks. Today, let me focus

on a subset of the community in India, the Dawoodi Bohra Shia Ismaili Muslims. Recent estimates suggest the population of Muslims in India is 20 crore. Of this, only 5 lakh are Dawoodi Bohra Shia Ismaili Muslims.

The Dawoodi Bohras trace their heritage to the Fatimi imams, direct descendants of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Members reposit their faith in the al-Dai al-Mutlaq, the spiritual leader of the community — a representative of the Imam who is today in seclusion. Intriguingly, the word Bohra comes from the Gujarati word *vohru* or *vyavahar*, which means "to trade". The Bohras are primarily a mercantile community, deeply rooted in business and trading. They have a near-100 per cent literacy rate among members worldwide. Their presence might be minuscule, but they are a progressive community. Their per capita income is higher than that of other Muslim communities.

Why does a community that makes up 0.25 per cent of even the Muslim community matter to the world's largest political party? As always, the devil is in the details. About half of all the Bohras in India live in Gujarat. The Prime Minister speaks their language. True to form, the BJP was quick to identify this link and use it to earn political brownie points. Days after the contentious Waqf (Amendment) Bill was passed in Parliament months ago, the Prime Minister contrived a photo-op with members of the community, with the delegation praising the Waqf law. Subliminal messaging: Muslims in India were backing the legislation. What the photograph did not tell you was that the hugely suc-

cessful Bohra community comprises just 5 lakh of a 20 crore population. That the Waqf (Amendment) Act 2025 is fundamentally anti-federal and anti-minority is not lost on anyone. Muslim (and non-Muslim) Members of Parliament from non-NDA parties (including AITC, INC, AIMIM, SP, DMK, RJD) challenged the Bill foundationally. Interestingly, the Dawoodi Bohras made a representation to be excluded from the Mussalman Waqf Act as early as 1923. Their rationale was simple. The Bohras as a community reposit their faith in the al-Dai al-Mutlaq — the sole trustee administering all the properties of the community. The minuscule minority requires that members be permitted to establish and manage properties in accordance with their beliefs. This autonomy is fundamentally challenged by the Waqf Board proposed by the Waqf Amendment Act. The big question then: Why did a delegation from the community agree to meet with the Prime Minister and thank him for backing a piece of legislation that they (and the larger community they are part of) were historically against?

That the BJP may have involved itself in the community's internal functioning in trade for support on the Waqf Act is part of a subtle divide-and-rule strategy. Unlike the unabashed display of bigotry, bias and prejudice against minorities, this tactic is slightly more covert. A closer reading of events from the past 10 years might tell you this: The BJP is on a quiet mission to pit minorities against each other, amongst each other. With ears firmly to the ground, it identifies gaps in the internal functioning of these groups and offers "assistance" in order to eventually leverage it for support on matters widely controver-

sial — most times against the very ethos of these communities.

After Indonesia and Pakistan, India is home to the third-largest Muslim population in the world. According to Census 2011, the community constitutes around 15 per cent of the country's population. The "world's largest political party" does not have a single Member of Parliament, elected on its party symbol, who is Muslim. (Gulam Ali Khatana was one of the 12 members in the Rajya Sabha under the "nominated" category. Within the six-month window, he wrote to the Chairman to be included as a BJP member.)

It gets more brazen. Twenty per cent of the population of Uttar Pradesh is Muslim. Even with the largest Muslim population — 4 crore — of any state in the country, the Yogi Adityanath government does not have a single Muslim MLA in the 403-seat Legislative Assembly. How could it? Not a single Muslim got a ticket from the BJP.

P.S. Bangladesh, with an 8 per cent minority Hindu population, recently elected a minister who is from the Hindu community.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Diversionsary tactic

IT COULD soon be official. Yet, many Keralaites still think that 'Kerala' sounds infinitely more powerful and regal than 'Keralam' ('For Kerala, no AIIMS, only an extra "m", *IE*, February 26). In reality these are diversionsary tactics that sidestep the more pressing problems such as unemployment and governmental inefficiency. Kerala becoming Keralam is not an index of development nor is it a panacea for all the ills.

S S Paul, Nadia

### Symbolic protest

THE RESPONSE of the state must be proportionate to the act ('7 shirtless protests are no national threat', *IE*, February 26). From a legal perspective, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) provides sufficient room for handling such demonstrations under provisions for "public nuisance", which carry minor penalties. While the Youth Congress's choice of venue — the AI Impact Summit 2026, held in Bharat Mandapam in the national capital between February 16 and 21 — lacked decorum, characterising

a non-violent, symbolic protest as "sabotage" or an "offence against the state" is a grave exaggeration. Such a heavy-handed approach serves to polarise rather than protect our democratic fabric.

Krishan K Chugh, New Delhi

### Distant peace

FOUR YEARS of war and 1.2 million Russian casualties later, the human cost alone should compel serious diplomacy ('Four years later, an elusive peace, *IE*', February 26). Yet peace remains out of reach, largely because the terms being discussed are weighted against Ukraine. A settlement that forces territorial concessions and bars NATO membership will not bring lasting stability — it will only delay the next conflict. Europe's continued support for Kyiv is encouraging, but cannot substitute for a genuine multilateral framework. Any durable peace must address Ukraine's legitimate security concerns. Without that, negotiations, however frequent, will remain exercises in futility rather than steps toward genuine resolution.

M Barathi, Bengaluru



SRINIVAS KATIKITHALA

INDIA'S URBANISATION story is entering a decisive phase. Cities today account for a dominant share of the country's GDP, host its most dynamic economic clusters and increasingly shape the quality of life of millions. Yet they also face persistent infrastructure deficits, climate vulnerabilities, fiscal constraints and institutional fragmentation. The challenge is to urbanise productively, sustainably and inclusively.

The recently approved Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) represents a significant shift. With a central assistance outlay of Rs 1 lakh crore over FY 2025-26 to FY 2030-31, and a design expected to catalyse nearly Rs 4 lakh crore of total investment, the fund marks a transition towards a market-linked, reform-driven and outcome-oriented framework for urban infrastructure. Central assistance is capped at 25 per

## A new compact to reshape India's cities

cent of project cost, and cities must mobilise at least 50 per cent from market sources. The rest may come from states, urban local bodies or other channels. This signals that urban infrastructure must increasingly access capital markets through bankable, revenue-backed projects.

The UCF is structured around three verticals. The first, cities as growth hubs, supports integrated spatial and transit planning, infrastructure along economic corridors, and the development of economic anchors such as industrial, tourism or logistics clusters. The objective is not merely to build assets but to enhance competitiveness and productivity.

The second, creative redevelopment of cities, addresses the congestion and decline of historic cores and central business districts. By encouraging brownfield regeneration, transit-oriented development and the reorganisation of public land, the fund seeks to unlock value within existing urban footprints. The third is water and sanitation, em-

phasising service saturation, wastewater reuse, flood mitigation and remediation of legacy waste sites. Climate resilience is woven into this framework.

One of the most innovative elements is the Rs 5,000-crore Credit Repayment Guarantee Scheme. For the first time, smaller urban local bodies — particularly those with populations below 1 lakh, along with cities in hilly and northeastern states — are being enabled to access market finance with structured central guarantees.

Access to central assistance is contingent on reforms. Cities are expected to improve creditworthiness, strengthen asset management systems, digitise service delivery, enhance operational efficiency and adopt integrated land use and mobility planning frameworks.

The UCF also redefines the role of the private sector. By mandating market financing and encouraging structured risk-sharing arrangements, it opens the door for deeper private participation in design, financing and operations.

Project preparation support, transaction advisory assistance and digital monitoring systems are intended to strengthen project viability and investor confidence. If implemented effectively, this could deepen India's municipal bond market and broaden the financing base for urban infrastructure.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has positioned the UCF within a broader ecosystem. States, urban local bodies, financial institutions, credit rating agencies and private developers are expected to engage through a competitive challenge-based process that rewards readiness and innovation.

The UCF reframes urbanisation as an investment opportunity to be leveraged. By embedding market discipline, reform incentives and measurable outcomes into its design, it seeks to drive the next phase of India's urban transformation.

The writer is secretary, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs

MoSPI TO RELEASE GDP DATA WITH 2022-23 AS BASE YEAR

# Deflators, discrepancies, data sources: GDP set to get updated

Siddharth Upasani  
New Delhi, February 26

AFTER MORE than a decade of questions and debates, India is set to finally get an updated gauge of its GDP, with the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) set to unveil the new data series at 4pm Friday.

"Over the past two years, the Advisory Committee on National Accounts Statistics (ACNAS) and its five sub-committees had more than 40 formal meetings," a senior official from the Statistics Ministry said, requesting anonymity.

The revision of India's GDP data is important for several reasons. Chief among them is that it will present the most accurate picture of the structure of the Indian economy. Since January 2015 — when the current GDP series was released with 2011-12 as the base year for prices to calculate real growth — India's economy has undergone huge changes; for instance, digital sectors such as e-commerce have become more prominent.

Procedurally, too, GDP data should be regularly updated. This, along with the continued use of 2011-12 as the base year, led to the International Monetary Fund in December 2025 re-

taining its 'C' grade for India's GDP data.

## What will happen on Friday

MoSPI will release GDP data for October-December 2025 as per the new series with 2022-23 as the base year, along with the Second Advance Estimate for 2025-26. The First Advance Estimate, released in January as per the old series, pegged full-year growth at 7.4%.

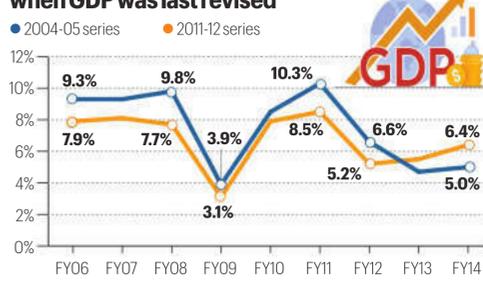
GDP data for the first two quarters of 2025-26 will also be revised.

Finally, annual and quarterly GDP data as per the new series will also be released for 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25. This will help policymakers and economists understand how India's recent growth trajectory has evolved as per the new series.

However, it will take almost a year to get a 'back series' that shows GDP data for years before 2022-23 as per the new GDP series, with the MoSPI official quoted above saying the back series is expected to be released by December 2026.

"As per the practice, in India, back-series estimates are recalculated using revised methodology of the new GDP series up to the previous base year. After that, the data is

## How India's growth picture changed when GDP was last revised



NOTE: 2011-12 GDP SERIES WAS RELEASED IN JANUARY 2015 SOURCE: MoSPI

linked to a disaggregated level and extended back to 1950-51. However, the final method for preparing the back-series will be decided in consultation with the Advisory Committee set up to guide MoSPI," the official said.

## Growth: higher or lower

The latest GDP series will also see major changes, the most crucial of which will be how nominal GDP is adjusted for price changes to arrive at real GDP.

According to economists, India's real GDP growth of 7.8% in April-June 2025 and 8.2% in July-September 2025 was likely overstated due to MoSPI's use of the so-called single-deflator method.

The new GDP series will, in a major move, not use the single-deflator method at all. Deflators will also be used at a more granular level, allowing for more accurate measurement of real GDP growth.

Some other changes in the new series include the use of new sources of data and surveys (GST, e-Vahan, Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprise, Periodic Labour Force Survey, among others). Further, by integrating national accounts data with Supply and Use Tables — which show how different goods and services are supplied by domestic industries and imports and how they are distributed between different intermediate or final uses, including exports — MoSPI is hoping to minimise the 'discrepancy' component which arises when GDP measured by the more reliable production approach does not match with the GDP calculated via the expenditure method. Large discrepancies can lead to significant revisions in GDP growth rates in the future while making it difficult to understand what is driving growth.

FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

# Changes under DGCA's new rules: Cancellations, refunds, name corrections

Sukalp Sharma  
New Delhi, February 26

AVIATION REGULATOR Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on Thursday released revised rules governing airfare refunds in the event of ticket cancellations by passengers. A comparison of the new rules — which will take effect from March 26 — with the existing ones shows that refund timeline for tickets booked through travel agents has been shortened, no-charge cancellation and amendment window has been extended, and a new clause pertaining to refunds in the case of cancellation due to a medical emergency has been introduced. Apart from these and a few other tweaks, most other rules remain unchanged.

According to the regulator, the rules have been amended "to stem the growing dissatisfaction" among passengers regarding the refund procedures adopted by some airlines.

The DGCA said the issue of ticket refund by airlines has become a "major source of grievance" among passengers, with a large number of complaints being regularly received on issues like delay in refunds, problems with the refund value, and airlines adjusting refund amount against future travel instead of issuing a refund, making ticket refunds a 'major source of grievance'.

"While the government is committed not to interfere in the commercial practices of the airlines, the volume of the complaints necessitates some affirmative action to safeguard the interest of the travelling public. The matter has been discussed in several meetings

## E. EXPLAINED

### Refunds a 'major source of grievance'

The DGCA said a large number of complaints are regularly received on issues like delay in refunds, problems with refund value, and airlines adjusting refund amount against future travel instead of issuing a refund, making ticket refunds a 'major source of grievance'.

with the airlines with no improvement in the system adopted by airlines for refund of tickets. It is now considered that the onus rests with the government to fix some minimum benchmarks, as far as the refund policy is concerned..." the regulator said.

### Changes in airfare refund rules

Refunds for bookings made via travel agents, portals: In case the ticket is booked through a travel agent or an online travel portal, the deadline for completing the refund process has been shortened to 14 working days from 30 working days.

Look-in option: The "look-in" period — allowing cancellation or amendment without charge — has been doubled to 48 hours from 24 hours. But the time between booking and departure to qualify for this option has been changed from a flat seven days earlier to seven days for domestic flights and 15

days for international flights.

Moreover, the new rules mention that this facility is available "when ticket is booked directly through the airline website"; the facility was also applicable to bookings through travel agents and portals in the earlier rules. This effectively means that changes/cancellations can be made chargeable even in the look-in period if booking are made through travel agents/online portals.

Name correction window: The 24-hour window for free name correction now specifies it applies when the ticket is booked directly through the airline website.

The earlier rules did not make a distinction between the airline and travel agents/portals for this facility. The change means that customers can be charged for name correction even in this window if the ticket is not booked directly with the airline.

New medical emergency clause: A new clause has been inserted in the revised rules, which provides for refunds or credit shells in cases of hospitalisation of the passenger or a family member listed on the same ticket PNR during the travel period. "For all other situations, refunds will be issued once an opinion on the passenger's fitness to travel certificate is received from an airline's aerospace medicine specialist/DGCA empanelled aerospace medicine specialist," the revised rules state.

Except for these changes, all other clauses in the revised rules are identical to the ones already in place.

# Digital platforms must share revenue with creators in a 'fair way': Vaishnav

ENS Economic Bureau  
New Delhi, February 26

REITERATING HIS stance on compensation for content creators such as news publishers and online platforms that host their work, Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnav Thursday said digital platforms should share revenue with creators in a "fair way". He called for online platforms to "rethink" their revenue sharing policies voluntarily, given that the government could compel them through legal means as well.

Speaking at the Digital News Publishers Association (DNPA) Conclave 2026, Vaishnav said, "Platforms must also share revenue in a fair way with the people who are creating the content, whether it is news persons, the conventional media, the creators sitting in far-flung areas, influencers, the professors and researchers who are disseminating their work using the platforms. Everywhere the principle now has to be set right and there has to be a fair share of revenue with the people who are creating the content".

The minister said if original content is not fairly compensated, it could stunt the growth of science, technology, arts and literature. "I will request all the platforms to rethink their revenue sharing policies. If this is not done voluntarily, there are so many countries which have shown the path to get it done in

**There is growing scepticism of news publishers on concerns over copyrighted material being used by firms to train their foundational models, without permission or payment**

a legal way," he added. His comments assume significance as they come amid growing scepticism of news publishers in several jurisdictions, including in the US and India, over concerns of copyrighted material, such as news reports, being used by firms such as OpenAI for training foundational models, without permission or payment.

This has led to court cases, including in India, where publishers — members of the DNPA, including *The Indian Express*, among others — have mounted a legal challenge against OpenAI over the "unlawful utilisation of copyrighted material".

Discussions on compensating news publishers for the original work they produce goes much beyond the advent of AI platforms. The tussle initially began between publishers and social media firms like Facebook and YouTube. FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

## CARMAKERS, CITY GAS DISTRIBUTORS RAISE CONCERNS

# CAQM panel may back only EV registrations in Delhi-NCR by '30

ENS Economic Bureau  
New Delhi, February 26

THE LIKELY recommendation of an expert panel set up by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) that only electric cars be registered in Delhi-NCR by 2030 to tackle air pollution in the region has spooked city gas distributors and carmakers. They have called for a technology-neutral energy transition, flagging a potential increase in infrastructure costs.

Pollution from transport, including private cars and taxis, accounts for 23% of PM 2.5 concentrations, making it the largest primary source in winters, as per the CAQM's panel report, titled 'Identification of the causes for worsening AQI in Delhi-NCR'.

In its submission to CAQM, gas distributor Indraprastha Gas Ltd (IGL) suggested a "dual pathway" — CNG for medium and heavy vehicles and electric mobility for two-wheelers, arguing that it will offer a "balanced,

## Delhi lacks charging infra, grid capacity, and consumer financing for an all-EV mandate within 4 yrs despite being a major PV market

cost-effective, and operationally feasible strategy for Delhi-NCR. It also suggested diesel vehicles in Delhi-NCR be phased out, and converted to CNG. "...it is important to note that CNG emits negligible particulate matter compared to other fuels... Real-world emission performance of many two-wheelers, especially those who have completed the life or poorly maintained ones shows high levels of NOx, CO, VOCs. This indicates that AQI improvement is not possible unless two-wheeler emissions are targeted through stricter testing, better compliance mechanisms, and a structured transition strategy," IGL said.

Association of Citygas Distribution Entities (ACE) said CNG is uniquely positioned as an immediately scalable, afford-

able, and reliable clean transport fuel, urging the CAQM to recognise CNG as a "distinct low-emission fuel category in regulatory communications alongside EVs as low carbon and sustainable mobility," and push EVs and CNG vehicles "through equal incentives and policy support". Queries sent to the CAQM, IGL and ACE did not elicit a response until publication.

Carmakers are concerned over the pace of transition. Industry voices warn that Delhi, despite being one of India's significant passenger vehicle markets, lacks charging infrastructure, grid capacity, and consumer financing ecosystems needed for an all-EV mandate within four years.

FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

# CAFE-2 penalties of Rs 8,800 crore yet to be levied

Nitin Kumar  
New Delhi, February 26

ASPASSENGER vehicle makers intensify lobbying over the shape of the proposed third phase of Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE-3) norms — due to take effect from April 1, 2027 — official data show most manufacturers have failed to meet the current CAFE-2 standards, with penalties of Rs 8,713

crore remaining unrecovered between FY23 and FY25.

The issue has surfaced at a time when Maruti Suzuki India has argued for regulatory relief for small cars under CAFE-3, while other manufacturers including Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra have taken a different view on the proposed framework.

Data accessed by FE show that ten automakers were

flagged by the Ministry of Power for breaching fleet emission limits under CAFE-2. These include Hyundai Motor India, Mahindra & Mahindra, Kia India, Honda Cars India, Renault India, Nissan Motor India, Skoda Auto Volkswagen India, Jaguar Land Rover and Isuzu Motors India.

Hyundai accounts for the largest share of penalties at over Rs 2,838 crore. Mahindra & Mahin-

dra follows with Rs 1,788 crore, while Kia faces dues of Rs 1,346 crore and Honda Rs 1,228 crore. Renault and Nissan have penalties of Rs 834 crore and Rs 462 crore, respectively. Skoda Auto Volkswagen's liability stands at Rs 248 crore. Tata Motors-owned Jaguar Land Rover has Rs 19 crore in dues, while Isuzu Motors India and Force Motors account for the smallest amounts among those cited. FE

SEMICONDUCTOR COMPANIES RUN LOW ON SCANDIUM, 5G CHIPS AT RISK; U.S. PRESIDENT TRUMP SET TO VISIT BEIJING IN MARCH

# 'Rare earth shortages worsen in US despite trade truce'

Reuters  
Montreal/Beijing/  
Washington, February 26

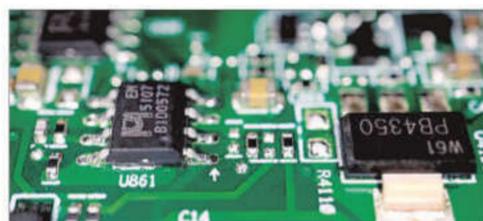
SUPPLIERS TO US aerospace and semiconductor firms face worsening rare earth shortages, with two turning away some clients, industry insiders said, weeks before US President Trump is expected to meet his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping for a summit in Beijing.

The shortages center on rare earths such as yttrium and scandium, niche members of the family of 17 elements, which play tiny but vital roles in defence technology, aerospace and semiconductors and are almost entirely produced in China.

While Beijing has allowed many rare earth exports to resume since it imposed restrictions in April, shipments of these materials still rarely make it to the U.S. despite the October detente with Washington, Chinese customs data show. That easing of trade tensions, premised in part on China pausing its critical mineral export restrictions, will be on the table when Trump and Xi meet in Beijing in March.

A key pain point is yttrium, used in coatings that keep engines and turbines from melting at high temperatures. Without regular application of these coatings, engines can't be used.

Since Reuters first reported about yttrium shortages in No-



Semiconductor chips seen on a printed circuit board. REUTERS

ember, prices have jumped 60% and are now about 69 times as high as a year ago. Some coatings manufacturers are also now starting to ration material, as per firm executives and traders.

Executives at two North

American firms that buy yttrium to make coatings told Reuters they have needed to temporarily pause production due to shortages. One is also now turning away smaller and offshore customers in order to conserve

supply for larger clients, which include certain engine makers.

While shortages of yttrium and scandium have not weighed on production of jet engines or chips yet, a US government official told Reuters some US manufacturers now face "shortages" of certain rare earths from China.

China exported 17 tonnes of yttrium products to the US in the eight months after controls were introduced last April versus 333 tonnes in the eight months before the measures.

Reuters spoke with two US government officials, 14 company executives and staff, traders and analysts across aerospace and semiconductors. All of them spoke to Reuters on con-

dition of anonymity except the analysts named in the story. The North American executives did not want to be named discussing internal production challenges in public. China's Ministry of Commerce did not respond to questions.

In addition to yttrium, US semiconductor makers are running low on scandium, putting production of next-generation 5G chips at risk, said Dylan Patel, founder and CEO of research firm SemiAnalysis. US chip-makers have experienced delays in receiving new scandium export licenses from China in recent months and have reached out to Washington for help, said two industry sources.

FULL REPORT ON [WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM](http://WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM)

## BRIEFLY

### YES Bank reports Rs 2.5 crore forex card fraud

New Delhi: YES Bank on Thursday said it has detected unauthorised transactions worth \$280,000 (Rs 2.5 crore) related to its multi-currency prepaid forex cards. Unauthorised transactions were carried out by YES Bank's Multi-Currency Prepaid Forex Card, which were issued in partnership with BookMyForex. These unauthorised transactions were attempted on specific BIN numbers only and these fraudulent transactions were carried out on 15 merchants that are based out of a Latin American

country, in the early hours of February 24, 2026, YES Bank said in a regulatory filing. PTI

### Apple in talks to start payment service in India

Bengaluru: Apple is in talks with several Indian banks and global card networks as it prepares to launch its Apple Pay service in India, Bloomberg News reported Thursday, citing people familiar with the matter. It is in talks with ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank and Axis Bank, as it aims to introduce its payment service in India around the middle of 2026, the report said. Reuters could not immediately verify the report. REUTERS

## MARKETS

Sensex 82,248.61 -2746 -0.03%	NIFTY 25,496.55 14.05 0.06%	Gold ₹1,62,900	US Dollar ₹90.91
		Silver ₹2,70,500	Oil \$70.25

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER ALL INDIA SARAFI ASSOCIATION DATA GOLD PER 10G, SILVER PER 1KG; CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF FEBRUARY 25, 2026

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

• GEOPOLITICS

## How India and Canada mended their frayed ties



SHUBHAJIT ROY

CANADIAN PRIME Minister Mark Carney's arrival in India on Friday will mark a significant moment for the bilateral relationship that has gone through an arc of downs and ups over the last two-and-half years.

Carney will land in Mumbai and later visit New Delhi for talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, before wrapping up his trip on March 2.

Even a year back, such a visit would have been unthinkable. Bilateral ties unravelled in 2023 under Justin Trudeau over the killing of pro-Khalistani separatist Hardeep Nijjar. The unprecedented diplomatic crisis had political, economic and geopolitical consequences. The impact on the people-to-people ties, too, was immense.

After Carney took charge in early 2025, both the Canadian and Indian governments put in a tremendous amount of heavy-lifting to build back the relationship and shield it from the fallout of Trudeau's Nijjar allegations. And as US President Donald Trump upends the world with his trade policies, this relationship assumes more importance than ever.

### The bombshell

In September 2023, then prime minister Justin Trudeau dropped a bombshell allegation in the Canadian parliament, saying the Indian government could have had a hand in the June assassination of Khalistani separatist Nijjar in British Columbia province.

Trudeau said he had taken up the issue with Prime Minister Modi during his visit for the G20 Leaders' Summit in September.

The Ministry of External Affairs called Trudeau's accusation "absurd and motivated". It said he had made similar allegations during his meeting with the PM, which had been "completely rejected".

The diplomatic escalation happened rapidly. Both sides expelled diplomats, closed down consulates and withdrew High Commissioners. These were particularly drastic steps, usually taken in situations such as wars and terrorist attacks.

Top Canadian officials — national security and intelligence advisor Nathalie Drouin and deputy minister of foreign affairs David Morrison — also linked India's Home Minister, Amit Shah, to an alleged campaign of targeting Sikh separatists in Canada.



Modi and Carney at the G7 Summit in Canada in June 2025. AP FILE

### • India-Canada bilateral trade

	Goods trade		Services Trade	
	2024	2025 (Jan-Nov)	2024	2025 (Jan-Sept)
Exports (\$ bn)	4.14	4.1	3.15	1.61
Imports (\$ bn)	4.84	3.06	11.07	7.75
Total Bilateral Trade (\$ bn)	<b>8.98</b>	<b>7.16</b>	<b>14.22</b>	<b>9.36</b>

The Indian government responded sharply to the allegations and called Canada a "safe haven" for "terrorists, extremists and organised crime". Such descriptions are usually reserved for Pakistan and Afghanistan, and it was rare for India to use them for a Western democracy.

### The recovery

The needle began to move in January 2025, when Trudeau announced he would step down. Carney replaced Trudeau as prime minister in March and his Liberal party won the general election in May, cementing him in the role.

A former central banker, Carney was keen to reset ties with India, a major economic partner. He approached the Nijjar killing as a law enforcement and judicial issue that was best delinked from political and economic relations. So, he made the first move by inviting Modi to the G7 leaders' outreach summit in June last year in Kananaskis, Canada.

Following a "positive" meeting, both leaders "agreed to take calibrated and constructive steps to restore stability" in their relationship, starting with the "early return of High Commissioners to each other's capi-

### Different strokes

Trudeau caused a major rupture in bilateral relations with his allegations on the Nijjar killing.

Carney, however, has chosen to delink the investigation into the killing from the political and economic relationship.

Canada PM Carney arrives in India today for a visit that would have seemed unthinkable a year ago. It's a chance to reset the relationship

tal". The thaw led to the reinstatement of envoys and diplomats, lifting of visa curbs, and reciprocal visits over the last eight months at the foreign minister and NSA level.

To firewall the relationship from the Nijjar investigation, both sides have created a separate framework under their National Security Advisors to discuss "transnational crimes". This mechanism is specifically meant to address the concerns related to pro-Khalistani activities in Canada.

### The pillars of the relationship

Notwithstanding the relatively brief strain in ties, India and Canada have typically enjoyed strong cooperation in sectors such as politics, business, investment and people-to-people relationships. Here's a look at the pillars of cooperation and how the two governments are looking to build on them.

### TRADE AND ECONOMIC TIES

At last year's G20 Leaders' Summit, Canada and India agreed to formally launch negotiations for an ambitious Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement to double two-way trade to \$70 billion by 2030. In 2024, India was Canada's seventh-largest goods and services trading partner, with two-way trade at \$30.8 billion.

India's major exports to Canada are pharmaceutical products, machinery parts and mechanical appliances, iron and steel products, electronic goods, organic chemicals, jewelry, gems, textile and seafood. India's major imports from Canada include pulses, fertilizers (potash) and minerals.

According to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Canada is the 17th largest foreign investor in India. Its cumulative investment of \$4.18 billion from April 2000 to June 2025 represented 0.56% of the total FDI inflows into India.

### SECURITY AND DEFENCE

India and Canada have regularly engaged in dialogue and cooperation on global security issues, including counter-terrorism, cyber security and regional stability. The counter-terrorism engagement has largely taken place through the framework of the 'Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism' set up in 1997. Both sides also enhanced security cooperation through another framework on 'Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism' signed in February, 2018. Canada's national security and intelligence advisor, Drouin, met India's NSA, Ajit Doval, in New Delhi on 18 September, 2025. Doval visited Canada from 6-7 February, 2026 and met Canada's Minister of Public Safety Gary Anandasangaree and Drouin.

With Canada's vast natural resources and India's expanding energy demand,

energy cooperation remains a key pillar of the bilateral relationship. The partnership encompasses both conventional and renewable sources, with Canada pitching itself as a reliable supplier of oil, gas, LNG, LPG, crude oil, and critical minerals.

### EDUCATION

The education sector has significantly strengthened people-to-people ties between the two countries. Indian students represent the largest group of international students in Canada. More than 3.92 lakh Indian students were studying in Canada as of December 31, 2024. Both countries have long recognised the strategic significance of higher education and research. The educational ties include institutional linkages, joint research programs and academic mobility initiatives.

### DIASPORA

With over 1.8 million Indo-Canadians and approximately a million non-resident Indians, Canada is home to one of the largest and most vibrant Indian diasporas in the world. Indo-Canadians have had a profound impact across a wide range of sectors, and their influence continues to grow.

Diplomats who have dealt with Canada say pro-Khalistan elements are a small minority in the Canadian Sikh community and had hijacked the Trudeau government's India policy. Estimates suggest that of the about 20 lakh Indian diaspora, only about eight lakh are Sikhs. Of them, Indian estimates say, only about 1% — 8,000-9,000 people — are pro-Khalistan radicals.

But this small population of Khalistanis control 12-15 gurdwaras, where they generate funds and organise politically. The constituencies in which they have a say are mostly in Brampton in Ontario province, and Vancouver and Surrey in British Columbia.

### GEOPOLITICS

Canada is an important strategic partner for major western powers — it is part of the G7 grouping and shares the table with the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Japan. It also shares intelligence with the Five Eyes grouping which also includes the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand.

All these countries are also close strategic partners for India. Last fall, on the margins of the G20 Leaders' Summit, Canada, India and Australia entered into a new trilateral technology and innovation partnership to deepen strategic collaboration on critical and emerging technologies and drive further diversification of supply chains toward a secure, sustainable, and resilient future.

Carney's visit is expected to give a fillip to all these sectors and more, especially with Trump's actions affecting Canada and India.

• LEGAL

## Why High Court discharged Hooda and AJL in land allotment case

Vineet Bhalla

New Delhi, February 26

FORMER HARYANA Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Associated Journals Ltd (AJL), the company that publishes the National Herald newspaper, were discharged on Wednesday by the Punjab and Haryana High Court in a corruption and cheating case regarding the allotment of a plot in Panchkula to AJL, bringing an end to the nearly decade-long legal case.

Justice Tribhuvan Dahiya set aside the April 2021 order of a special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) judge that had framed charges against Hooda and AJL, terming the continuation of the prosecution an "abuse of the process of Court".

### Allotment, resumption and re-allotment

The case stems from the decision of the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA) — now known as Haryana Shehri Vikas Pradhikaran — to allot a 3,500-sq metre plot in Sector 6, Panchkula to AJL in 1982 for publishing a Hindi daily, *Nav Jwan*. AJL failed to complete construction on the plot within two years — a condition for allotment. Consequently, in October 1992, HUDA took back ownership of the plot. AJL's appeals to regain the plot were dismissed by the HUDA administrator in 1995 and by the Financial Commissioner and Secretary of the Haryana government's Town and Country Planning Department 1996.

The controversy arose in 2005, after the Congress returned to power in Haryana with Hooda as CM. Following a representation by AJL, Hooda — who was also the chairman of HUDA — ordered the re-allotment of the plot to AJL on August 28, 2005 at the original 1982 rate, along with interest, rather than 2005 market rates.

### The CBI case

The CBI registered an FIR in April 2017, alleging that the re-allotment caused a wrongful loss to the tune of Rs 63 lakh to the state exchequer and a corresponding wrongful gain to AJL.

The agency contended that Hooda ignored the advice of HUDA officials and legal opinions from government officers stating that once a plot is resumed and the resumption attains finality, it cannot be re-allotted to the same entity. It claimed that by allotting the land at 1982 rates, Hooda abused his official position, causing a loss of Rs 63 lakh — the difference between the market value of the land in 2005 and what AJL ultimately paid for it.

The CBI charged Hooda and AJL with criminal conspiracy and cheating under the IPC and criminal misconduct by a public servant under the Prevention of Corruption Act. In April 16, 2021, a special CBI judge framed charges against Hooda and AJL, sanctioning a trial against them. Both appealed against the order before the High Court.

### Why the charges didn't stick

The HC found that the CBI failed to prove any actual loss to HUDA. Hence, there was no "wrongful loss" or "wrongful gain" — an essential element of a cheating or corruption charge. The judgment noted that while an audit objection was raised against the reallotment in 2007 claiming a loss of Rs 63.08 lakh, this objection was formally dropped by the Accountant General (Audit) in 2009 after HUDA explained that the re-allotment was done in "public interest" that a Hindi daily would serve.

Justice Dahiya observed that since AJL paid the price for the land demanded by HUDA with interest, "to claim on this premise is the re-allotment caused any loss to the Authority, is fictional which cannot afford any ground to frame charge".

Another critical factor in the High Court's decision-making was that while Hooda passed the initial order in 2005, the decision was unanimously ratified by HUDA on May 16, 2006.

The court criticised the CBI for singling out Hooda while ignoring the other members of the authority who ratified the decision, saying this "raises doubts about [the CBI's] bona fides and the nature of investigation carried out".

The court also held that even if Hooda went against the advice of bureaucrats, that alone does not constitute a crime unless there is evidence of dishonest intention. Citing multiple Supreme Court rulings, the HC held that a public servant can only be accused of criminal misconduct if they obtain a pecuniary advantage through corrupt means. Since Hooda did not take any money and the "loss" to the state was non-existent, his decision could at worst be an error of judgment, not a criminal conspiracy.

The High Court also pointed out a fundamental flaw in the prosecution's logic: the re-allotment order of 2005 has never been challenged or declared illegal by any civil court. "It is unfathomable as to how the investigating agency can consider the re-allotment of plot unlawful on its own, and proceed to register a criminal case on that basis," Justice Dahiya wrote.

• WILDLIFE

## The complex social world of macaques, through the eyes of Punch

Yashee

New Delhi, February 26

IN THE seven short months of its life, a lot has happened to Punch the monkey, from being rejected by its mother at birth to becoming an internet sensation. The video clips of Punch, from the Ichikawa zoo in Japan, have led to curiosity about its species, the Japanese macaque. Punch was given a stuffed orangutan by zoo keepers after its mother left. In videos watched millions of times, Punch can be seen clinging to the toy as other monkeys behave aggressively towards it or ignore it. The baby monkey now seems to be making progress towards integration. On Thursday, the zoo posted on X that Punch "played with the other young monkeys without using his stuffed toy".

### Why did Punch's mother abandon it?

Antonio Jose Osuna Mascaró, an animal cognition researcher at the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna, told *The In-*

*dian Express*: "This is a behavior that happens sometimes, particularly under captive conditions. If the mother is inexperienced and stressed, a Japanese macaque can abandon its offspring. An extreme case of this was observed during the infamous experiments done by American psychologist Harry Harlow during the 1950s and 60s, in which he raised monkeys under terrible conditions." These monkeys were not very good at mothering. In Punch's case, the zoo authorities said it was born in a heat wave and its mother was stressed.

### How does the loss of a parental figure impact a primate's life?

The group of a primate like a Japanese macaque functions very differently from a herd of say deer. Primatologist Anindya Sinha of the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bengaluru explained that while herd animals stay together for better food opportunities and safety, a primate group has its own social rules. "Punch is a new individ-

### Toystory

- Primates are carried around by their mothers. They depend on the touch for emotional regulation.
- This is likely why Punch is so attached to its toy, a stuffed orange orangutan (pictured right).



NTY

with it... There is also the fact that Japanese macaques are deeply hierarchical..."

### How does the hierarchy work?

Osuna Mascaró said Japanese macaques "live in matrilineal, this means that the daughters remain in the group, while males do not. This results in a society in which the rank of each individual depends on the rank of his/her mother. They also have a curious system to rank individuals, the youngest sister ranks above the older ones". Sinha said while the rank of the females depends on mothers, for males, it depends more on if they can establish dominance and form alliances.

### Is Punch being 'bullied'?

Both researchers said it is common for higher-ranked macaques to show aggression towards lower-ranked members. "It is their way of pushing them away from food sources and social interactions or simply a way of reinforcing the rank structure," Osuna Mascaró said.

ual for that group, and its integration will take some time, specially given that its own mother has rejected it. Integration also depends on the conditions the group as a whole is experiencing. If there are more stresses, for example more competition for food, the group will not welcome a new individual. In this case, the monkeys are captive in a zoo, and are together all the time. Punch has nowhere else to go, and the group has to deal

• SECURITY

## In PRAHAAR lies India's consolidated strategy for counterterrorism operations

Deeptiman Tiwary

New Delhi, February 26

THE MINISTRY of Home Affairs Monday unveiled India's first publicly articulated national counter-terror strategy document, PRAHAAR. The eight-page document outlines a comprehensive framework for India's approach to terrorism, as well as the steps taken over the years and plans for the future.

Many of the measures listed are not new, but comprise ongoing initiatives of the Home Ministry and law enforcement agencies, or are already in force through laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. PRAHAAR situates India's terrorism challenge in a landscape shaped by decades of cross-border violence, global jihadist networks, and the accelerating use of technology, including drones, encrypted communications, and cyber attacks, while avoiding a narrow focus on any single theatre.

### What makes PRAHAAR different?

PRAHAAR proposes a seven-pillar response:

- Intelligence-led prevention and real-time inter-agency coordination to disrupt propaganda, sleeper cells, funding, and arms networks
- Swift, proportionate response led by local police and backed by specialised counter-terror forces
- Aggregation of capacities through police modernisation, standardised training
- Adherence to human rights, rule of law
- Graded de-radicalisation and community engagement with attention to youth and women
- Alignment of international cooperation through intelligence sharing, legal assistance, extradition, and multilateral designations
- Recovery and resilience through an approach involving civil administration, professionals, NGOs and communities, underpinned by a clear political stance of zero tolerance for terrorism without linking it to religion or identity.

The "newness" lies in bringing together tools, like the National Security Guard, National Intelligence Agency (NIA), UAPA,

community outreach and socioeconomic schemes in a single, public, national policy. Until now, India's counterterrorism architecture was scattered across laws, internal SOPs, cabinet decisions and state-level arrangements. PRAHAAR affirms that India does not associate terrorism with any particular religion or community, a line that carries diplomatic weight in multilateral forums.

### How has the West approached counter-terror strategy?

Both the US and the UK have published counter-terror strategy documents. The then-Trump administration outlined the nation's policy on terrorism in the US National Strategy for Counterterrorism (USNSCT) in 2018. In the UK, the Rishi Sunak government updated the country's 2003 strategy document, CONTEST, in 2023.

The USNSCT intends to use all "instruments of US power" to protect the homeland and US interests overseas, built around objectives such as diminishing terrorists' capacity to attack, severing financial and logistical support, and countering

radicalisation and recruitment. It also describes "lines of effort" including pursuing terrorists to their source, tightening border and travel screening, and expanding financial and intelligence tools with allies.

The UK's CONTEST 2023 organises counterterrorism work into four strands — Prevent (stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism), Pursue (stop attacks), Protect (strengthen protection) and Prepare (mitigate impact), stressing the partnership between the whole-of-government and whole-of-society.

### How does PRAHAAR compare?

Unlike Prahaar, both the US and UK strategies are detailed articulations of their counterterrorism plans. The USNSCT stands at 34 pages, and CONTEST at 78 pages.

**GRANULAR DETAILS:** PRAHAAR sets out principles but does not break these down into public objectives, sub-programmes or agency-specific tasks. The US strategy, by contrast, turns big goals into lines of effort and concrete "we will" actions. The UK's CONTEST goes even further in spelling out

delivery machinery, outlining clear roles for stakeholders from a school headteacher to a council official.

**OVERSIGHT AND METRICS:** PRAHAAR stresses the rule of law but does not embed public reporting or independent strategy-level review. There is no commitment in the text to annual public reporting on PRAHAAR's implementation. In the US, DHS has committed to annual assessments to Congress and measurable improvements; in the UK, CONTEST is delivered through formal reporting lines across departments and local CT structures.

**NARROWER IDEOLOGICAL CANVAS:** PRAHAAR focuses mainly on cross-border and jihadi terrorism, while Western strategies explicitly address extreme right-wing and hybrid forms of extremism.

"Detailed plans appear to have been purposefully avoided in order to not give away tactical details," a senior security establishment officer said.

### What is the way forward?

For PRAHAAR to matter, the MHA will

need to follow it up with clear, possibly state-wide guidelines, translating the seven pillars into day-to-day policing, intelligence sharing, prison management and community engagement. It will require capacity-building for state ATS units and district police.

"The success of the strategy will depend on how well the role of each spoke in the response wheel is defined and how well they are equipped. If the state police are the first responder, they will have to be trained for that. All states will need to have state-specific forces. It will also have to be spelt out at what point NSG will come in," said a former officer involved with India's counter-terror efforts.

Flagging a gap between intent and implementation, he said: "While the document talks about deradicalisation, there is no national framework for it. States such as Telangana and Maharashtra have done great work in this, but the same has not been scaled up."

Former NIA Additional Director General, NR Wasan, said, "The NIA is said to be India's FBI. Unlike the FBI, it has no intelligence-gathering capabilities. So NIA's success hinges on coordination with other agencies."



## Taking sides

India's relations with Israel should not be at the cost of ties with the Arab world

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 24-hour visit to Jerusalem was a significant bilateral outreach to Israel, but a missed opportunity on Palestine, with complex consequences for India's ties with West Asia. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had announced the visit in December and confirmed the dates on Sunday, indicating Israel's keen interest in hosting Mr. Modi. From Mr. Modi's landing, to every engagement up to his departure, Mr. Netanyahu personally escorted Mr. Modi everywhere. After bilateral talks on Thursday, the two leaders agreed to upgrade ties to a "Special Strategic Partnership", and signed a critical technologies partnership among more than 15 MoUs in AI, agriculture, culture and education. They also agreed to facilitate the employment of 50,000 Indian workers in Israel over the next five years. The engagement, and Mr. Netanyahu's deep praise for Mr. Modi and the India relationship was even more intense than during Mr. Modi's 2017 visit. This possibly accrues from the timing of the visit, as Israel faces growing isolation over high casualties in Gaza and Mr. Netanyahu's West Bank settlement plans. In the past week, Israel's West Bank proposals have been condemned by dozens of countries, which includes Germany, France, and the U.K. that have been measured so far. Mr. Netanyahu heads into an election later this year, which will be seen as a referendum on his record, in terms of alleged corruption in his government as well as for accountability for security lapses in 2023 and the civilian toll of Israel's response. Mr. Modi's visit would bolster him politically. In his speech at the Knesset, Mr. Modi referred only obliquely to Palestinian sovereignty, saying that the U.S.-led Gaza Peace Initiative, which commits to a two-state solution, "holds the promise of a just and durable peace... including by addressing the Palestine Issue". The Prime Minister said that India shared the pain and grief of every life lost in the October 2023 terror attack by Hamas but made no mention of the high toll – more than 72,000 killed – in the strikes on Gaza by Israel since then.

It is hoped that Mr. Modi will clarify India's position on the conflict, as he did after his last visit, by following it up with a visit to Palestine. His decision to travel amidst the threat of U.S. attacks on Iran carried the possible risk of taking sides in the event of a conflict. Beyond the bilateral, the outcomes of his visit will be judged globally by its impact on the larger West Asian neighbourhood. First, his announcement that India-Israel-UAE and India-Israel-UAE-U.S. "I2U2" would develop new momentum, as would the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), indicates New Delhi believes that regional initiatives are still viable despite the polarised atmosphere and recent deep fault-lines. Second, a decision to "stand with Israel, firmly..." could come at the cost of India's relations with other West Asian powers, which expect India to remain steadfast to its historically calibrated regional balance, and to principles of peace, morality and compassion in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

## A brittle shell

ISRO should choose transparency to reinforce public confidence

A venerable institution, facing accusations of opacity, decided to stun its detractors with some transparency. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) made public the report of a technical committee, constituted to analyse why the NVS-02 satellite, which was launched aboard a GSLV rocket on January 29, 2025, could not be placed in its intended orbit. Until this week, there was no official explanation why this had happened. An accompanying press statement – not a report it must be noted – surmised that an 'apex' committee had concluded that a signal meant to activate a key valve in the engine's oxidiser line never reached it. This valve is crucial for firing the engine to raise the spacecraft's orbit and this likely happened because at least one connection in the electrical connector – in both the primary and backup lines – came loose or failed, preventing the signal from getting through. All of this is useful information, but only for ISRO to be cautious in future missions. In fact, the press statement continued, these learnings were "successfully implemented" in a November 2, 2025 mission by the LVM-3 M5 launch vehicle that placed the GSAT-7R, India's heaviest communication satellite, in its intended orbit. When the ISRO releases a statement on an event from a year ago, it must strive to illuminate rather than be seen to declassify under duress. It should have revealed whether the connection came loose because of an oversight; whether multiple levels of personnel – or machines – who scrutinise every nut and screw on the assembly line failed, or if a manufacturing anomaly had compounded over time in a way that would have escaped detection even by the most vigilant overseers.

At the other end, doing so reinforces public confidence in the institution. It should be able to reveal such information without blaming individuals or withholding proprietary or strategic information. Making such 'Failure Analysis' reports public, as they are called, used to be a routine affair. However, ISRO seems to have retreated into a shell following the back-to-back failures of the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicles in January and in May 2025. In fact, beyond the technical committees – another committee has been set up to probe "systemic issues" underlying the failures of these rockets – ISRO should not choose insularity at a time when traditional business models all over the world are being disrupted.

# Analysing India's cycle of deprivation and affluence

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times", wrote Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. This sums up the state of affairs in India in the past decade or so. Of particular interest here is the income mobility of different segments of the population which reveals sharp upward and downward shifts between 2014 and 2025. Those experiencing downward mobility among the poor suffer humiliation, hunger, morbidity, infant and child mortality, while the affluent experiencing upward mobility flaunt their wealth in ostentatious living, speculative investments in real estate, business ventures, and high risk gambling. So, movements into and out of deprivation and affluence are of considerable interest. All these changes are likely to influence income distribution that cannot be captured through poverty and income inequality measures. Instead, we demonstrate below that analysis of income mobility during the period 2014-25 yields richer insights into income distributional outcomes. The overall picture has shades of grey but it is not counterintuitive.

### The state of households

Households are grouped each year into three income categories based on their 2014 per capita income rank: the top 10%, the next 40%, and the bottom 50%. Income mobility is defined as movement across these groups relative to a household's 2014 position – downward (to a lower group), no change (same group), or upward (to a higher group).

To assess whether elections mattered, the period 2014-2025 is divided into two sub-periods, 2014-19 and 2019-24, each anchored around a national election year. Our analysis draws on real (inflation-adjusted) per capita income data from the Consumer Pyramids Household Survey conducted by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, spanning 2014-2025. We construct a balanced panel of households that are consistently observed across these years.

At the all-India level, the share of households experiencing downward mobility nearly doubles – from 14% in 2015 to 26.8% in 2025 – while the proportion remaining in the same income group falls sharply from over 70% to below half. Upward mobility does increase over time, rising from 14.1% to 23.5%, but this improvement is gradual and consistently trails the rise in downward movement. What stands out is not just mobility, but its direction: the balance tilts increasingly towards decline rather than ascent. By 2025, more than one in four households are worse-off relative to their 2014 position. The data suggest an economy marked less by broad-based upward progress and more by growing vulnerability and uneven gains.

The rural trends are particularly sobering. By 2025, nearly 29% of rural households are worse-off than they were in 2014, while the share that remained in the same income group has fallen below half. Although some upward

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movement is visible, especially in the early years, it is consistently outpaced by the rise in households slipping down the income ladder. The sharpest deterioration occurs in the first subperiod (2014-19), but the vulnerability persists thereafter.

Urban India fares somewhat better, yet, the picture is hardly reassuring. Downward mobility rises here too, albeit more gradually than in rural areas, even as upward mobility improves at a faster pace than in the countryside.

The contrast suggests that whatever gains have materialised are more concentrated in urban centres, while rural households bear the brunt of economic volatility. Far from a story of broad-based inclusion, the evidence points to a widening experience of insecurity – one that sits uneasily with vociferous claims of steadily falling inequality.

### Caste patterns

The caste-wise patterns are equally revealing – and troubling. Since 2014, downward mobility has risen across all social groups, with particularly sharp increases among Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Caste (SC) households. By 2025, roughly a quarter or more of households in each of these groups are worse-off than they were in 2014. While upward mobility has improved for the Unreserved and OBCs, it remains muted and uneven for SCs across the entire period.

For SC households, the constraint appears less about dramatic descent and more about the persistent narrowing of pathways upward. The steepest rise in downward mobility occurs in the first subperiod (2014-19), even as upward mobility loses momentum in the years thereafter. This sits uneasily with repeated assertions by the ruling party and the Prime Minister about shrinking inequalities and expanding opportunity.

At the same time, there has been considerable social churn, with the ruling party broadening its base – particularly among OBCs and sections of upper castes in States such as Uttar Pradesh – reshaping traditional hierarchies of influence within the broader caste landscape. Our analysis echoes a longer history of caste-based deprivation in India – where occupational segmentation, unequal access to assets and education, and entrenched social discrimination continue to shape economic outcomes.

Scheduled Tribes display comparatively lower downward mobility and some episodes of stronger upward movement, possibly reflecting targeted interventions and regional development efforts. Yet, the broader message is unmistakable: caste remains a decisive fault line in income mobility, and the promise of equal economic ascent remains illusory.

Relative to 2014, downward mobility rises across all religious groups, with the rise being more pronounced among both Hindu and Muslim households over time. Upward mobility increases steadily for Sikh and Christian

households, often outpacing downward movements in several years, while gains for Hindu and Muslim households are more gradual, indicating uneven mobility trajectories across religious groups by 2025. Among Hindus and Muslims, downward mobility spikes around election years, while upward mobility rises more modestly. For Muslims in particular, the rise in upward mobility remains weaker than for Hindus. Again, discrimination against Muslims has restricted their upward mobility and not so much their downward mobility. Sikh and Christian households display stronger upward mobility in the earlier years, though this momentum weakens in the latter half of the decade.

### The story is about entrenched inequality

While the headline numbers point to growing downward mobility, a more rigorous statistical analysis reinforces the same conclusion. After accounting for household characteristics, we find that higher income dispersion at the district level is systematically associated with greater downward mobility. In other words, households located in more unequal districts are more likely to slip down the income ladder than to climb up.

Inequality, far from spurring aspiration, appears to harden economic boundaries. The results also echo familiar social fault lines: households from historically disadvantaged caste groups and Muslims exhibit significantly lower mobility, while education, urban location and larger household size are associated with better prospects. The deeper story, then, is about entrenched inequality shaping who moves ahead – and who falls behind.

That 2019 marked a turning point is not surprising as the Bharatiya Janata Party secured a historic victory in the general election. But, soon after, the government had to deal with the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic that caused massive humanitarian and economic crises. Their inept handling means that the disruption persisted long after the pandemic ceased.

Reckless pursuit of Hindutva without a coherent strategy to revive the informal sector including agriculture, lower increase in upward income mobility while resilience among certain segments – including OBCs and SCs as well as Muslims – helped slow their descent into deprivation. So, perhaps resilience in the face of adversity matters too.

The larger concern is that an economy in which more households are slipping down than climbing up cannot sustain social stability for long. When inequality hardens into reduced mobility, frustration replaces aspiration. Therefore, policy must move beyond headline growth and focus on strengthening public health, education, employment-intensive sectors, and social protection. Policies addressing discrimination are not matters of welfare alone – they are central to restoring mobility and renewing faith in economic progress.

Analysis of income mobility during 2014-25 shows sharp upward and downward shifts, with implications for social stability

# The shift of critical minerals to India's strategic centre

Three years ago, and at the start of India's G-20 presidency, critical minerals barely featured as a strategic topic in policy thinking. As recently as August 2023, several critical minerals, including lithium, were still classified as atomic minerals, effectively barring private exploration and mining. But the latest Union Budget shows that something critical has shifted in India's thinking.

The government has now signalled that critical minerals have moved to the mainstream, and must become a core pillar of India's industrial, energy, and geopolitical strategy. The emphasis on 'critical minerals' in the Budget speech is revealing. The focus is no longer on whether India needs a critical minerals policy but on whether India can now execute while building expertise at scale, speed and depth.

### Clear policy drive

There is clear policy momentum. India now has a list of 30 critical minerals and has eased mineral exploration for junior miners while also rationalising the royalty rates. In January 2025, the government launched the National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM) with a budgetary outlay of ₹16,300 crore. Today, India is among a small group of countries with a comprehensive and ambitious policy framework for critical minerals.

Yet, ambition alone will not deliver mineral security. Execution will. It takes years – often decades – to discover and mine minerals, but extraction is not the only bottleneck. China controls up to 90% of global mineral processing capacity for several critical minerals. However, analysis by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) suggests that India already has the capabilities to process a few minerals to high purity levels.

For instance, Indian industries already produce high-purity copper, graphite, rare earth oxides, tin and titanium – often exceeding 99.9% purity. However, existing production is largely geared towards conventional uses and limited volumes. Meeting the requirements of clean tech and defence will require further technological



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The Union Budget has highlighted India's new 'mineral resolve'

upgrading, deeper refining, and capacity expansion. Skills from established sectors such as chemicals, pharmaceuticals and textiles could be leveraged to process raw minerals to higher purity and scale.

### Priority areas

In this context, Budget 2026 begins the harder work of implementation. To sustain this momentum, India must double down on three priorities: First, create demand avenues for processed minerals. The Budget rightly removes import duties on capital goods used in the processing of critical minerals. Given high capex requirements, this improves the competitiveness of upcoming refineries. However, the biggest constraint investors face is not just cost but also the lack of assured domestic demand for processed minerals. While government initiatives support domestic manufacturing of batteries, solar modules, wind turbines, and electric vehicles, delays in backward integration continue to create uncertainty for midstream processors. Boosting the deployment of locally-made electric vehicles, batteries, solar, and wind would have powerful third-order effects, strengthening processing, mining, and exploration ecosystems. Demand creation remains the most decisive industrial policy lever.

Second, adopt an Artificial Intelligence (AI) -first approach to mineral exploration. The NCMM targets 1,200 exploration projects by FY2031. The Budget strengthens project viability by making exploration expenditure for nine critical minerals eligible for tax deductions. Interestingly, four of these minerals (beryllium, tantalum, lithium and niobium) were on the restricted atomic minerals list just three years ago. To truly de-risk exploration, leveraging technology will be critical. India should mandate an AI-first approach to mineral exploration, backed by coherence across the IndiaAI Mission, the National Geospatial Policy, and Mission Anveshan. Today, Mission Anveshan focuses on hydrocarbon discovery using seismic AI tools. Extending such capabilities to the National

Geoscience Data Repository could significantly improve prospectivity analysis and aid new site discoveries.

Third, leverage geopolitical disruption to build technological sovereignty. In 2025, the weaponisation of rare earth magnets and battery supply chains exposed the fragility of global industrial and clean energy policies. The government's response – announcing rare earth corridors across coastal States and reducing import duties on monazite sands – is timely. States should now leverage existing infrastructure and manpower to serve global demand, creating jobs and boosting regional growth.

### International partnerships are key

Beyond local action, India should accelerate institutional and industrial partnerships with Australia, the European countries, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. Many of them possess advanced minerals processing or complex component manufacturing capabilities but remain cautious about technology transfer. These firms should be nudged and encouraged to set up their facilities in India to service global markets. While the ₹7,280 crore scheme for sintered rare earth permanent magnets is a start, regulatory certainty, water-tight legal frameworks, market access and research collaboration will be equally important. Strengthening links between centres of excellence in India to their global counterparts – such as through the UK-India Critical Minerals Supply Chain Observatory – should be prioritised, including under the recently concluded India-European Union Free Trade Agreement.

In a turbulent world, 2026 can be a year of accelerated ambition if approached with speed, confidence and caution. India's leadership in critical minerals hinges on coordinated action supported by inter-ministerial coordination, proactive state leadership, and global partnerships.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### R. Nallakannu

The passing of comrade R. Nallakannu, the veteran Communist leader, at the ripe old age of 101 in Chennai, is a great loss. I have had the opportunity to

meet him on a couple of occasions, and was deeply moved each time by his extraordinary simplicity and sacrifice. He dedicated his entire life to the freedom of this country and to the

peasantry and the downtrodden. It is needless to say that it is difficult to find leaders like him. It is my firm belief that honouring him with the Bharat Ratna would not

only recognise his immense contributions to society but also reaffirm the values of simplicity, sacrifice, and service that he embodies. N.G.R. Prasad, Chennai

His final wish was not for stone or symbolism, but service. By donating his body to the MMC to advance medical education, he chose purpose over prominence. A legacy is

built not in marble, but in meaningful contribution. A.P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

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

# Have AI products/LLMs started to disrupt the software services industry?



**Alaganambi Welkin**

General Secretary of the Union of IT and ITes Employees, which represents technology sector workers across India



**Kishan Sundar**

Chief Technology Officer at Maveric Systems, where he leads digital engineering and AI-led transformation initiatives across banking and financial services clients

**PARLEY**

**A**rtificial Intelligence (AI) has moved from experimentation to enterprise adoption in under two years, with industry estimates projecting AI services revenues of \$10 billion-\$12 billion in FY26. Yet, this moment of expansion coincides with layoffs, automation, and the vulnerability of entry-level roles in India's Information Technology (IT) and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sectors. It also coincides with India's top tech firms integrating AI products into their workflows. Have AI products/LLMs started to disrupt the software services industry? Kishan Sundar and Alaganambi Welkin discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Kunal Shankar**. Edited excerpts:

**Are the rapid advances in AI disrupting India's IT services sector, or are we witnessing a transformation?**

**Alaganambi Welkin:** Based on discussions with union members across companies and levels, what we think is happening now is AI washing. The retrenchments or restructuring happening in companies are not primarily due to AI, but in the name of AI.

At the same time, transformation is happening. Every developer and key engineer in IT services companies is adapting to AI tools that assist their day-to-day life. There is a wide shift happening across the industry in how we work, and that transformation is positive.

But the claims that AI is going to take over massive jobs, that no more developers are needed, and that entire end-to-end development can be done by AI... we think that is far-fetched. So, what we see is cost cutting, typically done by major multinational corporations, now being termed AI-based cost cutting.

**Kishan Sundar:** AI is not replacing the industry; it is transforming it. In the last three decades, the industry has operated on labour arbitrage. Growth came from adding people. That was its strength – well-managed processes and predictable delivery. Now we are moving towards intelligence arbitrage. GenAI enables growth without a matching increase in staff.

From COBOL days, when you had to remember syntax and semantics, to IntelliSense improving productivity, to AI assistance that completes methods and refactors – today, by giving a prompt, you get well-structured code. But is that code production-ready? You need a different skill set to assess whether it is good enough, whether it needs refactoring, whether the right pattern is adopted.

The same shift is happening for product



GETTY IMAGES

managers. Writing user stories and acceptance criteria, which used to take hours and required concurrence from developers and testers, can now be done much faster. Testers are becoming efficient. DevOps engineers are becoming efficient. In essence, a squad of eight to 10 members can become three to five.

But does that mean roles are shrinking and layoffs are inevitable? No. AI applications are not deploy-and-forget. There is drift and fine-tuning. Traditional AMS (application management services) now need to adopt differently. Additional roles are getting created.

Net-net, revenue per engineer is increasing. The number of people needed per engagement may reduce, but the range of roles is expanding.

**Are entry-level roles, especially in BPO and KPO (knowledge process outsourcing), more vulnerable?**

**AW:** When we speak about the IT industry in India, there are two major classifications. One is IT services companies that build, maintain, and enhance software. The other is BPO and KPO jobs, which are repetitive and well-defined.

Because of the scale, we increase head count and deliver through documentation or calls. Those kinds of jobs are definitely vulnerable now. With agentic AI developments, companies are saying they can automate end-to-end processes. A call centre with 4,000-5,000 staff does not need all of them for every process. Handling validation and retraining in response to deviations may require just 10-15 people.

On the other side, in IT services companies, AI is assisting the end-to-end software development cycle and drastically reducing the number of hours required to complete a task.

But development is not just coding. Engineers interact with multiple teams – within the client organisation, across geographies, and with counterpart teams in the U.S. or the U.K. There are interdependencies, internal politics, differing agendas, and competition. Even if



Based on discussions with union members across companies and levels, what we think is happening now is AI washing. The retrenchments or restructuring happening in companies are not primarily due to AI, but in the name of AI.

ALAGUNAMBI WELKIN

software can be built in two or three hours, it still requires requirements from one team and data from another. And when someone feels vulnerable, they may not communicate those requirements clearly. So, a part of the job is getting easier because of AI tools, but that alone is not enough to replace humans entirely. At the same time, if the hours required to build software drop significantly, there may be a case for reducing overall working hours.

**Are global AI partnerships defensive moves, or growth strategies?**

**KS:** They are definitely growth strategies. We should not fall into the trap of vibe coding. In regulated environments such as banking and financial services, every line written must have audit and traceability – why it was written and for what purpose. We are adopting the same Software Development Life Cycle but embedding AI in every aspect. LLMs generate code. We build wrappers and context layers so that every line generated against a prompt is repeatable and consistent across developers. That ensures maintainability.

Gone are the days of the 10x developer. Now context engineering is the essence. The engineer who knows the domain and context becomes critical rather than someone who codes fast.

Most LLMs are horizontal. Where we come in is bringing domain context – retail banking, wealth management, corporate banking – and embedding regulatory aspects into the lifecycle.

Beyond services, we are developing proprietary frameworks and product engineering capabilities.

**Is India largely consuming AI built elsewhere?**

**AW:** The MNCs leading LLMs and AI transformations own the IP and build foundational models with enormous capital and infrastructure. Indian IT companies collaborate with them, use their services, rebrand them, or build on top of them. Compared to the U.S. or China, we invest insufficiently in education, research, compute capacity, and data infrastructure, so we are not building

foundational models that can compete globally. Reskilling is happening mainly on the consumer side – prompt engineering, context engineering, and agent building.

**KS:** It is not completely black and white. India has strengths in systems engineering, enterprise integration, scaling, execution, and process rigour. The strategic question is whether we prioritise sovereign LLMs or double down on AI services dominance. Both should happen, but prioritisation matters.

**Is the services model shifting from manpower-driven billing to outcome-based pricing?**

**KS:** We moved from the traditional pyramid model to a diamond structure and from time-and-material pricing to squad-based pricing. Now, we are moving further towards outcome-based or output-based pricing. Customers care about predictable delivery, quality, and clarity of cost upfront. With outcome-based pricing, what matters is predictable delivery and quality. That gives us the opportunity to grow faster while maintaining margins.

**Has the time come to speak about a 'just transition' for the IT sector? What should companies and government do, and what protections are needed?**

**AW:** That part is not being discussed enough. When transformation happens, unemployment increases. If a person suddenly gets laid off without information, his financial planning, family, and children's education are all affected. Employees in India pay huge taxes. Why don't we get unemployment benefits when we do not get jobs for six months or a year?

Skill India is not credit-based. You cannot formally certify your skills in India through it. Simply watching a video and claiming competence is not enough for the industry.

Algorithms are increasingly deciding work and life. There should be transparency and regulation. Otherwise, it will create difficult situations, including mental health concerns.

Data centres are going to increase because of AI and data protection needs. They create less employment but more climate impact – electricity consumption and water usage. That impact also needs to be discussed.



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**NOTEBOOK**

## At the AI Summit, learning to love and fear the era of agents

AI is already helping with some subtle shortcuts in journalism. What if that changes?

**Aroon Deep**

**H**ow does a reporter cover a massive international summit with simultaneous programming? That was my challenge when I entered the India AI Impact Summit at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi last week.

I first thought I had an infallible tech-enabled plan: I would use a snippet of code to fetch audio clips of YouTube livestreams of several panel discussions, transcribe them with a cloud-based voice recognition tool, review those transcripts later, and then file stories.

But that is not what happened. The organisers seem to have found it difficult to get an adequate number of video and livestream personnel to reliably take care of a dozen simultaneous livestreams. My technique ran into trouble at several discussions, where the stream started only after the panel was introduced. This made it challenging for me to "diarize" transcripts (add speaker names to each text) by cross-referencing the panellists listed on the summit website. The website itself kept changing without notice. And sometimes, much to my annoyance, someone would leave a live mic on a production counter, severely compromising my automated transcription.

Thankfully, other reporting assignments kept me busy – daily briefings, interviews with different players in the AI ecosystem, and high-profile controversies, including the haphazard security arrangements that caused speakers to miss their own sessions and Galgotias University's Chinese robotodog.

As I ran around taking notes, I kept thinking, 'there has got to be an easier way to do this'. And there indeed was, for many tasks. I felt guilty whenever I was not trying to find those easier ways. That feeling came from having just downloaded Claude, a coding-focused AI app that could help make my work much simpler.

With no coding experience, I built three tools likely to save me time on grunt work. The first is an Android app to con-

tinuously fetch notifications from the Gazette of India, which has a tendency to drop, with little warning, major policy updates through the week. The second is a process to update my personal website. While it earlier took me half an hour every three months to do this, it now takes just a minute. The third was a small browser extension to automate the many steps required to submit a drafted story.

I was – and still am – excited and scared. Excited because I can be free of some of the drudgery that is incidental to my work. Fear because these are capabilities that theoretically everyone has now. And with time, these may not be just cool hacks, but a core part of the capabilities we are expected to exercise. How can someone who grew up in a pre-AI internet era compete with someone who tries all they can to get more done?

To be sure, the craft of journalism is not as exposed to AI-led displacement as, say, programming. The profession demands that a journalist earn the trust of experts – and convince them to share what they know as well. The LLM frenzy is, however, likely to diffuse in unsettling ways. What happens to journalists starting out without these tools when their competition is using agents to compose and send individualised emails seeking information? What happens if the AI natives supercharge their productivity and compound their skills faster than someone who still does things as they have been for the last decade?

For now, there is likely a ceiling: complex workflows involving autonomous agents – as opposed to mere productivity hacks – require tokens for LLM inference, which are expensive. Even with a paid Claude subscription, I hit usage limits using its most advanced model to build the three tools above. These costs offer some cushion. But as inference becomes cheaper, professionals will have to face the full possibilities of automation and the costs of failing to adapt.

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**PICTURE OF THE WEEK**

### A light moment at Pusa



Women farmers from Dausa district, Rajasthan, during their visit to the Pusa Krishi Vigyan Mela at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute grounds on the Pusa campus in New Delhi. The event was inaugurated by Union Agriculture and Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. SHIV KUMAR PUSHKAR

**FROM THE ARCHIVES**



**FIFTY YEARS AGO** FEBRUARY 27, 1976

### Nuclear plant: Pak. refuses to give guarantees to Canada

Washington, Feb. 26: Pakistan has told Canada that it cannot permit the latter to have a say in how Pakistan operates a nuclear reprocessing plant it is buying from France. Canada, it seems, wants to be assured that Pakistan will not use the nuclear wastes produced by its Canadian supplied reactor in the French plant

to make weapons-grade plutonium. After inconclusive discussions on the subject with Premier Trudeau of Canada, the Pakistan Prime Minister, Mr. Z.A. Bhutto, told a news conference in Ottawa: "We are prepared to consider adequate safeguards but we do not want to be tied body and soul to it. We cannot see Canada imposing safeguards on a reprocessing plant." Though Mr. Bhutto also said: "We are not interested in making explosions," Canada and the U.S. suspect that Pakistan's only motive in acquiring an expensive and unviable reprocessing plant from France is to make atomic bombs.

**A HUNDRED YEARS AGO** FEBRUARY 27, 1926

### League council controversy

London, Feb. 25: Frequent comings and goings at Foreign Office of European emissaries indicate the delicate state of the League Council issue. Sir Eerie Drummond came to London to confer with the Cabinet who, in addition to negotiating with foreign diplomats, are continuously consulting British Dominions. Yesterday's cabinet meeting was devoted almost entirely to foreign affairs.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Firearms recovered from Naxalites in Chhattisgarh in 6 years**

**989** AK-47, INAS, and SLR rifles were recovered in Chhattisgarh over the past six years following encounters with Naxalites and from surrendered or arrested ultras, Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma informed the State Assembly. PTI

**Migrant deaths or missing cases recorded in 2025**

**7,667** At least 7,667 people died or went missing on migration routes worldwide in 2025, International Organization for Migration said. Sea routes such as the Mediterranean remain among the deadliest. REUTERS

**Residential schools to get Innovation Labs in Karnataka**

**60** The Karnataka government will establish 'Innovation Labs' in over 60 residential schools across the State. ₹6 crore has been allocated under the Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan/ Tribals Sub-Plan grants for the 2025-26 academic year. PTI

**Number of animals killed in Ohio farm complex fire**

**6,000** A massive fire at an Ohio farm complex killed 6,000 animals. The blaze engulfed two of five large agricultural buildings. The State Fire Marshal's Office is investigating the cause of the fire. PTI

**Bodies of Ukrainian soldiers handed over by Russia**

**1,000** Russia handed over the remains of 1,000 Ukrainian soldiers, while Ukraine returned the bodies of 35 Russian fighters, according to Moscow's top negotiator. AFP  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Why bulldozers threaten due process

The Allahabad High Court examines whether demolitions carried out immediately after FIRs violate constitutional principles, stressing that punishment lies exclusively with the judiciary; it warns that such selective demolitions, carried out without notice or hearing, undermine due process, erode constitutional rights

**LETTER & SPIRIT**

G.S. Bajpai

**W**ith five-pointed questions recently, the Allahabad High Court has laid bare bulldozer justice. Punitive demolitions transform executive discretion into punishment without due process. In a constitutional democracy, coercive state power is expected to follow a predictable sequence: allegation, investigation, adjudication, and only thereafter sanction. Yet, in recent years, Uttar Pradesh has witnessed a troubling administrative trend popularly described as 'bulldozer justice', in which properties linked to persons accused of crimes are demolished shortly after incidents of alleged wrongdoing.

Courts have repeatedly been called upon to examine whether demolitions carried out immediately after the registration of criminal cases conform to constitutional principles. In 2024, the Supreme Court intervened to delineate the boundaries of lawful action, issuing explicit directions against punitive demolitions. However, the recurrence of such practices indicates that the tension between executive discretion and constitutional restraint remains unresolved.

**Present episode**

The latest instance reached the Allahabad High Court when a family from Hamirpur district sought protection against the threatened demolition of their residence and commercial premises following the registration of charges against a relative. The petitioners themselves were not implicated, yet municipal notices were issued and some properties were sealed soon after the FIR.

The Division Bench noted that such sequences were becoming increasingly routine. It reaffirmed the foundational principle that punishment lies exclusively within the domain of the judiciary and



A bulldozer being used in Prayagraj in June 2022 to demolish an 'illegally constructed' residence. PTI

cannot be assumed by administrative authorities. To examine the legality of the action, the court framed five substantive questions, including whether such demolitions violated Supreme Court directions and infringed the guarantees of equality and life under Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution.

A careful appreciation of the statutory framework is essential. Laws such as the Uttar Pradesh Municipal Corporation Act, 1959, and the Uttar Pradesh Urban Planning and Development Act, 1973, empower authorities to remove unauthorised constructions. These powers, however, are circumscribed. Demolition is permitted only through a structured process; authorities must first identify a violation, issue a written notice detailing the grounds, provide a reasonable opportunity to respond, consider objections, and then pass a reasoned order.

Most statutes also allow appeals and possibilities of regularisation, showing that demolition is intended as a regulatory measure of last resort rather than an instrument of instant action. Equally important is the limited purpose of these laws: municipal statutes regulate buildings and land use; they do not

determine criminal culpability. The registration of an FIR neither renders a structure illegal nor justifies accelerated enforcement.

**The court's guidance**

The Supreme Court addressed this precise concern in the *Re: Directions in the Matter of Demolition of Structures* (2024 INSC 866) case and categorically held that property cannot be demolished merely because its owner is accused of an offence. The court reinforced that criminal guilt must be established through adjudication alone. Municipal powers cannot be transformed into parallel instruments of punishment; permitting such use would undermine both the presumption of innocence and the integrity of the justice system.

State authorities often contend that demolitions are independent exercises under municipal law. While the existence of such power is not in dispute, constitutional analysis looks beyond form to substance.

Notices issued immediately after FIRs, targeting only those connected to the accused and executed without delay, strongly suggest punitive intent.

Administrative law describes this as a

colourable exercise of power – the use of a lawful instrument to achieve an impermissible objective. These practices erode the separation of powers by allowing the executive to impose consequences that only a court may authorise. The deprivation of a home or livelihood based on suspicion alone is incompatible with constitutional governance.

**Larger implications**

The Allahabad High Court's questions highlight enduring issues: Can the mere apprehension of demolition infringe fundamental rights? What standards should guide preventive judicial intervention? What mechanisms ensure accountability exists when municipal powers are misapplied?

These are not abstract concerns. Demolitions inflict immediate and often irreversible harm on families who may ultimately be found innocent. Beyond individual hardship, they corrode public confidence in impartial governance.

**A necessary balance**

No city can function without enforcing building regulations. Yet that authority must remain strictly within constitutional boundaries. Selective or exemplary demolitions convert regulatory power into punitive action and breach administrative neutrality.

The Constitution guarantees that no person shall be deprived of property except by procedure established by law, notice, hearing, reasoned decision, and judicial oversight. When demolition precedes adjudication, this sequence is inverted and due process defeated.

Bulldozers have a legitimate role in urban management, not in determining guilt. Punitive demolitions, however labelled, are legally unsustainable. Preserving this distinction is essential to upholding the rule of law.

G.S. Bajpai is the Vice Chancellor of National Law University. Contributions of Vibhuti Sharma, Academic Fellow, are acknowledged. Views are personal

**THE GIST**

The Allahabad High Court examined whether municipal action taken in close proximity to criminal proceedings reflects a pattern of administrative overreach and a colourable exercise of power.

Referring to safeguards under the Uttar Pradesh Municipal Corporation Act, 1959 and the Supreme Court ruling, the Bench underscored that demolition is a regulatory measure of last resort, not an instrument of exemplary action.

## What changed in Hong Kong after National Security Law?

Is Hong Kong's distinct identity giving way to a party-approved Chinese identity?

Gunjan Singh

**The story so far:**

**H**ong Kong has undergone significant changes since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. Under Mr. Xi, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has increasingly focused on exerting its control over the city and integrating it more closely with mainland China. This process of assimilation has been systematic, raising questions about Beijing's commitment to the "one country, two systems" framework and Hong Kong's Basic Law. The most decisive shift came with the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020. The law has fundamentally altered Hong Kong's political, media, and judicial landscape.

**When did the tussle between Hong Kong and Beijing intensify?**

The major tussle between the CCP and Hong Kong began in 2014 when the city

witnessed major protests known as the Umbrella Movement. They were triggered by Beijing's proposal that Hong Kong residents could vote for their Chief Executive only from a list of candidates vetted by the CCP, with elections planned for 2017. However, after 79 days of demonstrations across the city, the protests were cleared by police.

Hong Kong was again rocked by violent protests in 2019 against a proposed extradition Bill that would have allowed suspects to be sent to mainland China for trial. As per critics, "people would be subject to arbitrary detention, unfair trial, and torture under China's judicial system". Although the bill was eventually withdrawn, protests continued over demands for more democracy. In response to the protests, Beijing described the unrest as "terrorism" and asserted that "restoring order was Hong Kong's most urgent task." The demonstrations were ultimately suppressed by law enforcement.

The clampdown on both protests

clearly eradicated the political space promised to Hong Kong under the 'one country, two systems' framework. In addition, the lockdowns imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic further helped the CCP to control any form of dissent.

**What does the NSL entail?**

The NSL, passed by China in June 2020, "criminalises anything considered as secession, which is breaking away from China; subversion, which is undermining the power or authority of the central government; terrorism, which is using violence or intimidation against people; and collusion with foreign or external forces". Data show that around 260 people have been arrested under the NSL, with 16 convicted.

**How has media freedom been affected?**

The kidnapping of five Hong Kong book sellers by Beijing in 2015 heavily impacted its media freedom. In 2015, Lui Bo, Cheung Jiping, Gui Minhui, Lam

Wing-kee, and Lee Bo, associated with the publisher Mighty Current and its bookstore Causeway Bay Books, disappeared. Authorities cited the sale of banned books in mainland China as grounds for legal action. This incident showed the push for ending critical media space in Hong Kong.

Jimmy Lai, the founder of the newspaper *Apple Daily*, was prosecuted under the NSL in 2026. The clampdown on newspapers started immediately after the implementation of NSL, and Lai was found guilty of protesting in 2021, and his newspaper was shut down. Another newspaper, *Stand News*, was shut down in 2021, and its journalists were arrested on charges of "conspiracy to publish seditious materials".

**What does this mean for Hong Kong's identity?**

Hong Kong's identity has long been rooted in the 'one country, two systems' framework and the Basic Law, which promised to "preserve their unique political and economic systems". However, since Mr. Xi assumed power, there has been a consistent effort to dismantle this uniqueness and subsume it under China's identity. With no space left for critical voices with the implementation of the NSL, Mr. Xi has managed to completely subsume Hong Kong identity within the idea of Chinese identity, one approved by the party. Gunjan Singh is Associate Professor at OP Jindal Global University

**THE GIST**

Since Xi Jinping came to power, Beijing has systematically tightened control over Hong Kong, especially after the 2020 National Security Law, reshaping its political and media landscape.

Protests in 2014 and 2019 were suppressed, media freedom curtailed, and the "one country, two systems" framework significantly eroded.

CACHE

# A machine has verified the maths that won a Fields Medal: why it matters

Mathematicians announced that a machine had verified Maryna Viazovska's solution to the eight-dimensional sphere-packing problem; the feat used Gauss, an AI tool, to spell out proof in the machine's language; the wider goal is to make mathematical correctness depend more on verifiable proofs

Vasudevan Mukunth

A group of mathematicians has announced a milestone in the effort to thoroughly verify the solution of the sphere-packing problem – for which the Ukrainian mathematician Maryna Viazovska won the Fields Medal in 2022 – using a machine.

This version of the problem asks what the best way is to pack a bunch of spheres in eight dimensions.

On February 23, the team that achieved this said it now has a proof that a machine has verified fully.

Viazovska's proof, like many other (human) proofs of difficult maths problems, was originally written for mathematicians to make sense of. This means her paper skips steps that are considered "obvious" or which follow from some theorem awareness of which mathematicians may take for granted.

On the other hand, the new achievement involved a machine checking both the evident and the 'hidden' steps.

### Benefits of checking

Mathematicians are making this effort because sometimes a logical flaw or an unstated assumption can slip through unnoticed.

Once a proof has been checked in this way, other mathematicians can know which definitions the proof used at all points, which theorems the prover relied on, etc., making it easier for them to audit it themselves or reuse parts of it in their work. Other machines can also use it future when verifying more complicated proofs of other problems.

### 'Remarkable contribution'

The development is also notable for its use of an auto-formalisation agent called 'Gauss', developed by California-based company Math, Inc.

Formalisation here means translating a non-exhaustive human proof written in papers into the machine's language.

The language here was for a piece of software named Lean.

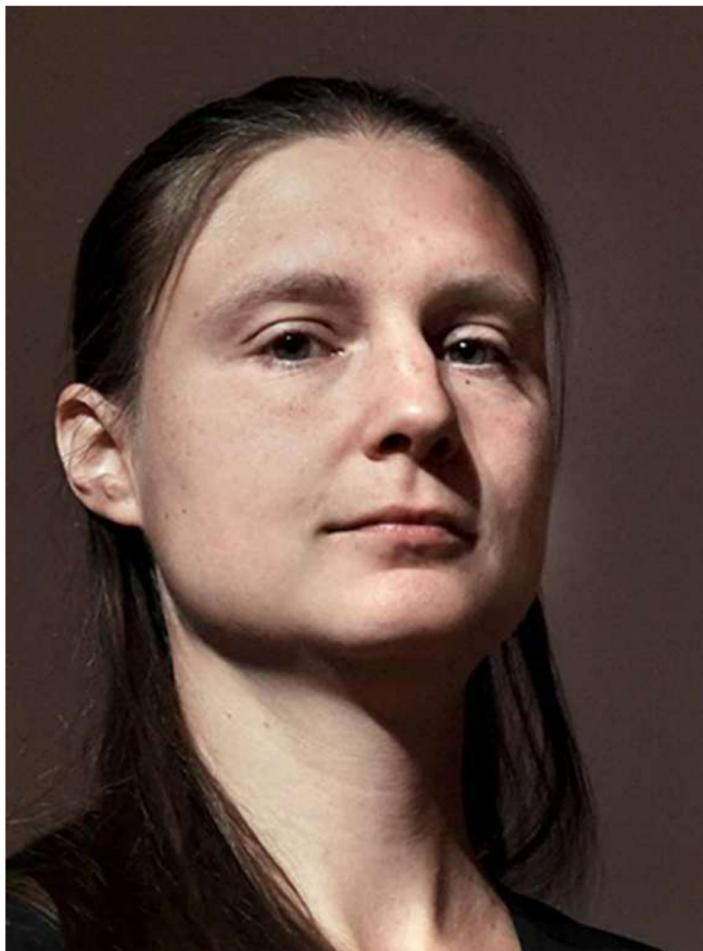
The Sphere Packing Lean project, an open-source effort to formalise Viazovska's proof, already had a large Lean codebase with many lemmas and definitions and a to-do list of the statements that still needed to be proved. 'Gauss', which is an AI tool, formalised the remaining statements for Lean to check.

"The project team is already in the process of reviewing and revising Gauss' code, thereby ensuring that it meets the editorial standards of the formalisation community. This process will ensure that the code is maintainable and reusable, and that it will support future formalisation work," Carnegie Mellon University PhD student Sidharth Hariharan wrote in a post on LinkedIn. "Gauss' remarkable contribution has saved the project months of effort, and Gauss will continue to play a role in the revisions."

Mr. Hariharan is also a maintainer of the Sphere Packing Lean project.

### How Lean works

Lean is a programming language with a logical foundation. Mathematicians first translate definitions, theorems, and



Ukrainian mathematician Maryna Viazovska won the Fields Medal in 2022 for figuring out the best way to pack spheres in a volume in eight dimensions. REUTERS

proofs as Lean code, then its kernel – which is the checker – verifies if they're correct.

The kernel checks proofs using Lean's built-in logical rules, while a separate library called mathlib supplies most of the standard definitions and theorems that mathematicians can reuse.

To use Lean, mathematicians start by encoding a problem as a Lean statement, including what the objects involved in the proof are and what exactly is being claimed. Then they incorporate the necessary mathematical 'parts' of the proof inside Lean, in this case, real and complex analysis, Fourier transforms, special functions, modular/Theta-functions, inequalities, measure theory, etc.

Every step that a human might skip in a paper needs to be expanded into a chain of lemmas that Lean can verify. Then finally the kernel gets to work.

At the Lean Together conference in January, Lean creator Leo de Moura said the priorities for this year include finalising the Lean 4 compiler and improving its performance to reduce compilation times and to handle the large scale of modern Lean libraries.

### Challenge of formalisation

According to mathematicians, the ultimate purpose is to make mathematical correctness less dependent on trust and

social processes and more on explicit and verifiable mathematics.

For instance, in 1879, the English mathematician Alfred Kempe published a proof of the four-colour theorem. If you draw a map on a flat sheet of paper, you can colour each region so that any two regions that share a border get different colours, using only four colours. And Kempe said he'd proved this.

Kempe's peers accepted his proof for about a decade because the proof looked reasonable and he was highly reputed. But in 1890, the mathematician Percy Heawood found a mistake that invalidated it. The theorem later turned out to be true but Kempe's proof was still wrong.

Mathematicians also found in the 20th century that a mathematical 'proof' is a formal object that can, in principle, be checked by a machine, and people wanted practical tools to do that.

Proofs in modern mathematics can also be extremely long and peer-reviewers may not always be up to the task of checking if they're correct from start to end. Proof assistants thus emerged as a way to raise, and meet, the bar for verification.

### Helping with formalisation

The main barrier to getting a machine to thoroughly check a proof is to get it into the machine's language – i.e. formalisation.

Some major theorems that have been completely formalised include the four-colour theorem itself, in 2005; the prime number theorem also in 2005; the Feit-Thompson odd order in 2012; and the Kepler conjecture in 2014.

Automation has helped in this regard, although it's still not come to the point where a tool can take a 'human proof' and turn it into a complete formal proof in a reliable way.

In September 2025, a team led by Indian Institute of Science mathematics professor Siddhartha Gadgil won a grant from the AI For Math Fund for its work on 'LeanAide'.

"By creating an accessible, no-code AI+Lean environment, the project seeks to simplify the formalisation process for Lean users and empower mathematicians with new, innovative tools for research, including agentic solutions," the citation reads.

Some other tools like Gauss include Lean Copilot, an AI helper inside Lean that suggests what step to try next; Sledgehammer, a tool that tries to solve your current goal automatically by calling other programs; and Alpha Proof, an AI tool developed by DeepMind to produce proofs that a proof assistant like Lean can check.

### AI in mathematics

AI has been reshaping mathematics even as it has continued to evolve away from just being a powerful calculator. Platforms like Photomath and specialised educational intelligence, or SEI, models today serve as on-demand tutors that offer step-by-step explanations in natural language and can adapt to individual students.

Large language models (LLMs) are being used to generate high-quality standardised tests as well as to take on challenges like the International Mathematical Olympiad. In 2025, reasoning models from OpenAI and Google DeepMind achieved scores worthy of gold medals.

AI models have also become a reasoning partner for seasoned mathematicians, helping to solve problems by detecting patterns in large datasets.

It has been used to generate novel conjectures in topology and geometry, often spotting connections across disparate fields that evaded experts.

On February 13, for instance, OpenAI announced that two models built by the company helped physicists make a new finding in particle physics, overturning a belief the community had held for many years.

"[XAI cofounder] Christian Szegedy has predicted that models will be mathematically 'superhuman in almost all respects' in six months to a year," University of Toronto assistant professor Daniel Litt wrote on his blog on February 21.

"I find that precise timeline hard to believe for most aspects of mathematical research, but I suspect that he won't be off by much when it comes to proving some class of involved statements that would previously have required an expert. This is a narrow conception of mathematics indeed, but it is true that producing such proofs is a large part of math research."



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

S. Upendran

"Hi! I see that you have finally managed to get the speakers mounted on the wall."

"I did that yesterday. It was the devil of a job getting them to..."

"...devil of a job? What are you talking about?"

"When you say that something was the 'devil of a job', it means it was a very difficult task."

"I see. Is it an informal expression?"

"Yes, it is. For example, it was the devil of a job trying to find an auto in the pouring rain."

"It was the devil of a job scoring runs against the spinners."

"Last week I had the devil of a job trying to fix the scooter."

"What was wrong with it?"

"I'll tell you later. By the way, 'the devil's own job' means the same thing as 'the devil of a job'."

"So, is it O.K. to say, it was the devil's own job trying to find an auto in the pouring rain?"

"It sounds good to me. It was the devil's own job fixing the car."

"Why didn't you take it to a mechanic?"

"The last time I took the car to a mechanic, he did a snow job on me."

"We don't get any snow here. How could he do a snow job on you?"

"When you do a snow job on someone, you deceive them or confuse them."

"That's what our politicians do all the time."

"Exactly! Here's an example. The students wanted to do a snow job on the teacher. Unfortunately, she knew all the tricks."

"I bet she did."

"The children wanted to do a snow job on their parents. But it backfired."

"That's happened to me several times."

"Neena seems to know when I am trying to do a snow job on her. Last week she..."

"... talking about Neena. How is she doing?"

"Not too good actually. She's pretty depressed. She fell down on the job. So they sacked her last week."

"Fell down on the job! Did she hurt herself?"

"Ha! Ha! When someone falls down on the job, it means he/she fails to do his/her job satisfactorily."

"I see. Many people in our school feel that our Physics teacher falls down on the job. Can I say that?"

"I guess you could."

"In the private sector, if you fall down on the job, you are likely to be fired."

"If you are part of the public sector, on the other hand, nobody really cares..."

"... really cares if you work or not. But tell me more about poor Neena. She's lost..."

"... oh, don't worry about her. She'll land a job soon."

"Another expression with the word 'job'. Tell me, does 'land' mean to find a job?"

"That's right. Once again, it's an informal expression. Mohan says, as soon as he lands a job, he is going to buy a CD player."

"My cousin hasn't managed to land a job as yet."

"I am sure..."

"... do you think Neena will land a job soon?"

"I am sure she will."

Published in *The Hindu* on September 28, 1999.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

American writer John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902. Here is a quiz on the author who has been called a giant of American letters

Sindhu Nagaraj

### QUESTION 1

An early Steinbeck novel, this book portrays a group of 'paisanos' – literally, countrymen – a small band of errant friends enjoying life, and wine, in the days after the end of World War I. Name the book.

### QUESTION 2

Steinbeck himself considered this book his magnum opus. The novel brings to life the intricate details of two families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, and their interwoven stories. Name the book.

### QUESTION 3

*The Grapes of Wrath* focuses on a poor family called the Joads. Which famous prize did this book win?

### QUESTION 4

Which American philosopher influenced Steinbeck's writing, including the characters of Doc and Friend Ed?

### QUESTION 5

In which year did Steinbeck win the Nobel Prize for literature?



### Visual Question:

Identify the film that was adapted from a novel of the same name written by Steinbeck. AP

**Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. After living in poverty for a year, 20-year-old Hugo secured a pension of 1,000 francs for his book from this King. Identify the book and King. **Ans: Odes et poésies diverses and King Louis XVIII**

2. Hugo's first play, which was never performed in a theatre, came out in 1827. The preface to the text is widely considered the foundation stone of French Romanticism. **Ans: Cromwell**

3. Hugo's seminal text was translated into Malayalam as *Pavangal*. Name the translator. **Ans: Nalapat Narayana Menon**

4. The text related to the previous question has been adapted on screen several times. The 2012 film adaptation of the book won several accolades. Who directed the 2012 version and who played the character of Madame Thénardier in the movie? **Ans: Tom Hooper and Helena Bonham Carter**

5. This essay by Hugo is a work of literary criticism and examines the literary geniuses of history. Its title is also the name of a very popular English playwright. Identify the playwright. **Ans: William Shakespeare**

Visual: Archdeacon Frollo, Captain Phoebus, and Pierre Gringoire are characters in this Hugo novel, which also prominently features a cathedral. A fire broke out at the cathedral a few years ago, and it was subsequently restored. Identify the cathedral. When was the book published? **Ans: Notre-Dame de Paris and 1831**

Early Birds: Sukdev Shet | Mohan Lal Patel | Sadhan Panda | Haridas Pal | Piyali Tuli

## Word of the day

**Quip:** a witty saying

**Synonyms:** joke, sally

**Usage:** She is known for her sharp quips and quick wit during interviews.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/quip

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /kwɪp/

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## Last mile finance

Local body finances need boost, with more transparency

**D**ebates on Finance Commission awards revolve around the share of revenues to be shared with States and the norms for sharing between States. However, what is less discussed are the financial needs of local bodies, rural and urban. They do need more funds — the question is the form in which this should be provided or raised (grants or own taxes), and the terms, if any, that should accompany grants.



The need to provide more funds is a Constitutional imperative. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment mandate regular elections to rural and urban local bodies, respectively. The corollary is that these bodies need the funds to be effective. The 16<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission has earmarked ₹7.9 lakh crore as grants for local bodies for the 2026-31 period. Such sums have been rising sharply every five years. The latest panel has increased the allocation of grants by 84 per cent in the case of rural bodies to ₹4.35 lakh crore over the 15<sup>th</sup> panel, and by 230 per cent to ₹3.56 lakh crore for urban local bodies. The rural to urban ratio here is lower than in the past, as there's a sharp push this time to promote smaller towns and cities. Even so, assuming an average tax devolution to States, from the Centre, of about ₹16 lakh crore annually over this period (41 per cent share), the overall allocation of ₹7.9 lakh crore over five years is still less than 10 per cent.

The key question is whether this share should be raised, or these bodies should be encouraged to step up their own resources. Urban local bodies raise 50 per cent of their resources on their own, but it is also true that they are faced with rising urbanisation and its challenges, such as pollution, poverty and natural disasters. This explains the role of municipal bonds as well as green finance. Rural local bodies raise less than 10 per cent of the resources through own revenues, while supporting over half the population. The Economic Survey FY18 which dwells on transfers to local bodies in depth, raises the question of whether, in the case of rural bodies, the low own taxes share works as a convenient arrangement — where the elected representatives fight shy of antagonising their small voter base. The Survey also cites the basic maxim of taxpayers having a stake in the system and holding it accountable, more so where governments are in proximity. In that case, the power to collect taxes could be shifted to the district level, linking some transfers with rewards for performance. In fact, for new financial instruments to take root, better records and audits are a must; the 16<sup>th</sup> finance panel recognises this. Half the basic grants accounting for 80 per cent of the total are tied to waste and water management, while performance grants are linked to raising own resources. The devolution between local bodies is based largely on population (90 per cent) and area (10 per cent).

Finally, political and economic institutions for grassroots governance have not done well enough. Elections to panchayats and municipalities are delayed for years. Financial and political reform must go together.

## OTHER VOICES.

## The Guardian

## Saving Westminster: parliament should leave London

MPs and peers face a looming choice: stay put or move out to allow billions of pounds of urgent repairs to the crumbling Palace of Westminster. That was the conclusion of a report from MPs, peers and lay members on the restoration and renewal client board this month. The palace, rebuilt after a fire destroyed it in 1834, is falling apart. There have been 36 "fire incidents" since 2016. Water leaks, heating failures and sewerage problems plague the heart of this Unesco world heritage site. Fixing Westminster would save money in the long run. An upgrade is also a matter of safety and legacy. "The building is just waiting for some disaster," says the Tory peer Michael Dobbs, who advises visitors that if they see someone running, they should run too. Labour's Peter Hain is blunter still, calling it "a Notre Dame inferno in the making". LONDON, FEBRUARY 25

## CHINADAILY

## Opportunity to reflect on folly of tariff war

The United States Supreme Court pulled the emergency brake on a tariff train that had been barreling down the tracks in the name of national crisis, powered largely by political theatrics and a fondness for blunt instruments. The ruling striking down last year's sweeping tariffs imposed under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act should have been a moment of reflection in the White House — a time to realize that governing the country's economy is not the same as hosting the finale of a television reality show. Instead, the response has been to rummage through the legal attic for replacement weapons: Section 122, global tariffs, and the ever-reliable Section 301 investigations. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer insists this is about "continuity", a word that in Washington often means doing the same thing with a different acronym. BEIJING, FEBRUARY 26

MS SAHOO  
CKG NAIR

**T**he Securities Market Code Bill, 2025 is a significant and overdue attempt to modernise India's securities law architecture. It has many positives. Yet, one provision, Section 65(2), risks diluting the reformist ethos that the Bill otherwise seeks to advance.

Section 65(2) empowers the Centre, in public interest, to exempt any listed public sector company (PSC) from any or all requirements relating to the issue of capital, minimum offer size, issue and transfer of securities, corporate governance, disclosures, substantial acquisition and takeover regulations, public shareholding norms, concentration and prudential norms, risk management, and incidental matters. In effect, it enables the executive to suspend core securities market disciplines for an entire ownership class. It strikes at the philosophical core of India's post-1991 reforms.

Economic liberalisation was not merely about allowing private entry; it was about redefining the state's role in markets. The doctrine of the 'commanding heights', where public enterprises dominated key sectors under preferential policy regimes, was gradually dismantled. Sectoral reservations were reduced and ultimately abolished; competition was introduced in banking, telecom, and insurance; and disinvestment diluted state ownership in commercial enterprises. The reform consensus rested on a simple proposition: the State would move from a privileged market participant to a rule-maker and referee. Section 65(2) unsettles that equilibrium by reintroducing regulatory asymmetry based purely on ownership.

## SHORT SHRIFT TO NEUTRALITY

A central pillar of the reform has been competitive neutrality. Public and private enterprises operating in the same market have been subject to the same competition law, the same disclosure standards, and the same governance expectations. If an enterprise raises capital from public markets, it must submit to public market discipline. The proposed exemption provision departs from this fundamental logic. It creates a dual regime, one in which private companies remain fully bound by governance, disclosure, and takeover norms, while listed PSCs may be relieved from them through executive notification. That disturbs the level playing field and injects uncertainty into regulatory expectations.

## Securities Bill has a problematic Section

**ANTI-MARKET.** An omnibus exemption for public sector companies from governance norms risks weakening accountability and competitive neutrality



GETTY IMAGES

More fundamentally, the provision creates an anomalous relationship between market access and market discipline. Listed PSCs access equity markets, attract institutional and foreign portfolio investors, benefit from liquidity and price discovery, and rely on market valuation to support disinvestment programmes. Yet, under Section 65(2), they may be exempted from the very rules that underpin investor confidence: public shareholding requirements, takeover protections, governance standards, and risk management norms.

Markets operate on reciprocity: access to capital is conditional upon transparency, predictability, and adherence to uniform standards. To enjoy the benefits of the market without being fully subject to its discipline is to create regulatory free riders. Over time, such asymmetry can irretrievably weaken confidence in the system, painstakingly built over decades.

The justification offered is 'public interest'. But public interest cannot be presumed solely from state ownership. Many listed PSCs operate in sectors where private firms of comparable scale compete directly: banking, insurance, energy, infrastructure, and financial services. If a public sector steel company and a private sector steel company serve the same customers and access the same capital market, the rationale for exempting one from governance norms while holding the other to full compliance becomes difficult to sustain. Several public sector entities already operate under special statutes that confer bespoke governance structures. Where differentiation was necessary, Parliament has consciously provided it. Section 65(2) adds a further, sweeping executive override atop these arrangements. Such a notification-based power inevitably raises questions about regulatory autonomy and predictability.

Independent securities regulation evolved precisely to ensure that rule-making is stable, transparent, and insulated from short-term pressures. The prospect of selective exemptions for an issuer or class of issuers may unsettle investor perception, particularly among global institutions that value consistency of regulatory treatment.

There is little evidence that regulatory relaxation enhances enterprise value. In recent decades, private peers in several sectors have commanded stronger valuation multiples than public sector counterparts of similar scale. Markets reward governance quality, board independence, disclosure rigour, and credible minority shareholder protection. Diluting these disciplines may not improve performance; it may simply increase perceived governance risk and the cost of capital.

Ownership, by itself, cannot become the basis for differential regulatory treatment in competitive markets. A modern securities code must reinforce equal rules and institutional credibility, not dilute them.

Minority shareholders in listed PSCs, including retail investors, pension funds, and domestic institutions, rely on takeover norms, public float

## NEED FOR SAFEGUARDS

Minority shareholders in listed PSCs, including retail investors, pension funds, and domestic institutions, rely on takeover norms, public float

## Reimagining FCI to raise farm incomes

The revamp of FCI must be in sync with MSP and fertilizer subsidy reforms. Curbing grain wastage must also be a priority

Amit Kapoor  
Pradeep Puri  
Ananya Khurana

**T**he Food Corporation of India (FCI) was set up in 1965 as a bulwark against hunger, responsible for procuring grain at assured prices, stabilising markets, and feeding millions through the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Six decades on, the mission remains vital, but the context has shifted dramatically. Today, India stands at a point of opportunity: managing abundant cereal stocks, building resilience against climate variability, and optimising fiscal resources.

FCI should pivot from open-ended physical MSP procurement to a more calibrated role focused primarily on maintaining buffer stocks for food security, while reducing unnecessary costs. This basically implies delinking procurement volumes from storage capacity so that procurement responds to buffer stock norms and does not exceed them by default.

Modern silo capacity and smarter buffer stock management, aligned with domestic price stabilisation objectives, can transform price stabilisation from a reactive exercise into a predictable, rules-based system. FCI cannot be revamped standalone or in one stroke. It must evolve alongside reforms in MSP and fertilizer subsidies through Direct

Benefit Transfers (DBT), guided by broad stakeholder consultation and consensus. This could address chronic storage inefficiencies, reduce fiscal burdens, and eventually support India's ambition to reach \$100 billion in agricultural exports by 2030.

Buffer stocks act as economic insurance as they are procured in surplus to prevent price crashes and released during shortages to curb inflation. Norms are set quarterly to meet the National Food Security Act (NFSA) requirements, strategic reserves, and contingencies, yet stocks often exceed these levels.

As of July 1, 2025, rice and wheat reserves stood at 736.61 lakh tonne against norms of 411.20 lakh tonne, forcing Open Market Sale Scheme (OMSS) releases to moderate prices. Such overhangs inflate carrying costs, risk quality loss, and add logistics expenses, implying the need for smarter storage and faster rotation. It is excess procurement, not capacity constraints, that generates today's inefficiencies.

In 2023-24, FCI spent a staggering ₹1,87,834 crore on procurement, logistics, employee remuneration, and depreciation on its traditional storage capacity, translating to ₹22,347.62 per tonne. Of the total expenditure, the Comptroller and Auditor General flagged ₹62.76 crore spent on storage and supervision of food stock as avoidable costs in Punjab and Haryana alone. Set this beside a modern domestic



REFORMING. Food management SRINATH M

silo operator that manages similar functions at around ₹534 per tonne, illustrating how technology and incentives dramatically lower costs.

## ADVANTAGE SILOS

While conventional FCI godowns cost about ₹915 crore per million tonnes to build, modern silos cost only marginally more at about ₹1,000 crore, whereas global benchmarks hover around ₹207-₹373 crore. Even with higher upfront costs, silos slash losses, improve quality, and deliver long-term savings.

India's rapid rollout of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) silos is a step in that direction. The six modern facilities (50,000 tonne each) commissioned in Bihar, Punjab, and Gujarat promise scientific storage, bulk handling, and rail integration. Silo capacity is projected to rise from 2.8 million tonne to 9 million tonne across 250 locations in three years, with long leases and per-tonne storage charges creating clear performance incentives. The payoff is

real: scientific storage of wheat can reduce losses to 0.3-2 per cent, preserving quality and lowering re-bagging, fumigation, and shrinkage. These efficiency gains matter because they ensure that even if MSP procurement is scaled back, food security remains intact as long as buffer-stock norms under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) are maintained.

All this hinges on policy discipline. Rule-based OMSS bands should automatically trigger releases whenever stocks exceed buffer norms, with reserve prices calibrated to regional wholesale indices and transport costs. Faster OMSS releases could generate fiscal savings that can be redirected toward DBT, agronomic extension, and support for lagging regions.

Eliminating wastage of nearly 28 per cent of subsidised foodgrains could unlock savings of about ₹70,125 crore, allowing reinvestment in scientific storage that preserves grain quality, cuts losses, and improves realised farm returns.

At the same time, predictable price stabilisation would reduce crash risk and encourage diversification away from water-intensive cereals toward pulses and oilseeds. Crucially, this does not dismantle food security.

Kapoor is chair, Puri is Senior Fellow and Ananya Khurana is senior researcher at the Institute for Competitiveness

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## PSBs shine bright

With reference to the Editorial 'Rhetoric to reality' (February 26), it is highly creditable that public sector banks have started performing better than their private sector counterparts and brought out their inherent potential to the fore in the last quarter.

While State Bank of India led the profit growth with lion's share, a few other PSBs also have posted double digit growth. Treasury operations of PSBs also contributed significantly to the profitability with major gains

reaped by Canara Bank and Bank of Baroda.

Another significant performance point to be noted is the recoveries made in technically written off accounts by PSBs, especially PNB, SBI and Central Bank. If PSBs can improve their customer service as well, they have the potential to overtake private sector banks in future as well.

Kosaraju Chandramouli  
Hyderabad

Apropos, 'Rhetoric to reality',

(February 26), public sector banks are healthier today because sustained structural clean-up and tighter institutional discipline have fundamentally reengineered balance-sheet quality and risk governance.

Years of aggressive recognition and time-bound resolution of stressed assets compressed legacy NPAs and restored transparency. Improved recoveries through insolvency and settlement frameworks have strengthened cash flows.

Above all, tighter regulatory

supervision by RBI has embedded prudent underwriting, continuous monitoring and compliance culture. Collectively, these reforms have revived market confidence, lowered systemic fragility for sustainable credit expansion nationwide today.

N Sadasiva Reddy  
Bengaluru

## Push disinvestment

This refers to the article 'Disinvestment must gather pace' (February 26). Disinvestment is one of the important capital receipts of

the government. With rising capital expenditure, achieving the disinvestment target (₹80,000 crore for 2026-27) can lessen the government's fiscal deficit considerably.

Having said that, one feels, the government should monitor the performance of undertakings post-disinvestment phase and get the views of the stakeholders. Privatisation at the expense of public welfare is unwelcome.

S Ramakrishnasayee  
Chennai

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# OPINION

The  
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{ OUR TAKE }

## Pawar politics in Maharashtra

Sharad Pawar may have his way with a Rajya Sabha seat, but the polls will test MVA unity

Constituents of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) are reeling from a poor showing in the local polls in Maharashtra that, following as it does their poor showing in the 2024 assembly election, now face a challenge that could test their resolve to stay united, and it comes from an unlikely source, Sharad Pawar.

This is ironic because the MVA, formed in November 2019, was the brainchild of Sharad Pawar, who outsmarted the NDA, which was poised to form the government, by weaning away the united Shiv Sena by offering to back party chief Uddhav Thackeray for the chief minister's office. While the alliance ruled till mid-2022, its formation set in motion a series of events that transformed Maharashtra politics in unexpected ways. The Shiv Sena and Sharad Pawar's own Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) underwent splits, forcing a realignment of forces in the state. This eventually resulted in a dip in Pawar's own fortunes, leaving him in charge of a smaller unit of the NCP, the NCP (SP). The unfortunate death, in an air crash, of NCP leader and Maharashtra deputy CM Ajit Pawar (Pawar's nephew) came when the two factions were considering a merger — and may have effectively scuttled it. All of these mean that Pawar, now 86 and in indifferent health, no longer sets the agenda in Maharashtra politics.

The Rajya Sabha (RS) elections present a problem, both for Pawar and the MVA. The MVA has the numbers to get, at best, one MP elected to the RS, but all three constituents, the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray), Congress, and NCP (SP), have staked a claim. The RS polls will test the MVA's unity. The Sena (UBT) and Congress have more legislators than NCP(SP), and are also wary of the latter, especially on account of its merger talk with the NCP. Pawar has now thrown his hat in the ring — NCP (SP) leader Supriya Sule has sought the seat for her father — and is likely to force the MVA constituents to rethink their priorities. Sharad Pawar has completed two terms in the Upper House and previously expressed his intent to retire from the RS, but it is clear that he is having a rethink, perhaps because the merger with the NCP isn't happening (at least, not immediately), and the party needs him.

It isn't clear whether the other MVA constituents will back him. At one time, they might have found it difficult to say no to Pawar. And even if they eventually decide to back him, the election will test their unity.

## The burden of adding an extra M to Kerala

For seven decades since its formation, the state went by the name Kerala, though its natives always added an "M" to it, making it Keralam, as if to rhyme with the local language, Malayalam. Now the Centre has cleared the state's demand that it be called Keralam, instead of its anglicised variant. This small act of cultural assertion could add up to little other than forcing the cash-starved government to undertake a renaming marathon, including the high court, a university, numerous departments, and even its Ranji team. Kerala could have easily coexisted with Keralam (as is written in Malayalam) just like European cities are spelt differently in different languages.

This near-pointless exercise is different from similar acts from the 1950s through to the 1970s when the state of Madras became Tamil Nadu, Mysore became Karnataka, and Bombay became Maharashtra. Those demands arose with the formation of linguistic provinces, which also saw the redrawing of borders, and were meant to instill an inclusive identity in the residents of the new states. Kerala, born in 1956 after the merger of the princely states of Travancore and Kochi with Malabar, a part of the Madras Presidency and later, Madras State, had already made that journey. One origin story called the region the land of *keram* trees, *keram* being one of the Malayalam words for coconut. An extra "M" in the state's name doesn't cost the Centre much, unlike the demands of neighbouring Tamil Nadu that involve a more relevant "M", money.

A third state set for elections doesn't find all this amusing. CM Mamata Banerjee has demanded to know why there is step-motherly treatment to West Bengal in the case of renaming. She wanted the state renamed Bangla since the prefix West is more a legacy of Partition, which, Banerjee complains, pushes residents to the back rows because of W's position in the English alphabet. Such obsessions, a vacuous form of sub-nationalist assertion, may add ballast to the political rhetoric on Centre-state relations, but it is anybody's guess if they can ignite political passions.

## Fate of US trade deal post tariff takedown

A prudent approach for India is to let uncertainties arising out of the SCOTUS ruling resolve themselves to the extent possible before finalising the trade deal with the US, and pursue domestic policy reforms

The Supreme Court of the United States of America (SCOTUS) handed the Trump administration, arguably, its biggest institutional pushback by striking down the tariffs that the US had imposed under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977. Given that these tariffs have been the centrepiece of President Trump's economic policy in his second term, the legal setback now raises myriad issues spanning administrative details, policy options and political fallout.

The administrative challenges thrown up by the SCOTUS ruling are with regard to the almost \$300 billion in revenue that has been collected by the US government since the tariffs went into effect. Given the ruling, the tariffs that were collected potentially have to be refunded. This presents a formidable challenge in terms of the records that have to be organised in order to send the refunds to the right businesses and in the correct amounts. Moreover, since some businesses may

have passed on the tariffs to their consumers, the refunds also raise a secondary issue of equity: Money that should be going to consumers will end up with businesses, representing, in effect, a redistribution from consumers to firms. Some of these issues will likely end up in court, sooner or later.

On the policy front, the SCOTUS ruling raises two crucial issues. The first is about the options available to the administration to reintroduce the tariffs. President Trump has announced a 15% global tariff under Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act, which allows for tariffs to deal with "large and serious" BOP problems, but this has a 150-day limit. Extending tariffs under this clause beyond the 150-day period would require renewal authorisation through a vote of the US Congress. It is unlikely to pass in the US Senate. The administration could also invoke Section 301 (also of the 1974 Trade Act), which allows the government to use tariffs to respond to unfair trade practices by America's trading partners. But this requires investigation. It is time-consuming and difficult to do such wide investigations across many products and countries, though President Trump has announced that such investigations are being initiated.

The administration could also expand its use of Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which allows for tariffs by the President for national security reasons; for example,

the 25% tariffs imposed on aluminium, steel, copper, automobiles etc. These remain in effect and unaffected by the SCOTUS ruling. However, further expansion of tariffs under this section will need new investigations, followed by a certification by the US secretary of commerce. Any serious investigation to prepare a report covering many products and countries will take time and resources.

There is also Section 338 of the Tariff Act of 1930, which allows the administration to retaliate with a tariff if there is discrimination by a trading partner against the US relative to other countries. This has never been used. In today's world of most favoured nation rates, this is going to be difficult to show, and if used, almost surely, will end up in litigation.

In summary, while the administration certainly has alternative levers to pull to rescuscitate the tariffs, they all have limitations and imply reduced flexibility relative to the way Trump had been using tariffs to bend countries to the US's will on myriad trade and non-trade issues. The second policy issue that the ruling has thrown up is the status of the various trade deals agreed to or currently under negotiation. The legal standing of these deals from the US side was always uncertain, especially with respect to whether they needed Congressional ratification.

Now, there is secondary confusion from the perspective of the partner



While the Trump administration certainly has alternative levers to pull to rescuscitate the tariffs, they all have limitations. REUTERS

countries as well. If they agreed to tariff rates higher than 15% (such as India and Indonesia), will they remain bound by the terms that they "voluntarily" signed on to? At the very minimum, the uncertainty surrounding the status of the tariffs will likely slow down any legislative ratification of the agreements by US trade partners.

The biggest impact of the SCOTUS ruling, though, may be on the political fallout that it could unleash. Two things that have marked Donald Trump throughout his political career (as well as his public pronouncements before running for public office) are his unquenchable desire to be perceived as a "winner" and his affection for tariffs as a policy instrument. The ruling hits both simultaneously. While normal political actors would react to such a setback by quietly using other avenues to reimpose their policy vision, Trump's persona makes it unlikely that he will go this route. The State of the Union address suggests that he will stay on this path. His desire for revenge and quick victories opens up the possibility that his words or actions in the coming days could create a backlash both from the courts as well as the non-MAGA wing of conservative America, many of whom have already soured on his two major policy initiatives: Immigration enforcement and tariffs.

The possibility of having to refund the tariffs also raises an additional political unpleasantness for Trump. A big part of his pitch for tariffs to the American public was based on the assertion that the tariffs would be paid by foreigners. Having to refund tariffs to domestic businesses would give the lie to these claims. That too is loaded with consequences given the upcoming midterm elections in November.

Having just recently agreed to a framework for a trade agreement, India now has to decide how to proceed. Perhaps, the prudent approach is to let uncertainties resolve themselves to the extent possible before finalising the deal, including parliamentary ratification, factoring in, of course, possible US retaliation under sections 232 and 301 in case of a long delay in ratifying on India's part. However, the Trump tariff assault did have the effect of reversing creeping protectionism in India, and possibly catalysing a few domestic policy reforms. It is important that India does not reverse itself on those trade and other reforms.

Amartya Lahiri is Royal Bank Professor of Economics at the University of British Columbia and Devashish Mitra is Professor of Economics and Cramer Professor of Global Affairs at Syracuse University. The views expressed are personal

## Climate crisis and health, and AI at the intersection

Last week, New Delhi buzzed with the AI Impact Summit, promising real-world results over abstract discussions. Yet, the robo-dog spectacle at the summit stole the spotlight for all the wrong reasons, reminding us that India needs less theatrics and more substance. For India, the real issue is not what impresses on stage, but what actually saves lives and livelihoods.

Can Artificial Intelligence (AI) step in to prevent the wave of deaths and diseases looming over the next few months?

The heat season is already tightening its grip across much of the country and will intensify from March to early June. This will be followed by the monsoon rains that unleash dengue and other mosquito- and water-borne diseases. Year after year, these dangers return, and the climate crisis is making it worse. Though we have enough warnings, we simply lack the readiness to tackle these disasters that are obviously waiting in front of us.

Disaster management should not wait for a disaster to strike. It should start well in advance through proactive planning, targeted forecasts, and swift local action. Despite the rollout of climate and heat action plans, too many municipalities still treat heat and dengue like surprise visitors each year, struggling to respond only after the damage is done. Water tankers roll out after the first deaths, fogging starts after cases surge, and hospitals rush to catch up when they should be staying ahead. This is not a strategy or informed action — it is a desperate reaction.

So, what should an AI-enabled early warning system for climate and health look like in India? The answer starts with heat because it is our most urgent and deadly threat. While some cities have heat action plans, improved public messaging, cooling centres, and access to drinking water, heat deaths keep climbing. This is because heat has become an annual affair instead of an occasional crisis.

AI and machine learning have the potential to transform weather forecasts into daily, hyper-local health risk alerts. This involves analysing temperature, humidity, night-time heat, and urban hotspots, while considering the most vulnerable, including the elderly, those without adequate housing, outdoor workers, and populations without access to cooling. The system should then trigger clear actions tailored to each city. This should include ensuring emergency rooms are fully staffed, that supplies like ORS and IV fluids are stocked, and that cooling shelters are open before emergencies start. Work-rest rules should be enforced, not just suggested in guidelines.

We have the tools to predict climate-driven diseases by training models with past climate and health data, but this needs reliable health

data. Right now, our health and death records are scattered and often underreported, and even researchers struggle to access them. Without reliable, up-to-date health data, even the best forecasts are just another set of maps and numbers. To build predictive systems for heat and health, we need to treat public health data as critical national infrastructure.

A recent project we worked on shows how we can forecast dengue risk using climate data. Across India, dengue cases are highest during the monsoon season, especially from June to September. But the conditions for high dengue often start earlier. Research led by my PhD student found that more dengue cases are linked to temperatures, rainfall, and humidity from March to May, as well as rainfall during the monsoon. This means we can use pre-monsoon conditions to predict dengue spikes before the monsoon arrives.

This research also reveals how dengue risk could rise in the near future as the climate crisis accelerates. Here, AI can save time, money, and lives. AI can combine seasonal climate forecasts, local weather data, satellite imagery of land and water, and disease-tracking data to produce dengue risk forecasts. It can help target mosquito control in the right neighbourhoods and warn communities before outbreaks. If used well, AI can guide health departments on where to send tests, platelets, and staff where they are needed most, before the crisis peaks.

India can improve, but only if we treat this as essential public infrastructure, not another flashy product for an AI summit. First, we must weave climate-health early warning systems into the fabric of our public infrastructure. This means setting up open data links between the India Meteorological Department, health agencies, and city systems. Most importantly, we need to share real results, not just launch new dashboards.

Second, people must remain at the heart of the process. AI should empower, not replace, human judgement in critical decisions. Public officials need to review and approve AI-generated outputs, always prioritising safety and fairness. In health, this means doctors, disease experts, and city leaders should make the final decisions, not a computer model.

Finally, we must measure the real-world impact. Did hospital admissions for heat actually fall in areas where early warnings were used? Did dengue cases go down where pre-monsoon actions were taken based on forecasts? If we cannot answer these questions, then our system is just another performance at another summit.

The heat has already arrived, and soon dengue, chikungunya, and other mosquito- and water-borne diseases will follow close behind. Global climate agencies indicate a chance of an El Niño event emerging in the latter half of 2026, a reminder that heat and weather swings may be sharper than usual. Taking precautions now is cheaper and easier than rushing to respond in an emergency later. While the world debates the future and promises of AI, India can show that real impact means fewer people collapsing in the heat and fewer children suffering in packed hospital wards.

Roxy Mathew Koll is a climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology and a lead author of recent IPCC reports. The views expressed are personal

{ ISSAC HERZOG } PRESIDENT, ISRAEL

We should recognise the young Indian talent across the globe — students in colleges, universities, and research centres — who are driving innovation



## India's flying training organisations need reset

In recent times, it seems as if air disasters in the country have been vying for national attention. The crash near Ranchi on Monday that killed seven on board came just weeks after the one in Baramati in which all on board, including Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar, died. Amid all this, the AII71 crash from June 2025 lies forgotten by most, except for perhaps the victims' families and the handful of parties with stakes in the investigation outcome.

The last several weeks have seen several incidents involving India's flying training organisations (FTOs) and smaller trainer-aircraft. These escaped attention given there were no fatalities. In January itself, an India-One Air Cessna Grand C208B aircraft with six on board crash landed in Odisha's Rourkela — thankfully, there were no fatalities. And earlier this month, a Cessna 172 trainer aircraft aged more than 50 years, operated by the Redbird Flight Training Academy, made a forced landing in Karnataka due to inadequate fuel. The academy is a repeat offender: In 2023, the directorate general of civil aviation (DGCA) had indefinitely suspended flying training activities at all bases of the academy after it reported two crashes within four days.

Sector experts say that a serious concern dogging the aviation space in the country is the inexorable decline in the quality of flying training in India over the years. In the 1980s, commanders and former instructors say, India was a preferred destination for flying trainees. At the Madras, Delhi, and other flying clubs in the country, it was common to find trainees from Sri Lanka, Iran, Bhutan, Jordan, Malaysia and many other countries. But the flow has reversed since the early 2000s, and Indian trainees are going to Sri Lanka, the Philippines and even distant Monte Negro, among other countries. In fact, of every 1,000 commercial pilot licences (CPLs) issued in the country annually, 700 are going to those who have completed their training outside India. The authorities must ascertain why India lost its pole position within just decades.

Coming back to the present issue, alarm bells went off after a May 2025 aircraft accident investigation board (AIB) presentation on FTO aircraft accidents. The presentation highlighted that of the 38 accidents involving FTO aircraft reported in the last 13 years, 14 had been fatal. Between 2013 and 2016, five accidents occurred and then in a single year (2017), five more took place. In 2020, despite the cessa-

tion of flying due to the pandemic, four fatal accidents took place; 2022 recorded seven.

Industry, DGCA and the ministry of civil aviation sources say that a majority of these accidents occur due to a lack of discipline and failure to observe laid down standard operating procedures (SOPs). While some crashes and accidents are due to poor and irregular maintenance, or technical glitches or, at times, inclement weather, the majority can be attributed to human error or even careless actions. Instructors and trainees often fly the aircraft at lower than recommended heights, deviate from the authorised flight paths, try acrobatic manoeuvres, don't follow patterns advised for take-offs and landings, and fly in low visibility conditions, often to/from unregulated airfields.

There have been several allegations of harassment and inappropriate behaviour meted out by instructors to trainees. Illegal occupants in the cockpit during solo flights or sorties have been reported as well, with instructors and trainees offering unauthorised joy rides to friends and family members.

In 2022, there was a suggestion that CCTV cameras be installed in unregulated airfields, which has now largely been done by all the FTOs operating out of these. However, finding this level of monitoring still inadequate, DGCA in January has asked for all trainer aircraft cockpits be fitted with on-board audio and video recording devices. This, industry experts say, is rather embarrassing as it amounts to resorting to desperate measures to keep pilots, commanders, and instructors in check. DGCA has advised operators to record flight data through suitable methods, including recording the communication between the cockpit and the air control towers. From October 2025, a bi-annual ranking of the FTOs has been instituted, to keep them on their toes.

That said, it remains to be seen how many of the 380 aircraft registered (including those that are no longer airworthy) with the close to 40 FTOs in India, across 60-odd bases, will comply — within the 120-day deadline set by the regulator or even at all. India's FTOs have been long-time offenders with an unshakeable nexus between the operators and the authorities. Breaking this will require more than regulatory circulars.

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

## The AgriStack opportunity

Accurate data collection is key to its success

Speaking at *Business Standard* Manthan this week, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman evocatively referred to AgriStack, a digital public-infrastructure network being developed for the farm sector, as the “next UPI”. The reference is to the Unified Payments Interface, which has undoubtedly revolutionised retail payment in India and is gradually expanding overseas. But UPI is relatively simple in concept: It links a user’s bank accounts to a digital payment infrastructure and can be accessed via commercial apps such as GPay or PhonePe. AgriStack, however, is a far more ambitious and complex venture that will test the administrative and information-technology capabilities of the Centre and states.

The remit is to create digital IDs for 110 million farmers and build comprehensive three foundational databases linking farmer registries, land records, and crop data. The intention is unexceptionable: To enable farmers to access benefits and services with minimum paperwork or physical visits to service providers. The project, which the Centre approved in September 2024, has allocated financial support to states to create their farmer registries. Most states and Union Territories have signed on. So far, 86.2 million farmer IDs have been created. The Centre aims to complete this exercise by March 2027. Making AgriStack effective, therefore, demands granular data collection. Though digital mapping of agricultural land using drone technology has progressed apace in parts of the country, establishing land ownership has been a tougher proposition.

This is principally because approximately 20 per cent of India’s farm households are tenants, leasing land for cultivation, with owners located in big cities or even overseas. In some states, the proportion of tenant farmers is as high as 36 per cent. Yet if farmer registries and land records are accurately captured, AgriStack could be a game changer, especially for landless tenants, who account for about a third of tenant farmers and tend to be among the most vulnerable with small holdings and limited agency. Most have little access to institutional credit or government-support schemes such as crop insurance or the signature PM KISAN direct-benefit transfer programme, which transfers ₹6,000 per year as minimum income support. The data also shows that 60 per cent of fertiliser usage is by those who do not have land in their own name.

In fact, it is in fertiliser usage that AgriStack has the potential to deliver major benefits, both in terms of controlling the burgeoning subsidy — which is budgeted at over ₹1.7 trillion in the coming financial year — and restoring soil health. In Haryana, for example, an experiment connecting land, fertiliser usage, and crops grown using AgriStack resulted in major savings. The biggest cutback occurred in urea, which is so heavily subsidised that its chronic overuse has resulted in an imbalance in fertiliser usage. Over the years, this excessive application of urea (N) over phosphatic (P) and potassium (K) fertilisers, typically known as the NPK imbalance, has been a key cause of soil degradation and falling agricultural productivity. AgriStack, therefore, could drive significant policy shifts in the delivery of fertiliser subsidies directly to farmers rather than to manufacturers. Direct transfers could also introduce a degree of transparency in usage, leading to a more accurate recalibration of the subsidy. Experts argue that this could help save about ₹30,000-40,000 crore. But much will depend on the accuracy and efficiency of the data-collection mechanism.

## Containing the subsidy burden

India needs a national debate

The Supreme Court last week expressed displeasure over the growing culture of freebies. The court’s concern is understandable, and needs a collective response from the Union and state governments. While hearing a matter related to Tamil Nadu Power Distribution Corporation, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant noted that unchecked distribution of largesse could weaken the economic foundations of the country. This is important because many states are running a revenue deficit, which effectively means they are borrowing to fund subsidies or simply distributing cash under one scheme or another. The Bench also noted that announcements of such schemes frequently took place before elections. Notably, the court acknowledged that the state had an obligation to help those who lacked access to essential services such as education and utilities, but they should be well targeted.

The 16th Finance Commission has also discussed this issue at length while underscoring the implications for public finance. An analysis of 21 states by the Finance Commission showed that their subsidies and transfers were budgeted at ₹9.73 trillion in 2025-26, as against ₹3.86 trillion in 2018-19. As a percentage of the combined gross state domestic product (GSDP) of the 21 states, the outlay on subsidies rose to 2.7 per cent in 2023-24 from 2.2 per cent in 2018-19. Unconditional cash transfers are budgeted at nearly ₹2 trillion in the current year. They account for a 20 per cent share in schemes for subsidies and transfers of states. The biggest component remains power subsidy — at 27 per cent. The power-subsidy bill for 2023-24 was ₹2.60 trillion. However, it must be noted that the bill understates the subsidies provided by the states. Part of it is on the books of state power-distribution companies, which is reflected in their accumulated losses and debt. Besides the state governments, the Centre also provides various kinds of subsidies. The allocation increased during the pandemic, but moderated in the following years and is budgeted at 1.76 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) this financial year. The bulk of the subsidy allocation goes for food and fertilisers.

As the Finance Commission also noted in its report, it is worrying that, once implemented, a subsidy or cash-transfer scheme remains in effect permanently. Given that a substantial amount of general government expenditure goes in subsidies, particularly at a time when public debt is at an elevated level of about 80 per cent of GDP, there is a need for a national debate on the subject. In a competitive political environment, incumbents are often inclined to keep increasing the level of subsidies and cash transfers. Thus, it is necessary to have hard fiscal rules and mechanisms need to be devised to keep the general government finances on a sustainable path.

There are several issues here. First, there is a need to define merit and non-merit subsidies. Second, clear limits on states’ expenditure on subsidies and cash transfers are needed, particularly for those states running a revenue deficit and carrying a higher debt burden. Third, India needs a consensus as to how much of general government spending should go into financing subsidies and cash transfers. This is critical because higher government spending on subsidies constrains fiscal capacity, and higher borrowing requirements tend to crowd out private investment. Sustained higher spending on subsidies will directly affect longer-term growth prospects.

# Shifting dynamics of state finances

The 16<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission throws up a transition challenge for states facing strict fiscal limits

With every new Finance Commission’s award period coming into effect, there are subtle changes in the resource positions of the states. Some Commissions have increased the share of states in vertical devolution. Most have recommended changes in the formula for horizontal devolution, implying an increase in the share of some states and a decline for others, depending on the variables chosen and the weightings assigned. The report of the Sixteenth Finance Commission has left the vertical devolution unchanged while revising the formula for horizontal devolution. Clearly, there are both gainers and losers. Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala and Punjab emerge as the gainers, with an increase in their share. On the other hand, Arunachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal have seen a reduction in their share.

Any moderation in the receipts of states could induce them to seek out additional sources of borrowing to bridge emerging gaps. Based on the monthly key indicators put out by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, for 26 of the 28 states, the ratio of fiscal deficit-to-gross state domestic product (GSDP) for 2024-25 is at 3.3 per cent, compared to 2.9 per cent for 2023-24. To understand the evolution of trends over time, the table juxtaposes the fiscal deficit-to-GSDP in 2023-24 with the change in fiscal deficit-to-GSDP ratio between 2023-24 and 2025-26 (BE). The table suggests that there is some evidence of convergence towards 3.5 per cent. Many states with a higher deficit in 2023-24 have proposed a reduction in deficit while a significant share of those with a lower deficit have proposed an increase in deficit.

The states marked in red in the table indicate those with a reduction in share. A reduction in receipts or a slowdown in growth for a range of states could mean upward pressure on deficits.

In particular, the impact on the year of transition needs to be closely examined. It would be instructive to examine the profile of change in tax devolution in

2026-27 against the prevailing debt profile of states. The figure plots change in receipts from central tax devolution between 2025-26 and 2026-27 against the debt-to-GSDP ratio for individual states (2023-24 is the latest date for which data is available). While no clear trend is visible, two points need to be noted. First, of the states with debt-to-GSDP exceeding 40 per cent, 4 experience a decline in the level of devolution available in 2026-27 when compared to 2025-26. This represents not just a decline in the rate of growth but, more importantly, a decline in nominal transfers. These also happen to be states with relatively high dependence on central transfers — own resources account for 10-20 per cent of total revenue receipts. The fiscal situation of these states could come under strain during the transition without support.

The second issue to note is that most of the states that will experience a decline in devolution or a low growth (less than 5 per cent over last year) have a debt-to-GSDP ratio over 30 per cent. In other words, these are the states that should be nudged to reduce their debt-to-GSDP ratio. A moderation in the devolution to these states could create upward pressures on their fiscal deficit.

Another dimension pertaining to resource flows from the Union government needs attention. There is a gentle pivot in the central programmes towards adopting a challenge mode. The challenge mode is presented as a mechanism to induce proactive decision-making by states — the design of the scheme provides funding for a limited number of states. From a value-for-money perspective, this could be an interesting tool, since states are expected to make an effort to present their best foot forward in both design and execution. However, for fiscally constrained states, such an approach introduces an additional element of uncertainty in resource availability.

Juxtaposing these observations against the recommendations on fiscal consolidation in the report of the Six-

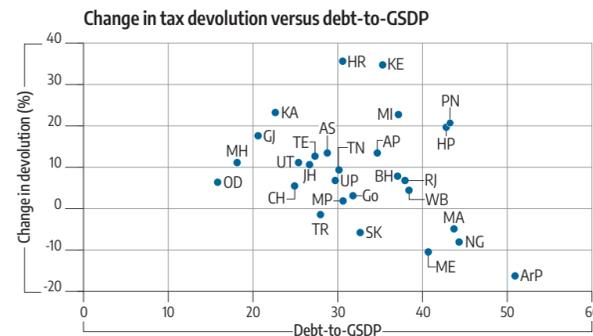


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

### Diverging fiscal paths

		Fiscal deficit-to-GSDP in 2025-26 (BE)	
		↓	↑
FD/GSDP in 2023-24	>3.5%	Meghalaya, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Nagaland, Manipur, Punjab, Bihar	Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam
	<=3.5%	Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana	Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Kerala, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Mizoram, Goa, Odisha, Gujarat, Tripura, Jharkhand

Das, P and A Kaur (2025): State of State Finances, 2025, NIPFP (forthcoming)



teenth Finance Commission throws up a transition challenge. It is recommended that the fiscal deficit of the Union government be reduced from 4.4 per cent in 2025-26 to 3.5 per cent by 2030-31, while the states are expected to keep their deficits at 3 per cent of GDP, through the entire period. The Commission recommends that, “To ensure the stability of State Government debt, this limit should be strictly enforced in accordance with clause (3) of Article 293 of the Con-

stitution.” In other words, the adjustment for lower devolution cannot be implemented through additional revenue mobilisation or expenditure compression. As a general principle, this is acceptable, but at a point of transition, a less disruptive glide path might be required.

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# Trade & sustainability: Time to shape the rules

Trade and sustainability has become a contentious issue in global economic governance. It is likely to appear in the forthcoming Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO), directly or embedded in another proposal. For India and many other developing countries, this debate revives long-standing concerns about the appropriateness of introducing non-trade issues into the multilateral trading system.

India’s guarded approach has deep roots. When these issues first surfaced at the Singapore Ministerial Conference in 1996, developing countries strongly opposed their inclusion in the WTO’s negotiating agenda. The Doha Round significantly rolled back ambitions on non-trade issues. Labour standards were dropped entirely, while environmental issues were truncated to a narrow and carefully circumscribed mandate: Examining the relationship between WTO rules and multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), promoting trade in environmental goods and services, and enhancing information exchange between the WTO and MEA secretariats.

India accepted this limited mandate, while firmly reiterating the principles of development, equity, and common but differentiated responsibilities. For nearly two decades, India and many others have maintained their position. Labour issues have remained outside. Environmental issues, however, have repeatedly surfaced, especially through plurilateral and Joint Statement Initiatives (JSIs) such as those on trade and environmental sustainability, fuel subsidy reforms, unilateral measures, circular economy, etc. India has stayed out of these initiatives on grounds of principles, warning that they risk diluting the WTO’s consensus-based decision-making and encroaching upon mandates better handled elsewhere.

Yet, the global landscape has changed significantly. Blocked at the multilateral level, developed countries have pursued sustainability issues through free trade agreements and plurilateral arrangements. At the

bilateral and regional level, the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) have been particularly aggressive. The US relies on stringent, sanction-based dispute settlement mechanisms to enforce labour and environmental commitments. The EU traditionally preferred dialogue-based approaches, but recent FTAs show a clear move towards stronger enforcement.

India’s own approach has, however, evolved. Since the India-Japan FTA in 2011, and more notably in recent agreements with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the United Kingdom and the EU, India has accepted comprehensive trade and sustainability chapters, albeit with soft enforcement mechanisms based on consultations. The recently concluded India-EU FTA reflects this pragmatism, though the details are not yet known. The urgency on both sides to conclude the agreement amid trade uncertainties unleashed by the US may have resulted in a relatively benign outcome for India, particularly in the design of the dispute settlement section in the sustainability chapter.

India’s environmental credentials have strengthened considerably since 2015. It has maintained pace in the green transition, and if the availability of resources, both financial and technical, is eased over time, it may achieve its targets in due course. It is a party to all major MEAs, including those on biodiversity, ozone protection, hazardous wastes, chemicals, and endangered species. It has taken stewardship in adopting environmentally friendly technologies such as various forms of renewable energy.

The most consequential shift, however, lies in the rapid proliferation of unilateral environmental measures with extraterritorial impacts. The EU’s Green Deal has spawned a slew of regulatory instruments, most notably the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the EU Deforestation Regulation, and corporate sustainability reporting requirements. CBAM has entered its definitive phase from January 1, 2026. These measures have already begun eroding the com-

petitiveness of developing-country exports.

India is not immune to adverse consequences of these developments. The EU is India’s second-largest export destination, and Indian exports of steel and aluminium — both CBAM-covered products — declined sharply in 2024, even during its trial phase. The complex emissions reporting requirements may have deterred smaller firms, while EU importers might have reoriented sourcing towards more CBAM-aligned suppliers. Similar measures are being contemplated by the UK, Canada and Japan, each with distinct methodologies and compliance regimes. For exporters, especially micro, small and medium enterprises, navigating this regulatory fragmentation will be extremely costly.

India faces three broad choices at the WTO. First, maintain the status quo of non-engagement, which is increasingly untenable. Rules are being written anyway, but outside the WTO.

Second, accept developed-country agenda wholesale, and lock itself in asymmetrical obligations without adequate safeguards for development and equity.

The third option, while viable but challenging, is for India to actively shape the emerging trade-sustainability interface by building strong coalitions of like-minded countries.

The real question today is no longer whether trade and sustainability should be linked, but where, how, and under whose rules that linkage is designed. The Ministerial Conference offers India an opportunity to reassert the centrality of the WTO by pushing for multilateral principles governing trade-related environmental measures and principles that recognise equity, proportionality, capacity constraints, and policy diversity.

Rather than rejecting plurilateral approaches outright, India could advocate open, inclusive, and WTO-consistent frameworks that discipline unilateralism and provide predictability for developing-country exporters.

In a world where sustainability norms are increasingly shaping market access, staying out of the conversation is no longer a strategy. Shaping the rules from inside can be.

The authors are, respectively, distinguished fellow and consultant at RIS. The views are personal

# The making and legacy of the Emergency



BOOK REVIEW

AMRITESH MUKHERJEE

India’s constitutional architects were also the students of power’s worst instincts. They had watched empires, witnessed fascism. They understood the perils of unchecked authority. So, they distributed it — across an executive, a legislature, a judiciary — each designed to frustrate the ambitions of the other two. It was a republic built on institutional distrust, which is another way of saying it was built on wisdom.

But democracies take centuries to build and months to die. After India’s victory in the 1971 war, the Prime Minister was more than just a Prime Minister. She was compared to Durga, the martial goddess of the Hindu pantheon, and to Shakti, the spiritual embodiment

of power. *The Economist*, capturing the mood of the times, crowned her the “Empress of India”. Not many years later, the chief minister of Haryana would suggest “get rid of all this election nonsense. If you ask me just make our sister President for life and there’s no need to do anything else.”

As the saying goes, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is the story of a woman who sought absolute power, absolutely.

The Emergency has always been the easiest place to start and stop with Indira Gandhi. Two years of suspended democracy, over a hundred thousand imprisoned — it is, as spectacles go, impossible to look away from. Srinath Raghavan’s *Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India* is less interested in the spectacle of the Emergency than in the making of it — the decisions that preceded those two years and outlasted them. To understand the Emergency, you must first understand the woman nobody took seriously.

Indira Gandhi entered politics dismissed and patronised, a woman in a

room full of men who had already decided her function, banking on her inexperience, her dependence on the legitimacy of her father’s name. In a culture that had never created space for female authority without attaching conditions to it, every obstacle she encountered, whether the Syndicate’s manipulation, the judiciary’s resistance, the Opposition’s protests, or her own party’s recurring “betrayals,” yielded the same response: Route around it, rally against it, concentrate power, leave nothing to others.

As Mr Raghavan writes, “Indira Gandhi’s subsequent metamorphosis into the most powerful politician of her age was entirely unforeseen by her patrons and detractors alike. No one took her seriously until it was too late. Through her years in political life — she ruled India for all but three of the next eighteen — she was at once the most adulated and execrated public figure in the land.”

Understanding Indira and her political career is key to understanding the rise of presidential-style rule over a parliamentary one in modern India — the

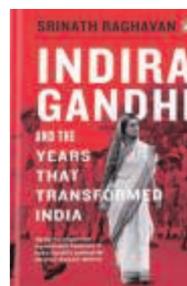
cult of the irreplaceable leader, the blind loyalty, the Opposition recast as enemy, and criticisms termed “anti-national.” She “would claim — even to officials close to her — that opposition leaders were being covertly funded from overseas.” Mr Raghavan is careful never to draw the contemporary parallel himself — he is a historian, not a polemicist — but he is candid about his aims: “I have sought to write a history that supplies the antidote to every generation’s illusion that its own problems are uniquely oppressive.”

The Emergency was a symptom of the disease called Caesarism — a structural mutation where the leader’s direct bond with “the people” displaces every institution standing between them, be it the party, Cabinet, judiciary, or Parliament. Each of these, in Indira’s hands, was either subordinated or routed around. The Congress became an extension of her will rather than its source. The Cabinet was downgraded into a ceremonial body. The judiciary, when it obstructed, was confronted and packed. Elections became plebiscites on the

person herself.

The republic, to its credit, resisted. The people, given the chance, voted her out; the “dramatic humbling of India’s most powerful politician tremendously boosted the importance of elections in the public mind”. But the Janata Party, assembled from every faction that had opposed her, that improbable coalition of grievances, promptly squandered the power it had inherited. “Forged in the white heat of the Emergency, it proved brittle in the cooler climate of power,” Mr Raghavan notes. “In politics as in courtship, the pursuit of gratification without commitment can only lead to short-lived affairs.”

Indira returned. Her legacy — a leader above institutions — would become a nation’s habit. In 1976, with the Emergency at its peak, Congress president D K Barooah gave the most complete summary of the era in six words: “India is Indira, and Indira is India.”



Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India by Srinath Raghavan Published by Penguin Allen Lane 384 pages ₹899

Though it was sycophancy at its most abject, in hindsight, the history of modern India and the history of Indira Gandhi are inseparable. The country whose democratic institutions, still young and still forming, became so thoroughly shaped by a single person that the two were, for a time, genuinely indistinguishable.

Indira Gandhi is long gone. But the India she made remains. Mr Raghavan’s biography charts the making of that India — its habits, its centralised governance, its plebiscitary elections, its monarchist vocabulary, its hunger for the irreplaceable leader. It’s a story that continues,

refined with each successive iteration. We, the readers, are its inheritors, too.

The reviewer is a journalist, writer, and editor fascinated by the stories that shape our world. Instagram/X: arwoodfords



## OUR VIEW



## Why India should rally around the rule of law

India withdrew an NCERT textbook that cast the judiciary in dim light. We must secure the law's supremacy even if it has gaps and needs to evolve. Think of the US rift over AI weapons

School textbooks rarely get recalled after their rollout, but it happened this week with a social science book withdrawn by India's National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), a government institution. Of the 38 copies sold on Monday at an NCERT counter in Delhi, 16 had been taken back by Wednesday, as reported, with UPI data trails being sought to retrieve a few proving hard to trace. This recall followed a swift order from the education ministry in response to Chief Justice of India Surya Kant's objection to a part on "corruption in the judiciary." A thin online sample suggests two kinds of reactions popped up on social media to the court's intervention. Some teenagers wondered why it's such a big deal if AI chatbots could scroll out so much on that topic anyway. A cynical few joked about how a scandalous copy could turn into a collector's item worthy of an auction someday. For all the banter that NCERT's rollback may have inspired among students, this episode should prompt us to reflect on the majesty of law—a solemn matter in any republic.

Among the effects of the prevailing digital overload is a marked loss in the weight of the written word. Social media has relaxed the use of language to a level so casual that even printed text has been a casualty. Officially issued texts, however, must resist that tide and meet a far higher bar of formality and truth. School textbooks are in a special category. This is not voluntary reading. These texts are prescribed as part of a syllabus on which students are tested for academic proficiency. Hence, in general, such study material must always take a minimalist approach. As a matter of prudence, foundational texts must not stray beyond what's

essential to the subject, especially into territory that can inspire harmful forms of conjecture. Coverage of the judiciary must follow this principle all the more strictly for the dignity of law to prevail as common sense across society. Given the power of public perception, the Rule of Law risks a loss of traction should its interpreters, our courts of justice, come under a cloud. While India's contempt-of-court law makes space for truthful arguments and critiques under some conditions, it exists for exactly that reason: as a safeguard against a popular spiral into cynicism. The caveat is that this law should be invoked judiciously.

Respect for the law is vital, but we cannot deny that nuances exist. A dilemma could arise if legislation lags the evolution of ethics. Take this week's standoff between the US Pentagon and Anthropic. On the face of it, the Pentagon's pressure on this Agentic AI startup to let it deploy its Claude AI tools for all lawful military action sounds justified. Who can object to that? Anthropic, however, has reportedly barred Claude's use for domestic surveillance and autonomous weapons. These are hazards that do not seem to ruffle US lawmakers, gripped as they might be by the fear of China sneaking ahead in an AI arms race. Pentagon policy on AI-guided arms does ask for appropriate levels of human judgement, as it should, but Anthropic has a valid point of safety in not letting its technology venture into the danger zone of AI-taken calls on life and death. If this startup gets stared down, its effort to plug a legislative gap will come to naught. As this case shows, legal frameworks can be inadequate in some instances. Even so, it is incumbent upon every republic to uphold the supremacy of law over individual authority.

## THEIR VIEW

## Clear pathways for turnaround artists to rescue firms in distress

Specialists would be readier to take on the challenge if doing so did not entail significant legal risks



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Before the enactment of India's Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), there was very little talk of turnaround professionals. Yet, they were deployed in many companies, not as external consultants, but as individual key managerial personnel (KMP). The IBC pivoted the paradigm towards resolving corporate distress via the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT). The IBC aims to redress only the capital structure, leaving operational problems unaddressed. Delays in adjudication are another big problem; they accelerate value erosion: key customers defect, accredited vendors switch, employee churn is high, cannibalization of equipment is rampant, maintenance is absent and parts of plant and machinery have to be scrapped.

Thus, forward-thinking boards now seek turnaround specialists. Regrettably, India's legal architecture thwarts such engagements. Several modern practitioners eschew the immersive role of a KMP, preferring instead to serve as independent consultants to shield themselves from the company's prior improprieties.

The laws, however, do not view such professionals merely as external consultants. The Companies Act of 2013 features an array of definitions that scare turnaround specialists: 'control,' which includes control of management or policy decisions; the term 'key mana-

gerial personnel' with its various connotations; 'manager,' denoting any individual directing the company's affairs irrespective of job title; and 'officer,' which extends to individuals whose directives the board obeys.

These definitions act as impediments to the engagement of turnaround specialists. A nuanced interpretation of the terms 'manager' or 'officer,' coupled with the definition of 'control' place designations such as 'turnaround manager' or 'chief restructuring officer' in the realm of regulatory scrutiny. Further, although turnaround mandates are inherently holistic, delineating their scope in an engagement letter inadvertently portrays the specialist as a KMP, thereby imputing liability on such professionals for prior transgressions.

A couple of finance ministry notifications exacerbate that risk. A 9 May 2023 notification states that proxy directorship or actions taken in similar capacity on behalf of another person in a company will be construed as an activity under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). It does not take much imagination for a zealous regulator to stretch the applicability of the term 'in similar capacity.' Thus, a turnaround professional risks being deemed a director or KMP under the Companies Act and be subject to PMLA provisions.

A notification of 3 May 2023 states that financial stewardship on behalf of a client, including the management of money, securities, assets or operations (or of a company on the whole), will be considered as an activity under PMLA. A turnaround manager would have to engage in such activities, but may recoil from an assignment if it risks landing in the PMLA's clutches. The problem is magnified if the turnaround manager is part of a larger firm, as then the liability of an antecedent transaction of the company in need of a rescue may fall on members of that larger firm.

The recent admission of India's first shareholder class action under Section 245 of the Companies Act worsens the situation. The NCLT looks at damages that span past, present and future acts, and holds a panoply of professionals liable. Among them, auditors are the most vulnerable, as any improper or misleading statement they make could be scrutinized by shareholders. However, the standardization of audit practices can mitigate this risk.

Turnaround professionals are exposed as they are immersed in day-to-day operations. Moreover, turnaround strategies are situational, so few aspects of it are amenable to standardization. Also, their actions are visible to several stakeholders, including shareholders, who may deem these decisions incorrect. In contrast, other consultants incur negligible risk as their advice is typically not disclosed to shareholders.

To tackle this problem, the government must enact carve-outs, exempting turnaround professionals from these strictures and notifications, barring cases of fraud and gross negligence. Other stipulations may be specified for their independence—they must be unrelated to promoters or directors, for example, or have no audit relationship. If nothing is done, we face destruction of enterprise value, misallocation of capital, the spectre of job losses, bigger haircuts for lenders and an ever-increasing number of pending cases at the NCLT.

## QUICK READ

Turnaround specialists can play a vital role in the revival of distressed businesses but are deterred by legal provisions that could hold them liable for past actions they had no part in.

To speed up corporate resolutions and help enterprises in distress retain their value and viability, the government should shield such professionals from being unduly hauled up.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

The very definition of a republic is 'an empire of laws, and not of men.'

JOHN ADAMS

## THEIR VIEW

## Banking: Has the credit-deposit ratio lost its relevance?

MADAN SABNAVIS



is chief economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of 'Corporate Quirks: The Darker Side of the Sun'

Is there an ideal credit-deposit (CD) ratio for the banking system or is the concept *passé*? This is an interesting debate, given the trends seen of late. The CD ratio of the Indian banking industry has been exceeding 80%, raising eyebrows. The logic goes this way. If the cash reserve ratio (CRR) is 3% and the statutory liquidity ratio (SLR) 18%—both are mandatory carve-outs from deposits that banks must keep—then the CD ratio cannot be above the residual 79%. Yet, it is so, and none of the norms is reported to have been violated. This implies that the premise of a threshold and the sanctity of the 80% number needs to be revisited.

Data over the last five decades or so shows that the CD ratio was less than 80% until 2023-24. In fact, there were phases when it was in a range of 50-60% (between 1991-92 and 2003-04). Back then, the CRR and SLR were extremely high, which left little room for lending. Interestingly, in 1990, the SLR peaked at 38.5% and CRR was at 15%. From 2005-06 onwards, the CD ratio has been

above 70% but well below 80%, with the peak being 78% in 2012-13. We are clearly in a different phase of banking now.

A few things are relevant here. The *raison d'être* of financial intermediation is to facilitate lending in the most efficient way. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has several regulations, including CRR and SLR mandates, for prudent banking. Both these have been brought down over time to give banks more space to lend. The idea was for banks to take risks and not just stick to safe assets like government paper. Banks have to grow their loan books optimally to use deposits well.

RBI has been assiduously aligning norms with the Basel regulations for the last couple of decades and has changed the regulatory structure to put best practices in place. The latest are its liquidity coverage ratio (LCR) and net stable funding ratio (NSFR) mandates designed to address liquidity issues. These come on top of CRR, SLR and capital adequacy stipulations. So long as these guideposts are adhered to, banks should ideally be left to manage their resources. It is for banks to ensure that the quality of assets is maintained. When RBI smells a possible problem, though, it introduces new capital norms to curb perceived exuberance.

The point to note is that the resources of

banks are not limited to deposits. Deposits typically account for around 75-78% of their liabilities. Other borrowings and their own capital (equity plus reserves) have a share of 17-18%. Logically, when optimal utilization of funds is being assessed, the resource components of borrowings (mainly through bonds) and capital (reserves that include ploughed-back profits) should also be taken into account. In fact, the CD ratio should ideally include these two components in the denominator along with deposits to offer a complete picture.

As for bank assets, credit has a share of 60-62%. The balance is deployed in investments and other assets. Interestingly, when the CD ratio rises, the composition of bank assets changes too. In 2025-26, banks have lowered their holdings of government paper. This has happened because of RBI's use of open market operations (OMOs) to supply liquidity to the system by purchasing government securities

from banks. The investment-deposit ratio has come down by almost 300 basis points, which has been more or less balanced by the rise in the industry's CD ratio. RBI has been providing this facility on a near-continuous basis to assist banks that have found it progressively difficult to mobilize deposits in a falling interest rate environment.

Therefore, the industry's high CD ratio can be looked at in two ways. Either banks are using their capital more effectively by deploying it as loans or they are selling government paper and using these proceeds for

## QUICK READ

India's banking industry has seen its CD ratio exceed its ideal threshold for a prolonged period without RBI's prudential rules being flouted. So just how meaningful is this measure?

The non-deposit borrowings of banks and their reserves must also be taken into account to run a resource-sufficiency check. That will offer a better picture of funds available for lending.

lending. Either way, for the sector's regulator, there should be no major concern so long as all the regulatory stipulations are being complied with.

It should also be noted that India is largely a bank-financed economy, with most formal entities accessing bank loans for their funding. The corporate bond market is large, but access to it is largely limited to AA- or AAA-rated companies. The external commercial bor-

rowing route is also available, but again limited just to big companies with good credit ratings. Banks also have wide networks, which makes them physically accessible. The technology push of recent years has added to their reach by improving last-mile connectivity. Today, it is imperative that banks use their resources in an optimal manner. True, asset quality is something that has to be monitored regularly, but that is a different subject.

Further, as banks still seem to be doing a good part of the heavy lifting in the field of infrastructure finance, the bonds they issue for this purpose should be accounted for as borrowings. This component is analogous to deposits, except that they have a higher cost attached. This extra cost, however, must necessarily be borne for banks to fund long-term infrastructure projects and ensure that asset and liability maturities do not go perilously out of sync.

All considered, it can be argued that the concept of the credit-deposit ratio needs to be modified to include other borrowings and capital in sources of funding. Also, the thumb rule of 80% may not be too relevant anymore, especially if no regulatory norms are violated by banks.

These are the author's personal views.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# How artificial intelligence alters India's challenge of employment

A three-pillar strategy outlined for the country must now take into account the impact that AI may have on job availability

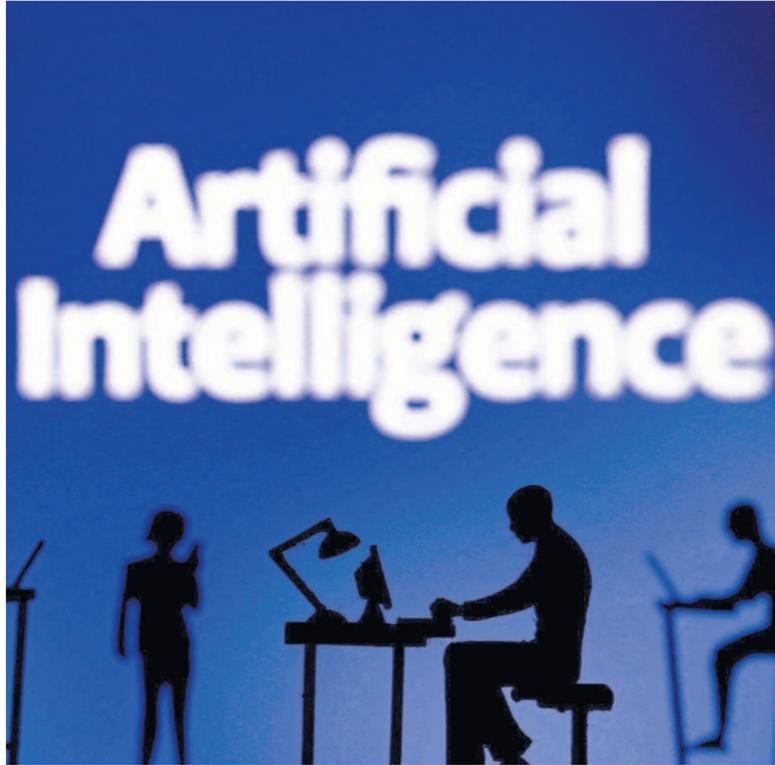


**SUDIPTO MUNDLE**  
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The recent Artificial Intelligence (AI) Summit in New Delhi has brought home the remarkable pace at which AI is changing the way we live and work. The jury is still out on whether an AI-led society would be utopian or dystopian. Meanwhile, we need to reset our thinking on many issues. Around this time last year, in my presidential address to the Indian Econometric Society [*Journal of Quantitative Economics*, 2025, 23:319–331 [bit.ly/4s4McEJ](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11464-025-10000-0)], I had discussed India's growth paradox: namely, that though India has been the fastest growing major economy in the world for quite some time, the number of unemployed in the country has also been growing almost as fast. To address this employment challenge, I had outlined a strategy based on three pillars. Within just a year, I now need to revisit that strategy, not because the pillars have changed but because the content of each pillar has to be adapted to a rapidly changing employment context driven by the rising tide of AI.

The first pillar I had outlined, the short-term one, was the need to deploy 'industrial policy' for the non-agricultural sector to help accelerate the growth of employment-intensive industries in addition to high-tech industries and services. The latter add a lot to GDP but relatively little to employment. In comparison, just six employment-intensive sectors account for as much as two-thirds of all employment outside agriculture: construction, trade, land transportation, processing of food and beverages, apparel manufacturing, hotels and restaurants. Most jobs in these sectors require a low level of skills. The corresponding level of productivity and remuneration is also low, but their low skill requirement matches the skill profile of the bulk of India's labour force, which cannot be changed overnight. Accelerating the growth of these sectors will quickly expand the scale of employment and livelihoods, however modestly, in the short run; this will buy India time to appropriately skill the labour force and prepare it for higher productivity and better-paid jobs in the medium to long term.

Given the emerging labour market impact of AI, it is possible that these employment-intensive sectors will grow faster even without the prop of 'industrial policy.' At the recent AI Summit in New Delhi, Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), made some very important observations. The IMF, she noted, is finding that AI will affect—not necessarily eliminate—40% of jobs globally. More interesting is its finding that demand for very high-skill jobs and that for low-skill jobs is actually increasing with the impact of AI, while demand for entry-level skilled jobs in the middle is disappearing. Human labour is being displaced by AI in these tasks. Why demand



should be rising for mass consumption products when income inequality is increasing is not clear. But if true, then in the Indian context, this would imply that demand for goods and services delivered by the employment-intensive sectors cited above would accelerate. That's the good news.

The bad news is that, by the same token, the second pillar of my suggested employment strategy will be much more challenging. I had proposed a skilling strategy called University Technical Education (UTC). This is an alternative to the conventional path of secondary education which could replace the current dysfunctional vocational education programme. UTC would be a private sector-led, self-financing programme. It would combine STEM-oriented classroom education with intensive shopfloor training in operational plants of corporate partners. Students graduating from this alternative higher secondary education programme could go on to higher education if they so desired or opt for employment. In the latter case, their UTC graduation combined with shopfloor training would better position them for jobs than conventional higher secondary graduates. The UTC programme, along with a significantly reformed higher education system, could prepare India's workforce for the 21st century.

The broad structure of this second pillar would remain intact despite AI. But the content of the STEM-oriented courses would have to prepare students not for entry-level jobs but higher skills

for use in roles where they would have to prompt AI models to perform elementary tasks. The same would apply to on-the-job training on the shopfloor. But AI models are evolving so rapidly that today's training in their use could become obsolete tomorrow. The UTC courses would therefore need to be designed in collaboration with experts from AI companies who can see in which direction AI models are headed. Fortunately for us, the fact that so many corporate leaders of Indian origin are embedded in leading global tech companies places

India exceptionally well to move down this path. The development of India's own foundational models like Sarvam is excellent news and should help the country prepare its workforce even better for the future.

My third pillar was raising productivity in agriculture. No matter how the employment outlook outside farming might improve, agriculture will continue to be a major sector of employment for years to come. However, productivity is abysmally low in agriculture. I had earlier discussed standard approaches to ramping up productivity. However, applica-

tion of AI could radically transform traditional farming—from water and land management to selection of seeds and crops, production techniques, post-harvest technologies in storage and transportation, etc. This AI revolution in agriculture, not unlike the ongoing revolutions in biotech, medicine and other sciences, could raise labour productivity in ways unimagined so far.

*These are the author's personal views.*

QUICK READ

The first pillar of deploying 'industrial policy' can still work as a short-term measure to multiply jobs and buy us time to prepare our workforce for a challenging future.

The second pillar of technical education needs to be modified in accordance with changes wrought by AI and the third of agricultural productivity could count on AI for support.

# Can middle powers break the global deadlock on AI safety?

Declarations at summits are not enough. The world needs action



**CATHERINE THORBECKE**  
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asia tech.



Middle powers mustn't wait for Washington or Beijing to act.

Last week's AI Impact Summit ended the way these gatherings routinely do. This time with a 'New Delhi Declaration,' a non-binding hymn to cooperation and the hope that "AI could be made to serve humanity." It's the sort of empty language that dozens of countries and international organizations can sign up to without changing a thing.

The most revealing statement came from the industry. Hours before the declaration, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman offered a bit of moral arithmetic in an interview with the *Indian Express*. "People talk about how much energy it takes to train an AI model," he said, "but it also takes a lot of energy to train a human. It takes, like, 20 years of life, and all of the food you eat during that time before you get smart." Altman likely meant it as a quip. It landed, however, as a sobering reminder that the people steering the AI race are starting to talk about raising children the way they talk about training machines. So much for human-centred AI.

New Delhi should have been a turning point for middle powers, from India and Brazil to Canada. Instead, it showcased the deadlock that has come to define global AI governance. AI superpowers won't meaningfully restrain themselves, AI companies won't elect to slow down and everyone else is signing empty statements while being propelled by a fear of missing out.

The drift is apparent in the meetings themselves. The first at Bletchley Park in 2023 was branded as an AI 'Safety' summit. That was dropped from the title in Seoul's 'AI Summit.' The theme then shifted to 'Action' in Paris and 'Impact' in New Delhi. The word that started the series has been edited out. India this year got frontier firms to sign to broad commitments to study the impact of AI, but even these are voluntary.

Middle powers, meanwhile, can't wait for Washington or Beijing to take the reins. This year alone, American tech giants are expected to collectively invest some \$650 billion in AI. Such astronomical spending accelerates deployment, but it also distorts incentives away from safety and towards recouping a return. And with so much of the US economy now riding the tech boom, the White House has little appetite for rules that might slow it down.

China has its own safety labs and voluntary commitments from companies. But the government leaves scant room for plurality of opinions or public debate about risk—especially if it collides with President Xi Jinping's ambition to lead the world in technology. Safety leadership is unlikely to emerge from Washington or Beijing.

At the same time, the harms are already piling up. Women and girls are digitally undressed, cyber attackers exploit new tools at scale and reports link teen suicides with the use of chatbots. AI systems are becoming exponentially more powerful and the rush for agents only encourages humans to cede more power to machines, raising fears of more existential risks.

In that geopolitical race, hopes for meaningful US-China collaboration on safety are increasingly a fantasy. As was hinted at in Davos, each side can use the other's acceleration as an alibi for why they can't slow down even if they want to. It's why middle powers matter more than ever. India hosted this year's gathering explicitly to position itself as a bridge between the rest of the world and the US-China rivalry.

During a side event on safety, computer scientist and 'AI Godfather' Yoshua Bengio said that it's ultimately up to these governments to unite and break the superpower deadlock before AI concentrates power. Courting favour from Washington or Beijing in a bid to get ahead is a self-defeating strategy that cements dependence, not sovereignty—let alone safety.

A middle-power coalition needn't beat the US or China on frontier AI. It just needs to make access to markets of billions, as well as their schools, hospitals, courts and power grids, conditional on measurable safety commitments. They can start with near-term essentials: disclosures of the data that goes into these tools and the energy use needed for training and running models. Mandate standardized, independent safety evaluations before deployment in sensitive domains like policing or politics. Insist on incident reporting and public transparency around model failures and risks.

The easiest thing policymakers can do right now, Bengio warned, is listen to the voices that make them feel good—which overwhelmingly belong to those selling the technology. But organized backlash is growing, uniting people across identities and political lines. "Governments won't do anything until the general population wakes up," he said.

Delhi's traffic gridlocks last week became a metaphor for the global AI safety debate: We keep convening, everyone is trying to get ahead and nothing moves. Declarations don't protect, rules do. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

# Frequent school bomb threats hold a mirror to society

CHANDRAKANT LAHARIYA



is a practising physician and specialist in parenting and child development.

In the past few days, nearly every alternate day has brought news of bomb-threat emails sent to one or more schools in Delhi. The script is wearisomely familiar. An email lands in multiple school inboxes—often routed through encrypted servers, sometimes crudely drafted with digital trails left behind. So far, all have proven to be hoaxes. Yet, there has been no let up and the invisible damage they cause continues.

After winter air pollution, which now routinely suspends on-campus classes, these anonymous threats have become the city's other disruptor of education. Each episode may end without physical harm, but the true cost cannot be measured only in cancelled classes, postponed exams or police deployment. It alters society's idea of safety and a child's sense of normalcy.

Schools are among the first public institutions that children learn to trust. Young minds internalize a quiet assurance: that adults are in control, routines are reliable

and that tomorrow will look much like today. Stability is part of the promise. When bomb threats recur, they chip away at it. The classroom becomes a site of interruption, not just learning. The damage is subtle, but it accumulates. It would be convenient to frame this purely as a law-and-order problem: anonymous actors exploiting digital anonymity, investigators struggling to trace IP addresses across jurisdictions, encrypted servers masking identities.

But repeat hoaxes say something also about the moral climate of a society. In a culture increasingly mediated by screens—where provocation, virality and spectacle are rewarded—the line between prank and harm blurs. The sender may never see the frightened faces of children or the distress of parents, but they see the reaction through media. In behavioural terms, this feedback loop is powerful for disruptors.

There is an uncomfortable possibility that some of these threats may originate from students trying to delay exams. Even if such cases are rare, the mere plausibility should give us pause. In hyper-competitive educational environments, where exam results carry disproportionate weight and fear of failure is rarely discussed openly,

schooling can become synonymous with anxiety. When academic pressure eclipses emotional resilience, disruption—however misguided—can seem like an escape. If that is the case, the issue is not only criminality; it is also culture. An educational system that prioritizes performance over well-being risks tempting evasion. The solution, then, cannot be limited to policing alone. It must include reflection on how we define success, handle failure and how openly we address stress within our schools.

Child psychology offers further insights. Research shows that repeated exposure to perceived danger—even if no harm occurs—can elevate baseline anxiety in children. It can affect concentration, disturb sleep and weaken a child's sense of control. The threat may be declared false, but the physiological response is real. For children already carrying invisible burdens, each

disruption compounds unease. The harm is rarely dramatic. It is incremental.

Beyond that lies a broader social concern: the normalization of ambient insecurity. Cities adapt to air pollution by purchasing air purifiers. They adapt to traffic congestion by leaving home earlier. When they begin to adapt to bomb threats by adjusting school calendars and refining evacuation protocols, a deeper erosion may be underway. The belief that certain spaces are always safe begins to weaken.

Enforcement must be credible, investigations swift and transparent. Perpetrators need punishment that deters hoax calls. But society must also confront the cultural currents that make such acts conceivable. Digital citizenship cannot be reduced to warnings about passwords and privacy settings. It must include conversations on consequences, empathy and civic responsibility. Schools have a responsi-

bility beyond conducting drills. After each incident, children deserve age-appropriate explanations and reassurance. Mental health support should not be an afterthought. Counsellors and trained teachers have an essential role to play in this.

India recently concluded an AI impact summit that celebrated technology and innovation. Such events are meaningful, but they ring hollow if tech sophistication cannot be harnessed to address disruptions like hoax threats. Advanced analytics, inter-agency coordination and better cyber-forensics should make tracing and deterring such acts easier. Technology must serve public trust, not merely national prestige.

Ultimately, recurrent school bomb threats are a social challenge more than a security one. Why do these happen at all? Are our institutions—legal, educational and moral—strong enough to absorb shocks without normalizing them?

As children are remarkably adaptive, they may adapt to such disruptions. The more pressing question is why they should. The responsibility lies with adults—with institutions, educators and governments—to ensure that schools remain anchors of stability in an uncertain world.

# Opinion

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2026



**BROAD VIEW**

Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar

We have consistently underlined dialogue over confrontation, consensus over division, and human-centric development over narrow interests

## Small caps shine

Stronger cost control lifts Q3 profits, but it won't be easy to maintain the momentum

**SMALLER LISTED COMPANIES**—those with annual revenues of ₹10,000 crore or less—turned in a relatively strong performance in the December 2025 quarter. Their operating profits rose 12.2% year-on-year (y-o-y), outpacing the 8.8% growth reported by mid-sized and large firms. Part of the outperformance stems from tighter cost control. While larger companies posted faster topline growth, they also saw a sharper rise in expenses, which diluted profit gains. Smaller firms, by contrast, managed to rein in costs more effectively. With revenues also expanding 12.2% y-o-y, it is encouraging that India's smaller businesses have been able to tap into the recovery in consumer spending. The question is whether that momentum can be sustained.

Households may continue to benefit from higher disposable incomes and relatively cheaper credit, but aggregate demand could soften, especially given mixed signals from urban and rural markets. Urban spending rebounded strongly in Q3FY26, rising to a seven-quarter high of 8% y-o-y compared with 4.9% in Q2FY26. Rural demand, however, moderated to 5.3% from 7.9% in the previous quarter. Urban consumption has likely been buoyed by rising salaries and wages, increased personal credit, and low inflation. Yet demand for mid-tier housing remains subdued, and economists expect this softness to persist—hardly positive news for smaller real estate developers or manufacturers of household goods. More broadly, the December-quarter consumption bump may not be durable. A more decisive boost could come only in FY28, when the implementation of the 8th Pay Commission's recommendations—including arrears—is expected to lift spending.

The moderation in rural demand is somewhat puzzling. Real wages—both agricultural and non-agricultural—have been rising, and credit flows to the sector remain robust. However, these gains appear to have been offset by a decline in government spending on rural schemes. Rural fiscal outlays fell nearly 21% in the December quarter, marking the sharpest drop in three quarters. In addition, while the terms of trade for agriculture are not severely adverse, they are not particularly favourable either. For rural demand to strengthen meaningfully, farm incomes and real wages will need to improve further, supported by more consistent public spending. This is important as agriculture and allied activities still employ over 40% of India's workforce. Companies with significant rural or agri exposure could feel the strain if government allocations stagnate.

Export-oriented small businesses face a separate set of challenges. Elevated US tariffs and uncertainty around the India-US trade agreement have weighed on sentiment. Although tariffs have been lowered, the environment remains unpredictable. Smaller exporters are typically more vulnerable to such volatility. While the government has offered limited support, visibility on US-bound shipments remains weak. What may provide a buffer for smaller firms—particularly in engineering, chemicals, and electrical goods—is domestic industrial demand. Private-sector capacity expansion is picking up, but a broader capex push led by large corporates would provide stronger tailwinds for ancillary units and small vendors. Between FY21 and FY25, government capital expenditure was the primary driver of growth; that thrust is now expected to moderate. At the same time, the job market is not expanding rapidly, and disposable incomes are not rising significantly. Taken together, while smaller firms have delivered an impressive quarter, sustaining that performance will depend on a more durable revival in consumption, steady rural support, and a firmer private investment cycle. Without these, business conditions may turn less brisk in the months ahead.

## COST OF CAPITAL

FIRMING TREASURY YIELD WARRANTS A RELOOK AT THE FISCAL ARITHMETIC

# Early signs of fiscal stress

**SINCE EARLY FEBRUARY**, banks have been flush with surplus liquidity—so much so that more than ₹3 lakh crore is being parked at the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Standing Deposit Facility (SDF), pushing the tri-party repo rate below the SDF rate (5%). Since December 12, 2025, it is creating market perceptions of “shadow easing” beyond the 125-basis-point (bps) policy rate cut since February 7, 2025, largely due to the RBI's durable liquidity infusion exceeding ₹6.5 lakh crore—₹4.2 lakh crore open market operations and ₹2.3 lakh crore (\$25 billion) of buy/sell FX swaps. Strangely though, there's been an insignificant impact upon long-term yield—the 10-year benchmark G-sec is trading at 6.77% currently, almost same as at the start of this easing cycle last year (see graph). The 10-year yield that fell to 6.26% at end-May 2025 climbed back to 6.77% last week, nearly 50 bps higher and steepening the yield curve.

More disturbing is the sharper rise in the 10-year state government securities yield—for example, Tamil Nadu's weighted average yield touched 7.44% on February 17, almost 80 bps higher than 6.65% eight months ago (June 10, 2025).

Given perceptions of improved financial conditions and a sharp fall in headline consumer price index (CPI) inflation since January 2025 (old series) to below 2% lower bound in July 2025, the reference yield rate should have slipped below 6%. Ironically though, it began rising—almost coinciding with the surprise 50-bps rate reduction on June 6. Seemingly, the market failed to capitalise on India's inclusion in the JPMorgan emerging markets bond index and completely dismissed S&P's ratings upgrade in August 2025. In the event, a 50-bps increase in the nominal long-term yield may not sound alarming, but compared with a falling inflation rate the real rate increase is stronger than a few forecast. In fact, CPI-adjusted real interest rates in FY24 and FY25 were relatively lower!

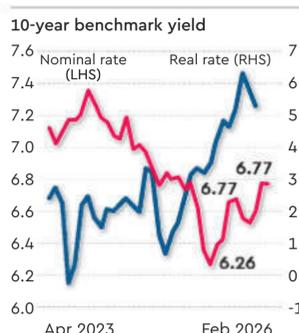
The obvious question is, why has the

## RENU KOHLI

Senior Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress



### LOW IMPACT



market gone against the tide? Notwithstanding the hardening long yields across advanced economies, domestic factors dominate market commentary, particularly the gigantic central and state government borrowings against weaker appetite, i.e. excess supply. Beneath this simplistic equation, however, lie complex market dynamics and broader reasons. On the supply side, states' planned borrowing in the second half (FY26) exceeded market expectations and was perceived by some as the chief villain.

The trigger, however, was lower tax revenue realisation—a fallout of fiscal actions initiated by the central government, viz. raising income tax exemption limits and lowering effective GST rate. While the Centre could fill the gap from higher RBI dividend, the states had no such luck and were forced to borrow. Private corporate

bond supplies, though subdued, also muddied the bond market. On the demand side, foreign portfolio investor debt inflows are tepid—₹0.35 lakh crore in FY26 so far. Pension and insurance funds are reportedly investing more in shorter-tenure bonds. But more critically, banks' investment appetite for government bonds has decreased because private credit picked up after the GST rate reduction.

Will the trend persist in FY27? This will surely depend on how supply-demand factors unfold. The market is already frightened by higher-than-expected gross and net borrowings in this year's Budget.

But one development we would like to flag is potential crowding out in play. As the G-sec (central and states) supply submerged the market, funds raised in the corporate bond market tapered off. Data from the Securities and Exchange Board of India shows that private corporates raised a record ₹9.9 lakh crore via bonds in FY25, but fresh corporate bond issues declined sharply since the second quarter of 2025-26, consequent to the 10-year yield hardening more than 60 bps since June 2025. It would be damaging if private corporate investment, lying dormant for more than a decade, faced an unlikely headwind at the very early signs of revival. It remains to be seen if commercial banks will be able to meet corporate credit demand without raising lending rates, especially when constrained by slower deposit growth.

A critical look at the broader macro framework for allocation of financial savings already showed signs of stress. Back in 2017, the Fiscal Responsibility and

Budget Management Review Committee Report suggested that the estimated pool of financial saving—10% of GDP (7.6% domestic and 2.3% external savings)—be equally divided at 5% each between the government and private sector to avoid potential crowding out. Accordingly, it recommended targeting the general government fiscal deficit at 5% of GDP (2.5% each for the Union and state governments). With the sharp drop in financial savings to 6.5% of GDP in recent years—domestic and external savings averaged 5.4% and 1.1% respectively between FY23 and FY25—and remarkably below the consolidated general government deficit of 7.5% of GDP, the pressure on interest rates could have been immense if not for the unimpressive business investment demand.

The question is, if private investment demand gathered force ahead, would the limited financial savings turn into a binding constraint, causing significant crowding out?

A pertinent policy question in this light is if the 16th Finance Commission's recommendation to target a general government fiscal deficit at 6.5% of GDP by 2030-31 (3.5% and 3% for the Union and state governments each after adjusting for special assistance to states for capital investments) is not synchronised with the emerging constraints. Even more disturbing is the central government's decision to excuse itself from setting any road map for fiscal deficit consolidation, confining its promise to keep debt on a declining path towards attaining a debt-GDP level of about 50±1% by FY31. Policymakers should recognise that the resurfacing of fiscal dominance could force a monetary policy reset by pushing up r\*, the real equilibrium interest rate. Let alone creating a fiscal buffer, in the current framework, there would be very little financial resources left for the private sector, risking higher cost of capital vis-à-vis China and an overall drag on private investment.

Views are personal

# Boardroom ethics: Dharma or drama?



## M MUNEER

Fortune-500 advisor, start-up investor, and co-founder of Medici Institute for Innovation X: @MuneerMuh

A truly ethical board interrogates, probes, and occasionally irritates. It treats power not as a perk, but as a responsibility

## Nvidia's 75% margin gives rivals something to aim for

**THANKS TO NVIDIA'S** practice of reporting earnings outside of the typical cycle for technology companies, the question of whether the almost \$5-trillion company will record strong demand in 2026 had already been safely answered well before its latest announcement on Wednesday. Investors already knew that the hyperscaling AI companies are collectively forecasting around \$650 billion in capital expenditures this year, an increase of about 60% from 2025—and Nvidia will get a lot of it.

Preempted by its customers, Nvidia thus needed its own fresh good news to trump what investors already knew. Hello, margins. Adjusted gross margin in the November-January period was 75.2%, the highest it has been since the second half of 2024. The company forecasts that number to be roughly the same in the current quarter. What's unclear is just how long Nvidia can maintain this extraordinary profitability.

One lingering question going into the company's closely monitored analyst call was about supply. It won't be able to avoid the rising cost of memory, even if it is at or near the front of the line for the crucial component compared with most other electronics firms. Nvidia's chief financial officer, Colette Kress, said the company had “strategically secured inventory and capacity to meet demand beyond the next several quarters” but that it expected “tightness” in supply to persist. Leading component makers have warned the shortages will linger through 2027 and maybe longer. The demand for the hardware behind AI is still growing faster than the infra needed to produce it.

Another question is how resilient Nvidia is against competitors seeking a slice of the AI chip business. To reapply Jeff Bezos' (possible) phrase, Nvidia's margin is its rivals' opportunity—and they are starting to grasp it. In the final quarter of last year, Alphabet's stock price rose when it started to become clear its own AI chips—called Tensor Processing Units, or TPUs—were handling a significant portion of workloads for its Google Cloud clients as well as for its own AI services like Gemini. Amazon.com notched a win for its own AI chips by bringing on Anthropic as a client.

The availability and pricing of alternative chips has made diversifying worth the constraints. According to Bloomberg Intelligence, the average selling price per unit of a Google TPU is \$8,000-\$10,000 compared with \$23,000 or more for Nvidia's H100 chip or \$27,000 and above for its

newer Blackwell system. More recent moves have Nvidia investors paying even closer attention. This week, Meta Platforms and Advanced Micro Devices announced a “double-digit billions” deal for the chipmaker to supply processors for data centres, a more direct hit on Nvidia's core GPU business. Last October, OpenAI negotiated something similar. In both deals, AMD threw in some stock for good measure.

Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang's retort to all this is to talk up his company's moat, and he did that on Wednesday. Up against the custom chips from Google and Amazon, he stressed, Nvidia GPUs can carry out a broader range of AI-related tasks instead of just being used for, say, training or “inference”—the running of AI once underlying models are built. Power consumption enhancements give Nvidia an edge when energy availability is stretched. The key to maintaining Nvidia's staggering profitability, he said, was holding on to its position as the leading AI innovator.

That may be true, but it only hints at the other side of that hundred-billion-dollar equation. With slightly above half of the company's \$62.3 billion in data centre revenue coming from the AI hyperscalers, Nvidia is reliant on those investments to produce a meaningful return for those clients and maintain the appetite to keep paying a premium for Nvidia's product. “I am confident in their cash flow growing, and the reason for that is very simple,” Huang argued. “We have now seen the inflection of generative AI and the usefulness of agents across the world and enterprises everywhere. You're seeing incredible compute demand because of it.”

“In this new world of AI,” he added, “compute is revenues.” True enough, but the revenue return hasn't come close to justifying the spend yet, and that lofty margin will be a casualty if it doesn't materialise.

**CORPORATE BOARDROOM ETHICS** is a bit like yoga in the C-suite: everyone swears by it, very few practise it properly, and most people treat it as a photo opportunity rather than a discipline.

There is no dearth of ethics manuals, thicker than the *Bhagavad Gita*, crafted by law firms that charge per comma and consultants who speak in spreadsheets. Directors are schooled at great length on the seven deadly sins of corporate life: fraud, insider trading, conflicts of interest, confidentiality breaches, self-dealing, market manipulation, and creative accounting that could make a Bollywood scriptwriter blush.

These presentations are usually delivered with solemn attitudes, accompanied by ominous case studies and a few slides showing jail bars. The message is clear: behave, or you might end up swapping your corner office for a corner cell.

This is all very useful. It is good to remind directors that ethics is not merely a suggestion, and that regulators, from Sebi to the MCA, are slowly becoming less forgiving than an annoyed mother-in-law. Yet this entire apparatus of governance training rests on a rather flimsy assumption: that if something is legal, it must be ethical.

Boards have become extraordinarily skilled at asking “Can we do this without going to jail?”, while being far less interested in asking “Should we do this without losing our soul?” In most Indian board-

rooms, the real mantra is not “tone at the top” but “keep it just clean enough”.

Directors are reminded that they have two sacred duties—the duty of loyalty and the duty of care—which sounds lofty until you see how flexibly these are interpreted. In theory, loyalty means putting the company first. In practice, it means putting your network first while pretending it's the company. Take procurement, a favourite playground of boardroom creativity. If a director openly pushes a contract towards a firm they own, even the most relaxed board will raise an eyebrow. But conflicts in India are rarely that crude.

What if the preferred vendor happens to be run by an old IIT batchmate? Or the MD's golfing partner? Or a cousin who just coincidentally shifted from real estate to renewable energy last month? Technically clean. Socially convenient. Ethically... interesting.

In many boards, the unwritten rule seems to be: “It's not a conflict if everyone benefits quietly.”

Then there is the delicate dance between loyalty and care when something smells rotten. Imagine management presenting financial data that is murky, inconsistent, and full of mysterious “adjustments.” A diligent board should dig in like a forensic auditor. Instead, many

boards treat ambiguity as a feature, not a bug. If the numbers are confusing, they assume the problem must be too complex for them, rather than that someone might be cooking the books at a low flame.

Consider the spectacular governance meltdowns of recent years: telecom scandals, bank frauds, shadow lending disasters, and infrastructure companies that collapsed faster than poorly built flyovers. In many of these cases, boards were not absent but simply dazzled, distracted, or diplomatically asleep. In too many cases, boards were not victims of ignorance; they were beneficiaries of wilful blindness.

This is why board ethics cannot be reduced to glossy codes of conduct. Every company now proudly declares that it is committed to transparency, sustainability, and stakeholder capitalism... usually in reports that look like luxury coffee-table books. But the real ethical test comes when a decision is legal but deeply questionable. Can the board approve aggressive tax avoidance that leaves the public exchequer poorer? Can it sign off on layoffs while awarding itself handsome bonuses? Can it green-wash environmental damage with slick marketing?

Many boards would say yes—and call it “fiduciary duty”.

But here's the serious point: Employees, investors, and the public are not fools anymore. Young professionals do not worship corporate logos the way their parents did. Social media ensures reputational missteps travel faster than a political rumour in Delhi.

The most troubling habit of some boards is their reluctance to ask the hardest question of all: “What are we not being told?” In India, this question is often avoided because it threatens relationships. Challenging management can feel impolite. But politeness is not a fiduciary duty.

A truly ethical board doesn't simply read what is placed before it like a passive audience at a corporate AGM. It interrogates, probes, and occasionally irritates. It treats power not as a perk, but as a responsibility.

Perhaps the best test of boardroom ethics is this: if tomorrow's newspaper splashed your decision across the front page—with your photograph and your name—would you feel proud, embarrassed, or suddenly very interested in retiring?

In too many Indian boardrooms, the honest answer is the last one.

Until directors learn that governance is not just about avoiding jail but earning trust, corporate ethics will remain what it is today—a beautifully framed ideal hanging in a very crowded room, largely ignored by those sitting closest to it.

**In most Indian boardrooms, the real mantra is not 'tone at the top' but 'keep it just clean enough'**

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Discord within Tatas

Apropos of “An institutional test” (FE, February 26), there are few points of discord between Noel Tata and N Chandrasekaran—keeping Tata Sons unlisted, maintaining balance sheet discipline, and controlling high-risk capital investment. Chandrasekaran has rightly deferred the matter instead of pushing for a vote. The rare public disagreement at the top is a testimony of internal governance and

strategic differences. Its governance model has defined the group for over a century and an alignment between Tata Sons and Tata Trusts is non-negotiable. Chandrasekaran is credited with steering the diversified conglomerate through a period of restructuring and consolidation. Under him, the group's 15 largest listed firms have almost doubled their top and bottom lines, so amicable resolution between Tata and him is the key for the group.

—Bal Govind, Noida

### Tariffs hurt US economy

Apropos of “The economics of tariff ruling” (FE, February 26), President Trump has mismanaged the American economy by entrenching tariff-centric protectionism that transfers systemic costs onto households and firms rather than generating competitiveness. Under the rhetoric of national revival, draconian import duties have amplified inflationary pressures, disrupted integrated supply chains, and distort-

ed corporate investment calculus. Retaliation from trading partners compresses export demand, weakening farm incomes and industrial employment. The burden of geopolitical posturing is thus socialised across workers, savers, and small enterprises, entrenching uncertainty and structural fragility in the globalised US economy today.

—N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bangalore

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

## No More Buffering in Net Neutrality Debate

Align 5G innovation rules with access for all

Telecom regulators across countries, including Trai, are having to review their stance on net neutrality in light of 5G networks that allow tiered offerings. The scope of monetising slicing capabilities, such as defined upload or latency criteria, has been a key driver for operators to upgrade their networks. Telecom companies argue that 5G network slicing is based on technology and not on content, and does not run afoul of the original regulatory intent of keeping internet traffic free of discrimination. Moreover, they add that the neutrality debate took place when network slicing was not an option, and some of the conclusions are due for a fresh appraisal.

The EU and the US are reinterpreting net neutrality principles with proposals to lump 5G network slicing into a basket of specialised telecom services. These moves have run into opposition from critics who see neutrality in isolation from advancements in technology.

There remains a risk that an immutable position on neutrality could delay investor confidence and network upgrades if monetisation plans are blocked. Trai, which has not revealed its mind in the current round of conversations over the matter, will have to balance commercial flexibility with equitable internet access. And it may have to do so simultaneously with other regulators as the race heats up for 6G telecom networks.

The existing neutrality framework emerged amid public outcry, and any move perceived as discriminatory could still face opposition. There will be consumer resistance if the perceived value is not clear or if the internet experience is degraded. Enterprises have their own set of issues with security, privacy and service quality. Yet, uncertainty over large-scale adoption should not be allowed to hold telecom investment hostage. Services provided by differentiated telecom networks need innovation that is being delayed by the neutrality hurdle. The matter needs to be resolved transparently without compromising the interests of the general internet user, who is unlikely to become a customer of specialised 5G services.

## Out-of-Syllabus Bits In School Syllabus

It's unwise to bite the hand that decides your fate in court. GoI, specifically NCERT, responsible for contents of its latest social sciences textbook, 'Exploring Society: India and Beyond, Vol II', found itself in hot water after the Supreme Court found a section, 'Corruption in the Judiciary', not just an assault to the judiciary's reputation but a 'deep-rooted conspiracy' to inculcate in the minds of school-going 13-14-yr-olds ideas that could leave them prejudiced forever. The removal of all copies of the book from public access thereby ensures that alleged shortcomings in the judiciary are kept out of sight, and out of impressionable minds.

For the rest of us who are not school-goers, judicial corruption is a concern. Former CJI B R Gavai had stated in July 2025: 'Sadly, there have been instances of corruption and misconduct that have surfaced even within the judiciary. Such occurrences inevitably have a negative impact on public confidence, potentially eroding faith in the integrity of the system as a whole,' a quote that finds its way in the NCERT textbook. The blanket ban by a 3-judge bench led by CJI Surya Kant is, thankfully, limited to the Class 8 textbook.

One can presume that at that age, curious as they may be, youngsters will be protected from such warts-and-all news and notions freely available on various platforms. For a student, a textbook has the quality of a testament to it. And appearance of such unsavoury information, valid as it may be, in a government textbook, can be construed as an indictment—in other words, political motive—that young learners can do without. Outside the school syllabus, of course, it would be most effective to weed out purported malpractices, rather than simply put a lid on them.



### JUST IN JEST

Don't fret! Make hay while short videos and reels shine

## In the Golden Age Of Attention Deficit

We are told—in constant, spasmodic, short '2-min long (to read)', itchy thumb-scrolling news reports—that compulsive watching of short videos and reels erodes attention span, impulse control, and the ability to remember why you walked into the kitchen. Prolonged exposure to fast, emotionally-charged content keeps neural networks in a state of perpetual DEFCON 1: restless, twitchy and primed for anxiety. In short, our brain becomes a hamster on a caffeine drip. But here's the twist: this is the golden age for people with attention spans of a gnat. For the perpetually distracted, instead of being sent to 'concentration' camps, the world now has on offer a gargantuan buffet of dopamine-snacks, each bite-sized and monetisable.

Once, restlessness was frowned upon. Now? You channel that jitter into endless scrolling, and the algorithm pats you on the head with another video of a cat with subtitles. Creators, doomed earlier to obscurity for producing content shorter than a sneeze, are thriving. They monetise our inability to sit still and are profiting from all that neural chaos, including their own. So, yes, reels may corrode concentration. But they also democratise distraction. The hamster is no longer trapped. Now, it's a brand ambassador, mascot for 'move!' And in this 'Next, next, next!' world, attention deficit's a neat business model.

**GLOBESPOTTING** Shifting geopolitics has prompted a keener approach by India in West Asia

## Smart Salaam in Jerusalem



Indrani Bagchi

India stands with Israel firmly, with full conviction, in this moment and beyond,' said Narendra Modi in the Israeli Knesset on Wednesday. 'No cause,' he added, 'can justify the murder of civilians. Nothing can justify terrorism.' This has been India's policy for a very long time. But in West Asia, particularly in Jerusalem, the statement was replete with significance.

India's geopolitical play in West Asia has acquired new depth and scope. For a country that has spent decades balancing between Persian and Arab, Shia and Sunni, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Iran and Israel, this is a new moment. Shifting geopolitics of the Gulf/West Asia has prompted a keener approach by New Delhi. It's not without its risks. But India no longer has the luxury of living life on the sidelines of global geopolitics.

The May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict didn't merely expose how deeply China was integrated into Pakistan's operational systems, but it also showed the extent to which Türkiye was involved. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's open endorsement of Pakistani army chief Asim Munir prompted New Delhi to make their own conclusions. This was followed by the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia mutual defence pact in September, which also apparently had Washington's blessings.

The pact, which showcased Riyadh's nervousness after Israel's hit on Qatar, also appeared to range Saudi Arabia against India. That was somewhat of a shock, particularly since India had been investing in the Saudi relationship. Israel was the other country that felt the adverse impact of this defence pact, given



Getting more selfie-assured

ven Pakistan is the only nuclear weapons power in the Islamic world. (It has been believed forever that Saudi financial support helped the Pakistani nuclear programme.)

The subsequent blow-up of the Saudi-UAE relationship over Yemen (and Sudan, to an extent) created new fault lines in West Asia—and, inevitably, new coalitions of the willing. It brought UAE ruler Zayed al Nahyan to New Delhi in January. Armed with a letter of intent for a defence and security partnership, a new alliance is being given shape.

We can see the desert winds changing course. Just a little further afield, the Horn of Africa is in the middle of its own geopolitical flux. New Delhi is a big swing player there. India, Israel and the UAE are big players in Ethiopia, which serves as a lynchpin in eastern Africa. Ethiopia's landlocked condition and its traditional rivalry with Somalia may be slowly tilting it towards Somaliland, which Israel has just recognised. India is not likely to go that far yet. But it may not be averse to opening channels of communication there. Decades ago, this region used Indian rupee as legal

tender:

Trump has



**It's not without its risks. But India no longer has the luxury of living life on the sidelines of global geopolitics**

di Arabia, and neutralise Pakistan. It needs to balance Chinese influence in this region. The US will remain a premier power and occasionally on India's side. So, everyone in this region is investing in geopolitical insurance.

We can see the areas of emphasis—defence, space, tech, including emerging technologies, advanced manufacturing, diverse but shorter and more resilient supply chains, energy and new markets. India is looking to fill the gaps in its defence and security. But so are Israel and the UAE. Space cooperation will form a big part of these partnerships, as will air defence like Iron Dome, or even BrahMos (which the UAE may acquire).

Investment within these partnerships is likely to increase. Witness the UAE's investment in Dholera and in LNG. Israel-India FTA will provide Israel with a massive market, while In-

**India doubling down on its Israel and UAE relationships goes beyond the bilateral. In the ongoing global shifts, India is choosing sides, and building stakes**



dia provides massive scale. Which brings us to Iran. Both India and the UAE enjoy very good relations with Iran, which adds to regional stability. Because no matter how you look at it, Tehran, weak and battered, is still a considerable power, and one can imagine a future where Iran can play a more beneficial role in the region. Saudi Arabia is the other big power where India is building a robust economic relationship. Riyadh has to make its own choices on security.

The region blows up with alarming regularity. That's the big risk for a country like India. Is it a risk worth taking? New Delhi is betting on it.

The writer is CEO, Ananta Centre



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Count Your Blessings

LAKSHMI R SRINIVAS

Often, people feel envious of others' success, wealth and joy, including friends and family. When envy makes a home in an individual's heart, it eats up happiness.

There are umpteen young students pursuing their academic careers while earning a living. If they started envying those whose parents can afford to send their children abroad, they would not be able to achieve either their goals or the joy of being self-made successful person. A poorly paid employee, envious of a better-paid schoolmate, could become ineffective. If a differently-abled person envies the able-bodied, it would only make them give in to despair and hinder them from reaching their full potential.

Harold Coffin says, 'Envy is the art of counting another's blessings instead of your own.' Why should we not count our blessings, then? Students who must work while earning must be happy to have the opportunity. So also the poorly paid employee, who by dint of their diligence, can try to rise in the hierarchy. The differently-abled must recognise their other gifts and build on them.

Everyone is unique and has the potential to fulfil their dreams and aspirations. Finally, doing our best but being contented works wonders. This realisation will root out envy and bring peace and enthusiasm to the heart.

## Chat Room

### Blockbuster 2.0: Sau Din SaaS Ke

Apologies 'No Funeral, But Baptism by Fire' by Jaspreet Bindra (Feb 26), the shift from Software-as-a-Service to Service-as-a-Software explains what's changing in the IT industry. The arbitrage model built on cheap labour is under pressure, but the transition will not be uniform. Smaller firms may adapt faster precisely because they carry less legacy. The real challenge is for mid-sized IT companies caught between scale and agility. Reskilling workforces to supervise and audit AI agents is not optional but urgent. Industry bodies and universities need to work together on this now, not after the disruption fully arrives. S M Jeeva Chennai

### Rewriting Legacy Language Model

This refers to 'The Bell Tolls for Big Blue' by Himanshi Lohchab and Srishti Achar (Feb 25). For decades, the stewardship of legacy systems underpinned the business models of firms such as IBM, TCS, Infosys and Wipro. Anthropic's breakthrough in automating Cobol has triggered a structural reassessment within the global IT services industry. The volatility reflects deeper uncertainty about how traditional service models will adapt in an era of intelligent automation. Yet, disruption also signals opportunity. For India's IT sector, the imperative is clear: evolve from custodians of legacy systems to architects of next-gen digital ecosystems. The present turbulence may mark a transition rather than a decline, which will reward firms capable of integrating automation into their core strategy and redefining leadership in a rapidly transforming technological landscape. Amarjeet Kumar Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

Stare Dread In the Face

Apologies the Edit, 'Striking at the Heart of Terror' (Feb 25), the spectre of terrorism has bled many corners of India over the decades, especially in absence of a unified policy. India's newly released National Counter-Terrorism Policy and Strategy marks a significant attempt to bring coherence to the country's long-standing fight against terrorism. However, the policy's effectiveness will depend less on its intent and more on implementation. India's federal structure has historically complicated counter-terror coordination, with states often guarding operational autonomy. Ensuring seamless cooperation between central agencies and state police units will be critical to translating policy into action. Gregory Fernandes Mumbai

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

## WASTE GENERATION

The global official legal waste management market was valued at \$1.2 trillion in 2024. According to a report by the UN, that's about three times more than the value (\$410 billion) estimated for 2011. Industrial waste is the largest waste category globally, followed by agricultural waste, construction and demolition waste, and municipal solid waste. Hazardous waste, medical waste, and e-waste contribute much less but are more costly to manage...

**Estimates of global legal waste generation**



Estimated global average for municipal solid waste from 2016; estimated yearly global average for the other waste types from 2011-2017

Source: Global Analysis on Crimes that Affect the Environment

## Bell Curves

R Prasad



He might have prayed to me a couple of times, but I swear I've never visited him even once!

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN

## Cash, Stabilising Catalyst



Rajesh Shukla

Budget 2026 resolves a key macroeconomic debate by pairing higher public investment with credible fiscal consolidation, opening a policy window. Focus has shifted from whether India can afford to invest, to whether such investment can ensure income stability and everyday confidence for households. That challenge is visible in how families spend today. Consumption decisions are increasingly made with spreadsheet precision. Brands are rotated rather than rejected, discretionary purchases postponed, not abandoned. Grocery baskets are optimised around offers, appliances repaired rather than replaced, and even festivals are budgeted with restraint. This behavioural shift will shape India's growth. The budget boosts public capex to ₹2.2 lakh cr while targeting a 4.3% fiscal deficit, a disciplined yet ambitious mix. The key question now is: can this space generate a jobs and consumption cycle that reaches households, not just balance sheets?

While consumption grows, the neo-middle class—about 40% of the population, nearly half in rural and semi-urban areas—remains the backbone of mass consumption. Positioned above vulnerability and mostly outside the IT net, their spending shapes demand, employment and fiscal outcomes.

Consumption growth is becoming uneven, with more accruing to the upper-middle class (35% of the population) and top 10% wealthiest. While headline growth may stay strong, spending patterns of mass households will determine how growth is felt and sustained.

The neo-middle class is often framed as a question of confidence. But it's really about volatility. They adjust spending not because of doubt in India's prospects, but due to irregular incomes, costly me-

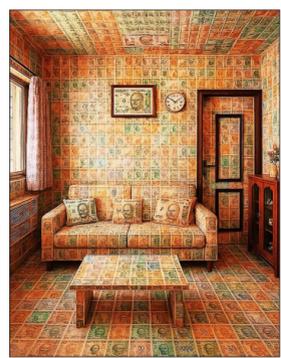
dical shocks, rising rent and transport, and frequent job changes. Still forming about a third of India's consumption base, even small behavioural shifts can affect demand, and a few disrupted months can erase years of progress.

The next phase of public investment will be judged not by assets built but by income stability. Roads, ports and urban infrastructure matter because they should deliver predictable incomes. Without stable employment—if work remains casual, intermittent or mediated through insecure subcontracting—neo-middle-class households will keep spending defensively, even amid economic growth.

The budget's focus on derisking private investment reflects capital's caution. The challenge is to apply the same logic to labour and households. For the neo-middle class, the real constraint isn't taxes or credit—it's exposure to shocks. Without insurance against health costs, job changes and income gaps, precaution will outweigh aspiration.

This reframes how future budgets and policy follow-through should be assessed.

**► Employment quality matters as much as quantity** Public capex aimed at attracting private investment should be assessed by the stability and continuity of jobs it creates. Projects that provide steady monthly incomes and reduce



More living room

churn generate stronger consumption effects than those dependent on fragmented or informal labour.

**► Social infrastructure will shape demand** Infrastructure Reliable primary healthcare, skilling systems linked to placement and wage progression, and efficient urban services reduce the need for precautionary savings. When households feel better able to absorb shocks, discretionary consumption can return organically.

**► Geography of growth shapes its durability** Neo-middle-class households, concentrated in small towns and peri-urban areas, face uneven services and high labour mobility. Capex that boosts connectivity without improving local services may raise asset values but not everyday welfare, widening the gap between measured growth and lived experience.

The smart buyer's insight matters because it's forward-looking. Consumption hasn't collapsed. Households adapt, trading down, delaying upgrades and stretching product life. Macroeconomically, this shows resilience; from a policy view, it signals caution. Substitution maintains demand but slows the shift from recovery to a self-reinforcing growth cycle.

The budget has done the difficult macro work of restoring fiscal discipline while sustaining investment momentum. The next question: how growth is transmitted to households. The coming years will test whether public spending can move from building assets to underwriting income stability for households that live month to month, not quarter to quarter. The budget's success should be judged less by deficit ratios and more by behavioural shifts. When neo-middle-class households stop behaving like procurement managers, constantly optimising, postponing and hedging, and begin upgrading with confidence, the jobs and consumption flywheel will become visible in everyday life. That transition, more than any single budget number, will determine whether India's growth is merely sustained or genuinely shared.

The writer is MD-CEO, People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE)

## Wait for the Kettle to Boil

Take time out and waiting for your kettle to boil. It's a little pleasure that modern life, with its compulsive multitasking, rarely allows. The kettle demands patience. It hums, it clicks, it gathers itself like a monk preparing to chant. And in those few minutes, you are suspended in a rare pocket of purposelessness.

You could check your phone. But don't. Simply stand. Listen to the slow crescendo



of water gurgling into steam. Rediscover the art of waiting. The hiss becomes a meditation, the rattle a reminder that anticipation is its own kind of bliss. The kettle insists on its own kind of presence. It teaches that the pour is sweeter when preceded by pause. The inaction on your part is distilled presence. And when the boil finally arrives, it is earned. The tea or coffee, the pour—all richer because you stood still, resisting the itch to fill the gap. In a world obsessed with speed, the kettle offers a little rebellion. Waiting becomes luxury. Doing nothing becomes everything. It tells you that you haven't run out of steam, after all.



## CONTRAPUNTO

The evil that men do  
lives after them

— MARK ANTONY, Julius Caesar

## I To I

India-Israel ties have moved beyond business.  
As they say in Hebrew, *sababa*, that's great

There isn't a better word to describe India-Israel relationship than the Hebrew *firgun* – genuine pride in the accomplishments of another. And Modi's second visit has only strengthened it, like the sycamores of Tel Aviv. You can pore over MoUs and deals to grasp this. Or, pay heed to chants of "Modi" in Knesset, Netanyahu's recollection of his "first or second" date with his wife at an Indian restaurant, and Modi telling Israeli lawmakers he was born the day India recognised Israel in 1950. Clearly, this bilateral relationship has progressed beyond business, to bonhomie. And how sycamore-like its growth has been. Between 2014, when India really started warming to Israel, and now, both sides have come to trust each other deeply.

India is now Israel's second biggest trade partner in Asia, after China. Bilateral trade had zoomed to \$10.8bn in 2022-23 before troubles in Red Sea made movement of goods difficult. India is also Israel's top arms buyer, and its strongest ally in the east. Netanyahu is keen on involving India in a new "hexagonal alliance" against "radical adversaries". There's also the old, Biden-era "I2U2" grouping of India, Israel, US and UAE for containing China in West Asia. The first time Modi visited Israel, in 2017, Netanyahu had spelt out his idea of bilateral ties as a mathematical equation:  $IT \times IT = I^2T$ . *Tachles* – Hebrew for "to the point" – Indian Talent combined with Israeli Tech would define India-Israel future ties.

That's happening already. Mutual cooperation extends from agriculture to water treatment, education and space technology. But AI, cybersecurity and defence are major focus areas. Although Israel is a small country, it ranks 14th out of 139 countries on the Global Innovation Index. Which isn't surprising because it spends over 6% of GDP on R&D, as against only 0.7% in India. It has chip-making factories, and an impressive record in defence production.

So, as India and Israel deepen their engagement, what do they seek from each other? For Israel, India is invaluable as a vast market, and a friendly power. India would want greater access to defence tech, such as the Iron Dome missile shield. Israel's Hermes 900 drones are already made in India, but given the increasing importance of UAVs in war, it would want more advanced know-how too. The good news is that Israel seems happy to share its tech, although US approvals are needed in some cases. But for the relationship, intent is what matters most. *Sababa* – that's great.

## Knock, Knock...Who's Fluent?

Teenagers are naturally attracted to foreign cultures, and thus languages. Encourage this

Policy is all very well, but what about pleasure? It gets little mention in politically charged shouting matches about the Centre's three-language policy, or its heated two-language rebuttals. In all the earnest talk of national identity, competitiveness and cultural preservation, joy barely gets a footnote. In classroom models too, language learning is more grim duty than delicious discovery. And yet, look around. Teenagers are picking up Korean because they adore BTS and binge-watch *Squid Game*. Others slip into Spanish thanks to *Despacito* and *Money Heist*. They are gaming with friends in Brazil, France and Italy, absorbing slang and syntax as casually as oxygen. No previous generation has had such easy, daily contact with peers across continents. For them, language isn't a syllabus; it's a soundtrack.

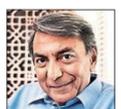
To learn most naturally and efficiently, the language has to feel like an *invitation*. Like being pulled into a darkened cinema where unknown joys await. Neuroscience tells us the teenage brain releases more dopamine in response to rewarding experiences; motivation matters. So do our schools understand this? Do they fling open doors to the mysterious continents students long to explore, or do they quietly use nationality to fence them in? Remember that even as visa controls tighten in some corners of the world, the traffic of ideas remains gloriously free. As Michael Erard writes in *Babel No More*, that means our brains also have to flow, to stay plastic, stretch towards new sounds and skills. Multilingualism, after all, is a workout for neuroplasticity.

Yet, parents and teachers still wave away a student's fascination with some foreign culture as frivolous. But a language acquired through teenage passion compounds like an investment. Beyond all the possibilities of direct career enhancement, it sharpens those softer skills – empathy, flexibility, executive control – that employers will prize even more tomorrow. What joy and utility are joining together; let no school put asunder. So the student may forever sing, *Non, je ne regrette rien*.

## Jeffrey and me

As more Big Names are linked to Epstein, the needle of suspicion moves closer home

Jug Suraiya



Shortly after Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, formerly known as Prince Randy Andy Andrew, was arrested by the police for his close association with sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, Bill Gates suddenly quit the AI summit in Delhi where he was scheduled to make a keynote address, his precipitate departure reportedly linked to his nominal connection with Epstein.

The so-called Epstein Files read like a Who's Who of Big Names, including Donald Trump, Elon Musk, Bill Clinton, Richard Branson, linguist Noam Chomsky, and motivational maestro Deepak Chopra.

Though in most cases, no wrongdoing has been ascribed to those so named, the very fact that they have been mentioned in Epstein's copious correspondence with innumerable people is enough to make headlines.

The vile Epstein seems to have been an indefatigable networker, corresponding with all and sundry with the frenzied dedication of an army of spam senders selling 3BHK apartments, or urging you to divulge your bank details so that they can deposit the ten-million-dollar prize you won in a lottery, even though you forgot to buy a ticket for it.

The Epstein list keeps growing. Who'll pop up next? The Pope? That's what worries me. Not that it might be the Pope. But that it might be someone much closer home. Me.

I've never communicated with the fellow. But suppose the chap's tried to contact me through emails or texts that unnoticed by me have gone into spam. Does that make me an accomplice by association, like an unwitting recipient of stolen goods?

True, Epstein connected only with capital-letter Big Names and I'm very much a lower-case small name. But suppose the bozo did so by mistake, or as an April Fool lark, or just to show he wasn't too snobbish to hobnob occasionally with hoi polloi, me being about as polloi as you can be?

So far, my lower-case name hasn't cropped up Epstein-wise. But as put by Nassim Nicholas Taleb – don't say he's in the Epstein dossier too! – no evidence of guilt is not evidence of no guilt.

So I might as well confess: Guilty, as not charged – yet.

## Hamnet: To Judge Or Not To Judge

The film raises the question, should we separate the artist from the art. Should we really let artists' tarnished personal records disqualify their achievements?

Indira Ghose



*Hamnet*, directed by Chloé Zhao, is a strong contender at this year's Oscars. It is a heart-wrenching fiction about Shakespeare and his wife, Agnes (or Anne), and the event that allegedly inspired the play *Hamlet*: the loss of their only son, Hamnet, at the age of eleven.

Agnes never forgives her husband for being absent at their child's death. Years later, she attends a performance of *Hamlet* and realises that he has transmuted his grief for a dead child into the grief of a Danish prince for a dead father.

Does any of this hold up in the cold light of historical truth? And if so, does it matter?

The documented facts are these: in 1582, Shakespeare, aged 18, married Anne Hathaway, aged 26. In 1583, Anne gave birth to a daughter, Susanna. Two years later the twins Judith and Hamnet were born, named after neighbouring friends. The next trace we have of Shakespeare stems from 1592, when a rival playwright published a sneering attack on the 'Upstart Crow' who was making a name for himself in London. In 1596, Hamnet died of unspecified causes.

Nothing is known about the emotional ties that shaped Shakespeare's life. The sonnets depict a love triangle between the poet, a young man and a dark lady, but generations of scholars have been unable to identify whom they correspond to. The affair may have taken place entirely in the poet's mind. Anne is explicitly mentioned only once: in Shakespeare's will, in which he bequeaths his "second-best bed" to her. The rest is speculation.

Every age reinvents Shakespeare in their own image. Based on a novel by Maggie O'Farrell, the film reclaims the shadowy figure of Shakespeare's wife as a free-spirited proto-feminist. *Hamnet* lets Shakespeare off lightly. He might be an absentee father, but redeems himself through his art. But the film raises a far broader question. What is the relationship between the life and the work? Can art be reduced to biography?

In the case of Shakespeare, reading art as a mirror of the artist's life fuels the ever-smouldering Shakespeare authorship controversy. Since the mid-19th century, legions of enthusiasts have set out to prove that the

plays cannot have been written by a glovemaking son.

No one from such a humble background, they argue, could have penned works that reveal such a wealth of knowledge about classical literature, court politics, law, or foreign countries. Alternative candidates are Sir Francis Bacon, philosopher and statesman, and Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, poet and patron of the arts. Ample documentary evidence attests to the authorship of Shakespeare.

In our age of conspiracy theories, however, the debate has gained fresh momentum. Even people who don't know a line from Shakespeare (apart from "To be

personal record disqualify their achievements? Or do we need to distinguish between the person and their work, the artist and the art?

Moral outrage about the repellent behaviour of celebrated artists has reached a frenzied pitch in the era of social media, where the boundaries between private and public have collapsed. One of the latest casualties is Picasso. Today his work is discussed mainly in terms of misogyny and cultural appropriation.

Female artists too have come in for their share of vitriol. Joni Mitchell and Doris Lessing are castigated for abandoning their children, Virginia Woolf for her antisemitism. What we overlook is that we too are flawed, fragmented, and contradictory beings. The lives of the famous harbour sordid secrets in the same way as do our own.

While we live in a world in which the rich and the powerful operate with impunity, the demand for moral purity has established a stranglehold over the arts. Dead or alive, artists are expected to conform to a high moral standard and promote worthy sentiments. The art is equated with the artist. But artworks are much more than a sublimated version of the artist's biography. And rather than confirming our opinions, powerful art unsettles us by evoking deeply ambivalent emotions – and accordingly, captures the conflicts and moral complexities of being human. This is why art from the past still speaks to us.

The death of Hamnet may or may not have inspired *Hamlet*. The play is, however, immeasurably richer than a tearjerker. It wrestles with dark moral dilemmas: guilt and resentment, the desire to break free from family bonds and nostalgia for a lost Eden.

"Remember me", the ghost urges. What he demands is not remembrance, but revenge. Self-deluded and posturing though Hamlet might be, he resists to the extent possible. Once he embarks on a spree of violence, like all revengers, his actions become increasingly dubious.

Set in a surveillance state in which corruption and betrayal are rampant, the play depicts a disintegrating moral order, a world without clear answers. It is a play for our times.

The writer is former professor, English Literature, University of Fribourg, Switzerland



or not to be") flaunt their insider wisdom and proclaim that Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare.

Our fascination with the hidden lives of the famous is not a recent development. Over the years, lurid details about the moral failings of thinkers, writers and musicians have emerged. We are now all too familiar with Kant's racism and the "outlandish" experiments of Mahatma Gandhi, while Hemingway and Norman Mailer, Miles Davis and Michael Jackson have been exposed as despicable individuals.

Needless to say, even outstanding personalities should be accountable to justice for any crimes they commit. But to what extent does their tarnished

disruption and moral calamity of barbaric world wars that wrecked faith in progress based on Western 'rationality'. He blamed, in the same breath, 'godless communist revolutions' and 'anti-colonial uprisings'.

Why are 'evil' commies lumped with people? Both apparently imperilled the hitherto-'expanding' West, one by challenging free societies, the other by wanting to be free! Rubio is fine with 13 American colonies attaining independence – perhaps because they fought not imperialism per se but specifically the British empire, as historian Bernard Porter noted, partly to gain 'freedom to imperialise their own continent'. Ergo, what was wrong for, say, 'anti-colonial'

India, Vietnam or Algeria in the 20th century was right for 'infant nation' America in the 18th.

Go from Eurocentric Trumpian history to Trumpian geography. When 'new continents' are seen as vast, unclaimed places, colonial appropriation becomes 'guilt-free'. In his latest State of the Union address, Trump said nation-building Americans 'carved through an unforgiving wilderness, settled a boundless frontier' and 'tamed' the 'Wild West'. Rubio similarly romanticises Europe's seemingly bloodless conquest of the 'New World', and American settlers' westward expansion. Trump talks of 'empty marshes', 'wide-open plains'; Rubio describes 'frontiers', heartlands, 'empty plains' and interiors shaped by industrious Euro-Americans. Neither mentions native populations, upon whose

misery, displacement and/or extermination empires – and America – were built.

Rubio extolls Spain-payrolled Italian explorer Columbus's 'adventure' as defining 'the imagination of our pioneer nation'. He seemingly forgets Columbus set sail in 1492 to find the 'Indies'. Asian civilisations that existed before America was born. The Caribbean lands he stumbled upon – heralding colonisation of the Americas – weren't unpeopled. Nor did the systematic exploitation and enslavement his 'discovery of America' triggered go uncontested by Christian colonists. Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas, for one, witnessed carnage firsthand. Relinquishing his slave-driving estate, he tirelessly petitioned against 16th century Spanish conquistadors' brutality towards indigenous peoples.

Expectedly, for Trumpists, *who* lives where seems irrelevant if 'America First' can straddle *where* they live. Hence Gaza is 'real estate' rather than home to two million-plus Gazans. Mineral-rich Greenland is a 'piece of ice'. 56,000-plus Greenlanders should let America acquire. And Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean should submit to Donroe doctrinaires.

In a not-unrelated ideological takeover bid based on blackening the West's accomplishments, Europe's asked to don ethnonationalist robes. Scientific enquiry, democracy, human rights, secularism, anti-militarism, trade's peace dividends, media freedom, environmental protection – these hard-wrought values, however imperfectly upheld, are denigrated. Indulging far-right elements, Trumpists rap anyone across ideological lines who defends rules-based coexistence, or red-flags supremacism, expansionism, wealth concentration, climate scepticism or disease risks.

Not everyone favours whitewashing history. At MSC, German chancellor Friedrich Merz warned America of the 'limits' of unilateralism, contrasting autocracy's followers with democracy's partners. Pitting European solidarity against big power politics, he rejected 'hegemonic fantasies' that once led Germany astray. 'Might makes right' took his country to a 'dark place', down a path to the 'bitter' end, he said – alluding to the catastrophe of WWII. Telling his multilingual audience about this enduring lesson never again 'to go it alone', Merz championed Europe – speaking in German. A point Trump should note.

## IT ALL GOES BACK TO COLUMBUS

In MAGA's book, Western civilisation has no discontents. If only Europe would agree

Rupa Sengupta



Trump recently said Europeans would 'all be speaking German' had America not 'won' WWII. By oversight or design, he didn't acknowledge Britain's and Soviet Union's big role in wresting Allied victory. Also ignored was the historical context and pillars of US's postwar might. Emerging from WWII as a global superpower, US needed and cultivated transatlantic partners to bolster its dominance and help fight Soviet communism. Whether through the Marshall Plan or Nato's formation, America served itself by safeguarding Europe.

In Trump-speak, though, Europe owes America, Atlas that's shrugged. It must refund US for 'globalism' – post-1945 trade and collective security arrangements that boosted US power-projection. Besides 'burden-sharing', US's eternally indebted allies must also satisfy every demand of their Trumpian protector-in-name, one that wants maximum power with minimum responsibility. For instance, they must cede Greenland even if, deprioritising Europe's security and Ukraine's deliverance, US defence strategists write off Putin-led Russia's revanchism as a 'manageable threat to Nato's eastern members'.

Most important, Europe must help America revitalize the West, jointly defending their 'sacred inheritance'. At the recent Munich Security Conference (MSC), secretary of state Marco Rubio lauded 'Western civilisation', the 'greatest-ever, expanded by explorers, missionaries, pilgrims and soldiers – read: superior Western science, faith and arms. US could go solo with the task of civilisational renewal, he said, but transatlantic fates were 'connected' spiritually and culturally. So US preferred if its allies abandoned deluded internationalism, and embraced their shared heritage: the empire-building, Christianity-spreading Europe whose ships crossed oceans and birthed America.

According to Rubio, in 1945 Europe lay prostrate for the first time 'since the age of Columbus'. But what had hastened the 'decline' of 'great Western empires'? No, he didn't mention disastrous great power rivalries, scrambles for land and resources, arms races, Hitler's abominations, or the economic strain, social

disruption and moral calamity of barbaric world wars that wrecked faith in progress based on Western 'rationality'. He blamed, in the same breath, 'godless communist revolutions' and 'anti-colonial uprisings'.

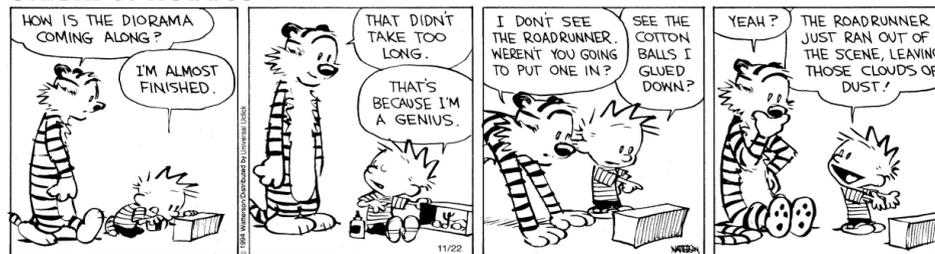
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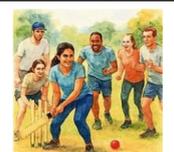
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## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



## Sacredspace



How important it is for us to recognise and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!

Maya Angelou

## Democracy Of Silence: When Not Choosing Is A Choice

Sonal Srivastava

In Indic epistemological parlance, *abhava*, absence, is not a mere void. It is a distinct way of examining reality through the lens of nonexistence. Take, for instance, the air inside a pot. When the pot is merely a lump of clay, air inside the pot is absent but only in a relational sense. Hence, when the Supreme Court recently observed that some mechanism, not necessarily punitive, could be devised to make voting compulsory, it raised a deeper philosophical question: Is abstention not a gentler way to express disapproval?

Abstention is a form of censure that can speak louder than words. Take for example, an elephant in the room. It's absent yet it cannot be ignored. The dictionary meaning of the word 'abstention' is 'the fact of not voting in favour of or against someone or something'. Hence, like, *abhava*, abstention is not mere absence from voting; it could be many things: a silent

critique of available choices, a protest against binaries, or even a philosophical refusal to reduce one's conscience to pressing a button.

The act of choosing is inherently dualistic: civic agency must be expressed through a preference for one option over another. For a sage in *Brahm Samadhi*, this may appear futile, for he knows that 'there is no two', and therefore no choice is to be made. The ultimate Truth includes play of opposites, yet one who chooses the Divine rises above *dvaitavad*, the realm of dualities. Such a person, Gita says, is a *Shitaprajna* – even-minded in victory and defeat, joy and sorrow, love and hate, trust and disgust.

For the spiritually inclined, voting may thus pose a dualistic proposition. It could be examined whether participation in structured dualisms compromises a nondual orientation? Or is abstention a

way of remaining equanimous?

For many young citizens, political binaries may feel outdated, too simplistic to capture the complexity of their concerns. Sam Altman recently suggested that young people should not automatically defer to older generations, as the pace of technological change and AI are blurring boundaries in economic and informational spaces. Old maps no longer match the terrain. Yet the dominant political narrative in India is rife with hypernationalism, marked by exaggerated patriotism, aggressive assertion of religious identity, and hostility towards perceived 'others'. In this framework, abstention, like the epistemological concept of *abhava*, is meaningful relational absence.

Nations run on engines of competing nationalisms that must harvest patriotism for fuel. "The truth is that spirit of conflict and conquest is at the origin

and in centre of Western nationalism; its basis is not social co-operation," says Rabinranath Tagore. Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, took upon himself the task of deconstructing the nation itself. The nation is not an eternal essence; it is a narrative, a story told about common language, memory, and destiny. Jürgen Habermas wrote the *Postnational Constellation* suggesting a world where democracy and polity must adapt to global interdependence, moving beyond the limits of exclusive national identity.

*Abhava* is not a barren void but a meaningful absence: a shift in relational form. When clay becomes a pot, its configuration, function, and field of relations within which it exists change. In much the same way, postnationalism does not signal the demise of sovereign nations; it gestures towards the need for transformation. It calls for a recalibrated response to certain crises that exceed the moral and geographic limits of a nation-state.



THE SPEAKING TREE



## Editor's TAKE

### Signals from Modi's Knesset address

As tensions in West Asia deepen, India must ensure that its strategic partnerships are matched by a consistent moral stance

West Asia is a quagmire very few world leaders are keen to step into. The situation here is complex and the reality so twisted that it is difficult to identify the perpetrator, let alone judge the situation. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched down in Israel, he had a very difficult task at hand: to strengthen relations with Israel but at the same time remain steadfast in India's West Asia policy that has supported Palestine's right to self-determination. Modi's historic address to the Knesset, a first by an Indian Prime Minister, was indeed a defining moment in India's West Asia diplomacy.

Modi's message – that "no cause can justify the murder of civilians" – was multilayered; it was directed at all concerned without naming anybody. Modi condemned violence and kept his pitch generic, stating that India was for peace in the region and that nothing whatsoever could justify the killing of innocent people. Modi's visit is also filled with realism, though it is loaded with rhetoric. Standing alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Modi described Israel as a "trusted partner" and reaffirmed India's support "with full conviction". It was a razor-edge walk, as Modi in the same breath reiterated India's backing of the UN Security Council-approved Gaza peace initiative, signalling that India was not shunning its well-articulated and practised West Asia policy. This dual messaging – solidarity with Israel's security concerns while endorsing a pathway to "just and durable peace" – encapsulates India's balancing act.

The India-Israel partnership today is both strategic and substantive. Since Modi's landmark 2017 visit – the first by an Indian prime minister – ties between the two countries have improved significantly. India is Israel's largest arms buyer, and defence cooperation has become the backbone of the relationship. From advanced missile systems to surveillance technologies, Israeli defence exports have played a critical role in modernising India's military capabilities. Beyond security, both countries are deepening collaboration in artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, water management, and agriculture. The recent Bilateral Investment Treaty further institutionalises economic engagement.

However, India has traditionally championed Palestinian self-determination in multilateral forums and continues to endorse a two-state solution. Indeed, New Delhi recently joined over 100 countries in criticising Israeli moves in the West Bank. The tension between principle and pragmatism is therefore unmistakable. What has now changed is that India's West Asia policy is interest-driven rather than ideological. Security cooperation, technology partnerships, and geopolitical convergence matter more than symbolic posturing. Finally, the future of India's West Asia policy will depend on its ability to sustain this delicate balance. Moral consistency – particularly on civilian protection – must complement strategic partnerships. Modi's Knesset address was more than a ceremonial milestone. It was a statement that India seeks to be both a steadfast partner and a principled actor – navigating West Asia not through binaries, but through calibrated conviction.

# Decoding the politics of protests

Democracy protects dissent, but a rising nation must also protect the sanctity of its institutional platforms – the AI summit disruption forces India to draw that line clearly



JAGMOHAN SINGH RAJU

Democracy gives citizens the right to protest. It does not confer the right to disrupt the nation's institutional platforms. That distinction is not technical; it is civilisational. A republic survives not merely because dissent is permitted, but because institutions function with authority, continuity and public trust. When that order is deliberately breached, the issue is no longer only about grievance; it becomes a question of national responsibility. The shirtless protest staged by members of the Indian Youth Congress inside Bharat Mandapam during the recent AI summit in New Delhi was not an ordinary expression of dissent in a public square. It was a calculated disruption inside a secured international event designed to project India's technological ambition before global delegates, investors and policymakers. The venue was chosen for impact. The optics were chosen for virality. The disruption was chosen for maximum visibility.

That choice demands scrutiny. India's Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. These guarantees form the backbone of democratic life. The Opposition is fully entitled to question the government's AI strategy, trade posture, economic direction or employment record. Dissent is not anti-national; it is intrinsic to democratic accountability. Yet constitutional freedoms operate within a framework of reasonable restraint. When the security perimeters of an international summit are breached and proceedings are interrupted from within, the character of protest changes. The debate shifts from policy substance to procedural violation. It ceases to be merely expressive and becomes obstructive.

A democracy must protect protest. It must also protect order. These principles are complementary. Without order, rights cannot be exercised meaningfully. Without rights, order degenerates into control. The strength of a republic lies in balancing both.

When India hosts a global summit on artificial intelligence, it is not organising a routine conference. It is signalling strategic intent. Artificial intelligence will shape industrial competitiveness, national security, governance models and economic power in the coming decades. Hosting such a summit asserts that India seeks to help shape technological norms, not merely adapt to them. Bharat Mandapam, in that moment, was more than architecture. It was a national stage. It reflected confidence in India's capacity, ambition and stability. To stage a shirtless protest inside the arena converted that moment into spectacle. The imagery ensured headlines. Yet the clarity of argument was far less visible. If the



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objective was to highlight youth unemployment, technological displacement or inequality, those concerns required detailed articulation, structured alternatives and sustained engagement. A dramatic gesture cannot substitute for policy seriousness.

There is a decisive difference between protesting outside a venue and breaching proceedings within. Outside, dissent confronts power while respecting institutional space. Inside, it risks undermining the very platforms that represent the nation before the world.

Across established democracies, high-level summits attract protesters. In the United States and Europe, climate meetings, economic forums and global conventions draw vocal opposition. Authorities designate protest zones, negotiate boundaries and maintain firm security. Demonstrations occur – sometimes intensely – but secured proceedings continue.

The principle is clear: visibility without paralysis. Authoritarian systems respond differently. In 1989, at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, dissent was met with tanks. Debate was extinguished by force. That is how insecure regimes react.

India is not that system. The AI summit protest occurred. It was reported, debated and legally processed. That itself reflects democratic openness. But openness must not be confused with permissiveness. A state that cannot secure its international platforms signals fragility, not freedom. Order is not the enemy of liberty; it is its guardian.

Artificial intelligence raises profound national questions. Will automation displace workers faster than reskilling mechanisms can respond? How will India protect data sovereignty in a world dominated by global platforms? What regulatory architecture will ensure algorithmic accountability? How can technological growth remain inclusive rather than exclusionary? These questions deserve rigorous parliamentary debate, expert consultation and alternative policy frameworks. They demand persistence and intellectual seriousness. Democratic influence is built through argument, documentation and sustained mobilisation – not

through fleeting spectacle. When protest becomes performative, it risks diminishing the gravity of the issue it claims to elevate. A viral moment may dominate one news cycle; it rarely shapes legislation or regulatory design.

India today stands at a pivotal moment. It seeks to position itself as a technological power and a responsible global actor. Investors assess stability. Diplomatic partners assess institutional coherence. Global perception carries economic and strategic consequences.

Disruption inside the arena of a global summit shifts attention from substance to theatrics. It hands critics an easy narrative. It distracts from national ambition. Political actors must ask whether such conduct strengthens India's voice in the world or dilutes it. Democratic politics does not exist in isolation from national interest. In a competitive global environment, internal conduct influences external credibility.

There are moments in history when dramatic protest becomes morally imperative – when institutions close and avenues of accountability disappear. In such contexts, extraordinary tactics gain legitimacy because the system has failed. That is not India's present reality. Parliament functions. Courts intervene. Media debates flourish. Opposition leaders campaign freely. Elections remain fiercely contested.

In such an environment, political capital is earned through persuasion, not provocation. Disruption of secured national platforms is neither necessary nor constructive. It confuses noise with influence and visibility with credibility.

A rising nation requires maturity from both government and Opposition. The government must act firmly yet proportionately. Overreach weakens democratic authority; indifference weakens institutional strength.

The Opposition must calibrate tactics to context. Passion is understandable. Accountability is essential. But seriousness is indispensable. Democracy is not measured by how dramatically proceedings are interrupted. It is measured by how effectively public opinion is shaped and policy is influenced.

The AI summit protest will pass. What must remain is a principled standard: protest is legitimate; breach of secured national platforms is not. India's democratic space is expansive. Its global aspirations are rightful. Protecting both requires discipline as much as freedom, restraint as much as resolve.

Patriotism and protest are not adversaries. But when protest diminishes national platforms without elevating democratic reasoning, it ceases to serve the republic.

A confident nation does not silence dissent. It expects dissent to rise to the level of the nation itself. India deserves politics that matches its stature – firm in conviction, responsible in conduct, and conscious that national dignity is not a partisan asset but a shared inheritance.



# Connected online, silent within our own home



SAKSHI SETHI

## 2ND OPINION

In one of my seminars, a student once beamed while checking her phone and said, "My brother sent me a meme." Then she paused and added quietly, "We don't talk much though." Her statement reflects a peculiar truth of modern households. Many siblings today share reels, memes and forwarded jokes almost every day, but rarely share their real thoughts, fears or emotions. They live under the same roof, eat at the same table and celebrate the same festivals, yet somewhere along the journey from childhood to maturity, conversations become formal, constrained and sometimes altogether absent.

Childhood tells a different story. Siblings are our earliest companions. They share secrets under blankets, fight over television remotes, complain about parents and defend each other fiercely in front of outsiders. They grow

up in the same environment, shaped by the same values and memories. They know each other's strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities better than anyone else. Yet, as years pass, something changes. Responsibilities increase, careers begin and marriages happen. Individual identities take precedence over shared ones. Slowly, without any dramatic conflict, emotional distance replaces emotional intimacy. In Indian families, this silence is often misunderstood. Parents feel relieved that their children are no longer fighting and interpret silence as maturity. But silence is not always peace. Sometimes, it is simply unexpressed emotion.

One of the most overlooked reasons behind this silence is emotional conditioning. From a young age, children – especially boys – are rarely taught to express affection openly towards siblings. Love is shown through duty rather than words. A brother may ensure that his sister reaches home safely but never tell her he misses her. A sister may worry endlessly about her brother's well-being but may never articulate that concern.

Technology has further complicated this dynamic. Digital communication has created an illusion of connection. Sending birthday wishes on a family WhatsApp group or reacting to a social media story appears to sustain relationships. Yet these small gestures often replace deeper, meaningful conversations, resulting in reduced emotion-

al exchange. Implicit childhood roles also play a part. Labels such as the 'responsible one', the 'rebellious one', the 'sensitive one' or the 'successful one', assigned consciously or unconsciously, continue to shape sibling relationships in adulthood. Sometimes, distance is not created by present circumstances but by past perceptions.

Despite this quiet distance, the emotional tie rarely disappears. In moments of crisis, siblings often stand beside each other without hesitation. They may not speak daily, but their presence carries a familiarity and security that few other relationships offer. Unlike friendships, sibling relationships are not chosen.

Unlike parental relationships, they exist on equal ground. But like all relationships, they require nurturing. Emotional connection does not survive on memories alone; it demands effort in the present. Breaking the silence does not require grand gestures. Bridging the sibling gap is less about logistics and more about intimacy.

In a society where individuals are constantly connected yet emotionally distant, the most meaningful conversations may be waiting within our own homes. Sometimes, the person who has known us the longest is also the one we speak to the least. And sometimes, one honest conversation is enough to revive a lifetime of connection.



The writer is an educator

## PIC TALK



A participant performs with a traditional circular acrobatic prop during the Nagar Devi Yatra of Goddess Bhadra Kali in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

PHOTO: PTI

## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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## STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS CAN PREVENT FUTURE AVIATION ACCIDENTS

The recent accidents underline how fragile aviation safety becomes when procedures are treated casually. While investigations often highlight pilot error, the deeper issue lies in systemic lapses – training, oversight and enforcement. Practical steps can help. The DGCA must ensure that Standard Operating Procedures are not just written but actively monitored through routine audits and transparent reporting. Airlines should invest in recurrent training, not as a formality but as a culture of safety. Equally important, the Pilot-in-Command must be free from commercial pressure, with decisions respected even if they cause delays.

One area that deserves greater attention is weather assessment. Several accidents in

India have involved poor visibility or adverse conditions that were either underestimated or ignored under operational pressure. Strengthening pre-flight meteorological briefings and equipping smaller aircraft with updated navigation aids should be a regulatory priority. Crew fatigue, inadequate rest protocols and poor cockpit communication have contributed to accidents worldwide. India must align its crew duty-hour regulations with international standards and enforce them strictly.

Public confidence in air travel depends on visible accountability. Aviation safety cannot be compromised; it must remain the first priority, not the last consideration.

A MYLSAMI | COIMBATORE

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

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## A pragmatic diplomatic move

The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel is significant in view of the evolving relationship between the two nations, which gained momentum after his landmark 2017 visit.

Historically, ties between India and Israel remained cautious, shaped by India's vote against the creation of Israel in 1947 and its delayed establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992, despite recognising Israel in 1950.

India's consistent support for Palestine often restrained open engagement with Israel. PM Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to move beyond this hesitancy while continuing to support Palestinian concerns without allowing them to restrict bilateral cooperation.

The warm reception extended by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu symbolised the growing warmth between the two countries. By addressing the Israeli Parliament, PM Modi reinforced India's commitment to strengthening strategic cooperation despite ideological differences. The visit reflects a pragmatic shift in India's foreign policy, signalling that national interest and regional stability now guide engagement in West Asia.

SUNIL OKHADE | INDORE

## Conflict continues without clear resolution

Four years after its outbreak, the war between Russia and Ukraine shows no credible path towards resolution. What began as a strategic confrontation has now hardened into prolonged attrition, leaving civilians to endure displacement, destruction and insecurity.

Despite repeated mediation efforts by the United Nations, negotiations remain constrained by mistrust and uncompromising positions. President Vladimir Putin continues to frame the conflict in existential terms, limiting scope for compromise, while President Volodymyr Zelenskyy maintains that sovereignty and territorial integrity remain non-negotiable.

External military assistance has sustained Ukraine's resistance but has also deepened global polarisation. Energy markets and food supply chains continue to experience instability, disproportionately affecting developing economies.

The conflict today represents not strategic manoeuvring but a test of endurance. Neither side appears capable of achieving decisive advantage without risking dangerous escalation.

Even when hostilities eventually cease, rebuilding confidence across Europe and beyond will remain a formidable challenge.

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU

## Cultural identity needs equal recognition

The Union Cabinet's approval to rename Kerala as "Keralam" marks an important step towards restoring linguistic authenticity and cultural identity. The decision, announced on February 24, 2026, initiates the constitutional process under Article 3.

While this recognition of Malayalam identity is welcome, it revives the unresolved case of West Bengal's long-pending proposal to rename itself "Bangla".

Passed unanimously by the State Assembly in 2018, the proposal continues to await approval.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has repeatedly highlighted the delay as discriminatory, especially when similar requests from other states have been accepted. State renaming is not merely symbolic. It reflects cultural self-definition and addresses practical concerns, including representation in official forums.

If Keralam's adoption is celebrated as a victory for linguistic heritage, consistency demands that similar aspirations be treated equally. A transparent and non-partisan approach to such proposals is essential to uphold the spirit of cooperative federalism. Cultural identity must not be subject to selective recognition.

VIDYASAGAR REDDY KETHIRI | TELANGANA



## Towards qualitative democracy: Need for poll reforms

Parliamentarians should be required to compulsorily fill in all particulars in their biodata, including details of their assets and the name of spouse(s), to be placed in the public domain on the websites of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

FIRST Column

SUBHASH C AGRAWAL



Wide-ranging poll reforms are necessary to make quantitative democracy qualitative as well, in such a manner that such an ideal democratic system may be followed by other countries too. It is ridiculous that such well-educated officers from the IAS and allied services are at times ruled by uneducated political leaders. It is shameful to note that invalid votes exist even in elections to the posts of President and Vice-President, where MPs and MLAs vote.

There must be at least some minimum educational qualification to contest any election. It would be best to constitute an "Indian Political Service" on the lines of the "Indian Administrative Service (IAS)". The system will automatically abolish the faulty practice of family politics, where politicians often misuse politics like a family business rather than as a tool for service to the people. Experience reveals that senior bureaucrats have done remarkably well when appointed as ministers. On the contrary, there are cases where less-educated ministers were not given a repeat chance due to non-performance.

Other wide-ranging poll reforms are also urgently needed to be implemented simultaneously without requiring any never-to-be-achieved political consensus. The case of George Fernandez being elected to the Rajya Sabha despite having lost his memory even calls for medical fitness certificates before allowing candidates to contest elections. An RTI response reveals that even the oath for his membership of the Rajya Sabha was read by a party colleague of George Fernandez.

Simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies should be three-tier, with elections to municipal bodies also included in the ideal system. Elections for the President and Vice-President should also be held simultaneously by all MPs and MLAs in the same manner as the President is elected, but through EVMs equipped with VVPAT on nominations signed by at least 34 per cent of MPs to ensure direct elections. In case of a vacancy caused in the post of President, the Vice-President may be made President for the remainder of the term. However, in case of a vacancy in the

TO AVOID THE USUAL DELAY IN APPROVING POLL REFORMS BY PARLIAMENT, THE ELECTION COMMISSION SHOULD BE EMPOWERED TO IMPLEMENT REFORMS BY GIVING ONE YEAR'S NOTICE TO PARLIAMENT.

The writer is Guinness World Record Holder for writing most letters and RTI Consultant

dailypioneer @subhashti The Pioneer

post of Vice-President, an interim Vice-President may be elected by MPs only for the rest of the term. If both the regularly elected President and Vice-President are not in office, fresh simultaneous elections for both posts should be held without waiting for the five-year period.

The Prime Minister/Chief Ministers, along with the Speakers and Deputy Speakers of the Lower Houses, should be elected through a secret and compulsory vote of members of the Lower Houses through Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) equipped with VVPAT on nominations signed by at least 34 per cent of members. Such an elected Prime Minister/Chief Minister may be removed by the same process, but with the compulsion of naming an alternate leader in the same motion. Members not opting to vote may lose their voting rights in the House, even while retaining membership. Without adopting such a system, the aspect of "One Nation, One Election" can never become a reality because of mid-term elections caused due to a hung Lok Sabha/State Assembly or the fall of governments in between. Even the present Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, Speakers and Deputy Speakers may be re-elected along the lines suggested above.

Since a person cannot represent two constituencies or become a member of both Parliament and a State Assembly, no person should be allowed to contest from more than one constituency or for both Parliament and a State Assembly. A sitting

MP or MLA should first resign from his/her earlier seat before filing nomination for another. Membership of a Parliamentarian must be auto-terminated upon taking oath in a State as a Minister (or Chief Minister) and vice versa, to prevent situations such as the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government falling due to the single controversial vote of the then Odisha Chief Minister Girdhar Gomango, who did not resign from the Lok Sabha even after being sworn in as Odisha Chief Minister.

Secret voting for Rajya Sabha elections should be restored, but through EVMs equipped with the VVPAT system, with simultaneous elections for full-time and part-time members. Persons receiving more votes should be declared elected for full terms, while those with fewer votes may be declared elected for part terms. The Constitution should be amended to abolish the useless provision of Legislative Councils, which practically serve as political assignments to favourites and relations of political leaders. Only those who have not contested any election in their life should be appointed as nominated members of the Rajya Sabha. No MP or MLA should retain any type of post in their party or even in society. Ministerial strength should be reduced to 10 per cent of the strength of the Lower House. The post of Parliamentary Secretaries should be abolished. Persons losing security should be barred

from contesting elections for the next six years. The 'None of the Above' (NOTA) option should be made practically useful. All candidates receiving fewer votes than NOTA may be barred from contesting any future election, even though, in case NOTA wins in any constituency, the candidate next to NOTA may be declared elected, but only for that term. Thereafter, he may lose the right to contest any election in his lifetime.

An absconding Parliamentarian from court summons/warrants, if present at Sansad Bhawan even for attending the session, should not be allowed to leave until police authorities arrive for execution of the warrants. Parliamentarians and legislators with attendance of less than, say, 75 per cent in the House should not be allowed to contest any election for the next six years. Immunity to elected representatives should be withdrawn even from legislative proceedings because, in the infamous JMM bribery case, even the Apex Court expressed its inability to act against the guilty, as their bribed act to vote for the Narasimha Rao government was considered immunised under Parliamentary proceedings. Usually, Chairpersons of the Lok Sabha/Rajya Sabha/Parliamentary Committees are ultra-soft on impropriety by Parliamentarians. Rules of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha should be re-written in a stringent manner by encoding fixed punishments for Parliamentarians for not following rules and norms, removing discretionary powers of Chairpersons and Parliamentary Committees. The Lok Sabha mildly punished its member Rajesh Manjhi for taking his lady friend as his wife on a foreign trip at government expense by merely barring him from a few sittings, even though such an act was not immunised under Parliamentary proceedings.

Parliamentarians should be required to compulsorily fill in all particulars in their biodata, including details of their assets and the name of spouse(s), to be placed in the public domain on the websites of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. This can check several malpractices, such as hiding the name of an additional spouse, as was done by Dharmendra when he did not disclose the name of Hema Malini as his wife. Rules should mandate that all deductions of government dues such as water, electricity, telephone, rent, or any other

charges be made from salary/perks/pensions payable to them. Pensions should be withheld until former Parliamentarians/Ministers vacate government accommodation. Defaulters should be barred from contesting any future election until all dues are cleared and unauthorised accommodation is vacated. Since even persons posted as Prime Minister have been defaulters of dues for using Indian Air Force aircraft for non-official purposes, either the Prime Minister or the political party sponsoring the Prime Minister should deposit advance payment for such use.

Since political parties are not complying with the CIC verdict bringing them under the purview of the RTI Act, all direct or indirect government funding - including tax exemptions, subsidised land, leased government accommodation, free voters' lists, and free Doordarshan/Radio time - should be abolished. Political parties not contesting any election in the last five years should be de-recognised. Sections 13A, 80GGB, and 80GGC of the Income Tax Act regarding contributions received by and made to political parties should be abolished to prevent the whitening of black money through registered but inactive parties. Live TV debates between prominent leaders and Prime Minister/Chief Ministerial candidates should replace mega-budget rallies and roadshows, which should instead be banned. Corruption-generating MPLADS should be abolished. Pensions for MPs and MLAs have no logic when they have been abolished for government servants. Persons with more than two children should not be allowed to contest elections. To avoid lifelong ambitions to remain in power, there may be an upper age limit of 65 years to contest direct elections. Experienced persons, if needed in ministries, can be elected as Rajya Sabha members. Retired judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts must not be given post-retirement assignments or allowed to enter politics for two years after retirement, or else they may lose post-retirement benefits or appointment as arbitrators.

To avoid the usual delay in approving poll reforms by Parliament, the Election Commission should be empowered to implement reforms by giving one year's notice to Parliament. If Parliament does not disapprove of the reforms proposed within the stipulated one year, these should be deemed approved.

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## Coal belt climate reform starts with women



JIWESH NANDAN ARPITA VICTOR

At sunrise in a village in Sundargarh along the highway in eastern India's Odisha, 32-year-old Sushila walks half a kilometre to fetch water. She uses her sari to shield her face from the coal dust that settles on her skin and in her lungs as coal-laden Tata Hyva trucks drive past. These trucks ply day and night, transporting coal dispatched for thermal power from the big open-cast coal mine five kilometres from Sushila's village. Her daily walk illustrates how far removed women like Sushila are from the climate negotiations that affect them; that women and marginalised communities in India's coal regions are already living the future the world is trying to avoid. Their everyday struggles are part of the realities of coal production in India, exacerbating the effects of climate change felt globally - polluted water, degraded forests, insecure livelihoods, rising care burdens, and the social stresses of an economy in transition.

This is why the adoption of the Belém Gender Action Plan (GAP) at COP30 deserves attention in India. For the first time, UNFCCC signatories have agreed on a nine-year, legally anchored global framework that places women and girls at the centre of climate action. UN Women called it a "blueprint for action". For countries like ours, where the transition away from coal is inevitable to achieve net zero, the Belém GAP provides the policy scaffolding to ensure the shift is not only low-carbon but also socially just.

### A reality India cannot ignore

In India's coal-bearing districts - from Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh to Odisha - women face layered risks that national climate policy has yet to fully confront. Water sources remain compromised. Forest products that tribal women rely on for income have declined because of environmental degradation. As men migrate in search of work due to the shifting economy following old coal mine closures, women bear the full weight of caregiving, farming, managing household debt, and coping with a power dynamic skewed against them.

These are not isolated anecdotes. They mirror exactly the challenges the Belém GAP identifies: deteriorating health, increased violence, unequal access to decent work, and the compounding effects of discrimination on Indigenous, rural, disabled and marginalised women. Importantly, the new plan introduces explicit provisions on

women's health, gender-based violence, decent work, and protection for women environmental defenders - issues that have long remained at the periphery of climate policy.

India's transition plans must now catch up. India has taken important steps towards just transition planning, and the adoption of the Belém Gender Action Plan offers an opportunity to strengthen this work further.

The Plan provides a clear roadmap for ensuring that women are not only included but actively supported in shaping transition strategies. It encourages countries to anchor climate policy in human rights, recognise unpaid care work as a factor that limits women's participation in the labour force, and advance meaningful representation and leadership of women at every level of decision-making.

The Belém GAP also sets out commitments



to safeguard women environmental defenders - who frequently lead community efforts to address pollution and land-use concerns - and to expand gender-responsive finance that can enhance women's livelihoods, mobility, enterprises and local institutions.

For India's coal districts, these provisions are not abstract principles. They mirror what women have been consistently asking for: clean water, safe homes, stable livelihoods, recognition of their labour, and a seat at the planning table.

### A transition that works for women works for everyone

There is compelling evidence that when women are included in climate and energy governance, policies are more ambitious, equitable and durable. TERI's recent work in Girdih illustrates this potential: through the People-Centric Transition initiative, women's groups in four coal-adjacent villages established micro-enterprises - from mop and wiper units to incense stick production, home décor manufacturing and beautician services - after receiving financial literacy, business ideation and technical training. Forty-nine women and adolescent girls

are now running enterprises that were set up through group and individual models, supported by joint liability groups and seed capital.

These experiences show that with targeted investment and structured capacity-building, women in coal regions can move from informal, low-productivity work to managing viable businesses that strengthen local economies and support a more people-centred transition. India has an opportunity to align its district-level just transition plans with the Belém GAP, turning global commitments into local action. This means earmarking funds - especially District Mineral Foundation (DMF) resources and the ESCROW funds for coal mine closure - for women's health, mobility, skill development and entrepreneurship. It means measuring the impacts of transition on women as rigorously as emissions are tracked. And it means redesigning governance mechanisms so that women are not merely present but influential.

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### The cost of ignoring women is too high

Evidence from global climate programmes consistently shows that gender-responsive approaches lead to stronger outcomes across mitigation, adaptation and resilience. By incorporating the provisions of the Belém Gender Action Plan into national and state-level strategies, India can strengthen transition governance, reduce social risk, and expand economic opportunity in regions that have historically borne the costs of extraction. It means earmarking District Mineral Foundation (DMF) and coal mine closure ESCROW funds for women's health, mobility, skills and enterprise development; tracking gender-differentiated impacts with the same rigour as emissions; and redesigning local governance so that women are not merely present but influential in decision-making.

The adoption of the Belém GAP sets a clear global benchmark for embedding gender justice in climate governance. For India, the real test lies in translating these commitments into district-level action that protects livelihoods and expands opportunity for women in coal regions. These questions - on finance, leadership and accountability - will be central to discussions at the forthcoming Silver Jubilee edition of TERI's flagship World Sustainable Development Summit (WSDS), where leaders will examine how to ensure the energy transition is not only low-carbon, but genuinely inclusive.

Jiwesh Nandan, Distinguished Fellow & Advisor, World Sustainable Development Summit (WSDS) 2026, TERI; Arpita Elishaba Victor, Research Associate & Contributor, WSDS 2026, TERI

## AI and the progress paradox



KAJLEEN KAUR

With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as the harbinger of technological reformation, the world is set to be reshaped. An advanced restructuring encompassing all arenas - from finance, manufacturing, healthcare, services and education - has already taken off. The recently held India AI Impact Summit 2026 starkly reflected India's ambition to be a global AI hub. The event brought together world leaders, policymakers, researchers and innovators from across the globe to discuss and derive the potential benefits of AI and also the unavoidable need for inclusive AI development.

While every economy is ready to reap the benefits AI offers in terms of promising productivity and innovation, there is also a flip side. AI poses a paradox of serious long-run challenges in terms of negative externalities. There is a grave threat to the future course of human development and the widening of the economic and digital divide among nations. Human brains adapt to environmental changes, and therefore human traits of curiosity, ideas and focus are indispensable to critical and analytical minds. In an AI-driven world, this is expected to diminish, as software may limit the inquisitiveness required for mental growth. The next generation, born and growing in such an environment, is at higher risk as it faces serious challenges to cognitive development and the trajectory of human evolution. The digitally smart world has already created a revolution, where the comfort of easy availability, access and convenience has replaced the need for hard work, exploration and creativity, especially among young minds. Moreover, AI, which offers virtual assistants, reduces human interactions and interdependence necessary for social development. This, in the long run, may create an isolated environment as empathy, communication skills and cultural understanding slowly decline, impacting overall well-being and holistic human development.

Macroeconomic models identify growth as a function of labour force expansion, technological progress and human capital formation. India, and other countries in the developing stage, with population pressure and high unemployment, face an additional risk of structural shock. AI undeniably enhances productivity, but it has the capacity to develop technologies of such a nature and pace that can substitute labour, causing a displacement effect which can intensify the problem of unemployment. In a labour-surplus economy like India, this can have severe repercussions. Furthermore, the ubiquity of AI in every sphere means that the nature of unemployment may

widen, affecting even the educated class. India is presently enjoying a demographic distribution, with the maximum population centred around the earning age; such structural disruptions and the resulting unemployment can be detrimental to long-term sustainable growth.

Further, there is a possibility of deepening income inequality, with favourable returns accruing to digital literates, technology developers, data controllers and established entrepreneurs able to incorporate the latest AI-driven technologies. Internationally, emerging economies attempting to enter global value and supply chains may face setbacks. Developed economies with technological advantages may further dominate and create digital dependencies for developing economies, aggravating the economic gap and concentration of economic power. The restructuring of the world due to the AI revolution is inevitable, and the way forward is not to resist or avoid it but to find ways to embrace it judiciously for the benefit of society.

The education system, especially schools, needs to take maximum responsibility for keeping curiosity alive among children and reducing dependence on technology. AI should rather be used to augment human capability with customised learning mechanisms and adapt to both fast and slow learners. Higher education institutions, at the same time, should invest in skilled education, which will make the younger generation competent and market-ready. The future of education has to be a hybrid and blended learning curriculum at every level, with a focus on AI and technology as assistive tools to provide students with a higher platform for learning. The Indian Knowledge system, which aims to conserve a cultural and value-based society, will play an important role in the evolution of posterity.

Governments and policymakers, at the same time, need to frame strategies and provide incentives for promoting indigenous innovation to reduce digital dependence. India's dream of becoming a manufacturing-driven growth economy, following China, will now have to be integrated with AI-based development, which can also help accelerate the rate of growth. Additionally, India should innovate ways to incorporate AI technologies to mitigate environmental degradation and waste management resulting from rapid industrialisation and urbanisation.

The key to AI as a paradox lies neither in escaping nor becoming dependent on it, but in complementing human development with technological advancement and using it as a catalyst to activate progress.

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## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Judicial integrity

Textbook row lays bare fault lines

A controversial section in a Class 8 textbook has outraged the judiciary and embarrassed the Union government. The Supreme Court has imposed a ban on the book published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), terming the inclusion of the "Corruption in the judiciary" subchapter a "well-orchestrated conspiracy". The NCERT has apologised, while Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has promised to take action against those involved in drafting the contentious portion. The entire episode has reignited the debate over judicial accountability — and also the platforms where this vital issue can or can't be discussed.

Courts derive their authority from the constitutional mandate as well as public faith. Any narrative that appears to paint the judiciary as systemically corrupt, especially for impressionable students, can erode trust in the institution. Judicial challenges and reforms have long been part of the national conversation, debated in courtrooms, legislatures and the media alike. However, a classroom of adolescents is certainly not an appropriate forum for such discussions.

The Court has clarified that it does not seek to stifle legitimate criticism or the exercise of the right to scrutinise the judiciary. This assurance is significant as there is a key distinction between defamatory insinuation and constructive critique. Notably, the passage in question mentions then Chief Justice of India BR Gavai's lament over instances of corruption and misconduct within the judiciary. Greater emphasis on institutional integrity and transparency in the justice delivery system is the need of the hour. The lesson for the government: strengthen checks and balances so that such controversies don't recur. Above all, sincere efforts are a must to bridge the trust deficit between the executive and judicial organs of the government. Harmonious relations between them are indispensable to a healthy democracy.

### A heavy toll

Transport tax will hit industrial momentum

THE protest by truck operators against the proposed toll hike in Himachal Pradesh's industrial belt is more than a sectoral grievance; it is a warning about the fragile balance between revenue generation and economic growth. The increase, scheduled to take effect from April 1, has triggered strong opposition from transport unions operating in the Baddi-Barotiwala-Nalagarh (BBN) corridor, the state's principal manufacturing hub. For an industry dependent almost entirely on road transport, logistics costs determine competitiveness. Any sharp escalation in toll charges raises freight expenses, which are ultimately passed on to manufacturers, traders and consumers. Pharmaceutical units, small manufacturing enterprises and ancillary industries located in the BBN region already operate under geographical disadvantages typical of hill states, including higher fuel consumption and longer transit times. Higher transport costs risk eroding the very industrial attractiveness that Himachal has painstakingly built through policy incentives over the past few decades.

The impact extends beyond industry. Thousands of workers commuting daily from the neighbouring Punjab and Haryana will face higher travel expenses, while increased freight rates could quietly push up prices of essential goods and raw materials. What appears to be a targeted revenue measure thus risks becoming an economy-wide burden with inflationary consequences. States grappling with fiscal stress understandably seek new revenue streams. Yet infrastructure financing cannot rely on abrupt user-charge increases without stakeholder consultation and transparent cost justification. Excessive tolling may yield short-term gains but it weakens long-term investment confidence, particularly in regions competing with better-connected plains.

Himachal's economic future depends as much on industrial stability as on fiscal prudence. Policymaking must therefore move beyond immediate revenue considerations toward a calibrated approach that protects logistics efficiency while ensuring sustainable infrastructure funding. A negotiated solution with transporters and industry is economically necessary.

#### ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1926

#### Punjab Budget

IN his speech in the Punjab Legislative Council while presenting the Budget for 1926-27, Sir John Maynard endeavoured to show that Punjab had now recovered from the after-effects of the War and entered on a more or less assured career of prosperity. "The six budgets of this province for whose preparation I have been responsible," he said, "have travelled over the whole range of the financial barometer from discontent and drought and deficit, through the stages of gradual recovery, to the present time which, with all the caution and modest reserve becoming to one who has seen the clouds of misfortune pass suddenly over the fair face of an untroubled heaven, I venture to describe as one of happy promise." We have no doubt that Sir Maynard will be the recipient of general congratulations on his almost unique good fortune. Let us take a bird's eye view of the facts revealed by his speech. Taking ordinary and extraordinary accounts together, the total budgeted receipts for the current year amounted to Rs 13.95 crore and fell to Rs 12.52 crore in the revised one which, with the opening balance of Rs 1.41 crore, made a gross total of Rs 14.53 crore. On the disbursement side, the budgeted figure of Rs 13.82 crore fell to Rs 12.52 crore (revised), thus leaving a total surplus of Rs 2 crore. Turning to the details of the expenditure, Sir Maynard was able to claim that the government was now able to do for the beneficent departments what it could not do in the days of poverty, and that those departments were receiving a much larger share of the advantages of opulence than other departments.

# Military funding merits long-term planning

The real challenge for India is to convert resources into usable combat power



LT GEN DS HOODA (RETD)  
FORMER NORTHERN  
ARMY COMMANDER

THE Indian defence budget announced for 2026-27 has been broadly welcomed by the armed forces and the industry. Defence allocation, at Rs 7.85 lakh crore, has increased by 15.19% over the previous year's estimates of Rs 6.81 lakh crore. In a push for modernisation, the capital budget is almost 22% higher than last year, with 75% spending earmarked for the domestic defence industry.

Approximately 20% of the total defence budget is earmarked for revenue expenditure on sustenance and operational preparedness. Although revenue expenditure is often viewed as not contributing to modernisation, it is critical to ensure the readiness of forces deployed on our unsettled borders and in the maritime spaces that are vital for India's economic growth.

While the government's focus on national security is clear, we must ask the larger question: how is defence spending contributing to the development of our military power? This question is important because we often equate military capability with inputs, assuming that higher defence spending automatically translates into better capability. While budgets matter, outputs are the real measure — what is our readiness status today? And there are some concerns here.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) is down to 29 squadrons, the lowest figure since the 1960s. A total of 180 Tejas Mk1A are on order, but deliveries have not yet commenced. Media reports indicate that some pending issues remain



DELAY : A total of 180 Tejas Mk1A are on order, but deliveries have not yet commenced. PTI

before the IAF can accept the aircraft, but assuming these are resolved, the delivery of 180 aircraft will be completed by 2033.

The government has approved a deal to procure 114 Rafale fighter aircraft at a cost of about \$36 billion. Eighteen aircraft will be procured in fly-away condition from France, and 96 are to be manufactured in India with 60% indigenous content. Considering the current backlog of orders with Dassault Aviation, the first aircraft is likely to arrive in India after three years.

The shortfall in air-to-air refuellers will be made up by converting six second-hand Boeing 767 airframes into tankers by Israel Aerospace Industries, in partnership with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited. Also approved are six additional Airborne Early Warning & Control Systems, based on the Embraer aircraft. Both these projects are likely to see completion by 2032.

There is justifiable pride in the Indian Navy's indigenous shipbuilding capacity. Project 17A, which aims to equip the Navy with seven advanced stealth frigates, is on track with four frigates commissioned and the remaining three to be delivered this year. Project 15B, which was to provide the Navy with four stealth guided-missile destroyers, was completed in 2025.

### One problem plaguing the modernisation of the military is that decision-making is hesitant and personalised.

The challenge before the Navy is the induction of a new class of frigates and destroyers. Project 17B, the next-generation frigates, was approved in 2024, but the Request for Proposal has yet to be issued. Project 18, the next-generation destroyers, is in an advanced planning stage, but formal approval is pending. Therefore, it appears unlikely that any new frigate or destroyer will be inducted into the Navy in the next five years.

There is a similar situation with Project 75I for six advanced diesel-electric submarines with Air-Independent Propulsion technology. Approved in 2019, the project is in advanced negotiations, and the first submarine is expected to be commissioned in 2032.

The Army is also seeking replacements for its existing infantry fighting vehicles and battle tanks. Both projects have experienced numerous delays, and the earliest induction is unlikely before 2030. Due to delays in the procurement of new equipment, the Army has initiated projects to upgrade existing infantry fighting vehicles, air defence guns and artillery.

India ranks among the top five spenders globally on defence. There are voices in India's security establishment that regularly call for increasing the defence budget to at least 2.5% of the GDP, up from the current 2%. However, the central challenge is not the amount of funds, but the effectiveness of the ecosystem and processes that support military capability development. In this regard, three recommendations are made.

First, the military must be funded in accordance with a long-term plan. Each service prepares a 10-year Integrated Capability Development Plan (ICDP) that the Chief of Defence Staff harmonises. The ICDP is approved by the Defence Acquisition Council in the Ministry of Defence. However, since there is no approval of this plan by the Ministry of Finance, annual budgetary allocations reflect funding for annual requirements rather than a long-term plan. The government must approve the

ICDP and ensure a regular flow of funds to ensure its completion.

One problem plaguing the modernisation of the military is that decision-making is hesitant and personalised. There are numerous examples, from fighter aircraft to submarines to tanks, which took decades from initiation to approval. A well-defined long-term capability plan can help mitigate this problem by making decisions more structured, predictable and institutionally anchored.

Second, the procurement process requires structural reform. While some corrective steps have been taken, including updated acquisition manuals, the underlying culture remains overly compliance-driven, procedurally cumbersome and risk-averse. As Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh observed in June 2025, the real bottleneck is the acquisition cycle itself, with the purchase of weapon systems stretching five to six years. Such delays mean that systems risk obsolescence by the time they enter service and also undermine private-sector participation, since firms wait for years with no clear idea of orders.

Third, India must invest more in research and development (R&D). India's spending on R&D is about 0.65% of the GDP, well below the global average of 2%. Roughly two-thirds of R&D funding comes from the public sector, with the private sector contributing the balance. In most advanced economies, the situation is reversed, with private industry accounting for the bulk of R&D spending. Under-investment in R&D has left India import-dependent on critical technologies.

The real challenge facing India is not about how much it spends on defence, but how it converts resources into usable combat power. That will require reform in procurement, greater investment in critical technologies and a stronger alignment between long-term planning and execution. Otherwise, India will continue to spend heavily while remaining short of the military capability its strategic ambitions demand.

#### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We are modernising our forces through new platforms, technologies and structures. —Rajnath Singh

## The day I learned to breathe again

SANJEEV SURI

A squally wind shook the windows before dawn. Somewhere between a dream and a worry, I woke up. The room was cold. My phone lay beside me, glowing faintly — resting off my breast like a small, obedient heart. For once, I did not reach for it. I wrapped myself in a shawl and stepped outside. A phantom light from distant lamps rimmed roofs and branches. Mossy trees leaned quietly over the footpath.

I walked without purpose. For months, my days had been filled and empty at the same time — meetings, messages, deadlines. My mind played dissonant music: half-remembered promises, unreturned calls. I functioned efficiently like a well-oiled machine, but I was no longer certain that I was fully alive.

Near the park gate, I noticed a woman standing alone. She was middle-aged, dressed simply, holding a small cloth bag. In one hand, she carried a notebook; in the other, a pen. She was writing something while watching the sky. Out of curiosity, I slowed down. "Good morning," I said. She looked up and smiled: "It is, if you notice it."

We stood together as clouds thinned and colour spread quietly across the horizon. She closed her notebook. "I come here every day," she said, "to write one sentence."

"About what?" I asked.

"About what made me feel alive yesterday."

I laughed softly. "Only one sentence?"

"Yes," she replied. "Anything more becomes an excuse."

She told me that three years earlier, she had survived cancer. Hospitals, medicines, fear, waiting — life had been reduced to numbers and reports. When she returned home, she realised something frightening. "I was alive," she said, "but I didn't know why." So she began this ritual. Each morning, one sentence. Each day, one honest reason to exist.

She opened the notebook and showed me a page. Yesterday's line read: Watched my grandson learn to tie his shoelaces. Nothing dramatic. Everything precious.

We walked together for a while. The air reverberated with birds' cries. A teal stall opened. The city stretched itself awake. Even the mossy trees seemed more attentive. Before leaving, she said, "We take care of our bodies, our homes, our careers. Rarely do we take care of our meaning." I watched her walk away.

When I returned home, the television was blaring. Messages were waiting. The world wanted my attention back. I did not give it immediately. Instead, I picked up a notebook. That day, I wrote the first sentence: Stood under a winter sky and remembered I was more than my schedule.

Since then, I write every morning. Some days, the sentence is small. Some days, it is brave. Some days, it is uncomfortable. But it reminds me that I am not merely surviving. I am choosing. And that, perhaps, is what it truly means to be a moral being — not perfection, not success, not applause — but the courage to live deliberately. Even when no one is watching.

The writer teaches English at MCM DAV College, Kangra

#### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Looking beyond GDP

Refer to 'A blueprint for all-round growth'; although the size of Indian economy is growing fast, the gap between the rich and poor persists. GDP measures only the monetary value of produced goods and services, and not income distribution. The GDP does not capture fully the contribution of the unorganised sector as well as the domestic care services provided by women in Indian society. All-round development requires moving beyond GDP to ensure that the benefits of growth are shared across all sections. The focus should not only be increasing economic output, but also the dignity and well-being of citizens.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

#### Symbols can't substitute change

Refer to 'Cosmetic changes won't heal the nation'; the article is right in raising caution against mistaking symbolic gestures for genuine transformation. A key limitation of the article is its emphasis on colonialism largely as a cultural or psychological inheritance. British rule was not primarily cultural; it was fundamentally extractive. Renaming avenues, removing statues or rearranging memorials cannot address historical injustice. Symbolic acts may start a process they cannot themselves complete. Symbols, however visible, cannot substitute substantive change. Yet, symbolism need not be dismissed as politically irrelevant. If questioning leads to serious scrutiny of institutional design, such churning can move toward meaningful reform.

MANU KANT, BY MAIL

#### Institution supreme

Apropos of 'Won't allow insult to judiciary: CJI slams NCERT graft chapter'; judiciary is not a sacrosanct holy cow which cannot be questioned on the issue of corruption. Former Delhi High Court Judge Yashwant Varma is an example. Almost a year has passed but no concrete action has been taken against the judge except a transfer and no assignment of judicial work. The Punjabi language has a very apt proverb, 'apni pidi thale sota mar-na', which means before judging others, we ought to judge ourselves. The institution is supreme, but not its incumbents.

ARUN HASTIR, GURDASPUR

#### Schools crucial to utilise AI

Refer to 'Equipping kids to face AI's brave new world'; the article rightly highlights the transformative impact of AI on jobs and the urgent need to prepare our younger generation for a rapidly evolving future. Strengthening primary and secondary schools is essential if children are to acquire not only technical knowledge, but also critical thinking, creativity and ethical awareness. The role of parents and society is crucial too. Parents must guide children toward responsible and meaningful use of technology, nurturing curiosity and resilience. Society, including educators, policymakers and industry leaders, must work collectively to make AI viable.

AJAY KUMAR MINHAS, SHIMLA

#### Air safety non-negotiable

Apropos of 'Unsafe flights'; the real problem is not individual pilot error but organisational culture. Airlines and charter operators routinely allow commercial pressures to override safety judgment. A pilot who diverts or cancels a flight should be supported, not quietly penalised through rosters or appraisals. That change cannot come through audits alone. What is needed is transparent, time-bound follow-up on audit findings, mandatory SOP refresher programmes and an independent safety reporting mechanism where the crew can flag concerns without fear. The DGCA's public safety ranking proposal is promising, but only if implemented with genuine rigour. Safety must be treated as non-negotiable, not a performance metric reviewed after the next accident.

SM JEEVA, CHENNAI

#### Harassment at the hands of police

Apropos of the news item, 'HC seeks DGPs' affidavits on non-registration of FIRs'; it is a harsh reality that the police do not register an FIR unless and until the complainant is well-connected or influential. The common man is not entertained in police stations at all. Even if an FIR is registered under pressure, investigation is not done properly, rather the complainant is harassed. I went to the police station to get an FIR registered regarding chain snatching but to no avail. I hope conditions will improve after the High Court's intervention.

HARWINDER SINGH, MOHALI

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: [Letters@tribunemail.com](mailto:Letters@tribunemail.com)

# Profit over miners' lives in Meghalaya



**SANJOY HAZARIKA**  
INDEPENDENT COLUMNIST

**T**HE tyranny of distance was perhaps never more clearly emphasised than when India watched as a couple from New Delhi was hunted down and arrested by the city police for abusing, threatening and using racist epithets at three young women from Arunachal Pradesh who lived in a flat above theirs. The incident, which went viral, was apparently triggered after some dust fell onto the couple's space while an air conditioner was being installed. We applauded the effective action of the Delhi police. But over 2,000 km away, when a furious blast in an illegal underground mine in Meghalaya on February 8 blew away at least 34 men in one of the worst mining disasters in recent times, there were no loud protests, no massive media coverage. What is more astounding is the flaccid response of the state government whose appointment of a judicial commission came under blistering criticism from the Meghalaya High Court. The court said the terms of reference were inadequate and

the commission needed to examine the nexus between big money that pushed the process of supply and demand. This, it said, was the key.

What the court found astonishing was that while the families of eight persons had received compensation (apparently, they were from the state), there were 15 from Nepal and 13 from Assam whose next of kin had not been notified or identified. So this is not just a local tragedy but an international disaster. One hopes the Nepal embassy in Delhi has been notified and the Assam government and families too in the neighbouring state.

In any other part of India, perhaps the streets would have been packed with crowds demanding justice and also the government's resignation for inaction. But not in Shillong or elsewhere in the East Jaintia Hills, despite this being the second time in 10 years that something like this has happened in the district. The sense of outrage, so visible across Delhi and the country, on the racism incident was missing.

When businessman Raghuvanshi of Indore was killed in a conspiracy by his wife, her lover and others in Sohra or Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, the first finger of suspicion was pointed at local people. The metro media wasted no time in attacking the alleged criminal tendencies in the region before learning to their embarrassment that the reported masterminds included his wife.

As these incidents have



**NO ESCAPE:** The issue is coming to the door of the mining minister who, in this case, is the CM himself. ©OINDRF

shown, social media has positive uses. They fade in significance though when compared with the thunderous explosion which ripped through the tiny tunnels underground, giving little or no chance of escape as methane gas, the silent, odourless killer, ignited.

The Meghalaya government under CM Conrad A Sangma announced compensation of Rs 2 lakh for each victim while his Assam counterpart Himanta Biswa Sarma pledged Rs 5 lakh to each of the dead. That is little comfort for the families of those who have been killed in this brutal fashion, working desperately at the risk of life and limb in a banned "rat hole" procedure, for a measly few hundred rupees every day.

In 2022, the Meghalaya government set up a one-man commission to review and recommend measures to stamp out illegal mining. Jus-

stice BP Kakety, a former judge of the Gauhati High Court, has been at it doggedly, seeking to fix responsibility and pushing the government to move files. The fact that the state government, despite as many as 35 reports by Justice Kakety, has failed to act on the matter shows that it does not really care about the issue.

CM Sangma said that accountability would be fixed and that "those responsible will face strict legal action. There will be no compromise when it comes to the safety of lives."

What is missed in all this in the mainland media is that the CM himself has held the mining portfolio since 2023, seeking to develop a transition from illegal to "scientific mining".

In December 2018, water flooded a mine killing 18 persons in the same district where the latest tragedy struck. There were mine disasters in the

Garro Hills district in 2012 and 2014. Yet the practice was never really stopped, some say, because too many stand to profit from the gravy train.

These mines are referred to as rat holes, underlining both the indignity of the process as well as the inherent dangers accompanying it. Their employment is not just a violation of labour laws but flies in the face of a ban issued by the National Green Tribunal. By failing to act against the coal miners and mafia barons who control the business, the Meghalaya government is complicit in the continuance of these death traps.

Meghalaya is one of the top 10 states with coal reserves. Coal from the state is a huge informal business—it is smuggled out in trucks to Assam from where it is dispatched to other destinations. The names of political leaders reportedly involved in the process are whispered from time to time. Huge money purportedly funds campaigns and networks that assure protection and helps maintain their dominance in the coal-rich areas.

In addition, numerous disturbing issues come up. The first is that there is very little outcry in civil society in general on such matters. A part of the rationale for local silence is a mixture of dependence for livelihoods, which these mines represent, and fear of what activists call the power of the mining mafia.

Various commentaries have said that the state has not

learned from the past. The question is whether it is interested in doing so.

One of its ministers, when asked last year about how thousands of tonnes of illegally mined coal which had been photographed suddenly vanished, gave an absurd answer: that the rains had washed it down to Bangladesh. This approach speaks loudly to the issue, underscoring the systemic rot and lack of accountability.

The issue is coming to the door of the mining minister who, in this case, is the Chief Minister himself. Sangma is popular, known for his affable nature, public relations skills and clarity of articulation. He plays a mean guitar and deals with difficult issues with suavity and patience. However, he has been facing a sharp challenge from the new Voice of Peoples Party (VPP) which has done well in local and legislative elections over the past three years. The VPP has received a burst of sympathy after the sudden passing of its popular MP, Ricky Syngkon.

The law is catching up with the abusers but what about those responsible for the deaths of the miners? Surely responsibility does not just lie on the heads of the mine owners (who've been arrested) and district administrative staff (who've been suspended or otherwise punished)?

What is needed is a clear process of ensuring accountability, robust prosecution and adequate punishment, while protecting whistle-blowers.

Surely responsibility does not just lie on the heads of the mine owners?

## Urban drift in Haryana



**VIPIN GUPTA**  
EX-ADDITIONAL MISSION DIRECTOR, URBAN DEVELOPMENT

**T**HE concept of a 'sector' in Haryana once represented disciplined urban planning. What was conceived as an orderly residential layout increasingly appears fragmented and functionally strained. Planned sectors were engineered environments, not organic settlements. Road cambers were scientifically designed to ensure smooth storm-water runoff. Sewerage networks were calibrated to maintain self-cleansing velocity. Drain inlets, manholes and outfalls were positioned according to contour-based drawings.

Developed by the Haryana Urban Development Authority, now the Haryana Shahari Vikas Pradhikaran (HSVP), these sectors were supported by structured engineering oversight intended to preserve long-term technical integrity. I have been a resident of Sector 17 in Yamunanagar since 1996 and have seen the gradual erosion of planning discipline.

The challenge begins when institutional continuity weakens and responsibilities blur between HSVP and municipal corporations. In smaller cities, municipal bodies operate under staff shortages and limited availability of skilled engi-

neers. Preventive inspections give way to complaint-driven maintenance. This reactive approach dilutes the structural discipline envisioned in sector planning.

A noticeable shift is visible in road surfacing practices. Bituminous roads, when properly laid, provide a continuous riding surface and preserve designed gradients. In contrast, the increasing use of cement concrete tiles has altered both performance and appearance. While tiles offer ease of removal during utility repairs, their durability depends heavily on sub-base precision and edge restraint stability. Minor settlement creates uneven joints and disturbs surface uniformity. Even small depressions compromise intended drainage slopes, causing water stagnation.

Encroachments further weaken sector discipline. Front setbacks are altered, temporary projections extend into public space and boundary lines deviate from approved layouts. Corner plots present a particularly sensitive issue.

Roadside parking adds another layer of strain in Yamunanagar. The presence of the Mini Secretariat and District Courts significantly increas-

es vehicular inflow on working days. In the absence of structured parking management, roads are informally converted into parking corridors. Household vehicle ownership has increased and public carriageways are frequently used as private extensions of residential parking space.

An additional dimension concerns the community centres within the sector. Inadequate maintenance has gradually reduced their usability. Poor upkeep, functional limitations and lack of consistent management make them less attractive for residents, who either shift to private banquet halls outside the sector or attempt to organise events within residential streets. In some instances, adjoining roads are barricaded or partially blocked to manage gatherings, inconveniencing other residents.

Across the main Jagadhri-Yamunanagar road, commercial establishments contribute significantly to the local economy. While showroom facades are generally maintained, the rear service lanes often remain unattended. Poorly maintained market toilets, waste accumulation and irregular drainage behind commercial blocks create sanitation concerns. This infrastructure needs focused civic attention rather than peripheral neglect.

Utility infrastructure further compounds the issue. Overhead electric lines intermingling with cable television and broadband networks, producing visual clutter inconsistent with planned development principles. Preserving planning discipline in Haryana's emerging cities is essential not only for order and aesthetics, but for safety, sustainability and long-term urban resilience.

Preventive inspections give way to maintenance that is complaint-driven.

## State's decade of reform



**RAJ NEHRU**  
OSD TO HARYANA CM

**H**ARYANA'S recent journey reflects the timeless ideal of people-centric governance. For a long period, despite its natural advantages—fertile land, strategic location and proximity to the national capital—the state was unable to fully translate its potential into broad-based prosperity.

Since the BJP assumed power in Haryana in 2014, the party leadership has guided the administration with a clear, consistent purpose to deliver honest, accountable governance, where merit prevails, corruption finds no place and every citizen's progress becomes the true measure of success.

Former CM Manohar Lal Khattar's foundational tenure established transparency as the cornerstone of administration. He often emphasised that people's trust in zero corruption and merit-based opportunities is the government's greatest strength.

CM Nayab Singh Saini has carried forward the same ethos, prioritising good governance, transparent recruitment, timely service delivery and empathy in public administration, reinforcing that public service must remain the top

priority for every official.

Together, their aligned vision has translated into deliberate, enduring actions, championing transparency across all facets of government, institutionalising merit-based systems, especially in recruitment and opportunities, leveraging technology for citizen-centric services like the SARAL portal and ensuring zero tolerance for injustice or discrimination.

These foundational principles have restored direction to the state, rebuilt deep trust among youth and investors and ignited a sustained phase of inclusive, outcome-driven development across Haryana.

A comprehensive diagnostic assessment, including the 2015 White Paper on State Finances, revealed deep-rooted challenges at the end of the Congress decade—the declining share of the state's own revenue (from 89.5% in 2004-05 to 80.4% in 2013-14), rising dependence on Central grants, chronic losses in power Discoms (part of national losses exceeding Rs 67,000 crore in 2013-14), opaque and litigation-prone recruitment.

Industrial growth was concentrated around Gurugram and weak social

indicators were on display such as a sex ratio at birth of 871 in 2014.

The government responded with institution-driven reforms that directly addressed these pain points and delivered superior outcomes.

Transparent, merit-based recruitment through bodies like the Haryana Staff Selection Commission more than doubled government job creation—from approximately 86,000 positions in the 2004-14 period to over 1.43 lakh between 2014 and 2024—while reducing litigation and restoring youth trust. 24.35 lakh jobs were created during 2015-2025.

One significant change that occurred was that earlier, farmers were abandoning agriculture rapidly and involuntarily, which slowed down during 2015-25. This means that labour movement became structural and opportunity-driven, not distress-driven.

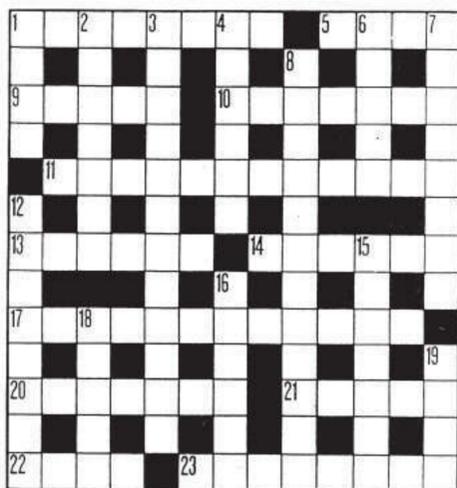
The government has achieved significant milestones by prioritising farmer welfare, income stability and sustainable practices. Haryana stands out as the only state procuring all 24 crops from farmers at Minimum Support Price, benefiting over 12 lakh farmers.

More than 16 new universities have been announced, with the government ensuring that colleges are established within a 20-km radius and schools within a 10-km radius. This has made learning more inclusive, leading to a steady rise in the gross enrolment ratio to 33% and strengthening the state's human capital base.

Haryana has evolved into a resilient, inclusive and future-ready growth model that balances economic expansion with equity and stability.

Haryana has evolved into a resilient, inclusive and future-ready growth model.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**  
1 A cushy job (8)  
5 As soon as (4)  
9 Acknowledge (5)  
10 On horseback (7)  
11 Rapidly (2,5,5)  
13 Breed of sheepdog (6)  
14 A tendency in person's character (6)  
17 In impetuous, blundering way (12)  
20 Go away to avoid arrest (7)  
21 Mass of cast metal (5)  
22 Heartfelt (4)  
23 Quiet and out-of-the-way (8)
- DOWN**  
1 False (4)  
2 Only in name (7)  
3 Begin to see (5,5,2)  
4 Observation (6)  
6 Distinguished (5)  
7 Long-lasting (8)  
8 Quite ordinary (3-2-3-4)  
12 Sheath for sword (8)  
15 So-called (7)  
16 Waste time (6)  
18 A fine cotton thread (5)  
19 Horse-breeding establishment (4)

#### Yesterday's Solution

**Across:** 1 On the town, 8 Aloft, 9 Hearsay, 10 Fitful, 11 Census, 12 Free will, 15 Come true, 18 Ramble, 20 Shrewd, 21 Vivaldi, 22 Occur, 23 Think tank.

**Down:** 2 Niece, 3 Heresy, 4 Transfer, 5 Native, 6 Forfeit, 7 Still life, 11 Crack shot, 13 Exertion, 14 Embrace, 16 Thwart, 17 Impact, 19 Laden.

### SU DO KU



#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

#### CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 27, 2026, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 8
- Phalgun Parvishite 16
- Hijari 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 11, up to 10:33 pm
- Ayushman Yoga up to 7:44 pm
- Aardra Nakshatra up to 10:49 am
- Moon enters Cancer sign 3:53 am

### FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN	SUNSET:	FRIDAY	18:20 HRS
			SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	06:50 HRS
Chandigarh	28	14			
New Delhi	31	15			
Amritsar	26	12			
Bathinda	29	10			
Jalandhar	26	12			
Ludhiana	28	15			
Bhiwani	30	14			
Hisar	30	12			
Sirsa	29	12			
Dharamsala	22	11			
Manali	17	04			
Shimla	17	08			
Srinagar	17	02			
Jammu	25	13			
Kargil	08	-06			
Leh	06	-07			
Dehradun	27	12			
Mussoorie	18	08			



Waging war on cervical cancer

Despite being a largely preventable disease, cervical cancer is the second most common cause of cancer deaths in India...

India's free HPV vaccination drive for girls aged 9-15 could accelerate global elimination efforts

A time-bound, mission-mode approach can help overcome the inertia that often slows the inclusion of new vaccines in routine immunisation...



ANAND SHARMA Congress leader

We had unequivocally condemned the October 7 Hamas attack... India should not be seen as endorsing a regime in Israel that has perpetrated genocide in Gaza



FRIEDRICH MERZ German Chancellor

The big global political problems can no longer be tackled today without involving Beijing. Signals from Beijing are taken very seriously in Moscow — that goes for words as well as deeds



DHARMENDRA PRADHAN Union Education Minister

There was no intention to insult the judiciary. An enquiry will be conducted and accountability fixed. Action will be taken against those involved in drafting the chapter

Engaging with West Asia

Modi's visit to Jerusalem sends a clear message: India seeks partnership, not alignment; stability, not sides



BRIG ADVITYA MADAN (RETD)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel marked his third engagement with the Jewish state — and each visit tells the story of a changing India, a changing Israel, and a dramatically changing West Asia.

His first visit, on May 21, 2006, was as the Chief Minister of Gujarat. It was a quiet, focused trip to study agriculture and water management.

Rooted in Shared Realities

India and Israel are societies shaped by difficult neighbourhoods and persistent security challenges. Beyond strategic calculus, there is genuine warmth at the people-to-people level.

During my tenure commanding 15 Punjab in Lebanon, I recall entering Jerusalem to visit the Western Wall. Strangers rushed forward saying, "You are from India — welcome, come to our home."

The context of this visit differs profoundly from 2017. Since the June 25 strikes on Iran's nuclear infrastructure and the degradation of Iran's "axis of resistance" — including Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis — the regional balance has shifted.



We must remember that the June 25 attack took place while talks were ongoing; diplomacy and conflict in this region often move on parallel tracks.

Road to Open Diplomacy

India recognised Israel in 1948 but hesitated to establish full diplomatic relations. An Israeli diplomat once quipped that India treated Israel "like a mistress — private engagement, public distance."

Yet even before formal ties, strategic cooperation existed. During the 1962 war with China, India used Israeli weapons. In 1977, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan visited India quietly.

The relationship gathered momentum under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, culminating in Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's landmark visit to India in 2003.

Since 2014, ties have become more visible and institutionalised. Modi's 2017 standalone visit — without a stop in Ramallah — marked a decisive policy shift.

Defence at the Core

Defence cooperation remains the anchor. Between 2020 and 2024, roughly 34% of Israel's total arms exports came to India.

Beyond Security

Bilateral trade stands at approximately \$4 billion. India exports about \$2 billion worth of goods — primarily cut and polished diamonds, engineering products, petroleum derivatives, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, electronics and agricultural products.

Cooperation spans water management, solar energy, irrigation, clean drinking water, agri-technology, quantum computing and advanced electronics. Israel is also a key partner in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced during the 2023 G-20 Summit in New Delhi.

New Delhi must avoid rigid alliances that risk regional entanglements, keeping strategic autonomy at the core of its West Asia policy

Emerging Alignments

The regional canvas has shifted further with the Abraham Accords, under which Israel normalised relations with several Arab states.

Parallel alignments are visible. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar are deepening coordination, reportedly seeking to draw Pakistan into a collective security framework.

Herein lies the strategic challenge. India's core interests in the Arab world — energy security, oil supplies and the welfare of a vast Indian diaspora — cannot be compromised.

India must avoid any formal alliance architecture that entangles it in regional rivalries. Strategic autonomy remains our compass.

Realism, Not Rhetoric

Prime Minister Modi was received personally by Prime Minister Netanyahu at Tel Aviv airport and driven to Jerusalem — symbolism that resonates deeply in Israeli political culture.

What is most significant is that India's relations with Israel no longer adversely affect its ties with Arab states. New Delhi's engagement with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is deepening; differences persist mainly with Turkey.

This visit signals maturity. India is engaging West Asia as it is — fractured, competitive, opportunity-laden — not as it once was.

(The author is a retired Army officer)

Letters to the Editor

Irrational freebies

The freebie culture of State governments when elections are around the corner has come under severe criticism from the Supreme Court.

duct is in effect. Instead of using this money for infrastructure development, huge amounts are diverted for providing freebies.

VENU GS, Kollam

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

The Straits Times

Will China, India capitalise on tariff...

New openings have been created for two of Asia's largest economies, China and India, in their trade talks with Washington now that the sweeping tariffs by President Trump have been struck down by the US Supreme Court.

The New York Times

How India, Pak tensions spilled over...

All eight teams in The Hundred have committed to not excluding players on the grounds of their nationality in this year's competition.

The Guardian

Kerala to be renamed Keralam

Indian state of Kerala, known as "God's own country" for its golden beaches and lush tea plantations, is to be given a new name.

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

# The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from  
the Friends of India -founded 1818

## Tariff Uncertainty

The United States is once again reminding the world that its trade policy can turn on a dime - and that reminder matters far beyond Washington. When President Donald Trump signals that countries which "play games" with trade commitments will face steeper penalties, he is not merely posturing for a domestic audience. He is reasserting a worldview in which tariffs are not a last-resort instrument but a permanent negotiating weapon, deployed to keep partners off balance.

For economies like India's, this is not just an irritant. It is a structural risk that forces hard choices about how much faith to place in deals that can be reinterpreted, reissued, or replaced by executive fiat. The President's response to the US Supreme Court ruling his tariffs illegal has been revealing. Instead of treating the ruling as a signal to stabilise policy, the administration has reached for other statutes - Section 122 for short-term tariffs, Section 301 for "unfair" trade practices - and promised continuity of pressure. The message to trading partners is simple: the toolbox may change but the leverage will not.

For India, this arrives at an awkward moment. New Delhi has spent the past year trying to balance strategic alignment with the United States against a long-standing instinct for trade autonomy. Talks on market access, technology, and investment have inched forward, but always under the shadow of Washington's tariff threats - on steel, aluminium, and now potentially across a wider range of goods. When negotiations are conducted in a climate where one side can credibly threaten sudden, sweeping duties, the resulting agreements look less like stable compacts and more like ceasefires.

Trade is about supply chains, compliance costs, and long-term investment decisions. A pharmaceutical manufacturer in Hyderabad or an auto-parts exporter in Pune does not plan on six-month horizons. They build capacity assuming rules will hold long enough to justify the capital outlay.

If the United States signals that even settled arrangements can be reopened whenever domestic politics demands, the rational response is not trust - it is hedging. Companies diversify away from exposure, and governments quietly look for alternative markets and partners.

There is also a broader institutional cost. The World Trade Organisation, already weakened, becomes even less relevant when major powers prefer bilateral pressure backed by unilateral penalties. The US Congress, divided over tariff extensions, is sidelined by creative lawyering. Courts become speed bumps rather than guardrails. What remains is a system where predictability is replaced by permanent negotiation.

Supporters of this approach argue that it extracts concessions and corrects imbalances. Sometimes it does. But leverage-based trade has diminishing returns. Over time, partners learn to give only what is necessary to avoid punishment - and to keep their real strategic bets elsewhere.

For India, the lesson is not to walk away from the United States, but to stop treating any single trade track as foundational. A world in which tariffs are policy by mood demands a portfolio strategy: more regional deals, more domestic resilience, and fewer assumptions that today's handshake will survive tomorrow's headline.

## After the Kingpin

Mexico has seen this movie before: a man at the summit of a criminal empire falls, and the country holds its breath for the aftershocks. The death of Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes - known as El Mencho - has produced exactly that pause, filled with burning vehicles, shuttered streets, and a surge of soldiers into Jalisco and neighbouring states. The temptation is to treat the moment as a decisive blow. It is not. It is a hinge in a much longer struggle over who truly governs large parts of the republic.

For years, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel built something closer to a franchise than a gang: logistics, territorial managers, propaganda, and a talent pipeline that replaced fallen commanders with alarming speed.

That architecture is why the state's success against one man immediately triggered coordinated disruption across multiple cities. Roadblocks, arson, and ambushes were not just revenge; they were a demonstration of reach, a message to rivals and residents alike that authority remains contested. In places like Puerto Vallarta or the outskirts of Guadalajara, the question on ordinary days is not who rules in theory, but who can close a highway in practice.

President Claudia Sheinbaum's government has answered with numbers - thousands of troops, armoured vehicles, checkpoints - and with the language of order. The deployment is necessary. No state can allow armed groups to stage a rolling veto over daily life.

Yet the arithmetic of force has limits. Mexico's security institutions have learned, repeatedly, that decapitation strategies create succession markets. They break a cartel's symbolism while sharpening its incentives to prove continuity through spectacle. The National Guard can clear a road; it cannot, by itself, dissolve the business model that makes roads worth blocking.

That model is not mystical. It rests on extortion, ports, fuel theft, synthetic drugs, and the quiet capture of municipal budgets. It survives because prosecutors are overmatched, courts are slow, prisons lack command authority, and money moves faster than warrants. Killing a kingpin changes the cast list, not the script.

There is a harder, less cinematic path. It runs through boring victories: asset seizures that truly stick, prosecutors who can protect witnesses, judges who can finish cases, and prisons that sever, rather than transmit, command. It means treating ports, customs, and trucking routes as strategic terrain. It also means accepting that coordination with the United States - intelligence, finance, chemicals - will remain indispensable, even when it is politically uncomfortable to say so.

The state deserves credit for confronting a figure who symbolised impunity. But credit is not closure. The real measure will be whether, six months from now, shopkeepers reopen without paying a tax to fear, whether mayors can govern without escorts, and whether a cartel can still choreograph a city's paralysis on cue. If those answers change, then this moment will mark more than the end of a man. It will mark the beginning of a different balance of power.

# A lesson for India

*The SCOTUS decision underscores a fundamental principle: when a constitutional court is faced with a question of law, its duty is to decide that question - clearly and without any fear. The moment a court avoids doing so, defers excessively to the executive, or seeks refuge in committees and procedural devices, it risks abdicating the very responsibility the Constitution entrusts to it. Judicial review is not an exercise in governance. It is an exercise in constitutional fidelity. A court that confines itself to its assigned role does not weaken democracy; it strengthens it by ensuring that every branch of government remains within its constitutional bounds*

By striking down the tariffs imposed by the President of the United States, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) has sent a powerful message to Constitutional courts across the world. The Court identified with precision the limited question of law before it, addressed that question directly, and delivered its ruling with clarity and speed. It discharged the responsibility assigned to it by the Constitution - without being overwhelmed by the political or economic consequences of its decision, without venturing into the realm of policy prescription, without allowing the question before it to become academic or infructuous and without allowing the policy to remain in a prolonged phase of uncertainty pending adjudication. These are all hallmarks of an institution firmly committed to upholding the majesty of the law, conscious that it is the final interpreter of the Constitution.

Under the United States Constitution, the President heads the executive branch and is charged with implementing laws enacted by the legislature - Congress. A strict separation of powers ensures that no individual can simultaneously serve in Congress and hold executive office. The judiciary, in turn, retains the final authority to interpret the law, creating a nearly perfect system of checks and balances. The narrow question before SCOTUS in the tariffs case was whether the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) authorized the President to impose tariffs. The Court answered in the negative and in words that merit close attention, observed:

"The President asserts the extraordinary power to unilaterally impose tariffs of unlimited amount, duration and scope. In



light of the breadth, history and constitutional context of that asserted authority, he must identify clear Congressional authorization to exercise it. IEEPA's grant of authority to 'regulate importation' falls short. IEEPA contains no reference to tariffs or duties. The Government points to no statute in which Congress uses the word 'regulate' to authorize taxation. And until now no President has read IEEPA to confer such power. We claim no special competence in matters of economics or foreign affairs. We claim only, as we must, the limited role assigned to us by Article III of the Constitution. Fulfilling that role, we hold that IEEPA does not authorize the President to impose tariffs."

Simply put, while the executive argued that the power to "regulate" imports was broad enough to include the "imposition of tariffs," the Court held that such an expansive reading lacked clear Congressional authorization. The Court neither deferred reflexively to the executive nor assumed the mantle of economic policymaker nor tried to find a viable workaround leaving the issue 'open'. It simply confined itself to interpreting the statute and enforcing constitutional limits. The clinical approach of the SCOTUS in this can be a valuable guide for Constitutional Courts in India.

Hypothetically speaking, if a similar case were to arise before the Supreme Court of India, and the Court were to find tariffs imposed by the Union Government illegal, would it unhesitatingly set them aside? What if the Attorney General or Solicitor General argued that such a ruling would result in massive fiscal loss because collected tariffs would need to be refunded? Would the Court nonetheless decide the legal question squarely? Or would it, citing lack of expertise in economics or foreign affairs, refer the matter to a committee - perhaps comprising officials appointed by the very executive whose action is under challenge - receive a report in a sealed cover, and dispose of the case in terms of that report in the name of protecting the nation's economic security?

Equally, would the Court confine itself to adjudication, or would it proceed to craft a policy framework of its own, invoking its wide discretionary powers to "balance

competing claims" and "meet the ends of justice," thereby entering the executive domain? Alternatively, would it prefer to nudge, prod, cajole or browbeat the Executive to review its stand or try the mediation approach so that somehow or the other, it does not have to decide the question before it and can dispose of the matter in terms of the undertakings given or agreements arrived at between the parties?

These questions are no longer academic and require serious contemplation because in recent years, a new kind of jurisprudence appears to be emerging from the Supreme Court of India, one which has rightly been described by some as its "Illegal but Helpless and Sympathetic" Jurisdiction. This jurisdiction encompasses those cases in which the Court identifies and acknowledges the illegality or constitutional infirmity but then declines to grant full consequential relief citing one reason or the other ranging from practical constraints, national interest, subsequent developments, actions of the parties or simply because it would be too harsh. In most cases it appears that the Court is

more focused on the consequences or managing the consequences of its answer than with speedily providing the answer to the constitutional question before it.

If in Subhash Desai v/s Principal Secretary to Governor of Maharashtra, concerning the Maharashtra government crisis, the Court found serious constitutional violations but stopped short of restoring the previous government then in the Ayodhya dispute case (M. Siddiq v/s Mahant Suresh Das and others), it held that the 1949 desecration and the 1992 demolition were egregious violations of the rule of law but still awarded the disputed land for the construction of a temple and an alternative five-acre site for the mosque. If in the Enforcement Directorate Case (Dr Jaya Thakur v/s Union of India)



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## CHINA DAILY

## Top nuclear power obliged to cut its arsenal

The specter of nuclear weapons remains one of the most daunting challenges to global peace and security, with recent developments casting a glaring spotlight on the United States. The country's irresponsible actions, including its refusal to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty after its expiration early this month, threaten to dismantle decades of progress in nuclear nonproliferation.

Yet in order to justify its renegeing on nuclear nonproliferation commitments, the US has made unfounded accusations against China regarding nuclear testing to pave the way for its own resumption of nuclear tests. "Because of other countries' testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis," the

US leader said last October in a post on his Truth Social site. "That process will begin immediately." US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas DiNanno, too, made unwarranted remarks at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva recently, accusing China of having conducted a nuclear explosive test in June 2020.

This prompted Robert Floyd, executive secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, to clarify in a statement that the International Monitoring System of the organization did not detect any event consistent with the characteristics of a nuclear weapon test explosion at that time. The remarks made by the US in

regard to nuclear testing are nothing but lies told to serve the country's own dangerous agenda at the cost of other nations' security and global stability. The baseless claims that China is conducting "covert" nuclear tests serve as a pretext for the US to abandon a moratorium on nuclear testing it has upheld since 1992.

As Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian pointed out, the US' distortion and slander of China's nuclear policy are essentially "political manipulation", through which it aims to evade its own nuclear disarmament responsibilities. In fact, it is the US that is "the biggest source of disruption to both the international nuclear order and global strategic stability". Indeed, the US has consistently undermined

international efforts to promote nuclear disarmament. Its reluctance to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, as well as its recent threats to resume testing, stands in stark contrast to the global consensus on the need to prevent nuclear proliferation.

By refusing to adhere to the nonproliferation framework, the US is effectively dismantling the very architecture that has constrained the nuclear threat for decades.

The series of US maneuvers, which portend a significant shift in its nuclear policy, threaten to reignite a nuclear arms race that the world can ill afford.

The narrative that the US propagates - of needing to resume testing to match the capabilities of other nations - is not only false and misleading but also dangerous.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

## Lack of trust

Sir, Apropos the editorial "A Delicate Ledger", the ongoing dispute in West Bengal over electoral roll revision serves as a stark reminder that the administrative machinery of democracy is only as strong as the trust between its institutions.

When routine cooperation between the state and the Election Commission breaks down, the process becomes a political battleground, leaving the citizenry in a state of anxious uncertainty about their most fundamental right.

The Supreme Court's intervention to deploy judicial officers is a pragmatic and necessary step to restore neutrality. It effectively places a non-partisan referee into a process that had become mired in mutual suspicion. While this infusion of judicial credibility can help clear the backlog of claims and objections, it also delivers a

sobering lesson: once institutional trust erodes, even the most basic civic exercises require the heaviest constitutional tools to function.

Yours, etc., K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru, 24 February.

## Disgrace

Sir, The editorial "Voter Roll Trust" published today has aptly pointed out the lack of trust between the EC and the State Government. Millions of citizens are unsure whether their names will appear in the final electoral rolls or not. Many people have lost their lives only due to the inefficiency of the EC and its lackadaisical attitude.

The Constitution gives the EC wide authority over elections but they do not have the infrastructure to perform such a big task like SIR independently. They mostly depend on the state's manpower. Due to

conflict between the EC and the State, people of Bengal have suffered from the beginning.

The EC frequently changes its decision relating to accepting the documents from voters and this leads to confusion. However, with the intervention of the Chief Justice of India, there may be a hope that genuine voters will get their voting rights at last. It is really disgraceful for the EC.

Yours, etc., Deba Prasad Bhattacharjee, Kolkata, 24 February.

## No freebies

Sir, The Supreme Court has rightly criticized the growing culture of announcing freebies and indiscriminate subsidies on the eve of elections. Reckless spending on freebies attracts voters and helps politicians to create vote banks. For example, when the government provides life-saving medicines, food, or funds during times of natural disaster or



pandemic to all, it will come under essential services, but in normal times, these schemes are freebies. Almost all state governments are under severe debt because of their freebies culture and essential services like roads, hospitals, schools, medical colleges, etc. are affected. Freebies disrupt state finances and throw governments into a debt spiral.

Though, freebies give temporary respite to the masses, they put a dent in the country's economy. If the money is spent on developmental activities, it will generate employment which help the economy to flourish.

Yours, etc., S K Khosla, Chandigarh, 22 February.

# Rehman will need to walk a tightrope



RAJA MUNEEB

When Tarique Rahman took oath as Bangladesh's newly elected prime minister, the swearing-in ceremony projected a sense of political closure. Years of turbulence under the interim administration led by Muhammad Yunus had left the country weary. Voters appeared to be seeking not ideological transformation, but restoration of economic stability, institutional normalcy, and social calm that the Yunus administration had promised but ended up destroying.

Yet Rahman's return to executive authority marks the beginning of a far more complex chapter. He inherits an economy under strain, institutions that have lost public trust, and a political opposition that, though electorally weakened, retains formidable capacity for mobilization. At the centre of this uncertainty lies his government's delicate relationship with the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and the controversial "July Agreement" - a political compact forged during last year's unrest that may now become the fault line of his tenure.

Bangladesh's economic narrative over the past decade had been one of cautious optimism. Under the Hasina government garment exports surged, remittances flowed steadily, and GDP growth rates placed the country among South Asia's stronger performers. That trajectory faltered during the political uncertainty of the interim period under the Yunus administration.

Foreign exchange reserves declined amid currency volatility and rising import costs. Inflation began squeezing urban and rural households alike, undermining purchasing power and fuelling public frustration. The garment sector, long the backbone of the economy, struggled with labour unrest and declining external demand. Investor confidence weakened as policy continuity appeared

uncertain and administrative decisions became reactive rather than strategic. Rahman must now stabilize macroeconomic fundamentals while rebuilding investor trust. Fiscal discipline, currency management, and renewed engagement with multilateral lenders will be crucial. But economic stabilization cannot succeed in isolation. Markets respond not only to numbers, but to political predictability. And predictability remains elusive.

The interim government period has left deep institutional scars. Bureaucratic decision-making slowed as civil servants sought to avoid political entanglement. Accusations of selective enforcement and politicized investigations eroded trust in law enforcement agencies.

The judiciary, too, became entangled in high-profile political disputes, with rulings scrutinized for perceived bias. Public confidence in neutral arbitration weakened. The civil administration, traditionally Bangladesh's stabilizing force, emerged cautious and fragmented.

Rahman's challenge is to restore institutional credibility without appearing to weaponize reform for partisan gain. A sweeping purge could be interpreted as revenge. A cautious approach, however, risks perpetuating dysfunction. The balance between reform and restraint will define the tone of his early months.

Beyond economics and governance lies a deeper social anxiety. Increased communal violence against the minorities since the Yunus administration took over have unsettled Bangladesh's secular constitutional framework. While the country's identity has historically blended religious devotion with constitutional secularism, recent periods of political uncertainty left behind a deep sectarian fracture. Minority communities have expressed concern over targeted violence, and have accused the state of selective responsiveness.

Rahman must reaffirm constitutional protections without alienating religious constituencies whose

political influence remains significant. This requires careful calibration by asserting secular governance while acknowledging religious sentiment in a way that prevents polarization from deepening.

Although Jamaat did not secure dominant parliamentary representation, its defeat at the ballot box does not equate to marginalization. Its organizational infrastructure particularly its student and grassroots wings remain intact and capable of rapid street mobilization. In Bangladesh's political culture, electoral loss often precedes, rather than prevents, street activism.

Rahman faces a strategic dilemma. Engaging Jamaat through political dialogue could reduce immediate confrontation but risks alienating secular allies and international partners wary of Islamist influence. Ignoring or sidelining the party could provoke a return to agitation politics. Direct confrontation may strengthen Jamaat's narrative of victimhood.

The July Agreement emerged during the height of nationwide protests last year, when political paralysis threatened to spiral into sustained instability. Under intense domestic and international pressure, major political stakeholders, including Islamist factions, reached a provisional understanding designed to de-escalate tensions.

The agreement reportedly included commitments to electoral reforms, the release or review of cases against political detainees, assurances regarding political participation rights, and limitations on the use of force during demonstrations. It was less a detailed legal framework than a political ceasefire, a mechanism seen to cool the streets and facilitate elections.

For Jamaat, the agreement became a strategic instrument. It legitimized their participation in the electoral process while preserving leverage. By framing themselves as co-signatories to a national stability pact, they positioned any perceived deviation as a betrayal of consensus.

Now that Rahman leads a new government, the July Agreement



poses a test. If his administration seeks to reinterpret its clauses, particularly regarding protest permissions, detainee amnesties, or the scope of political reforms, Jamaat could argue that the government is renegeing on its commitments. Conversely, strict adherence may constrain Rahman's ability to assert authority or pursue accountability measures.

The agreement's ambiguity is its danger. Its lack of precise legal codification allows competing interpretations. In moments of political tension, that ambiguity can quickly transform into confrontation.

Bangladesh's political rhythms often align with religious gatherings. Post-Eid periods have historically provided both symbolic momentum and logistical opportunity for mass mobilization. Should negotiations over the July Agreement deteriorate, Jamaat could use post-Eid congregations as a launchpad for renewed agitation.

A return to street-centred politics would place Rahman in a precarious position. A forceful crackdown risks international criticism and domestic backlash while permissiveness could encourage escalating demands. Each protest cycle would not merely test public order but would also strain the investor confidence and diplomatic credibility.



Front page of The Statesman dated 27 February 1926

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

BENGAL will rejoice at the appointment of Mr. Surendra Nath Mullick to the India Council. A man of many gifts, he has played an important part in affairs and would have played a greater had he not been foolishly attacked by Swarajist vehemence when selected as a Minister. His defeat at the polls meant the loss to political life—at least to the Bengal Council—of one of the ablest and sturdiest men in the province. When in charge of the Calcutta Corporation he won the confidence of every section of the people and it was confidently expected that his success there would carry him far. It must be admitted that public opinion has been restive in the belief that Government had overlooked his worth. Prophecy had assigned him to the Governor's Executive Council in succession to the Maharajah of Burdwan. The secret is now out, and the best wishes of all who know him will attend him to London. He has qualities that will ensure him further success, among them a cheerful sense of humour and a way of speaking that makes men listen.

## News Items

### COTTON INTERESTS INDIA AND LANCASHIRE IN HARMONY

LONDON, FEB. In the course of a felicitous speech at the Manchester Constitutional Club, Earl Winterton expressed the opinion that 15 or 20 years should see India more an integral part of the British Empire than it was even to-day.

Regarding Lancashire's sympathetic reception of the abolition of the Cotton Excise Duties, the Under-Secretary of State for India said it was at last recognized that the interests of Lancashire and India was not mutually destructive and that it was possible not only to prosper side by side but to cooperate and help each other. He thought the reconciliation was materially assisted by the recent visit to Lancashire of distinguished and representative Indian mill owners.

Earl Winterton, by means of statistics, elaborated the favourable position of Indian trade which, he said, was better than he dared hope when he took office four years ago. He dwelt on the factors responsible for the relatively low imports into India, notably that the Indian as a shrewd businessman would not commit himself in a falling market. He reminded the businessmen of Lancashire that there was more actual competition in India than before the war and welcomed the interest that Lancashire was taking in the production of a better class of Indian cotton. Although such cotton was primarily intended for local mills Lancashire benefited from the fact that its production left Manchester more free in the market to East African and other cottons.—Reuter.

### STRIKE OF LONDON ENGINEERS THREAT OF NATIONAL LOCK-OUT

LONDON, FEB. THE strike of 900 London engineers and labourers, which the Engineering Union refuses to recognise, has resulted in the threat of a national lock-out of the engineering trade. The trouble has arisen over wages and the men's refusal to work with non-Unionists.

Representatives of the Engineering Employers' Federation and the trade unions met yesterday, after which it was announced that the Employers' Federation had sanctioned the issue of notices of a national lock-out if the strikers did not resume immediately.

It is hoped that the Unions will exert pressure and secure a resumption.—Reuter.

### BRITAIN'S AIR POLICY PLEA FOR MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

RUGBY, FEB. INTRODUCING to-day into the House of Commons the Air Estimates for the next financial year, Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary for Air, said these were not markedly different from those of last year.

There was a net addition of about £500,000, and, against that, there was a reduction of the gross estimates representing a saving of nearly £350,000 in the cost of defence in Iraq and Palestine, resulting partly from the visit which he had paid to the Middle East a year ago, but still more from the efficiency of the Air Command under Vice-Marshal Sir John Higgins and the Civil Administration, under Sir Henry Dobbs.

The small net increase in the estimates was explained by new developments and additional squadrons recently formed. The increase must have been greater but for the rigid economies practised.

# Trade deals matter only if markets open

SHREY MADAAN

India's new trade deal with the United States will be celebrated as a diplomatic win. But trade agreements are not trophies. They are tests. And this one will be judged on a simple question: does it make Indian markets more open, more competitive, and more affordable for ordinary people?

If not, it is just paperwork. At its core, the agreement brings down tariffs and opens markets on both sides. India will cut duties on American industrial and agricultural goods, while the United States lowers tariffs on Indian products. While it may appear technical, the outcome is clear, competition increases, protectionism recedes, and consumers benefit from better prices and greater choice.

For decades, many sectors have operated behind steep tariff walls. Import duties on automobiles, for example, have often exceeded 100

per cent. The result has been predictable, higher prices, weaker innovation, and fewer choices than consumers would see in open, competitive markets. Protection kept competitors out, but it also kept progress out.

Trade agreements disrupt that comfort zone. They expose protected industries to better products, sharper competition, and more demanding consumers. That pressure is not a problem. That is the point. India has seen this before. When the telecom sector opened to competition, call rates collapsed, and data became among the cheapest in the world. Hundreds of millions gained access to affordable connectivity. That transformation was not driven by protection or subsidies. It was driven by competition. Trade liberalisation works the same way.

Trade works best when markets, not ministries, determine outcomes. Countries operating on government-mandated purchase targets distort

competition and inflate prices, while lower tariffs and clear, simple rules allow businesses and consumers to respond to genuine demand. That is how trade creates lasting gains.

The same logic applies to agriculture and industrial goods under this deal. Lower tariffs on items like nuts, fruits, or industrial inputs will increase competition at home. Some producers will feel the pressure. But that pressure usually leads to better quality, greater efficiency, and stronger export competitiveness over time. Protection preserves firms. Competition improves them.

What ultimately matters is not the size of the purchase pledges or the symbolism of the agreement. It is whether the deal makes India's markets more open and dynamic. If tariff cuts lead to lower prices, better products, and more innovation, the agreement will deliver real value. If it becomes a system of managed



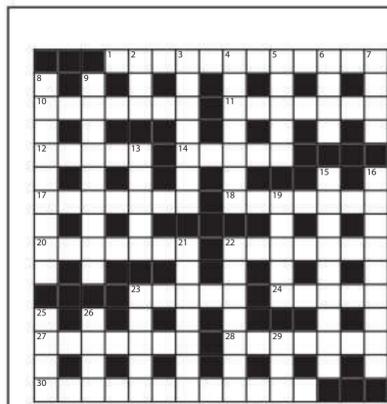
trade and selective concessions, its benefits will be limited.

Trade agreements are not about press releases or podium statements. They are about what changes in the marketplace. This deal will prove its worth only if it opens

markets at home, expands competition, and lets people, not governments, decide what success looks like.

(The writer is Indian Policy Associate, Consumer Choice Center.)

## Crossword | No. 293389



### Yesterday's Solution

PUBLIC FOOTPATH  
ORIENTAL TRAFFIC  
PRINCE CHARMING  
UNHEALTHY  
LOTS FOURTH WALL  
ATISN W E L Y  
COMPASS POINT  
E E L E R I C R  
G M O V D N A G  
ORIENTAL TRAFFIC  
T R E T Y D K R  
HERALDIC SHIELD  
T O L O A R E  
CURTAINS CLOSED

- ACROSS**
- 1/2 Vocalist to improvise around unusual chord — it's a must-see (12,5)
  - 10 Methuselah had to complete a course his boss thought up (7)
  - 11 Naked man possibly relieves 28 older women (7)
  - 12 With lead characters lost, hob must cast spells (5)
  - 14/4 Stirring cauldron, cut a sinister figure (5,7)
  - 17 One sent down for good over unsuccessful coup, originally (7)
  - 18 Endangered bat s taken to have wings clipped (2,5)
  - 20 A-list brought on board to create comedies (7)
  - 22 Old devil's got a couple of old stars forgetting their lines (2-3-2)
  - 23 Tolkien has him following a ring of gold around (5)
  - 24 Part of a Halloween tradition where a sucker is made to welcome a little rascal (5)
  - 27 Fancy gadget shown in Bond film's teaser? (3,4)
  - 28 Troublemaker finally blowing entrance off Vlad's castle (7)
  - 30 Pole gives attack dog the slip and joins two Italians who escaped long ago (5,7)
- DOWN**
- 2 See 1 Across
  - 3 Slasher presumably showing vamp with a different origin (7)
  - 4 See 14 Across
  - 5 Downing Street figure working to upset some players (5)
  - 6 Wickedness to be sent from below (4)
  - 7 Part of window showing star now and then — shut it! (4)
  - 8 Dom's alibi when travelling is fiendish practice (9)
  - 9 Priest cracking hints about contents of early cardinal's tomb (9)
  - 13 Letters regularly dispatched from US to African capital (5)
  - 15 Little attention seekers in hotel with things available at reception (9)
  - 16 Initiating another session about action on pitch (9)
  - 19 Sharp, stinging pain (5)
  - 21 Sign of cross almost knocked European character over (7)
  - 22 A portion of scrambled egg on salmon's picked up and necked (7)
  - 23 Gothic building in which there's a lack of reflection (5)
  - 25 Sorceress wants women to tickle (4)
  - 26 Dress like a Folk-tale wolf we've heard about (4)
  - 29 Ultimately obsolete little contraction which we still use occasionally today (3)

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

# DECCAN Chronicle

27 FEBRUARY 2026

## Why pick on judiciary in school textbooks?

The outrage the Supreme Court has expressed over the publication of a textbook that lists the shortcomings of the Indian judiciary including allegations of corruption, long pendency of cases and large number of vacancies being left unfilled is justified in that the referenced portion looks only at the darker side of just one eminent pillar of the Indian State but spares all others. The court has now ordered a complete ban of the Class 8 social science textbook which contains a chapter "The role of the judiciary in our society" wherein there is a section that is titled "corruption in the judiciary".

On its part, the National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT), the publishers of the book, have apologised to the court and decided to withdraw the book. The Union education minister has also expressed profound regret over the textbook containing the objectionable part. The court, however, is not satisfied; it believes this to have been a "calculated move to undermine authority and demean the dignity of the judiciary" and, therefore, initiated contempt of court proceedings against the NCERT director and the secretary of the department of school education in the Union government. The anguish of the court is reflected in Chief Justice of India Surya Kant's comment: "They have fired the gunshot. The judiciary is bleeding."

It may be noted that the court is not dismissive of the whole idea of corruption in the judiciary; instead, as the CJI pointed out, the bench was "deeply hurt that there is no mention of the judiciary's positive work — protection of civil rights, access to justice, free legal aid and safeguarding fundamental rights". There was no attempt to present the students with a balanced picture, it said.

It has been almost eight decades that India attained freedom and we have a Constitution for the last 76 years. We have come a long way in improving the system of governance in the country while remaining firmly committed to democracy and its principles. It may be true that we have not been able to introduce all the changes the founding fathers wanted, but every major step that India has made in these decades was aimed at improving the lot of the people. The judiciary has also played its role in it, especially in advancing the rights of ordinary people. No one has a case that all the pillars have played their roles in full: there are acts of omissions and commissions that can be traced to the door of the legislature and the executive. Focusing on the slip-ups of only the judiciary hardly helps.

There will be skeletons in the cupboards of every single institution in the country, and for that matter, every country, but none would see it as prudent to present them before schoolchildren and warp their outlook on life itself. Even if in the interest of truth such a thing is attempted, it must be done in such a way that young minds are encouraged to identify and use those tools to fight corruption. Making the problem statement alone serves no right purpose.

That said, the judiciary will be making a big mistake if it thinks the issue that it is indeed suffering from can simply be wished away. Glaring instances of judges coming under suspicion of wrongdoing are no rare incident, as the discovery of burnt currency notes from the house of a sitting judge of a high court amply shows. There are CJs on record pointing towards corruption in the judiciary. The people will stand with the apex court in protecting the judiciary's image as the custodian of their rights, but they will be happier themselves if the judiciary did some soul-searching as well.

## Donald Trump brazen it out

With the midterm elections coming up, the stakes around this year's State of the Union address by the US President Donald Trump were higher considering the hold of the Republicans on the legislature is wafer thin. Little wonder then that it sounded more like the beginning of an election campaign than a statement on the state of the USA or what the President proposed to do about his promise to lower the cost of living to alleviate the difficulties of the less well off.

The President's wings may have been clipped by the Supreme Court verdict on the illegality of the tariffs with which he had overturned global trade with the US, but all he said was that the verdict was "unfortunate", a far more polite term than those he had used outside. And yet the tariffs are the revenue he wants to take for his "America First" with the vague promise that income tax could be done away with.

Was any light shed on the issues that got him elected over the Democrat Kamala Harris in 2024, but which may have turned into susceptibilities ahead of the midterms? Probably not as tough immigration actions were the main reason the country may have been put off by its President, and he hardly spoke about them nor mentioned at least two Americans killed in ICE action even at the risk of alienating further those who are not in his MAGA fan base.

Of course, he had the overriding, if tiringly repeated message of an America doing well in its new golden age with claims that may not stand up to fact checking but which will be sweet music to the conservative Republican base. He said he had inherited a crisis-ridden US with a stagnant economy, record inflation, open borders and rampant crime at home and wars and chaos around the world, but he did not say what he would like to do about it.

Has anything changed is the question though Mr Trump avows that he seeks dialogue with Iran even as his forces have assumed a most aggressive posture with two aircraft carriers in waters near the Middle East and a dozen of America's most advanced F-22 Raptor jets to Israel. And Mr Trump thinks that America is winning so much that they don't know what to do about it.



## B'desh game of votes: How Hindus aided BNP victory



Manash Ghosh

Bangladesh's recently held 13th parliamentary election was an exercise of paradoxes. Parties which had for over four decades considered themselves natural allies spawned from the same mother, and who had twice jointly run governments for over a decade, contested this time as inveterate foes. Unsurprisingly, both went full throttle in trying to outwit each other through one-upmanship and ingenious moves. For instance, the BNP, concerned over the American and Pakistani Deep State's unabashed role in promoting the Jamaat-Islami's electoral prospects, was forced to take counter-measures, such as by winning over its bete noire Awami League's sizeable Hindu vote bank. Just the way Sheikh Hasina's August 2024 overthrow had been orchestrated, similarly a meticulously designed electoral strategy had been drawn jointly by Jamaat backers as well as Muhammad Yunus, who wanted an outright victory for the 11-party Islamic alliance. They knew that with the votebank's protective shield gone (provided by the top AL leadership), this minority bloc (comprising 1.5 crore Hindu voters out of a total 12 crore-plus Bangladesh voters) had become extremely vulnerable and could easily be preyed upon by Jamaat through coercive and persuasive tactics. This emboldened their chief Shafiqur Rahman to proclaim that he could "clearly foresee his party's emphatic victory and that February 12 would be a turning point in Bangladesh's political history". His comment was further reinforced by a Western news agency's prediction of a shock result awaiting Bangladesh, with JeI's Islamic alliance stealing a march over the BNP at the hustings. The Jamaat was so confident of its success that it even released names of its five Cabinet ministers well in advance.

But the BNP had an ace up its sleeve. Its secretary-general, Mirza Fakhrul Alamgir, along with two other senior party leaders had already held two secret meetings with three Hindu apex bodies to seek the support of Hindu voters. A similar offer had been extended to those bodies by the Jamaat, but it got no response. Hindu leaders, at their meeting with Mr Fakhrul, had been categorically told "to stand by us to resist Jamaat". But the Hindu community had laid down one condition: the spirit of the liberation war for which Bangladesh fought and won, and which formed the basis of the 1972 Constitution, must be protected and upheld.

Mr Fakhrul pledged that his party would never compromise on the nation's ideals, but he knew his assurances alone wouldn't convince Hindu voters. Thus, a meeting was arranged with BNP chairman Tarique Rahman, who reasserted that the BNP was a party of "muktijoddhas", and while most Hindus never backed his party, they could give it a chance and see the difference.

Mr Fakhrul, to ensure all Hindu votes were cast for the BNP, saw to it that leaders of the apex bodies campaigned across all 64 districts to convince Hindu voters how crucial their vote was for the BNP to defeat Jamaat. But the Hindu community was unwilling to respond positively. They recalled how BNP cadres had brutalised them for having voted for AL in the 2001 polls. It took a lot of persuasion to bring them around; they were warned that in AL's absence it would be foolhardy for them to boycott the elections as that would help Jamaat romp to power with ease, which would land all the minorities

The equation between the Awami League and BNP has changed from open hostility to one of growing understanding and cooperation, reflected in local BNP leaders initiating the reopening of AL offices throughout the country

in an existential crisis. Even Awami Leaguers were for voting the BNP to power to deny victory to Jamaat. This appeal had a magical effect.

Saikat Paul, a young Bangladesh Supreme Court lawyer, clearly spelt out this exceptional tectonic shift in Hindu votes, a first in Bangladesh elections: "The 1.5 crore Hindu voters, by voting for BNP, kept Bangladesh's muktijuddho ethos and identity alive and intact. They realised that if this was not done, the People's Democratic Republic of Bangladesh would overnight become an Islamic Republic."

It was the Hindu votes that saved the day for the BNP in at least 80 seats, where the party won by a slender margin of 2,000 votes and more. Besides, the Jamaat chief's repugnant remark on working women, comparing them to prostitutes, alienated most women voters who, along with Hindu voters, heavily tilted the electoral balance in favour of the BNP. Realising the formidable odds facing them, the Jamaatis began widespread rigging the night before and on the day of the election.

The social media live-streamed Jamaat cadres furiously stamping ballots and stuffing them into ballot boxes, with the presiding officers looking on helplessly. No wonder the Election Commission at 11 am in its accounting of the voting percentage, quoted 14%, which leapfrogged first to 47.91% at 2 pm, and then to 65% at 5 pm. This galloping percentage showed that this "non-inclusive farcical" election was no different from those held under Sheikh Hasina's rule, which had been labelled both by the BNP and Jamaat as "lacking in credibility". Despite the dubious nature of the

Jamaat's electoral credentials, its fairly spectacular rise in the polls is the most significant feature of this election. From just two seats it had won in 2008, it raised its tally to 68, which has brought about a significant change in Bangladesh's political landscape.

What is disconcerting for India about the Jamaat's dramatic rise is that the bulk of the 68 seats it won (around 40) are all along the West Bengal border. This has already raised security concerns for poll-bound West Bengal, whose border districts have lately seen communal clashes and bomb blasts.

The Awami League's most significant gain is that despite Muhammad Yunus keeping it out of the poll fray at the behest of the US and Pakistan, the party has proved its indispensability in national politics. Its muktijuddho-centric policies at times of national crisis have worked as a political beacon that guided Bangladesh to overcome challenges posed by Islamists. The political support that its local leaders and supporters extended to the BNP has begun to minimise the trust deficit between the two traditional rivals. Their equation has changed from open hostility to one of growing understanding and cooperation, which is reflected in local BNP leaders initiating the reopening of AL offices throughout the country, earlier shut down on the orders of Mr Yunus. Given the growing points of friction that are developing between Jamaat and the BNP, the latter knows that containing a regimented, aggressive, foreign-backed JeI and other Islamist forces requires AL's help, especially when JeI is still scrambling to grab power at any cost. A close Jamaat ally has already given a call to people to "remain prepared for another mass uprising" as it isn't happy "with the way the country is now being run".

Manash Ghosh is a veteran journalist who had covered the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, and is the author of several books including, most recently, Mujib's Blunders: The Power and the Plot Behind His Killing

### LETTERS

#### NCERT BOOK

Teaching students about corruption in the judiciary through the Class 8 Social Science textbook by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is condemnable (NCERT to remove 'judiciary graft' from book, Feb. 26). Judiciary is an independent organ of the government. If corruption is found, impeachment of the judge concerned is done through a parliamentary process. The impeachment process can be taught to students, but not about the corruption in judiciary.

P.T. Joy Venkatachalam

#### INDO-ISRAEL TIES

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel stands as a highly fruitful and forward-looking diplomatic engagement that strengthens India's global partnerships and reinforces its commitment to technological advancement, agricultural innovation, and strategic cooperation (India backs Gaza peace plan, PM tells Israel Parl, Feb. 26). At a time when water conservation, farmer welfare, and technological self-reliance are crucial for India's future, collaboration with a nation like Israel — known for its excellence in innovation and efficient resource management — holds immense promise. The visit also reflects India's confident and balanced foreign policy, guided by national interest, mutual respect, and long-term vision. Such diplomatic efforts contribute meaningfully to national progress.

Dr Challa Krishnaveer Abhishek Visakhapatnam

It's noted that Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi both are nationalists. Ties have significantly strengthened in the last few years. Unavoidable friendship with Israel enhances diplomacy in defence, water technology and space cooperation. Netanyahu reminded the world about bonding with India by addressing Modi as a brother in the Knesset. Notwithstanding political differences Modi was given a standing ovation in the Knesset is a great honour.

Veeranjaneyulu Vuyyuru

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Dilip Cherian Dilli Ka Babu

## Foreign service or forest? IFS in a tizzy over acronym wars

Only in India can two of the country's most elite services find themselves in a turf war over... three letters: IFS. Not policy. Not budgets. Not national interest. Initials.

In 2016, the ministry of external affairs essentially told the forest fraternity: "We were born in 1946. You arrived in 1966. Seniority applies. Kindly relocate to IFS." It was the bureaucratic equivalent of "We were here first."

The ministry of environment, forest and climate change was not amused. It shot back with a deliciously pedantic question: how can a service be both "Indian" and "Foreign"? Is it home-sick? Confused? Philosophically unstable? Perhaps, they suggested, the diplomats should rebrand — maybe Indian Diplomatic Service. Or Indian External Affairs Service. Problem solved. And then came the heritage card. Forest administration in India dates back to the 19th century under the British. So, if this is the longest-standing claim contest, shall we rewind the clock further?

What makes this episode priceless isn't just the pettiness but the straight-faced seriousness with which it was pursued. Letters were written. Files were moved. Arguments were crafted. Somewhere in North Block and South Block, oxygen was consumed over consonants.

Meanwhile, citizens may have assumed IFS officers were either protecting India's interests

abroad or protecting its forests at home. Instead, they were protecting brand identity. In a system obsessed with hierarchy, acronyms are rank badges. And in Delhi's ecosystem, reputation often begins with initials.

Three letters. Two egos. Zero irony. If this is what counts as inter-service rivalry, perhaps the tigers were the only calm participants in the entire affair.

**DEFAMATION DUEL IN KARNATAKA'S TOP RANKS** If Karnataka's babudom had a prime-time slot, this saga would be running in its third season.

In the latest episode, the Karnataka High Court has declined to quash the defamation proceedings filed by IPS officer D. Roopa Moudgil against IAS officer Rohini Sindhuri. This feud, which began as an unfiltered exchange of accusations and social media posts in 2023, has now matured into full-fledged criminal litigation. What started as a very public bureaucratic spat has acquired affidavits, counter-affidavits, Supreme Court detours, mediation suggestions, and enough procedural drama to exhaust even seasoned court reporters.

Frankly, civil servants occupy offices that demand discretion, restraint and a certain steel-trap composure. Instead, Karnataka watched two senior officers conduct what looked less like administrative disagreement and more like gladiatorial combat with

screenshots. Roopa alleges reputational harm. Sindhuri wants the case scrapped. The High Court's message is refreshingly simple: argue it out before the trial court. In other words, no shortcuts.

There's a larger discomfort here. When elite officers turn adversarial in public, the damage isn't confined to personal reputations. It chips away at institutional credibility. Bureaucracy thrives on the perception of neutrality and professionalism. Public crossfire erodes that mystique fast. One can't help asking: is this about justice, vindication, ego, or all three?

Either way, the real winner so far is litigation. And perhaps a lesson lurks beneath the wreckage: in the age of instant outrage and permanent digital records, even India's steel frame can rust in public view.

**WHEN TURBULENCE HITS, AIR INDIA CALLS A FAMILIAR PILOT**

When the skies get rough, you don't experiment with new pilots. You bring back someone who's flown the route before.

That's what Air India appears to be doing by appointing former civil aviation secretary Pradeep Singh Kharola as senior advisor. The move comes amid a leadership reshuffle and just ahead of the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau's much-anticipated final report on the AI-171 crash. Coincidence?

Unlikely. Mr Kharola isn't an ornamental hire. He has been CMD of Air India in its government avatar and later, as aviation secretary, oversaw its disinvestment to the Tata Group. Few people understand the airline's bureaucratic DNA and its regulatory pressure points better.

Industry chatter suggests he'll function as a bridge with the directorate general of civil aviation. In plain English: when the regulator knocks, it helps if someone inside knows exactly how hard that knock can get.

For Tata Sons chairman N. Chandrasekaran, this is textbook consolidation: tighten oversight, steady the narrative, and ensure there are no mixed signals at cruising altitude. The simultaneous changes in corporate communications only reinforce the sense that this is about control, clarity, and getting ahead.

Air India's makeover under the Tatas has been bold, expensive and highly visible. But aviation has a cruel memory. Safety questions don't fade with rebranding exercises. Bringing Mr Kharola back into the fold sends a clear message that when scrutiny intensifies, experience beats experimentation. In this business, reputation flies first class, or it doesn't fly at all.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com.

# Touching a raw nerve in judiciary

It must surely rank as a rare occurrence in the country that a court ruling has been acted upon in double-quick time. Quite ironically, the subject revolves around 'corruption' in judiciary, and the trigger came from a chapter in a Class VIII textbook that has been published by NCERT, which is an autonomous body. Stung by the content in the chapter, almost the entire legal fraternity raised a hue and cry and demanded action against those responsible for the publication. The issue became the talk of the town after the Supreme Court slammed NCERT for adding a section on 'Corruption in Judiciary' in the Class 8 textbook. Senior advocates Kapil Sibal and Dr Abhishek Manu Singhvi raised the matter before the Chief Justice of India, expressing

serious concern over the inclusion of judicial corruption in a class eight textbook. "We are deeply disturbed as members of this institution to see that Class 8 students are being taught about corruption in the judiciary. This is part of the NCERT curriculum. We have a strong stake in preserving the integrity of the institution; this is completely scandalous. We have copies of the book," Sibal commented.

The BJP on Thursday termed the controversial chapter as a "sensitive matter". This was preceded by the Supreme Court imposing a blanket ban on the Class 8 NCERT book and ordered seizure of all physical copies, along with the digital forms. The apex court bench vented ire by describing it as a "well-orchestrated conspiracy"

to defame the judiciary. It all began when NCERT's newly introduced Class 8 social science textbook described corruption, a huge backlog of cases, and shortage of judges as major challenges facing India's judicial system. The book cites data of around 81,000 cases pending in the Supreme Court, 62.40 lakh in high courts, and 4.70 crore in district and subordinate courts. It also mentions internal accountability mechanisms, including complaints filed through the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS). Quite expectedly this shocker has left the legal practitioners crying for blood by way of stringent action against all those responsible for this damaging text. Prime Minister Narendra Modi

has called for accountability.

Meanwhile, former law minister Ashwani Kumar hailed CJI Surya Kant for taking suo motu cognisance of the chapter and said that the prompt action would help bury the propaganda against the judiciary. The CJI-headed bench has described the entire episode as "They fired a gunshot and the judiciary is bleeding." The main objection was that the book spoke about corruption in the judiciary but has nothing about its prevalence in the legislature and executive. Apparently, this hit the legal hawks and their egos as they were being singled out. Meanwhile, NCERT has removed the book from its official website and is likely to drop the controversial chapter. One fails to understand why the Council did not

clarify on the issue or come up with a statement that corruption in other departments would be featured in a revised edition. When sex education can be incorporated in the school curriculum why should students not be made aware of corruption across segments that is destroying the country? Government sources have come up with valid suggestions that the textbook should have addressed corruption across all branches of government, not just the judiciary. This faux pas seems like it has been done at the behest of vested political interests. Making scapegoats of some Council members is all that can happen. After all, the CJI has gone on record: "Heads must roll" and NCERT has a history of courting controversies.

## LETTERS

### Rajaji's bust in Rashtrapati Bhavan is welcome move

UNVEILING of Rajaji's bust in the Rashtrapati Bhavan is a welcome move as it fulfils the stated objective of erasing all colonial relics from India. Rajaji, an ardent nationalist, was instrumental in awakening the spiritual potential of the nation. During his tenure as the first Governor General of India, he installed the statues of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Mahatma Gandhi in the puja alcove which exemplifies his idea of India.

Satish Reddy Kanaganti, Nalgonda

### Fostering science temper

AS we observe National Science Day on February 28, commemorating the discovery of the Raman Effect by C V Raman, it is a fitting occasion to reflect on the vital role science plays in shaping our lives and driving national progress. Beyond celebrating a landmark scientific achievement, this day invites us to nurture a spirit of inquiry and rational thinking among citizens. In an era defined by rapid technological advancements and the pervasive reach of digital platforms, science has transformed communication, healthcare, agriculture, and infrastructure. Yet, these advancements have also brought the challenge of misinformation and pseudoscience, which often spread more quickly than verified facts. In such circumstances, cultivating a scientific temper—the ability to question, analyse evidence, and think logically—becomes more important than ever. Scientific temper is not confined to laboratories or academic institutions; it is a way of thinking that should guide everyday life. It empowers individuals to make informed decisions on issues ranging from health and the environment to social concerns. By promoting critical thinking, it helps counter blind beliefs and encourages reasoning based on evidence. Initiatives such as science exhibitions, public lectures, and hands-on activities can make science more accessible and engaging, especially for young learners. Parents and society also play a crucial role in fostering curiosity among children. A scientifically aware society is better equipped to address global challenges such as climate change, public health crises, and sustainable development. National Science Day, first observed in 1987, is celebrated across schools, colleges, universities, research institutes, and medical institutions throughout the country. This year's theme, "Women in Science: Catalysing Viksit Bharat," highlights the importance of inclusive participation in science and technology, as well as their role in addressing global challenges and building a sustainable future.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

### Bucknor should have apologised long back

MORE than two decades after making what was then widely seen as a "dreadful decision", against Sachin Tendulkar, the reputed cricket umpire Steve Bucknor expressed regret for giving Tendulkar out LBW at Brisbane has admitted that the decision was a mistake. In the commentary box Tony Grieg had referred to it as a "dreadful" decision. To err may be human, but who knows? Had that mistake not been made, Sachin and India would have dominated the cricketing world as done by Australia for 22 years. It seems like Australia and Pakistan are enjoying the best of everything as far as luck is concerned.

M Chandrasekhar, Kadapa

### Balancing effort and opportunity in education

WITH reference to the article published in The Hans India (Feb 26) under the headline "The role of opportunity and preparation in student outcomes." The thoughtful piece sheds light on a subject that lies at the heart of our education system. Indeed, diligence and perseverance help learners burn the midnight oil and climb the academic ladder. Access to quality resources, mentorship, stable study environments, and informed guidance can give some students a head start. True merit should not merely reward those who ace the test, but also recognise resilience, growth, and determination shown under challenging circumstances. When schools and institutions acknowledge context alongside performance, they move closer to ensuring that no child slips through the cracks. A fair system must therefore strive not only to test knowledge but also to expand access to preparation and support.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Meeting with 28 MLAs soon to tackle issue: Khandre

BENGALURU: Karnataka Forest, Ecology and Environment Minister Eshwar Khandre has said that a meeting with all 28 MLAs of Bengaluru city will be convened shortly to prevent the state capital from turning into a "gas chamber" like Delhi.

The Minister made the statement after holding a high-level meeting with officials at the request of S. Suresh Kumar, MLA of Rajajinagar. He noted that air, water and noise pollution levels are rising in Bengaluru and stressed the need for bipartisan cooperation from all elected representatives to address the issue effectively.

Raising the matter during the meeting, Suresh Kumar pointed out that dust on city roads is worsening air quality and contributing to respiratory problems among children. He said that doctors are advising some residents to move to the outskirts of the city due to declining air standards and urged immediate corrective measures.

Responding to the concerns, Khandre stated that air quality is currently being monitored at 11 fixed stations and through 13 mobile units across Bengaluru. He directed officials to issue notices to the concerned local bodies if the Air Quality Index (AQI) exceeds 100, instructing them to bring the levels under control within a stipulated timeframe. He warned that failure to act would invite legal action as per provisions under environmental laws.

The Minister further said that, after discussions with Deputy Chief Minister and Bengaluru Urban Development Minister D. K. Shivakumar, a comprehensive meeting will soon be held under his chairmanship.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# Consideration: The missing core in our society?

## SURGICAL STRIKE



K. KRISHNA SAGAR RAO

A silent erosion is taking place in our society. It is not economic, technological, or political. It is emotional. We are steadily losing one of the most fundamental human qualities that sustain civilisation, consideration. When patience declines, when mutual respect weakens, when empathy becomes selective, and when self-interest dominates public behavior, disorder becomes normalised.

Observe daily life in any Indian city. People cut queues without hesitation. Drivers block intersections, fully aware they are paralyzing traffic behind them. Individuals crowd a personal space without awareness. Public conversations are loud and intrusive. Vehicles are parked across entrances as though convenience is a personal entitlement. There is a constant rush to move ahead, to secure advantage, to occupy space, regardless of the inconvenience caused to others.

This pattern is not about poor manners. It reflects a deeper emotional deficit. We are not witnessing isolated acts of indiscipline. We are seeing weakening of internal restraint. The willingness to pause and consider the impact of one's actions on another person is diminishing. When that pause disappears, chaos becomes culture.

The most worrying aspect is that this is no longer episodic.

It is generational. Children observe adults' bending rules and equating smartness with aggression. They see fairness compromised in the name of efficiency. They internalize the message that speed is superior to order and advantage is superior to empathy.

Emotional patterns are absorbed through modelling, not instruction. We are inadvertently institutionalizing inconsistency.

### Consideration as an emotional intelligence deficit:

As someone who works extensively in emotional intelligence, I view consideration as a composite emotional competency. It is not a soft virtue. It is the outcome of three essential skills—empathy, impulse control, and social awareness. Empathy enables us to sense the inconvenience or discomfort our actions may cause others. Impulse control allows us to restrain the urge to prioritize ourselves at someone else's expense. Social awareness helps us understand that public spaces are shared ecosystems governed by mutual respect. When these three competencies weaken, inconsiderate behavior becomes instinctive.

Many defend our disorder by pointing to population density. This explanation is inadequate. Population is structural. Discipline is psychological. Several densely populated nations maintain order because consideration is culturally embedded. Their citizens regulate themselves. Systems function smoothly because internal restraint is stronger than external enforcement.

We frequently debate whether India is developed or developing. We celebrate economic growth and technologi-



cal achievement. Yet development must also be measured behaviourally. A developed society is one where individuals wait their turn even when no authority is watching, where traffic rules are followed out of conviction rather than fear, and where silence in shared spaces is respected instinctively. If public systems collapse without constant policing, emotional development remains incomplete. Third World is often interpreted economically, but it also reflects behavioral culture. When civic order depends entirely on surveillance, when rules function only under threat of penalty, and when shared norms are weak, society has not matured emotionally. No nation can police its way into greatness. It must emotionally evolve into it.

The cost of inconsideration: The consequences of this

deficit extend beyond daily inconvenience. Inconsideration compounds. When one person cuts a line, others feel justified in doing the same. When one driver violates rules without consequence, imitation follows. Soon, fairness appears naive and restraint appears foolish. That is the tipping point of civil decline.

This dynamic erodes social trust. Friction increases. Time is lost in chaotic traffic. Productivity declines in disordered environments. Emotional stress rises in avoidable situations. We bleed progress through behavioral inefficiency. There is also a reputational cost. Increasingly, there is backlash against Indians globally for perceived lack of social awareness and civic discipline. Complaints about queueing behavior, noise levels, disregard for shared spaces, and traffic conduct are no longer rare. In-

stead of introspecting, we often react defensively.

National pride cannot substitute for civic responsibility. If our social management skills are weak, our global credibility suffers. Consideration is foundational to social awareness and social management, two critical emotional intelligence competencies. Without consideration, we fail to anticipate the impact of our behavior. Without anticipation, we create discomfort and conflict. Reputations, whether individual or national, are built on predictable, respectful conduct. When unpredictability and self-interest dominate, respect declines.

### Reinstating consideration as a civilizational value:

Restoring consideration requires deliberate cultural correction. Families must model respectful behavior consistently. Parents cannot preach patience while practicing aggression. Children absorb behavioral norms through observation.

The responsibility begins at home. Schools must treat civic conduct as seriously as academic achievement. Discipline must be reframed as self-regulation rather than fear-based obedience. Students should understand that professionalism and citizenship are rooted in emotional maturity, not merely intellectual capability.

Organisations must elevate professionalism beyond designation. Respect for time, shared space, and process must become non-negotiable standards. Public campaigns should address behavioral literacy as directly as they address sanitation or digital awareness. Honking should not be normalized as an expression.

Queue discipline should not be seen as optional courtesy. Silence in shared environments should not require enforcement.

Most importantly, consideration must become aspirational. It must be reframed as disciplined strength rather than passive compliance. It requires confidence to yield space. It requires maturity to wait. It requires self-mastery to restrain advantage when no one is watching. Our civilizational heritage emphasizes self-control, dignity, and mutual respect. Philosophically, we are not deficient. Practically, we are inconsistent. If we aspire for global leadership, behavioral maturity must accompany economic ambition.

The transformation begins with a simple pause. Before acting, we ask how our behavior affects another person. That pause is the birthplace of social order.

When enough individuals practice it consistently, systems stabilize and trust rebuilds. A nation does not become developed merely by increasing wealth. It becomes developed when its citizens internalize responsibility toward one another.

Consideration is not ornamental. It is foundational. If we restore it consciously and collectively, we will not only improve daily civic life, but we will also elevate our national character. And that elevation will define whether we remain crowded or become truly cultured.

(The writer is Chairman of Nation Building Foundation, a BJP leader, expert in Emotional Intelligence and a Harvard Business School certified strategist)

# Science as social justice: Karnataka's blueprint for a future-ready India

N S BOSERAJU

In every generation, nations are defined not merely by their economic output or military strength, but by the quality of their ideas. Science and technology are the instruments through which ideas are transformed into progress. In fact, they are no longer peripheral to governance but central to it. They shape our public health systems, our agriculture, our climate responses, our education, and the transparency of our institutions.

Science is not just about laboratories and equations. It is about dignity. It is about equity. It is about empowering citizens with knowledge and ensuring that governance is evidence-based, accountable, and forward-looking.

Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the foremost champions of scientific temper in India, has rightly observed, "It is science alone that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy." I am a firm believer in this vision. For me, science is not an abstract pursuit; it is a moral commitment to development with justice.

### Science as an engine of social justice:

When we speak of science in governance, we speak of measurable outcomes. Data-driven

decision-making reduces arbitrariness. Transparent technological systems enhance accountability. Digital public infrastructure ensures that welfare reaches the last beneficiary without leakage. Environmental monitoring safeguards both ecology and livelihoods.

In Karnataka, we recognize that scientific temper is the foundation of democratic citizenship. It encourages questioning, rational discourse, and informed participation. By embedding science into public policy, we strengthen the trust between institutions and citizens. Science-driven governance also promotes social justice. When we use technology to monitor groundwater levels, improve agricultural productivity, enhance rural health diagnostics, or enable digital service delivery, we are not merely modernizing systems; we are widening access.

### Democratizing science education:

However, the true measure of progress is whether a child in a remote village can access the same scientific inspiration as a student in Bengaluru. Our approach is quite clear on this: democratize science education.

Our mobile digital planetarium programme has taken astronomy to thousands of schools. With eleven mobile units operating across regions, including extensive outreach



N S Boseraju, Minister for Science and Technology, Karnataka

in Kalyana Karnataka, lakhs of students have experienced immersive sky shows. We are launching Nehru Stream Labs to promote hands-on learning ensuring that rural students can look at the night sky and see possibility, not limitation.

When a child observes the rings of Saturn or Jupiter through a telescope for the first time, something transformative occurs. Curiosity is awakened. Imagination expands. The foundations of innovation are laid. Imagination at the early stage always paves the foundation for exploration in the future.

### Building institutions for the future:

Infrastructure is the bedrock of sustained scientific progress. We are developing a state-of-the-art Science City near Bengaluru with an estimated investment of ₹30 crore in

collaboration with the Union Government. This facility is a place where science meets society. We have also strengthened research ecosystems through the Vision Group on Science and Technology (VGST). Over the past two years, VGST has supported more than 200 research and innovation projects across Karnataka's higher education institutions, committing nearly ₹3 crore. Through Programmes such as Grants for Research Excellence (GRE), K-FIST infrastructure strengthening, Early Career Research Awards, and Faculty Development Programmes, we are nurturing research excellence beyond metropolitan centers.

We are equally committed to supporting young researchers. Through the DST PhD Scholarship Programme, hundreds of doctoral scholars in science and engineering are receiving sustained financial support, reinforcing our talent pipeline.

### Deep tech and the quantum horizon:

The world stands on the threshold of a technological transformation driven by deep technologies, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, advanced materials, and quantum computing. Among these, quantum technology represents one of the most profound paradigm shifts in computational capability. Quantum computing

promises breakthroughs in materials discovery, drug development, secure communication, financial modelling, and climate simulation. Nations that lead in quantum research will shape global economic and strategic architectures.

Karnataka has resolved to stand shoulder to shoulder with the world in this endeavour. The State has launched the Karnataka Quantum Mission with an allocation of ₹1,000 crore and a clear vision: to build a \$20-billion quantum-driven economy by 2035. Our roadmap envisages nurturing over 100 quantum startups, generating thousands of high-skilled jobs, and developing indigenous quantum processors scaling toward 1,000 qubits within the decade.

Through Q-City, the proposed integrated quantum innovation and manufacturing hub, we aim to converge research, startups, industry, fabrication facilities, and export infrastructure in one ecosystem. Our approach is structured around four pillars: talent and skilling; research and technology targets; infrastructure and industry and business growth. Our international engagement with global platforms such as Swissnex and other international quantum ecosystems demonstrates our commitment to collaboration without dependency. Our am-

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27 FEBRUARY 2026

## Why pick on judiciary in school textbooks?

The outrage the Supreme Court has expressed over the publication of a textbook that lists the shortcomings of the Indian judiciary including allegations of corruption, long pendency of cases and large number of vacancies being left unfilled is justified in that the referenced portion looks only at the darker side of just one eminent pillar of the Indian State but spares all others. The court has now ordered a complete ban of the Class 8 social science textbook which contains a chapter "The role of the judiciary in our society" wherein there is a section that is titled "corruption in the judiciary".

On its part, the National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT), the publishers of the book, have apologised to the court and decided to withdraw the book. The Union education minister has also expressed profound regret over the textbook containing the objectionable part. The court, however, is not satisfied; it believes this to have been a "calculated move to undermine authority and demean the dignity of the judiciary" and, therefore, initiated contempt of court proceedings against the NCERT director and the secretary of the department of school education in the Union government. The anguish of the court is reflected in Chief Justice of India Surya Kant's comment: "They have fired the gunshot. The judiciary is bleeding."

It may be noted that the court is not dismissive of the whole idea of corruption in the judiciary; instead, as the CJI pointed out, the bench was "deeply hurt that there is no mention of the judiciary's positive work — protection of civil rights, access to justice, free legal aid and safeguarding fundamental rights". There was no attempt to present the students with a balanced picture, it said.

It has been almost eight decades that India attained freedom and we have a Constitution for the last 76 years. We have come a long way in improving the system of governance in the country while remaining firmly committed to democracy and its principles. It may be true that we have not been able to introduce all the changes the founding fathers wanted, but every major step that India has made in these decades was aimed at improving the lot of the people. The judiciary has also played its role in it, especially in advancing the rights of ordinary people. No one has a case that all the pillars have played their roles in full: there are acts of omissions and commissions that can be traced to the door of the legislature and the executive. Focusing on the slip-ups of only the judiciary hardly helps.

There will be skeletons in the cupboards of every single institution in the country, and for that matter, every country, but none would see it as prudent to present them before schoolchildren and warp their outlook on life itself. Even if in the interest of truth such a thing is attempted, it must be done in such a way that young minds are encouraged to identify and use those tools to fight corruption. Making the problem statement alone serves no right purpose.

That said, the judiciary will be making a big mistake if it thinks the issue that it is indeed suffering from can simply be wished away. Glaring instances of judges coming under suspicion of wrongdoing are no rare incident, as the discovery of burnt currency notes from the house of a sitting judge of a high court amply shows. There are CJs on record pointing towards corruption in the judiciary. The people will stand with the apex court in protecting the judiciary's image as the custodian of their rights, but they will be happier themselves if the judiciary did some soul-searching as well.

## Donald Trump brazen it out

With the midterm elections coming up, the stakes around this year's State of the Union address by the US President Donald Trump were higher considering the hold of the Republicans on the legislature is wafer thin. Little wonder then that it sounded more like the beginning of an election campaign than a statement on the state of the USA or what the President proposed to do about his promise to lower the cost of living to alleviate the difficulties of the less well off.

The President's wings may have been clipped by the Supreme Court verdict on the illegality of the tariffs with which he had overturned global trade with the US, but all he said was that the verdict was "unfortunate", a far more polite term than those he had used outside. And yet the tariffs are the revenue he wants to take for his "America First" with the vague promise that income tax could be done away with.

Was any light shed on the issues that got him elected over the Democrat Kamala Harris in 2024, but which may have turned into susceptibilities ahead of the midterms? Probably not as tough immigration actions were the main reason the country may have been put off by its President, and he hardly spoke about them nor mentioned at least two Americans killed in ICE action even at the risk of alienating further those who are not in his MAGA fan base.

Of course, he had the overriding, if tiringly repeated message of an America doing well in its new golden age with claims that may not stand up to fact checking but which will be sweet music to the conservative Republican base. He said he had inherited a crisis-ridden US with a stagnant economy, record inflation, open borders and rampant crime at home and wars and chaos around the world, but he did not say what he would like to do about it.

Has anything changed is the question though Mr Trump avows that he seeks dialogue with Iran even as his forces have assumed a most aggressive posture with two aircraft carriers in waters near the Middle East and a dozen of America's most advanced F-22 Raptor jets to Israel. And Mr Trump thinks that America is winning so much that they don't know what to do about it.



## B'desh game of votes: How Hindus aided BNP victory



Manash Ghosh

Bangladesh's recently held 13th parliamentary election was an exercise of paradoxes. Parties which had for over four decades considered themselves natural allies spawned from the same mother, and who had twice jointly run governments for over a decade, contested this time as inveterate foes. Unsurprisingly, both went full throttle in trying to outwit each other through one-upmanship and ingenious moves. For instance, the BNP, concerned over the American and Pakistani Deep State's unabashed role in promoting the Jamaat-Islami's electoral prospects, was forced to take counter-measures, such as by winning over its bete noire Awami League's sizeable Hindu vote bank. Just the way Sheikh Hasina's August 2024 overthrow had been orchestrated, similarly a meticulously designed electoral strategy had been drawn jointly by Jamaat backers as well as Muhammad Yunus, who wanted an outright victory for the 11-party Islamic alliance. They knew that with the votebank's protective shield gone (provided by the top AL leadership), this minority bloc (comprising 1.5 crore Hindu voters out of a total 12 crore-plus Bangladesh voters) had become extremely vulnerable and could easily be preyed upon by Jamaat through coercive and persuasive tactics. This emboldened their chief Shafiqur Rahman to proclaim that he could "clearly foresee his party's emphatic victory and that February 12 would be a turning point in Bangladesh's political history". His comment was further reinforced by a Western news agency's prediction of a shock result awaiting Bangladesh, with JeI's Islamic alliance stealing a march over the BNP at the hustings. The Jamaat was so confident of its success that it even released names of its five Cabinet ministers well in advance.

But the BNP had an ace up its sleeve. Its secretary-general, Mirza Fakhrul Alamgir, along with two other senior party leaders had already held two secret meetings with three Hindu apex bodies to seek the support of Hindu voters. A similar offer had been extended to those bodies by the Jamaat, but it got no response. Hindu leaders, at their meeting with Mr Fakhrul, had been categorically told "to stand by us to resist Jamaat". But the Hindu community had laid down one condition: the spirit of the liberation war for which Bangladesh fought and won, and which formed the basis of the 1972 Constitution, must be protected and upheld.

Mr Fakhrul pledged that his party would never compromise on the nation's ideals, but he knew his assurances alone wouldn't convince Hindu voters. Thus, a meeting was arranged with BNP chairman Tarique Rahman, who reasserted that the BNP was a party of "muktijoddhas", and while most Hindus never backed his party, they could give it a chance and see the difference.

Mr Fakhrul, to ensure all Hindu votes were cast for the BNP, saw to it that leaders of the apex bodies campaigned across all 64 districts to convince Hindu voters how crucial their vote was for the BNP to defeat Jamaat. But the Hindu community was unwilling to respond positively. They recalled how BNP cadres had brutalised them for having voted for AL in the 2001 polls. It took a lot of persuasion to bring them around; they were warned that in AL's absence it would be foolhardy for them to boycott the elections as that would help Jamaat romp to power with ease, which would land all the minorities

The equation between the Awami League and BNP has changed from open hostility to one of growing understanding and cooperation, reflected in local BNP leaders initiating the reopening of AL offices throughout the country

in an existential crisis. Even Awami Leaguers were for voting the BNP to power to deny victory to Jamaat. This appeal had a magical effect.

Saikat Paul, a young Bangladesh Supreme Court lawyer, clearly spelt out this exceptional tectonic shift in Hindu votes, a first in Bangladesh elections: "The 1.5 crore Hindu voters, by voting for BNP, kept Bangladesh's muktijuddho ethos and identity alive and intact. They realised that if this was not done, the People's Democratic Republic of Bangladesh would overnight become an Islamic Republic."

It was the Hindu votes that saved the day for the BNP in at least 80 seats, where the party won by a slender margin of 2,000 votes and more. Besides, the Jamaat chief's repugnant remark on working women, comparing them to prostitutes, alienated most women voters who, along with Hindu voters, heavily tilted the electoral balance in favour of the BNP. Realising the formidable odds facing them, the Jamaatis began widespread rigging the night before and on the day of the election.

The social media live-streamed Jamaat cadres furiously stamping ballots and stuffing them into ballot boxes, with the presiding officers looking on helplessly. No wonder the Election Commission at 11 am in its accounting of the voting percentage, quoted 14%, which leapfrogged first to 47.91% at 2 pm, and then to 65% at 5 pm. This galloping percentage showed that this "non-inclusive farcical" election was no different from those held under Sheikh Hasina's rule, which had been labelled both by the BNP and Jamaat as "lacking in credibility". Despite the dubious nature of the

Jamaat's electoral credentials, its fairly spectacular rise in the polls is the most significant feature of this election. From just two seats it had won in 2008, it raised its tally to 68, which has brought about a significant change in Bangladesh's political landscape.

What is disconcerting for India about the Jamaat's dramatic rise is that the bulk of the 68 seats it won (around 40) are all along the West Bengal border. This has already raised security concerns for poll-bound West Bengal, whose border districts have lately seen communal clashes and bomb blasts.

The Awami League's most significant gain is that despite Muhammad Yunus keeping it out of the poll fray at the behest of the US and Pakistan, the party has proved its indispensability in national politics. Its muktijuddho-centric policies at times of national crisis have worked as a political beacon that guided Bangladesh to overcome challenges posed by Islamists. The political support that its local leaders and supporters extended to the BNP has begun to minimise the trust deficit between the two traditional rivals. Their equation has changed from open hostility to one of growing understanding and cooperation, which is reflected in local BNP leaders initiating the reopening of AL offices throughout the country, earlier shut down on the orders of Mr Yunus. Given the growing points of friction that are developing between Jamaat and the BNP, the latter knows that containing a regimented, aggressive, foreign-backed JeI and other Islamist forces requires AL's help, especially when JeI is still scrambling to grab power at any cost. A close Jamaat ally has already given a call to people to "remain prepared for another mass uprising" as it isn't happy "with the way the country is now being run".

Manash Ghosh is a veteran journalist who had covered the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, and is the author of several books including, most recently, Mujib's Blunders: The Power and the Plot Behind His Killing

## LETTERS

### NCERT BOOK

Teaching students about corruption in the judiciary through the Class 8 Social Science textbook by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is condemnable (NCERT to remove 'judiciary graft' from book, Feb. 26). Judiciary is an independent organ of the government. If corruption is found, impeachment of the judge concerned is done through a parliamentary process. The impeachment process can be taught to students, but not about the corruption in judiciary.

P.T. Joy Venkatachalam

### INDO-ISRAEL TIES

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel stands as a highly fruitful and forward-looking diplomatic engagement that strengthens India's global partnerships and reinforces its commitment to technological advancement, agricultural innovation, and strategic cooperation (India backs Gaza peace plan, PM tells Israel Parl, Feb. 26). At a time when water conservation, farmer welfare, and technological self-reliance are crucial for India's future, collaboration with a nation like Israel — known for its excellence in innovation and efficient resource management — holds immense promise. The visit also reflects India's confident and balanced foreign policy, guided by national interest, mutual respect, and long-term vision. Such diplomatic efforts contribute meaningfully to national progress.

Dr Challa Krishnaveer Abhishek Visakhapatnam

It's noted that Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi both are nationalists. Ties have significantly strengthened in the last few years. Unavoidable friendship with Israel enhances diplomacy in defence, water technology and space cooperation. Netanyahu reminded the world about bonding with India by addressing Modi as a brother in the Knesset. Notwithstanding political differences Modi was given a standing ovation in the Knesset is a great honour.

Veeranjaneyulu Vuyyuru

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Dilip Cherian Dilli Ka Babu

## Foreign service or forest? IFS in a tizzy over acronym wars

Only in India can two of the country's most elite services find themselves in a turf war over... three letters: IFS. Not policy. Not budgets. Not national interest. Initials.

In 2016, the ministry of external affairs essentially told the forest fraternity: "We were born in 1946. You arrived in 1966. Seniority applies. Kindly relocate to IFOs." It was the bureaucratic equivalent of "We were here first."

The ministry of environment, forest and climate change was not amused. It shot back with a deliciously pedantic question: how can a service be both "Indian" and "Foreign"? Is it home-sick? Confused? Philosophically unstable? Perhaps, they suggested, the diplomats should rebrand — maybe Indian Diplomatic Service. Or Indian External Affairs Service. Problem solved. And then came the heritage card. Forest administration in India dates back to the 19th century under the British. So, if this is the longest-standing claim contest, shall we rewind the clock further?

What makes this episode priceless isn't just the pettiness but the straight-faced seriousness with which it was pursued. Letters were written. Files were moved. Arguments were crafted. Somewhere in North Block and South Block, oxygen was consumed over consonants.

Meanwhile, citizens may have assumed IFS officers were either protecting India's interests

abroad or protecting its forests at home. Instead, they were protecting brand identity. In a system obsessed with hierarchy, acronyms are rank badges. And in Delhi's ecosystem, reputation often begins with initials.

Three letters. Two egos. Zero irony. If this is what counts as inter-service rivalry, perhaps the tigers were the only calm participants in the entire affair.

**DEFAMATION DUEL IN KARNATAKA'S TOP RANKS** If Karnataka's babudom had a prime-time slot, this saga would be running in its third season.

In the latest episode, the Karnataka High Court has declined to quash the defamation proceedings filed by IPS officer D. Roopa Moudgil against IAS officer Rohini Sindhuri. This feud, which began as an unfiltered exchange of accusations and social media posts in 2023, has now matured into full-fledged criminal litigation. What started as a very public bureaucratic spat has acquired affidavits, counter-affidavits, Supreme Court detours, mediation suggestions, and enough procedural drama to exhaust even seasoned court reporters.

Frankly, civil servants occupy offices that demand discretion, restraint and a certain steel-trap composure. Instead, Karnataka watched two senior officers conduct what looked less like administrative disagreement and more like gladiatorial combat with

screenshots. Roopa alleges reputational harm. Sindhuri wants the case scrapped. The High Court's message is refreshingly simple: argue it out before the trial court. In other words, no shortcuts.

There's a larger discomfort here. When elite officers turn adversarial in public, the damage isn't confined to personal reputations. It chips away at institutional credibility. Bureaucracy thrives on the perception of neutrality and professionalism. Public crossfire erodes that mystique fast. One can't help asking: is this about justice, vindication, ego, or all three?

Either way, the real winner so far is litigation. And perhaps a lesson lurks beneath the wreckage: in the age of instant outrage and permanent digital records, even India's steel frame can rust in public view.

**WHEN TURBULENCE HITS, AIR INDIA CALLS A FAMILIAR PILOT**

When the skies get rough, you don't experiment with new pilots. You bring back someone who's flown the route before.

That's what Air India appears to be doing by appointing former civil aviation secretary Pradeep Singh Kharola as senior advisor. The move comes amid a leadership reshuffle and just ahead of the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau's much-anticipated final report on the AI-171 crash. Coincidence?

Unlikely. Mr Kharola isn't an ornamental hire. He has been CMD of Air India in its government avatar and later, as aviation secretary, oversaw its disinvestment to the Tata Group. Few people understand the airline's bureaucratic DNA and its regulatory pressure points better.

Industry chatter suggests he'll function as a bridge with the directorate general of civil aviation. In plain English: when the regulator knocks, it helps if someone inside knows exactly how hard that knock can get.

For Tata Sons chairman N. Chandrasekaran, this is textbook consolidation: tighten oversight, steady the narrative, and ensure there are no mixed signals at cruising altitude. The simultaneous changes in corporate communications only reinforce the sense that this is about control, clarity, and getting ahead.

Air India's makeover under the Tatas has been bold, expensive and highly visible. But aviation has a cruel memory. Safety questions don't fade with rebranding exercises. Bringing Mr Kharola back into the fold sends a clear message that when scrutiny intensifies, experience beats experimentation. In this business, reputation flies first class, or it doesn't fly at all.

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## OPINION

## Vance, Newsom and Tales of Want



**UNRULY REPUBLIC**  
By Barton Swaim

It's the commonest trope in politics: The candidate sentimentalizes his hard-scramble upbringing and remembers how mom and pop had to work two or three jobs to keep food on the table. A winning message every time.

There's probably an inverse relationship between the actual deprivation experienced by politicians in their youth and the prominence they give the subject in speeches. People who grew up in real poverty mostly don't boast about it. But it's a sign of health that American politicians still regard hard work and fortitude as good things. What irritates is that some of the same leaders portray today's Americans, whose standard of living far exceeds that of their parents and grandparents, as overworked, underpaid and incapacitated by perverse economic conditions.

The contradiction goes unnoticed: A ferocious work ethic was a virtue among our elders; today it's evidence of systemic injustice. If only those tireless, uncomplaining parents and grandparents had been given more help from the government, they wouldn't have had to make the sacrifices for which their children, now successful politicians, praise them.

Vice President JD Vance has spun a political career out of

this incongruity. The book that brought him fame, "Hillbilly Elegy" (2016), was a paean to his hardworking and resourceful grandmother. "I remember my dear Mamaw," Mr. Vance said in December of his memoir's heroine. "I was in a particularly hard math class in high school. And she said, 'What do you need to do well in this class?' My grades weren't so good. And she went out, even though she could not afford even the essentials in life, she went out and got me a calculator, a very expensive calculator so that I could do well in this math class."

The vice president fervently supports expanding almost any redistributionist program said to benefit the working class. Maybe if Mr. Vance's ideas had obtained 30 years ago, the American economy would have shown more generosity to the working class, Mamaw would have enjoyed an income in keeping with her moral worth, and she would have had no trouble buying that calculator. But in that case, Mamaw would have had to make no sacrifice and there would have been no "Hillbilly Elegy" and thus no Vice President Vance.

That Mr. Vance grew up in a solidly middle-class home rather than the state of near-destitution he likes to portray is apparent to any careful reader of "Hillbilly Elegy." Mamaw's late husband had a "lucrative pension"; her poverty was "emotional, if not financial." Mamaw could afford "the essentials of life." But leave that aside. The point is, she

worked hard and went without for the sake of her grandson. Mr. Vance, if his stated policy aims are a guide, thinks she shouldn't have had to.

Another politician inclined to praise the lady who raised her, and for the same reasons, is California Gov. Gavin Newsom. His memoir, "Young Man in a Hurry," published Tuesday, relates more than once that his mother, Tessa,

**They romanticize a hard-knocks past that they don't want anyone else to live.**

worked several jobs, sometimes three at once, to make ends meet. "At different points," Mr. Newsom recalls, "she was working as an assistant buyer in the children's department at I. Magnin four days a week, a bookkeeper in the Financial District once a week, a waitress at Ramona's Mexican restaurant in San Rafael on Friday and Saturday nights, a development director for a Piedmont nonprofit called Aid to Adoption of Special Kids, and a budding real estate agent."

She did this, the memoirist implies, because her ex-husband, the author's father, had a habit of "not coming through" with help. At 13, young Gavin took a paper route to help out.

Mr. Newsom's pretense is easier to see through than Mr. Vance's. The Californian's fa-

ther, William Newsom, served as the personal attorney of oil magnate J. Paul Getty, at that time one of the wealthiest men in the world. So bound up with the Gettys was Newsom père that Gavin and his sister, Hillary, traveled all over the world with the famously affluent family. On vacations—Mr. Newsom can't help revealing these details in a book meant to boost his hard-knocks credibility—they socialized with Arthur Miller, Luciano Pavarotti, Jack Nicholson, and King Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain.

In his youth, Mr. Newsom tells us, he moved between San Francisco's "worlds of rich and poor and hardly thought it remarkable." Count me skeptical on the poor part, whatever his mother's employment history. "Young Man in a Hurry" is a calculated attempt to present its author as having experienced the sort of personal handicaps likely to impress Democratic primary voters in early 2028. His labored insistence that he suffers from dyslexia stems from the same political need.

But let's assume Mr. Newsom's mother really did have to juggle jobs to keep the bills paid. Her son has devoted his political career to the doctrine that no Californian should ever have to do that again. He has expanded state-funded child care, promoted a mandate for six months of paid family leave, and supported a guaranteed income program. He may never have thought about the contradiction. Political ambition so often crowds out thought.

**BOOKSHELF** | By Dominic Green

## Shock, Awe And Bad Taste

**This Ain't Rock 'n' Roll: Pop Music, The Swastika, and the Third Reich**

By Daniel Rachel

Akashic, 336 pages, \$28.95

After John Lennon's first wife, Cynthia, died in 2015, a collection of some of Lennon's art-school drawings sold online. They included Nazi swastikas incorporated into designs for badges and flags, and a sketch of Adolf Hitler with the caption "all you people." A self-portrait showed a bespectacled Lennon on a podium, armed raised in salute, with the caption "heil John."

Lennon, who nominated Hitler for the collage of Beatle heroes on the cover of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" (1967), is one of the more prominent fools in Daniel Rachel's "This Ain't Rock 'n' Roll: Pop Music, the Swastika, and the Third Reich." Mr. Rachel takes his title from David Bowie's 1974 song "Diamond Dogs": "This ain't rock 'n' roll; this is genocide."

As Susan Sontag and Cynthia Ozick have noted, fascism, and Nazism especially, anticipated pop music: a youth revolt aroused in an arena; power dynamics augmented by sound and light; a Wagnerian whiff of sex and death surrounding a charismatic performer. The displaced continuity between mass murder and mass entertainment led rockers to spell their bands' names in Gothic script with the gratuitous umlauts that Lemmy from Motörhead called Nazi dots, and conflict-seeking punks to don swastika T-shirts and armbands. More recently, it has inspired Kanye West, an African-American, to record a song called "Heil Hitler." Only in America.

"In the early days of rock 'n' roll," Mr. Rachel writes, "Hitler and the Nazis were easy targets for mockery, yet they also evoked a sense of wonder and reverence. This conflicting emotion sits at the core of rock history's flirtation with Nazism." Mr. Rachel presents a multigenerational supergroup of stupidity, opportunism and, occasionally, earnest morbidity. It includes the Rolling Stones' Brian Jones (SS uniform, 1966) and Mick Jagger (swastika T-shirt, 1978) and Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page (Stormtrooper outfit, 1977). Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols was a repeat offender. In 1978, Mr. Rachel writes, Sid "strolled through the Jewish quarter of Paris exposing a swastika T-shirt worn beneath a hardened leather jacket."

"My God, the Nazis knew how to put themselves in the limelight and present themselves," said Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music in 2007. "I'm talking about the films of Leni Riefenstahl and the buildings of Albert Speer and the mass marches and the flags—just fantastic. Really beautiful." He soon apologized.

What were they thinking of? Shock and awe, mostly. The first group in the rogues' gallery are the British children of World War II. Lennon was born in the interlude between air raids. Keith Richards's first sonic memory was a siren. The naughty boys who played on bomb sites resented the legend of heroism but took pride in capturing the flag. "We won the war," the 20-year-old Lennon taunted the Beatles' audience in Hamburg. "Krauts!" The drummer Ginger Baker said he sported an SS officer's cap because the war was "not a thing to forget or let happen again."

The second group are the performance artists who see the dramatic potential in acting out. They aggravate the adults, but are more interested in arousing the children through theatrical transgression and teenage delinquency. Mostly, the naughty Nazi stuff was unconsidered or ill-considered (the Ramones' metaphorical "Blitzkrieg Bop"). Keith Emerson of the Nice developed a performance-art bit that involved jamming knives between the keys of his Hammond organ. "If you're going to use knives, use real ones," Lemmy advised, lending him a couple of Hitler Youth daggers.

**Hitler had been an easy target of mockery for musicians. But fascination with the Nazis led some into odious fashion and artistic choices.**

Hitler, Patti Smith said, was a "fantastic performer" and "black magician." Glittering fascination led some of this second group into real depths. "Too many Jews for my liking," Siouxsie Sioux sang on an early version of "Love in a Void" (1979). Her response to critics was that she meant to say "too many fat businessmen." Warsaw renamed itself Joy Division after the female prisoners who were selected for rape in concentration camps, wrote a song about the Nazi war criminal Rudolf Hess, printed a Hitler Youth image on the cover of its first record, and then, following the suicide of its singer, Ian Curtis, rebranded as New Order. Mr. Rachel's detailed juxtaposition of this voyeurism with the vile historical facts exposes the young musicians' ignorance and crassness.

Mr. Rachel dips into fascism's popular associations with sexual perversion but refrains from a grand theory. His subjects also struggle to explain themselves. Most seem to have been aspiring to emulate the musical "Cabaret" rather than the invasion of Poland. But a smaller, third group believed that Nazi showmanship was occult wizardry and that they were in on the secret. In his Aladdin Sane and Thin White Duke personae, Bowie read up on magic, claimed that Hitler was "one of the first rock stars," employed imagery suggestive of the British Union of Fascists' lightning-bolt-in-a-circle logo and called for dictatorship. Bowie later apologized, pleading temporary insanity due to cocaine.

We should not seek ethical guidance from addled entertainers, but we can find insights into our temporal and spiritual condition. In this regard, Mr. Rachel's exemplifies what the French controversialist Renaud Camus calls the second career of Adolf Hitler: the long hangover of inexplicable catastrophe. Art—crude or cruel, adolescent or arch—is supposed to make comprehensible the incomprehensible. Motörhead's "Bomber" (1979) is the sonic image of industrial war. It evokes the feel of a night raid with RAF Bomber Command better than the Len Deighton novel that inspired it. Dark stuff.

Mr. Green is a Journal contributor and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

## The State of the Union Is Belligerent

By Karl Rove

At one hour and 48 minutes, it was history's longest State of the Union speech. President Trump's address Tuesday was also the most effective and extensive use of gallery guests since Ronald Reagan introduced the practice in his 1982 State of the Union. But as Mr. Trump spoke of his first year back in office, he made a key mistake.

The president electrified the House chamber by bringing in the U.S. men's Olympic hockey team and awarding goalie Connor Hellebuyck the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Even Democrats stood and joined in the chants of "USA! USA!"

The president also presented two Congressional Medals of Honor. One went to a helicopter pilot grievously wounded during the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. The other was bestowed on a 100-year-old Navy pilot who led his squadron to victory in a 1952 Korean War aerial battle against an overwhelming enemy force that remained secret until 2002.

The Coast Guard swimmer who jumped time and again from a chopper into the raging waters of the July 2025 Texas flood, saving 165 lives, was also honored. A Venezuelan dissident sprung from prison surprised his niece in the gallery, to applause. Two National Guardsmen who were ambushed on duty in Washington

received Purple Hearts, one posthumously.

Mr. Trump introduced families who had suffered violence or loss inflicted by illegal aliens as he pressured Democrats to support a sanctuary city ban, tougher immigration laws and voter ID rules.

Throughout his record number of guest introductions, the president was empathetic and personable. His remarks, delivered as written, were often moving, patriotic and unifying.

**Trump made great use of guests, but gave the most partisan such address in history.**

This was also the most partisan State of the Union in memory. In what may have been a first, Mr. Trump attacked his predecessor by name several times. He repeatedly condemned congressional Democrats, tried to force them to stand and applaud him, and lacerated them when they didn't. He was spoiling for a fight.

Many presidents have used the occasion to pressure the opposition on key issues. None have done so as directly and brutally as Mr. Trump did Tuesday. He savaged Democrats as "sick people" and "crazy," claiming they "are destroying our country."

This cheered Republicans and angered Democrats in the

room. But did it help Mr. Trump with the key voters the GOP must sway in the midterms? Almost everything the president said energized his MAGA hard core. But they aren't enough to stave off a shellacking this fall.

Mr. Trump should have fixated more on those of his 2024 voters who have since become disenchanted: Those represented by his approval rating's almost 8-point slide in the RealClearPolitics average since re-entering office. That isn't a large slice of the electorate, but those swing voters will decide which party controls Congress for Mr. Trump's final two years in the White House.

For them, the president's speech almost certainly didn't sound based in reality. Many Americans, especially swing voters, are pessimistic about the economy. At the end of 2025, 12-month inflation was at 2.7%, near its 2.9% level the December before Mr. Trump took office. The economy started off gangbusters in 2025 with 3.8% growth in the second quarter and 4.4% in the third but slowed to a crawl with 1.4% in the fourth. The congressional Joint Economic Committee says the U.S. lost 108,000 manufacturing jobs last year. And all this took place amid growing public concern over the effect of artificial intelligence on jobs, utility bills, kids and the future.

Yet the president claimed "prices are plummeting downwards." They generally aren't. His tariffs, he opined, will

"substantially replace the . . . income tax," and ending fraud in federal spending will produce "a balanced budget overnight." They won't. Here, Mr. Trump sounded as out of touch as Joe Biden did when he kept proclaiming "Bidenomics is working."

Mr. Trump was on stronger ground arguing Democrats made a mess and that his administration is setting things right. But he should have acknowledged it'll take time to repair the economy. Tone also matters. When he warned that the U.S. shouldn't go back to failed politicians and policies, he came across as harsh, partisan and mean-spirited.

It too often sounded like a political convention speech rather than a presidential address. Even by the former's standards, it was angry, pugnacious, and hence less effective.

Mr. Trump offered elements of a credible, effective case for Republicans in the midterm campaign. But if they're to defend their majority successfully, congressional Republicans must offer more substance, be more forward-looking, display more empathy, and focus much more on the economy than what Americans heard Tuesday. They better get cracking. Time's a-wasting.

Mr. Rove was senior adviser and deputy chief of staff for President George W. Bush and is author of "The Triumph of William McKinley" (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

## Random Short-Term Rentals

By Brenda Cronin

West Palm Beach, Fla.

I've always been leery of short-term rentals, and my friends' recent experience is further proof that rummaging through an online grab bag of properties isn't for me.

I like the straightforward transaction of reserving a hotel room, not the gray area of booking with a stranger who—the cozy "host" title notwithstanding—plans to charge me for my stay. Better to know beforehand what I will pay and what I will get and avoid the disaster that befell my friends.

Eager to break up the winter in Connecticut, they went online and rented a house in Florida for February. They browsed sites for a suitable place for their dog and plenty of guests. Impressed by a sunny three-bedroom with ample outdoor space and a pool, they reserved it. After paying their deposit and part of the month's rent, they received the house's address.

That deal-breaking wrinkle would have stopped me cold. Forking over thousands of nonrefundable dollars on the strength of snapshots and a gushing profile drafted by the property's host? Insanity.

My friends plugged their vacation spot's address into Google Maps. The neighborhood looked a bit iffy, so they texted and asked, since I live down here, if I would take a

**Do I really want to live in some stranger's house for a week?**

look. "Neighborhood" was a misnomer for the area I scouted, car windows up and doors locked. Among the nearby attractions: a "criminal justice complex," aka the county jail, and a strip club.

My friends didn't even try to claw back their deposit. They settled on House No. 2, which also appeared civilized

but in a less unsavory location. Fingers crossed, they loaded up their dog and began driving from Connecticut.

Alas, House No. 2 proved a nonstarter. The rooms that looked spacious on the website, thanks to photos apparently taken with a fish-eye lens, were cramped. There was no lawn for the dog and no sidewalks for strolling. The home next door felt inches, not feet, away. Another deposit down the drain.

My friends checked into a pet-friendly hotel, went online and booked another house. This one worked. Furnished in the bland decor of an extended-stay hotel, it lived up to its billing: recent construction, high ceilings, a patio and fenced yard. The property is clearly no one's home but a cash cow, turned over every few days or weeks for new arrivals.

I didn't ask my friends how the website responded to their tale. I would imagine with some squirrely pablum about

valuing their feedback and pointing out that user experiences may vary because—as no site is likely to admit—someone's paradise is someone else's slum, and vice versa.

This comedy of errors doesn't befall everyone. Think of the glorious Italian castle that several English women rent in "The Enchanted April." But that novel was published in 1922, well before the dawn of websites and apps to rent everything from homes to handbags. If passing on a holiday house means I might miss an Italian epiphany, I am fine with that.

I prefer transactions with no veneer of bonhomie or friendship, no wine bottle on the kitchen counter with a note: "We hope you enjoy the place as much as we do." It really should read: "Thanks! Your stay will help pay for our daughter's wedding."

Ms. Cronin is an associate editorial features editor at the Journal.

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Trump and the Stakes in Iran

Secretary of State Marco Rubio and CIA director John Ratcliffe briefed Congressional leaders Tuesday on President Trump's Iran policy, and Members emerged saying the chance of war in the near future is high. It's time for the Commander in Chief to explain his thinking on Iran to the American people.

There are excellent reasons to take military action now against the weakened revolutionary regime, but Mr. Trump has never made a sustained case for doing so. In his State of the Union address, he offered a list of the regime's depredations over the years. This included massacring "at least 32,000" protesters in January, sponsoring terrorism around the world, killing Americans in Iraq, and building a missile arsenal that threatens Europe, U.S. bases and eventually the U.S. homeland.

Yet he also talks about doing a deal on nuclear weapons alone. Iran is restarting its nuclear program, Mr. Trump said Tuesday. "We haven't heard those secret words: 'We will never have a nuclear weapon,'" he added. But Iran says this all the time, and it's been lying for 40 years. At other times Mr. Trump speaks of regime change, but without an argument for why this is in U.S. interests.

This failure is creating uncertainty even inside his Administration. Media reports Monday said that Gen. Dan Caine, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, is worried about the risks of striking Iran. Our sources say those stories are accurate, and the leaks suggest an effort by doubters inside the Administration to deter Mr. Trump more than Iran.

We're also told that as of Tuesday the head of Central Command, Adm. Brad Cooper, hadn't briefed Mr. Trump on the war plan he's put together for Iran. The plan calls for an extensive attack on a host of Iranian regime and military targets, which is consistent with the armada Mr. Trump has assembled in the region.

In the current chain of command, Adm. Cooper reports through Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth to the President. Gen. Caine is a presidential adviser, but Central Command and Mr. Hegseth are responsible for the plan and military results. Mr. Trump needs to hear directly from Adm. Cooper about the plan and his confidence that it would be successful.

Any attack carries risks. While U.S. air defenses are formidable, casualties cannot be ruled out when Iran returns fire. Iran is threatening to retaliate harder than it did in June, when it launched more than 500 ballistic missiles and 1,000 drones at Israel but was unable to do major damage or down any jets. Initial

U.S. strikes probably can't eliminate everything Iran could fire at U.S. forces in the region.

But there are also risks to not striking now. The Tehran regime is weaker than it has been since it came to power in 1979. Israel has degraded its proxy armies. It is under extreme financial and economic pressure, and it is at war with its own people.

Waiting a year, as some in the Administration advise, would give the regime time to rebuild its proxies and rearm. The Financial Times reported this week on a secret €500 million Iran deal to buy advanced missiles from Russia. Reuters reports that Iran is nearing a deal with China to buy supersonic anti-ship missiles.

Waiting would squander a rare opportunity to topple a regime that has terrorized the world, spread war across the Middle East, supplied Russia and China, and killed or maimed thousands of Americans.

Waiting would also damage Mr. Trump's credibility. He told the Iranian public in January that "help is on its way," and he didn't say help would only arrive after the U.S. election. If he now settles for nuclear promises or symbolic strikes after having amassed so much force, Moscow and Beijing will notice. An honorable peace in Ukraine becomes harder.

It's true that no one can know what would happen if the theocratic regime led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei collapses. No clear opposition leader is waiting in the wings, though the former Shah's son in exile has followers inside the country. But a new regime would have every incentive not to follow its predecessor into the same losing battle with the U.S., financial markets, and its own people. It is hard to believe it would be worse.

Negotiations resume Thursday, and no one can say Mr. Trump hasn't tried diplomacy. But Iran's leaders are dug in. Nuclear "enrichment is our right," Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Sunday. Mr. Khamenei is convinced Iran needs a path to nuclear weapons and can't admit he has impoverished his country for nothing. The real problem in Iran is the nature of the regime and its revolutionary designs.

Mr. Trump has put himself in a position where there is risk no matter what he decides. His way out is to explain why he thinks he must act now in Iran. If he asks for support in advance from Congress and the public, he will have more allies if the war doesn't go exactly as planned, which it rarely does. The upside is a chance to weaken or topple a regime that promises "death to America," and to give the Middle East a new chance for peace.

### He needs to hear from the chief of Central Command, Adm. Cooper.

### Casey Means won't restore confidence in public-health advice.

## A Vaccine Skeptic for Surgeon General

The menagerie at the Department of Health and Human Services keeps getting stranger. President Trump's nominee for Surgeon General, Casey Means, auditioned Wednesday for the role of vaccine skeptic at her Senate confirmation hearing.

The Surgeon General is supposed to provide Americans with "the best scientific information available on how to improve their health and reduce their risk of illness and injury," according to the HHS website. Ms. Means, who founded a "wellness" business, doesn't seem qualified for that role.

Asked about HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s discredited claims linking vaccines with autism, Ms. Means equivocated that "we do not know what, as a medical community, causes autism," and "we should not leave any stone unturned." She's right that we don't know all of the causes of autism, but countless studies have

ruled out vaccines. Why not say that?

She also dodged when asked if she'd encourage parents to get their children vaccinated against measles. "I believe every patient, mother, parent needs to have a conversation with their physician," she replied. How about a simple "yes"? Ms. Means said that "vaccines are not part of my core message." So what will be her message?

Hard to tell, but she has made a career of promoting unproven and dangerous health remedies like raw milk and psychedelic drugs, which she has said she experimented with. The drug "psilocybin can be a doorway to a different reality that is free from the limiting beliefs of my ego, feelings, and personal history," she wrote in her 2024 book "Good Energy."

What HHS needs are serious people who will tell the truth and can begin to restore confidence in public-health advice.

## The State of Trump's Agenda

President Trump's State of the Union address was full of patriotic spectacle, and it was moving in its encomiums to the country's military heroes.

America's 250th anniversary deserves to be celebrated as the President did. But the main political news in the speech is that there isn't much that Mr. Trump wants Republicans in Congress to do for the rest of this year.

The President highlighted the GOP's greatest hits from 2025, especially on taxes. But his point was mostly to persuade Americans that the economy is better than they say it is in polls. He's right at a macro level, but at home where people live they don't feel it. Much of this is the residue of Bidenomics and inflation, but Mr. Trump's unpopular tariffs and their impact on prices are complicating his message.

More striking is that Mr. Trump seems to have given up on getting anything done in this Congress. He pressed ideas that have little chance of passing, such as the SAVE America Act, which would require proof of citizenship, often a birth certificate or passport, when registering to vote. He also asked Congress to fiddle with a retirement subsidy program passed by Democrats for Americans without a 401(k) or pension.

But immigration reform? Nothing but more enforcement and nothing to expand legal pathways to ease the labor shortage. Permitting reform needed for energy and public works? We

didn't hear it. Mr. Trump also made no case for increasing defense spending and appears to have dropped his target of \$1.5 trillion a year

for the military. He's fooling the public by saying the U.S. deterrent force is stronger than it really is.

Many of his ideas would be more likely to pass in a Democratic Congress. Those include

drug price controls, banning corporations from buying homes, and punishing health insurance companies. But Democrats won't vote for these proposals this year because they don't want to give Mr. Trump anything he can call a victory. Congress might pass more limits on stock trading by Members, but that will do nothing for Americans other than indulge populist resentment.

The larger goal of the speech was to remind voters why they shouldn't risk returning Democrats to power. The polls show independents and even many Republicans have turned sour on the President, as voter memories of the Biden era fade. He's right to remind Americans that Democrats wanted a huge tax increase that Republicans prevented. He's also right that all signs suggest Democrats in Congress will return to their habits of income redistribution and progressive cultural diktats.

Mr. Trump is betting that this contrast, and the legislative victories of 2025, will be enough to save the House and Senate (which is increasingly in jeopardy). In light of his scarce agenda, this is the only real bet he has.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## A Roadmap for Presidential Trade Retaliation

Your editorial "The Real Tariff Liberation Day" (Review & Outlook, Feb. 21) celebrates the Supreme Court's decision in *Learning Resources v. Trump* as a victory "for the law and the economy."

Try telling that to the workers I represent in West Virginia's Second District. For 40 years, these workers have lived through a trade war, watching factories close, jobs disappear and communities hollow out. For them, President Trump's tariffs marked the end of America's economic surrender and offered hope that someone in Washington finally cared about bringing honest, blue-collar jobs back to the heartland.

The editorial board insists that Congress should speak in more explicit terms. But we should also acknowledge the policy choices that prioritized multinational corpora-

tions over American labor, and promoted foreign production over domestic strength. These are the policies that led to the current crisis.

Thankfully, President Trump retains numerous options to address the situation and protect American workers. But in light of the Supreme Court's decision, Congress should work to further expand his toolkit. My bill, the U.S. Reciprocal Trade Act, would provide a clear framework for the president to retaliate against foreign countries that impose high tariffs on our goods or maintain significant non-tariff barriers to entry to their market.

Our constituents, in communities that have been decimated by four decades of unfair trade practices, deserve nothing less.

REP. RILEY M. MOORE (R., W.VA.)  
Washington

## Jack Hughes Leads the Red, White and Blue

Regarding your editorial "Jack Hughes for President" (Review & Outlook, Feb. 23): Unfortunately there is a constitutional requirement that presidents must be 35 years old. Being only 24, Mr. Hughes will have the opportunity to lead the U.S. men's national hockey team to two more Olympic gold medals before he gets the chance to lead America.

FREDERIC SEITZ  
Franklin, Wis.

I couldn't help but compare Jack Hughes to another American Olympic champion, Eileen Gu. While Mr. Hughes wraps himself in the American flag, Ms. Gu wraps herself in the Chinese flag.

She says that it honors her mother. I wonder if the Uyghurs would agree. I wonder if the people of Hong Kong would agree. Would

Jimmy Lai agree? Ms. Gu should ask herself what would have happened to her or her family if she had been born in China and chosen to ski for the U.S.

Mr. Hughes, all of America is proud of you. Ms. Gu, not so much.

STAN CONNELL  
Charlotte, N.C.

It was refreshing to hear a gold medalist speak positively about American institutions, especially with this year marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Many of the earlier American medal winners felt compelled to apologize for the country they represented. Let's cut them some slack. They were repeating what they learned in school.

DOUGLAS COATE  
Newark, N.J.

## How America Can Make Congress Lead Again

In "Neil Gorsuch Tries to Revive Congress" (Review & Outlook, Feb. 23), the Journal praises Justice Gorsuch's call for Congress to step up and play the role the framers envisioned for it. As Justice Gorsuch says, through "the deliberative nature of the legislative process," the Nation "tap the combined wisdom of the people's elected representatives, not just that of one faction or man."

The problem is that Congress isn't playing that desired role. It's instead effectively answering to the president.

This violates the key requirement James Madison laid out in the 51st Federalist Paper—that each branch of our three-part government "should be as little dependent as possible on those of the others." Madison also foresaw the remedy if one branch of government becomes too dependent on another branch. As he said, "a dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government." Thus, if the people decide that

Congress isn't working as they and Justice Gorsuch believe it should, they will have a chance to make their views known during the November midterms.

WALTER SMITH  
Washington

To reclaim the governing role for which Justice Gorsuch calls, one step Congress could take is to amend the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to clarify which powers aren't granted to the executive. This could include, for example, prohibiting the use of IEEPA to override other provisions that are particularly described, such as tariff authority. Congress might also better define what constitutes an "emergency" that justifies the use of IEEPA and limit the duration of an emergency without congressional approval.

JIM LEMUNYON  
Oak Hill, Va.

## Trump Can't Forget Havana

Mary Anastasia O'Grady's column is on target ("The Cuban Regime's Slow Collapse," Americas, Feb. 23). I can't understand why President Trump is willing to consider bombing Iran, but not a brutal Communist dictatorship 90 miles from our shores, hosting Chinese and Russian installations spying on the U.S.

The slow death of the regime could last a long time—look at how long Haiti has lived in misery. The Cuban people are living under dire conditions, without electricity, with little food, with garbage piled up on the streets and without adequate medical care. They face the threat of violence if they do or say anything against the regime. Cubans want their freedom, and they want their suffering to stop.

SYLVIA HERNANDEZ  
Duck Key, Fla.

## The Rise of the Robo-Slacker

Andy Kessler's column advises readers to ignore the AI hysteria—and the coming dystopia ("Ignore the AI Hysteria," Inside View, Feb. 23).

But sometimes you can't, like when you ask a chatbot a factual question and get a bum steer. Or when utility bills skyrocket because data centers use up enormous energy. Or when you phone a company and the AI "assistant" that responds really can't make out what you're asking to route the call correctly. Or when you ask a question about, say, the racial makeup of sides in a court case, as I did, but the chatbot is evasive in answering.

AI may eventually enhance productivity, as Mr. Kessler claims, but right now it seems to be doing the opposite.

BILL APPLE  
New York

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## Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Sure carrion's organic but I would like a nice salad now and then."

## OPINION

## The Economics of Illegal Drugs

By Roland Fryer

Cartel leaders assassinated. Fast boats intercepted in the Caribbean. Coast Guard cutters in the Pacific. Vessels destroyed from the air. Last weekend, Mexican forces—with CIA intelligence support—killed “El Mencho,” leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel; within hours, retaliatory violence erupted across Mexico. Since September 2025, the Pentagon’s Operation Southern Spear has conducted more than 40 strikes on small boats suspected of carrying drugs, killing around 150 people. The images are designed to look decisive, muscular and tough.

This approach, according to the economics of illegal markets, is almost certainly making the problem worse. And not for the first time. Richard Nixon declared the War on

**As a teenager I saw the war on drugs up close. Then I studied it as an economist and saw it differently.**

Drugs. Ronald Reagan signed mandatory minimums into law. Bill Clinton launched Plan Colombia. George W. Bush doubled down on it. Barack Obama expanded border interdiction. Each administration chose supply-side enforcement. Each one failed. The current administration has simply found a more cinematic way to repeat the mistake.

I know what these failures look like up close. I was a teenager when the Drug Enforcement Agency raided my great-aunt Ernestine’s house in central Florida. Agents found crack, cash and guns—including an AR-15 with a laser. She ran part of a distribution operation, never dealing to

users but embedded deep in the supply chain. My grandmother implored her to quit. Ernestine would wave her off, saying the war on drugs was making her too much money.

A decade later, I sat in a seminar room at the University of Chicago listening to Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy present their work on the economics of illegal goods. I came in skeptical. I had seen what drugs did to my grandmother’s neighborhood: the violence, the fractured families, the lives swallowed whole. I couldn’t imagine an argument for making any of it legal. But the model on the screen delivered a stark conclusion: When demand for a drug is inelastic—meaning users don’t reduce consumption much even as prices rise—supply-side enforcement doesn’t starve traffickers. It enriches them. I understood Ernestine’s point.

The logic is simple. When enforcement raises costs, the street price goes up. If demand is elastic, consumers cut back, total spending falls, and less money flows to traffickers. But if demand is inelastic, as decades of evidence suggest it is for hard drugs, consumers cut back only modestly, total spending increases, and more money flows into the drug trade.

The Becker-Murphy-Grossman framework prescribes an alternative to the war on drugs: legalize and tax. When demand is sufficiently inelastic, an excise tax on a legalized drug, they found, reduces consumption more than any “war” on the drug. With legalization, producers prefer paying the tax to going underground, and enforcement costs collapse. When demand is inelastic and the social value of consumption is neutral or positive, it doesn’t pay to enforce prohibition.

The social harms of drug use are dwarfed by the social harms of prohibition. In a 2013 study with Paul



A scene in Puerto Vallarta after the killing of a Mexican cartel leader.

Heaton, Steven Levitt and Kevin Murphy, I measured what crack cocaine did to black communities in the 1980s and ’90s. With the rise of crack, homicide rates doubled among black males 14 to 17 while fetal deaths among blacks sharply increased. Yet even as crack use persisted at 60% to 75% of its peak level through 2000, the violence almost disappeared. The initial violence was driven not by drug use but by the struggle to establish property rights in illegal markets. Once those rights were established and crack prices fell, the violence subsided. The carnage of the crack epidemic wasn’t an argument for prohibition. It was an indictment of it.

No country has fully tested what the Becker-Murphy-Grossman model actually prescribes—legalization with an excise tax. Portugal and Switzerland represent partial steps: decriminalizing use while keeping supply illegal, or medicalizing supply for the most dependent users. Becker himself endorsed Portugal’s approach as a moderate alternative to the drug war. But even these incomplete reforms produced dramatic results.

Portugal decriminalized all drugs in 2001 and redirected resources to treatment. Annual drug-related deaths fell from 76 to 16 by 2012; HIV infections among users fell more than 90%; drug use didn’t spike. When austerity later gutted treatment funding, outcomes reversed.

Switzerland began prescribing pharmaceutical-grade heroin to its hardest cases in the 1990s. Muggings by participants dropped 70%; opioid-related criminal cases nationally declined from 20,000 a year to 5,000. Swiss voters made the program permanent by a two-thirds majority. Oregon tried decriminalization in 2020 without the treatment infrastructure and overdose deaths rose 23%. The lesson is consistent: Reform without resources fails.

So what would evidence-based policy look like? The economics points to three principles, none of which involves naval blockades.

First, legalize and tax. Prohibition currently functions as an implicit tax of staggering size. According to economist Jeffrey Miron, cocaine retails at 262 times its farm gate price—a markup attributable to

the risk premium of illegality. A well-designed excise tax could achieve a greater reduction in consumption at a fraction of that markup, generating revenue instead of violence.

Second, invest in treatment and don’t let up. Reform without resources fails.

Third, provide credible information about health costs. Becker and Murphy’s 1988 theory of rational addiction shows that addicts respond far more to permanent price changes than to temporary ones. Cigarette consumption fell significantly—down by half by 2010—after the surgeon general’s 1964 report permanently altered the price of smoking.

There is something deeply peculiar about a country that considers itself the global champion of free markets but refuses to apply market logic to drug policy. In November 2025, the Congressional Budget Office’s director testified that he had no evidence the interdiction campaign has affected drug use or prices in the U.S. A classic RAND Corp. study found decades ago that treatment is 23 times as cost-effective as source-country control and 10 times as cost-effective as interdiction. The data aren’t ambiguous. They are ignored.

At some point, a great nation must follow the evidence—even when the evidence leads somewhere politically inconvenient. Every administration for 50 years has exposed its citizens to more violence, more incarceration and more death rather than confront the basic economics of drug markets. The evidence isn’t wrong. Our policy is.

*Mr. Fryer, a Journal contributor, is a professor of economics at Harvard, a founder of Equal Opportunity Ventures and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.*

## Munich Showcased the West’s Security Illusions

By Garry Kasparov

Munich

Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s Valentine’s Day speech at the Munich Security Conference was no love letter. Despite his talk of bonds between America and Europe, the takeaway is that the U.S. will remain absent from the role it occupied for generations. It is no longer the pre-eminent champion of democracy, backbone of the free world. Its support of allies is conditional—financially, politically, even culturally, as suggested by Mr. Rubio’s emphasis on Christian ties.

For years, the institutions designed to safeguard international security—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United Nations, the European Union—have been crumbling, unable to adapt to a changing world order under threat from belligerent authoritarianism. Gatherings like Munich are an opportunity to reimagine these structures of cooperation and develop new strategies to meet the challenges of the moment.

Unfortunately, in Munich I heard more of the wishful thinking and reality denying that have dominated Western politics for years: rhetoric about needing to get Ukraine into a better negotiating position before sitting down with Vladimir Putin at the bargaining table, for example. After four years of Mr. Putin’s refusal to accept concessions, no one should be under the illusion that he will stop

fighting voluntarily. Economically, politically and culturally, Russia has shifted to a permanent war footing that can’t be dialed down even if Ukraine falls. Mr. Putin knows Russia can’t safely absorb a million undisciplined killers back into society.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz knows the future of Germany and European democracy depends on his government’s assuming a leadership role in confronting Russia, including a budget overhaul to support Ukraine in this critical phase of the war. But neither he nor his European counterparts are bold enough to take a political risk by making that case and taking decisive action.

The moral arguments to stand against Russian aggression remain true, but the threat is more concrete. The horizon of danger has moved from considerations about the world we want to leave future generations to the survival of the West today.

While the U.S. and Europe have been idle, China has revised its military strategy. Xi Jinping’s shake-up isn’t merely a ploy to secure personal loyalty. It is also calculated to get rid of the old guard and bring in fresh faces who can take China’s military to the cutting edge. As Russia’s supplier and ally in the war on Ukraine, China has access to the kind of front-line data that would provoke radical changes.

Look at how the war in Ukraine is being fought. Traditional heavy

weapons and vehicles, which Ukraine has largely lacked because of the West’s reluctance to supply enough of them, have turned out to be less effective than cheaper, more-mobile alternatives—drones in particular.

These pages recently reported on war games 12 NATO countries conducted with elite Ukrainian drone operators last year. The exercises exposed NATO as woefully unprepared for the high-intensity drone warfare

**I heard more of the wishful thinking and denial that have dominated European and U.S. politics for years.**

that has defined the conflict in Ukraine. In one simulation, Ukrainian forces destroyed 17 armored vehicles and launched successful attacks against 30 other targets.

Technological innovation used to be the West’s greatest military advantage over our stagnant authoritarian foes. That advantage is fading as Russia and China are forced to learn in real time to compete with Ukrainian ingenuity. At a panel in Munich, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius boasted about Germany’s defense investment increases. I asked him if this money was going to the same old big companies and weapons systems, or if

Germany was looking toward innovators like the Ukrainians. His response acknowledged the problem, but Europe has a poor track record of turning such talk into action, and does nothing quickly.

The U.S. has \$900 billion to spend on defense in 2026, more than enough to preserve its place as the world’s pre-eminent military power—if it is allocated wisely. Now is the time to undertake a full strategic revision of military spending, geared toward the new realities of hybrid and drone warfare. These changes must be fast-tracked; the typical bureaucracy of budget negotiations can’t keep up with the pace of change on the battlefield. Updates to drone tech don’t happen on a timetable of years; in Ukraine, it’s every few weeks. The critical value of drones was evident when Starlink belatedly blocked Russian drone internet access a few weeks ago. Ukrainian forces were able to retake about 115 square miles almost overnight against Russian forces with diminished drone capabilities.

But Russia is right behind Ukraine in drone-warfare expertise, and therefore far ahead of NATO. As former British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak posted recently after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky showed him real-time battlefield updates on his iPad, “80% of the casualties Ukraine is inflicting are from drones. The world has changed. Defence has changed.

Warfare has changed. And we must adapt fast.”

More ominously, Mr. Putin has demonstrated the will to order soldiers to kill and be killed. There is reasonable doubt that Western leaders have the same resolve, regardless of paper commitments. I’m tired of hearing that Mr. Putin is weak, that his army is outdated, that he doesn’t pose a real threat to NATO and the West. While Russia’s economy and military face major obstacles, it is still a formidable foe, especially given the weight of China’s economy and military behind it. Stop dreaming of the separation of Russia and China. Mr. Xi is happy for both sides to bleed and is propping up Russia’s war with the West while expanding into Russia’s eastern flank.

The only country that has been actively fighting to fend off the advance of authoritarianism is Ukraine, and it has emerged as the most effective, most experienced military in Europe. The rest of the free world must wake up and learn from the Ukrainians—morally and militarily.

The future is up for grabs. I hope that by the time Munich comes around next year, Western leaders will have been roused from their state of hibernation and are building a new architecture of global freedom.

*Mr. Kasparov is chairman of the Renew Democracy Initiative.*

## How I Killed—and Revived—Teamwork With AI

By Scott Dyreng

I killed team culture in my M.B.A. class. Not with an impossible grading policy or a thoughtless change to my course, but by letting students use artificial intelligence on team assignments. I thought I was being practical. AI is part of business today. I wanted to bring it into the classroom and teach its limits. What I discovered was frightening.

In my course, students work in teams of five. Throughout the term, each team completes 10 assignments together, culminating in a team-based final project. I give them an

option at the end that I call “divorce.” A team can break up for the final project if members want. Those who separate can join others who have divorced in a new team—or they can do it alone. Usually roughly 5% of the teams choose divorce.

Last term, more than half the teams broke up. Students didn’t develop strong bonds with their teammates because they were using AI for too much of their shared thinking. Going it alone felt less daunting because AI could help. The assignments were still completed, but the human elements of teamwork—the arguments, the negotiation, the dis-

covery of agreement—were missing. Students seemed to conclude that an AI bot was a more convenient classmate than a human, and it showed. When I asked a question in class, the response was sometimes, “I don’t know. It wasn’t my turn to do the assignment.”

Many professors have adopted one of two paths with AI. The first is prohibition—ban AI, police it, punish violations, and hope the old learning model survives. The second is surrender—treat AI as harmless, let students use it without structure, and embrace “the future.” Both approaches miss what is at stake: academic integrity and the replacement of human interaction with machine interaction. If AI becomes the default study partner, collaboration becomes optional. If collaboration is optional in education, it will be fragile in business.

Business is a team sport. Leaders aren’t made by learning to craft the cleanest memo but by learning to align a room full of smart people who don’t naturally agree. The leaders of the future won’t be simply AI super prompters. They will be socially excellent. Jensen Huang, Nvidia’s CEO, recently said that the truly “smart” people in the future will be those who can “infer the unspoken,” “see around corners,” and “pre-empt problems before they show up.”

This term, I am experimenting with AI-assisted tools that are bring-

ing back team culture by using AI to encourage more, not less, human interaction. Teams record their meetings, and internally developed AI tools analyze their interactions. Did one person do all the talking? Did someone interrupt constantly? Did the team ask good questions or slide

**My M.B.A. students used chatbots to think. Then they used them to analyze how they worked together.**

into polite agreement? Did anyone summarize decisions and assign next steps? Did the team actually debate alternatives or simply divide the work and disperse?

When the first results came in, I was blown away. The new tools compelled students to interact and gave them feedback they can use to hone those skills. In the workplace, people often have only vague impressions about team dynamics. In school, we can make patterns visible while students can still change them.

This method was a frontal assault on the “divide and conquer” mentality, which used to mean specialization followed by integration. For many students today it has become “you do one piece of the work, and I do another—and we never meet to

talk about it.” AI made that worse. If a bot can synthesize everyone’s work into a single voice, then people can avoid the hardest part of teamwork, which isn’t writing. It is integrating ideas. It is resolving conflict. It is building shared understanding.

AI-assisted meeting analysis changes the incentives. When teams know that collaboration itself will be evaluated, the rational strategy is no longer to avoid the meeting. It is to show up, engage and build on one another’s thinking. Done well, AI-assisted team evaluation brings issues to the surface early enough to fix them.

Most teams don’t need a breakup. They need coaching. The results are already visible. Students are far more prepared for my class this term than in the past. Nobody has responded with the dreaded “it isn’t my turn.” Discussions are deeper.

I learned the hard way. I loosened the rules, and team culture weakened. I assumed teams would stay intact because the syllabus said “team.” I was wrong. Now I am using AI to fix what it helped break. Not by banning it or worshipping it, but by designing it to strengthen the irreplaceable human skills that business demands.

*Mr. Dyreng is senior associate dean of innovation at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business and an instructor in its M.B.A. program.*

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## EDITORIALS

# Illinois confronts its housing shortage — at last

Affordability, or the lack of it, was the primary talking point of nearly every candidate with whom we met during our week-long endorsement conversations.

That buzzword was largely tied to the cost of groceries during the 2024 campaigns, and while food costs still are a serious concern, the affordability discussion today is centered more on the lack of reasonably priced housing.

Thankfully, new ideas are emerging on how to solve this problem, and we're all ears.

We endorsed newcomer Nick Uniejewski in Illinois' 6th Senate District Democratic primary. He has mastered the housing affordability issue and would offer up not only fresh energy to the state's Democratic supermajority but also new ideas to increase housing supply.

More recently, Gov. JB Pritzker in his Feb. 18 budget address unveiled a housing abundance package and called for state legislation to incentivize the construction of far more new housing. We suspect Uniejewski and his YIMBY peers are thrilled.

It didn't take long for a bill to emerge. There's a lot to like about the legislation (House Bill 5626, filed by state Rep. Kam Buckner shortly after Pritzker's address).

We like that it would speed up permitting, which today often is a painfully slow process. Municipalities would be required to complete their permitting processes more expeditiously. If that doesn't happen, it would allow for "third party review," essentially letting applicants hire their own private inspector — a licensed architect or engineer — instead of waiting on the government. States like Florida, Tennessee and Texas have adopted this policy to expedite development, with some success.

The legislation would require municipalities across the state to allow construction of accessory dwelling units (ADUs), often referred to as granny flats, in areas currently zoned for single-family homes. This page is a proponent of granny flats, and we appreciate,



State Rep. Kam Buckner arrives to greet Gov. JB Pritzker before his annual State of the State and budget address on Feb. 18 at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield. Shortly after Pritzker's address, Buckner filed state legislation that aims to incentivize the construction of more new housing. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

ciate, too, that that bill doesn't require new such units to be built by union members, a needless impediment added last year to Chicago's granny flats ordinance. If a project passes inspection, who cares who built it? Here's hoping labor doesn't tack that onto this statewide legislation.

These reforms won't make homes cheaper or flip a switch on development overnight, but they will go a long way to foster more housing supply, which is how we'll eventually lower those costs. Illinois has a shortage of 142,000 homes and needs to build 227,000 units over the next five years to keep up with demand, according to research from the Illinois Economic Policy Institute and the Project for Middle Class Renewal at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

In general, we don't like the

state ordering localities around on matters as sensitive as development within their borders, but the steps discussed above strike us as justified given the magnitude of the problem. There are parts of this bill that go too far, though.

This bill effectively bars single-family-only zoning for lots over a certain size.

State preemption at this sweeping level is a radical departure from the current system. Yes, municipalities could still write their own zoning rules, but only within tight guardrails set by the state. That's not going over well with local officials.

"Illinois communities vary widely in geography, population density, infrastructure capacity and housing demand. Uniform statewide standards cannot adequately reflect those differences or the planning

efforts underway or completed in many municipalities," the Illinois Municipal League said in a statement after the governor's announcement.

We are also well aware that local authority often has proved to be too much of an impediment when it comes to new housing, with trustees and boards that gate-keep what gets built. When local governments serve more as an exclusive HOA than officials tasked with embracing housing development that promotes strategic growth and affordability, that's a problem. By and large, local control has yielded insufficient supply.

Certainly, there are avenues for compromise. New Jersey recently came close to adopting its own statewide housing guidance before Gov. Phil Murphy used a pocket veto to halt the effort.

That bill would've allowed the state to incentivize local governments to adjust zoning regulations to support additional housing. Carrots rather than sticks make sense to us.

Illinois lawmakers could also consider carving out municipalities under a certain size or tying rule changes to areas within close proximity to public transportation, major highways or central business districts. There is precedent for the latter in the way Chicago changed its parking requirements last July (eliminating minimum parking requirements for new residential and commercial developments within a quarter mile of CTA bus corridors or half a mile of rail stations). This is already the way many major suburbs have zoning set up already, yielding a growing number of multiunit buildings in high-demand places such as Arlington Heights.

We understand that we're unlikely to achieve large-scale development and a widespread shift in mindset on important policies to encourage new housing without elevating the conversation to this level, but we hope the governor brings locals to the table before ramming this down their throats. Most villages don't have enough incentive to change on their own, but they don't deserve to have their authority completely undermined, either.

We'll add that no housing reform conversation can ignore Illinois' exceptionally high property tax burden, which continues to discourage development and homeownership. This legislation doesn't touch that essential component of affordability.

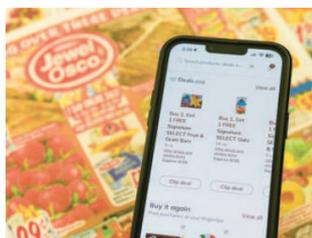
Property taxes aside, Pritzker's plan has all of the right red-tape-cutting ideas baked in, and we are pleased to see the governor championing this issue. In fact, many of the proposals in this bill offer an excellent blueprint for local reforms. Smart leaders would be wise to take heed and adopt many of these ideas voluntarily and preemptively.

## Fix your lousy shopping app, Jewel-Osco!

In the annals of global problems, a supermarket shopping app sounds like small potatoes. But like much in life, the seemingly trivial bespeaks of issues of weightier import. In this particular case, it involves whether anyone without a smartphone should be paying higher prices than one clutching one in their hands as they push their cart.

That's how it goes with the Jewel-Osco shopping app that requires you to digitally "clip" coupons to get the store's best deals on (as we write) such items as Chips Ahoy!, Samyang noodles, Garrett popcorn and Mary Kitchen corned beef hash.

Even Simply Orange juice. Not simply priced. No phone, higher cost for you.



**EILEEN T. MESLAR/TRIBUNE**

Jewel's competitors do it differently: Whole Foods has Amazon Prime discounts, but all you have to do is enter your phone number at check out. Costco, Trader Joe's and Aldi don't traffic in clipper and give everyone the same price. At Jewel-Osco, you have to go item by item.

From Jewel's point of view, this merely is a digital updating of the coupons people still can clip in this and other newspapers. They're part of what economists call price discrimination. Jewel wants its rich, busy customers who can't be bothered to "clip" things to pay more while also snagging those who are more price sensitive and willing to invest the time in getting a deal. These days, some form of variable pricing is everywhere, from airlines to online promo codes.

But legislators in Springfield have taken notice, and there's a bill wending its way and gaining sponsors that would amend the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act and force Jewel and others to make avail-

able in-store paper versions of whatever discounts they are offering in their app.

We're not generally in favor of such governmental interferences in private business, especially low-margin operations like grocery stores; after all, people without phones who are irritated at Jewel are free to shop elsewhere. And this is hardly the only area of business where the best deals now are to be found only online; hotels do this all the time. This is something that the market should be able to police.

That said, we still think that Jewel has a lousy app.

It's buggy: It froze on us when we reached the checkout the other day, causing us to be anxious we were overpaying, having not yet

fully "clipped." We find it unappreciative of couples' shopping, since one spendthrift spouse/partner is likely to slip an unclipped item into the cart, causing the irritated bargain hunter then to go rushing around the store to see which stuff qualified (we know whereof we speak). Jewel has so many items on its shelves that the search function is one big pain.

And, yes, the store should offer an alternative for those who'd prefer not to be poking at their phone as they shop or who prefer not to carry one at all. Plus, unless you give up all kinds of data, your points expire, too.

So we'd humbly suggest that Jewel, which is owned by Albertsons Cos. Inc., rethink. Before the state makes them.

### ON THIS DAY 126 YEARS AGO HORSES IN WAR

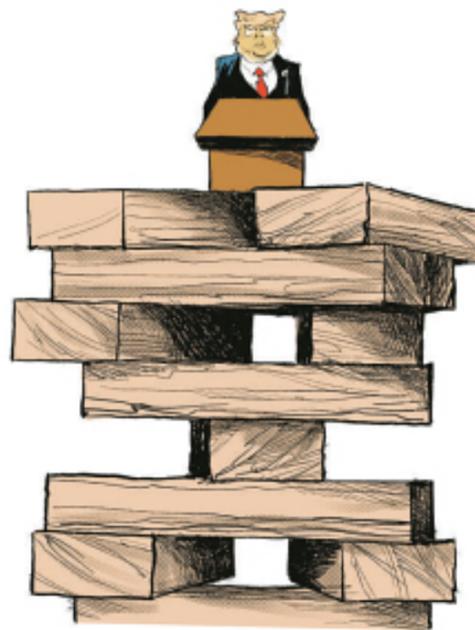
Alarmed by the purchase of automobiles for military use, French horse-breeders asked Minister Gallifet as to the truth of the rumor that no further purchases of horses would be made. The Minister's inevitable negative reply seems rather unnecessary. Much has been said lately about the probable disappearance of the horse from the battlefield. Not only has it been declared that automobiles and traction engines would be used for the transportation of artillery and supplies, but the experts have asserted that the day of cavalry was past.

The Boer war has proven the falsity of these theories. The army mule is doing more service than ever before, and an occasional stampede must be overlooked in view of the other valuable services rendered. No war has been fought in which cavalry has played a more prominent part. The Boers are almost entirely mounted, and the effectiveness of Joubert's and Cronje's forces has been due in great measure to the excellent horsemanship of the soldiers and the speed with which they have been able to concentrate and separate, as well as to their excellence as rifle shots. It has been since the British brought their cavalry into play that they have done their most effective fighting. General French's relief of Kimberley was a cavalry operation, whose effectiveness was aided by the rapidly moving horse artillery. The quickness with which French moved made concentration against him impossible. Thus the south African war is proving the value of horses in military service, and disproving the theorists' notions, a reliance upon which may be held responsible partly for the ineffectiveness of the British forces during the early part of the campaign.

**Tribune Editorial Board, Jan. 26, 1900**

### EDITORIAL CARTOON

**SHENEMAN** PHILIP COLEMAN AGENCY



**THE STATE OF THE UNION**

**DREW SHENEMAN**

## OPINION



Halas Hall on Jan. 19 in Lake Forest after the Bears season ended with a loss to the Los Angeles Rams in an NFC divisional playoff game. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

## The city should offer concessions to the Bears — but not at the expense of taxpayers

By Bill Quinlan

Like many Chicagoans, I have been watching the latest round of drama unfold as the Chicago Bears seek concessions from the city and state to keep their stadium here.

Sadly, this is not the first time we have seen this movie.

In the 1970s, amid disputes over Soldier Field and stadium conditions, the Bears raised the possibility of leaving Chicago and explored alternative sites — including options outside the city — as leverage in negotiations.

At the time, my father, William R. Quinlan, was corporation counsel under Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley. When asked about the Bears potentially leaving, the mayor's response was to say that if the team left, it could not take the "Chicago" name with it. The name belonged to the people of Chicago. The mayor then gestured to my father and said, "Isn't that right,

Bill?"

The Bears didn't leave then. And they shouldn't leave now.

No one wants to wake up one day to the "Chicago Bears of Hammond." It makes me a little sick even typing that.

But the question remains: Should taxpayers subsidize a plan to keep the team?

The city has already given the Bears a favorable lease at Soldier Field. Now the team says it wants more — its leaders want to be the landlord, not a tenant, and they want financial assistance.

But Chicagoans already pay too much in taxes and fees. Raising them further is not just unpopular — it's counterproductive. We might keep the Bears but drive more of our own residents to watch games from the suburbs, or worse, from some more tax-friendly state such as Florida or ... Indiana.

The city should be willing to offer the Bears some concessions to keep

them in Chicago but not on the backs of taxpayers. No property tax hikes. No sales tax increases. If there are concessions, they should be targeted as entertainment taxes on corporations buying premium suites or hotel-related revenues tied directly to games and events.

More importantly, if the public gives something to keep the Bears, the public should certainly get something of value in return.

My proposal, which is informed by touring city neighborhoods and listening to residents in my campaign outreach through Leading a Better Chicago, is simple and strategic: In exchange for any meaningful concessions, the Bears should agree to move Halas Hall and their football operations from Lake Forest to the city of Chicago.

Put the Bears' headquarters, practice facilities and day-to-day operations in the city and make it a fan destination. What that would look like in action:

■ Real economic development in the city.

■ Tourism opportunities for year-round activity from practices, camps and special events.

■ Players actually living in Chicago instead of commuting from the northern suburbs.

This kind of proposal is what a deal for the people of Chicago should look like: creative and rooted in long-term value, not short-term political wins or two-year plans built around the next election or the next ambition.

The Bears want something from us, but we should be just as clear about what we want from them.

Just a thought from the son of someone who helped deal with this issue one of the last times the Bears threatened to head east.

*Bill Quinlan is a Chicago attorney and the founder of civic advocacy group Leading a Better Chicago.*

## Pritzker's budget does little to help Black and brown Illinoisans



Willie Wilson

Gov. JB Pritzker's proposed \$56 billion maintenance budget for 2027 does little to address the emergency of disparities that exist in Black and brown communities.

As Pritzker and elected officials know, the problems in these neighborhoods predate President Donald Trump. There is no doubt the administration's policies have exacerbated long-standing issues.

However, Pritzker, who is running for a third term with an eye on the presidency, should channel state resources into closing the widening disparities in Black and brown neighborhoods.

Budgets are viewed as moral documents that reflect the government's values and priorities. Pritzker's budget should address systemic barriers to equity. These communities do not have the luxury of waiting for the new Congress or the next presidential administration.

Black and brown residents do not need play-it-safe budgets. They need budgets that transform communities and lead to entrepreneurship and investment in education, trade programs, jobs, health care and homeownership. Budgets that guarantee safe neighborhoods free of gun violence, smash-and-grab robberies and assaults.

The Black youth unemployment crisis in Illinois has become normalized. Eighty-one percent of Black 16- to 19-year-olds in Chicago were jobless in 2024, according to a recent report from the University of Illinois Great Cities Institute. The jobless rate among Black adults 20 to 24 years old was 46.5%, more than double the 18.9% rate for their white



Gov. JB Pritzker delivers his annual State of the State and budget address Feb. 18 at the Illinois Capitol in Springfield. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

peers. The highest rate of joblessness is pervasive on the South and West sides of Chicago.

The Black homeownership rate today is virtually the same as it was when mortgage discrimination was legal. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 prohibited discrimination concerning the sale and financing of housing based on race, religion or national origin. In 58 years, the homeownership rate for African Americans has remained stagnant.

In 2025, the Black homeownership rate in Chicago was 43%, well below the 70% rate of white people. Latino homeownership has seen record growth in 2025. In Illinois, Latinos were responsible for 56% of homeownership growth over the last 10 years, and the current rate sits at 58.8%.

Homeownership is important for building long-term generational wealth and stable commu-

nities. A 2024 "Color of Wealth in Chicago" report noted the median net worth for Black households in Chicago is \$0. The same report showed a net worth of \$40,500 for U.S.-born Mexican families in Chicago, \$24,000 for Puerto Rican families and \$210,000 for white people.

During a recent visit to the Cook County Department of Corrections, I found out that the population of detainees had increased to more than 6,000. The Chicago Crusader reported that between January 2020 and November 2025, 54% of the 61 people who died while in custody in Cook County were Black.

With veterans sleeping under viaducts and the unhoused population using CTA trains, buses and libraries as their shelter, how can Pritzker's budget cut funds for people who are unhoused?

Black people account for 53% of the unhoused population, despite making up less than one-third of the city's total population. Latinos account for 35% of the homeless population.

According to the Chicago Coalition to End Homelessness, Pritzker's proposed cuts to the HOME Illinois program, as well as decreases to supportive housing and emergency and transitional housing line items, will likely halt progress made toward ending homelessness. High prices for rents, groceries, health insurance and other costs could drive more citizens into homelessness.

Pritzker's budget also does not address the achievement gap. In Illinois, there are still wide gaps in proficiency rates between white, Black and Latino students in both English language arts and math.

A failure to address the educa-

tion achievement gap could exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline.

The following are suggestions to bring equity to Black and brown citizens:

■ Illinois House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch and Senate

President Don Harmon should determine why Black homeownership is stuck at less than 50% and pass solutions to improve it.

■ Welch, Harmon and Pritzker should fix the unfair property tax system that harms Black and brown communities.

■ Pritzker and the Illinois legislature should opt into the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program.

■ Pritzker and the legislature should invest in job training and bring employment opportunities to vulnerable neighborhoods on the South and West sides of Chicago.

■ Welch, Harmon and legislative leaders should close the 20-year life expectancy gap in West Garfield Park through significant state investment.

■ Pritzker, Welch and Harmon should use Illinois state procurement contracts to stabilize Black and brown communities.

Illinois legislators can amend the governor's maintenance budget and provide real investment in Black and Brown communities. The question is: Will they do the work or go along to get along?

I will convene clergy leaders to meet with Pritzker, legislative leaders and legislators to ensure the needs of low-income families and the working class are addressed in this budget.

I write this commentary to make those comfortable with withholding investments in Black and brown communities uncomfortable.

*Willie Wilson is a business owner, philanthropist and former mayoral candidate.*

## OPINION

# The Rev. Jesse Jackson shaped Chicago in innumerable ways



David Greising

When the Rev. Jesse Jackson arrived in Chicago, he was a classic nobody nobody sent: He was from the South, Black and in his 20s. By the clannish rules of Chicago politics circa 1964, he shouldn't have amounted to much.

But he became somebody. And now that he's gone and a procession of memorial services will begin Thursday, these questions come to mind: Did Chicago make Jackson who he was? And to what extent did Jackson make the city what it is today?

The battles he fought here and mostly won helped earn him a national profile. They also made the city and the country more equitable and just. And he did it the Chicago way — direct, in your face, backing down only as tactical retreat. Rarely wavering and never giving up.

Beginning in 1966 with Operation Breadbasket, Jackson's first assignment from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., he used boycotts to force A&P, Pacific Tea Co. and other grocery chains to give Black job applicants a fair shot. The grocers gave in: The power of Jackson's boycott left them no choice.

Jackson used his knack for grabbing attention as a tool. Along with Al Raby, head of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, Jackson helped select Marquette Park as the target for a 1966 fair housing march, at which racist white hecklers infamously threw rocks, bricks and bottles and hit King in the head.

Jackson's PR instincts at times played out as theatrical or self-serving. After witnessing King's assassination at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, Jackson rushed back to Chicago to tell the story. During a stirring Chicago City Council speech, he wore a turtleneck he said was stained with King's blood. That earned him a rebuke from some in King's inner circle who viewed it as a performative bid to take up King's mantle.

But as a lesson in a Chicago-style pursuit of power, it worked: The visuals and language Jackson used did help him claim leadership as an heir to the King legacy.

As Jackson's national profile grew, Chicago's white establishment had a reflexive, negative reaction.



After the Fire Department's fire prevention parade, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, center, led a group of people down State Street demanding jobs for low-income residents on Oct. 7, 1974, in Chicago. The group had a brief confrontation with the police. **WILLIAM KELLY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

During the 1972 Democratic presidential primaries, Jackson crisscrossed the country in search of an alternative to Sen. George McGovern for president — earning the nickname “Jetstream Jesse” from Chicago Daily News columnist Mike Royko.

As the years passed and Royko kept using the sobriquet, many read it as a dig at Jackson's tendency to show up anywhere in the U.S. or abroad where he deemed civil rights activism was needed — a form of self-aggrandizing crisis chasing. But Jackson did use his travels to important effect: flying to places such as Serbia, Gambia and Syria to secure the release of Americans held captive, for example, or to Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, to help quell racial unrest after the police killing of Michael Brown.

Closer to home, during the 1972 campaign, Jackson and Ald. Bill Singer put forward a racially diverse delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Miami and succeeded in unseating the one led by Chicago's boss, Mayor Richard J. Daley.

Daley's national political power was never the same, and neither was Jackson's. Seemingly overnight, he was a national force. “The convention made him a hero

on the left,” said Don Rose, a long-time Chicago political consultant and onetime press aide to Jackson.

Jackson put his fingerprints all over Chicago after Daley's death.

During the legendary blizzard of 1979, Jackson's attacks on then-Mayor Michael Bilandic for closing CTA stations in Black communities helped Jane Byrne win the mayor's office. Then, after Byrne appointed only white people to the Chicago Housing Authority board in 1982, Jackson led a boycott of Byrne's ChicagoFest. The next year, a Jackson-led voter registration drive helped Harold Washington become Chicago's first Black mayor in 1983.

Even as he expanded his national profile, Jackson continued to use Chicago, and especially his Saturday morning rallies at his Operation PUSH headquarters on the South Side, as a base for his political ambitions — and a must-visit destination for any national politician seeking his endorsement. This culminated in his “Rainbow Coalition” run for president in 1984 and another in 1988, the most formidable campaigns by a Black aspirant until Barack Obama ran in 2008.

Jackson's prime-time speech at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, with its “Our

time has come” refrain, can be mentioned in the same breath as any of the best by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, John F. Kennedy or King.

But by the time Obama rose to prominence, Jackson seemed sidelined.

In an unguarded moment, appearing as an Obama surrogate on Fox News, Jackson was caught by a live microphone saying he wanted to cut off certain Obama body parts because the candidate was “talking down to Black people.”

Soon after that, I got to know Jackson while writing a profile of him at this uncomfortable moment: a historic civil rights leader, watching Obama's candidacy from the outside in.

The “hot mic” incident was the most embarrassing moment of his career, Jackson told me. After it, he spent 10 days in the Arizona desert “talking with Dr. King, reading the Bible and talking with myself.”

He ultimately decided an Obama presidency would be a delight to him. “I have lived long enough to see the fruits of my labors,” he said. “I've been blessed since the 1960s. I've seen 40 years of struggle from the front lines.” Weeks into the reporting, musi-

cian Isaac Hayes died, and I flew with Jackson to the funeral in Memphis. Between the funeral and the burial, we drove to the Lorraine Motel. We walked up the concrete staircase to the balcony where King was shot.

Visitors can get close to that horrific yet hallowed spot. But a heavy metal chain blocks guests from stepping onto the balcony. Not Jackson.

Deep into a detailed recounting of this pivotal moment in his life — and the nation's history — Jackson stepped right over the chain. He leaned against the steel railing and carried on with his memories.

In its way, the impromptu balcony moment with me was vintage Jackson. A civil rights warrior since youth, a political and moral leader all his adult life, he stepped over barriers that stopped everyone else.

After all, Jackson had a story to tell: in this instance, about King's assassination; in his life's work, about the need for equality and justice in a society riven by racism. His vision of a better nation.

Now, with Jackson gone, it's our duty to work toward the dream he pursued all his life.

*David Greising is president of the Better Government Association.*

## Voice of the People

### More usual nonsense

I watched the State of the Union address filled with hope that President Donald Trump would deliver a strong message. He did not disappoint!

He began with some of his most often-repeated half-truths and outright lies. Throughout the speech, there were the expected bits of misinformation and misdirection. And what would a Trump speech be without the childish taunts and insults?

Trump went above and beyond this time. He used Purple Heart and Medal of Honor recipients as props, as if the event was a campaign rally. Of course, these heroes deserve their honors, but what did that have to do with the State of the Union? Aren't those honors more suitably given in White House ceremonies?

There were several other campaign props, none more notable than the Olympic gold medal-winning U.S. men's hockey team. I love hockey, the fastest and most intense team sport there is, and I'm a huge Blackhawks fan. The Olympics, winter and summer, are must-see TV in our house. Connor Hellebuyck, goaltender for the Winnipeg Jets, is a decorated NHL stalwart. Trump pointed out, correctly, that several athletes have been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Those athletes were honored when their playing days were over and were tapped for their social and philanthropic efforts as well as their physical skills. Hellebuyck isn't there yet.

I wonder: How many of those singled out by Trump awoke the next day with the realization that they had been used?

Beyond Trump vowing to continue the wildly unpopular immigration tactics and going around the Supreme Court tariff

decision, no policy initiatives were offered.

The president delivered, all right. It was just more of the usual nonsense.

— *Len Levy, Glenview*

### For shame, Democrats

In 2019, Joe Biden launched his presidential campaign focusing on uniting the country, rebuilding the middle class and offering an alternative to political, social and racial divisions.

So, what did he do? He and his party divided our country and failed the middle and lower classes with his rocketing increase in inflation. Now, years later, the Democrats continue their drive toward division.

They were elected and paid to represent their constituents in the federal government. Defaming the president and boycotting a State of the Union address are despicable!

— *John Skaritka, Hampshire*

### Duckworth's absence

I may not agree with everything the president does, but I am very disappointed Sen. Tammy Duckworth did not attend the speech. I voted for Duckworth to represent me; the least she can do is attend the biggest speech to Congress the president gives every year.

I am also very disappointed with the current candidates to replace Sen. Dick Durbin, I want to send someone to Washington with ideas and the ability to reach across the aisle to create solutions to America's problems — not just fight, fight or hurl expletives at the president.

— *Rob Scharf, Mundelein*

### Campaign promise

I listened to President Donald Trump's State of the Union speech that contained many truths but

also had many misleading or dishonest statements. What is sad is how he left out the campaign promise he made to the voters that if elected, he would quickly resolve the Ukraine-Russia war. In reality, he has put Ukrainians in a position of weakness by cutting military weapon support. Increasing that support would put Ukraine in a strong position of bargaining a peace treaty.

Trump has no intention of strongly challenging Russia's invasion; thus, he won't fully arm the Ukrainians so they can bargain from a point of strength.

— *Raymond Hubbard, Sandwich*

### Undemocratic actions

In President Donald Trump's State of the Union address, his comments toward bipartisanship were: “These people are crazy, I'm telling you. They're crazy. ... Boy, oh boy. We're lucky we have a country, with people like this. Democrats are destroying our country. But we've stopped it just in the nick of time, didn't we?”

The majority of voters disagree with the president's assessment. The political polls show that many Republican candidates running for office in the midterm elections this fall are lagging behind their Democratic opponents. Trump is truly aware of these findings and is doing everything in his power to destabilize that election. His undemocratic actions greatly undermine what happened 250 years ago: 56 delegates to the Second Continental Congress voted to approve the Declaration of independence on July 4, 1776.

— *Sam Solomon, Deerfield*

### Dishonor to medal

Let's not underestimate the trivialization of the Medal of Honor at Tuesday night's State of

the Union address.

The Medal of Honor is our nation's highest military honor, which is awarded sparingly. It is given for actions while engaged in combat against an enemy of the United States, for the highest level of bravery, sacrifice and integrity while exhibiting a deep love of country and a desire to always do what is right. “All recommendations require thorough reports on the act itself, the battlefield and its setting; at least two sworn eyewitness statements; and any other compelling evidence that can be gathered. Recommendation packets must be approved all the way up the military command structure,” the Medal of Honor website states.

I do not mean to diminish the actions of the Army pilot or Navy captain awarded the Medal of Honor at President Donald Trump's State of the Union address; they gave more than I did during my brief tour in the Navy years ago. Awards may well be appropriate — at a minimum, a Purple Heart — but for someone wounded in a Trump-ordered raid less than 60 days ago and a centenarian veteran who fought 74 years ago, it seems to be insincere, improper, and both politically premature and politically manipulative.

It's another attack by this administration on a deeply respected, time-honored American institution.

The Medal of Honor deserves our highest respect.

— *Joe Szczepaniak, Wheaton*

### Trump's reality show

President Donald Trump

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## The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

## Mexico's biggest battle in the drug war is yet to come

**Killing a cartel boss is a start but politicians linked to crime also need tackling**

Nemesio Oseguera was arguably Latin America's most wanted drug trafficker. He controlled a sprawling criminal enterprise whose tentacles stretched as far as Australia. His empire supplied fentanyl responsible for killing thousands of American addicts and his thugs murdered countless Mexicans.

So when government forces killed "El Mencho", as he was known, after a fierce gun battle on Sunday, Mexico was right to claim a big success in the war on organised crime. The operation was the clearest evidence so far that President Claudia Sheinbaum, acting under heavy US pressure, has buried her predecessor Andrés Manuel López Obrador's disastrous policy of appeasement towards the cartels.

Oseguera's elimination was a joint

effort between Mexico and the US. CIA intelligence appears to have been crucial in locating the drug baron following a love tryst, while Mexican special forces were responsible for moving in on the mountain cabin where he was hiding.

Cross-border collaboration has worked well before; US intelligence located Colombia's cocaine king Pablo Escobar in Medellín in 1993 and American officials helped capture Oseguera's one-time rival Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán in 2014. Sunday's operation also demonstrated that Mexico's elite forces can act effectively on shared intelligence. That gives the lie to those in the Trump administration who argue that US military forces are needed inside Mexico to tackle the cartels.

Crime experts will argue, correctly, that decapitating Oseguera's Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) will not kill it. But that is not an argument for leaving drug bosses alone. It is simply a reminder that much more work is needed to address the problem. Colum-

bia's experience in ridding itself of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the 1990s proves that entire gangs can be eliminated with determined action.

Mexico has tolerated the growth of murderous criminal enterprises for far too long. Some have splintered, spreading violence across the country. During López Obrador's six years of "hugs not bullets" for the cartels, there were more than 200,000 murders.

Sheinbaum's conversion to attacking drug barons head-on is welcome, if belated. During her election campaign she had argued against a war on drugs but strong pressure from Washington appears to have changed her mind. Her security secretary Omar García Harfuch had his own reason for going after "El Mencho": he was ambushed and almost killed by the CJNG in 2020.

But Sheinbaum has yet to break with her predecessor on one crucial issue: tackling the complicity between members of Mexico's political class and organised crime. This is a longstanding

**The operation against 'El Mencho' demonstrates that the country's elite forces can act effectively on shared intelligence**

problem spanning political parties. But it is more urgent now because of accusations against key figures in Sheinbaum's own leftwing movement Morena.

Adán Augusto López has stepped down as Morena's leader in the Senate following an outcry over alleged links between one of his former top lieutenants and the CJNG. But López, who served as interior minister in the previous government, remains a ruling party senator (he says he had no knowledge of any wrongdoing). US President Donald Trump's administration has revoked the visas of more than 50 Mexican politicians and officials, including at least one state governor, amid a crackdown on the political allies of drug cartels. Sheinbaum has said she has no information about the issue.

Despite describing Mexico's president as a "good woman", Trump has said "the cartels are running Mexico. She's not running Mexico." Sheinbaum can prove him wrong by tackling the rotten apples within her own party.

## Opinion Economics

## Japan has become the ultimate Halo trade

María Hergueta



Leo Lewis

However shortlived it turns out to be, the Halo trade is doing some heavy lifting in these confused and confusing times. Snappy acronyms can give the impression of coherence, even when it's in short supply.

For now at least, the investment quest for companies with heavy-asset, low-obsolescence (Halo) credentials is on. The AI revolution is moving more rapidly than was recently assumed, and the business of weather-proofing portfolios at such a pace, and with the storm still very much overhead, is acutely challenging.

It might be less so, however, if Japan is given a chance to prove itself as the ultimate Halo play. It's a market unexpectedly canonised by the current turmoil: much that once struck investors as ungodly — from the sustenance of

metrics but suddenly look attractive "due to the weird effect AI is having on both the economics of manufacturing and the destruction of moats in services".

It is far too soon for gloating, but you can feel a few preparing to do so. Japan's Halo status was achieved in the face of fierce and sustained criticism — which may, of course, be revived when another snappy acronym emerges.

The long years that followed the collapse of Japan's 1980s bubble were notable for low (eventually negative) interest rates. Banks rolled over the debts of Japan's smokestack industries. Mainstream investment wisdom screamed they were crazy to prolong the life of companies that a wealthy, high-cost country like Japan should not logically support.

Japanese groups were supported too in what has been seen as a foolhardy, wasteful breadth of industrial coverage. According to Shrikant Kale, a quant strategist at Jefferies, the average Japanese company is exposed to 2.3 sectors, versus 1.5 for US and European peers. Only a third of Japanese companies are pure plays, against two-thirds in the US and Europe.

But this apparent craziness maintained what is now a hotly desirable set of industrial skills across the industrial spectrum. The ongoing US push for re-industrialisation arises from precisely the void that Japan was once deemed silly for refusing to let form.

Goldman Sachs makes the case that Japanese companies are positioned to become compelling partners for American industry. American industry, meanwhile, is scrambling to more closely resemble what Japan already is. It is significant that the largest investment project so far under the US-Japan tariff deal is a colossal gas turbine facility in the US — conceived to support the energy demands of AI, but almost certainly dependent on Japanese machinery and knowhow.

The pricing power now in the hands of the semiconductor industry, notes Smithers, has granted it to Japanese speciality materials makers like Mitsui Kinzoku, Nittobo and Dow. These make products that few other firms can replicate to the specs required by state of the art manufacturing, such as AI chips. "Markets that were worth millions are starting to be worth billions, and margins, which might perhaps have been 10 per cent are set to be above 25 per cent," he says. Supply chain bottlenecks that are not yet obvious, he adds, soon will be and are often controlled by Japanese Halos.

There is plenty of risk here. The Halo trade could evaporate, taking with it this endorsement of what Japan has spent years defending. For now, it should wear its Halo with pride, but not get sanctimonious.

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## Letters

## Is there now a glass cliff edge for female CEOs?

Anjali Raval's article asks "Why are there still so few women CEOs?" (Opinion, Work & Careers FT.com, February 24). Buried in the final paragraph is a more troubling possibility: what if many of those who do reach the top are appointed precisely because the odds are stacked against them?

We are not only blocking women from the top job; we may be setting them up to fail.

The "glass cliff", the tendency to appoint women to lead organisations

already in crisis is not a footnote to this story but central to it. Coupled with evidence that female chief executives are more likely to be dismissed than their male counterparts, this begins to look less like coincidence and more like a structural pattern.

Place women on burning platforms, then cite the fallout as proof that women cannot lead.

Almost the entire policy conversation about advancing women focuses on the pipeline: succession planning, sponsorship, flexible

working, leadership development. All assume the core problem is access to the role itself. But if frequently the role is offered under precarious conditions, then improving the pipeline merely delivers more women to the cliff edge, more efficiently.

If boards truly want more women to succeed at the top, they must stop pretending crisis appointments are proof of progress.

**Michelle Weston**  
Chief Revenue Officer, The Executive Coaching Consultancy, London EC3, UK

## It won't be easy for EU to weaponise its chokepoints

There are some disquieting ideas in Martin Sandbu's op-ed "It is time for Europe to weaponise its chokepoints" (February 23). First, which is the "Europe" that should weaponise its chokepoints? In the subheading, he refers to the EU. Well, good luck with that too. It was the US that pushed allies to ban purchases of Huawei's telecommunications equipment, not the EU.

Further, the Institut Montaigne experts cited betray a weak grasp of the semiconductor industry. ASML, the Dutch company, does indeed have a monopoly on the very high margin deep ultraviolet (DUV) lithography machines, but ASML does not make semiconductors. Its customers — Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing (TSMC), Samsung Electronics, and Intel — do. Moreover, China accounts for a third of ASML's revenues, virtually all of which are the less cutting-edge DUV machines.

One may thus infer that TSMC has significant monopsony power in DUVs, as it accounts for roughly 37 per cent of



ASML sales outside China. My question is how Sandbu proposes to weaponise ASML without throwing it into receivership? Or is he suggesting that European taxpayers will pick up the multibillion-euro tab?

**Luis Arenzana**  
Lisbon, Portugal

## Gaza or Iran: Britain can be fickle on international law

It is good to see that the UK government has rediscovered its enthusiasm for international law in its resistance to American use of UK bases to bomb Iran ("UK expresses unease over allowing use of its bases to launch strikes", Report, February 20). The contrast of course is with its repeated evasion of the subject in response to Israel's behaviour in Gaza.

**Tony Brenton**  
Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, UK

## Obstetricians and midwives

In the Big Read "Maternity care is broken. Who can fix it?" (February 18) midwives are mentioned 20 times, whereas obstetricians are mentioned only twice. Is this a reflection of the current reality of critical clinical decision making within modern labour suites? Have obstetricians now only a reduced or secondary role in obstetric management? If so, it may be a factor in why maternity care is broken.

**J Wilson Carswell**  
London W1, UK

## How joke idea turned into a potential tool of abuse

Meta's tie-up with Ray-Ban maker EssilorLuxottica, when combined with the appropriate software ("Smart glasses give glimpse of physical goods at risk from AI", Lex, February 23), may well lead to additional suffering for women from this unregulated form of observation and the potential real-time image manipulation described in Laura Bates's Weekend Essay "How tech turned against women" (Life & Arts, February 21).

The X-ray specs advertised in the comics of my youth will turn from a joke idea into a weapon of abuse and emotional hurt.

This technology needs regulation sooner rather than later.

**Colin Paton**  
Freising, Bavaria, Germany

## Reform UK should learn from the BNP experience

Jennifer Williams' Big Read article "What Reform has learnt from its first taste of power" (February 24) reminds me of the problems encountered by the British National Party earlier this century, when it saw councillors elected in various constituencies in the north of England. Electoral success came on the back of a promise to sweep away old political norms and end high taxation. This also led to a realisation that cuts in spending and public services could not be made without undesirable consequences.

This also resulted in the demise of that party. Sadly, from my point of view, Reform's potential voters are unlikely to be reading the Financial Times in a council-run library like I am. And they certainly won't be doing so if Reform delivers on its promise of Doge-style cuts to council services.

**Trevor Hopper**  
Lewes, East Sussex, UK

## OUTLOOK

## BERLIN

## Becoming a citizen is bittersweet in today's Germany



by Juliet Riddell

The train journey from London to Berlin takes nine hours and involves its fair share of hassle. But in my family there's a simple way to put the trip into perspective: to think about those who once travelled in the opposite direction, for a very different reason, in a far more dangerous time.

Both of my mother's parents were refugees from Germany. My grandmother came on the Kindertransport in early 1939 and was orphaned by the Nazis at the age of 14. My grandfather was luckier. He left a few months earlier along with his siblings and his mother, my great-grandmother, Frieda Glücksmann.

I grew up knowing only a fraction of this family history. My grandparents never wanted to speak much about their life before they arrived in the UK.

In Germany, however, the story of Frieda, a German Jewish social worker, is celebrated. In 1935 she took over a Jewish convalescent home near Berlin and turned it into a domestic science school. Her intention was to train young Jewish people so that they could secure the documentation required to leave Nazi Germany. Thanks to her, many of the students and staff made it to safety.

Last December, my family and I were invited to attend a ceremony to recognise Frieda's work and rename the school after her. Three generations — my mother, my children and me — set off for Germany together for the first time, Interrail passes

and German passports in our hands.

As many descendants of German Jews can testify, German institutions have done meaningful reconciliation work in recent decades. Ahead of our visit my family went through the "naturalisation" process to become German citizens, a route offered to those who might have been born German had it not been for the Holocaust.

At the naturalisation event, the London embassy's deputy head of mission thanked us — the children of Jewish refugees — for the "wonder of forgiveness". "Being able to call you our *Mitbürger*, or 'fellow citizens' in English, is a true privilege," he said. "We can try to learn from our history and apply those lessons here and now."

Just a few weeks later, however, our trip to our reclaimed homeland seemed to tarnish that message. Sometimes, history does repeat itself. We do not all learn the same lessons.

We started in Berlin. At the Jewish Museum my mother ordered a coffee and listened as the young man serving her made a tasteless joke about a coffee without milk being an "africano". In a place dedicated to the consequences of racism he seemed woefully unaware of what he was saying.

The next day we took a train north into the state of Brandenburg. The area is known for its beautiful woods and lakes — and for being the location of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The camp began operating in 1936 while Frieda was

working at her school just 3km away.

The school ceremony was celebratory and solemn. Students, some of whom were recent immigrants to Germany, performed piano pieces and gave touching speeches. "We are giving our school not only a new title but also a clear message," said one. "We stand for respect, diversity and humanity."

Commemorating past courage is also a form of defiance against rising intolerance today. In Brandenburg the far-right party, Alternative for Germany, very nearly won the state election in 2024. Among voters aged 16 to 24 it was the largest party, with 31 per cent of the vote. One local teacher said instances of racism in the classroom were a rising problem.

As we returned to the station I saw lampposts plastered with AfD stickers. One had an image of a muscular white man and the words: "You are German, you must do your duty." On the train, my mother got talking to a man who said he was worried about the future that he and his partner, an immigrant, faced in the country.

Our trip to Germany connected my family to the past but it did not put history behind us. As we returned home we reminded one another of the message Frieda once gave to her students: "If a generation emerges from our suffering . . . a generation that will take a better path in courage and enlightenment, then it was hard but not in vain."

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## Opinion

## The Bank of England does not need to 'follow the Fed'

Megan Greene

Major central banks have tended to move in lock-step over the past few decades in the face of big, global shocks like the financial crisis and Covid-19 pandemic. This lends weight to the conventional wisdom that the central bank of the world's biggest economy – the Federal Reserve – sets a course for policy and other central banks must “follow the Fed”. But looking at the spillovers of Fed policy to UK growth and inflation, I think there's a strong case for the Bank of England doing exactly the opposite.

My interest isn't why the Fed might choose a particular course for monetary policy. Instead it's what the implications would be for the UK economy and inflation.

Foreign monetary policy tends to

wash up on our shores via two main channels: trade and financial markets. The impact via trade on UK growth and inflation is ambiguous. Let's say the Fed cuts interest rates while the BoE does not. Other things being equal, US aggregate demand would rise, and with it demand for UK exports. This would push upwards on UK growth and inflation.

But this explicit demand channel is only part of the picture. When the US cuts rates, investors hunting for yield might redirect capital away from the country. All else being equal, this would push the US dollar down relative to sterling. UK exports to the US would be more expensive, sapping UK demand. And UK imports from the US would become cheaper, dragging on inflation.

The impact of surprise Fed rate cuts on the UK via financial markets is much clearer. As sterling appreciates relative to the dollar, capital inflows to the UK would push up UK bond and equity prices. An easing in financial conditions in the US is likely to buoy risky

assets elsewhere. Looser financial conditions would push UK activity and inflation up.

Understanding these various channels is nice but insufficient. We have to aggregate them to determine the overall impact on the UK economy. One way to do this is to use a top-down approach to look at how surprises in Fed policy have

## Foreign monetary policy tends to wash up on our shores via trade and financial markets

moved US borrowing costs and spilled over to the UK economy.

Using historical data from 1997-2019, I've looked at how moves in two- and 10-year US Treasury yields happening in the wake of Fed decisions have affected UK GDP growth and inflation. Two-year yields are highly relevant for borrowing in the real economy and incorporate shifts at the very short end of the curve.

As such they are a decent proxy for changes in the US central bank's benchmark federal funds rate.

Ten-year yields reflect surprises in unconventional monetary policy such as quantitative easing, which impact the long end of the curve. I've considered a 1 percentage point drop in both, not because either is likely but because it's a round number with a clear directional impact.

A 1 percentage point fall in two-year Treasury rates initially pushes UK GDP and inflation up. This likely reflects a loosening in financial conditions. But subsequently UK growth and inflation fall as a result of the exchange rate channel. As sterling appreciates against the dollar, UK exports are less competitive and UK imports are less expensive.

Still we have to consider moves across the entire yield curve to understand the impact of Fed policy on the UK overall. A 1 percentage point drop in 10-year Treasury yields very clearly pushes both activity and inflation up in the UK. Moves in two- and 10-year Treasury yields together suggest a surprise Fed

loosening might put upward pressure on UK growth and inflation.

What does this mean for my policy views? At the moment, very little. It doesn't make sense to set domestic monetary policy based on the risk that another central bank might surprise us.

And all of this must be placed within the greater context of the UK's domestic economy. The Monetary Policy Committee expects inflation to fall back to target this year, but it has been above 2 per cent for the best part of five years now.

There are two-sided risks to the underlying disinflationary process. Surprise rate cuts by the Fed could tip these risks towards greater inflation persistence and necessitate a more restrictive policy stance.

However Fed policy evolves, the BoE must focus on the forces shaping the outlook for UK inflation and set policy on that basis.

The writer is an external member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee

## Putting data centres in space is even harder than it sounds

Rebekah Reed

On January 30, SpaceX filed a request for regulatory approval of “a constellation of a million satellites that operate as orbital data centers”. Elon Musk has suggested that this could become a reality within two to three years. He is not alone. The idea that outer space can act as a release valve for AI's increasingly unmanageable energy demands is ever more popular with hyperscalers.

Space-based computing is a goal worth pursuing. Carefully scoped, mission-specific compute in orbit could help to process Earth observation data, support deep space missions and handle tasks where data is generated and consumed in space.

But treating orbit as a workaround for AI's current energy-hungry training needs is, as OpenAI co-founder Sam Altman recently put it, “ridiculous”. Orbital data centres are many years, perhaps decades, away.

The International Energy Agency projects that by 2030, data centres will consume more electricity than Japan does now. Large AI facilities also require billions of gallons of water to cool down their servers. Against this backdrop, orbital data centres have been sold as a quick fix to maintain AI's growth curve while shifting its impacts away from strained power grids. Proponents highlight free and continuous solar energy, the vacuum of space as a natural heat sink and independence from terrestrial power grids.

The problem is that this pitch leaves

## Every new constellation raises the risk of collisions and debris, threatening communications

most of the system off the balance sheet.

Every component of a satellite constellation, from compute hardware and solar panels to the large radiators required for cooling, must be manufactured on Earth and launched into space. Google's satellite-based data centre initiative, Project Suncatcher, estimates that launch costs would need to fall below \$200 per kilogramme (a sevenfold reduction from current levels) before this becomes economically viable. That threshold isn't expected until the mid-2030s.

Even if costs do fall, the components required – including radiation-hardened servers, on-orbit communications infrastructure and in-space servicing capabilities – do not yet exist at commercial scale.

Adding to the conundrum, orbital data centres turn routine IT management into a complex space systems problem. On Earth, a failed server can be replaced in minutes. In orbit, that task requires either sophisticated in-space servicing or acceptance of degrading performance and stranded capital that becomes orbital debris as components age and fail.

Burning satellites up when they become obsolete is not environmentally neutral: the process injects metal particles into the upper atmosphere where they can affect winds, temperatures and ozone chemistry.

Moving data centres to space will not eliminate AI's energy and emissions challenge; it will simply redistribute it into a system that is harder to monitor, regulate and decarbonise. The full life cycle of space data centres, including manufacturing, launch, operations and end-of-life disposal, could involve emissions that rival or exceed those of terrestrial data centres, according to researchers at Saarland University.

Orbital data centres would instead join an increasingly crowded space environment. Every new constellation raises the risk of collisions and debris, threatening communications, weather and navigation services. Scaling data centres to match terrestrial demand would accelerate congestion and degrade the night sky.

The best way to address AI's energy needs is on the ground: decarbonising power grids, improving cooling efficiency and using energy more efficiently. Space is not a shortcut.

The writer is associate director of the Belfer Center programme on emerging technology, scientific advancement and global policy at Harvard University and a former associate director at Nasa

## How war stopped working

POLITICS

Janan Ganesh



To enter the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, visitors pass an old US Army helicopter. In fact, the whole courtyard is given over to menacing but ultimately futile hardware from the American arsenal of the mid-20th century. The implied message – “This was not enough to beat us” – is subtle.

One day, Kyiv might have a museum full of the Russian materiel that failed to subdue Ukraine. The Taliban could certainly show off the gear that was left behind after two decades of botched foreign occupation in Afghanistan. As for Iraq, imagine all the “remnants” from the US misadventure there.

When did a major state last unambiguously win a land war on a significant scale? Desert Storm in 1991, perhaps, but it was settled to a great extent from the air. The Iran-Iraq war was inconclusive. The Soviets lost in Afghanistan before the west did. France gave up on Operation Barkhane, its counterinsurgent mission in the Sahel, in 2022. You are left to cite Russia's invasion of Georgia (population 4.4mn at the time), the still-evolving situation in Gaza and the Falklands war, which happened

nearer to the second world war than to the present.

The world seems to be living through a trend that, if it holds, could scarcely be more profound: the increasing ineffectiveness of war. There is a pattern of military failure, or at least frustration, which covers democratic aggressors and autocratic ones, wars close to home and wars on distant continents, wars against other sovereign states and wars against irregular forces. Vietnam used to be the reference point for the military humbling of a major power. It was such a unique shock as to inform a generation of rather good movies and even a “syn-drome”. Now it seems unexceptional.

It is hard to make this argument without seeming to throw one's hands in the air at the pointlessness of everything. So, to stipulate, air-to-surface strikes without land armies have been fruitful. Think of the ousting of Slobodan Milošević (after a lag) and the beating back of Isis. But reckon too with the limitations. After toppling Muammar Gaddafi without ground forces in Libya, the west lost control of the aftermath. It became mired in Iraq partly because the air attacks of the 1990s had done only so much damage to Saddam Hussein. Both precedents should haunt Donald Trump as he contemplates a new round of strikes against Iran.

If we are witnessing the impotence of the world's leading armed forces, what explains it?

For one thing, the means of violence have spread more widely. It does not take a major state, or a state at all, to use

drones or guerrilla forces. Autonomous weapons systems can offset a lack of personnel. A “porcupine strategy” has been suggested for Taiwan, but even smaller and weaker entities have their quills. A generation has passed since the British general Rupert Smith, in *The Utility of Force*, wrote that unending “wars amongst the people” had succeeded the chivalrous old world of discrete battles with clear outcomes. That was before the Afghanistan war really soured and before Russia got stuck in Ukraine. This prescient book just needs an “f” before the second word of its title.

At the same time, fear of nuclear escalation is quite the inhibitor. Countries will not do whatever it takes to win a war. Even if the state under attack is nuke-less, the aggressor has to keep in

## There is a pattern of military failure that covers democratic aggressors and autocratic ones

mind third parties that have the bomb. In the old world, Russia may have struck the US or Britain to deter their support for Ukraine. That is now (we trust) unthinkable. How odd that Korea is the “forgotten war”, given it prefigured the world of indecisive conflict. The stalemate on the peninsula came about in part because the US and China wanted to avoid a nuclear exchange more than they wanted their proxies to win.

Anyway, it is easier to guess the causes of war's mixed recent record than to predict the consequences. On the face of it, war should become less common, as states decide it entails too much cost for too little gain. There is a lot of journalistic certainty around now that a “might is right” world is coming. This should be hedged a bit. Powerful states might feel legally and morally unshackled to use force in “their” historical spheres of influence. That does not mean it will work. If they grow reticent, having seen the Russian experience in Ukraine, that is the next best thing to a world in which such wars are seen as wrong in principle.

But life wouldn't be life if things were



Carl Godfrey

## Let Chinese mainland tourists return to Taiwan

functioned as a soft buffer. An island that receives thousands of mainland retirees and backpackers a day diminishes the chances of armed conflict.

Since 2016, mainland visits to the island have declined dramatically, to just over half a million in 2025. After the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party took power in Taipei, Beijing paused individual tourists, and the DPP took advantage of Covid-19 to shut down completely.

Mainland tourists always need permits from both Taipei and Beijing in order to travel. Now, neither side currently grants them for individual tourism, and both largely withhold licences for group tours. While both sides trade blame for the downturn, each has also signalled interest in reversing the trend.

The group tours, however, require facilitation by Taipei, which has so far maintained a cautious stance, citing the need for balance and safety as well as concerns about “healthy and orderly” tourism. Such worries were reasonable when Taiwan was receiving 4mn visitors annually.

Today, the immediate issue is not overcrowding but the near-total

absence of mainland tourists. The idea of balance is difficult to apply meaningfully when Taiwanese travellers to the mainland already outnumber mainland visitors by a wide margin. Easing restrictions is the only practical means of moving towards balance.

Beijing doesn't profess worries about the safety of tourism in either direction.

## Even when sensitive questions remain, progress in isolated areas can serve to temper tensions

It has kept individual Taiwanese entry to the mainland open, registering 4.89mn visitors in 2025. In early 2024, general secretary Xi Jinping told former Taiwanese leader Ma Ying-jeou that Beijing welcomed mainland residents to travel to Taiwan “as much as possible”.

Taipei probably worries about infiltration or spying, but a decade ago it successfully managed mass tourism with appropriate rules and enforcement. Tourism need not become

a hostage to excessive suspicion. If Taipei were to show greater flexibility – potentially with encouragement from the US – it could help stabilise cross-strait ties.

Beijing has already made high-profile political statements about restoring tourism and begun limited reopening measures without securing substantive concessions from Taipei. This creates an opportunity for reciprocal steps. To start, Taiwan could facilitate the return of tour groups from Shanghai and Fujian. It could also allow airlines and shipping companies to restore routes in line with market demand.

Taipei could also align its travel alert for the mainland with that of the US, which in 2024 downgraded its advisory for China to the same level as France and Germany. Individual legal cases on the mainland involving Taiwanese residents are often highlighted, as Beijing sometimes prosecutes views or actions it deems criminally secessionist. However, these cases are statistically insignificant relative to the millions of Taiwanese trips to the mainland each year.

US President Donald Trump has claimed a strong interest in promoting

peace and in managing the US-China relationship constructively. He and other global leaders with a stake in regional stability should treat tourism as a means of de-escalation.

Reopening tourism will not resolve fundamental disputes. Tourism has always been entangled with politics. Taipei may find it difficult to welcome mainland tourists while warships operate nearby, but compartmentalisation is possible. Even when sensitive questions have remained unresolved, the two sides managed to ink arrangements on direct flights, sea links and post services; progress in isolated areas can serve to temper broader systemic tensions.

Tourism cannot solve everything. But a meaningful message of restraint can be delivered through mundane reality: a full arrivals hall, regular flights operating at scale and tour buses moving without fanfare. Peace in the Taiwan Strait will be strengthened by the presence of civilians – and by routines that make escalation harder to justify.

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