

The many fruits of Meghalaya's creative economy

Post-covid, Meghalaya decided to revive its economy by focusing on the creative arts. The result is a delightful medley of food, literature and music experiments



CULT
FRICTION
SANDIP ROY

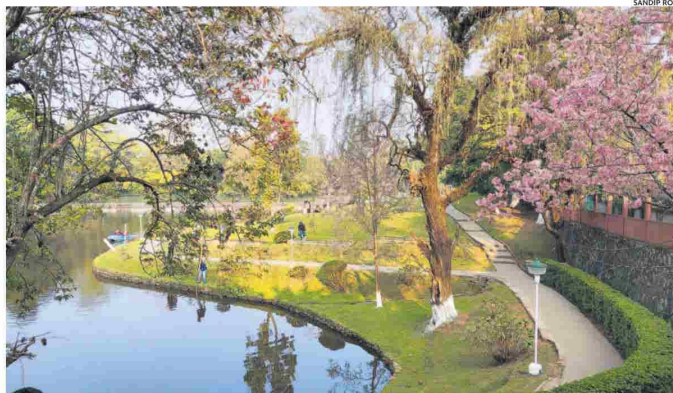
At a literary festival one expects to come back with the usual haul. Autographed books. Selfies with authors. A tote bag.

But as a writer I am embarrassed to admit I bought no books at the Shillong Literary Festival in November. My excuse was books are heavy. I was already carrying some and there was no room in my luggage. However I managed to find room for some very unlitary goodies—bottles of fruit wine carefully swaddled in T-shirts and socks.

I felt like a literary traitor. Every year I go to the Kolkata Book Fair, the world's largest non-trade book fair. And every year I make snide remarks about how the lines for the food stalls selling biryani and fish fries are longer and busier than the lines to get into the bookstores. Now I was one of those people.

But then I remembered what IAS officer and Meghalaya commissioner D. Vijay Kumar had said at the opening of the Shillong Literary Festival. He said post-covid, the state decided the way it wanted to revive its economy was to focus on the "creative economy." The literary festival was part of it, as were the Chief Minister's Meghalaya Grassroots Music Program (CMMGP), films, design and food. And fruit wine.

As I walked to the festival venue past Ward's Lake and cherry trees in pastel bloom, the food stalls were just setting up but smiling vendors already offered samples of fruit wine. "It's barely 10 in the morning," I protested feebly. "It's just a sample," John, a beaming young man replied as he offered a swig of dark



Cherry blossoms at Ward's Lake, Shillong, in November.

sohiong or Meghalaya blackberry wine. It was surely wine o'clock somewhere.

Sohiong oak reserve promised "dark berry notes with a smooth finish" while the bayberry wine claimed it would deliver a "tasty berry burst and earthy depth." It was a fruit bonanza—strawberry, guava, jamun, chikoo. Everything non-grape. Maryanne Hynnieta of The Little Haven winery told me her dream is to make wine even with the *bhoot jholokia* chilli. A little further down Mishmi Deb at The Taste of Shillong offered ice creams in local flavours—creamy khasi rice, sweet-tart sohiong and the state's famous golden turmeric.

Over at the literature festival stage, a Booker winner was about to begin speaking. But the ice cream was melting and needed my urgent attention.

At this time of the year the cherry

blossom is in bloom in Shillong. A literature festival framed by pink cherry blossoms next to a placid lake under clear blue skies is fairytale enough. As Booker winner Banu Mushtaq said at the inauguration, "To stand in Shillong feels like walking into a page that has been quietly waiting for me." If that page also comes with blackberry wine and chicken with bamboo shoots so much the better.

Like every state blessed with forests and natural splendour, Meghalaya grapples with thorny issues of development—deforestation and mining, for example. But it's still heartening to see a state trying to steep in its own creative juices in so many ways.

The Chief Minister's Meghalaya Grassroots Music Program, started in 2022, funds young aspiring musicians for small gigs at cafes just to get an eco-

system going. It helps that the chief minister Conrad Sangma is himself a musician and likes to strum a guitar and belt out *Summer of '69* on occasion. The state also funds young filmmakers. It has its own OTT platform Hello Meghalaya. At the festival, Sangma wondered whether there could be a writing competition next time to encourage more local voices and local stories.

National award-winning filmmaker Dominic Sangma grew up in the hills of Meghalaya. His school was on the top of a mountain. Every day as he went uphill he would tell himself stories to while away the time. "I wanted to go to Mumbai to make films," he said during a discussion. "After I went to the film institute, I wanted to go back home to tell stories of my people for the world."

Now those stories are in bloom. Like

the cherry blossom. The cherry trees were planted here as part of a massive beautification drive in the late 1970s. These days there's a Cherry Blossom Festival every autumn. Shillong, Scotland of the East, is now a *sakura* city like Kyoto in Japan. It all feels cosmopolitan in a way many big Indian cities do not.

Elsewhere, it's all about global brands. Here it's a cosmopolitanism that tries to remain rooted in the local. At Shad Skye, a plush bar overlooking the hustle of Police Bazar in central Shillong, the literary festival's opening party had cocktails with familiar names like gin sling and Old Fashioned. But the bartender said they also had local infusions from Meghalaya and its sister states—drinks infused with black sesame, pinewood bitters, khasi mandarin, bamboo shoot. They were probably hesitant to offer them at the reception, unsure how guests from other parts of the world would take to whisky with black rice.

Downstairs from Shad Skye, Nonna Mei, a new Italian restaurant, serves Italian food but with a local touch. Even the name brings together an Italian grandmother and a khasi one though there is no real heart-warming grandmothers meeting story here. But it's a bold way to imagine Italian food.

The sweet baby carrots came roasted on a bed of mash but instead of the usual cheese, it was the local staple, *khur*. The waiter warned me that the blood sausage on the pizza might be an acquired taste and the red chillies would be hot. As for the negroni, he asked hesitantly "Are you okay with pork?" It's a smoked pork negroni. For those who do not eat pork there is Lak-
along turmeric. My drink arrives—a deep ruby red with a jaunty curl of crispy pork skin as garnish.

This is a very different Shillong from the town I knew on holidays as a child when Bengali families would arrive en masse to see Elephant Falls and eat

pineapple soufflé at the very venerable Pinewood Hotel where a log fire burned in the fireplace. That Shillong was so picture-perfect and wholesome one could imagine it as an Enid Blyton story setting. This Shillong is flaunting the funkiness that was once kept discreetly hidden away from the "mainland." Now its infusing its cocktails with it. And fermenting its fruits.

It's not happened organically. Wine-making is as old as the hills. Hynnieta of The Little Haven winery says her mother-in-law would make wine at home from the excess fruit in their backyard. But it was never quite legalised. In 1947 one Captain Douglas Hunt set up a winery for Mawphlang cherry wine and brandy. But this hobbyist wine has now been developed into a bona-fide tourist attraction. Excise rules were amended to legalise production and sale of homemade wines. Now the rice beer of Garo Hills can be bottled, canned and sold with smart labels at places like the lit fest. Bitchi, the rice beer, even has a GI tag. The state just extended VAT exemption on its fruit wine to 10 years to boost production. Wine tourism, like the Cherry Blossom Festival, is a thing. But it can be too much of a good thing.

Just as I feared, thanks to my bottles, I was over my allowed weight. The airline staff at the tiny Shillong airport were sympathetic but firm. "But I can't take the wine out," I said sadly imagining myself sitting at the airport and drinking a bottle of Himalayan dark cherry wine aka *te.gisim*.

"Isn't there a book or something you could take out?" she asked. And that's just what I did. I returned from a lit fest, the books made room for wine in my luggage.

But then again they were all fruits of the same creative economy.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

Why caste census will not annihilate the foundations of inequality

Anand Teltumbde mines data and history to analyse the narrow framing, as well as futility, of a caste census

Paranjay Guha Thakurta

Anand Teltumbde, an academic and an activist, has written an unusual book that seeks to combine scholarship with popular political rhetoric that is not always negative. Rhetoric is a way of speaking or writing that is intended to impress or influence people but is not always considered sincere. Teltumbde is not insincere. However, he is convinced that he has to provoke people to challenge the notion that the impending all-India caste census, the first since 1931, on which there is consensus cutting across political party lines and apparent ideological divisions, could represent a new beginning in re-emphasising the importance of caste in the country's society and politics.

The author seeks to refute the view that only after a caste census is conducted can there be a forward movement towards identifying and then resolving the complex and multifarious issues surrounding social divisions in India to eventually achieve the laudable goal of the "annihilation of caste"—the title of the speech written in 1936 by B.R. Ambedkar that he was supposed to deliver in Lahore but did not.

The uniqueness of the caste system in Indian society, and the overlapping and intersections of caste and class, have been topics of innumerable books and writings over the centuries. Teltumbde refers to many of these in his book. A mere glance at the chapter titles reveals the wide range of topics the author has attempted to deal with. From the seeds of *jati* in ancient India, the impact of Brahminism, Buddhism and Islam, the colonial construction of caste, how the British sought to control, divide and rule, and onwards to what happened after 1947: the making of what the author calls "constitutional caste," the B.P. Mandal Commission and

the expansion of reservations in government jobs and admissions to government educational institutions. The writer also discusses the issue of reservation of jobs in the private sector.

Teltumbde delineates "data politics: miscounts and missed counts" before going into what he believes are the ploys used by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) before suddenly agreeing to a national caste census months before the recently concluded elections to the Bihar legislative assembly that was swept by the incumbent National Democratic Alliance. When the BJP came to power in 2014, it inherited the raw data of the "socio-economic and caste census" (SECC) that was conducted in 2011 when the second United Progressive Alliance led by the Indian National Congress was in power. The socioeconomic data from the SECC was made public in 2015. Subsequent state-level caste surveys took place. But, as Teltumbde points out, the BJP government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has used various justifications to not release granular caste data generated by the SECC.

Nearly a century ago, the British government had identified 4,147 castes. The SECC returned more than ten times the number. Teltumbde argues that by its very definition, caste divides and in recent years the number of castes has only multiplied. Unlike certain advocates of social justice, he contends that counting and categorising castes will not help redress economic and social inequalities. After elaborating on the definitions of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), extremely backward or most backward castes, and economically weaker sections, he argues that the census behind the caste-based census is nothing but a "con" to justify the title of the book.

Will there be a quota for everyone? Can annihilation of caste ever be reality? As the book blurbs of the book states, Teltumbde "wades through" the history, the mathematics and the dynamics of these debates in an era where the government frequently "fudges the truth and numbers" to look at the future of reservation as affirmative action or negative discrimination and a "way out of the mess" we are supposed to be in.

The author—who has written four books since he was released on bail in November 2022 after he was charged and

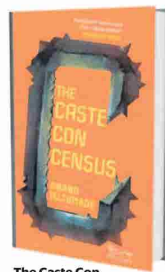


Teltumbde argues that the inherent definition of caste is divisive, and that the number of castes has recently multiplied. ISTOCKPHOTO

incarcerated for around two-and-a-half years under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act in the infamous Bhima Koregaon case—even handed in his criticism of most political parties, and not just the BJP. He contends that the census could, like reservations, be another method of governing and managing caste, as author Gyan Prakash notes in his commendation for the book.

The Left in India has for long argued that caste and class overlap more often than not, that it is next to impossible to find a Brahmin who cleans public toilets for a living, unlike locating a rich Dalit who not only firmly believes in the virtues of free enterprise but who flaunts her or his riches as a mark of political strength.

One prominent example would be that of Union minister Babu Jagjivan Ram, said to be an excellent administrator. Another, more recent example, would be former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati whose career appears to be currently at a rather low ebb. Yet, the Left parties, less so



The Caste Census: By Anand Teltumbde, Narayana, 256 pages, ₹499

the Congress, do acknowledge during moments of introspection that their failure to appreciate the importance of caste has contributed in no small measure to their political marginalisation in many parts of the country.

Teltumbde says the current discourse on the caste census is "narrowly framed" and could become a "technocratic exercise aimed at recalibrating reservations for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes" and OBCs.

The discourse is rarely "seen as a tool to expose the full spectrum of caste-based inequality, particularly the domination of elite castes who have historically cornered a disproportionate share of power, privilege and public resources."

He adds that in its limited framing, the caste census "becomes a means to moderate petty squabbles over leftovers among the lower orders, rather than a challenge to the foundations of inequality itself."

After leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi raised the issue

of a caste census to challenge the Modi government, the BJP suddenly decided to support it after opposing it as a divisive move. The caste census would become a part of the forthcoming national census that has been postponed for the first time since the last few decades of the 20th century, for more than four years on rather specious grounds (notably, the covid-19 pandemic).

The general census, Teltumbde points out, was delayed with the "ulterior motive" of ensuring the completion of a delimitation exercise that would benefit the ruling regime in New Delhi and eliminate threats to its continuation. The author argues that the BJP's political opponents would be naive to underestimate the ruling party's ability to retain the support of the lower strata of the backward castes, and obtain new support from these sections of the population.

At a more general level, Teltumbde draws several comparisons with what is happening in India with developments in other countries such as the US and South Africa in terms of programmes of affirmative action, and the right-wing backlash against these. Closer home, he writes that in the absence of clarity on what kind of data is to be collected and for what purpose, the proposed caste census would not be transformative.

He may be correct but he is also sweeping in his generalisation that the country's political climate is "intellectually starved." The demand for a caste census, he believes, has been advanced by an upwardly mobile minority even as the deprived majority has been pushed towards deprivation and made increasingly dependent on government doles. One can disagree with him but, as other commentators and activists like Yogendra Yadav point out, you cannot disregard his arguments nor brush them aside easily.

In conclusion, Teltumbde claims that a caste census does not simply reflect Indian society; it reshapes it. He states that while the caste census is a "pragmatic measure" and may appear necessary at this juncture, the politics that follow must be guided by—and not become a substitute for—the ultimate goal of annihilation of caste.

Paranjay Guha Thakurta is a journalist, author, publisher, maker of documentary films and music videos, and an occasional teacher.

Neeraj Kanwar

ALWAYS IN MOTION

The managing director of Apollo Tyres on learning the ropes from ground up and how being the sponsors of India's cricket team jersey gives them greater visibility

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

Amin Ali

In October, when the Indian cricket team walked on to the pitch in Ahmedabad during the Test series against West Indies with the Apollo Tyres logo on their shirts, it was a moment of intense pride for Neeraj Kanwar. "It's not just a logo. It is India's cricket team jersey that sports Apollo Tyres," he says.

The managing director of the Gurgaon-headquartered multinational tyre company, founded in 1972 by his grandfather Ramnaq Singh, says the ₹579-crore, three-year deal with the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) to become the principal sponsor of the national team was a well thought-out marketing move.

"We are reaching tier 2, 3, 4 markets in India and also wherever cricket and the Indian team is being watched across the globe. This gives us big visibility," he says over a call from London, where he spends part of his time. The Indian women's cricket team lifting the World Cup soon after the deal was announced made the association feel even more special. Kanwar hopes the men's team will follow with a World Cup victory next year.

It's a good time for Kanwar, 54, to look back at his journey with the company, which he joined in 1995 after graduating in industrial engineering from Lehigh University in Pennsylvania and working in a bank in the US for a year. He entered the company quietly, almost anonymously, as he wanted to understand it from the ground up. "I was a very junior guy. I joined as Neeraj Singh, not as Kanwar, so that no one knew who I was," he says.

His first posting was as a trainee in marketing at the transport hubs of Delhi, places where tyres are sold in the heat and noise of India's trucking lanes. He worked in Peera Garhi and Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, where dealers and truck operators haggled over prices, and technicians

Apollo Tyres is a ₹27,000-crore global organisation with 19,000 employees, seven plants and a presence in more than 180 countries

spoke freely. "There was a lot of abusive language," he says with amusement. "But that is how I got real feedback and understood what our customers really thought."

Those early years after joining the business, whether it was working at the Kochi factory, travelling across Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Delhi in his Maruti Gypsy, or selling tyres out of vans and negotiating with transporters, shaped his instincts more than anything else. He recalls those days, emphasising how much of Apollo's transformation is rooted in those ground-level learnings.

Kanwar's father, Onkar, the current chairman, took charge when Apollo was still a regional manufacturer in Kerala and gradually expanded it into a national and later global player through steady execution and a long-term view of the industry. When Kanwar joined the company in 1995, Apollo was already a 20-year-old company with revenues of about ₹1,300 crore and two plants in Gujarat and Kochi. But it remained largely a truck tyre company. "We were one product and one country," he says. "Then slowly the economy opened, the car market grew, Suzuki came in, and the mindset and country started changing," he explains.

The real shift came in 2005, when Apollo set itself the ambitious goal of becoming a \$2-billion company by 2010. "At that time we were a \$350-400 million company. It was a six-times growth target," says Kanwar. "Passion in Motion" became the internal call for change, and Apollo stepped up investments in R&D, brand building and organisational strength. In 2006, the company made its first acquisition outside India by buying Dunlop Tyres in South Africa. Three years later, it acquired Vredestein, the Dutch premium tyre brand. "That got us into Europe, the most premium market in the world. And then we never looked back," says Kanwar.

Today, Apollo Tyres is a ₹27,000-crore global organisation with 19,000 employees, seven plants and a presence in more than 180 countries. "When I joined, we were ₹1,300 crore. The company has gone through a huge change and so have the people. The mindset has changed," he says.

The internal evolution was equally

important. Early experiences revealed gaps in communication, transparency and HR practices. Salaries were sometimes delayed, and systems lacked structure. "That is when we changed the whole thing. That stabilised the organisation," he says. Many employees who joined in the 1990s remain with the company even today, with some completing 25 or 30 years.

Over the years, Apollo has expanded its product range far beyond its truck-bus bias tyre origins. It now caters to all categories—radials, passenger vehicles, two-wheelers, farm and off-highway tyres—and leads the truck-bus and passenger vehicle segments in India. The company established two global R&D centres, in the Netherlands in 2013 and in India in 2015, and set up three major greenfield facilities in Chennai in 2008-09, Hungary in 2017 and Andhra Pradesh in 2020. From making 2 million tyres annually in 1995, Apollo today produces 31.7 million.

Kanwar himself has moved through the company's various departments. "My father always says change is required. Move fast," explains Kanwar. "I have gone through the whole episode. Marketing, manufacturing, strategic planning, finance," he fondly recalls.

In the journey of global expansions, his first big test came with the \$2.5-billion bid for Cooper Tyres in the US in 2013. The deal eventually fell through after two years of negotiations. "It taught me a lot," he says. "But the next morning I said let us not get demotivated. What is

next?" What followed was the Hungarian plant, Apollo's first European manufacturing facility, which began production in 2017. "It was a foreign land for us but our engineers put together a beautiful plant," he says.

Brand-building evolved in parallel. Apollo's association with sport began in the 2000s through its support of Mahesh Bhupathi's tennis academy in 2008, where it invested ₹100 crore to scout and train young talent. The mission was to build a homegrown singles winner. This association continued for three-four years. Football followed in 2013. Apollo became the "Global Tyre Partner" of English Premier League football club Manchester United, a partnership that still continues. "Football has the maximum viewership in the world," Kanwar says. "It connects cultures."

Yet cricket remains the closest to his heart. "Cricket is something I have grown up with," he says. The endorsement space, specially bat logos, were all booked by other tyre brands. He knew he had to look beyond these usual partnerships to make an impact. In 2018, he approached Sachin Tendulkar soon after the cricketer retired. He became Apollo's brand ambassador. "I grew up watching him play and we became friends. I do not like to settle for a bat logo or a hoarding. Sachin is humble and grounded and he fits our brand totally," he explains.

The opportunity to sponsor the Indian cricket team also revived chatter about the so-called "jersey jinx." Previous sponsors

Who is your role model?

Onkar Kanwar and Steve Jobs.

How do you unwind?

By spending time with my family and friends.

What is left to be achieved?

Make Apollo Tyres one of the most admired tyre companies globally.

like Sahara, Byju's and Dream11 had faced business setbacks. "I was told by my team about the jokes and superstitions," Kanwar says. "I said, I have a lot of faith in my company. Apollo has strong roots and strong foundation. This building is not falling, I can guarantee you that."

When the logo finally appeared on the India jersey during the India-West Indies series in Ahmedabad, he felt a moment of rare satisfaction. "It gives me goosebumps," he says.

People are watching cricket on TV, mobile phones. They are watching live matches and highlights. They are watching our brand. This gives us big visibility," he adds.

Meanwhile, Apollo has also continued to strengthen its technical spine. Its two major R&D centres in India and the Netherlands employ more than 300 scientists working on rolling resistance, carbon neutrality and sustainable manufacturing. "Today about 26-27% of our energy is clean. The target is 50-60%," Kanwar says. European tests regularly place Apollo and Vredestein tyres among the world's best. A chief digital officer now leads data hubs in London and Hyderabad, where machine data is uploaded to the cloud and analysed for patterns to improve manufacturing discipline. "That is how we improve productivity," he says. AI and predictive analytics are now integral to Apollo's operations.

Despite all the global expansion and advanced technology, Kanwar has not lost the habit he picked up as a trainee in

When I joined, we were ₹1,300 crore. The company has gone through a huge change and so have the people. The mindset has changed

Delhi's transport lanes. When he's at a traffic light in Mumbai or stepping out of a car in London, he instinctively looks at the tyres around him—the treads, the wear, the brand. "I am a tyre guy," he laughs. "I look at the tyres of every car at red lights." This habit is also a real-time feedback that tells him where the company is gaining and where it still has ground to cover.

The future, he thinks, remains full of opportunity. "Tyres will always be there. Whether it is an electric vehicle or a combustion vehicle, we all have to travel," he says with a smile.

Away from work, his world is anchored by family. His daughter studies at Columbia University in the US, while his son, a London School of Economics graduate, has started Zeus Labs, an AI logistics-tech startup. His wife, Simran, an entrepreneur who has built Nutriburst, a vitamin gummy brand born in the UK and expanding into India.

He remains deeply connected to the larger Kanwar family. His father continues to guide the business. His siblings, Shalini Kanwar Chand and Rajja Kanwar, though not associated with the company, remain an important part of his family life.

From changing scooter stepney covers in Old Delhi to placing Apollo Tyres on the country's most cherished jersey, Kanwar's journey mirrors that of the company he leads—constantly learning and evolving, and always in motion.

Amin Ali is a New Delhi-based journalist.



Economy

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2025

IN THE NEWS

SHAH: GOVT AIMS TO STRENGTHEN COOPERATIVES



UNION MINISTER FOR COOPERATION Amit Shah said that the government, as part of its "definite strategy", aims to triple the contribution of the cooperative sector to the country's GDP in the next few years and create over 500 million active cooperative members.

INDIA & CHILE CONCLUDE 4TH ROUND OF TALKS



INDIA AND CHILE concluded the fourth round of negotiations for the proposed CEPA, an official said. During the five-day talks, the official said, both sides held constructive and solutions-oriented discussions that resulted in substantial progress.

Sebi proposes to streamline FPIs registration process



MARKETS REGULATOR SEBI on Friday proposed a comprehensive overhaul of the Foreign Portfolio Investor (FPI) framework, aiming to streamline the registration process and introduce an abridged application option for related funds.

Karnataka CM urges Modi to compensate GST revenue loss

KARNATAKA CHIEF MINISTER Siddaramaiah on Friday once again flagged his demand that the Centre compensate states for the revenue loss arising from GST rate rationalisation, warning that the trend poses a serious threat to state finances.

Delhi AQI still 'very poor' on year's coldest day so far



A THICK VEIL of smog descended over the capital on Friday, with the average AQI settling at 327, in the 'very poor' category, while the city shivered on its coldest December morning so far this year with the mercury dipping to 5.6 degrees Celsius.

AGENCIES

ALLIANCE TO EXPLORE SECOND NUCLEAR POWER PLANT IN INDIA

India, Russia vow to deepen nuclear energy partnership

● Putin assures uninterrupted fuel supply to India

ARUNIMA BHARADWAJ
New Delhi, December 5

INDIA AND RUSSIA on Friday reaffirmed their cooperation in the energy sector, with a strong emphasis on civil nuclear energy, critical minerals, and clean energy partnerships.

In the nuclear energy domain, the two countries confirmed their intention to broaden cooperation on life-cycle support for operating the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) and on non-power applications. They also agreed on an expanded agenda of engagement in the peaceful use of atomic energy and related high technologies.

In a joint statement, both sides recognised the importance of continuing discussions on the second site in India for a nuclear power plant (NPP), with India committed to finalising the formal allotment of the site in accordance with earlier signed agreements.

"The sides agreed to accelerate technical and commercial discussions on the VVER of the Russian design, research and joint development of nuclear plants, localisation and joint manufacturing of nuclear equipment and fuel assemblies for Russian designed large capacity NPPs subject to terms



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a state reception, in New Delhi, on Friday. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was also present.

and conditions as mutually agreeable," the statement said. "There was a considerable amount of discussion on nuclear-related issues between the two leaders. Kudankulam 1 and 2 are already connected to the national grid generating electricity. The work is currently underway on units 3 to 6. Where in fact a number of critical shipments with regard to units 3 and 4 are underway. The work to conclude agreements for similar things with respect to units 5 and 6 is already also proceeding in parallel," said Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri.

"When it comes to the second site, this is an issue that has been under discussion between the two countries for some time now. As you are aware, selecting a site for a nuclear power plant is an elaborate and complicated exercise. It has to take into account various factors. These are all under consideration of authorities concerned," Misri said.

The partnership will also extend to small modular reactors, floating nuclear plants, and potential non-energy applications of nuclear technology, including in medicine and agriculture.

During the 23rd India-Russia Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that energy security has long been a "strong and important pillar" of the India-Russia partnership. He also stressed that cooperation in critical

minerals is essential for creating a secure and diversified global supply chain. "This will give solid support to our partnership in clean energy, high-tech manufacturing and new-age industries," he added.

Both sides reviewed their wide-ranging cooperation in the energy sector — described as pillar of the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership. They noted ongoing and prospective collaborations between Indian and Russian firms in areas such as oil and oil products, refining and petrochemical technologies, oilfield services, upstream technologies, LNG and LPG infrastructure, underground coal gasification (UCG), and nuclear projects.

India's fertiliser units to form JV with UralChem

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, December 5

TO ENSURE along-term supply of fertilisers and curb price volatility, Indian and Russian companies on Friday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to form a joint venture (JV) for establishing a large urea manufacturing facility in Russia.

Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilisers, Indian Potash signed the MoU with UralChem, Russia's largest producer of potash and ammonium nitrate, to set up a urea plant that is expected to ensure a steady supply of soil nutrients to India and reduce import costs.

The planned urea plant is expected to have an annual production capacity of 1.8 to 2 million tonnes (MT). Technical parameters and financial viability of the JV are currently under discussion.

The JV will be anchored on

The planned urea plant is expected to have an annual production capacity of 1.8 to 2 MT

the supply of ammonia produced by Togliattiazot JSC, with Indian companies providing financing for the project until commercial operations begin.

"The parties are also negotiating the corporate structure and governance approach in respect of the joint venture," UralChem said in a statement. The UralChem group includes three major Russian companies — Uralchem JSC, Uralalkali PJSC, and Toaz JSC — with a cumulative production capacity of about 25 MT.

"India is a leading agricultural player globally and also one of the world's biggest consumers of mineral fertilisers. For Uralchem Group, India has his-

torically been a strategic market, and we are committed to expanding and deepening our cooperation with Indian partners," Dmitry Konyaev, CEO of UralChem, said in a statement.

India's largest such JV abroad is Oman India Fertiliser, a collaboration between IFCCO and Kribicho, which produces around 1.65 MT of urea annually.

In 2024, India imported 4.7 MT of Russian fertilisers, including urea and potash — according to the Russian Association of Fertiliser Producers. This year, Russia could meet 25% of India's fertiliser import needs, trade sources said.

In their joint statement, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed steps to secure long-term fertiliser supplies for India and discussed the potential establishment of additional joint ventures in this sector.

Select products can increase exports to Russia: GTRI

INDIA COULD INCREASE its exports to Russia seven-fold if it succeeds in penetrating key sectors such as food, pharmaceuticals, textiles, and machinery, according to a study by the trade policy think tank Global Trade Research Initiative.

India currently supplies only 2.4% of Russia's total imports, valued at \$202.6 billion. While bilateral trade is approaching \$70 billion, India's exports remain stuck below \$5 billion, with imports overwhelmingly dominated by crude oil worth \$50 billion. The bilateral trade has become an oil relationship rather than a broad trade partnership.

In FY25, India exported just \$4.9 billion worth of goods to Russia, while importing \$63.8 billion, leading to a massive trade deficit of \$58.9 billion. For trade to expand beyond oil, GTRI said India must be the "plumbing of commerce".

FE BUREAU

National security, health cess Bill gets House nod

FE BUREAU
New Delhi, December 5

THE LOK SABHA on Friday passed the Health Security and National Security Cess Bill, 2025, clearing the way for a dedicated cess on pan masala manufacturing units to fund the strengthening of national security and public health systems.

The Bill was cleared by voice vote after Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman responded to an extensive debate, clarifying that the cess would be shared with the states, as public health falls under the state list.

Sitharaman said the cess aims to create a "dedicated and predictable resource stream" for two national priorities — health and defence. The levy will apply to machines installed or production processes used in manufacturing pan masala and similar products, and will be calculated based on production capacity. This cess will be imposed in addition to

NIRMALA SITHARAMAN, FINANCE MINISTER



Cess aims to create a dedicated and predictable resource stream for two national priorities — health and defence

The cess, as a percentage of gross total revenue, stands at 6.1% in FY26

the existing GST regime.

She emphasised that the move would not affect GST revenues. Pan masala will continue to attract the highest GST slab of 40% based on consumption, ensuring that the new cess functions independently of GST inflows.

The minister added that the cess, as a percentage of gross total revenue, stands at 6.1% in the current fiscal, lower than the 7% average recorded between 2010 and 2014.

Highlighting the need for enhanced defence spending, Sitharaman underscored that modern warfare increasingly relies on precision weaponry, cyber capabilities, space-based systems, and advanced surveillance technologies — all of which are capital-intensive. While defence is a central subject, she said the Centre must mobilise adequate resources to meet evolving security challenges.

Low farming cost after GST cuts on fertilisers: Nadda

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, December 5

THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION on September 22, to reduce GST on micronutrient fertilisers from 12% to 5% has lowered production costs for small and marginal farmers, who are particularly sensitive to price fluctuations, Fertiliser Minister JP Nadda said in Parliament on Friday.

Stating that lower input costs have encouraged farmers to apply the recommended doses of micronutrients, Nadda said, "As per Indian micro-fertiliser manufacturers association, due to reduction of GST from 12% to 5%, savings would be of ₹140 per acre in paddy, ₹199 per

acre in sugarcane, ₹446 per acre in potato and ₹146 per acre in wheat to farmers."

He added that reducing GST from 18% to 5% on key raw materials — such as ammonia and sulphuric acid — used in fertiliser manufacturing has eased working capital needs, reduced the accumulation of input tax credit, and improved cash flows for manufacturers.

These measures, Nadda said, would boost domestic production and support the availability of soil nutrients to farmers.

The lowering of GST on biopesticides from 12% to 5% is also expected to reduce input costs and promote wider adoption of integrated pest management (IPM) practices.



QUICK PICKS

Govt, ICAR sign MoU for 5-year nano urea project

THE GOVERNMENT has signed an MoU with ICAR for a network project focused on nano urea. Union Minister Anupriya Patel informed the Lok Sabha on Friday.

No irregularity found in Bihar elections: Govt

NO IRREGULARITIES WERE found in the conduct of assembly elections in Bihar, the government told Lok Sabha on Friday citing the Election Commission.

Road accident deaths rise to 177,000 in 2024

THE NUMBER of road accident fatalities in India rose 2.3% to over 177,000 in 2024, resulting in the death of 485 persons every day, Parliament was informed.

'Time for India's drug makers to move up the value chain'

As a leading global supplier of generics drugs and vaccines, India has built a strong competitiveness by producing affordable, high-quality medicines at scale. But the sector is now entering a new phase of transition that will require sustained investments in R&D and skills to move up the value chain. Professor of strategy and digital transformation at Switzerland-based IMD Business School Didier Bonnet spoke to Manu Kaushik at the CII IndiaEdge 2025 about the challenges for the industry, use of AI, and the row over data exclusivity provisions. Excerpts.

How can Indian drug companies move up the value chain? This could be via a combination of two strategies. One is how can Indian companies capture even more of the generics markets from their

production advantage built over several years. But the industry does not want to stay there because otherwise India will become the back-office production centre.

Moving up the value chain means getting into advanced drugs, different types of drugs and specialty applications. Some companies actually have two different streams of products — low-cost brands and new drugs. A lot of pharma companies have developed a dual model of sorts over a period of time. It might sound nice on paper, but running a low-cost and high-end business in the same structure is very hard.

How should Indian pharma companies shift their focus from producing generics to creating new molecules? No drugmaker is going to start producing a wide array of specialty drugs from day

one. They could pick one (category), work on it, manage it slightly differently, build the skill set, hire the right people and start growing it. That's the way to transform the business. There are specialty products and very advanced specialty products. The companies have to pick their battles where they can potentially build global competence. The advantage with India is that companies can scale up quickly, which is not true for a lot of countries.

What's your estimate of the potential of the fast-growing weight-loss drugs market, given many of these

GLP-1 drugs will go off patent over the next 1-2 years?

With GLP-1, the companies are now innovating with pills rather than injection. The base R&D technology for the weight-loss drugs actually came from diabetes and other treatments. People are now realising that if the name of the game is to have weight loss drugs, there are other ways through which we can achieve the same results. In a space

of less than five years, GLP-1 segment has evolved from just treating diabetes to treating obesity through an injection in the form of a pen. The fact that a patient doesn't have to inject himself should be a major growth driver for this segment going forward.

The government is planning to bring in data exclusivity provisions in the pharma regulations. Do you think that will enable more global pharma companies to launch their new drugs in the country? I think the pressure will come from Big Pharma,

particularly the US companies. They are quite secretive about some of their clinical trials. I don't think it's something that will be coming to India. It's purely because that's how they work in the US. I think the Indian government will probably crack first, and allow data exclusivity for a few years, and see what happens. Because India needs access to these drugs, companies will ask for protection. So they will find a middle ground somewhere. The argument of Big Pharma is that they put billions of dollars into developing a drug, so why should they share their data on clinical trials. It's a circular argument because everybody is right.

What will be the impact of US tariffs on the global pharma industry? It varies from country to country. US President Trump is basically trying to force others to shift their manufacturing to the US. In Switzer-

land, we have Eli Lilly and Roche. They are quite successful but not just manufacturing but doing R&D activities in Switzerland. It's hard to shift manufacturing to the US. For the most advanced R&D-led molecules, it will take 10 years to build a plant. It's a bit like semiconductors which cannot be manufactured without the supporting ecosystem.

You have talked about ESG integration as a strong long-term value creator. However, the ESG adoption remains uneven across the pharma sector, especially among smaller or API-focused players.

In many sectors, what we've seen is that Indian companies are just doing enough to be compliant. Whereas in a lot of other geographies, people are building strategies around ESG. They are not just making ESG-compliant products, but also using that as a marketing tool. Companies have turned

this compliance issue into a real strategic issue. In the case of pharma, companies are ensuring ESG compliance, but the effect is not as huge as it is in other sectors.

Do you have visibility on the use of AI in the Indian pharma industry? The global pharma industry has been using traditional AI tech like machine learning for a long time. Now, they are starting to use generative AI for a number of applications. The two areas where AI is really paying off are R&D and clinical trials. AI is accelerating the various stages of pharma R&D leading to faster drug discovery. The second is transformation in the clinical trials where the timelines and costs are going down. For Big Pharma, a reduction in R&D costs and faster clinical trials result in savings of hundreds of millions of dollars. In India, it's more of a piloting effort by the companies right now.



Opinion

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2025

An early Xmas gift

Another rate cut in February would not be unwarranted for the sake of growth

TISAN early Christmas for borrowers. Friday's 25-basis-point (bps) cut in the repo rate to 5.25% will lower borrowing costs for a large swathe of consumers and businesses. Equally important, the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) decision to inject about ₹1.5 lakh crore of liquidity into the system should help accelerate the transmission of the rate cut into lower lending rates across banks and financial institutions. The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) had sufficient room to act. Inflation averaged 2.2% in the first half of FY26—well below the 4% target and lower than projected. RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra has indicated that price pressures are likely to remain contained. Core inflation is under control, and stripping out the surge in precious metal prices, retail inflation has been particularly benign. The central bank has also lowered its inflation projection for FY26 to 2% from 2.6%, while trimming its forecasts for Q1FY27 and Q2FY27 to 3.9% and 4% respectively.

Even so, opinion was sharply divided ahead of the policy announcement. Strong real GDP growth in the September quarter and the sharply depreciating rupee led many to believe the central bank would hold rates. The decision to cut suggests that the RBI is prepared to live with the currency weakening past ₹90 to the dollar and is comfortable with current conditions in the external sector. The rate cut also reflects growing unease about the growth outlook. Economic momentum could weaken in the second half as the front-loaded boost from exports fades and government spending slows. Governor Malhotra acknowledged this, noting that while overall growth remains resilient, signs of strain are visible in some indicators. With no trade agreement in sight, exports are likely to continue struggling under the weight of elevated US tariffs.

Moreover, headline GDP growth of 8% in April-September flatters reality; weak deflators have magnified the real growth numbers. While the RBI has raised its FY26 growth forecast by 50 bps to 7.3%, it expects growth in the first half of FY27 to slip below 7%. The central bank also appears uneasy about nominal GDP growth, which at 8.7-8.8% has implications for fiscal arithmetic and corporate earnings alike. If inflation remains on track, another rate cut is possible. The neutral stance leaves the door open. A counter-cyclical policy push is timely and could help revive urban demand while sustaining rural consumption. That said, monetary easing takes time to filter through. Friday's measures are growth-supportive, and the evolving growth-inflation mix keeps the door open for one more rate cut. A further reduction in February would not be unwarranted. Financial conditions should be supportive for rate transmission and for bond market sentiment.

Liquidity conditions should also improve meaningfully. The infusion of durable liquidity—through open market operations (OMO) and the \$5 billion buy-sell swap—ought to ease funding conditions. It is essential that yields, particularly in the corporate bond market, soften to support investment. While benchmark yields initially dropped to 6.46% after the OMO announcement, they subsequently rose after the governor clarified that OMO purchases are aimed at supporting liquidity rather than managing yields. Still, intent matters. The RBI has committed to maintaining adequate liquidity at around 1% of net demand and time liabilities. It must now follow through. In the end, the effectiveness of this easing cycle will not be judged by announcements—but by how quickly cheaper money reaches those who need it most.

The time-tested spirit of Druzha-Dosti

THERE IS CONSIDERABLE international attention on Russian President Vladimir Putin's first visit to India since the war in Ukraine began in 2022 for the 23rd bilateral summit. India's time-tested ties with Russia have passed through a challenging period as it did not join western nations in condemning Russia's invasion, while appealing for dialogue to end the conflict. India was slapped with punitive sanctions by US President Donald Trump for buying Russian oil to fund Putin's war in Ukraine. But times are a-changing with the US intensifying efforts to broker peace between Moscow and Kyiv. New Delhi has much to gain if this initiative succeeds and US-Russian relations improve that will permit it to redefine its strategic ties with both powers.

India's relations with Russia may not have the scope and depth of its alliance with the erstwhile Soviet Union, but they have stood the test of time. It has been 25 years since both nations signed a historic declaration on a strategic partnership and 15 years since it was elevated to a special and privileged strategic partnership. But this relationship has lacked ballast on the economic front—like the loyally sided trade, for instance—to realise the potential of this partnership. The 2030 economic cooperation agreement between India and Russia should enable a more contemporary engagement on the solid foundation of time-tested ties between the world's fastest-growing \$4-trillion economy and a \$2.5-trillion economy that have much to offer each other.

To be sure, Putin also realises this imperative as he told a leading TV channel that "we have laid out an ambitious plan for our collaboration in key domains. The most critical areas are indeed forward-looking. I am referring specifically to high technology. Our partnership with India encompasses such fields as space exploration, energy (notably nuclear power), exemplified by the prominent Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant project (KNPP), shipbuilding, and aviation. There are many interesting areas for cooperation that are looking to the future. Take, for example, artificial intelligence... These are the matters we will discuss".

However, urgent steps are most needed on trade as India's exports are limited while it has imported a lot of Russian oil, taking bilateral trade to \$68.7 billion and its deficit to \$58.9 billion. With US sanctions on Russian oil, the targeted \$100 billion in bilateral trade will not be possible without widening the trade basket through more Indian exports of pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and textiles, besides the smooth settlement of trade transactions in national currencies. A free trade agreement between India and the Eurasian Economic Union and connectivity initiatives like the International North-South Transport Corridor, and the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor could boost trade. Indian skilled workers in IT, construction, and engineering can address the labour needs in Russia. A mobility agreement has been inked in this regard.

The showpiece of Russia's partnership with India is nuclear power generation and defence. The flagship project is, of course, the 6,000 megawatt (MW) KNPP in Tamil Nadu, which will have six VVER-1000 (and possibly VVER-1200) nuclear reactors. KNPP units 1 and 2 have been connected to the national grid in 2013 and 2016. Progress continues in other units. Both Russia and India confirmed their intention to broaden cooperation in nuclear energy, including fuel cycle and life cycle support for operating KNPP.

Defence is a big-ticket item for bilateral cooperation as India extensively uses Russian weaponry. While additional procurement of S-400 surface-to-air missiles is very much on the anvil, bilateral discussions continue for the Su-57 fifth-generation fighter jet. Even if there are no summit deliverables in this regard, the joint statement noted that the partnership is reorienting presently to joint research and development, and co-development and co-production of advanced defence technology and systems. These include the joint manufacturing of spare parts and components as both nations take forward a broad-based, time-tested engagement, including greater people-to-people contacts in the spirit of Druzha-Dosti.



N CHANDRA BABU NAIDU
The writer is an economics and business commentator based in New Delhi

MPC MEETING

MONETARY POLICY TRAJECTORY APPEARS TO BE ENTERING A PHASE OF PAUSE WITH NEUTRAL STANCE

Growth in times of (no) inflation

EXTRAORDINARY TIMES often demand out-of-the-box responses, even if the ensuing results can remain chained to the vagaries of serendipity.

In the early 1970s, UK's Chancellor of the Exchequer Anthony Barber made a "dash for growth" that involved easy terms of credit in lockstep with monetary easing and massive tax cuts, abandoning fixed exchange rates that saw the sterling slump around 15% over the next 18 months. In March 1973, the interest rates were slashed by a massive 75 basis points (bps) (8.5 to 7.75%) even with the GDP clocking 12.5%. The railroad, however, fizzled as an unanticipated oil shock triggered inflation to skyrocket and a miners' strike reversed the process.

Bank Indonesia (BI), during June 1995 to March 1997, cut the key BI rate five times even when the GDP was looking quite robust. Caught on the wrong foot in the Asian crisis, growth plummeted to a record low of -13% in 1998.

In present terms, the closest India can think of cutting rates in a benign inflationary rate regime, even when growth is high, would be China's easing of rate by 25 bps in mid-2015 when inflation was marked decisively low at 1.4% (though the GDP data came days after the rate decision) and its own playbook stretching from June 2015 to September 2016, when policy rates were cut by 25, 50 and 25 bps with inflation remaining within the framework (5.40-4.20%).

This prelude was necessary as the monetary policy decision made by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday—to cut 25 bps—was precisely negotiating this dilemma. The high GDP figure in Q2 at 8.2% implied that the full-year GDP growth for FY26 in RBI forecast stands at 7.30%, resulting in an output gap of 30 bps if we assume the potential growth at

Soumya Kanti Ghosh

Part-time member, 14th Finance Commission, part-time member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, and Group Chief Economic Advisor, SBI



7%. If we assume the potential growth in the post-Covid-19 period is still lower, the output gap is much wider.

On the inflation side, the RBI has reced inflation projection for FY26 to 2.0% from the October estimate of 2.6% and February estimate of 4.2%. The Q1FY27 estimates are now lower by around 100 bps to 3.9%, from 4.9% put out in June. Q3FY26 estimates in February, at 3.8%, now stands at 0.6% according to the new forecast.

Forecast inflation for FY26 at 1.8% and for FY27 at 3.4%. With such unprecedented level of downward revisions and further prospects of downward revision looming large, the RBI has kept the door ajar for future rate decisions. However, for now, the repo rate at 5.25% will be lower for longer.

In fact, the Indian situation is at variance with most of the other economies that are experiencing below potential growth and low inflation, suggesting a rate cut or pause. India's situation is just the opposite as explained earlier, and the current divergence may continue for some time which will have its implications in terms of headroom for further cuts.

The RBI has, as expected, announced liquidity enhancement measures through open market operations of

around ₹1 lakh crore and buy-sell (B/S) swaps of \$5 billion/₹44,500 crore.

The situation of the rupee deserves careful consideration in the overall outlook on policy with analysis suggesting a 5% depreciation of the currency impacts inflation by ~30 bps. The current USD/INR non-deliverable forward premium remains elevated above the normal rate differential, and the hedging position needs closer monitoring to align the rupee's trajectory.

The RBI's decision for a higher B/S swap could also ease the pressure on hedging. B/S swaps have historically led to a fall in the Mumbai Interbank Forward Offer Rate by lowering forward premiums, making overseas borrowing more attractive, and reduced hedging costs for Indian companies. While the market players (through banks) are provided with liquidity injections and the central bank replenishes

The low inflation, positive output gap dilemma will ensure that the headroom will shrink in FY27, and policy may remain in wait and watch mode for a while

its reserves, corporate asset liability management mismatches are also taken care of through hedging due to the liquidity-rich feature of B/S swaps that come in handy for corporates that have availed of longer tenor external commercial borrowings.

Jerome Powell, in late 2023, stressed the importance of a central bank's dilemma of having clarity on what it is not doing, emphasising that the Federal Reserve is not and will not be a "climate policymaker", while exhorting banks to understand and manage (climate-related) risks. It is not the Fed's role to tell banks which businesses they can and cannot lend to, and this guidance is not intended to do so. The guidance clearly articulates this fundamental principle—an important addition to the proposal.

Against this background, the RBI has done its best to ensure monetary policy continues to support growth through a bouquet of measures. In all, with the 25 bps cut in the policy repo rate and by keeping the stance neutral, the monetary policy trajectory appears to be entering a phase of pause with neutral stance. The low inflation, positive output gap dilemma will ensure that the headroom will shrink in FY27, and policy may remain in wait and watch mode for a while. This works well in the overall uncertain environment for India as policy uncertainty is minimised, given the confidence to both domestic and foreign agents.

As Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote, "the heart's memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and (that) thanks to this artifice, we manage to endure the burden of the past." A central bank can often be user-pragmatic and envisage things that eventually ring-fence the burdens of the past while revitalising future drivers of growth.

Views are personal

Time to reconsider GM seed as a tool



AMIT KAPOOR PRADEEP PURI
Respectively Chair and Fellow, Institute for Competitiveness

THIS YEAR'S NOBEL laureates in Economics affirm that the future of growth models will be driven by innovation. This is both a challenge and an opportunity, and resonates deeply with India's agricultural ambitions.

As India seeks to boost agricultural productivity, few innovations have sparked as much debate and promise as genetically modified (GM) crops. In many ways, the story of GM crops in India mirrors the invention of the light bulb as a paradigm-shifting innovation. GM crops arrived with the promise of solving persistent agricultural challenges, such as pest infestations, low yields, and climate stress. But its journey from lab to land has been uneven. Just as consumers were once reluctant to switch from incandescent bulbs to LEDs due to cost and unfamiliarity, GM crops face scepticism related to ethical concerns, regulatory hurdles, and public mistrust. Yet, the parallels continue. Like LEDs use less energy and last longer, GM crops use less pesticides and water, and produce more food per acre. While LEDs cost more upfront but save money over time, GM crops also require investment in research and regulation but promise long-term gains in food security and sustainable livelihoods. Customisation is another shared trait. Akin to LEDs that can be tuned for brightness and colour, GM crops can be designed for drought tolerance, enhanced nutrition, and a longer shelf life. Like LEDs, GM crops have the potential to reduce environmental impact in terms of chemical runoff, greenhouse gas emissions, and resource utilisation, making them a compelling tool to combat climate change.

The light bulb analogy is a reminder that innovation often begins with hesita-

tion, but its true value lies in what it illuminates over time. The question is not longer whether GM technology works, but how India can use it wisely, ensuring that farmers are benefited, ecosystems are protected, and decisions are guided by science and trust. After all, the real impact will not be seen in labs, but in the lives of farmers and the resilience of our food systems.

India's engagement with GM crops began in 2002, when the imported Bt cotton gene (Cry1Ac) engineered to combat the American bollworm was approved for commercial use by inserting it into Indian cotton hybrids. The results were promising as yields improved, pesticide use declined, and many farmers reported better incomes. Within a decade, Bt cotton hybrid spread over 90% of India's cotton-growing area, and yields surged from a stagnant six quintals per hectare (q/ha) to 16 q/ha by 2013. However, the story didn't end there.

Initially, Bt cotton brought tangible benefits, but over time the pink bollworm pest began to develop resistance to the Bt toxin, forcing farmers to use pesticides again. Farmers, once relieved from heavy pesticide use, were back to square one. This shift not only increased costs but also reignited concerns about environmental and health impacts. Simultaneously, debates emerged around GM seed pricing, intellectual property rights, and the role of multinational corporations. In response, public sector institutions attempted to develop indigenous Bt cotton hybrids, unlike the pure GM cotton

popular globally. This experiment failed in India due to poor adaptation to uncertain rainfed conditions. Thus, some narratives link high seed costs, rising input costs, and crop failures in rainfed areas to farmer distress. Research suggests that these issues are complex and often rooted not only in biotechnology but also in broader systemic concerns such as market volatility and inadequate support systems.

The need for next-generation GM traits, such as stacked genes and herbicide tolerance, has been recognised. Yet, their approval is pending, reflecting the importance of thorough regulatory review and public scrutiny. India's regulatory framework for GM crops is overseen by the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee under the ministry of environment, forest, and climate change. The committee undertakes rigorous biosafety assessments, multi-location field trials, and public consultations. State governments also play a role in granting final approvals for cultivation.

Despite these provisions, the pace of approvals has been slow. For instance, Bt brinjal was approved in 2009, but placed under indefinite moratorium following public opposition. On the other hand, GM mustard, developed by Indian scientists, has passed safety evaluations but awaits final clearance amid ongoing debate. This cautious approach reflects a desire to balance innovation with safety, but it also raises concerns about delays in accessing potentially beneficial technologies. India's competitiveness in crops such as maize

and sugar could improve significantly with GM adoption. For example, GM maize yields in countries like Ukraine, Brazil, and Argentina (average of 6,045 kg/ha) are more than double of India's conventional maize yield (2,703 kg/ha). Similarly, Brazil's approval of GM sugarcane has boosted its sugar output per factory to 101,157 tonnes, nearly twice India's output of 52,336 tonnes using non-GM varieties.

Public perceptions of GM crops in India are shaped by a confluence of scientific discourse, cultural perspectives, and media narratives. While some view GM technology as a tool for progress, others worry about its long-term impacts on health, biodiversity, and traditional farming practices. Therefore, policymakers face a delicate task of ensuring food security and farmer welfare while maintaining public trust and ecological integrity. In addition to technological advancement, this calls for clear and participatory regulation, accessible farmer education, and sustained public engagement.

Rather than viewing GM crops as a binary choice between good and bad, it may be more productive to see them as tools. Like any tool, their value depends on how they are integrated into broader agricultural strategies. As India continues to explore this path, the goal should be to empower farmers, protect ecosystems, and ensure that the light of innovation reaches every corner of the field.

With inputs from Ananya Khurana, senior researcher, Institute for Competitiveness

Series concludes

Indo-US trade

Apropos of "US team likely in India next week for negotiations" (FE, December 5), reports keep citing that a US team is likely to visit India for trade negotiations. State governments also play a role in granting final approvals for cultivation. Despite these provisions, the pace of approvals has been slow. For instance, Bt brinjal was approved in 2009, but placed under indefinite moratorium following public opposition. On the other hand, GM mustard, developed by Indian scientists, has passed safety evaluations but awaits final clearance amid ongoing debate. This cautious approach reflects a desire to balance innovation with safety, but it also raises concerns about delays in accessing potentially beneficial technologies. India's competitiveness in crops such as maize

trade is Russian oil, which India continues to import despite US concerns. Now, with President Putin visiting India, the issue has become more vital. The future of Indo-US trade will hinge on how the negotiations balance oil, tariffs, political relations, and the moods of Trump, who might change decisions taken after the negotiations. —O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Evolve pollution fight

Apropos of "Tackling pollution" (FE, December 5), every winter Delhi descends into its now-routine public health catastrophe, as toxic smog renders ordinary existence precarious. Though public debate fixates on stubble burning, vehicular emissions remain the dominant contributor to pollution. With nearly 2,000 new vehicles flooding the roads daily, incremental tech

upgrades are swiftly negated. No metropolis can mitigate pollution while reinforcing private vehicle dependence. Delhi's public transport ecosystem requires aggressive augmentation, tighter integration, and enhanced frequency. Policy must evolve from episodic car restrictions to genuine modal shifts. Incentivising electric, CNG, or compliant engines is more pragmatic than transient bans. —N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Taint of trafficking

States must set their house in order

THE Donald Trump administration's crack-down on illegal immigration has left many countries red-faced. India is no exception. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told the Rajya Sabha on Thursday that 3,258 Indian nationals had been deported by the US this year so far; the number of deportees was far lower (1,368) last year and just 617 in 2023. In August this year, the Centre had given state-wise figures of Indians sent back during Trump's second term: Punjab topped the list, followed by Haryana and Gujarat. This unwelcome trend is in line with Jaishankar's latest statement in Parliament that Punjab has the highest number of human trafficking cases in the country.

This dubious distinction should prompt AAP-ruled Punjab to introspect and do urgent course correction. Haryana and Gujarat, both run by 'double-engine' governments, also need to stem the rife. Cases of human trafficking are being probed by the respective states and the National Investigation Agency. Rising above political lines, Central and state governments must work in close coordination to curb this menace. Collaboration between nations is also of the essence. Cyber slavery has emerged as a new threat — aspirants from India are lured with the promise of high-paying overseas jobs and then taken to countries like Myanmar and Cambodia, where they are forced to perpetrate online fraud.

Unemployment and underemployment make the youth desperate to go abroad by hook or by crook. They are ruthlessly exploited by unauthorised travel agents, who are underbitten by the action which the authorities take once in a while. A time-bound investigation is a rarity, so too are prosecution and conviction of the accused. Stringent law enforcement should go hand in hand with sustained efforts to promote safe and legal methods of immigration. Also, the creation of adequate avenues for gainful employment can save many skilled Indians from the clutches of traffickers.

A Goldilocks moment

Sustaining it will demand fiscal care

THE Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has delivered a widely anticipated 25-basis-point cut in the repo rate, bringing it down to 5.25 per cent. With this, the Central bank has eased rates by a cumulative 125 basis points since February, signalling confidence in the economy's ability to sustain growth while keeping inflation in check. Governor Sanjay Malhotra described the present moment as a "rare Goldilocks period", where strong GDP numbers — now projected at 7.3 per cent for the current fiscal — co-exist with inflation at a benign 2.2% and growth at 8% in the first half of the financial year.

The RBI's neutral stance underscores a calibrated shift from inflation control to growth support. Borrowers will welcome the move as home loans and other retail credit become cheaper. Industry bodies, too, have hailed the cut as a boost to credit offtake and a sentiment-lift for consumption and investment. But monetary easing alone cannot propel India into a higher growth orbit. The real test lies in whether banks transmit these rate cuts promptly and whether the government complements monetary accommodation with fiscal discipline and structural reforms. The RBI has reiterated that it does not target any specific rupee level, preferring to let the market determine currency movements. This is sensible in a volatile global environment, especially as geopolitical tensions and slowing world trade continue to cast shadows over emerging markets. What works in India's favour is domestic resilience, marked by services momentum, robust tax collections and strong demand indicators.

Yet, risks remain. Inflation, though easing, can turn sticky if food supply shocks reappear. Transmission delays could blunt the impact of rate cuts. For the economy to fully benefit, monetary easing must be paired with reforms that deepen credit markets, increase private investment and ensure sustainable, inclusive growth.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 1925

Civil justice in Punjab

THE report on the administration of civil justice in Punjab during 1924 is a document of great interest, not only because civil litigation is an index of the financial and commercial condition of the province but also because the facts disclosed by the report furnish an effective answer to several common fallacies regarding civil litigation in this province. The report conclusively shows that the accusation that litigation is on the increase or that people are fond of vexatious and mendacious litigation is entirely false. The suits instituted during the past 10 years are as follows: 1915 — 199,166; 1916 — 194,864; 1917 — 202,893; 1918 — 174,408; 1919 — 189,109; 1920 — 198,951; 1921 — 177,184; 1922 — 187,084; 1923 — 156,180; 1924 — 163,946. It would thus appear that the number of suits filed in the civil courts of the province is almost steadily on the decrease. No doubt there was a slight rise in the number of suits during 1924 as compared with the previous year, but the number was much lower than in any year since 1915; and even this slight increase was due, as explained in the report itself, to "good harvests, which gave greater expectation of realising decrees and the near approach of the end of the period of limitation, as curtailed by the Punjab Loans Limitation Act of 1923." The report further proves that the overwhelming majority of suits was true. There were 219,966 regular suits before the courts, out of which 178,201 were disposed of. Of these, 15,04 per cent were disposed of without actual trial, 54.28 per cent without contest and 1.06 per cent on reference to arbitration; and only 29.62 per cent after contest.

The Russia hand

India's message of multipolarity — or non-alignment — was clear to see during Putin's visit

THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

WHEN all the dust is settled and the conches blown and the embraces imprinted on the timeframe of history, one little exchange will symbolise the just-concluded summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin — a photo that shows the PM gifting a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, in Russian, to the President.

So what, you may ask, dear Reader. But look closer. The Russian smiles, half-quizzically, as he receives the book. The PM's glance is more patient and comes with several embedded messages — the age-old civilisational teachings of the Gita; the message from the Kurukshetra battlefield about fighting a just war; the implied comment on Putin's own three-year-old escapade in Ukraine; and the message to all the Western world curiously watching India's red-carpet welcome to a man who continues to be severely sanctioned by them, that India remains on the side of peace, a "not neutral" party in the Ukraine conflict.

After a long time, this week it seemed as if India had come into its own. In the wake of the Trump battering that India has received these last few months (over trade, the US President's insistence that he brokered the end of Op Sinoor, and Field Marshal Asim Munir's red-carpet welcome at the White House), Modi must have decided that enough was enough and that it was time to show some spine.

The invitation to Putin was overdue — the Russian last came four years ago. Modi decided to throw him a warm welcome not just because Trump is romanc-



KURUKSHETRA LESSON : The PM gifted a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, in Russian, to President Putin. PFI

ing Asim Munir, or because the India-US trade deal is experiencing a prolonged agi-hiccup, or because India's energy import bill is \$55 billion out of the \$64 billion India-Russia bilateral trade — but because of the fundamental lesson in geopolitics. There are no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests.

There can be no better example than the Ukraine crisis. The US is sanctioning Putin's Russia — including four Russian companies which supply energy to India — but Trump as well as his aides have repeatedly met Putin to try and resolve the conflict. The Russian President, meanwhile, has stuck to his guns; he has spent the last three years fighting not just the Ukrainians — but also the Europeans and the Americans who have funded the Ukrainians — for the right to occupy Russian-speaking territories, such as the Donbas, in Ukraine.

That is the second lesson in geopolitics — that it is possible to stand up to powerful opponents, as long as you have the strength to do so.

Modi knows that big powers — the Chinese, the Americans and the Russians — have this uncanny ability to shed the high moral ground when they want their

PM Modi greeted the Russian President with the familiarity of an old friend, but kept an eye out for the other friends in the room.

way. He realises that for India to take a leaf out of their book, it must build its economic strength. How to do that when the rupee is falling against the dollar and has lost half its value in the last 15 years, a large part of which period Modi has been in power?

The problem is that Delhi is significantly dependent on the US market, which is why it needs a sympathetic trade deal, on the Chinese market, which sells quality goods for less money than any other country in the world which is why the \$100 billion bilateral trade is hugely in China's favour; and on the Russian market, on which India depends hugely to supply cheap energy, which is what keeps the wheels of India's economy functioning far more

smoothly than if it had to buy oil at international rates. Why not, then, talk to all sides and build meaningful relations with each. Multipolarity. Non-alignment. Call it what you will.

That's why Modi broke protocol to receive Putin in the evening cold when Putin's plane landed at Delhi's Palam airport on Thursday. The two leaders together watched Indian dancers welcome the Russian President and drove home for dinner. Significantly, no agreements have been signed between the two sides, only memoranda of understanding — a good signal to nervous Western democracies, especially those from the European Union who are showing up as chief guests for India's Republic Day ceremonies next month, that India won't succumb to a Russian alliance even if it desperately needs Moscow's oil.

So there's no *Hindi-Russi bhai-bhai* sloganeering — that sounds too much like the bad or good, old days, depending on what side you're on. Instead, there's lots of rhetoric about a strategic revamp, just not at the cost of any other relationship.

Clearly, Putin understands Modi's America problem. He knows India needs a trade deal with the US. If Delhi can ally US

anxiety over its relationship with Russia, it might even be able to tempt Trump to come to India sometime next year. Especially if a US-Russia deal over Ukraine can, in the meantime, be sealed. Even if Trump has committed to going to China next April.

In this brave, new mixed-up world in which big powers carry large imprints, smaller powers like India must learn to negotiate, sidestep, circumvent and broker. It's what India has done since the early, tough days after Independence, when it refused to succumb to the false gods that tempted Delhi with one alliance.

This ability to play all sides — not just one, namely the US, which Delhi had set its heart on in the past few years — works for India not just because it is a smaller power, but an ancient one. It has the ability to preach the high moral ground but practise *saam, daam, dand, bhed*, a daily statecraft that combines persuasion with bribery, punishment with division.

Modi understands that for India to be counted, it must demonstrate economic strength. That it must take to heed the old comrade, Deng Xiaoping's fully capitalist slogan, and make it a central tenet of its own mixed economy. That it doesn't matter what the colour of the cat is, as long as it catches the mice.

That's why the Putin visit is important to both Modi and Putin. It allows the Russian President to tell the world that despite all the Western sanctions, Russia is not isolated — Putin needs to thank Modi for that. Equally important, the India visit allowed Putin to send a message to his good friend, Chinese President Xi Jinping, that there are other flowers blooming in Mao's "let a hundred flowers bloom" garden — India. That's why, after a long time this week it seemed as if India had come into its own. PM Modi greeted the Russian President with the familiarity of an old friend, but kept an eye out for the other friends in the room. The message of multipolarity — or non-alignment — was clear to see.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Our friendship with Russia is rooted in protection of mutual interests. — Atal Bihari Vajpayee

Dust, stardust and Dharmendra

ROSE GILL

WHEN I told my father that Dharmendra was no more, the air in the room turned heavy, as if the walls themselves stopped breathing. He didn't speak; he slipped away from me, into the dusty lanes of 1960s' Sangrur, where a boy once stood outside Roxy Cinema, staring at a poster of the handsome man alive. In that silence, I felt my father's childhood die a little. And mine with it. Two generations, bound by the same achy love for Punjab's Greek god, sat wordless, mourning the same man.

I was fortunate to meet him once. In 2014, during my first week as a civil servant in SAS Nagar, I attended an award function solely because someone said, "Dharmendra is coming." I sat far from the stage, eyes fixed on his table. When the DC called me so that I could meet him, a big guard blocked my way. "Dharam ji is not well." I stood two steps away heart pounding. Then the DC whispered something to Dharmendra. He turned, smiled and said, "Parah taan bahut chhoti hai!" He slowly stood up and opened his arms. The guard stepped aside. The world went silent.

He hugged me, those big arms around tiny me, and placed his famous hand gently on my head. "God bless you, my darling. *Khushi raho*," he whispered. At 80, time had dimmed the Greek-god looks, but not the glow. His skin was impossibly soft, softer than anything I'd ever touched, like touching a blessing. That softness, I realised later, came from a man who never forgot his roots.

In every interview, on every stage, no matter the question, he always returned to the same heartbeat: Punjab, his parents, his *pinde*. Other legends are remembered for films; Dharmendra is remembered for the village he carried in his voice. We may not instantly know where Anitabh Bachchan or Rajesh Khanna were born, but everyone knows Dharmendra was from Dangon village near Sahnewal — and he never let us forget it.

A Spanish friend once asked me in the US, "Why do you bring your Punjab identity into every second conversation — are you constantly reminding yourself?" I smiled. We don't remind ourselves. We never forget. Being Punjab is the pulse under our skin. It's the breath we take, weighing the generations' sand on every grain. For the world, he was cinema's He-Man. For us, he was the memory our fathers passed down to us, the pride that made us walk taller. Punjab is a joke that there have only ever been two elements in our history: the dust of our fields and the stardust that rises from it. Dharmendra rose from Punjab's dust, wearing stardust on his shoulders, and when he left, he returned to the ever-luminous sky he came from.

Somewhere in another time zone, at a different dawn we cannot yet envision, who knows — he may rise again, walk once more and mingle with the dust of this beloved Punjab.

And until then, he will always find a place in our tales, in our memories, and in our collective nostalgia. He will live forever in the pages of *Dastan-e-Punjab*!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EC must respond to concerns

Refer to "The silent panic behind SIR", the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls has triggered distrust in the Opposition-led states. The Election Commission must address the issue to the satisfaction of all political parties. Whether the EC can decide on voter's citizenship needs to be established. There is hope after the government agreed to the Opposition's demand for a debate on SIR in Parliament. The updating of electoral rolls is an important function of the poll body, which must be responsive to any concerns raised by voters and the Opposition. The SC's intervention will help address alleged mass disenfranchisement.

PI. SINGH, BY MAIL

IndiGo caught unprepared

Apologies of 'Indigo ops crumble, over 550 flights scrapped; flyers fume'; the prolonged disruption of IndiGo flights over the past week highlights a worrying vulnerability in India's aviation ecosystem. For three consecutive days, lakhs of passengers were left stranded, many waiting over 10 hours without information or assistance. This is a result of IndiGo's failure to prepare for the new pilot rostering norms that became mandatory from November 1 onwards. These rules, aimed at reducing fatigue and enhancing flight safety, increase rest periods and limited duty hours. The impact of these rules was known, yet IndiGo appears to have underestimated the need for careful planning or additional hiring.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Flyers' safety at risk

Amid 500 IndiGo flight cancellations in a day and all its domestic flights out of Delhi cancelled for a day, aviation regulator DGCA had to intervene to resolve the private airlines' operational crisis. The regulator rolling back the previous order and allowing IndiGo to follow the old roster for a few more days has given it some respite. Though this decision has eased travellers' agony for now, but in the process, the regulator has put their life at risk with fatigued and overworked pilots flying them. The FDTL (flight duty time limitations) norms had been announced in advance, but the airline did not bother to implement them.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Swift meaningful justice

Apologies of 'acid attacks'; the Supreme Court's anguished remarks on the delayed trials in acid attack cases as a 'national shame' has come as an eye-opener for the legal fraternity. The SC's direction to all high courts to submit details of pending cases within four weeks must lead to time-bound action rather than another administrative formality. Essential steps include fast-tracking of all acid attack cases with a strict one-year deadline, digital case-tracking systems, mandatory interim compensation within 30 days of the FIR, inclusion of survivors under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, strict enforcement of regulations on acid sales and a need for economic-based rehabilitation approach.

MM GOEL, KURUKSHETRA

Punjab's tragic reality

Refer to "A twin crisis"; the double whammy of severely depleted groundwater levels and toxic mineral contamination is Punjab's tragic reality, demanding immediate attention. Over-extraction, coupled with rampant contamination by heavy metals, has turned the state's groundwater into a lethal public health hazard. Millions of people are unknowingly consuming a toxic cocktail, leading to a devastating surge in preventable diseases. The documented risks of kidney failure, reproductive damage and widespread carcinogenic exposure are not remote threats, but an unfolding emergency jeopardising lives. We must enforce stringent measures: immediate curtailment of chemical-heavy agriculture and the rapid deployment of effective water quality testing and filtration systems.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

A responsible citizenry

Apologies of 'The queue conundrum'; the write-up beautifully captures how a simple mundane act of standing in a queue reflects patience, respect and civic sense. Waiting in a queue tests our character in small yet significant ways. It underlines the need for self-discipline and mindful conduct in public places — values that will strengthen our social fabric. The middle encourages an important conversation on the important values of a responsible citizenry.

SUNITA SIKRI, YAMUNANAGAR

Finally, a serious effort to reduce red tape



SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

ECONOMIC reforms seemed to have been put in the deep freezer by this government in recent years as the emphasis has been more on gaining political mileage and winning elections. The attempt to push through farm reforms met with failure and the mood has been more cautious ever since. Yet the latest crisis posed by the imposition of 50 per cent tariffs on Indian exports by the US has galvanised policy-makers into action.

The crisis seems to have turned into an opportunity. The aim now is to prevent any setback to growth due to the impact of tariffs. These affect not just exports but also jobs that hinge on supplying goods to the biggest market in the world.

The first step was to carry out the much-delayed restructuring of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The cut in rates as well as the reduction in slabs and efforts to remove anomalies were carried out speedily in September, soon after the US tariffs were announced

in the previous month.

The result was a spurt in consumption during the festive season that brought cheer to the business community after several years of tepid sales. It also enhanced the ease of doing business by ensuring that GST was made simpler to navigate, especially for small and medium enterprises.

The original aim of GST was to create a single point tax but it had turned out to be a hydra-headed creature. It was a vast improvement over the earlier multiple Central and state levies but restructuring was needed to simplify and make it more business-friendly.

The next step was to finally bite the bullet and notify the four codes meant to replace the existing 29 laws dealing with labour issues. This must be viewed as a much tougher proposition given the political sensitivities involved in taking decisions regarding millions of workers in the organised and unorganised sectors.

The codes were actually passed in Parliament in 2020 but were neither notified nor were the rules formally laid down. Now with the codes being notified, the rules will also come into a reality within the next two months.

Implementation by employers may take some time. The fact is, despite trade unions' protests, the new codes provide a safety net for a much wider num-



LONG-PENDING: With new GST and labour codes rules, reforms are back in motion. FILE PHOTO

ber of workers. These cover all enterprises, rather than only scheduled ones, and also bring the fast-widening community of gig workers under their ambit. Several of these measures have already been adopted by states. But with the Centre notifying provisions, the policies are now extended on a nationwide basis.

What is most significant in terms of easing the process of doing business is the conversion of 29 separate laws having contradictory provisions into four broad codes covering all aspects of labour-related issues. These had come into force during the colonial era — and remained on

the statute book since then.

It is now likely that these decisions have been the prelude to an even bigger reform — that of cutting red tape. A Niti Aayog committee has just submitted a report outlining plans for a drastic reduction in the regulatory cholesterol of the administrative system.

Former Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba heads the committee, set up in August, and has proposed wide-ranging measures to cut bureaucratic rules and procedures that have hampered developmental activity.

The report comes as a breath of fresh air, especially after top bureaucrats have repeatedly claimed in public

Cutting regulatory cholesterol is now essential for India to sustain high growth.

fora that deregulation can go no further at the Central level and bottlenecks are now only at the level of states. Fortunately, this committee has recognised that regulatory processes even at the Central level continue to hamper the ease of doing business.

The committee has proposed a radical overhaul of the country's regulatory framework. Describing the new proposals as a part of a trust-based approach termed Jan Vishwas Siddhant, it has recommended the ending of 'inspector raj' by scrapping licences, permits and no-objection certificates. It has also sought shifting routine inspections to accredited third parties. These measures will reduce the discretionary role of bureaucrats, which has remained entrenched even decades after the first round of economic reforms and liberalisation in 1991.

The committee has also suggested that there should be no sudden changes in policies and a fixed timeline should be laid down for regulatory updates to ensure predictability. Penal provisions for minor or technical violations are proposed to be eliminated with such punishments only to be imposed for serious offences.

A parallel Niti Aayog committee has also proposed a series of reforms specifically for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), including easing compliances

under the Companies Act and expanding credit guarantees. It has sought to address issues arising out of delayed payments by government entities to the MSMEs, which has emerged as a persistent problem that directly hurts interests of this sector.

The Gauba committee had earlier taken action to withdraw many quality control orders (QCOs) that had been introduced to improve the quality levels of the industry but had ended up disrupting industrial supply chains and raising compliance costs.

Now, one can only hope that the latest recommendations of the committee on regulatory reforms are implemented sooner rather than later. If the aim is to promote economic development and unshackle industry from the chains that have been binding it for decades, there needs to be quick action.

The latest GDP growth data showing 8.2 per cent growth in the second quarter of 2025-26 is encouraging. But the projection for the full year remains at around 6.5 to 7 per cent. India needs to grow faster. An annual growth rate of 9 to 10 per cent is urgently needed to bring India into the category of developed nations by 2047.

This can be achieved by deepening reforms, as is being done in this latest drive to shrug off the effects of US tariffs. It is a pragmatic and positive move but needs to be sustained in the long run.

Punjab's Gen Z reshapes the political landscape



GURPREET SINGH
KENDRI SRIGURU
SINGH SABHA



ANMOL RATTAN SINGH
CO-FOUNDER, PANI
FOUNDATION

PUNJAB approaches the next election cycle with a political question that is larger than party fortunes. The rise of Gen Z as a conscious political actor is beginning to rewrite the rules of public life in the state. What appears to older generations as a burst of scattered agitations is in fact the early shape of a generational realignment. Punjab's youth are gradually asserting a more explicit role in public decision-making, signalling a shift towards expectations of co-agency in the state's future.

The pattern of youth-led mobilisation in Punjab has become increasingly visible over the past few years. It was young organisers who, during the farmers' protest, sustained the logistical backbone well beyond what political parties or unions had anticipated.

More recently, the 1,158 relieved assistant professors and librarians publicly challenged what they

viewed as the state government's institutional negligence, defending the transparency and integrity of the recruitment process. In the Punjab University agitation as well, students rejected the presumption that youth must remain petitioners in a benevolent system.

Taken together, these episodes mark a widening generational assertion. As Punjab's political environment grows more relationally complex, marked by volatile stakeholder behaviour, and epistemically uncertain, defined by distrust in institutional information, the state confronts a profound governance challenge.

It is not as if Punjab has never witnessed unrest before. Nearly 6,000 protests took place in 2015 alone. What is different now is the character of the discontent. India's demographic window peaks in 2030. Punjab moves into this period with a median age projected at 36 by 2031 and nearly a third of its population between 15 and 34. Almost half will live in cities by the early 30s, owing to rising urbanisation. This young, semi-urban society is now looking at the state through a sharper and more constructive lens.

Yet, the numbers reflect a certain strain as well. The 2021 Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung survey showed that nearly 8 in 10 Punjabi young people are dissatisfied with the employ-



NEW: A young society views the state through a sharper, more demanding lens. SANDEEP JOSHI

ment opportunities in the state — the highest nationally (the national figure is 4 in 10). Even more concerning is the unemployment rate. As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey, Punjab's unemployment rate (aged 15-29 years) has surged from nearly 12.2 per cent (July-September 2024) to 18.9 per cent (July-September 2025). This is more than the national average of 14.8 per cent (July-September 2025).

The labour force survey also highlights that rural male youth in Punjab face steeper employment challenges than their urban peers, with their unemployment at 17.2 per cent compared to 13.9 per cent in

Traditional politics of paternalism is losing ground to a digitally connected, assertive generation.

cities. This disparity is compounded by the slow growth of the state's non-farm sectors, which remain insufficient to absorb the young workforce transitioning out of agriculture.

These pressures are not only shaping economic expectations but also inter-generational politics. Punjab is not a state fighting for basic survival owing to its decades of economic prosperity. Nevertheless, this prosperity has now manifested certain generational expectations.

A major chunk of the Gen Z in Punjab (unlike some other states) has grown up with enough security to seek something deeper than

subsistence, that is the will to self-expression and dignity. They want meaningful participation in decisions that affect their lives. Being a post-materialist generation that measures legitimacy not by promises but by responsiveness, this generation dons a different political psychology.

This shift matters for policy as older modes of authority that rely on paternalism or patronage are losing relevance. Gen Z largely operates through dense digital networks that move information quickly and expose institutional failures instantly. This renders the traditional politics of dismissal and delegitimisation obsolete.

Youth movements globally have unseated governments or forced policy change, yet the outcomes have often been mixed. In Nepal and Madagascar, young protesters helped bring down leaders but struggled to secure influence in the aftermath as interim regimes tightened control.

In Kenya and Morocco, youth achieved concessions but could not convert them into structural reform. Bangladesh saw a dramatic shift in power led by students, yet sustaining democratic gains remains a challenge.

Thus, there is an emerging consensus globally that repressive logic of state power might not be best with the

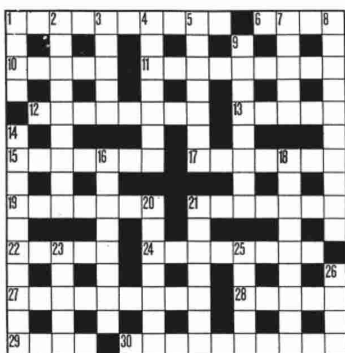
rising impatience of the youth. It is essential to meet this with a governance model suited to a new political psychology.

Therefore, Punjab and the Union government must now think in terms of anticipatory governance. In other terms, institutional recalibration is required in both politics and policy to build constructive civic agency. Policing needs to shift towards community-centred models that view young citizens as partners. Similarly, administrative systems require more doors to co-production, not just consultation.

Decades of economic prosperity have created what might be called a 'scarcity hypothesis' for the state's political imagination. Punjab's Gen Z, inheriting this prosperity, brings with it post-materialist values that demand recognition, participation and dignity.

The solution here does not lie in a high-modernist Punjab plan imposed from above, but in a model of governance that secures legitimacy through meaningful participation and strategic cooption into decision-making processes. Only by embracing such participatory and adaptive structures can the state navigate the uncertainties of a post-materialist, digitally connected and politically assertive generation.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 First sci-fi writer (5,5)
- 6 Burn crudely (4)
- 10 Burn superficially (5)
- 11 Diamond of finest cut (9)
- 12 Facade (8)
- 13 Sack by begging (5)
- 15 Dishonourable (7)
- 17 Action to boost self-esteem (3,4)
- 19 Originator (7)
- 21 Momentous (7)
- 22 Of more inferior quality (5)
- 24 Break (8)
- 27 US President 1933-45 (9)
- 28 Stringed musical instrument (5)
- 29 Locate (4)
- 30 Constant (10)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Tenuous, 5 Broad, 8 All corners, 9 Dip, 10 Note, 12 Intimate, 14 Distal, 15 Repose, 17 Specific, 18 Step, 21 Ask, 22 Then again, 24 Defer, 25 Abysmal.
Down: 1 Train, 2 Nil, 3 Oboe, 4 Seeing, 5 Besotted, 6 Odd man out, 7 Deplete, 11 To speak of, 13 Sinister, 14 Discard, 16 Cinema, 19 Penul, 20 Hazy, 23 Aim.

DOWN

- 1 Exactly (4)
- 2 Covering distant future (4-5)
- 3 Enforcing discipline (5)
- 4 Encompass (7)
- 5 Artlessness (7)
- 7 To grant (5)
- 8 Painful necessity to accept (6,4)
- 9 Suddenly lose consciousness (5,3)
- 14 Soften criticism unduly (5,5)
- 16 Severely beaten (8)
- 18 Allusion (9)
- 20 Revive (7)
- 21 Knock to the ground (7)
- 23 Henhouse (5)
- 25 Food provided in household (5)
- 26 Person in charge (4)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 6, 2025, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Margashirsh Shaka 15
- Margashirsh Purnimite 21
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 2, up to 9:26 pm
- Shubh Yoga up to 11:46 pm
- Mithun Nakshatra up to 8:49 am
- Aardra Nakshatra up to 6:14 am
- Moon in Gemini sign

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	1222 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	07:45 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	25	08
New Delhi	23	08
Amritsar	20	06
Bathinda	19	05
Jalandhar	20	06
Ludhiana	22	07
Bhivani	23	08
Hisar	24	06
Sirsa	19	07
Dharamsala	19	07
Manali	—	—
Shimla	16	07
Srinagar	11	00
Jammu	22	09
Kargil	04	-07
Leh	05	-08
Dehradun	25	07
Mussoorie	18	07

TEMPERATURE IN °C

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India - founded 1818

A line crossed

India's brief experiment with forcing a state-run cybersecurity app - the Sanchar Saathi App - onto every new smartphone has revealed a deeper tension at the heart of our digital governance: a widening gap between the intent to secure citizens and the methods used to achieve it. The swift withdrawal of the directive, after intense public pushback, shows that Indians understand the stakes of digital rights - and that the government underestimated both the sensitivity of the issue and the sophistication of its critics.

The app in question, designed to help users report fraud, block stolen devices and verify handset authenticity, is not inherently problematic. In a country with more than a billion mobile connections and a flourishing market for cloned or illegally resold phones, tools that strengthen device verification and curb cyber fraud can be genuinely useful.

Millions have downloaded the platform voluntarily, and the government highlights significant successes: millions of fraudulent connections terminated and stolen devices traced. But the controversy was never about the utility of the app. It was about the mandate.

The order to preinstall the programme on all new devices, make it visible on first use, and render its core functions 'not disabled or restricted' raised immediate alarm among digital-rights groups, cybersecurity experts, and global manufacturers.

When a tool, however benign its current version, becomes a permanent, non-removable fixture at the system level, concerns about 'function creep' are not paranoia but prudence. India's own privacy jurisprudence, anchored in the 2017 Supreme Court judgment, demands that any intrusion into personal devices meet strict tests of necessity and proportionality. The order failed both.

The government's subsequent claim that the app was always voluntary only added confusion. The language of the directive contradicted the ministerial assurances. And in matters of digital privacy, ambiguity is as dangerous as overreach. Citizens cannot be expected to trust verbal clarifications when the written mandate suggests compulsion.

What this episode exposes is a persistent procedural flaw: major decisions on digital policy are often taken without adequate consultation. India's data ecosystem is now too large, too complex, and too contested for unilateral directives. Stakeholders - from civil society to handset makers to technical experts - must be part of the process before any shift in the device ecosystem is contemplated.

The withdrawal of the order is welcome, but it cannot be treated as closure. Users need clarity on what data the app collects, what permissions it requires, how it integrates with national databases, and what independent audits will ensure it remains a tool of protection rather than surveillance.

Cybersecurity is essential. But so is trust. And in a democracy, trust cannot be legislated into existence; it must be earned through transparency, consultation and restraint. India should secure its digital borders, yes, but it must do so without crossing the constitutional boundaries that safeguard its citizens.

Cross currents

Israel's announcement that the Rafah crossing will soon reopen for Palestinians seeking to leave Gaza has been framed as a gesture of support for the ongoing ceasefire. But the flurry of conflicting statements that followed tells a more complicated story - one in which humanitarian relief is still mediated through layers of strategic calculation, political theatre, and unresolved hostility.

On paper, the plan appears orderly: exits through Rafah would resume under a mechanism involving Israeli security approval, Egyptian participation and supervision by a European mission. In practice, even this limited arrangement immediately met with resistance.

Cairo has publicly rejected any suggestion that it is coordinating with Israel. Its insistence that the crossing can operate only in accordance with the US-backed plan, and in both directions, is not merely a diplomatic clarification; it signals Egypt's determination to avoid any perception of acquiescence to Israeli control over Gaza's borders.

This discord reveals how even the smallest movement at Rafah reflects much broader power dynamics. For Israel, reopening the border is tied to ceasefire compliance and the delicate hostage-return process. For Egypt, it is about asserting sovereignty and distancing itself from policies that could provoke domestic criticism or undermine long-standing regional positions. For Palestinians, it is simply about survival.

The scale of need is staggering. Tens of thousands of severely ill and wounded Palestinians are waiting for evacuation, while only a few hundred have been permitted to leave since the ceasefire began. The reopening of Rafah, even if temporary and heavily controlled, offers a narrow passage for those whose lives now depend on access to hospitals abroad. Every delay is measured in lives lost, not diplomatic talking points.

Yet, the humanitarian narrative cannot be separated from the political one. Reports that Palestinian Authority (PA) personnel may assist at the crossing, but without displaying official insignia, demonstrate the convoluted compromises that define Gaza's governance vacuum.

Israel's refusal to allow any formal PA role, while simultaneously relying on its quiet involvement, encapsulates the contradictions of post-war planning. These arrangements are not steps toward a coherent political order; they are improvised fixes designed to function only for as long as the ceasefire holds.

At the same time, Israel's hesitation to reopen Rafah until all deceased hostages are returned underscores how intertwined humanitarian access has become with the bargaining logic of the conflict. The partial retrieval of remains, ongoing disputes over identification and continued negotiations illustrate that even the dead have become part of the political ledger.

In this context, the reopening of Rafah is not a diplomatic breakthrough but a reminder of how provisional the current calm remains. The crossing may soon open, but the deeper questions of authority, accountability and post-war governance remain unanswered. For those trapped inside Gaza, a functioning border is essential. But it cannot substitute for a political framework capable of ensuring that such openings are not forever conditional.

Age of Misinformation

In the battle against misinformation, Generative AI is undoubtedly a new challenge. Generative AI platforms can produce deepfakes, synthetic voices, and hyper-realistic images, making manipulation seamless and difficult to detect. AI technology has magnified confusion and misled millions quickly in a country like India with low digital literacy levels. Every individual with a mobile device and internet connection is both a consumer and a content creator. Unless the regulatory and technological safeguarding agencies keep pace, we will witness a tsunami of misinformation that will drown the truth.



can change the outcomes of the democratic process.

Traditionally, the media industry was considered to be the sentinel of truth. However, it has compromised its ethical practice in the current misinformation era, resulting in the crisis. The continuous bad performance of India's rank in the Press Freedom Index reflects a shrinking space for independent journalism. The race for TRPs has increased the volume of hate-mongering debates, manipulative visuals and selective framing of news events.

At the same time, digital-first outlets are busy manipulating the algorithm of the internet to get significant website traffic, often amplifying unverified claims in pursuit of 'viral' information. The result is an ecosystem where misinformation circulates not merely from the fringes to social media but from every platform entrusted with

agencies keep pace, we will witness a tsunami of misinformation that will drown the truth.

The Indian state has legal tools to counter misinformation, though the masses question their efficacy at different times. Section 353 of BNS 2023 criminalises the propagation of fabricated assertions, rumours, or reports, notably through electronic means, with the intent to induce public mischief, alarm, foster hostility, or harm national integrity. Section 152 of BNS replaces the old sedition law under IPC Section 124A, reframing it as offences that threaten India's sovereignty, unity, and integrity.

The Intermediary Guidelines & Digital Media Ethics Code Rules (2021) introduced under the IT Act (2000) mandate platforms to remove unlawful content and trace the origin of sources. These enforcements, however, remain inconsistent, and deception persists. The recent proposal to establish government fact-checking units was questioned and challenged by many, sensing the move as a threat to freedom of speech. The nation's highest judiciary has also repeatedly stressed on the perils of disinformation while continuing to consider and propagate free expression.

Curbing the ill effects of misinformation calls for a multifaceted approach, starting with the basics such as information literacy, media literacy, legal literacy, civic and political literacy and creating an ecosystem to debunk misinformation/disinformation and fake news with the help of special groups partnering with government sources, libraries, and information centres, and making use of AI-powered monitoring systems to control the spread of such news.

Students and young adults should be trained not just to be lazy consumers but proactive creators with a penchant for critical thinking. Fact-checking, inclusiveness and transparency in reporting events lead to quality journalism, most importantly, to 'switch off' the immediate reflex, to be read as 'forward', and to share any bit of information received via social media tools without an iota of doubt. Citizens must act with caution, cultivate emotional intelligence and develop critical thinking. The reflex to forward a message without reflection must be replaced with a culture of questioning because in a democracy, informed citizenship is the strongest defence against manipulation.

Drona was tricked into laying down his arms after hearing a half-truth about Ashwatthama's death; he learned citizens forgo their common sense and sanity, and succumb to the treachery of misinformation? If misinformation continues to masquerade as information, the casualty will not just include individual lives but will pose a threat to democracy. The World Economic Forum's warning is clear: misinformation is not a passing nuisance but the defining threat of our era. Government, media, technology platforms, and citizens must act in concert to preserve the sanctity of truth.

Mahatma Gandhi once wrote in 'Young India': 'An error does not become truth by reason of multiplied propagation, nor does truth become error because nobody sees it.' Let his words guide us. Truth stands firm even in silence; lies, no matter how loud, remain false.



RAMAKRISHNA BURAL



FAZLUNISSA H

The writers are, respectively, a Junior Research Fellow, University of Madras, and Assistant Professor & Dean - Alumni Affairs, University of Madras

informing the public. This has resulted in deepening cynicism among the youth, who are the most connected demographic to the information world and most vulnerable to digital misinformation.

The world has witnessed the power of social media in amplifying grievances into political crisis in the recent past of the global south, for instance, the recent upheaval in Nepal, where the banning of 26 social platforms spurred a series of Gen Z protests that eventually led to the government's fall. In Sri Lanka, the Aragalaya protests toppled the Rajapaksa family amid economic collapse. Similarly, student-led unrest over job quotas led to mass digital mobilisation and the eventual fall of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh.

In the battle against misinformation, Generative AI is undoubtedly a new challenge. Generative AI platforms can produce deepfakes, synthetic voices, and hyper-realistic images, making manipulation seamless and difficult to detect. AI technology has magnified confusion and misled millions quickly in a country like India with low digital literacy levels. Every individual with a mobile device and internet connection is both a consumer and a content creator. Unless the regulatory and technological safeguarding

THE KATHMANDU POST

Why secular politics in South Asia still clings to family dynasties

Why do secular parties in South Asia, despite championing democracy, cling to family names? Because in a land against religious nationalism, emotion often outweighs ideology. Politics here is rarely about policies alone - it is about identity, history, and belonging. Across Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, religious right-wing parties have mastered mobilising faith-based sentiments. In societies where literacy is low and institutions are weak, this poses a formidable challenge for secular parties. To survive, many lean on another emotional anchor: family dynasties. Bangladesh offers the clearest example. After the 1947 Partition, Islamic parties in East Pakistan exploited religious identity. When Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, the Awami League championed secularism and Bangalee nationalism. Yet religious parties continued framing

secularism as anti-Islamic. Rational arguments had limited traction in a country with low education levels and fragile institutions. The Awami League needed something visceral - an emotional narrative strong enough to rival politics in the name of religion.

That narrative emerged through Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the charismatic leader of independence. His image as the 'Father of the Nation' became a political asset, and after his assassination in 1975, his family became the living embodiment of that legacy. Sheikh Hasina's rise was not simply about bloodline; it symbolised emotional continuity. For millions, voting for the Awami League meant honouring Mujib's legacy. Dynastic politics became a survival strategy, not a cultural accident. Bangladesh is exceptional in one respect:

both dominant parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are dynastic at the top. This dual-dynasty structure deeply embeds family politics in society.

Voters do not just choose parties; they choose legacies. Moreover, the historical credit for liberation is not equal across South Asia. The Awami League's direct role in independence gives it emotional legitimacy that the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and India's Congress cannot claim to the same extent.

In this case, Pakistan tells a similar story. From its inception, Islamic parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami wielded religion as a political tool, often in alliance with military rulers. Secular politics, represented most prominently by the PPP, faced an uphill battle. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's populist charisma gave the PPP its initial momentum,

but after his execution in 1979, the party needed a way to sustain that emotional appeal. Benazir Bhutto stepped in as the torchbearer of her father's vision, and today Bilawal Bhutto Zardari carries that legacy forward. In Pakistan's volatile political landscape, dynastic politics has served as the PPP's shield against both religious parties and military authoritarianism. As in Bangladesh, low literacy and weak institutions make ideological appeals insufficient; voters respond to faces, not frameworks. Conversely, Sri Lanka illustrates the other side of the coin.

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

CHOUDHURY SWAGATA and PRABIR (ex-CESC) - Happily remember this day of 1977 - completing 48 years of blessed togetherness.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Ill-advised

Sir, The government's order mandating mobile handset makers to pre-install the Sanchar Saathi application on all devices manufactured or imported for use in India is not only bad governance but also bad economics.

While the app is presented as part of a broader strategy to strengthen cyber security and curb spam, compelling manufacturers to embed a government-backed app raises legitimate concerns about surveillance and intrusion.



yet this reassurance is insufficient. Consent must be based on opting in, not opting out - a fundamental principle of the right to privacy.

The directive also initially required that users share their location data with the app, making it a permanent, non-removable feature. Following public outrage, Union Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia clarified that the app is 'optional.'

But widespread adoption should be driven by trust, not compulsion. India's digital public goods like DigiLocker and DigiYatra gained popularity voluntarily. Forcing an app undermines this model. With India emerging as a global smartphone manufacturing hub, such dictates hamper ease of business.

The government should withdraw the order and focus instead on awareness and institutional capacity.

Yours, etc.,
N Sadhasiva Reddy,
Bengaluru, 3 December.

No benefit

Sir, This refers to your report 'Rajasthan Raj Bhavan renamed Lok Bhavan' published today. 'Rajtantra' (monarchy) no longer exists in India and people are supreme in 'Loktantra'

(democracy). In that sense Raj Niwases and Raj Bhavans across the country have been renamed 'Lok Niwases' and 'Lok Bhavans' respectively as per the notification issued by Ministry of Home Affairs.

The decision has ignited a political debate across the states as various parties question the need for such change years after India gained independence.

Critics argue that if the Governor's House is now truly a 'People's Bhavan', it follows that the Governor should be an elected position.

The Governor of a state has no direct connection with the people. People have no free access to the Governor's residence. After this change with the people secure any benefit or is it just a political stance?

Yours, etc.,
Deba Prasad Bhattacharya,
Kolkata, 3 December.



SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'No national role for Nitish'

Janata Dal (United) leader K.C. Tyagi speaks to Ananya Dasgupta on the Bihar mandate, Nitish Kumar's legacy and the road ahead.

Q: Were you surprised by the scale of the NDA sweep?

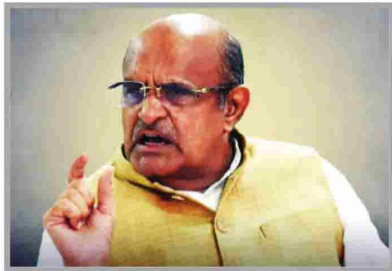
A: Not surprised at all. We always said JD(U) would cross 80 seats on its own. In 2020, we won 43 seats because Chirag Paswan's LJP cut into our votes in almost 40 constituencies and Upendra Kushwaha's party also took a few more. This time, with a clear NDA front, a sympathy wave for Nitish Kumar and his track record, the result was on expected lines.

Q: What, in your view, did the Bihar vote really vote for this time?

A: Primarily for Nitish Kumar's clean image and performance. He is seen as a leader who does not indulge in money-making or dynasty politics. The voters saw the progress in law and order. People contrasted him with the Lalu Prasad family - wife as CM, brother-in-law in politics, two sons fighting each other, and daughters contesting Lok Sabha seats against each other. Nitish emerged from the JP and Karpoori Thakur movement that always opposed dynastic succession. That contrast was stark.

The second big factor was two decades of genuine women empowerment - not just an election-eve Rs 10,000 scheme. Fifty per cent reservation in panchayats and Nagar Palika was brought in 2006, a year in which there was no election. In 2007, 35 per cent reservation was brought in the police. Now you will see every third police personnel in Bihar is a woman.

The cycle scheme, Jeevika groups, girl education initiatives, and now direct economic support - everything added to the empowerment of



women. It's about decades of empowerment initiatives, not a one-off scheme.

Q: This time female turnout was 71.6 per cent against 62.8 per cent male.

A: I want to tell you an interesting story, which I am sharing for the first time. Our friend Sharad Yadav opposed 33 per cent reservation for women, if you remember. He thought upper caste and middle-class women will be benefited. In their 50-year friendship, that was the only occasion where Nitish Kumar differed with our leader Sharad Yadav. He insisted on 33 per cent reservation for women and suggested there could be quota within quota.

And one more thing, women, especially in rural areas, complained earlier to Nitish Kumar about liquor consumption and resulting domestic violence. Now, latest figures show a reduction in cases of domestic violence. It is a matter of great relief for these women.

Wherever I went with Nitish Kumar for meetings, there were 70-80 per cent women in attendance. That was a cultural revolution of sorts. In villages, some men were actually complaining, 'Why is Nitish Kumar giving so much power to

women?' That itself shows the depth of change.

Q: The Congress and some others alleged EVM tampering and raised questions about the Election Commission. Your response now that the results are out?

A: It was not 'vote chori'. I have tracked politics for over 50 years, including the Emergency when I was in jail. The Congress has lost its mass base. It has lost Dalit votes, backward classes, the upper castes and even the Muslim vote, which has shifted to strong regional parties - SP in UP, RJD in Bihar, TMC in Bengal, DMK in Tamil Nadu. It is not 'vote chori' but 'Jan aadhar chori' or mass base loss. When you lose connection with the ground, every defeat looks like a conspiracy.

Q: Do you agree with the view that aggressive Muslim vote-bank politics ends up consolidating Hindu votes?

A: As socialists, we believe in democracy, socialism and secularism. There should be no politics that divides the country on communal lines - neither a Hindu vote-bank party nor a Muslim vote-bank party.

The country belongs to all; hatred against any community has no place.

Q: What went wrong for the RJD this time?

A: The era of the kind of politics Lalu Yadav practised is over. We worked with him for years, but after he became the Chief Minister, law and order collapsed and politics became about instigating one section against another. That politics of perpetual hostility and caste wars has been rejected. Society has moved forward.

Q: And Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraj campaign?

A: Prashant is a friend and a brilliant election strategist, but he is an election machine, not a political activist rooted in ideology. Despite all his efforts, the election boiled down to a single question: 'Do you want the old jungle raj back or not?' Those who didn't, wanted only one clear option - the NDA. That polarisation finished Jan Suraj.

Q: Nitish Kumar turns 74 this year. How does JD(U) plan leadership transition going forward?

A: There is no provision for dynastic succession in the socialist movement, and Nitish Kumar is particularly opposed to it. Neither his son nor any family member is in politics, and there is no sign that will change. The party works collectively under his leadership and will continue to do so.

Q: Yet an NDA ally, Upendra Kushwaha, has just made his son a minister though the son is not even an elected MLA.

A: Upendra is an old comrade, but he should have avoided this. It would have been better if he had nominated someone else. This

was entirely his party's decision; JD(U) was neither consulted nor is part of it.

Q: Is there still a national role for Nitish Kumar?

A: Not right now. It was Nitish who first started the process of opposition unity. He organised the Hissar rally with leaders from across the spectrum, then went to Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi requesting a structured opposition platform. Meetings were held in Patna, Bengaluru, Mumbai - but the Congress leadership wanted either Sonia or Rahul to be the sole centre. No clear programme emerged. Nitish got disillusioned. Today he is happy shaping Bihar's future, and we are happy with that.

Q: Finally, there are local reports of some unease in JD(U), whispers of MLAs possibly switching sides. Any truth in those reports?

A: Almost every MLA, minister and MP in JD(U) today is a product of the Nitish phenomenon. In the last twenty years there has been no major defection. Even when our tallest leader Sharad Yadav left, not one MLA or MP followed him. Anyone trying to engineer defections now will fail. As long as Nitish Kumar is at the helm - and we pray for his good health - the party remains rock solid.

Q: You mentioned about Nitish Kumar at the helm. There are some reports of concern regarding his health. I will ask this again - is there any talk in the party about a succession plan?

A: True to the traditions of democracy, we will collectively work together and try to manage things if anything happens wrong in the party.

100 YEARS AGO



Front page of The Statesman dated 06 December 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

It is startling to be told that rabies is prevalent in Calcutta, but the facts set out in another column leave no doubt of the extent of the danger. There are a number of neglected and unreliable dogs about, and passers-by have been set upon and bitten. It has been reported that people walking across the Maidan have been attacked. The danger to children is obvious, especially to those sent out for exercise in the charge of servants. The situation imposes a special obligation on those responsible for the administration of the city; there is only one answer to ownerless dogs that become a public menace. Authority must move, but until it moves the public must be on their guard.

NEWS ITEMS

INCREASING INTEREST

STERLING AND DOLLAR SHARES

Business in rubber shares on the Calcutta market has been somewhat easier during the past week, and closed yesterday with more selling of the cheaper stocks. The previous week recorded an advance when quotations from the Straits hardened the prices, and holders were not inclined to part, buyers having to advance their prices in order to obtain their requirements. In view of the increasing interest now being shown in India in rubber shares, the figures published on page 14 are of especial value. A study of the comparative values of sterling and Straits dollar shares on their capitalization per planted acre, indicates that the general trend of prices is considerably higher in London than in Calcutta, and also that rubber shares are still greatly undervalued. A British company has offered £1,000,000 for the Vereenigde Indische Outland Ondernemingen, a Dutch Indies rubber company with headquarters at Rotterdam. This offer amounts to 250 per cent of the nominal value of the Company's shares.

FOOTBALL SURPRISE

AMATEUR CLUBS TO PAY INCOME-TAX

LONDON, DEC.

Constitution has been created among four of the leading amateur clubs by the Treasury's sudden demand of income-tax for the past five years' working. The authorities have even refused to make allowance in respect of capital expended on ground improvements. —Copyright.

FRENCH FINANCE BILL

PASSE SENATE WITH LARGE MAJORITY

PARIS, DEC.

The Senate, by 196 votes to 59, passed the clause in the Government's Finance Bill with regard to the advance of six milliards from the Bank of France, and also passed the clauses with regard to the collection of taxes and an increase of taxes. After M. Briand had made a strong appeal to the Senate to pass the Bill by large majority, they passed the entire measure by 205 votes to 26. —Reuters's Special Service.

WRAPPING PAPER DUTY

NO COMMONS DISCUSSION THIS SESSION

LONDON, DEC.

In the House of Commons Mr. Baldwin stated that the proposed import duties on wrapping paper would not be taken this session. —Reuters.

Blaming the system for rejection by the people

BALBI PURNI

Indian democracy is a reflection of the world's largest public will. Here, elections are not just confined to change of power, but a sacred national ritual - where every vote serves as the pulsation of a healthy democratic system. Therefore, the accuracy of the electoral rolls is not only an administrative work of the Election Commission of India (ECI), but also a question of protecting the constitutional spirit of India.

With this basic spirit, the Election Commission launched a massive campaign of Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls from July 1 this year, so that no ineligible person (including infiltrators) is included in the rolls and no eligible citizen is left out. After Bihar, the process is underway in 12 more states. The previous SIR was conducted in the country during 2002-04. It is ironic that those political parties and their top leaders who were trying to project themselves as the 'protectors' of the Constitution by waving copies of it, are now raising baseless questions on this statutory electoral reform process inside and outside the Parliament.

Several petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court against the nationwide SIR by opponents including opposition parties as well as self-proclaimed 'protectors of the Constitution and democracy'. Former

Union Minister Kapil Sibal and Congress MP Abhishek Manu Singhvi are representing them as senior advocates. The top Court has rejected their argument that SIR is an unnecessary process and that the ECI has no authority to conduct it. Moreover, the Court, in its hearing on November 26, also noted that none of the ineligible voters whose names were removed during the SIR in Bihar had filed any objection.

The ECI, in the second phase of SIR, covering around 51 crore voters in 1,843 assembly constituencies in 321 districts of 12 states, is reviewing the accuracy of the rolls. As of 3 December, 99 per cent of SIR forms have been distributed and over 93 per cent of them have been digitised. To ensure a free, fair, and transparent process, the Commission has already held over 4,700 all-party meetings, attended by 28,000 political representatives. The final rolls will be published on 16 February 2026. Those whose names are removed from the list will have full opportunity to file claims and objections within one month. So, what is the point of being nervous about such a transparent process?

In fact, first casting aspersions on EVMs and then levelling accusation of vote-chori (vote theft) by opponents is nothing but a bad workman blaming his tool. The Congress has unsuccessfully tried to blame 'vote chori' for its debacles in last five Haryana and Maharashtra elections and recently concluded Bihar elections. Of the 61

seats it contested in Bihar, Congress bagged only six receiving just 8.7 per cent votes. It should be remembered that Congress's vote share drastically dropped to 6 per cent in 2005, that too when the UPA government was at the helm. Will the Congress be able to explain who committed the 'vote chori' then?

Congress' performance has been steadily declining for the past three decades in Bihar. In the 1990 assembly elections, it received approximately 24.7 per cent votes, which dropped to 16.2 per cent in 1995, 11 per cent in 2000, a meagre 8.3 per cent when contesting alone in 2010, 6.7 per cent in 2015, and 4.48 per cent in 2020. This decline of the Congress is not just confined to Bihar.

After independence, the Congress ruled the country directly or indirectly, for 50 years. During this period, Congress lost power in Tamil Nadu (1967), West Bengal (1977), Uttar Pradesh (1989), Gujarat (1990), Maharashtra (1995), Odisha (2000), Goa (2012), and Delhi (2013) and has not been able to return to power on its own. In Delhi, it even failed to open its account in the 2015, 2020 and 2025 elections. Its vote share in the Maharashtra assembly elections has dropped from 21 per cent in 2009 to a mere 12 per cent in 2024. Will this steady erosion - or in the words of the Congress leadership 'match-fixing' and 'vote chori' - also be blamed on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ECI?

The last four Lok Sabha elections clearly underscore India's changing political landscape. In 2009, the BJP bagged 18.8 per cent votes and 116 seats. In 2014, the same BJP surged to 28.2 seats with 31 per cent votes in its kitty. On the contrary, the Congress slipped from 206 to 44 seats with its vote share dropping from 28.5 per cent to 19.3 per cent. During both elections, the Congress-led UPA government was in power at the Centre. Public support for the BJP surged further in 2019 and the party secured a majority again with increased vote share (37.3 per cent) and seats (303).

The party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, fought the 2024 Lok Sabha elections amid anti-incumbency, opposition consolidation, plots by anti-India forces, and negative propaganda. It witnessed a drop in its seats (240) and vote share (36.5 per cent), but managed to form the government.

It is also worth noting that during the last 11 years of the Modi government at the Centre, opposition parties also won elections in many states. These mainly include Trinamool in West Bengal, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) in Jharkhand, Congress in Karnataka and Himachal, National Congress in Jammu & Kashmir and the Left in Kerala, etc. Even in the 70-member Delhi assembly elections, AAP won 67 seats in 2015 and 62 in 2020 and it also won 80 per cent of the seats in Punjab in

2022. Would these results have been possible if the Election Commission had been 'biased' toward one party?

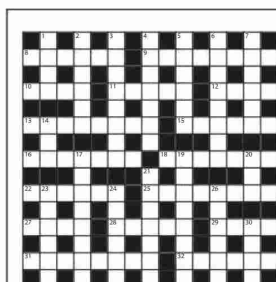
In fact, most of the opposition, including the Congress leadership, have lost the ability to see and understand their core problem. Arrogance and a sense of dynastic entitlement have deprived them of introspection. They are living in a fantasy, completely disconnected from reality, and are unnecessarily blaming Prime Minister Modi and the Commission for 'vote chori' for every electoral debacle.

Another bitter truth is that if for some reason voters get disillusioned with the BJP, they look for other alternatives instead of the main opposition, the Congress. In fact, most of the opposition parties - SP, RJD, Trinamool, DMK, NCP, AAP - have strengthened their roots by making inroads into the political base of the Congress.

The truth is that when the 'people', i.e. the voters, repeatedly reject the Congress, then use of an organised political strategy, the 'system' - institutions like the Election Commission - are put in the dock. The only objective is to somehow maintain its declining political relevance amidst the alienation from the public, even if it means damaging the credibility of the country's constitutional institutions.

(The writer is the author of 'Trust with Apollon: Decolonization of India and The Illusion of Democracy' and can be reached at purnihb@gmail.com)

Crossword | No. 293313



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

ACROSS
1. Bird or Turkey
2. On top of St Paul's cathedral there's one copper not quite freezing
3. Military help
4. Line to appear conversational
5. Narrow escape as air-freshener
6. Initially men are recording sound of cow with Electronic kit
7. Very old have nurse to push forward
8. Narrow escape as air-freshener
9. Initially men are recording sound of cow with Electronic kit
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NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

Manu Prakash alleged that properties worth about ?14 crore belonging to the accused and his family have been taken as donation to absolve Ravindra Kumar, which is questionable. He expressed confidence that the ongoing CBI and ACB investigations will soon reveal full details of the case and the roles of those involved.

SHORT TAKES

CYCLONE-TORN
SRI LANKA SEEKS
\$200 MN FUND

Colombo, Dec. 5: The International Monetary Fund said on Friday that Sri Lanka had requested financial assistance of about \$200 million to address the destruction caused by Cyclone Ditwah.

"The IMF remains closely engaged with Sri Lankan authorities during this challenging period and is committed to supporting the country as it undertakes urgent efforts to recover, rebuild and promote resilience for the future," Evan Papageorgiou, IMF Mission Chief for Sri Lanka, said in a statement.

TECHNICAL ISSUES
AT EDINBURGH
AIRPORT SOLVED

New York, Dec. 5: Edinburgh Airport restarted flights after fixing an IT issue with its air traffic control, provider that prompted a halt on all arrivals and departures.

Scotland's busiest airport resumed operations within an hour of the shutdown. Edinburgh arrivals had initially been suspended until at least 2 pm local time, according to a flight tracking site.

SPAIN PROBES
CAUSE OF SWINE
FEVER OUTBREAK

Madrid, Dec. 5: Spain is investigating whether a recent swine fever outbreak in Barcelona could have been caused by a laboratory leak, the agriculture ministry said on Friday.

The country, the European Union's top pork producer, said the outbreak was caused by a laboratory leak, the agriculture ministry said on Friday. The country, the European Union's top pork producer, said the outbreak was caused by a laboratory leak, the agriculture ministry said on Friday.

Trump's strategy shifts
from global role to local

National security strategy to readjust military presence

Washington, Dec. 5: US President Donald Trump laid out a radical realignment of the foreign policy of the United States on Friday, shifting the long-time superpower's focus from global to regional, brutally criticizing Europe as facing "civilisational erosion" and putting a top priority on eliminating mass migration.

The national security strategy, meant to flesh out Trump's norms-shattering worldview, elevates Latin America to the top of the US agenda in a sharp reorientation from longstanding US calls to focus on Asia to face a rising China. "In everything we do, we are putting America First," Trump said in a preamble to the long-awaited paper.

Breaking with decades of attempts to be the sole superpower, the strategy said that the "US rejects the old-fashioned concept of global domination for itself." It said that the US would also prevent other powers, namely China, from dominating but added: "This does not mean wasting blood and treasure to curtail the influence of all the world's great and middle powers."

The strategy called for a "readjustment of our global military presence to address urgent threats in our Hemisphere."

The strategy made clear that the US under Trump would aggressively pursue similar objectives in Europe, in line with far-right parties' agendas.

In extraordinary language in addressing close allies, the strategy said the administration would "cultivate resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations."



US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump attend the National Christmas Tree Lighting at the Ellipse in Washington, DC, on Friday. — AFP

Somalis rap Trump over 'trash' remark

Minneapolis, Dec. 5: Crowds usually press shoulder-to-shoulder at Karmel Mall, a sprawling Somali shopping centre in Minneapolis, where people often greet each other by name, speak Somali more than English and gather to browse for new hijabs and shop from hundreds of vendors lining the narrow hallways.

On Wednesday night, however, only a handful of people milled around the mall after US President Donald Trump called Somali immigrants "garbage" and said that "they destroyed our country."

ry within European nations. "Germany quickly hit back, saying that it does not need 'outside advice.' The strategy pointed to Europe's slide in share of

City officials say his remarks coincided with a surge of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in Minneapolis.

Minnesota's Somali community has become an increasingly influential political constituency in the state, with US Representative Ilhan Omar its most high-profile member. As a fraud investigation churns up convictions of community members, Trump has focused his ire on the Somali community.

The deportation campaign has forced some Somali residents into hiding. — Reuters

REFUGEE WORK
PERMIT TIME CUT
TO 18 MONTHS

Washington, Dec. 5: US President Donald Trump's administration on Thursday cut to 18 months from five years the period of time work permits are valid for refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants. The move took place just two days after it halted immigration applications for citizens from 19 nations.

The move also came after two National Guard members were allegedly shot last week by an Afghan man who entered the United States as part of a resettlement program following the American military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Joseph Eilow, director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services, cited the November 26 shooting in the US capital as a reason for the move.

"Reducing the maximum validity period for employment authorisation will ensure that those seeking to work in the US do not threaten public safety or promote harmful anti-American ideologies," Eilow said. "After the attack on National Guard service members in our nation's capital by an alien," he said. — AFP

Ukraine claims attack on Russian refinery

Kyiv, Dec. 5: Ukraine said it attacked Rosneft PJSC's Syzran refinery and a small port on Russia's Azov Sea coast, adding to spate of recent strikes that are becoming costly for Moscow and the country's oil industry.

Ukraine's military forces struck the oil-processing facility in Russia's Volga region overnight, its General Staff said on Telegram, adding the refinery had been supplying fuel to the Kremlin's army. It has a design capacity of 8.5 million barrels per year, about 170,000 barrels per day — and has been attacked several times this year, most recently in August.

Earlier strikes on Rosneft's Saratov refinery halted the facility's primary-processing altogether as of early December, Ukraine's General Staff said.



French President Emmanuel Macron plays table tennis with Chinese and French table tennis players at Sichuan University. — AFP

The facility has a design capacity of around 140,000 barrels per day and was last attacked on November 28.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia will continue its military operation in Ukraine if Kyiv refuses to negotiate a settlement. — Agencies

MACRON: U.S.,
EUROPE UNION
MUST ON KYIV

Paris, Dec. 5: French President Emmanuel Macron said on Friday that unity between Europe and the US was key in the support of Ukraine, adding there is "no mistrust".

"Unity between Americans and Europeans on the Ukrainian issue is essential. We need to work together," Macron said. "We welcome and support the peace efforts being made by the US," he added.

German magazine Spiegel cited a transcript of a confidential call showing the French President and German Chancellor have voiced scepticism about efforts by the US to negotiate a peace between Ukraine and Russia. — Reuters

Mamdani difficult to pronounce

Dallas, Dec. 5: From the election of Zohran Mamdani to the intrigue surrounding the jewel heist at the Louvre, keeping up with this year's news also left some Americans struggling with pronunciations.

That's put both the name of New York City's incoming mayor and the famed Paris museum on a list of the most mispronounced words in 2025. The language-learning company Babel and closed-captioning company The Captioning Group on Thursday released a list of the words that news anchors, politicians and other public figures in the US struggled with the most this year, giving an overview of the people and



Zohran Mamdani

topics that had Americans talking. As Mamdani made his political rise, the democratic socialist's name often was mangled. When he takes office in January, the 34-year-old will become the city's first Muslim mayor, first born in Africa and first of South Asian heritage. Babel said his name which should be pronounced zoh-RAHN mam-

DAH-nee was most commonly mispronounced when people swapped the M and N in his last name.

Mamdani has said he doesn't mind if someone tries to pronounce his name correctly and misses but that some mispronunciation intentionally. During one mayoral race debate, he chided former investment banker and Cuomo's pronouncement of his name, telling his opponent: "The name is Mamdani. M-A-M-D-A-N-I." The name of the worlds most visited museum, Babel said the correct pronunciation is LOOV-ruh. — AP

FINANCIAL
Chronicle

VIJAYAWADA | SATURDAY | 6 DECEMBER 2025

quick
BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	85,712.37 0.52
Nifty 50	26,186.45 0.59
S&P 500*	6,880.59 0.34
Dollar (₹)	90.02 0.03
Pound Sterling (₹)	120.13 0.05
Euro (₹)	104.87 -0.19
Gold (10gm)*	131,040.962 0.74
Brent crude (\$/bbl)	63.19 -0.11
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.500 -0.47
IN 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.118 0.01

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Govt to set up
intl' centre for
DPI innovation

The government has decided to establish an international centre for digital public infrastructure (DPI) innovation and advancement, which has been approved and sanctioned to be established in NISG, electronics and IT secretary S Krishnan said. He also said that the IT services companies should explore building AI-based solutions to address sector-specific problems, which have potential to create new jobs.

RUPEE VALUE: GOV
MALHOTRA SAID INTERVENTIONS AIMED ONLY
TO CONTROL EXCESSIVE VOLATILITY IN SYSTEMFALAKNAZ SYED
MUMBAI, DEC. 5

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) doesn't target any specific exchange rate level and relies on market forces to determine the rupee value, governor Sanjay Malhotra said Friday adding that its interventions are aimed only to control excessive volatility.

His statement comes at a time when the rupee slipped below the psychologically critical ₹90 per dollar level on Wednesday, extending an eight-month decline as a firm US dollar, uncertainty around the Indo-US trade deal and continued demand for dollars from importers and foreign investors weighed on the domestic unit.

"Our stated policy has always been that we allow the markets to determine. I mean we don't target price levels or any bands. We allow the markets to determine prices. We believe that the markets in the long run especially, are efficient," he said at the post monetary policy press conference, adding that the rupee is part of a "very deep market".

He cited the example of the rupee's appreciation earlier this year when it reversed from near ₹80 in February to below ₹84 within three months. "These fluctuations happen. Our effort is to reduce abnormal volatility. We are having sufficient reserves."



We allow the markets to determine prices. We believe that the markets, in the long run especially, are efficient and the rupee is part of market. —SANJAY MALHOTRA, RBI governor

The current account is manageable at about one percent or so, and given the strong fundamentals of our country, we should get good capital flows as well going forward," He added that the recent \$ 5-billion rupee-swap is a liquidity tool and not an attempt to bolster the currency.

The Indian rupee ended at 89.98/99 to a dollar level on Friday after opening at 89.85/86 level. The rupee rose to an intra-day high of 89.69 level and slipped sharply to 90.08 low, after the RBI announced a three-year buy and sell swap for \$ 5 bn as part of liquidity measures.

RBI views current
macros as goldilocks

From page 1

RBI also announced measures to ensure sufficient liquidity in the banking system and stabilize the rupee. These include open market purchases of government bonds worth ₹1 lakh crore and \$ 5 billion of dollar-rupee buy/sell swap for three-year tenure in December designed to inject durable liquidity into the system and facilitate faster transmission of rate cuts.

RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra described current macro-economic environment as a rare Goldilocks moment for India, with inflation at a benign 2.2 per cent and growth at 8 per cent in first half of financial year.

The central bank revised

both inflation and growth projections. It delivered a benign inflation outlook driven primarily by exceptionally subdued food prices and lowered the CPI estimates to 2 per cent from 2.6 per cent for the current fiscal giving space to cut

GDP REVISION

The real GDP growth has been revised upwards across quarters with the current fiscal year estimate at 7.3 per cent from 6.8 per cent. It however expects GDP growth to moderate in second half, some signs of which are already visible in recent high frequency indicators. RBI noted domestic activity remains resilient on account of a healthy agricultural sector.

STEADY PATH

INDIA experienced a rare Goldilocks phase of high growth and low inflation in H1.

MPC unanimously cut the repo rate by 25 bps to 5.25% and retained a neutral stance.

STANDING deposit facility (SDF) rate lowered to 5.00% and MSF/Bank Rate to 5.50%.

BANKING and NBFC sectors remain strong with solid capital and improved asset quality.

TOTAL FLOW of resources to the commercial sector rose to ₹20.1 L cr

RURAL DEMAND: STRONG; urban demand steadily improving.

FX RESERVES at USD 686.2 billion, providing 11+ months of import cover.

RBI to inject durable liquidity via ₹1,00,000 crore OMO purchases.

OMO to conduct a USD 5 billion 3-year USD/INR Buy-Sell swap.

INFLATION outlook revised downward; expected to stay at or below 4% through early FY27.

FY26 GDP growth projected at 7.3% as momentum moderates.

HIGH-FREQUENCY indicators remain positive, though some early weakness is visible.

THE Sathes offered courses called Geo, Membership, GEO Plus, Aarambh, Eye Opener, GEO Panoramic, Vow and Gurukul Samanvay. They charged highest fee of ₹6.75 lakh for the Membership Course. Sebi found 65 per cent of the course participants (investors) incurred losses during the six-month period after completion of the course, contradicting advertisements of supernatural profits.

Fees for other course were in the range of ₹6000 to ₹1.7 lakh. Sebi found chats in WhatsApp groups providing stock analysis and recommendation using live market data by Sathes.

The market regulator found Gauri Sathes receiving recurring payments from ASTA. Sebi director and as an authorised person of stock broker ABC Limited having 236 clients mapped to her. Of these, 179 of clients were also observed to be course participants.

Finfluencer
Sathe faces banRAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, DEC. 5

Securities and Exchange Board of India has barred Avadhut Sathe Trading Academy (ASTA) and its founder Avadhut Sathe and his wife Gauri Sathe from the securities market.

Sebi ordered disgorgement of ₹601.37 cr including ₹546.17 cr collected as course fees for eight programmes they ran from Jan 2020-Oct 2025.

Sebi froze their bank accounts and banned sale of their physical assets. Sebi investigation found out taut despite being not registered, these entities have been providing investment advisory and research analyst services under the guise of stock market training programmes and collected ₹601.37 cr from more than 4.1 lakh participants. They were still doing even after Sebi's search and seize operation.

"The notices have been recklessly misleading, soliciting and inducing investors to deal in the securities market on the basis of investment advice and stock analysis without the requisite registration certificate," Sebi said in its 125-page order.

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Netflix to buy Warner assets for \$82 billion

New York, Dec. 5: Netflix agreed to buy Warner Bros. Discovery in a historic combination, joining the world's dominant paid streaming service with one of Hollywood's oldest and most revered studios.

Warner Bros. shareholders will receive \$27.75 a share in cash and stock in Netflix. The total equity value of deal is \$72 billion, while enterprise value of deal, includes debt, is \$82.7 billion.

Prior to the closing of the sale, Warner Bros. will complete the planned spinoff of its networks division, which includes cable channels such as CNN, TBS and TNT. That transaction is now expected to be completed in the third quarter of 2026, Netflix said.

Harry Potter and Friends. — Bloomberg



Marked for life

Acid attack victims deserve better from courts and law enforcement

Shocked that an acid attack victim had not got closure 16 years after the crime was committed, the Supreme Court of India made a slew of oral observations early this week calling the slow pace a "mockery of the system". The Chief Justice of India (CJI), Justice Surya Kant, said acid attackers must not be shown any sympathy by courts, and called for the "entire system" to respond against them. Shaheen Malik was 26 and was studying for an MBA degree when she was attacked outside her office in Haryana in 2009. Till 2013, "nothing happened" in her case, she told the CJI. The case was finally transferred to Rohini court in Delhi from Haryana, where the trial is pending and "final arguments" are on. Ms. Malik has undergone reconstructive surgeries, and in 2021, she set up Brave Souls, an NGO which offers medical and legal support to acid attack survivors. In fact, she was knocking at the Court's door with a PIL seeking formal recognition of survivors as persons with specified disabilities under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. She was bringing the Court's notice to those acid attack victims who had been forcibly fed acid and were not marked for life like others who had acid thrown at them but nevertheless lived with terrible suffering.

The CJI asked the Centre to consider bringing an ordinance, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre, said no respondent could oppose the cause of the petitioners. Perpetrators of acid attacks who leave victims, mostly women and minors, scarred inside and outside for the rest of their lives "must meet with the same ruthlessness as they showed their victims", he said. The CJI ordered the Registrar-General of the High Courts to provide the number and details of pending trials in acid attack cases; he also proposed setting up of special courts to exclusively conduct acid attack cases on a day-to-day basis. In the past, in *Laxmi vs Union Of India and Ors.*, the Court had directed the government to ensure that acid attack victims get proper treatment, aftercare and rehabilitation, also asking it to look into the banning of sale of acid across the country. Section 124 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita deals with acid attacks and the punishment to be meted out, but reality paints a grim picture, with trials being long-drawn and conviction rates low. According to latest National Crime Records Bureau data, there were 207 incidents of acid attacks across the country in 2023, with West Bengal ignominiously topping the list with 57 cases, followed by Uttar Pradesh (31). Victims of acid attacks, one of the worst forms of gender violence imaginable, deserve a lot better.

Deal without peace

Trump's announcement of the accord between Congo, Rwanda is premature

President Donald Trump counts the crisis in Congo as among the conflicts he has helped resolve. On December 4, he hosted the leaders of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in Washington for the signing of a formal peace agreement, which endorsed an earlier deal concluded by the Foreign Ministers of both countries. Mr. Trump hailed the accord as a "historic" step towards bringing prosperity to Africa, while Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi and his Rwandan counterpart Paul Kagame, who had frequently exchanged insults, praised his mediation. Mr. Trump also promised American investments in the resource-rich Congo if peace holds. On Thursday, he said he would send "our biggest and greatest companies over to the two countries", adding that "we are going to take some of the rare earth, take out some of the assets and pay ... and everybody is going to make a lot of money". But beyond the grandiosity of the ceremony, the situation remains complex and violent, with fighting continuing to rage in eastern Congo between Congolese forces and the M23 rebels. Under the agreement, Rwanda wants Congo to disarm the Hutu militias operating from its territory, while Congo wants Rwanda to withdraw troops from the east. Ultimately, however, the success of the deal hinges on securing peace between the Congolese government and M23.

The crisis in Congo can be traced back to the 1994 Rwandan genocide in which about 8,00,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were massacred by ethnic Hutu militias. After the genocidal regime in Kigali fell, thousands of Hutus fled to Congo in the mid-1990s. Rwanda now claims that some of the militias that took part in the genocide continue to operate from Congolese territory. M23, which takes its name from a failed peace agreement signed between a Tutsi-led rebel group and the Congolese government on March 23, 2009, says it is fighting to protect the rights of Congo's Tutsi ethnic minority. The Congo and UN experts say neighbouring Rwanda, ruled by a Tutsi-led government, is backing M23. In 2012, shortly after its formation, M23 seized much of Goma in eastern Congo, but withdrew when Rwanda came under international pressure. It started another rebellion in 2013, capturing Goma again and expanding its reach. Alongside the U.S.-brokered talks between the Congo and Rwanda, a parallel dialogue between M23 and Kinshasa, facilitated by Qatar, is also under way. Congo wants M23 to withdraw from the eastern regions it controls, but the rebels have shown little interest in doing so. Mr. Trump's declaration that he brought the war to an end appears premature, given the complexity of the crisis. For peace, the wounds of the genocide must be healed, inter-racial relations between Hutus and Tutsis improved, non-state militias disarmed and ties between Rwanda and the Congo stabilised.

A growing shadow over digital constitutionalism

In an unprecedented move, the central government revoked its order to mobile phone manufacturers to install 'Sanchar Saathi', a government app, from 2026. The rollback came in 48 hours following widespread concerns raised by most stakeholders about ambiguous data collection methods, the lack of consent, surveillance and unlimited data storage. Reuters broke the story and Apple refused to implement the policy.

These foreign entities may have played some sort of a backstage role as the government cannot afford to lose Apple and its manufacturing in India. Although the government's move to have the app installed was apparently aimed as a safety measure — cybercrimes increased from 15.9 lakh cases in 2023 to 20.4 lakh in 2024 — to help mobile users and the police, legitimate questions were raised during the pushback against the government's move about surveillance, state power and data misuse. These issues can be regarded as a significant step to understand the urgent need of what may be termed as digital constitutionalism.

What digital constitutionalism entails

Digital constitutionalism signifies the extension of constitutional principles such as liberty, dignity, equality including non-arbitrariness, accountability and rule of law in the digital space. These values are being threatened in the world where data collection, artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance technologies take the lead. Modern governance is becoming an invisible system, whether it is biometric databases, predictive algorithms or both. In the absence of strong constitutional protection within these systems, humans are likely to be exposed to abuse of authority.

Everyday life is now being influenced by digital governance. Automated processes mediate Know Your Customer (KYC) verification, welfare distribution, job applications, health-care records, and even political expression in social media. These technologies tend to operate without any significant revelation or approval from people.

Consequently, the concentration of power takes place in the hands of tech designers, law enforcement agencies and private companies. This generates an unequal state where the citizens are passive data subjects but not active right-holders as they are supposed to be in liberal democracies.

There has also been a worrisome development in surveillance which even George Orwell could not imagine in the celebrated and futuristic 1984. It has ceased to be visible and immediate. These days it is being performed with the help of metadata gathering, location tracing, biometric identification, behavioural modelling and predictive analytics.

This kind of silent and constant surveillance can chill free speech, discourage dissent and disrupt democracies. People start censoring themselves when they are aware that they are



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Constitutional principles are under threat in a world where data collection, artificial intelligence and surveillance technologies are taking the lead

Constitutional principles are under threat in a world where data collection, artificial intelligence and surveillance technologies are taking the lead

under observation. Self-censorship is the new normal. The right to privacy is now considered to be one of the basic rights in India. This was affirmed in *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) And Anr. vs Union of India And Ors.* (2017) by the Supreme Court of India. More recently, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, was passed by Parliament. Although it was supposed to safeguard the data of the citizens, the law has some significant flaws. It gives broad exemption to the government, is not well overseen by the independent body, and has weak remedies for individuals. It places administrative convenience and national security over individual autonomy and dignity, rendering it inadequate as a constitutional protection.

Efficiency but less personal control

Data-fication has entered every sector. Banks rely on behavioural analytics. Hospitals and insurance agencies depend on digital medical records. Education is delivered through online platforms. Social media do profile users constantly. These developments create efficiency, yet they also reduce personal control over information.

Consent has become a routine "click-through" process, not a genuine voluntary choice. Purpose limitation is often ignored. Consequently, privacy loss is no longer just about isolated breaches. It is about the gradual erosion of personal control over identity and decision-making.

Surveillance technologies now form part of public places. Closed circuit cameras, biometric scanners and digital identifiers constantly monitor people. Accordingly, facial recognition has been prohibited or severely limited in a few cities in the United States because of racial discrimination, surveillance and false identification. Facial recognition misidentification has led to wrongful arrests abroad. Digi Yatra data (at Indian airports) too is not with the government. Research has found that these systems at times adversely work against people of colour, women, and minority groups. Thus, facial recognition technology basically leads to discrimination rather than assisting crime prevention which like Sanchar Saathi, is its stated objective.

While such technologies are still growing and are being used in India, there is no comprehensive law on surveillance. There is a lack of effective judicial control. Transparency is rare. This poses a serious disproportion between authority and responsibility. Unchecked surveillance may end up transforming a democratic state into a monitoring state like Big Brother.

Algorithms determine who receives welfare, is profiled by police, has their content removed, and who gets a job or a loan application shortlisted. Such systems are commonly known as black boxes as their decision-making functions are obscure. In cases when a benefit is not provided to a person, or a person is suspected, there is no explanation. It also lacks a clear-cut mechanism of appeal.

There are real consequences. Algorithmic failures have excluded deserving families from welfare schemes. Automated content moderation has silenced legitimate voices. Indeed, technology can quietly violate the constitutional principles of equality, reasonableness and natural justice.

An inadequate legal system

The legal system that is in place in India, including the Information Technology Act, 2000, and emerging digital laws, is mainly aimed at controlling technology and governing platforms. It is not doing enough to defend citizen's liberties in general and privacy in particular. Few guidelines have been provided by courts, but these are disjointed and provisional. When it comes to high-risk algorithms and surveillance orders, there is no external institution with the ability to audit them or even review them. To the majority of tech-savvy citizens, remedies are slow and expensive and unreachably. Masses are unaware of dangers.

This gives rise to a paradox in the constitution. Rights, freedoms and state power are now being shaped by the digital system, just like the government institutions. These are not, however, subjected to constitutional discipline. This is an incongruity that undermines democracy.

To find the appropriate model of digital constitutionalism, it will have to be more than being merely theoretical. It should develop institutional protection. Violations should be required into by creating an independent digital rights commission that will ensure accountability. The law should restrict surveillance except in grave situations of national security, which can be determined by necessity and proportionality. Public transparency reports and parliamentary scrutiny, and judicial warrants must be obligatory.

Risky AI devices should be audited and bias-tested on a regular basis. Citizens should be granted the right to explanation and the right to appeal to the automated decisions. The tight control of purpose, limited collection and severe punishment of abuse should be reinforced to ensure better data protection.

Digital literacy too is to be considered as a constitutional empowerment. Individuals should be in a position to criticise, challenge and oppose digital power structures. Rights are mere theories without knowing.

Digital technologies have become an integral part of citizenship. They determine the availability of services, political participation and even identity. With governance increasingly being more data-driven, constitutional values should be used as the starting point for this shift. Freedom, equality and privacy are too precious to be among the mute victims of efficiency. Digital constitutionalism is not just a change in law. It is the defence of the democratic era in the algorithmic era. It is a promise to make sure that technology is a servant of the people and not their silent authoritarian master.

Chile's lesson for India's coal conundrum

Despite dramatic gains in renewable energy, India dropped 13 places to 23rd in the Climate Change Performance Index released during COP30 in Brazil in November 2025. The main reason is the lack of progress to phase out coal. Coal presents a conundrum of the worst kind because its phaseout presents a loss of jobs and the supply of low-cost electricity in some States, while the current trajectory means the loss of lives and livelihoods from runaway global warming and air pollution. This trade-off draws attention to Chile's experience in tackling it.

A comparison

The big Indian picture is that coal, as a source of the use of all energy, makes up over half while renewables (solar, wind, hydro, nuclear) are still a minority share. At the same time, the good news is that India doubled clean energy capacity during 2021-25. Now, the share of renewables in total installed power capacity is one half, although only one-fifth of electricity was actually generated using them in 2024, with coal contributing 73% of electricity generation. What is more, India is increasing domestic production of coal.

In comparison, coal's share of Chile's electricity generation fell from 43.6% to 17.5% during 2016-24. Today, renewables (especially wind and solar) make up over 60% of the country's power mix. This shift was driven by decisive government actions, first by a 2014 tax of \$5 a tonne of carbon emissions. The government imposed stringent emission standards on coal plants, raising construction and compliance costs by 30%. Competitive auctions for wind and solar power helped push renewables. Chile has also aggressively built out energy storage systems to stabilise the grid, and committed to phase out coal by 2040. All this makes the case that even



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India needs to draw up a plan to exit the use of coal and in this, Chile's experience can help

economies with coal dependence can accelerate a transition. That said, coal occupies a smaller share of Chile's energy when compared to India, giving it fewer plants to shut down and a smaller dependent workforce. The transition was also enabled by a political environment that allowed swift, market reforms following privatisation of key sectors.

Crucially, Chile had already begun developing alternative industries, particularly in renewables, creating pathways to absorb displaced workers and capital. In contrast, India's far deeper coal dependence and limited economic alternatives in coal regions make its transition more complex. Many districts in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal could face social risks from abrupt closures.

But it is worth remembering that coal phaseout constitutes a "no regrets" policy. That is to say it is part of averting the damage from climate change. One estimate is that by 2100, climate change would sap 3%-10% of India's GDP through heat stress and declining labour productivity. It is also part of stopping massive health damage: by one estimate, a one GW increase in coal-fired capacity corresponds to a 14% increase in infant mortality rates in districts near the plant site.

Focus on decarbonisation

Considering this socio-ecological calculus, the eye needs to be squarely on decarbonisation which calls for a systematic removal of the oldest and most polluting plants, cancellation of new coal approvals, and replacement of coal output with firm renewable power backed by storage. It is important to have timelines for plant retirements and closures. TERI has suggested that India could phase out coal power entirely by 2050 to meet its net zero goals. In the transition

to this target, there could be an incremental scaling down of coal, improved efficiency and decommissioning. Three sets of action aid this central thrust of a coal phaseout.

First, the more the limitations of renewables are tackled, the better for the moving out of coal. The effort would also be aided by a drive to electrify transport, industry and households.

Second, underpinning this physical transition would be the reform of markets and regulation to disincentivise coal, for example through carbon pricing, removal of coal subsidies, clean dispatch rules and power procurement contracts that favour renewables.

Third, Chile's experience also speaks to providing robust support for workers through reskilling and alternative livelihoods. A dedicated transition fund is essential, such as the "Green Energy Transition India Fund" proposed by the Inter-Ministerial Committee.

The issue of finance

Financing the transition will benefit from a blended model of public and private capital, where government support is directed toward community welfare and workforce reskilling, while private investors lead the expansion of clean energy infrastructure. The District Mineral Foundation corpus can be strategically used to foster entrepreneurship and economic diversification in coal-dependent regions.

Considering the high stakes, a phaseout of coal needs to become a top political priority. Renewable energy gains show tremendous promise, but without an actionable plan to replace coal, climate ambitions would remain hollow. The time has come for a coal exit road map, one that enshrines delivery timelines, financing of social protection, market reform, and learning from peers such as Chile.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Politics and the Putin visit

The decision to 'stop' the Opposition from meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin is deeply troubling. The Opposition represents a sizeable percentage of India's citizens, and denying representatives of the Opposition a seat at the high table is the equivalent of disrespecting the citizens

of almost half the country.

Allowing two TV anchors from a private media channel to interview Mr. Putin sends the wrong signal — that our democracy values select media voices over elected representatives. Indian foreign policy has always been one of team effort, built on consensus between

the government and the Opposition. It should never be reduced to a one-party show. The Government must remember that foreign policy is not about political rivalry but national interest.

T. Kailash Ditya,
Hyderabad

I hope that India is able to prevail upon Mr. Putin and

convey to him the dire need to end the war with Ukraine. The red carpet welcome given to Mr. Putin clearly points to the high regard India has for Russia. But it is also important that a humanitarian point of view needs to be conveyed and the suffering ends.

Mani Nataraajan,
Chennai

On the margins

It comes as no surprise that "International Fisherwomen's Day" (Opinion page — "Notebook", December 5) did not garner much support. In a practically male-dominated society, the voices of women hardly reach those who matter in the corridors of power. Fisherwomen

have never been given their due. Nevertheless, awareness is vital and the contributions of women in every field must be recognised.

Balasubramanian Pavan,
Secunderabad

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

GROUND ZERO



Workers offload raw cotton at a ginning mill near Surendranagar, Gujarat. VIJAY SONEJI

Where cotton clouds hang heavy

Following heavy rainfall in October and the subsequent drop in the price of cotton, six farmers have died by suicide in Gujarat. The Union government's decision to allow duty-free cotton imports has only added to their woes. **A.M. Jigesh** reports on how farmers in Gujarat's cotton belt are calling for government intervention

Trigger warning: This article has references to suicide. Please avoid reading if you are distressed by the subject.

A month ago, in Revaniya, less than 100 kilometres from the industrial hub of Rajkot in Gujarat, villagers woke up to the news of the suicide of a 60-year-old farmer, Dhanabhai Jadav.

Dhanabhai's son, Bharat Jadav, 28, is yet to come to terms with the loss. Standing in front of his one-room hut, Bharat, who had a son recently, explained that Dhanabhai faced two problems: "First, the rate of cotton was going very low, to ₹1,200-1,300 per *mann* (about 20 kilograms). Second, the non-seasonal and excess rains of October 25 damaged crops, just ahead of the harvest. He could not come to terms with the fact that prices and production would be low."

After conducting an aerial survey of the affected districts, Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel announced a relief and assistance package of approximately ₹10,000 crore for the losses and said the State government would purchase groundnuts, moong, urad, and soybean worth over ₹15,000 crore from farmers at support prices from November 9.

Bharat said his family is yet to get any compensation. "No one from the government came here. We did not get any compensation," he said.

The family was working hard to make both ends meet, he added. "We hope that the crops of cotton, pulses, and peanuts in the seven *bighas* (about 4.3 hectares) of land we own will help us repay loans," he said.

Rajubhai, a friend of Dhanabhai, has not visited his friend's farm since his death. "I used to see him working tirelessly every day. All of us worked to make a living. If cotton failed, we tried growing peanuts. If peanut failed, we would try pulses. If that too failed, we would cultivate vegetables," he said, while walking to his friend's house across a mud road, away from the village centre. "This year, the damage was unprecedented and the decline in prices was unexpected. But I didn't think that he would take such an extreme step. I wanted to tell him, 'let us try chana dal (chickpea) next time.' But it was too late."

Following the rains of October 25, farmer organisations say six farmers have died by suicide in Gujarat. "Four of them were cotton farmers," said Dayabhai Gajera, a leader of the All India Kisan Sabha, a peasant organisation that claims to have 1.5 lakh members. While the government has said it has offered compensation and assistance to the farmers, the Opposition has said the government ignored the deaths.

The deaths occurred in the Saurashtra region, famous for production of cotton, groundnuts, and pulses. The farmers are now staring at a crisis, as free entry of imported cotton has further reduced prices.

Problem of importing cotton

According to the Commerce Ministry, India imported cotton (raw and waste) worth ₹2,069.12 in October this year, which is almost twice as much as it imported last October (₹1,073.08 crore). Though India is the world's second-largest cotton producer after China, the textile industry has



Usually in November and December, spinning mills buy from us. Now, they are taking imported cotton. Our product has not moved from godowns

SAGAR CHANDRESH BHAI PATEL
Entrepreneur

been pushing for cotton imports, largely because countries such as the United States, China, and Brazil offer cheaper cotton. The industry, spread across the country, is India's second-largest employer after agriculture.

Farm leaders, traders, and ginning millers in Gujarat say this year's decrease in prices has been caused not just by rains, but also the import of raw cotton. "Last year, we got about ₹1,500 for a *mann* of cotton. As soon as the import tariffs were waived off, the amount decreased to ₹1,200-1,300," said Gajera.

On August 19, the Union government exempted all customs duties on the import of raw cotton until September 30. It stated in a press release that the measure would bring relief to manufacturers and consumers. On August 28, the government further extended the import duty exemption until December 31.

"The decision, notified by the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, is expected to stabilise the input costs across the textile value chain, including yarn, fabric, garments, providing relief to manufacturers and consumers alike. This strategic intervention ensures that the textile sector remains globally competitive while safeguarding the interests of domestic cotton farmers," the government said in a press release.

The government claimed that farmers' interests are safeguarded through the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism operated by the Cotton Corporation of India Ltd. (CCI), which ensures that farmers receive at least 50% above their cost of production.

"Imported cotton often caters to specialised industrial requirements and does not substitute domestic cotton," the government explained in a press release. "Most imports occur during lean periods or when domestic stocks are insufficient, which minimises competition with peak domestic procurement periods. The government monitors cotton prices closely and retains the flexibility to impose safeguards as and when required."

According to the Textiles Ministry, the provisional acreage of cotton for 2024-25 is 114.47 lakh ha. This is a decrease of about 1.2 million hectares compared to the acreage of 2023-24 (126.88 lakh ha). The government, however, expects that the yield will be similar to last season's, of about 437 kg per ha.

The farmers claim otherwise. Ramkubhai Karpada, a farmers' leader in Surendranagar, says



Workers at a ginning mill near Surendranagar, Gujarat. VIJAY SONEJI

cotton prices have remained the same for almost 13 years. "In 2012, the rate of cotton was ₹1,500 for a *mann* in the open market. The input cost was much lower then (at least ₹200 less for a bag of cotton seeds and ₹300 less for pesticides). Now the price of cotton is lower and the input costs are high. Hybrid seeds can cost between ₹850 and ₹4,500," he said.

The MSP announced by the government is ₹7,710 for a quintal of cotton. Farmers argue that they get just about ₹4,500-6,000 for a quintal, which is almost half of the MSP. According to the government, only 34.04% of the cotton was procured under MSP operations in last year.

There are other logistics issues that worry farmers. Karpada said Surendranagar is one of the biggest production hubs of cotton. "But this district does not have a proper market or market yard under the Agricultural Produce and Livestock Market Committee (APMC). Farmers have to go to nearby districts to sell their produce. Farmers have been demanding a proper procurement system in the State. They are not getting the input prices. From top to bottom, the APMC system has been corrupted by a few influential traders. They deny prices to farmers on flimsy technical issues," Karpada said.

The Opposition Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has announced a series of protests, including mahapanchayats of farmers in each district of Gujarat. Mayur Sakariya is the president of the AAP's farmers' wing in Surendranagar. He also organises farmers in the nearby Botad district, also part of the Saurashtra region. "No farmer is getting MSP in this season. The government should have ensured procurement of cotton by the CCI under MSP. The fact is that the price has not increased in the last 13-14 years. That was why six farmers died by suicide," he said.

A double blow

Farm leaders argue that cultivation has come down because of stagnation in the prices of cotton in open markets. "But the input costs are increasing. Why then should a farmer cultivate cotton? They are either shifting to peanut or pulses or not sowing anything at all," Sakariya said, adding that the government's decision to waive off import duties was a blow.

"This was done due to the pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump. Industry can now easily import cotton from the U.S., Pakistan, Brazil, and China. They are not buying cotton from Botad, but from abroad. It will be a double blow for farmers and MSMEs," said Sakariya, who has cultivated cotton in 36 *bighas* of land.

Sakariya is at a district session court in Botad. He has come to meet about 80 farmers who are in various jails in Gujarat for protesting against the alleged corruption in APMC markets. He explained that farmers were not getting adequate price support and faced a decrease of ₹25 to ₹100 per *mann*. Sakariya said the farmers decided to hold protests in Botad on October 10, which was followed by a mahapanchayat after two days.

"Some miscreants attacked the gathering. Instead of arresting the miscreants, the police arrested 84 farmers on non-bailable charges. Only six farmers have got bail as of November 26. Several farmers were injured as they were attacked by the goons and lathi-charged by the police," he said, adding that all of them are cotton farmers.

Industries also agree that the imports from the U.S. have increased. "Yes, there is a measurable increase in U.S. cotton exports to India, after the removal of import duty restrictions. The duty cut is one likely factor among others (supply shortfall and trade shifts are others)," said Mukesh Kansal, Chairperson, CTA Apparels.

Need to increase yield

Sagar Chandreshbhai Patel, a young entrepreneur, has been running his family's ginning mill for the last 12 years. His mill, Ambika Cotton Industries, was started by his uncles 26 years ago. A postgraduate in international business management, he joined his uncles after his studies.

"The youth does not like this work. There is more field work. We need to check every variety

that brings cotton from farms – to ensure that the quality of cotton is good," he said, adding that decrease in production of cotton is because of the low quality of cotton seeds used in Gujarat.

Patel, a farmer, is also widely travelled. He has attended global seminars and workshops on the industry. "Other countries have fifth or sixth generation of BT cotton seeds. Their per acreage yield is much higher than ours. We need to increase our yield. Only then will we be able to sell at an international rate. Indian cotton is the most expensive in the market. The prices are high because of low yield," he said.

According to him, the problem has become severe in the last 5-6 years. "New seeds should be approved on an urgent basis. There is a price cap on sale of cotton seeds, as per the Cotton Seed Price (Control) Order, 2015. So we are not getting good seeds. Farmers are ready to pay more if there are good quality seeds that give higher yield. In one *bigha*, we get 12-15 *mann* cotton. In Brazil farmers, get 60-70 *mann*," he said.

His factory processes 36,000 metric tonnes of cotton in a year. He increased processing after taking over the business. "Earlier, this area had 20 factories, but now only five factories are working. My products go to spinning mills in Gujarat and other States. We used to export to Bangladesh, but for the last three years, we have not been exporting there as our price is not competitive," he said.

He is concerned about the duty-free import of cotton. "If imports increase, spinning mills will benefit, but ginning mills will suffer. Usually in the months of November and December, spinning mills buy from us. Now, they are taking imported cotton. Our product has not moved from godowns," he said.

Patel emphasised that farmers and ginning mills are facing a crisis. "Our production is coming down. We have given representations to government that the import duty should not be waived off beyond October 31. But it was not heeded. Some 70% of the ginning families in the State have closed down," he said. Patel chose this industry but says none of his cousins did.

Moving to traditional cotton

Farmers are shifting from BT cotton to the traditional cotton seed, *kala kapas*, to reduce input costs. Rana Kripal, a farmer from Sadad, Surendra Nagar, believes that organic farming of *kala kapas* will help farmers resist imported cotton. "It doesn't need pesticides and needs very little water. The input cost is lower and sometimes it gives more yield than BT cotton. The harvest will take another two months compared to the hybrid varieties. Two of my brothers also use this seed. Non-seasonal monsoons do not impact this variety. In this village, most people cultivate this variety," he said.

According to him, traditional varieties resist pink bollworm, a major menace, as well. "People shifted to BT cotton as irrigation improved. Now people are shifting back to this variety. For 1 *bigha*, if it is BT cotton, the cost is ₹50,000. For this, it is about ₹30,000-35,000," he said.

Gajera added that for the last 4-5 years, farmers are facing severe losses. He said the State government had last year estimated cotton production of 1 crore bales. This year, it is about 78 lakh bales. "The actual production will be around 65 lakh bales, much less than the target production. The government announced compensation for the deaths, but did not say anything about suicides," he said.

Cotton is an emotional crop, added Gajera. "BT cotton provides more yield. But it is more vulnerable to diseases and fluctuations in climate. The seeds production is controlled by big private companies. There is no control on them. The new Seeds Bill draft will help these companies. The government is leading farmers to an age of darkness. Our future is uncertain," he said.

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thehindubusinessline.

SATURDAY • DECEMBER 6, 2025

Extra thrust

MPC has rightly focused on growth over exchange rate

In an earlier era, it would have been surprising if the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) had cut the repo rate by 25 basis points at a time when GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth prints overshoot estimates. However, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has turned distinctly pro-growth since the present Governor took charge a year ago; MPC has all but shed its default hawkish garb.

This pivot is quite welcome; in an aspirational economy tasked with creating employment, monetary authorities cannot afford to be hawkish by force of habit. Since inflation is volatile and hard to call, it is important for the MPC to ease rates when benign inflation opens a window of opportunity. Today's economic context also makes a case for a rate cut on three counts. One, though quarterly GDP growth for the last two quarters (at 7.8 per cent in Q1 and 8.2 per cent in Q2 FY26) exceeded expectations, they were helped by tax cuts, festive buying, front-loaded government spending and a low-base effect. The second half of the year could see US tariffs beginning to bite, while the base effect fades. High frequency indicators such as the October Index of Industrial Production (growth of 0.4 per cent) and November Purchasing Manager's Index (nine-month low of 56.6) also point to weakening momentum. Therefore, the MPC probably saw reason to persist with its policy rate cuts to pre-empt a possible slowdown. RBI's revised GDP growth projections of 7 per cent for Q3 and 6.5 per cent for Q4 FY26 in this review, also reinforce this view.

Two, from worrying about upside risks to inflation a couple of years ago, it now appears to be time for India to worry about disinflation risks. As the MPC has noted, food prices deflated in September and October and overall CPI inflation fell to an all-time low in October. Softening core inflation also (which would have printed at 2.6 per cent without the gold price spike) contributed to this. Ultra-low inflation, which suppresses wages, nominal growth and tax collections, is not healthy for the economy. A rate cut that revives inflationary impulses therefore looks like a desirable intervention. Three, the longer end of the yield curve has proved unresponsive to repo rate cuts in recent months, with the yield on 10-year gilts staying put in the 6.3-6.6 per cent range. This has kept borrowing costs for the government elevated despite falling policy rates. It could, in fact, be one of the reasons why RBI has also proposed to open the taps of liquidity wide, by announcing ₹1 lakh crore Open Market Operations (OMO) and a \$5 billion rupee-dollar swap in this policy review.

The central bank has also sent out a firm message that it won't let the weakening exchange rate dictate domestic monetary policy. A bit of rupee weakness is perhaps expected to aid exporters until tariff uncertainties blow over. India has been receiving dollar inflows into bonds amidst this currency weakness. Economic prospects and prudent fiscal policies can attract capital flows, irrespective of rate actions.

POCKET

RAVIKANATH



DEEPAK RAJAGOPAL

Fossil fuels today are at the root of multiple societal problems. Among the alternative ways in which society can reduce consumption of fossil fuels, raising energy efficiency is perhaps the simplest and most economical policy to address many of those problems simultaneously. However, energy efficiency policies need to be designed carefully. Specifically, let us consider the revisions to the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) Standards for passenger cars proposed by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency for 2027 to 2032.

CAFE specifies an average carbon dioxide-emission per kilometre target across all vehicles sold by an automaker. Given certain assumptions, a carbon standard is equivalent to a fuel economy standard and vice versa. Phase I of CAFE lasted from 2017 to 2022. Phase II, which is in effect through 2027, lowered the upper-limit for average CO₂ emitted per km, and introduced additional credits for electric and hybrid vehicles to promote their adoption. The proposed Phase III norms for 2027 to 2032 mandate an even lower average emissions per km. Currently, these norms are applicable for passenger vehicles with gross vehicle weight (GVW) below 3,500 kilograms, although similar norms for commercial trucks and buses are under consideration.

A fundamental feature of India's CAFE norms, which is also their weakness, is that targets for carbon emissions (and fuel economy) are set based on vehicle weight with heavier vehicles such as SUVs allowed higher maximum emissions per km (i.e., a more lenient target) compared to that for smaller vehicles. This means firms selling more heavier vehicles (such as Tata and Mahindra) might find it less costly to meet their targets compared to automakers that mostly sell smaller cars (e.g. Maruti), as incremental fuel economy gets harder as cars get more efficient.

HEAVY INFLUENCE

In simple terms, heavier cars have more lower hanging fruit to raise fuel economy. Therefore, smaller cars may see a greater proportional increase in cost compared to heavier cars. Although CAFE norms are not the primary reason for India's car market shifting towards large cars and SUVs in the last few years, targets based on weight can inadvertently make larger cars relatively more attractive. With SUV and large makers already marketing their cars as safer because they are heavier, standards biased against small cars help strengthen their case and further drive down demand for smaller, more efficient cars. Of course, since heavier cars and



CAFE norms are too lenient

FUEL FOR THOUGHT. Firms selling heavier vehicles might find it less costly to meet their targets compared to automakers that sell smaller cars

SUVs are more expensive, weight based standards for passenger cars are also socially inequitable.

A second feature of CAFE that is retained at the same level in Phase III is called super-credits. Super-credits allow the sale of each alternative fuel vehicles like pure battery EVs, hybrid EVs or flex-fuel (ethanol) vehicles to be counted as if multiple units were sold. A super-credit of three for pure battery EVs means each EV sold is treated as three EVs sold for compliance purposes. This reduces the number of actual alternative and clean vehicles that need to be sold to achieve a given fuel economy or emission standard, which counteracts the objective of increasing demand for alternative technologies. The simplest explanation for super-credits is that they are there to reduce the cost of compliance with any given standard and make the norms more palatable to automakers. Generous

Super credits reduce the number of actual alternative and clean vehicles that need to be sold to achieve a given fuel economy or emission standard

super-credits also reduce the incentive to innovate and become more competitive.

REGULATORY CAPTURE

Interestingly, both weight-based standard and a form of super-credits feature in fuel economy standards in the US, China and the EU. This could mean either that these features have merits or that the automakers in those countries are as powerful as they are in India. As to the extent of truth in each is an empirical question. Suffice to say that the more lenient the emission (or fuel economy) standard and super-credits, stronger is the evidence of regulatory capture by the auto industry. Unfortunately, the proposed level of super-credits, which is to be set at three to begin with in 2027, seems a bit generous.

In any case the proposed norms provide no justification for this number. BEE's decision to re-solicit public comments on the current revised version, which is a little more stringent compared to original standards it put forward in 2024, is welcome.

However, in the opinion of this author, who submitted a public comment to BEE on the earlier version in 2024 calling for stronger standards, the proposed super-credits appear super-generous.

The reason being that lithium

batteries and EVs are near maturity with battery prices falling more than 10-fold in the last decade to below \$100 per kWhr today internationally. Moreover, EVs are also already supported with various forms of subsidies such as lower GST, rebates on income tax, road tax, and charging equipment, and preferential electricity tariffs, etc., which are not the point here.

But it does beg the question as to why in spite of all this electric cars remain costlier than what the cost of batteries suggest ought to be the difference in upfront cost. The auto industry might prefer to lay the blame on the cost of the technology for that is one way to convince policymakers to keep subsidising them. But is that really the case? And if this is the state of affairs after a decade of subsidies and no mandates, isn't the need of the hour stronger standards rather than weak regulations plus generous super-credits? If doing more of the same and expecting a different outcome is stupidity, then isn't this what finding new ways to soften the impact of EVs on internal combustion engine vehicles amounts to? Surely our policymakers are capable of holding powerful interest groups to higher standards if they can summon the political will.

The writer is faculty, UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability

Fall in inflation prepares the ground for rate cut

Also, the MPC pares the rates on likely near-term softening in GDP growth on account of external uncertainties

Aditi Nayyar

With inflation at a series-low, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) unanimously decided to cut rates by 25 basis points (bps) to 5.25 per cent in its December 2025 meeting, while keeping the stance unchanged. Although the soft CPI inflation prints for September and October, and the lowering of the forecasted inflation trajectory, had opened space for rate cuts, we had expected another pause, considering the strength of the economic growth that was revealed by the recently released GDP data.

The MPC's commentary around inflation outcomes was expectedly benign. The forecasts for CPI inflation for Q3 and Q4 FY26 were cut by 110-120 bps, while that for FY27 was pared by 60 bps. The projections for H1 FY27 are anchored around the 4 per cent mark, in line with ICRA's estimates, suggesting that while the trajectory is expected to remain upward sloping, the outcomes are likely to remain decidedly comfortable, around the mid-point of the RBI's medium term target inflation range.

Interestingly, the policy document also stated that the decline in inflation

has become more generalised; around 80 per cent of the CPI basket (by weight) recorded sub-4 per cent inflation prints in October 2025 vs. around 63 per cent in April 2025. However, this generalisation was partly driven by the favourable impact of the GST rate cuts, with more than half the items in the CPI basket witnessing a sequential dip in prices in October.

GDP GROWTH PROJECTIONS

While the MPC acknowledged the stronger-than-expected growth outcomes in Q2 FY26, it chose to focus on the expected near-term softening in the same to cut rates. While it raised its GDP growth projections for Q3 and Q4 FY26, and Q1 FY27 by 30-60 bps, the pace of expansion is expected to moderate from the 8 per cent seen in H1 FY26.

The MPC's GDP growth forecast for FY26 now stands at 7.3 per cent, marginally lower than ICRA's estimate of 7.4 per cent. Thereafter, it expects growth to remain robust at 6.7-6.8 per cent in H1 FY27. The Committee also highlighted two-way risks on account of external uncertainties, with a potential upside from a trade deal with the US.

Overall, the revisions in the MPC's inflation and growth projections were largely along anticipated lines. With



OPENING. The liquidity tap REUTERS

these, we do not expect any further rate cuts to materialise unless unexpected developments lead to material changes, particularly, on the downside in its growth projections.

On the liquidity front, the RBI has addressed market concerns around the potential drying up of liquidity in the near term as the advance tax date looms. It will conduct OMO purchases amounting to ₹1 trillion and USD/INR Buy/Sell Swap auction of \$5 billion that will lead to a durable liquidity injection of around ₹450 billion. In aggregate, the durable liquidity is estimated to increase by ₹1.5 trillion in the ongoing month. This is expected to ease pressures on account of advance tax and GST

outflows, as well as further increase in currency leakage related to higher demand during the wedding season and agri crop procurement in Q4 of a fiscal year. These measures follow the 100 bps CRR cuts, which had pumped in liquidity of around ₹2.4 trillion during September-November 2025.

The 100 bps cut in the policy repo rate during February-June 2025 has pulled down the weighted average lending rate (WALR) of outstanding rupee loans of banks by 63 bps. On the deposit side, the weighted average domestic term deposit rate (WADTDTR) on outstanding deposits has softened by 32 bps over the same period. The 25 bps rate cut accompanied with liquidity infusion measures would aid in policy transmission, putting further downward pressure on lending and deposit rates. However, the 10-year bond yield appears largely steady, in spite of the measures announced by the RBI.

While the dollar/rupee pair has crossed the 90-mark in recent sessions, we broadly concur with the RBI Governor's assessment of the current account deficit printing at modest levels in FY26, notwithstanding some stress in the ongoing quarter.

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Transmission of rate cut

The repo rate cut by 25 basis points, along with RBI's neutral, is timely. Though the rate cut would become effective without lag through credit products of the banking sector that are linked to external rates, in the case of outstanding deposit products, it will be effective after a considerable lag. Financial intermediaries, especially banks, will be under pressure to sustain their net interest margins due to the high interest cost of their deposit liabilities. The transmission of the policy rates needs to be closely monitored to derive the

intended result. The impact of the reduction in the policy rate on the cost of capital needs to be fast to ensure faster progress in capital formation.

VS K Pillai
Changanacherry, Kerala

IndiGo slow to act

Apologies, 'Chaos in the air as IndiGo cancels over 350 services' (December 5). The aviation upheaval confronting IndiGo passengers could have been largely averted had the airline engaged in serious contingency planning for the regulations enforced last month.

Instead, the extensive delays and cancellations over four days stemmed from IndiGo's prolonged and unorthodox lean-and-power philosophy. Airlines serving millions possess an inherent social obligation to maintain reliable public-service standards.

N Sadhasiva Reddy

Bengaluru

Trust before tech

This refers to 'The many nuances to currency movement' (December 5). The move to mandate the Sanchar Saathi app on all smartphones was well-intended. The app has useful features. It helps

track lost phones and check SIMs issued in one's name. These tools help prevent digital fraud. But preloading the app and removing the option to disable it reduced user choice and led to mistrust. The idea was sound but needed better execution.

S Balasubramanian

Villupuram, TN

Falling rupee

This refers to 'The many nuances to currency movement' (December 5). While India's 6.5-7 per cent bond yields look tempting on paper, the steady slide of the rupee quietly eats

away the real return for foreign investors. The article rightly points out that FPIs have already voted with their feet: November saw the sharpest equity outflows in years. A high nominal yield means little when the exchange rate is unpredictable. Instead of chasing short-term inflows through ever-higher rates, the RBI should focus on steady, credible communication and modest rupee defence that keeps two-way movement alive. Predictability, not rigidity, is what will truly anchor India's growth story.

SM Jeeva
Chennai

{ OUR TAKE }

Building on the past for the future

The Modi-Putin summit reaffirmed India's legacy partnership with Russia, announced intent to deepen relationship beyond defence and energy

India and Russia made the much-needed move of putting their economic relationship front and centre at their annual summit, drawing up a five-year programme for developing strategic areas in this sphere, concluding a mobility agreement and reiterating their commitment to the energy partnership that has been under stress because of pressure from the West. In many ways, the summit between PM Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin was an opportunity for India to reassert its stance of strategic autonomy amid unprecedented churn and uncertainty on the international stage. The outcomes of the summit were, in some ways, a riposte to strident calls from the West to curtail economic ties with Russia.

Modi's act of breaking with protocol to receive Putin at the airport set the tone for the India-Russia Summit, reinforcing the importance attached by New Delhi to one of its most consequential strategic partnerships. The optics of the visit — though Putin is visiting India for the tenth time, it is his first since the start of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 — were meant to restate that India's legacy ties with Russia are very much intact and to reaffirm the doctrine of strategic autonomy that places national interest at the heart of diplomatic choices. The pageantry and hospitality were meant to impress Moscow about New Delhi's commitment to bilateral ties, but could also be seen as a message to the US, which imposed punishing tariffs on Indian goods over Russian oil purchases, that India still has options. This was in line with the narrative generated by the images of Modi and Putin in the company of Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit some months ago. The Modi-Putin bonhomie, with Western capitals watching, merits description as a key geopolitical moment, when old global power equations are unravelling, and the contours of a multipolar world are emerging.

The decision by India and Russia to focus on their economic partnership at the summit and a subsequent business forum, which too was joined by Modi and Putin, reflected the realisation by both sides that they can no longer depend solely on their long-standing defence and strategic ties to take their overall relations into the future. The "Programme for the Development of Strategic Areas of India-Russia Economic Cooperation till 2030" is meant to ensure that two-way trade and investment become more diversified and balanced, a necessary step at a time when trade is completely skewed in Russia's favour. This, coupled with the renewed commitment to finalising a free trade agreement between India and the Eurasian Economic Union, could go a long way in addressing India's concerns about the lack of access to Russian markets and non-tariff barriers.

The future is surely not G2, as US President Donald Trump framed it, but multiple powers pursuing their national goals while cooperating on mutually beneficial interests. Putin has unambiguously backed New Delhi's stance on terrorism and promised uninterrupted shipments of fuel to India. Both Putin and Modi were confident of expanding bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030, up from \$68 billion now. India-Russia ties have never looked so good since the heady days of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty signed at the height of the Cold War in 1971.

However, unlike then, India now has the economic heft, strategic confidence and diplomatic leverage to pursue close relations with Russia, the US and Europe in parallel. As it should.

In defence of the electoral rolls reform exercise

SIR will add some more conviction to the global belief that India does its elections well

More than 50 years ago, a venerable British scholar of Indian politics wryly observed that elections are one of those things "Indians do rather well". Coming in the backdrop of fears — not entirely illegitimate — of India's democracy being put on permanent hold or becoming "guided", the sanctity of the electoral process was perceived as a redeeming feature of public life. This basic pillar of democracy secured its ultimate endorsement in 1977 when, despite the shadow of the Emergency, India's electorate voted out an authoritarian regime.

The ability of the Election Commission of India (ECI) to ensure that popular will is reflected in the legislatures has been tested over and over in the past seven decades of Independence. Although there have been instances of derailment — the West Bengal Assembly election of 1972 and the Jammu and Kashmir election of 1987 being two notable examples — India's overall experience with elections has helped maintain the legitimacy of the political system.

As happens in a first-past-the-post that exaggerates legislative majorities, there have not been instances of incredulous losers whose anecdotal experiences of the campaign didn't quite correspond with the outcome. In 1971, a defeated side insisted that the use of Soviet-made "invisible ink" helped Indira Gandhi win handsomely. Similar incredible claims of satellite manipulation of EVMs were heard after the 2009 general election.

What was once the prerogative of conspiracy theorists has become less of a fringe preoccupation in the past year. Encouraged by nattering crumblers in his party whose predictions were at variance with the popular mood, the Leader of Opposition has challenged the veracity of the

electoral rolls. There have been loud assertions that ECI is contemplating using the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls to exclude minority voters on the ground that they may not be Indian. The controversy has become a subject of jousting between political parties in West Bengal and this may spill over to Assam and other Northeastern states.

Since Article 32 of the Constitution and the Representation of People's Act gives ECI "exclusive jurisdiction" over the conduct of elections, the electoral process has been kept out of political interference. Over the decades, ECI has introduced many innovations to ensure the fairness of elections. Among the most important are the Model Code of Conduct that imposes curbs on untoward political behaviour and EVMs which have made manipulation of votes more difficult — although not impossible. There are now norms guiding the deployment of police and paramilitary forces at polling booths. Additionally, with the spread of technology, ECI is insisting on CCTV cameras in polling booths to ensure that decorum is maintained, and officials and voters aren't subjected to intimidation.

It is, of course, true that none of these innovations are foolproof. Crude muscle power often prevails at the local level, including at counting centres, and these have potentially perverted outcomes. Anecdotal evidence of manipulation by returning officers cannot be dismissed entirely.

When Parliament discusses electoral

ECI HAS INTRODUCED MANY INNOVATIONS TO ENSURE THE FAIRNESS OF ELECTIONS. ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT IS THE MODEL CODE OF CONDUCT THAT IMPOSES CURBS ON UNTOWARD POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR



Swapna Dasgupta



The hope is that in the coming decades, it will not be said about any state or locality that elections there aren't conducted, they are managed.

SANTOSH KUMAR/HT PHOTO

reforms in the Winter Session, it is possible that the country may hear of many more deviations from exemplary democratic conduct that need to be addressed by ECI. As an important stakeholder in the democratic project, Parliament needs to collate its vast experience of elections for the public good.

However, the larger cause of good politics is not served if the political executive issues crude threats, including bodily harm, against ECI and prevents lesser government officials — on whose decorous conduct the system is completely dependent — from carrying out their constitutional obligations. The conduct of the ruling party in West Bengal over the ongoing SIR is shameful.

It goes without saying that the existence of accurate voter lists is a basic precondition of democracy. There is an understandable outcry if members of underprivileged communities are coerced into staying away from the polling stations.

Unfortunately, the outrage is significantly less when large numbers are either not included in the rolls or there are duplicate and triplicate entries that could potentially distort the outcome. ECI has tried to address the issue of impersonation through voter identity cards and photographs. However, the cheats have also found ways to short-circuit the system by voting on behalf of people who are either dead

or have relocated permanently. In eastern India, there is the additional problem of the voter rolls having been padded by individuals who are ineligible to vote in Indian elections.

The ongoing SIR exercise isn't the first time ECI is undertaking a thorough voter inventory. Although there is no stipulated time schedule, say once in 10 years or so, for this large-scale exercise, it is well recognised that unless this periodic audit is undertaken, the outcome of elections will not accurately reflect the popular will.

In the early decades of the 20th century it used to be said, in the context of Ireland, that people were advised to "vote early and vote often". An enterprising scholar may find it worthwhile to document how innovative practices such as dead men voting or the votes of one candidate being effortlessly transferred to the tally of his rival are prevalent in parts of India.

SIR won't turn all these examples of creative politics into history, but it will add some more conviction to the global belief that India does its elections well. The hope is that in the coming decades, it will not be said about any state or locality that elections there aren't conducted, they are managed.

Swapna Dasgupta is a BJP leader and the author of *Awakening Bharat Mata: The Political Beliefs of the Indian Right*. The views expressed are personal

Future is AI, but returns may not be immediate

Every few decades a new technology arrives, which promises to change everything. And often, it does. We saw computers, the internet, e-commerce, smartphones, and each transformed how we live and work. Artificial Intelligence (AI) will no doubt join that list.

But every revolution comes wrapped in its own hype. The technology is real, yet the timelines are always exaggerated. Right now, the hype around AI is racing years ahead of what it can realistically deliver.

That gap is visible in the extraordinary flow of money chasing AI dreams. Over the past year, ten unprofitable AI startups have seen their combined valuations surge to nearly a trillion dollars, according to *Financial Times*. Venture capitalists have invested \$161 billion in AI this year, almost two-thirds of their total spending. And in the public markets, Nvidia has become the first company in history to break \$5 trillion in market capitalisation, its chips powering the global supercomputing build-up. That tells the story of an industry priced on what investors hope it might earn one day.

This surge is propelled by extraordinary hype. Big Tech is building at a massive scale: Data centres, chip foundries, and cloud infrastructure to handle the next wave of model training and inference. Citi expects AI-related capex at half a trillion dollars by 2028. Yet so far, only a fraction of it has brought in any measurable business impact. A recent MIT

study found that barely 5% of enterprise AI pilots delivered rapid revenue growth; the rest have stalled or are anaemic.

While the West chases giant general-purpose models, India is at a different inflection point, with its focus on digital infrastructure, data registries, and simplified use cases. We have the advantage of scale, data, and a massive base of skilled engineers. We've shown how scale and affordability can coexist: In telecom, fintech and vaccines. The same can happen with AI if channelled well. AI can power a new industry — built in India, for the world — leveraging our IT services, startup ecosystem and Government of India Capabilities Centres.

To make that leap, we must invest far more in applied research, computing infrastructure, and home-grown innovation. Our frugal realities can actually work in our favour if we produce cost-efficient AI products and platforms designed for emerging markets. With the right public-private push, India could create not just an AI-ready workforce, but globally competitive products and brands.

The valuation mania has detached from economic logic. Startups with limited revenues and half-built products are being priced unrealistically high. Big Tech can afford those bets; their profitable cloud and advertisement businesses act as a cushion. But smaller players and their investors are overpaying. The public may feel insulated as these are

seen as balance-sheet gambles by trillion-dollar firms. Yet, bubbles have a way of spreading beyond their origins. The dot-com boom at the turn of the millennium began with the same conviction that the internet would change everything instantly.

When it didn't, the crash was severe. Nearly \$5 trillion in market value vanished, and the Nasdaq fell almost 80%. The internet survived, and even thrived. But only after a decade of recalibration.

Technological revolutions come in waves. The internet's early years were defined by a gold-rush mentality; the true transformation came later. AI will follow the same arc. The first movers blaze the trail and burn through the cash. The second wave — the Oracles, Amazons, or perhaps tomorrow's equivalents from India, China or Europe — will build sustainable value.

So far, most industries, including manufacturing, remain largely untouched. Areas such as education, law, design, marketing and consulting are seeing early AI-driven changes. However, the shifts are incremental. The real transformation will come when enterprises re-engineer products, processes, and profit engines around AI. That shift will take years. What we're seeing now is the front end of the revolution: Pilot projects, prototypes, and promises, not the full system rewrite.

And amid the rush for digital dominance, it's also worth remembering that the physical world is holding its own. Take bricks and mortar retail, which has defied most predictions. Online shopping boomed during the pandemic but has since levelled off at about 20% of total US retail sales, and physical stores have been opening faster than they've been closing. The digital and physical economies are finding an

equilibrium rather than outright displacement, a reminder that new technologies often coexist with, rather than erase, the old.

In the late 1990s, Cisco, Lucent and Intel were the Nvidia and OpenAI of their time: Critical to the next generation of technology, yet caught in speculative exuberance. The problem then wasn't that the internet failed, but that capital arrived too early and expectations rose too fast. We are seeing the same pattern now. Nvidia is a great company in a great position, but the valuation also shows how the narrative can start to run ahead of economic fundamentals.

Bubbles rarely burst because of one big event; they deflate when confidence does. Some of today's growth rests on circular financing, or AI firms investing in one another while buying each other's chips or services. For now, that keeps valuations afloat, but eventually investors will want to see real profits. Microsoft, Amazon, Google and Meta are together spending sums equivalent to the GDP of Portugal on AI infrastructure this year. If enterprise demand doesn't rise as quickly as expected, we could be left with overcapacity, squeezed margins, and a painful reset.

None of this means AI isn't real. It is — as revolutionary as electricity or the internet once were. But potential doesn't equal immediate payoff. It is crucial to build patiently, integrate deeply, and adapt continuously. Policymakers should encourage innovation while staying off speculative euphoria, and investors would do well to separate possibility from probability. The promise of AI is immense, but the timing and discipline will decide who benefits. The technology will mature, the noise will fade and, as seen earlier, the true value will emerge.

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Beyond valuations, the utility of new-age IPOs

Initial Public Offerings (IPOs) often unfold with the drama and anticipation of a cricket match. Each listing day feels like a toss with lights flashing, anchors predicting outcomes, and investors watching anxiously to see whether founders will "win" on debut. In this excitement, founders are judged like cricketers — celebrated when shares soar, criticised when they don't.

But IPOs are not matches won or lost in a day. Having worked with many founders through their IPO journeys, I have seen the hard work behind the scenes: Endless documentation, restructuring, regulatory filings, board strengthening, and investor preparation. The bell-ringing ceremony is a proud moment, but behind it lie months of diligence and years of determination.

India today has become one of the hottest

IPO venues globally. This reflects a maturing regulatory framework, the credibility of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), and transparent listing mechanisms that inspire confidence among global investors.

It also mirrors the rise of India's burgeoning middle class and the surge in domestic retail investor participation. At the heart of this IPO boom is a new generation of nation builders, from fintech to consumer to e-commerce, choosing India as the stage for their public debut. This reverses the trend just a few years ago when overseas listings were seen as the ultimate badge of recognition.

Today, many companies take pride in listing in their home market, tapping domestic investors who understand and use their services

daily. Global investors have taken note too. In 2025, India accounted for nearly 40% of all IPOs in the Asia-Pacific region by volume. International funds are raising their allocations to Indian equity, attracted not just by strong growth but by the depth of participation and trust built into the system.

Still, vibrant markets come with noise. There are debates around valuations, subscription levels, and listing-day performance. Price discovery is a complex, well-laid process involving promoters, investors, bankers, and regulators with each operating within a defined framework. Promoters and investors have influence but not full control, and none benefits from an unsuccessful IPO. Market mechanisms ensure equilibrium emerges through demand and supply, not speculation or sentiment alone. Analysts, anchors, journalists, and commentators play an essential role in decoding these nuances. They analyse, question, and inform and build a culture of greater transparency and financial literacy. Some will get it right, others won't. Simi-

larly, some IPOs will meet expected valuations, others may not. The critical thing is not to get lost in short-term judgment but to appreciate the larger benefit. India now has a deep and dynamic equity market ecosystem. The market will always calibrate; people will learn and correct; ultimately, valuation is what the collective market decides.

The large number of public listings by startups and new-age IPOs signify more than access to capital. This marks a mindset shift toward higher governance, disclosure, and accountability. That, in turn, lifts standards across the startup ecosystem. These new-age founders are not inheritors of legacy wealth but builders of first-generation enterprises. They will make mistakes, learn, and evolve, just as great institutions do.

So, let's stop viewing IPOs as cricket matches where we cheer or jeer based on short-term scores. Let's acknowledge the long game: The deepening of India's capital markets and the rise of India's startup ecosystem.



Shweta Rajpal Kohli

Shweta Rajpal Kohli is president & CEO, Startup Policy Forum. The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

RUSSIA, OVER THE CENTURIES

New Delhi and Moscow have shared a warm relationship since the 1970s, when Indira Gandhi and Leonid Brezhnev signed a bilateral treaty with strategic dimensions. The relationship received a fresh boost after Trump 2.0 weaponised trade. Vladimir Putin's Russia, however, is different from the USSR and relates more to the Tsarist era.

Orlando Figes's *The Story of Russia* is a good introduction to this civilisational nation. Figes, a British historian, has been a master storyteller of modern Russia as his works, such as *Natasha's Dance* and *A People's Tragedy*, reveal. *The Story of Russia* provides a panoramic view of the country's history, from the founding myths associated with Grand Prince Vladimir from the 10th century to the Putin years. It marks the continuities and ruptures in Russian history, the importance of Orthodox Christianity to the idea of Russia, and its existence as a State on the edge of Europe, but one that refuses to be assimilated into Europe.



The Story of Russia
Orlando Figes
2022

The massive costs of anti-immigration policies



KENNETH ROGOFF

Immigration has become the central fault line in contemporary politics. Nowhere is this more evident than in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), where the rhetoric is becoming increasingly absurd. The underlying economics, however, are remarkably straightforward. Most advanced economies are rapidly aging, and with demographic decline comes a shrinking workforce. While automation and artificial intelligence (AI) may ease some of

these pressures, neither can meet the rapidly growing need for healthcare and elder-care workers or substitute for the educators, plumbers, and countless others whose jobs still depend on an irreplaceably human touch.

By contrast, the developing world has an enormous labour supply but not enough good jobs to absorb it. In Africa alone, more than 600 million people are projected to join the working-age population in the next quarter-century. Globally, the figure is closer to one billion. The result is chronic youth unemployment that is all but certain to fuel political instability and civil conflict in many low-income countries. These strains are compounded by climate change, which is expected to displace developing economies the hardest and accelerate migration flows to richer countries.

Economists have long argued that easing restrictions on cross-border mobility brings enormous benefits to both destination

and origin countries. Yet one would never know it from the fierce anti-immigration backlash now sweeping the developed world. In Germany, Angela Merkel's decision to admit a million Syrian refugees in 2015 is perhaps the most unpopular decision of her 16-year tenure as chancellor, however morally courageous it may have seemed at the time. Frustration over rising migrant populations was one of the main forces behind the UK's 2016 decision to leave the European Union. And in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has built his political brand on a headline anti-immigration platform, becoming a lodestar for far-right provocateurs such as Tucker Carlson.

America's trajectory over the past decade is particularly troubling. Historically, the country's ability to attract ambitious people from around the world has been one of its greatest strengths, fuelling economic growth, innovation, and cultural vitality. American universities, in particu-

lar, have been magnets for global talent, attracting bright students who come not only to receive a high-quality — albeit very expensive — education, but also to build a life and career in the US. That approach has faltered handsomely, as nearly half of all Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children.

But that pillar of American dynamism is now at risk of unravelling. US President Donald Trump's administration has effectively shut the border and made a public spectacle of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and deportations, ostensibly to reverse former President Joe Biden's so-called "open borders" policy. The shocking images of Venezuelan migrants accused of gang ties being deported to El Salvador's infamous Terrorism Confinement Centre — where they reportedly endured brutal and inhumane treatment — may have contributed to the subsequent drop in illegal border crossings. But this

approach is also chilling legal immigration, discouraging many of the skilled and ambitious people who have long underpinned US innovation and growth.

The Trump administration's crackdown on international students has been especially destructive. In one widely reported case, a 19-year-old Babson College student who had arrived in the US from Honduras at age seven was whisked out of a security line at Boston's Logan Airport. Instead of flying home to Texas as planned, she was detained, sent to an ICE facility, and then, despite a federal court order that she not be removed from Massachusetts, deported to Honduras — separating her from her parents, who remain in the US.

To be sure, Biden-era policies triggered a surge in illegal immigration while narrowing legal avenues for economically beneficial entry. Between 2020 and 2024, roughly 11 million immigrants entered the US — and given the large numbers who crossed unmonitored stretches of the southern border, the actual figure may be much higher. Of course, Mr Biden's

approach was itself a reaction to Mr Trump's restrictions during his first term, illustrating how US immigration policy has swung wildly between extremes, rather than converging on a coherent strategy.

Given the entrenched divisions and dysfunction in Washington, the chances of Congress passing a bipartisan immigration reform bill are vanishingly small. Similar dynamics are playing out across much of the developed world. Against this bleak backdrop, the economic case for immigration is as compelling as ever. In fact, recent research suggests that the growth costs of President Trump's anti-immigration policies will, over time, dwarf those associated with his tariffs and other trade barriers. If current political trends persist, the gap between economic fundamentals and policy choices is only likely to widen, leaving developed countries woefully unprepared for the challenges that lie ahead.

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ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Sweeps and stakes in Nepal

PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

Superficially, it is all back to normal. Regency Watch Pvt Ltd on Kathmandu's Durbar Marg is for Cartier, Omega, Hublot, and other luxury brands. It is open for business again. Customers are thronging the Himalayan Java Coffee, Nepal's own Starbucks. Both enterprises had to suspend operations on September 9, when they got letters from the local administration, imposing a curfew after the so-called GenZ movement exploded into a 40-hour revolution, which replaced the Prime Minister, suspended Parliament, and torched many public places. The blackened broken windows of the Supreme Court and the pile of burnt-out shells of cars are eerie reminders.

But here's the thing about Nepal. It has always looked outward regardless of troubles at home. The Nepalese have been among the most enthusiastic participants in South Asia's international labour force. Foreign remittances continue to contribute nearly 30 per cent to Nepal's gross domestic product. This does not include the informal labour force in India, which is mostly not documented.

Little wonder then that one of the primary demands of GenZ activists is that the diaspora be allowed to vote in the upcoming general elections, due March 5. The power of the Nepalese dias-

pora was evident in the rise of the TV personality Rabi Lamichhane-led Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). It was formed in June 2022, and won 20 seats in the general elections in November that year. The diaspora made extensive moral and material investment in his party, but more than that, it tapped a vein of discontent in Nepali society that continued to simmer.

Mr Lamichhane proved to be a god that failed. From being home minister, he was charged with citizenship fraud, embezzling public money, and other offences. He is currently in prison, although he continues to be working president of the RSP. When the GenZ movement broke out, people were quick to draw the conclusion that it was the Lamichhane effect at work. But it wasn't. But a number of political actors saw Mr Lamichhane's rise and thought they could mimic it. Among them was Kulman Ghising, now energy minister, who launched his own political party, the Ujyaal Nepal, earlier this week.

Mr Ghising is an electrical engineer who studied in Jamshedpur, supervised hydro power projects in Nepal, and eventually rose to oversee the Nepal Electricity Authority but was sacked when he and the K P Oli-led government went head to head on the recovery of electricity dues from industrial firms. The sum ran into millions. Mr Ghising ordered that power be cut to those who hadn't paid for it. Mr Oli saw the potential dangers from the move. The GenZ referendum supported him to become a minister in the current government. His popularity lies in efficiency: He is the one who set Nepal's dysfunctional power sector back in order and ended 18-hour power cuts. The twist in the tale is: As

minister, he also heads the United States-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which has given a grant to modernise Nepal's physical infrastructure, especially power and roads. The diaspora at work or American power? Hard to say but Mr Ghising enjoys the support of both.

Right now, talks are on between the RSP and the Ujyaal Nepal for political coordination. If this arrangement works out, mainstream political parties will be up against the diaspora's invisible might, America's unstated but firm support, and overall disillusionment at the state of politics. Many argue that this is largely a product of unstated ambition in Kathmandu and surrounding urban areas. But Nepal's digital infrastructure is extensive and even in small villages, people know about the GenZ hero Kulman Ghising. In Kathmandu, he has the backing of the mercantile but highly popular mayor Balen Shah.

Could the Ghising-Lamichhane combine pose a real challenge to the cadre-based organisation of the Communist Party of Nepal Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), the Nepali Congress, and the Prachanda-led 10-party alliance, the Communist Party of Nepal? Hard to say. But this much is true: That with barely 90 days to the general election in Nepal, there isn't time to rejig Nepal's electoral system, which incorporates both a direct election and a proportional representation system. In the circumstances, it is hard to envisage a clean sweep by any one political party, leading to the inevitability of a coalition government. This, in turn, will mean political arbitrage and the return of the politics of loaves and fishes. Great Games but very little change.

It isn't an irony or absurdity to laugh at. This is a military dictatorship's innovation equivalent to the best that Tesla or Palantir might achieve in tech domains. First, GenZ persuaded the Sharfs to appoint him chief of day before his retirement, while the incumbent (Qamar Javed Bajwa) was still in service. As a result, Pakistan had two serving chiefs for two days. Now, his three-year tenure ended on November 28, so he retired that day, but continued to be chief nevertheless for almost a week when the notification appointing him CDF and army chief was issued. I presume it is retrospective; otherwise some auditor might object to his salary for the days in between when he had no job. Of course, it will be a recklessly cheeky auditor.

Please stay with me. He first rigged the 2024 election by jailing Imran Khan and his wife, barring his party from contesting and then installing Shehbaz Sharif as Prime Minister of his choice. Now, he got the same Prime Minister to first promote him to field marshal, then mutilate his republic's Constitution through the 27th amendment, making the field marshal's job for life, creating the CDF as the boss of all armed forces with a five-year tenure, and lifelong immunity from prosecution. A two-year extension was thrown as a bone to the air chief, already serving an extended term since March 2024.

Thus, the general has become field marshal for life with immunity, the CDF for five years after the completion of his three-year tenure as chief — all through an elected Prime Minister, Parliament, the Constitution, amended by members elected in an opposition-free election. The latest in Pakistan's history of military dictatorships is consecrated by its Constitution, Parliament, and notified by its Prime Minister and President. This is like the two men elected to the

country's topmost positions signing political death warrants for themselves.

This, the civilian government inviting the general into power isn't unprecedented in Pakistan. In 1958, civilian President Iskander Mirza, dismissed parliament, appointed General Mohammad Ayub Khan as his Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA). Now Ayub fired Mirza, became President and appointed a nondescript, non-threatening general Mohammed Musa Khan as army chief under him. But how could a general report to him, also a general? He promoted himself to field marshal. Moosa lasted until 1966. This also set off the process of Pakistani army chiefs having long tenures. For comparison, Pakistan has had only 17 army chiefs, while India is already on its 31st. By the time Gen Munir finishes his term in 2030, India will have its 33rd.

Ayub invented party-less, "guided democracy," held a sham election and even ensured the defeat of Mohammed Ali Jinnah's sister Fatima. He handed over to General Yahya Khan. Yahya's hybrid regime included Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as foreign minister. He held an election too, but when the "wrong" side, Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won, tossed away the results. After him, Bhutto experimented with martial law briefly in 1977 but General Zia ousted and jailed, and later executed him. Bhutto tried ushering in an Islamic regime (Nizam-e-Mustafa), followed by a party with limited democracy through a staged election, and then fired the Prime Minister, Mohammed Khan Junejo, so elected. History was denied of more "imaginative" ideas from him with that C-130 crash or bombing in Bahawalpur, August 17, 1988.

Since then, either a general has been in charge (Pervez Musharraf, 1999-2007) or controlling power from outside, or rather leading from behind, routinely ceding extensions. Until Gen Munir came with a new, improved script.

We avoid going into greater details of the many colourful arrangements in Pakistan and take this argument to the larger subcontinent. That far from inspiring other military strongmen in the subcontinent, the Pakistani example has persuaded them to go the opposite way. As we now see, all have shedved political power and backed their democracy. We are talking about Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives. Even in Bhutan, the monarch has brought in a fairly elected government and ceded significant power to his elected Prime Minister. They've all rejected the example of Pakistan.

NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Junejo, so elected. History was denied of more "imaginative" ideas from him with that C-130 crash or bombing in Bahawalpur, August 17, 1988. Since then, either a general has been in charge (Pervez Musharraf, 1999-2007) or controlling power from outside, or rather leading from behind, routinely ceding extensions. Until Gen Munir came with a new, improved script. We avoid going into greater details of the many colourful arrangements in Pakistan and take this argument to the larger subcontinent. That far from inspiring other military strongmen in the subcontinent, the Pakistani example has persuaded them to go the opposite way. As we now see, all have shedved political power and backed their democracy. We are talking about Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives. Even in Bhutan, the monarch has brought in a fairly elected government and ceded significant power to his elected Prime Minister. They've all rejected the example of Pakistan.

The failed Marshall Doctrine

None of Pakistan's Prime Ministers has lasted five years. The fact that the current PM has given Asim Munir five years shows that of all the military dictatorships history has seen, Pakistan's is the most creative

They are all safer, more stable, and already more prosperous per capita — twice as much in Bangladesh, two and a half times in Bhutan, three times in Sri Lanka, and eight times in the Maldives compared with Pakistan.

Even Nepal has caught up and will soon leave Pakistan behind, given its slightly higher gross domestic product growth rate and much lower birth rates. Pakistan is the champion loser in the subcontinent because competitive politics, democracy, however messy, yields better outcomes than dimwit military dictatorships.

In each country, generals had their opportunities. In Bangladesh, two generals did rule. But the circumstances and context of General Ziaur Rahman's take-over in 1977 were unique. It was rooted in the contested history of the Bangladesh liberation war. While Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was imprisoned in West Pakistan, Zia, then a major, led the rebellion along with fellow young Bengali officers on the night of the Pakistani crackdown (Operation Searchlight), March 25, 1971, shooting his East Bengal Regiment's Punjabi commander Lt Col Abdul Rashid Janjira. He believed he proclaimed the new republic in a wireless radio broadcast at 7:45 PM, March 27, way earlier than Mujib. Mujib, had just been arrested and taken to West Pakistan.

Mujib too took a dictatorial turn and his assassination and multi-stage military takeover was led by relatively young officers. Zia, now chief, took over in 1977 and was assassinated by young officers in 1981. After a brief civilian interregnum General H M Ershad ruled (1983-90) but ultimately democratic pushback destroyed him. All major parties, notably arch rivals Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, joined hands to stop him and restore democracy. Convicted for corruption, he died jail time. Bangladesh recovered from these handkerchief wars by the army, having learnt its lessons, became a guardian of democracy.

Over the past two years, we have seen street protests throw out deeply unpopular and elected governments in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. In each, a general could have easily taken over. Instead, they all employed the army to bring reassurance amid chaos, while supporting peaceful civilian transition and elections. In Bangladesh, the country most likely to be influenced by the Pakistani military, the most political statement you've heard from its chief is a gentle nudge once that elections should be held sooner rather than later.

That's the three-example rule in journalism. In the exact period that Gen Munir has been consolidating power, his counterparts in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal have eschewed it with remarkable dignity and professionalism. Each of these countries is doing better than Pakistan. And if your country is doing so much better, so what nobody (not even I, who should) can remember the name of its army chief? The downside is, Donald Trump wouldn't hail your chief as his favourite field marshal. Isn't that something to celebrate?

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Ironies of history

EYE CULTURE

UDDALOK BHATTACHARYA

History, with all its vagaries, can be unkind. Marxists tenaciously cling to the belief that "history is behind us. We are destined to win". Competing world views, and also overlapping ones, were seen to be at lower stages of historical progress. One reason for Hitler's coming to power was the stubbornly irreconcilable positions taken by the Social Democrats and communists. But was it history that took revenge on the communists in 1991, when Leningrad was renamed St Petersburg?

As we know from E H Carr (*What is History?*), history is a dialogue between the present and the past. In India too, it is being dredged up in a manner that makes the present seem substantially unflattering. At the current moment, two historical matters, neatly overlaid, are abroad. On the one hand it is being said, even at the cost of repetition, with reference to the educational minutes of Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835, the nation must come out of the "slave mentality" brought about by British rule (*Business Standard*, November 26). What has come with the territory are the celebrations of 150 years of the composition of *Vandemataram*, which Parliament is expected to "debate" next week.

The expression "slave mentality" too can be debated. Is the mentality of a slave necessarily obsequious, which is perhaps implied here? The

career of Josiah Henson, the slave who escaped the clutches of the people who believed slavery found acceptance in the Bible, would be at variance with this position. So would be the story of George Harris, the character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who quoted from the Declaration of Independence to assert his freedom. And if juxtaposed with the "Dalit mentality" or "peasant-worker mentality", both with an institutional frame, the term "slave mentality" would have much to commend itself.

Leaving aside the disputations around the mentalities of the subjugated and the oppressed, if we turn to the British, are they being the minutes of Macaulay, meaning an outlook that is nothing but servile allegiance to India's colonisers after 1757, it is at once palpable that it is no longer the oppressed who are paying obeisance to the new masters. They are a new middle class, mostly beneficiaries of the land-settlement policies of the British, getting jobs in government and related institutions. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, deputy magistrate and deputy collector, was of some such person in the new social milieu. No doubt a brilliant mind with a thorough knowledge of his job, only he could compare the British to the great Muhammad Ali Jinnah in his novel *Anandamath* (*The Abbey of Bliss*, published in 1884), which had several disparaging remarks about what is now India's smallest minority. If this ties in well with a thesis popular now, what comes at the end of the novel is an

affront to the spirit of *Vandemataram*. The British are being the deliverers of Hinduism and positive players in the "recovery of the Sanatan dharma", that is Sanatan dharma in the positive sense of the word. Worshipping multiple gods (330 million) is not that, Mahapurush tells Satyananda, the man who fought the *misalokas* — the Muslims and the British, "Who is the enemy? There is no enemy now. Give up this fight. The British are our friendly rulers." He holds the hand of Satyananda, who then sees a vision, a vision of union — the union of wisdom and devotion, and the union of faith and service. The novel ends here. And history has played its trick. Beating the demon of Macaulay with the brush of the melodious *Vandemataram* can run into stony terrain. Bankim's own writing bears testimony to it and much else that might injure the view of a composite Hindu society. He considered the "Doms and Dosads" outside the fold of Hinduism (*Evidence of Rajmurti*, a novel). In the same work, what he wrote of the marriage practices of the Odias cannot be too pleasing to the people of West Bengal's neighbouring state.

Like justice, history is blind. Unlike justice, it is not even-handed. In the novel, the great scholar Michael Oakeshott's "History is made" by nobody save the historian: To write history is the only way of making it." This is tolerable if there is a method in it. Discomfort arises when the elbow room of the historian is stretched too far.

Beyond SEO with AEO, GEO & AIEO

YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

SEO, or search engine optimisation, has been the foundation of search visibility for over two decades, providing the structural basis for "discovery" for netizens. The general idea of improving a website's organic ranking through keyword targeting, technical structure, backlinks, and content relevance. In recent years, SEO has required deeper integration with structured data and E-E-A-T (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness) to help search engines index, interpret, and prioritise pages in results.

But today we are headed into a zero-click era; gone are the days of keyword usage, backlinking, and siloed SEO. To stay visible, brands have no choice but to optimise beyond Google's organic results and across other interconnected layers — SEO, AEO, GEO, and AIEO.

AEO (answer engine optimisation) is designed for visibility in featured snippets, "People Also Ask" boxes, voice search, and knowledge panels. Success in AEO

depends on clear, concise, and well-structured content, especially FAQ-style answers, step-by-step guides, and schema markup (FAQ Page, How To...). The goal is to be the source that powers the answer, even if the user never clicks.

GEO (generative engine optimisation) is about becoming a trusted citation source for generative AI models like ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and the like. These models retrieve links and synthesise information from authoritative content. To win in GEO, the content should be citation-ready: Actual, well-sourced, recently updated, and backed by real expertise. This includes public data, official records, citations, and references to increase the chances of being cited.

AIEO (artificial intelligence engine optimisation) focuses on visibility within AI-powered search experiences, such as Google's AI Overviews and Bing with Copilot. Unlike traditional SEO, AIEO requires freshness, clarity, and machine-readability. Content needs to be optimised for AI digestion, using structured headings, schema markup, and neutral and factual language. The goal is to be included in AI-generated summaries, instead of ranking below them.

All these acronyms — AEO, GEO, and AIEO represent how a brand — whether one is a publisher, a marketer, or an e-commerce site — ensure that AI crawlers can easily understand enough information about a brand

in order to surface it in the synthesised answers they curate within their answer engines. Which leads one into yet another new construct — Generative Search Optimisation (GSO) — which is really more about understanding what is happening within an AI result, the response that's been generated from a prompt, how a brand is represented there, whether or not it's linking back, whether or not it's citing the content or the brand correctly, and whether the information is accurate.

It is important not to treat these as competing models. Instead, there is a need to integrate them. SEO, AEO, GEO, and AIEO — to ensure that content is discoverable, answerable, citable, and AI-ready, across every surface where users now find information. Optimising for search visibility therefore requires a hybrid approach, combining all four to achieve the best results.

So what do you need to do? Best to start with an introduction followed by an executive summary for AI and GEO digestion. And then a structured Q&A, clear headings and schema for AEO and voice search. Close with a comprehensive, well-researched answer to the user's query, authority. To solidify the trust layer, add author bio, publication date, citation, and E-E-A-T signals for credibility across all models. This ensures content that is valuable, whether it's read, ranked, answered, or cited.

Marketers also need to understand the need to optimise for AI digestibility. Increasingly, AI systems favour content that is easy to analyse and summarise. Hence the need to use clear, descriptive headings (H2, H3) to structure logic; need to keep paragraphs short (1-3 sentences); the need to avoid jargon, fluff, and promotional language; and yes, the use of bullet points and numbered lists for better scannability.

Even if users don't click, a piece of content can still be seen in zero-click surfaces like featured snippets, "People Also Ask," and AI-generated summaries. For that to happen, one has to work towards answering common questions iteratively in the first 60 words; use natural language that matches voice search queries; target "People Also Ask" questions with concise, schema-powered answers and most importantly monitor Google's AI Overviews to be trusted by generative models. With a bit of focus, and a few rounds of trial and error, it can be done. And done well.

The author is chairman, Redifusion

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Repo rate cut 25 bp to 5.25%; 'rare Goldilocks period', says RBI Governor

Hitesh Vyas
Mumbai, December 5

BUOYED BY stronger-than-expected economic momentum and a steady cooling in inflation, the Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) on Friday unanimously cut the repo rate by 25 basis points (bps) to 5.25 per cent, a move that is likely to bring down lending and deposit rates across the banking system.

The reduction — the first after two consecutive pauses — signals a calibrated shift towards supporting growth at a time when the rupee has depreciated and breached the 90-mark against the dollar.

The central bank said the combination of robust GDP numbers and a benign inflation trajectory created the policy space to pivot toward accommodation. The growth engine

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

16 PACTS SIGNED DURING RUSSIAN PRESIDENT'S STATE VISIT

Modi, Putin chart roadmap: Labour mobility, n-energy, trade & defence

Our relationship has stood the test of time: PM; we work closely, says Putin

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, December 5

DEEPENING THEIR ties as the world watched India roll out the red carpet for visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin, Delhi and Moscow Friday signed a labour mobility pact, agreed on a programme for developing strategic areas of economic cooperation until 2030, announced a 30-day free tourist visa for Russian nationals and pledged to work towards early conclusion of a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Business as Usual
By EP UNNY

In the same fortuner ... with no backseat driving.



After 'not the era of war', PM frames Ukraine: India not neutral, on side of peace

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, December 5

WITH THE war in Ukraine grinding on, amid efforts by the US and its European allies to bring it to an end, and all eyes on his meetings with the visiting Russian President, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Vladimir Putin Friday that "India is not neutral, India is on

the side of peace" and "we support all efforts towards peace".

Putin, on his part, did not give away much about their discussion on the war. He said he had the opportunity to speak in "detail on the situation in Ukraine" and on the talks initiated by the US towards a "possible peaceful settlement of this crisis".

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin during a ceremonial reception at Rashtrapati Bhavan on Friday. (REUTERS/ANUPAM KUMAR)

FULL COVERAGE PAGE 7



More than 1,000 flights cancelled, DGCA gives IndiGo relief from new night rules for pilots

One-time exemption until Feb 10, no dilution in new norms, says Govt

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, December 5

AMID MASSIVE disruptions being faced by IndiGo, with over 1,000 flight cancellations on Friday alone, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) granted the airline a temporary one-time exemption from a few changes related to night operations for pilots in

the new Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDLT) norms — and other relaxations to augment its pilot strength.

The temporary rollback, which will be in place until February 10, is for the carrier's Airbus A320 fleet. Civil Aviation Minister K Ram Mohan

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

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The Editorial Page

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RAMNATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Economy is new lynchpin of Indo-Russian ties

DEFFENCE HAS been the backbone of the India-Russia relationship since the times of the Soviet Union. Russia's willingness to share technologies and localise production, along with the US arms embargo on India in 1965, had cemented this cooperation. But a durable transformation of a partnership built heavily around defence, even with a time-tested ally, requires deeper economic engagement. President Vladimir Putin's visit to India on December 4-5, his first since the Ukraine war began and in the backdrop of Western pressure on India to stop buying Russian oil, appears to mark that shift. The new direction in ties is underlined by a strategic economic roadmap for 2030, along with pacts on labour mobility, fertilisers, nuclear energy and tourism.

India exports barely \$5 billion a year to Russia, while bilateral trade reached about \$69 billion by March 2025 — up from just \$8 billion in 2020 — a surge driven almost entirely by India's imports, particularly discounted crude oil. The joint statement notes that trade barriers must be removed and smoother payment mechanisms ensured to achieve the revised target of \$100 billion by 2030. It also states that the joint work on the free trade agreement on goods between India and the Eurasian Economic Union is being intensified. Yet the trade basket remains heavily skewed, with a deep deficit on India's side. Delhi must now work to correct this imbalance. The labour mobility pact opens new avenues for Indian professionals to work across a wide range of sectors in Russia. It comes at a time when Russia is grappling with an acute labour shortage, and the West — particularly the US — is restricting immigration. If leveraged to its full potential, implementation of the pact could cultivate an Indian diaspora in Russia comparable in scale to that in the Gulf, giving Delhi greater strategic room to negotiate and assert its positions on issues of conflict, climate change and the international economy.

The Russian President has said Moscow is ready to ensure "uninterrupted shipments of fuel" to India. The strengthening of India-Russia ties, however, need not come at the expense of India's relations with the US (a trade delegation is expected next week) or with Europe (FTA talks have gained momentum). With negotiations over the Ukraine war now spearheaded by the Trump administration, the US-Russia-Europe dynamic could be reshaped. India must navigate this triangle by deepening engagement with all three. In recent years, Indian diplomacy has given several indications that it is well poised to do so. As Prime Minister Modi reiterated, standing next to Putin, India is not neutral in the conflict — it is on the side of peace.

Low inflation gives RBI space to support growth

IN THE run-up to the December meeting of the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee, there was a heated debate on what the committee ought to do. The meeting was being held against the backdrop of a peculiar situation — high real growth, record low inflation, and a falling rupee. Recent data showed that the Indian economy grew at a robust 8.2 per cent in the second quarter of the year. Strong growth was observed across all sectors — agriculture, manufacturing and services. However, nominal GDP growth was just 8.8 per cent during the year's first half — considerably lower than the 10.1 per cent assumed in the Union budget. On the other hand, retail inflation has been trending lower. In fact, it has remained below the central bank's target since February this year. The rupee, which has been falling against major currencies, breached the 90 mark against the dollar. The MPC, after holding steady over the last two meetings, lowered interest rates, and rightly so, by 25 basis points.

Price pressures remain muted in the economy. The central bank's own estimates peg inflation to average just 2 per cent this year. Excluding gold, core inflation was 2.6 per cent in October, signalling that the "decline in inflation has become more generalised". The inflation forecasts also do not indicate any big buildup of price pressures in the economy over the coming quarters. On a forward-looking basis, the real repo stands at around 1.25 per cent. However, on growth, the RBI appears to be cautious. While the central bank notes that high-frequency indicators suggest that economic activity is holding up in the third quarter, it also says that "there are some emerging signs of weakness in a few leading indicators". Uncertainties on the external front — goods exports declined in October — do pose downside risks. The central bank notes that high-frequency indicators suggest that economic activity is holding up to 7 per cent in the third quarter and 6.5 per cent in the fourth quarter.

With limited fiscal space, after the recent tax cuts, and headwinds on the external front, the heavy lifting has to happen through monetary policy. The central bank must also ensure sufficient liquidity for effective rate transmission — it has announced measures to boost liquidity in the economy. With inflation under control, how growth shapes up in the coming quarters will determine the future course of policy.

At Formula 1, it's best car versus best driver

THE FORMULA One world championship battle goes into a thrilling finale at this weekend's season-concluding Abu Dhabi Grand Prix. McLaren's Lando Norris, the championship leader, is ahead of Red Bull's four-time reigning world champion, Max Verstappen, by 12 points. Norris's teammate, Oscar Piastri, is lurking four points behind Verstappen. A third-place finish would seal the title for Norris, no matter what the other results are, but anything lower could leave the door open for an unpredictable photo finish for motorsport's most coveted title. The prospect may allude to this being an exciting, closely fought season, but the truth is far from it.

The superiority of McLaren's machinery is such that they had wrapped up the team constructor's title two months ago, and their drivers have routinely won Grand Prix by over half a second. That they have not yet won the driver's title is testament to the fact that getting the car right is only half the job done. Modern F1 is a team sport — the best vehicle also needs a team that never errs in strategies. Had McLaren not let their drivers down with questionable tactics, Norris would already have been champion. Verstappen's ability to win races despite being in average machinery, to complete overtakes in the tiniest of margins, and shave crucial milliseconds off this qualifying laps has him fighting for a championship in which he had ruled himself out by the summer. He may not be the favourite to emerge victorious on Sunday. But a fifth successive driver's title, making him only the second in F1 history to do so after Michael Schumacher, will be as much a credit to his talent as it will be to McLaren's error.

For Putin, a political win; for India, a stable partner



SHYAM SARAN

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT Vladimir Putin has concluded his two-day state visit to India and has every reason to go back to Moscow a happy man. For a leader being subjected to Western sanctions and international isolation, a reception at the airport by the Prime Minister of India and riding back to the latter's official residence, accompanied by his host, were unusual gestures of courtesy that may grate in Western capitals. For Putin, the positive visuals of the visit as much as its substantive outcomes would have been welcome. They project that he enjoys international legitimacy despite his blatant flouting of international law in invading and persisting with a violent war against Ukraine. This will play well in Russian domestic politics. This visit, therefore, has considerable political value for Putin.

For India, the visit comes at a time when underlying assumptions of its foreign policy, which had remained relatively stable and predictable over the past quarter-century, are being shaken.

The steady upward trajectory in the India-US strategic partnership has stalled under President Donald Trump in his second term. The US appears to have shifted its strategic focus away from the Indo-Pacific and from the containment of Chinese power. The importance of India as a key player in the erstwhile Indo-Pacific strategy, therefore, has diminished. It is in this context that there is a willingness to inflict significant economic damage on India through prohibitively high trade tariffs. India has also been singled out for the imposition of penal tariffs of an additional

25 per cent for continuing to purchase Russian oil, even while similar purchases by other countries have been exempt. India has limited capacity to buy back. Putin's visit in the wake of this negative turn in India-US relations is, therefore, politically significant. True, Russia would not be able to provide an alternative market for Indian goods that had access to the US market, but there is a serious effort to ramp up the economic and commercial relationship through the Economic Vision for 2030 and the target of \$100 billion trade by that year.

India-Russia relations are not of the same significance as Indo-Soviet relations before the end of the Cold War, in the early 1990s. It is important to understand the changed geopolitical context in which current political equations are playing out. The Indo-Soviet strategic partnership was driven by a common perception of threat from China, and this was further strengthened by the US adopting policies inimical towards India on critical issues such as Jammu and Kashmir. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a wholesale reordering of geopolitical alignments. While India continued to have cordial relations with Russia, the strategic glue of a Chinese security threat dissipated on the Russian side. It was the defence hardware relationship built over 30 years of the Indo-Soviet partnership that continued to provide a floor to the relationship.

While India began diversifying its defence hardware relations away from Russia, this could only be achieved over an extended period

Europe is the most unhappy about the red-carpet welcome given to Putin by India at a time when he is escalating the war in Ukraine. But Europe has more to fear from the US's unreliability and its repeated bullying of Ukraine

of time. Russia also had an interest in retaining this significant market for its arms as long as it could.

This legacy relationship continues to bolster India-Russia relations. In addition, there are key platforms such as nuclear submarines and anti-missile systems where Russia is the only country ready to share technology with India. This has been of great value and was demonstrated most recently in the effective use of the S-400 system during Operation Sindoor. Russia is also an important partner in the development of nuclear power in India, and during the visit, Putin specifically referred to Russian willingness to collaborate with India on small modular reactors (SMR) and floating nuclear power plants.

The challenge for India is how to preserve its continuing reliance on the US for high-tech collaboration and advanced weaponry. This component of the partnership has not been impacted so far, and India and the US renewed their Defence Cooperation Framework for a third 10-year term. However, given the unpredictability of Trump's decision-making, expanding the defence hardware relationship with Russia may make sense for India.

What about China's reaction to Putin's visit? Some Chinese commentaries warn that beyond a certain point, the India-Russia partnership may adversely impact China's interests by providing military muscle to a country it considers an adversary. But it may also welcome a closer India-Russia relationship at a time

when Indo-US ties are under strain, because it would have to worry less about American containment if India distances itself from the US. But Delhi should be clear that there are limits to the India-Russia partnership, which cannot compare to the declared "no-limits partnership" between Russia and China.

Europe is the most unhappy about the red-carpet welcome given to Putin by India at a time when he is escalating the war in Ukraine and holding out threats to Europe. But Europe has more to fear from the US's unreliability and its repeated bullying of Ukraine to concede substantially to Russian demands. By contrast, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that India is "not neutral" on Ukraine and supports an early return to peace. It has continued to uphold the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty even though it has avoided a public condemnation of Russia.

While Europe may not be happy about the welcome extended to Putin in New Delhi, it sees a greater convergence of interests with India in an overall strategic sense, and that is mainly due to the emergence of the US as an unreliable and sometimes hostile ally and secondarily due to a rising concern about a politically more assertive and economically predatory China. European leaders will come as honoured guests to India's Republic Day on January 26 next year.

India has long experience in managing a complex geopolitical terrain of shifting alignments, with the safeguarding of its strategic autonomy as a guiding star. This has been on display during Putin's visit.

The writer is a former foreign secretary

Maharashtra is betting on a football future India forgot



PRAVEENSINGH PRATAP SINGH PARDESHI

THERE WAS a time when India didn't just participate in Asian football, it dominated it. In 1962, India defeated Japan and South Korea on its way to winning the gold medal at the Asian Games. For today's football obsessed generation, this sounds almost mythical. After all, these are the same Japan and South Korea whose players now occupy elite European clubs, whose youth academies are studied worldwide, and whose footballing structure is considered a model. Yet, more than 60 years ago, India beat them with confidence. It wasn't a fluke.

Cut to the present, where young Indians can list Lionel Messi's diet plan, argue passionately about Premier League pressing systems, and stay awake until 2 am to watch European games, but cannot name five Indian footballers without hesitating. We adore football, but our devotion is largely imported. The passion is there, the imagination is there, but the system to channel that passion into performance has been missing for decades.

This is precisely the vacuum Maharashtra is attempting to fill through Project Mahadeva, an initiative that is quietly challenging India's long, frustrating story of untapped football potential. What makes it refreshing is that it has actually begun at the grassroots instead of starting with glossy presentations and ending with committee meetings. Over the past months, the Western India Football Association travelled across all 36 districts, conducting one of the largest talent hunts the state has ever seen. Thousands of children turned up. Some travelled long distances from remote villages, some walked in barefoot, and many carried dreams far bigger than the grounds they grew up playing on.

From this massive pool, 30 boys and 30 girls under the age of 13 have now been selected for an intensive development pathway. They are currently training at the Co-operative Football Ground in Mumbai and the CIDCO Football Ground in Navi Mumbai, receiving structured coaching, sports-science based fitness training, nutritional support, and exposure to regular competitive matches. Instead of occasional camps or one-time workshops, they are being put

through the kind of systematic training programmes that successful footballing nations rely on — the boring but essential work that actually builds athletes.

And then comes the moment every young footballer dreams of. These children will get to meet and train with Messi during his GOAT Tour visit to Mumbai. For any adult, meeting Messi would be unforgettable. For a child, it is likely to be transformational. It is the kind of memory that turns raw talent into relentless ambition. Add to this the involvement of international coaches and modern youth-development methods, and suddenly the dream of building future Indian stars feels logical.

The larger goal is one the country must take seriously. India has an explicit ambition of qualifying for the 2034 FIFA World Cup. With the tournament expanding to 48 teams, the path is tough but not impossible. But this ambition cannot be met through last-minute camps or imported quick fixes. It can only be achieved through a sustained pipeline of trained, disciplined, technically sound young players who begin early and stay in the system. The 60 children in Project Mahadeva represent the first generation of such talent. If they succeed, they could form the spine of a future national team.

This is why Project Mahadeva deserves attention beyond its headlines. It is sending a quiet but powerful message: The next chapter of Indian football will be written not by committees but by children on real training grounds, coached systematically from a young age. The glory of 1962 should not remain a nostalgic anecdote; it should be a reminder of what India once was and what it can become again.

If supported, encouraged, and amplified, these 60 children could rewrite India's footballing destiny. And if, one day, some of them walk onto a World Cup field with India's colours on their shoulders, the story that began in 1962 will finally find its long-awaited sequel — this time, written by a new generation of Maharashtra's young dreamers through Project Mahadeva.

The writer is CEO, MITRA and chief economic advisor to the chief minister, Maharashtra



SATYENDRA PANDEY

IndiGo crisis shows how little power passengers have

INDIA'S LARGEST airline, IndiGo, has experienced its most severe operational disruption in years. As of December 5, more than 1,000 flights have been cancelled over multiple days, with December 4 alone seeing over 550 cancellations, primarily in metro cities. Thousands of passengers have been stranded, holidays ruined, and baggage lost. Understandably, tempers are running high. However, given the airline's market position — it accounts for more than 60 per cent of domestic traffic — this situation calls for collaborative solutions. Three key issues emerge: Regulatory changes, pilot hiring and weak consumer protection laws.

At the core of the crisis is a mismatch between pilot staffing and the new Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) regulations that came into full effect on November 1. The revised rules, designed to enhance safety by combating pilot fatigue, mandate consecutive hours of weekly rest and tighter duty hours, and limit night landings to two per duty period. While universally welcomed for their intent, the implementation timeline has airlines short of the required pilot numbers. Each shortfall does not merely ground one flight. It triggers a chain reaction across the five to six sectors an aircraft typically flies daily, amplifying disruptions across the interconnected network. Compounding factors include the ongoing winter schedule, adverse weather, airport capacity, and the time required to onboard new pilots.

On the recruiting front, hiring, training, and integrating new pilots is a challenge, especially when global demand remains strong. There is opposition within pilot ranks to hiring expatriates, exacerbated due to the differential salaries and benefits. So, airlines have to walk a tightrope.

Finally, what has been lost in most commentary is the consumer. For air travellers in India, there are minimal passenger rights, near-zero accountability and few avenues for recourse. In the current instance, for aggrieved passengers, the only law prevailing in India is the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, which only deals with deficiencies in services in general. It does not have any dedicated provisions on the protection of air passengers. In February 2019, the Ministry of Civil Aviation published a Passenger Charter dealing with air passengers' rights. Its implementation has been found wanting. This incident will perhaps fuel the demand for a dedicated air passenger protection law.

On December 5, IndiGo took the unprecedented step of suspending all domestic departures from Delhi, its largest hub. This is effectively an operational reset. More targeted cancellations are expected over the next few days to restore stability. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation has responded by granting limited, temporary relaxations on the regulations and has engaged directly with the airline's leadership to monitor recovery.

The episode underscores the value of a closer government-industry partnership. As India's aviation market expands rapidly, events like this simply cannot stand. Data sharing, transparency, and accountability are the only mitigating measures to avert another meltdown.

The writer is managing partner at AT-TV, an aviation finance firm

40 YEARS AGO

December 6, 1985



SAARC declaration

The foreign ministers of the seven SAARC countries pledged their wholehearted support to regional cooperation and unanimously approved the draft summit declaration. The question of the scope and location of the SAARC secretariat that had been recommended by the standing committee of the foreign secretaries was, however, left undecided and might be remitted to an official committee to work out in the near future.

PM on terror in Punjab

Firm measures should be taken against terrorists trying to disturb the peace in Punjab again, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said.

Gandhi said people should assist both the state and central governments in identifying terrorists and dealing with them effectively. Extremists, the PM said, did not have faith in any religion and their only objective was to destabilise one of the most progressive states of the country.

Acid leak kills 1, injures 16

A senior lawyer at the Tees Hazari courts, affected by acid fumes, died in Hindu Rao hospital in New Delhi. Charanjit Singh (58), fell unconscious soon after the acid fumes swept through the courts. He did not recover after that. Sixteen persons were still lying in various city hospitals after breathing the acid fumes, the police said. The po-

lice have charged three Shriram executives with causing death by a rash and negligent act following Singh's death.

Anti-quota protests

The anti-reservationsists, who had given a call to boycott classes, set fire to two buses near Navjigar College in Ahmedabad. Meanwhile, most of the schools in the city suspended work for the day as some students went around throwing stones at schools in different parts of the city. Of the two buses burnt, one belonged to the Ahmedabad Municipal Transport Services and the other was a state transport bus, a double-decker shuttle between the state capital and the city.



New labour codes are a win-win for workers and employers



SHAMIKA RAVI

INDIA'S LABOUR market has been shaped by a complex legacy of well-intentioned but ultimately restrictive regulations. For decades, labour laws designed to protect workers ended up discouraging firms from growing, formalising, or hiring at scale. The sweeping labour reforms implemented through the four labour codes mark an important break from this past. By modernising outdated legislation and simplifying compliance, these reforms promise to reshape the labour landscape and unlock India's employment and growth potential. From here on, the states that enforce these reforms with full commitment are likely to witness major investments and job creation.

The foundation of India's labour regulation was the Industrial Disputes Act (IDA) of 1947. This created powerful disincentives for firms to expand beyond a small size. Three major distortions emerged. First, productive firms deliberately stayed smaller than optimal, fearing regulatory burdens if they grew. This prevented the development of large, competitive manufacturing enterprises. Second, India became a country of micro and small informal units, which often lacked access to technology, capital, and skilled management. These firms naturally struggled to raise productivity or offer secure, well-paid jobs. Third, the laws ended up protecting a tiny minority of formal, unionised workers, while the vast majority remained outside any legal safety net. Ironically, rules intended to defend workers benefited only those already fortunate enough to be in stable, formal jobs.

To close loopholes, the government introduced the Contract Labour Act (CLA) of 1970, increasing compliance requirements for firms hiring contract workers. Amendments in 1976 and 1982 tightened restrictions by lowering the thresholds at which firms needed government permission for layoffs. Despite India's 1991 economic lib-



ILLUSTRATION: C R SAKSHI

eralisation, the labour law system remained largely untouched, continuing to discourage large-scale, labour-intensive manufacturing. Over time, this rigid regulatory environment led to a structural imbalance: India had abundant labour, but firms were reluctant to hire. Job creation lagged behind economic growth, and millions remained in informal employment.

Recognising these distortions, the government consolidated 29 laws into four comprehensive labour codes: the Code on Wages (2019), the Industrial Relations Code (2020), the Code on Social Security (2020) and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020). Now notified, these reforms aim to balance worker protection with economic dynamism. They modernise outdated provisions, simplify compliance, expand social protection, and give firms the flexibility they need to grow.

Universal wage and social protection: The Code on Wages establishes a uniform national framework for minimum wages and timely payments. This is a major step toward inclusivity. Earlier laws covered only certain categories of workers, excluding many in the informal sector. Now, all workers across industries, regions, and job types receive wage protection. Combined with mandatory ap-

pointment letters, this pushes employers toward formalisation and transparency. The Code on Social Security expands the safety net to gig workers, platform workers, and other non-traditional categories that form a rapidly growing share of India's workforce. For the first time, delivery workers, ride-share drivers, freelance workers, and others on digital platforms are legally recognised and eligible for social security benefits. This modernises labour law to match contemporary forms of work.

Simplified compliance and reduced bureaucracy: A major obstacle for Indian firms has historically been the complexity of labour compliance. Different laws required multiple registrations, licences, inspections, and returns. The new codes consolidate these into one registration, one licence, and one return, greatly reducing bureaucratic friction. This is crucial for small and medium enterprises, which often operate informally precisely to avoid compliance burdens. Simplified procedures make it easier and more attractive for firms to join the formal economy, hire workers officially, and expand operations.

Flexibility in hiring and managing labour: The Industrial Relations Code introduces greater flexibility in hiring and workforce management. While maintaining

protections against arbitrary dismissal, it streamlines processes for layoffs and retrenchment in medium-sized firms. This reduces the uncertainty firms previously faced, encouraging them to hire without fear of crossing rigid thresholds. At the same time, worker protections remain intact through dispute-resolution mechanisms and safeguards against misuse. The goal is not to erode rights but to create a predictable, rules-based environment where both workers and employers benefit.

Modern, safer workplaces: The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code consolidates safety and health regulations across sectors and establishes clearer standards for working conditions. This is significant in construction, mining, manufacturing, and transportation, where outdated or fragmented laws previously created confusion. A modern safety framework improves the quality of work, encourages investment in safer technology, and ensures dignity and protection for workers.

Empirical evidence from recent decades suggests that Indian states that have implemented labour reforms have benefited more from trade liberalisation. This indicates that states with less restrictive labour regulations, such as lower bureaucratic hurdles and greater labour market flexibility, have enabled their industries to better capitalise on trade opportunities. But on the whole, these state-level reforms have been rare.

India's labour market has long been shaped by protective laws that turned into a stranglehold, pulling back its economic potential. The new labour codes represent a comprehensive attempt to correct this historical imbalance. By simplifying regulation, expanding protections, embracing new forms of work, and giving firms the flexibility to grow, these reforms create the conditions for a more dynamic labour market. If implemented effectively, the reforms can promote formal employment, raise productivity, encourage investment, and deliver better working conditions. They offer a pathway for India to move from a fragmented, informal labour system to a more modern, inclusive, and growth-oriented framework, unlocking the true potential of its vast and diverse workforce.

The writer is member, EAC-PM

West has always misunderstood Putin's nationalism

RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

YOU CAN love him or hate him, but you cannot ignore him." The phrase once used to describe Augustine, the fifth-century Christian theologian and bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, has been used to refer to many later leaders, including Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia. His visit to India at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shaken up several Western capitals.

The West has made many unsuccessful attempts to tame Putin. Russia was suspended from the G8 in 2014 when Putin annexed Crimea. Instead of pleading with the West, Putin announced Russia's permanent withdrawal from the group. Then, in 2022, he launched a military challenge to the regime in Ukraine over its treatment of Russian-speaking populations in Donbas region. Putin also strongly objected to Ukraine's moves towards joining NATO.

The Ukraine conflict escalated tensions between Russia and the NATO countries, leading to severe sanctions and further isolation of that country. Yet, three years later, Putin continues to be a thorn in the flesh for the NATO leaders, who are irritated by his proximity to countries like China and India. An op-ed by a group of European ambassadors in Delhi that "advises" India over how to treat Russia shows that the irritation is turning into frustration. Just as a relentless military campaign could not repress Putin, a no-holds-barred diplomatic campaign did not deter Modi. The visit will be remembered for the strong message it conveys to the world, the broad contours of which include the end of the days of hegemonic order; genuine multipolarity guided by strategic autonomy and, most importantly, there are no takers for duplicity and double standards in international relations.

In dealing with Russia, the Indian leadership will not lose sight of its longstanding commitment to ending wars. However, building peace is a two-way street and that calls for greater understanding.

The West seemed to have failed to understand "Volodya", as the Russian leader who is often referred to in his country. The son of a soldier who fought in World War II, Putin's rise from a one-bedroom apartment in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg today) to the presidential palace in Moscow is a fascinating story of grit and hard work. After graduating in law from Leningrad State University, Putin opted to join the KGB and worked for 16 years as an "agent" in Russia and East Germany. He was awarded a bronze medal "for outstanding services to the National People's Army of the GDR". KGB agents were trained to develop a mindset best captured in the Russian word 'derzhavnik' — those who believe in Russian greatness. They eventually became staunch statisticians. Putin is no exception.

best captured in the Russian word *derzhavnik* — "those who believe in Russian greatness". They eventually became staunch statisticians. Putin is no exception.

As a KGB agent in Dresden, East Germany during the years of Glasnost that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin's job was to spy on the "main opponent", NATO. His antipathy for NATO has its origins there. He probably never took Communist party membership. But Putin was clearly disturbed by the collapse of Soviet Russia. "I regretted that the Soviet Union had lost its position in Europe, although intellectually I understood that a position built on walls and dividers cannot last. I wanted something different to rise in its place. And nothing different was proposed. That's what hurt," he said in an interview once. He later justified his view quoting Henry Kissinger, who he met in Russia. "Frankly, to this day, I don't understand why Gorbachev did that," he is reported to have said.

On the last day of 1999, Putin was with Boris Yeltsin to celebrate the new year. Yeltsin, who was in poor health, reportedly turned to his prime minister and said, "Volodya, take care of Russia." The dawn of the new millennium thus saw Putin rising to the highest position. Russia was facing separatist terrorism in Chechnya and Dagestan at that time. Many thought that it was going to be Putin's nemesis. But Putin thought otherwise. For him, protecting Russia's integrity was most important. "It was a question of preventing the collapse of the country. I realised I could only do this at the cost of my political career," Putin is reported to have said. He described the dangers "Yugoslavisation of Russia". Putin carries that attitude to this day.

As Russian journalist Yevgenia Albats points out, "Putin is an extreme statism. For him, state always comes first. Everything else — democratic institutions, personal liberties, individuality — everything else comes after this," she adds. Like him or not, Russia comes first for Putin.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

State of economy

THIS REFERS to the article, 'Leaders in comfort zone need a jolt' (IE, December 5). India's macro numbers are strong, but complacency risks squandering momentum. Robust GDP and low inflation coexist with record-low FDI, high real interest rates, and weak investor sentiment. Policymakers should deliver a clear, coordinated shock: meaningful monetary easing to lower financing costs, paired with deep deregulation, labour-market flexibility, and streamlined FDI rules to attract technology and capital. Use the budget and trade negotiations to lock in reforms.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow

Putin in Delhi

THIS REFERS to the article, 'For India-Russia partnership, Moscow must do its fair share' (IE, December 5). The Prime Minister described India-Russia relations as "constant in a changing world". The shift from the "Modi-Trump bonhomie" to the "Modi-Putin bonhomie" seems to argue well for closer collaboration and cooperation in the mutual interest of India and Russia. Russia is looked on as an all-weather friend of India. The two share a relationship that has stood the test of time.

David Milton, Maruthanode

Mid-life isolation

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'When middle age walks a lonely road' (IE, December 5). It captures, with unusual clarity, how mid-life often becomes a quiet crossroads where shrinking social circles, growing responsibilities, and stalled ambitions create a kind of isolation that data is only now beginning to acknowledge. What makes this loneliness troubling is not just its emotional weight but its structural roots — from inadequate caregiving support to workplaces that overlook the needs of older employees. Literature may help us name the ache, but policy must help ease it.

K Sakunthalha, Coimbatore

ZERO HOUR
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

AS A responsible Opposition, it is our duty to protect the country's independent institutions. So whether it is our Parliament, judiciary, Election Commission, RBI, central investigative agencies, or others, it is time we defeated all attempts to undermine them and destroy their autonomy. It is these vital institutions that protect the citizen against state power, that are empowered by the Constitution to stand as bulwarks against a rampaging executive. Above all, we need to protect our educational institutions, which have always been the first to come under attack — to indoctrinate, manipulate, control. The closing of the minds of the young has grave implications for our country's future.

Institutes of higher learning include those built by the state and by individuals of extraordinary vision. Individuals with a Big Idea. Homi J Bhabha imagined the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. J N Tata conceived the Indian Institute of Science. Madan Mohan Malaviya built Banaras Hindu University. Syed Ahmad Khan created Aligarh Muslim University. Bengal, too, contributed gems to this intellectual nation-building: Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University (1920) and PC Mahalanobis's Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) (1931). If India ever declared "educational navratnas", these institutions would be among the first to qualify.

Over the past decade, we have

Stifling autonomy, one institute at a time

witnessed a tightening of the Union government's control over autonomous institutions. Take the Indian Institutes of Management (IIM). The Indian Institutes of Management Act, 2017 gave them autonomy, with the power to choose their own directors and frame internal policies. However, the Indian Institutes of Management (Amendment) Act, 2023 reversed that sovereignty. Appointments of directors and key decisions must now be approved by the Ministry of Education and the President. The message was clear: Autonomy is a privilege, not a right. And it can be taken back.

Or consider Visva-Bharati. Tagore built it on the ideals of openness, interdisciplinary learning, and a deep humanism. Today, that fragile ecosystem is being forced into the rigid mould of the National Education Policy, 2020. Instead of academic help, faculty are being sent for administrative training under the Rashtriya Karmayogi programme. The mantra is conform, not flourish.

The Common University Entrance Test is an example of the broader attempt to impose conformism and homogeneity. In essence, the Union government took control of who enters a university, and how.

The Union government recently released the Draft Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2025 for public consultation. It proposes to transform ISI from a registered society into a statutory body, largely controlled by the Union government. The democratically structured 33-member council will be

replaced by an 11-member board of governors, mostly nominated by the Union government.

Clause 17 (5) says, "The Board shall, in the exercise of its power and discharge of its functions under this Act, be accountable to the Central Government." ISI is a product of the Bengal Renaissance, an era of intellectual courage, scientific rigour, and humanist values. Mahalanobis, its founder, was the architect of modern India's statistical system. He established the National Sample Survey. His birth anniversary on 29 June is celebrated as National Statistics Day. ISI's strength has always been its independence. An environment where statisticians, economists, computer scientists, and mathematical thinkers could work free of bureaucratic interference. That independence is now under serious threat.

As the Union government attempts to bring more institutions under its direct command, one must ask: Is this really an attempt to strengthen education, or stifle it? An attempt to support institutions, or subordinate them? India will not progress by steamrolling its institutions into identical bureaucratic units, but only when its institutions are free to think, question, innovate. Control does not create quality. Freedom does.

PS: Education is on the Concurrent List. If the Union government decides everything from admissions to governance, states are reduced from partners in nation-building to suppliers of campus space.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party. Additional research: Ayashman Dey, Yash Jain



ABHIK BHATTACHARYA

NORWEGIAN LINGUIST P O Boddling, in his book *Studies in Santhal Medicine and Connected Folklore*, wrote, "There is no genuine Santhal who doesn't believe in witches." While one may criticise his colonial gaze for such sweeping generalisations, given the recent spate of witch-hunting across Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh — the latest being in Jharkhand where a 65-year-old woman was beheaded after being branded a witch — his reading is difficult to discard.

According to NCRB reports, in 2023, there was a 100 per cent rise in witch-hunt-

ing cases in Jharkhand from the previous year. The strict provisions of the Prevention of Witch Practices Act in Jharkhand, 2001 have led to little progress — six states have similar pieces of legislation. Across cases, two factors consistently show up: Lack of healthcare facilities and absence of Adivasi women's land rights.

In the Adivasi landscape of Chota Nagpur, if witch/dayan represents evil or black magic, *ghus* symbolises the white magic that, according to Shashank Sinha, is "socially and psychologically beneficent". This *ghus*-*dayan* binary becomes clearer when one tries to understand the perceptual construction of diseases among Adivasis. Among Kols, British official Thomas Wilkinson noted, the spread of disease had three rea-

sons: Angry *bonga* (generic name of Adivasi god), the deity of someone who died, and witchcraft. The first two could be pacified by animal sacrifices, but the last could only be cured through "elimination". This perception was echoed by other colonial officers. E G Man wrote that witches were believed to have the "power of killing people... and of causing fever, murrain in cattle and other kinds of evil". They were held responsible for cholera, smallpox, stomach ache or any physical complaints that *ghus* couldn't cure.

In 2023, there was a 100 per cent rise in witch-hunting cases in Jharkhand from 2022

The need to hold mostly aged single women, or those who breach the bounds of patriarchy, responsible for any crisis, is tied to the failure of *ghus* and the inaccessibility of health facilities. In 2021, a study by the Odisha State Commission for Women and NGO Action Aid Association found "27 per cent of witch branding was attributed to health issues among children, whereas 43.5 per cent of the cases were linked to health issues in the case of adult villagers".

Another major reason behind witch-hunting has been land-grabbing. Under Adivasi customary laws, women don't have inheritance rights. So, if any Adivasi woman loses her father or husband and doesn't have a son, she is left at the mercy of a male relative, who would eventually become the

property's owner. In such instances, women are often branded witches and forced out of the property. However, the Centre's proposed Uniform Civil Code, which claims to uphold women's rights, exempts Adivasis from its mandate.

So, the colonial understanding of witch-hunting lingers on, both due to the failure of governments to develop modern health infrastructure and due to the colonial belief that customary rights should be privileged even if they go against universal human rights. We must take a nuanced approach. Or else, Boddling would again be proved right.

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A witch-hunt that speaks of governance deficit

DEFENCE

Significance of DRDO's recent fighter pilot ejection test



SUSHANT KULKARNI

THE DEFENCE Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) on Tuesday conducted a successful high-speed rocket-sled test of a fighter aircraft escape system at controlled velocity. The technical achievement places India in an elite club of nations with advanced in-house escape system testing capability.

The test

The test was conducted in collaboration with the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) of the Ministry of Defence and public sector entity Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). It took place at the Rail Track Rocket Sled (RTSR) facility of the Terminal Ballistics Research Laboratory (TBRL), a key DRDO facility in Chandigarh.

The rocket sled is a ground-based testing system, which is propelled by rockets to climb to high speeds while moving on rail tracks, simulating the aerodynamic conditions of an aircraft in flight.

The dual-sled system allows the forebody of an aircraft to be mounted and tested under controlled velocities. In the recent test, a system with the forebody of the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) was propelled to a precisely controlled velocity of 800 kmph through phased firing of multiple solid propellant rocket motors.

The challenges

Dynamic ejection tests are more complex than static tests, which occur with the aircraft stationary or at zero altitude and zero speed. They are also considered the true measure of evaluating the pilot's escape aid, such as ejection seats and canopy severance systems.

Modern ejection tests use a combination of small explosive cartridges and, in many cases, rocket motors to propel the seat out of the aircraft. The initial explosive charge fires and lifts the seat. On the other hand, canopy severance is the controlled breaking of an aircraft's cockpit canopy to create a clear path for the ejection seat. The sequence includes canopy removal, seat firing, stabilisation, and parachute deployment that ensures the pilot's safe exit. This is a highly sensitive mechanism, and pilot survival depends on timing, down to the millisecond.

At high speeds, pilots experience extreme aerodynamic forces. Emergency ejections can occur under various circumstances — low or high altitude, zero or supersonic speed, during aircraft spin, or even inverted flight. The safety systems must function perfectly in such conditions, which makes testing critical.

This test used human-like test dummies, fitted with sensors and devices that record physical stresses to assess pilot safety, simulating processes such as ejection sequence and complete aircrew recovery. It recorded critical loads, moments — a measure of rotational force — and accelerations that ejected pilots would experience.

The entire sequence was captured through onboard and ground-based imaging systems. The test was witnessed by Indian Air Force (IAF) officials and the Institute of Aerospace Medicine.

The strategic importance

The successful test of India's indigenous fighter aircraft escape system represents a major strategic milestone. Escape systems are among the most safety-critical components of a combat aircraft, and their reliability directly affects pilot survivability during emergencies.

Until now, India has had to rely upon test ecosystems abroad to evaluate the performance of the ejection mechanisms. Sources have said the indigenous tests cost between one-fourth and one-fifth as much as the tests conducted abroad.

Officials said possessing an in-house dynamic ejection-testing facility boosts India's ability to design, certify, and upgrade ejection systems for both current and future fighter platforms. A DRDO scientist said that this not only reduces dependence on foreign testing facilities but also significantly shortens development cycles.

Also, the ability to simulate real-world emergency conditions using instrumented anthropomorphic dummies provides India with valuable insights into pilot safety parameters such as loads, accelerations, and impact forces.

TBRL has had an RTSR since 2014, which can test defence and aerospace systems at supersonic speeds (exceeding the speed of sound). In February, drogue parachutes of Gaganyaan, India's planned crewed orbital spacecraft, were successfully tested at the RTSR facility.

The test involved the simultaneous firing of two drogue parachutes to simulate deployment at the maximum angle of attack of the crew module during descent.

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Jaipur	11 डिसेंबर सुबह 10:00 बजे	Admissions Open
Indore	18 डिसेंबर सकाळ 8:00 बजे	1 दिस 8:00 AM
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LAW

Why Delhi HC rejected semaglutide patent suit



SOHINI GHOSH

REFUSING TO grant an interim injunction sought by Danish pharmaceutical giant Novo Nordisk, the Delhi High Court on Tuesday allowed Dr Reddy's Laboratories (DRL) to continue manufacturing and exporting its version of the drug containing semaglutide.

The case

In May, Novo Nordisk moved the Delhi HC against DRL, seeking that the Indian firm and its distributors be restrained from using, manufacturing, selling, distributing, advertising, exporting semaglutide active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) or any product derived from it.

API is the chemical in a medicine that produces the intended therapeutic effect. Semaglutide is the API for a new class of revolutionary drugs to treat Type 2 diabetes and obesity. It is marketed by Novo Nordisk as Ozempic for diabetes, and as Wegovy for weight loss.

Novo Nordisk took DRL to court after it refused to comply with a cease-and-desist notice; not only did DRL continue to manufacture semaglutide, it doubled down by filing a suit seeking revocation of the patent protection granted to Novo Nordisk for the compound in India.

By rejecting Novo Nordisk's demand for a temporary injunction, the court has essentially sided with DRL, allowing it to continue manufacturing and exporting its semaglutide drug. The court has also held that DRL's challenge to Novo Nordisk's patent to be *prima facie* valid, although final adjudication is pending on this matter.

Tale of two patents

Novo Nordisk's semaglutide products are covered by two main Indian patents. **INDIAN PATENT NO. 275964** covers the composition of semaglutide itself. It was filed in March 2006, granted in September 2016, and expired in September 2024.

INDIAN PATENT NO. 262697 covers specific formulations and delivery devices designed to improve stability and administration. It was filed in March 2007, granted in March 2014, and is scheduled to expire in March 2024.

But there was always a flip-side to this story: India, thanks to its growth potential, used to receive a lot of foreign investments — either in the form of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), or investing money into things like building a new factory in India or in the shape of Foreign Portfolio Investments (FPI), or investing money in the form of buying stocks and shares of company. Historically, the "surplus" on this count — called the Capital Account — papered over the "deficit" on the trade or current account.

GDP: GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES

IN RECENT days, the Indian rupee's exchange rate against the dollar has made headlines. More often than not, the primary reason for weakness in the exchange rate has been India's trade deficit (simply, the fact that India imports more than it exports) and India's current account deficit. Basically, more money (read dollars) was flowing out of India than coming in.

But there was always a flip-side to this story: India, thanks to its growth potential, used to receive a lot of foreign investments — either in the form of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), or investing money into things like building a new factory in India or in the shape of Foreign Portfolio Investments (FPI), or investing money in the form of buying stocks and shares of company. Historically, the "surplus" on this count — called the Capital Account — papered over the "deficit" on the trade or current account.

SPORT

DESPITE EVENTS such as Virat Kohli scoring back-to-back centuries in the two ODIs played against South Africa in recent weeks, discussions around the impact of dew have overshadowed other aspects of the game.

Since South Africa won the toss and chose to bat first in both games, it was India's bowlers who suffered. The dew on the ground impacted the quality of the two chases, making them largely unidimensional. Indian bowlers found it difficult to grip the ball; they could not operate at optimal capacity and were reduced to frantically trying alternate methods.

If the par score while batting first was 340, the expected score while chasing ranged between 380 and 400. It's a credit to India that they managed to win the first game, nonetheless.

Obstacle for bowlers

Dew almost turns the ball into a bar of soap, soaking up water droplets every time a batsman hits the ball along the ground. It

BLOCKBUSTER DRUGS

GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1) receptor agonists like semaglutide mimic certain hormones released in the digestive tract after eating. They work by:



- Improving the secretion of insulin that allows more of the glucose in the bloodstream to enter cells where it can be used for energy;
- Inhibiting the secretion of the hormone glucagon that stimulates the liver to release stored glucose into the bloodstream;
- Slowing down the emptying of the stomach so that the glucose levels in the bloodstream doesn't spike; and
- Reducing appetite by sending sections to the brain that you are "full".

in March 2026.

The expiry of the basic composition patent in 2024 opened the door to potential generic development. However, the formulation patent remains in force and continues to confer exclusive rights on Novo Nordisk. After the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) in September cleared DRL's semaglutide injection in India for grant manufacturing and marketing, the Indian company has been manufacturing the drug to be sold in international markets, beginning with Canada.

Arguments & counters

Novo Nordisk filed a patent infringement suit in the Delhi HC alleging that DRL imported substantial quantities of semaglutide API and manufactured finished formulations without its permission, thereby infringing Indian Patent No. 262697. On the other hand, DRL's patent revocation petition claimed that the second patent was for an analogue of the previously patented product, and that it lacked novelty and inventive step.

In patent law, inventive step means that a patented creation must involve a creative leap beyond what an average expert could figure out from existing knowledge. DRL claimed that the tweaks made to the earlier compound would be "obvious" to anyone skilled in the domain, and thus should not be provided patent protection.

Novo Nordisk countered by saying that the compound for which it held the second patent had shown "exceptionally higher ef-

Key Points

The Delhi HC has allowed Indian pharma company Dr Reddy's to manufacture and export its semaglutide drug.

This is a major setback for Novo Nordisk, which has been trying to enforce and extend its patent for revolutionary weight loss and diabetes drug semaglutide worldwide.

ficacy" compared to the prior versions of the compound, which made it "novel". It also said that the formulation of the compound was not publicly known at the time it had filed a patent for the derivative compound in India, meaning the tweaks made would not have been "obvious".

Delhi HC's ruling

The court agreed with DRL's assertion that there is no novelty in Novo Nordisk's second GLP-1 formulation, and thus concluded that the company had obtained two patents for the same compound. This double patenting resulted in "evergreening", the court said.

Evergreening involves drugmakers making only minor changes to an existing medicine and then seeking new patents. This does not reflect any significant innovation but prolongs a company's monopoly over a drug and keeps low-cost generics out of the market. Evergreening is prohibited by Section 3(d) of Indian Patents Act, 1970.

The court also noted how Novo Nordisk had strategically filed for patents in order to extend its monopoly over semaglutide.

In 2004 (in India), Novo Nordisk filed a genus patent for "NOVEL GLP-1 DERIVATIVES". This was a genus patent covering a whole class of drugs rather than a particular compound from the class.

Then, in 2007, it filed a separate formulation patent for semaglutide, essentially creating a new patent clock to extend its monopoly over the drug, the court concluded.

Notably, while filing the original patent,

The court held that Danish pharma giant Novo Nordisk had obtained two separate patents for the same compound

Novo Nordisk did not disclose the development of the newer version of the drug.

The court thus held DRL's challenge to Novo Nordisk's patent to be *prima facie* valid. DRL has been allowed to continue manufacturing and exporting semaglutide, although the court made it clear that the drug cannot be sold in India until Novo Nordisk's patent expires in March next year.

Major implications

Treatment for diabetes and obesity has emerged as an extremely lucrative market for drug makers worldwide. The new class of GLP-1 drugs such as semaglutide, developed by Novo Nordisk, and tirzepatide, developed by Eli Lilly and marketed as Mounjaro and Zepbound, has created ripples in this market.

Notably, it has triggered a global battle over the rights to manufacture and sell these drugs. While the pharma giants have sought to enforce and extend their patents over the drugs and thus protect their bottomline, other manufacturers, including generics, have sought to grab a share of the pie — and the profits.

In this context, Delhi HC's ruling is a setback for Novo Nordisk and a victory for other drug makers. Apart from DRL, companies like Mankind Pharma, Cipla and Sun Pharma are contemplating introducing GLP-1 products in India. Cipla, in its October earnings call, said that it sees "big volume opportunities" in the semaglutide space. Sun Pharma, in a November earnings call, termed the GLP-1 market as "exciting", adding that it wants to "participate in the market whenever the first opportunity is available".

According to an IQVIA report from August, "over 10 companies have filed Subject Expert Committee (SEC) submissions in India to conduct Phase III studies for semaglutide." With Novo Nordisk's patent over semaglutide set to expire soon in several big markets, including Canada, China, Brazil, India and Turkey, massive opportunities are likely to open up for generic drug makers, who can sell the drug for cheaper.

The IQVIA report notes that Canada, China, Brazil and Turkey, which make up 40% of the world's population and an estimated 33% of the world's population of adults living with obesity, "a lower-cost off-patent semaglutide could dramatically increase patient access" and with a dozen manufacturers developing off-patent semaglutide, "this could create a surge in demand and expand the private market."

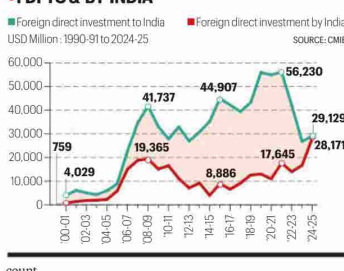
GDP: GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES

Amid rupee's fall, how investors are shunning the economy

Udit Misra

New Delhi, December 5

FDI TO & BY INDIA



Of late, however, the "net" foreign investments in India have taken a beating, contributing to the rupee's weakness. In

other words, the net money flowing into India via this route of financial investments has been falling. The word "net" here means that all the money coming into and leaving India is accounted for.

The case of FDI coming into India is an illustrative example. In the chart shown alongside, the green line shows the money coming into India as FDI, and the red line shows the money going out of India (that is, the FDI for foreign countries).

As the chart shows, since 2021-22, the green line has plummeted even as the red line has surged. In other words, while foreigners are holding back from investing in India via the FDI route. This is a critical problem because the FDI route is preferred over the FPI route; investments through the FDI route show that a foreign investor is really committed to staying invested in India for the long term. The data shown here is only up to March 2025. In the current financial year, the "net" FDI into India has fallen towards the zero level; that is, it

more money is going out as FDI than coming in.

Then there are the FPI investments that India receives. Numbers on net FPIs have often been negative over the last few years, meaning that once again, more money has been invested by Indians in stocks and shares abroad than by foreigners into Indian stock markets.

When more money goes out of India than what comes in, the rupee's exchange rate falls or weakens because it essentially means that the US dollars are more in demand relative to the Indian rupee.

The trend is counter-intuitive: Indian Indian economy is growing much faster than all the comparable economies, then presumably the Indian companies would also be doing very well and, by extension, foreign investors should be making a beeline to invest in India in every shape or form. Or, that is the GDP growth rate data is overstating India's economic momentum.

SPORT

India vs South Africa ODI series: Impact of dew on bowling

Sriram Veera

Mumbai, December 5

takes over the spinners, since they can't grip the ball well and can't impart the revolutions needed for a turn. As the pitch surface, too, is sprinkled with dew, the ball doesn't grip there either. Hence, there is little chance for the ball to turn, and it skids straight to the batter.

Fast bowlers also struggle to grip the ball, making most stock deliveries virtually impossible. Another victim is the yorker, as a slippery, damp ball isn't suited to that delivery. Invariably, the deliveries turn into full tosses.

How India managed a win

In the first ODI, Indian seamers relied largely on the slower change-of-pace deliveries, especially slow bouncers. Harshit Rana, Arshdeep Singh, and Prashidh Krishna, to an extent, largely relied in slower balls delivered like off-breaks, and they banded them into the turf short.

Even then, they were vastly restricted. If they tried other slower forms, like the back-of-hand or knuckleball-release, the wet ball would have made them tough to execute. So, they held the ball as an offspinner

Ball turns into soap bar

Dew makes the ball difficult to grip. While spinners fail to turn the ball, fast bowlers aren't able to bowl most of their stock deliveries.

The pitch is also impacted by the dew, and the ball doesn't grip there as well. As a result, it skids straight to the batter.

would, and banged it short like a bouncer. In the second game, the likes of Donald Brevin and co. did find it difficult to handle initially, but since that was the staple form of ball, they eventually became used to it and started to flat-bat the ball to boundaries.

While the dew came to play a huge part from the 25th over mark in the chase, earlier on, it lightly moistured the surface, enabling the new ball to skid through. Harshit Rana and Arshdeep Singh were upset with their lengths, and their skiddy deliveries sent half the South African team packing. However, they recovered once the dew started falling copiously.

Ball change rule

The dew also nearly killed a new ICC rule, with Rana being the first game where it was enforced in India. Usually, ODIs are played with two balls — one ball per end, so, effectively, a ball is used for just 25 overs in the 50-over game.

For a long time, it has been argued that this rule doesn't allow bowlers to bring reverse swing into play. Without the natural wear and tear of the ball that can take more

than 35 overs, the ball doesn't get rough enough to be ready for reverse swing.

The new rule thus stipulated that the fielding team would have to choose one of the two balls in operation after 34 overs. In theory, one could bowl for 16 overs, allowing the ball to lose its shine and get scrubbed up, ready for reverse movement. Instead, the dew softened the one old-ish ball so much that reverse swing was not on offer, but the absence of two balls meant this got progressively wetter.

But the ball was changed once in the second match in Raipur, nearly breaking the rule. It was so soaked that the umpires replaced it with a dryer ball. Immediately after the change, in the middle of the 43rd over, Prashidh Krishna immediately started bowling yorkers, dismissing Tony Zorzi. Arshdeep Singh took out Marco Jansen with a full delivery in the next over. But it didn't take long for that replacement ball to also become wet, and once again, South Africa cruised to a win. While better conditions were expected in the coastal city of Visakhapatnam for the third ODI on Saturday, by Friday, it seemed that dew may again become a factor.



Trump Unveils Radical US Foreign Policy Shift

AROUND THE WORLD >> FACING PAGE

Tagore's 'From Across the Dark' to Go under Hammer

COMPANIES: PURSUIT OF PROFIT >> 5

Z47 Fully Exits Ola Electric Books around 10x Returns

COMPANIES: PURSUIT OF PROFIT >> 4

Simone Tata, Beauty Matriarch, Passes Away

Simone Tata, chairperson emerita of Trent and mother of Tata Trusts chairman Noel Tata, passed away at 95 following health issues. She is best remembered for transforming Lakmé into India's leading cosmetics brand and for laying the foundations of modern fashion retail through Westside. >> 5

Home Loan

@7.35%

No Processing Charge

Hurry!

Limited Period Offer

Govt Calls for RRB Listings in FY27

The Centre has directed state-run lenders to prepare for the stock market listing of their sponsored regional rural banks (RRBs) in the next fiscal year. At least two RRBs, likely including Uttar Pradesh Gramin Bank, are being considered for market debut in the first half of FY27, reports Dheera Tiwari. >> 7

Taiwan Co to Invest ₹1,000 cr in Karnataka Industrial Park >> 4

Brookfield India REIT Gets ₹3.5Kcr

Brookfield India Real Estate Trust has raised ₹3,500 crore through a qualified institutional placement (QIP) from domestic and global investors. The listed real estate investment trust has raised a total ₹5,000 crore in the past year. The QIP was subscribed by a mix of players. Kaishab Babar reports. >> 10

PURE POLITICS

Apex Court Cautious on Unregulated Use of AI by Judges

The Supreme Court has said judges are very cautious when it comes to the use of artificial intelligence (AI). A division bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Jyotsna Bagchi said judges will not allow such technology to take over judicial decision-making. >> 2

Manipur Govt Warns Groups Against Disrupting Peace

The government of Manipur has issued a warning to any organisations attempting to disrupt the peace by threatening and intimidating people. Chief secretary Puente Kumar Goel said the police is taking strong action against such anti-social elements. >> 2

That-Which-Cannot-be-Named is Selling, Quickly & Quietly

Demand for sexual wellness products rising on quick commerce apps, with deliveries maintaining discretion and urgency

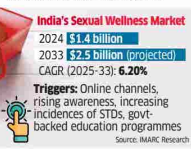
Ratna Bhushan & Teena Thacker

New Delhi: Sales of sexual wellness products grew at nearly double the pace on quick commerce platforms than on offline trade in the first 11 months of this year, as they allowed discreet purchases combined with a 10-minute doorstep delivery day or night. Data from clinical research firm IQVIA show sales of products such as condoms, lubricants and creams rose 35-40% on Swiggy Instamart, Blinkit and Zepto and others in January-November, compared with 22% in general trade, including pharmacies. While quick commerce growth came on a much



What's Triggering Growth?

- Unmarked, unbranded boxes further aiding privacy
- Consistent deals & discounts
- Online-only products
- AI verifications



Triggers: Online channels, rising awareness, increasing incidences of STDs, govt-backed education programmes

Sales Up More Than a Third >> 11

PADEMONIUM AT AIRPORTS

DGCA tells inspectors to fly IndiGo planes for a week, eases some pilot rest rules, as over 1,000 flights cancelled on Friday, with CEO Elbers warning of continued crisis till mid-month

IT'S A FLIGHT RISK

Rules Given a Rest as Pilots Fly

Our Bureau

New Delhi: Chaos and confusion reigned at major airports as the country's largest airline, IndiGo, cancelled more than 1,000 flights on Friday jeopardising travel plans and forcing the government into crisis control mode. As thousands of ruffled passengers jostled at airport counters to get the latest on flights, the civil aviation regulator, in an unprecedented move, asked its inspectors to operate IndiGo flights for a week, supplementing the carrier's available pilot strength. There was little sign of recovery, with civil aviation minister Ram Mohan Naidu saying operations will fully normalise within three days while IndiGo chief executive Pieter Elbers warned it can only be done by December 15. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) also gave relaxation to the budget airline from multiple clauses in the new pilot rest rules, including an earlier cap on the number of landings a pilot can handle during night hours. Pilots' associations read the regulator's decision, saying it would have a critical impact on flight safety. DGCA also formed a committee to probe the reasons behind the crisis. The panel has 15 days to submit its report. In his first comments, coming 72 hours after the crisis began, Elbers accepted the disruption has shaken the belief of customers in the airline's reliability. Inadequate Preparations >> 11



Bewildered crowds at IGI Airport, T1, in New Delhi on Friday

Regulator to the Rescue

WHAT HAS INDIGO GOT AS REPRIVE?

Exemption from rule that capped number of 12-6 am landings by a pilot

Pilots leave to be counted as weekly rest

12 inspectors who were in lien from IndiGo to fly for airline for a week

Ticket Prices Go through the Roof

IndiGo's sudden flight cancellations have sent domestic airfares soaring on India's busiest routes, with one-way tickets for typically busy routes increasing over three-fold. Forum Chandni & Anumeha Chaturvedi report. >> 10

Hotel Chains Cash In on Flight Meltdown >> 10

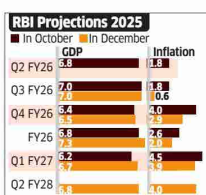
Mkt Concentration Risks Out in Open

The ongoing IndiGo fiasco has exposed the risks of having a single dominant carrier, reports Arindam Majumder. Travel plans went awry at the peak of holiday and wedding season, leaving airport terminals choked. >> 10

UNANIMOUS MPC STANCE FOR 5.25% RATE IN GOLDILOCKS MOMENT

Central Bank Cuts Policy Rate by 25 bps

RBI governor sees growth impetus in balance with low inflation



RBI Rate Trajectory

Policy Mnth	Quantum	Repo rate to	Stance
Feb	25 bps	6.25%	Neutral
April	25 bps	6.00%	Accommodative
June	50 bps	5.50%	Neutral
Aug	status quo	—	—
Oct	status quo	—	—
Dec	25 bps	5.25%	Neutral

Our Bureau

Mumbai: A 'Goldilocks' economy of record low inflation and multi-quarter strong economic growth overshadowed a sharply depreciating currency for the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) rate-setting panel, which on Friday delivered a quarter-point policy interest rate cut, as expected, while keeping the window open for further reduction in the cost of funds. The central bank also promised to open the liquidity spigot to ensure its interest rate reductions reach the consumer, while it moved to smoothen movements in currency markets with swap deals. Record production of food products and the momentum in economic activity prompted RBI to lower inflation forecast for the year to 2%, from 2.6%, and raise the economic growth target to 7.3%, from 6.8%.

"The growth-inflation balance, especially the benign inflation outlook on both headline and core, continues to provide the policy space to support the growth momentum," said RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra. "We expect the policy rates to be low and not high. What rate it will be... that will be getting into speculation." The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) voted unanimously to lower the key repo rate by 25 basis points and kept the stance neutral, with one member dissenting in favour of a stance change to 'accommodative'. RBI would introduce ₹1.45 lakh crore of durable liquidity in the banking system. "The decision to cut rates while keeping the door open for future easing helps buffer the economy against potential unexpected shocks or external headwinds," said CS Setty, chairman, SBI.

Cheaper Loans >> 11

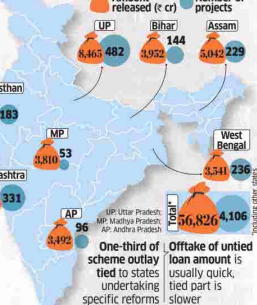
LENDERS LOOK TO SHORE UP MARGINS

Expect Home, Auto Loans to get Cheaper

Home and car loans are set to get cheaper after RBI cut repo rate by 25 bps to 5.25% in the fifth reduction this year. It's expected to nudge banks to further reduce lending rates. >> 8

Capital Pool

Key capex loan beneficiaries (As of Nov 27, FY26)



One-third of scheme outlay tied to states undertaking specific reforms

Offtake of untied loan amount is usually quick, tied part is slower

SLEW OF BILATERAL PACTS INKED

PM: India-Russia Friendship Like a Guiding Star

Action Stations

16 MoUs & pacts inked, including cooperation in...

Announcements

Economic Cooperation Programme till 2030

Russia to join International Big Cat Alliance

30-day e-tourist & group tourist visas for Russians on reciprocal basis

Cooperation between Prasar Bharati & Russian media

Healthcare, medical education and food safety

Academic collaboration between universities

Uninterrupted fuel shipments for growing Indian economy, says Putin

Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi described India's friendship with Russia as a "guiding star" as the two sides agreed on an Economic Cooperation Programme (ECP) until 2030 that's aimed at diversifying and expanding bilateral trade and investment. Modi said India is prepared to walk shoulder to shoulder with Russia on a journey of innovation, co-production and co-creation. ECP, which looks to achieve trade worth \$100 billion in five years from nearly \$70 billion now, was announced during the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit held in New Delhi during Russian President Vladimir Putin's state visit to India. The two sides signed several pacts covering the mobility of Indian workers to Russia, fertilisers, food safety and shipping, agreeing to work toward harnessing critical minerals to bolster the economic partnership. ET was the first to report that pacts in these sectors will be inked at the Summit. "Over the past eight decades, the world has witnessed many ups and downs. Humanity has faced numerous challenges and crises," Modi said in a joint statement with Putin by his side. "Yet, through all of this, the India-Russia friendship has remained steady like a guiding star. Built on mutual respect and deep trust, our relationship has stood the test of time." Putin assured India of "uninterrupted shipments of fuel for the growing Indian economy," as part of the strategy to bolster bilateral energy ties amid sanctions against Russian oil companies Rosneft and Lukoil. The PM also hailed Putin's role in consolidating bilateral ties since 2000. "Over the past two and a half decades, he has continually nurtured this relationship with his leadership and vision," he said.

MODI, PUTIN URGE NO HIDDEN AGENDAS OR DOUBLE STANDARDS

Call for Tougher Action On Terror

PM Narendra Modi and Russian President Putin reaffirmed commitment to countering all forms of terror, including its financing, reports Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury. >> 2

MAJOR SHAKE-UP IN MEDIA INDUSTRY

Netflix Casts New Spell to Take Over WBD in \$83b Deal

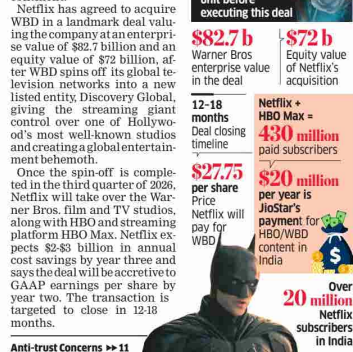
Warner Bros' studios, HBO, its streaming app to move hands in cash-and-stock deal

Blockbuster Behemoth

Netflix outbids Antitrust scrutiny expected in the US, Europe

Vast catalogue to find new home - Harry Potter, DC Comics, Game of Thrones, LOTR, etc

WBD to spin off its global TV networks into separate listed unit before executing this deal



The House Always Wins in the Arms Biz

New exporting nations trying to muscle in

It's been another good year for death merchants. Revenues from sales of weapons and military services by the 100 largest global arms-producing companies reached a record \$679 bn in 2024, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri). Topping the list of hotspots are Ukraine and Gaza. But there have been other flashpoints like Iran and Pakistan. Buying and selling weapons have also become part of strategic 'trade relations'. Today's era, like previous ones, is an era of war. What's new is a fresh crop of arms-exporting nations trying to muscle in on the action that feeds McProliferation. The form of conflict is changing as well, bringing in new demand from non-state actors for heavy duty munitions. The bazaar is bustling, even as homilies are delivered with the straightest of faces.

The weapons business pencils in a threshold of conflict that keeps them in business no matter what. Phases of heightened conflict are followed by relative peace. Separately, countries are in a constant game of one-upmanship. They step back when stockpiles grow too big to manage safely. Newer toys enter the picture as warfare morphs towards unarmed combat. Chips are making way for magnets.

The model is impeccable — weapons sold to 'both' sides, the 'house' always wins.

Long-held assumptions about globalisation are being tested as countries suit up for protectionism. This creates an environment of distrust that allows disagreements to turn hostile. Balance of power is also shifting as a group of economies acquires economic heft to challenge the established order. New tech like AI speeds this process along, implanting within nations fear of disruption and hope of pulling ahead. It's not conflict alone driving arms sales. Relations between countries — allies; included — are being radically altered by an uncertain future. Post-WW2 pacifists like Japan and Germany are rethinking in the name of protectionism in its most literal sense. All this, while the military-industrial complex laughs its way to the bunker.

MACROECONOMICS

Making Hay While Inflation Isn't Hot

Rarely does a central banker face a Goldilocks moment. Sanjay Malhotra and his co-members in MPC didn't let the opportunity slip, slashing the repo rate by 25 bps to 5.25% on Friday. It's a great time to cut interest rates and amplify the tax stimulus announced by GoI over the course of the year. Better still, Mint Road has turned on the liquidity tap, as the odds of the economy overheating appear slim. The sum of this year's interest rate cuts is the most aggressive since the pandemic-era monetary easing, and there's still some steam left. Another rate cut, and more liquidity injections could be in the offing.

Part of a central banker's job is to talk down prices — but not the reverse. Malhotra's messaging remains upbeat, with inflation expectations firmly anchored and market confidence sustained. Investors largely shrugged off RBI's upward revision of growth and downward revision of inflation, signalling resilience. The economy now faces a prolonged period of low rates, which should continue supporting debt and equity markets, though the rupee will bear the brunt of US tariffs. Delays in finalising a US trade deal continue to weigh on headline stock indices, but a Fed rate cut this month could spark a Santa Claus rally in India.

Easing, alongside an anticipated interest rate cut, should accelerate monetary transmission and lower credit costs. The banking regulator's efforts to extend financial sector deregulation do not stop there. RBI has allowed banks to operate multiple entities in the lending business, reversing a regulatory guideline issued last year. Rules for non-financial holding companies to operate MF, insurance and pension businesses have also been relaxed. Incremental deregulation should improve the financial sector's ability to function as an intermediary.



JUST IN JEST

As realcarpoolit picks up, you may find privacy of your car getting rarer

Not Offering a Ride Just Got Awkward

If you're a corporate or political leader who wants his or her own space before an important meeting, you may now face a peculiar problem: peer pressure to give a fellow leader a lift in your car. Worse, refusing such a ride if offered to you. Modi and Putin's travel in the same car along New Delhi's fair roads on Thursday has been deemed splendid 'car pool diplomacy' — or, as we call it realcarpoolit. It's not exactly new. During the Trump-Putin summit in Alaska in August, the two shared a 10-min ride in the US presidential limousine before formal talks began. In September, Modi travelled with Putin in the latter's car in Tianjin for some 45 mins on their way to the SCO summit venue.

Away from prying eyes, cars serve as mobile bunkers of intimacy. No mics, press or ceremonial stiffness. Just the hum of engine, and a chauffeur (who's signed an NDA). Churchill and Roosevelt did it during WW2, as did Kennedy and Khrushchev at the 1961 Vienna Summit after the Bay of Pigs debacle. Reagan and Gorbachev did it in Geneva in 1985 before taking that famous walk together. Even if nothing important goes on in the back seat, realcarpoolit's still imbued with an aura of mystery. But what happens now if you want to spread your legs, break some wind, take a power nap in your own vehicle before an important meeting? Raju, chup chaap gaadi! aao!

Beware the hubris of effective monopolies, one of which is holding Indian air travel hostage

LiGone? Cancel Culture



G R Gopinath

On Friday GoI put in abeyance the new flight duty time limitations (FDTL) rules for pilots. This, after more than 1,000 IndiGo flights were cancelled on Friday alone, leaving nearly 2 lakh passengers stressed and stranded, and a nation, hostage to the market leader in utter dismay.

FDTL, or maximum flight duty period (MFP), is a set of regulatory rules that define the maximum time pilots and cabin crew are allowed to work, fly and be on duty to prevent fatigue and maintain flight safety. The rules, for example, may specify that a pilot can fly 900 hrs in a year, but not more than 100 hrs in 28 days, or not exceed 8 hrs at a stretch with two pilots, or 13-hrs with 3-pilots on a single day with not more than 5-6 stopovers, and less landings at nights... Duty time starts from when a pilot reports 1 hr before flight time, till the aircraft comes to a complete stop at the destination.

International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) sets down global standards that individual countries adapt. Two main regulatory bodies, US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), together operating the largest number of airlines in the world, follow ICAO guidelines. They strictly comply when new rules and regulations are introduced, something that has been happening over the years.

India's Directorate General of Civil Aviation

(DGCA) was following FDTL guidelines not in consonance with ICAO, or PAA and EASA. There was pressure from Indian Pilots Association and other related bodies that lobbied to bring FDTL on par with ICAO guidelines.

They were unhappy that airline managements were exploitative, forcing pilots to fly out of routine international norms making their jobs unsafe and stressful.

DGCA held wide-ranging consultations with airlines management, pilot bodies and other stakeholders, and keeping safety utmost in their mind, notified new FDTL rules in May 2024.

Implementation was in two stages. July 1, 2025, with Phase 2 completed on Nov 1, which implied that after 20 months, airlines and pilots had to be compliant with the new regulations. Clearly, IndiGo didn't comply.

IndiGo has grown to a mammoth size, with a fleet size of 420 aircraft in the 20 years since its inception, an enviable track record of efficient and near flawless operations, on-time operations, young and spottless aeroplanes, well turned-out cabin crew, zero fatal accidents, incredible growth in revenue and profitability and a meteoric rise in market capitalisation reaching about \$22 bn. But somehow, it morphed down the line, it morphed into a cocky and arrogant behemoth.

While full-service carriers like Air

India and British Airways need 11 pilots per plane as they fly less hours, low-cost airlines that fly more hours require 15-18 pilots per plane under the new guidelines. It is widely believed that IndiGo's senior management thought that it would be able to convince the civil aviation ministry, by dint of their sheer market size, not to enforce the new FDTL rules. Fewer pilots flying more hours make cash counters jingle.

IndiGo should have listened to flight operators, trained and absorbed pilots, IndiGo pointedly brushed matters under the aisle carpet.

Pilot recruitment and induction take time and diligence. As does updating crew rostering software and data integration of flight times of 5,000-6,000 pilots and calculating route flying hours, outsourcing to global companies like Sabre, CAE and airlines software supplier AIMS.

With increased winter schedules, glitches and what IndiGo's statement termed 'multitude of other unforeseen operational challenges' with the new restrictions, the system collapsed.

IndiGo's aggressive expansion, with wet leasing of wide-bodied Boeing 787 Dreamliners and Boeing 777s, ordering Airbus A350-900, and launching new international routes, may also have distracted its management from looking into the 'boring' nitty-gritty.

The IndiGo mythome also holds a lesson for government and regulators. A country cannot grow robustly with duopolies, effective monopolies, in any sector. If we had a dozen low-cost airlines, a catalyst for the scale of IndiGo's crippling India would not have happened.

The writer is founder, Air Deccan

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A thought for today

Rules are not necessarily
frank, principles are

FRANKLIN D ROOSEVELT

Passenger As Hostage

GO! please note: IndiGo broke your rules, got away

The battle over India's pilot duty rules this week ended with civil aviation ministry giving in. Although the ministry on Friday evening termed its decision to place FDTL - flight duty time limitations - rules in abeyance as "solely in the interest of passengers", it was also making a virtue of necessity. For, what else could it have done when thousands of passengers were stranded at airports, and IndiGo, the country's biggest airline, declared it had no quick fix for the problem?



In fact, what played out at airports over the past few days was more hostage crisis than battle. IndiGo practically held a gun to aviation authority DGCA's head by cancelling hundreds of flights daily and precipitating a crisis that saw one-way Kolkata-Bengaluru economy fares touch ₹1 lakh. The reason it could do so was simply its outsized market share. IndiGo alone has more than 60% of India's aviation market. Contrast that with China, where the top three airlines together have less than 60%. And in US, the most evolved aviation market, the top four have about 75%, but none of them alone approaches 25%.

Indian aviation is practically a duopoly, with the top two having over 90% share. For govt to direct or discipline them isn't easy. The FDTL rules it announced in Jan 2024 were well-intentioned, and aimed at "addressing pilot fatigue, (and) enhancing overall flight safety" by ensuring pilot got adequate rest. June 1, 2024 was the compliance date, but it got pushed back to Nov 1, 2025, and even then, 17 months later - IndiGo wasn't ready. The closest analogue we can think of is real estate builders, who are infamous for delaying house possession by years.

Govt expects flight operations to normalise in three days, and they might, but what will also get normalised is impunity - despite the "high-level inquiry" that's been ordered. Pilots have cried foul. They say major airlines made no effort to recruit more hands in preparation for the FDTL deadline. In fact, no entry-level co-pilots have been hired this year. This disdains for rules, pilots and customers won't ebb without more competition in the sector. Once operations return to normal, govt should turn its attention to that.

PutiNamo

New Delhi, Moscow reinforce each other's
strategic autonomy

Coming at a pivotal moment in international geopolitics, the Modi-Putin summit yesterday, unsurprisingly, offered several key takeaways. First, it reinforced strategic autonomy for both sides. Following the Russia-Ukraine war, Moscow has been keen to break the impression of isolation and over-reliance on China. India, engaged in tough trade negotiations with US, wants strategic elbow room. Both were achieved with this visit. Second, Ukraine figured in the talks and Modi reiterated India's support for any efforts towards peace. That's welcome, for, the longer that war carries on, Russia will be chained to China, a common worry for both India and the West.

Third, both sides expressed their desire to impart momentum to bilateral ties with a migration and mobility agreement, and a programme for development of strategic economic collaboration. Diversifying the economic basket from just defence and energy is overdue. On defence and energy though, there is careful stocktaking. India wants

Russia to expedite delivery of military hardware that has been hugely delayed, and more Russian help to expand indigenous production. On energy, New Delhi is clear it will be guided by self-interest alone, opting for best prices and conditions on offer.

Taken together, given a reordering of global alliances, Trumpian America, and revisionist China, India and Russia are looking to find their respective optimum strategic slots. And touching base with an old partner is reassuring.

When Will The Dragon
Overtake The Eagle?

And how India will fare in this rivalry

For sure, the US-China geopolitical rivalry will define the rest of this century. Maybe there will be a bipolar world defined by a bifurcation of technological systems, maybe a catastrophic confrontation over flashpoints such as Taiwan. In *Everyone Is Wrong About China: The Myths and Realities of Sino-US Competition*, author Brendan O'Reilly breaks down the US-China great power dynamic into three helpful sections: myths, predictions and grey swans.

The myths section underplays China's aggressive manoeuvres on the international stage, by a clever statistical comparison with other countries. For example, that China has engaged in the least number of major conflicts since PRC was born in 1949 - the last major one was against Vietnam in 1979. The 2020 Galwan clashes with India are played down, played up are the number of major conflicts that US and other nations engaged in.

Statistically this may be true, but it ignores the historical trajectory of different countries. PRC in 1949 was a fraction of US in terms of national power. Today China has become a major power. There's no telling what aggressive turn the relatively younger PRC will take in the future. Hence, New Delhi-Washington ties, despite some differences, will continue to grow, per the author. This may actually reflect a current anxiety in Beijing, which thinks long term.

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS

Further, this means that US has a clear interest in intensifying cooperation with India today, as a counterbalance against China in the future. Hence, New Delhi-Washington ties, despite some differences, will continue to grow, per the author. This may actually reflect a current anxiety in Beijing, which thinks long term.

IndiGone: What We Learnt

Overworked pilots or hell for flyers, that's the choice IndiGo gave us. Not just govt, even the airline, never mind its big market share, should know this can't go on. But Indians, get ready to pay more as pilot safety rules fully kick in

Chetan Bhatnagar



By now, you've probably seen the memes, the videos and the chaos currently unfolding at Indian airports. It almost feels like an enemy nation hacked our aviation sector overnight. The culprit? IndiGo, which controlled over 60% of the market and has spectacularly crashed its pilot roster. Thousands of flights have been cancelled daily.

The fiasco continues as I write this. Lakhs of passengers are stranded. Weddings, conferences, interviews, holidays - all disrupted. Visa appointments? Gone. Money? Burnt. Tears? Unlimited. And junior IndiGo ground staff - who had zero part in this - are now the nation's punching bags. Meanwhile, the rest of the internet is having a meme party.

Funny - unless, of course, you were among the unlucky souls stuck in the airport overnight, scrambling to find stale overpriced samosas for dinner. With 16cr Indians flying every year - mostly on IndiGo - odds are you know someone who suffered.

To be fair, IndiGo has been the one shining star in India's graveyard of airlines. Ask the ghosts of Sahara, Kingfisher and Jet Airways. While they nosedived financially, IndiGo soared - making money in a business where glamour is a mask and bankruptcy lurks behind every business-class curtain.

India is a land where there are only three things people willingly spend on: religion, weddings and their children's education. Other than that, Indians love to scrape pennies. IndiGo understood that. No ovens on board - they add weight. Instead, you get those legendary cold sandwiches. Want fine dining? Sure, there's dehydrated upma rehydrated with thermos water. Run.

However, while it's no Michelin experience, IndiGo does the one job it promises to do - take you from point A to point B, in relatively clean flights, and with a focus on on-time performance. It's therefore ironic that an airline building a brand around on-time performance is knocked out of its seat by the rules in overnight.

What triggered this chaos? New DGCA rules - not

sudden ones, but announced almost two years ago - that finally came into effect. The audacity: they want pilots to sleep. Properly. Like eight hours of actual rest, not a catnap after three red-eye flights. Fewer night duties, longer breaks. Basically: treat pilots like humans, not flight machines.

And that's bad for business. More rest means more pilots. More pilots mean more cost. More cost means ticket prices that might - god forbid - go up by ₹200.

Finally, the rules kicked in and the whole IndiGo 'on-time' empire dominating Indian skies collapsed, like a badly built card house.



It is super tempting to blame the regulator. GOI and its babus have such a reputation that if a new rule causes chaos, then it feels obvious that the rulemakers are the problem. However, in this case, DGCA was only aligning India with global standards - FAA in US, EASA in Europe. Pilot fatigue isn't a joke - a sleepy pilot is not what you want flying a metal tub at 35,000 feet. If a pilot is unrested and hence lacks focus while flying, the results can be catastrophic. Hence, milking a pilot as much as possible so that Indians can save more on flights is a dumb idea.

Plus, the regulator did not shove the rules in overnight. They gave 22 months for the airline to implement them.

It is IndiGo that probably felt the regulator would extend the implementation again, and therefore didn't take enough steps. In a sense, IndiGo was right. The chaos it unleashed on the public has forced the civil aviation ministry to put the rules in abeyance.

IndiGo is no longer just a private company. It is India's aviation sector. If it doesn't fly, we don't have aviation in this country. Is such a dependence healthy for our economy? That's something well have to answer. There's nothing wrong with private companies, on whom we depend every day anyway. However, private companies can often have different incentives, driven by their investors. IndiGo's incentive is to keep costs low and maintain and grow market share - and for that, guidelines that require them to spend more on pilots are not welcome. They will have an incentive to push back or delay these as much as possible, and it looks like that's what they did.

In all this, two stakeholders suffer the most - the pilots (who don't get enough rest) and the customers (who are stranded and harassed at airports). Not to mention the junior IndiGo ground staff, earning modest wages, being yelled at, only because they are wearing the blue IndiGo uniform, as if they are responsible for the thousands of flights that were cancelled.

What is the way forward for all stakeholders? ● IndiGo needs to get its act together. Sure, Indians love cheap. However, pilot rest is non-negotiable. Keep that dehydrated upma or reduce its size to half. Don't scribble on fresh, well-rested pilots.

● Regulator needs to communicate to the public what happened, lest they become the fall guy, which they always do anyway.

● Indian consumers need to get their priorities right. Pay for safety. Not only demand, but also pay for good service. Else, it will come back to bite you.

● Finally, to IndiGo staff: sorry guys, for all the uncles and aunts that yelled at you. It wasn't your fault. We are all pawns in the grinding wheels of capitalism, and sometimes we get crushed in the process.

Takes rest, IndiGo pilots. And here's hoping you wake up refreshed and get Indian skies soaring again.

Russkiy Mir, Putin & The Ghost Of The Soviet Elite

Legacies of the past live on in Kremlin, colouring its sense of self, foreign policy choices and place in the global order. The current Russian leadership is a product of that continuity

Ivan U Klyszcz



To many, Russia remains a mystery. More than a cliché about the expanse of Siberia and the paradoxes of Russian culture, global geopolitics has rendered the understanding of the history of the country into an even more urgent matter as, indeed, much of its present-day realities echo the past.

For the past century, the problem of the idea of Russia has been central. Is the Russian Federation but the rump Soviet Union? Or is it a new country altogether? These questions belong in the realm of historians and legal scholars but it does not mean that politicians do not indulge in them. In fact, the rulers of Kremlin have strong convictions about what Russia is and where it is going. To understand these ideas better, it is important to understand who inhabits the seat of Russian power.

While the recent history of Russia is told as one of dramatic ruptures - crucially the 1991 Soviet dissolution and Putin's 2000 rise to power - it is the continuity that holds a key to these questions. Indeed, the end of Soviet rule did not lead to a change of elites, nor accountability for the crimes of the old regime.

More than an issue of justice, elite continuity is a sociological reality. According to research by Maria Snegovaya and Alexander Loszka, most of Kremlin's occupants (including Putin himself), are either members or direct descendants of the old Soviet *nomenklatura*, the socialist elite. This was an exclusive and heavily indoctrinated group. Some estimates suggest that only 1-3% of the Soviet population could be included in this narrow circle. Yet, Snegovaya and Loszka found that this was the background of 50% of the leading cadres of Russian govt and industry in the year 2020 (when the data was last gathered).

This elite maintained positions of power after 1991 because of the lack of accountability, as well as by Kremlin's own design. Putin's first presidency is also another supposed rupture, one that deserves nuance. As research by Baturo & Elkin showed, most of Boris Yeltsin's, Russia's first president, and Putin's predecessor - circle maintained positions of influence

after Putin took over in 2000. In that sense, Putin's arrival to the presidency did not represent a break in the upper echelons of power, further extending the life and influence of the old Soviet *nomenklatura*.

In this background, it is not surprising that some ideas have remained ingrained in the mindset of the elite in Moscow, including Putin himself. Of course, communism was dispensed with, as already in the 1980s people had ceased to believe in the October Revolution or in 'Building Socialism'. Ending the socialist system freed the post-Soviet elites to pursue power without the encumbering legacies of Lenin and Stalin, plus with the advantages of the modern world.

Most critically, Russian elites maintain a sense that Moscow should remain a superpower along the lines of the Soviet Union. Accompanying this sense of entitlement about superpower status came a sense of entitlement over the independent countries surrounding the Russian Federation. While sometimes changing in its expression (from 'regional integration' to open war) this sentiment would haunt the entire post-Soviet history of Russia.

Indeed, this has been a contradictory sentiment, and it played out in different ways in 1991. The Baltic states were - at the time - seen as having been incorporated wrongfully into USSR, as indeed the three countries were under Soviet occupation since the end of the Second World War. Their (re)independence was not controversial.

The Caucasus and Central Asia were also seen as separate. From the perspective of elites in Moscow, the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia were a financial burden. Their Asian populations were no different, former colonial subjects, as seen through a racist lens that predominated in Kremlin. This made the dissolution of the Soviet state an acceptable outcome for Moscow, for the most part.

Where this was not accepted was in Belarus and Ukraine. These two countries were seen as fellow Slavic republics, as well as desirable economic centres. This was the initial notion behind the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the first post-Soviet bloc, originally meant to bind Belarus, Russia and Ukraine together. For them, then, integration with the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia ebbed and flowed, but

Belarus and Ukraine remained top priorities.

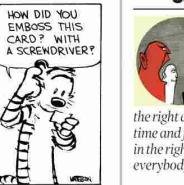
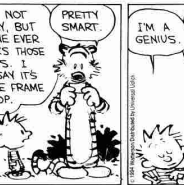
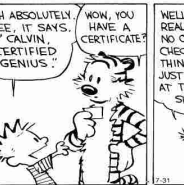
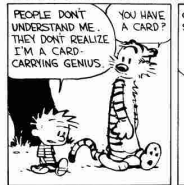
In the case of Ukraine, union with Russia was *contra natura*. Still, relying on a mixture of corruption, intimidation and co-optation, Moscow managed to pressure some Ukrainian govts into entertaining the union. Ukraine was indeed a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, yet Kremlin's repeated overreach - especially the 2014 annexation of Crimea or the 2022 invasion - ended any possibility of Ukrainian sympathy to Russia's sentimentality.

The war in Ukraine is currently waging on Ukraine thus belongs to this sense of entitlement, of taking as obvious that Ukraine - an independent state - should belong to Russia. While the legacies of the past cannot alone explain the decisions made by Kremlin, they do offer a glimpse into the lens through which the occupiers of the Russian throne look at the world.

The writer is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security



Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.

Aristotle

Stop Being Consumers In Marketplace Of Fury

Harsh Kabra

Oxford University Press naming 'rage bait' as the Word of the Year for 2025 is no surprise. The term - referring to online content meant to rile audience - has seen its usage trouble this year.

In times of rage-farming, fanning anger results in 22-25% higher engagement. Rage-bait headlines achieve higher click-throughs. Viral clips devoid of context ignite mass mobilisation long before fact-checkers can verify information. We live at the mercy of algorithms that reward provocation because hate-baiting, inflammatory headlines and polarising positions drive clicks, reactions and shares while keeping us glued - critical to growing ad revenues. If engagement is the new currency, rage is its liquid asset.

Anger has become a commodity that sells like hot cakes, not just on social media but also in politics, entertainment, even everyday discourse. From Washington to Delhi, politicians are stoking real and

imagined slights to rally attention. Rage offers a handy template for demonising opponents. Measured debates are turning into shouting bouts and nuances are being supplanted by absolutes. Political actors have discovered that anger consolidates bases like nothing else.

Spiritual traditions blame anger for wrecking clarity, relationships and growth. The Gita warns: "It is desire and anger, both born of the mode of passion... know this as the great all-devouring, sinful enemy in this world." Krishn says: "From anger arises delusion; from delusion, confusion of memory; from confusion of memory, destruction of intelligence; and from the destruction of intelligence, one perishes."

In Buddhism, rage is one of the three poisons that warp reality and bring suffering. The Buddha compares anger to holding a hot coal intended for throwing at someone else - it harms the bearer

more than the target. Stoics believed that human suffering is more the outcome of our judgements about external events than events themselves. Rage emerges when we strive to control people and situations that are beyond our power.

Endless craving for success, comfort and recognition makes rage contagious in today's world of consumption status, identity politics and constant comparison. Inequities, fear, conflicts and cultural one-upmanship polarise society and foment insecurity.

Rage bait soils collective consciousness by breeding ego, attachment and greed. Society, constantly fed on rage, becomes disoriented, reactive and short-sighted, diverging from the path inward and surrendering compassion, understanding and empathy.

The most worrying part is that we fail to notice: rage breeds victimhood, resulting in pathological scepticism,

anxiety, disillusionment and exhaustion. Rage is easy, instant and effective, while victimhood is a convenient tool to legitimise personal and social fault lines.

Rage is best countered by conscious action. Cultivate detachment, self-awareness and compassion. See through desires and attachments that add fuel to the fire. Be mindful and practise restraint. When provoked, pause. Create space for clarity with mindful breathing and reflection. Consume media with greater consciousness. Do not amplify outrage-baiting content just for a digital ego-boost. Instead, push content that uplifts and builds empathy. Side with truth and kindness and respond with understanding and objectivity.

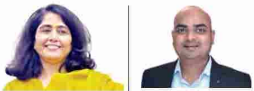
Kabir's warning that a single spark of anger born of ego can drown devotion and all good deeds is especially prophetic in the age of algorithmic fury. Rage will continue to exist. Whether we allow it to be weaponised against our collective consciousness is what will make a difference.



How global indices mislead the world and mask the real crises

The backdrop to this reliance is a world in crisis. Humanitarian disasters from Gaza and Sudan to the Sahel and Myanmar have pushed global displacement to its highest levels since the Second World War. Conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa reinforce a broader pattern of instability that no longer feels exceptional but systemic

FIRST Column



HEMANGI SINHA

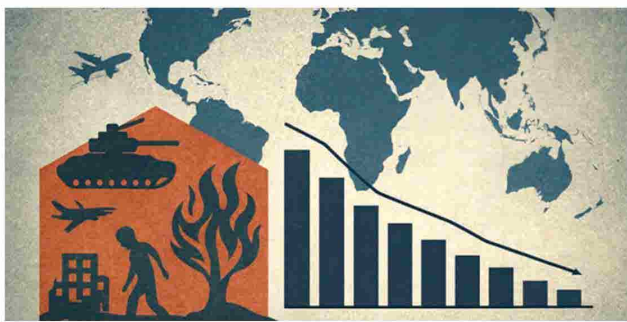


PRAVIN KUMAR SINGH

Global indices have never carried as much influence as they do today. Rankings on development, hunger, democracy, the environment, happiness, and peace shape how nations are perceived, how policies are debated, and how investments flow. In moments of uncertainty, the world turns instinctively to these numerical summaries to make sense of global progress. Yet this dependence has grown precisely when the world itself has become more fragmented, more unequal, and more difficult to measure with conventional tools.

The backdrop to this reliance is a world in crisis. Humanitarian disasters from Gaza and Sudan to the Sahel and Myanmar have pushed global displacement to its highest levels since the Second World War. Conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa reinforce a broader pattern of instability that no longer feels exceptional but systemic. Climate distress deepens this sense of upheaval.

The year 2024 was the hottest ever recorded; extreme weather events have become almost seasonal, and their impacts fall hardest on the Global South - regions least responsible for historical emissions. The global economy, too, is splintering. Sanctions, export controls, technology bans, and now tariff escalations reflect a widening trend of coercive economic statecraft. Strategic decoupling, rivalry over critical minerals and semiconductors, and the securitisation of supply chains have begun to replace the old narrative of globalisation.



THE GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX FACES A MORE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM THAN DATA INCONSISTENCY OR STATISTICAL ASYMMETRY: NARRATIVE OVERREACH. THE INDEX PRESENTS ITSELF AS A DEFINITIVE GLOBAL BAROMETER OF "HUNGER", YET THE CONSTRUCT IT MEASURES IS NOT HUNGER IN ANY HOLISTIC OR LIVED SENSE

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biases, raising the question of whether they illuminate global progress or distort it.

When the World Is Fractured, Measurement Must Be Exact — Yet It Is Not

Global indices were once conceived as instruments to democratise development knowledge. Their mission was noble: simplify complex realities to create global reference points. However, the growing political and economic consequences of these indices mean their limitations are no longer academic concerns; they now have material and normative implications. At a time when the world desperately needs trustworthy, culturally plural, and empirically robust measurements, many internationally influential indices rely on methodological shortcuts, cultural assumptions, and opaque data foundations.

A clear example is the World Happiness Report (WHR), which has gained disproportionate global influence. According to its published methodology, the ranking is derived solely from a single subjective life-evaluation question — the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale — which asks respondents to place their life on a ladder from 0 to 10. This is not a multi-indicator composite index, nor does it incorporate objective well-being metrics into its ranking formula.

This simplicity enhances transparency but raises major concerns about cross-cultural comparability. Psychological research shows that populations differ in how they respond to self-evaluation questions: Nordic societies tend to answer more directly; East

Asian societies may avoid high self-ratings due to cultural modesty norms; Latin American societies often give more affective responses. The WHR does not claim any cultural bias and presents the ladder as a universal tool, yet the possibility of cultural response biases cannot be dismissed — especially when life-evaluation patterns align more closely with cultural self-expression norms than with objective well-being indicators.

The Global Hunger Index faces a more fundamental problem than data inconsistency or statistical asymmetry: narrative overreach. The index presents itself as a definitive global barometer of "hunger", yet the construct it measures is not hunger in any holistic or lived sense. Instead, it merges disparate indicators — child stunting, child wasting, child mortality, and population-level undernourishment — into a single score, even though these phenomena do not move together, do not share determinants, and do not reflect the same type of deprivation. Compressing multidimensional nutritional realities into one rank creates a misleading storyline that a country's complex food landscape can be captured by a solitary ordinal position. The result is less an analytical tool and more a narrative device — one that travels easily through headlines, reinforces simplistic comparisons, and shapes global perceptions while doing little to illuminate the structural causes of food insecurity.

Democracy and freedom indices reveal yet another concern. Freedom House, V-Dem, and the Economist Intelligence Unit

generate global authority but depend heavily on expert-coded assessments. The identities of these experts, their epistemic frameworks, and their evidentiary standards are only partially disclosed. Many indicators hinge on interpretive questions — such as whether public discourse is "pluralistic" or whether media autonomy is "adequate" — that vary significantly with ideological pre-dispositions. These indices often present precise numerical scores without confidence intervals, giving perception-based judgments the illusion of scientific certainty. Because they feed into broader governance tools like the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, they influence sovereign ratings and investment patterns.

Environmental indices such as the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) and the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) face a different critique: they tend to apply uniform decarbonisation expectations to societies with vastly different historical emissions, development responsibilities, and energy transitions. By rewarding alignment with European policy pathways, they risk penalising countries that prioritise developmental equity or energy-access imperatives. Taken together, these examples show that the crisis of measurement

is not about flaws in individual indices; it is structural, epistemic, and systemic. It raises a fundamental question: Who measures the world — and through whose worldview? Today's global ranking ecosystem does not merely reflect global asymmetries — it reinforces them. The current global ranking system is deeply flawed because it rewards self-interest, privileging nations and institutions whose worldviews, data capabilities, and ideological assumptions align with the metrics they design.

A Measurement Architecture Dominated by One Part of the World

More than 85 per cent of the world's population live in the Global South, yet close to 90 per cent of global indices are conceptualised, designed, and produced by institutions in the Global North. This asymmetry shapes what is measured, which indicators are deemed meaningful, and which developmental pathways are legitimised. It generates narrative power: indices become the lens through which the world interprets itself. This power generates policy power: rankings influence negotiations, investments, and climate

finance priorities.

And it generates civilisational power: most indices embed Western philosophical assumptions — individualism, liberal-democratic norms, institutional templates — even when applied to societies grounded in entirely different ontologies. Most importantly, it produces epistemic power: the authority to define progress itself.

Reimagining How the World Should Be Measured

The world needs not fewer indices but better indices — those transparent in methodology, explicit in epistemology, and cognisant of civilisational diversity. A new global metrics architecture must begin with radical transparency: raw data, methodologies, expert identities (with safeguards), margins of error, and sensitivity analyses must all be publicly accessible.

Cross-cultural response patterns must be recognised rather than ignored. Clear distinctions must be made between empirical indicators, model-generated estimates, and perception-based judgments. Above all, the Global South must move from being a passive consumer of indices to an active producer of them.

Plurality is the antidote to epistemic concentration. When multiple frameworks exist — rooted in Global South realities, civilisational ethics, ecological justice, and social responsibility — the world gains not confusion but balance. In an age of polarisation and fragmentation, the objective should not be to rank nations in a single global hierarchy but to understand them on their own terms.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Right to Measure

At a time when the world is struggling with wars, environmental collapse, economic fragmentation, and failing global governance, the very tools we use to understand progress must themselves be trustworthy. Today, they are not. The crisis of global governance is mirrored by a crisis of global measurement. The crisis is also a clash between inadequate quantitative probes and unexamined qualitative judgments — a reminder that measurement without context can distort more than it reveals.

Reclaiming the right to measure is therefore not only a statistical necessity but a civilisational and epistemic imperative. Only when the world measures itself through pluralism, transparency, and culturally grounded lenses will it be able to imagine a more equitable future.

Is centrism the alternative to extremism? New grammar of governance



ACHARYA PRASHANT

The question is like asking a physician: which disease should I choose? The physician will say: choose health. But health, the state of not being seated in any ideological row, seems unimaginable to us. We have grown accustomed to sitting in camps, identifying ourselves by which chair we occupy. The very terms "Left" and "Right" came from an accident of seating. In 1789, during the French Revolution, supporters of the king sat to the right of the president's chair in the National Assembly; supporters of the revolution sat to the left. What began as a furniture arrangement hardened into identity. Rows became doctrines. Positions became personalities.

The Left now speaks of equality, redistribution and collective welfare. The Right speaks of tradition, order and the preservation of inherited structures. The Left says, "A better future awaits, once equality arrives." The Right says, "The best is behind us; preserve what was." One leans into the future, the other clings to the past. Broad distinctions, yes, but this tension between the pull of what should be and the weight of what has been is ancient: Plato imagined the ideal and Confucius honoured the ancestral. What 1789 offered was not a new conflict but new seats, and we have since mistaken the seating for the substance. Yet notice something deeper: both camps, while quarrelling over their chairs, keep gazing outward — to society, systems, others. Neither asks the question that dislodges the entire arrangement: who is the one so eager to sit on either side? Who is this "I" that seeks nostalgia or utopia?

Without asking this, the Left and Right become opposite costumes worn by the same actor.

every difference as a habit, is merely an extremity of moderation — just as seated, just as identified. The problem is not which chair you occupy, but the inner compulsion that you must occupy one. History exposes this vividly. In 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union — two ideological opposites — signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and divided Eastern Europe between them. Enemies by speech, twins by method. The pact was not an aberration but a revelation: when pushed far enough, ideologies converge into the same structure of fear, domination and dependence on unquestioning followers.

Mussolini offers the same lesson. Until 1914 he was a rising star in the Italian Socialist Party, within years he founded fascism. The man had not changed in essence, only in seating. The ego kept its taste for totalitarianism; only the banner shifted.

The Ego's Need for Ideology

Why do the extremes converge? Because every ideology, when carried to its limit, serves the same master: the unexamined human ego. The ego is terrified of groundlessness, so it grabs a chair. It clings to labels because labels give it continuity. When someone says, "I am a Leftist" or "I am a Rightist," this is not identity but insecurity. The chair is a crutch. The row is a refuge. The ego loves ideology because ideology is a respectable form of bondage. The prisoner paints his cage in party colours and calls it conviction. Ideological people are rarely found acknowledging virtues on the opposite side. I must criticise whoever sits across the aisle. This is bondage. Something outside has acquired the right to dictate what you must think, approve and attack. Before analysing the world, ask the sharper question: what is this mind that needs an ideology in the first place? This is the pivot. The investigation must now turn inward.

The Illusion of External Order

If the Left speaks of equality, ask: where is true equality possible? Not in the body, for bodies differ. Not in the mind, for minds vary infinitely. Not in circumstances, for no two lives match. Equality is genuinely possible only at the level of the Self, which is the same in all beings. Whatever truth the Left points towards is already completed in this understanding. If the Right speaks of order, ask: whose order? Which tradition? Every tradition was once an innovation; every order was once a disruption. The conservative clings to the past because the ego fears the unknown. But if there is a tradition worth preserving, it is the tradition of self-inquiry, the willingness to know oneself without bias. And order? True order arises from individuals aligned with their inner clarity. A society of inwardly chaotic people will produce outward chaos despite endless laws. The order the Right seeks cannot be imposed, only discovered. Not all positions are equally distant from truth. The abolition of slavery was not "Leftist" but a recognition of the Self in the other. The preservation of genuine wisdom traditions is not "Rightist" but

fidelity to what liberates. But insight becomes poison when it hardens into a camp identity.

Engagement Without Enslavement

In the real world, policies must be made, elections happen. Must I not choose a side?

A fair question, and it deserves a fair answer. Freedom from ideology does not mean withdrawal from action; it means acting without being owned. In a world of limited time and information, some heuristics are inevitable. Coalitions require coordination. The person who refuses all labels may find herself politically homeless. But the issue is not whether you take positions. The issue is whether your positions take you.

Can you revise your stance when evidence demands it — even if your row disapproves? Can you advocate without demonising? Can you see the human being behind the opposing chair? The test is not detachment but honesty. Self-inquiry alone enables such honesty — not the adoption of yet another ideology of "non-ideology," but a relentless questioning: Why do I believe what I believe? What fear is being defended? What image is being preserved? Who am I beneath all this seating arrangement?

The Freedom of Fearlessness

When roots are deep, the tree welcomes storms; when roots are shallow, even a mild breeze terrifies. The weak sapling needs walls and fences. The strong tree stands open to the sky. So too with the ideological mind. The frightened ego closes windows; the fearless mind says: show me everything. No thought scares me; no tradition threatens me. Because truth is limitless, it cannot be fenced. "All the scriptures of the world are mine," says the seeker rooted in truth. "I can read Marx and Adam Smith. I can sit with a Hindu or a Muslim. No danger arises, for there is no seat I must defend." Civilisations grow through such openness. India's oral wisdom received paper from elsewhere; the camera and microphone came from other lands; other cultures received zero and algebra from us. Exchange is natural when there is no inner boundary to maintain.

The Question Beyond Ideology

An era of narrowness sweeps the world. Walls rise everywhere: ideological, national, religious. We divide and subdivide, then subdivide again. Rows within rows, seats within seats. But wisdom exists to dissolve seating plans. If truth is limitless, then every boundary is self-imposed. The real question is not Left versus Right. The real question is: who am I, and what is the purpose, if any, of life?

Any answer that binds you to a row, demands enmity, sacrifices your independent inquiry, is not truth but an ideological prison. You were not born to sit on the Left or the Right. You were born to free flow.

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RAHUL KAUSHIK

Bharat is undergoing a profound transformation in the grammar of statecraft — one that is not cosmetic but structural. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the architecture of governance has been stripped of its feudal and colonial residues and reoriented towards its most fundamental purpose: service. This shift is not a matter of administrative rebranding; it is an ideological reset rooted in the belief that political authority is not a pedestal of power but a discipline of duty. Over the past eleven years, this philosophy has been implemented with consistent, almost monastic precision.

Prime Minister Modi's own positioning sets the tone. By calling himself Pradhan Sevak, he replaced the traditional, hierarchical vocabulary of high office with one grounded in humility and responsibility. This was not a rhetorical flourish; it became the organising principle of his governance model — seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day — marked by accessibility rather than aloofness. For more than a decade, the highest office in the land has functioned less like a throne and more like a workbench.

That single shift altered the culture of governance across the system. The renaming of the Prime Minister's Office as Seva Tirth crystallised this transformation. Far from symbolic, it represented an ideological intervention. The PMO is no longer to be viewed as an administrative citadel insulated from the public. It is reframed as a sanctified space of service — a pilgrimage site of duty. Such terminology forces a psychological reset. It removes the imprint of colonial hierarchy embedded in earlier institutional names and instead aligns the office with a native Bharatiya ethos of seva, karmaya, and people-centric governance.

The parallel decision to replace Raj Bhavan and Raj Niwas with Lok Bhavan and Lok Niwas extends this logic across constitutional offices. These buildings, historically symbols of colonial authority, retained an air of distance between the administrative elite and the citizenry. Renaming them as the people's houses reorients their purpose and cultural significance. Authority is reminded that it must be accountable, public-facing, and grounded in democratic legitimacy rather than ceremonial grandeur.

Similarly, calling the Central Secretariat Kartavya Bhavan further embeds this ideological framework. The Indian bureaucracy has long struggled with inertia, opacity, and a self-preserving mindset. The new name imposes a doctrinal expectation: duty is not negotiable. Every official entering the building is reminded that the state exists to serve — not to rule, delay, or evade

responsibility. It is a behavioural nudge woven into the very identity of the institution. Taken together, these renamings form a coherent architecture of governance. They dismantle a power-centric state and replace it with a service-centric one. They revive a civilisational lineage in which leadership is measured by responsibility rather than entitlement, by labour rather than privilege. Bharat is being steered towards a governance paradigm grounded in accountability and moral clarity.

Over the past eleven years, the Modi government has attempted to embody this ethic through relentless operational execution. The speed of implementation has been non-negotiable. Infrastructure expansion, welfare delivery, digital governance, foreign policy, cultural revival, and administrative reform have moved simultaneously — not sequentially. The goal has been to make the state visible, efficient, responsive, and rooted in service. The emphasis on seva is not branding; it is a directive for action. India's development trajectory reflects the results of this shift.

The decade has seen unprecedented infrastructure growth. These achievements rest on the belief that governance is a continuous sadhana, not a five-year political performance. It is an ethic of execution without noise, excuses, or delay. This administrative transformation runs parallel to a cultural and civilisational renaissance. The revival of heritage, restoration of temples, strengthening of cultural institutions, and renewed assertion of national identity are part of the same ideological continuum. A nation connected to its roots is more confident in shaping its future. Governance, in this sense, is not a means; it is an end.

The shift from Raj Bhavan to Lok Bhavan, from PMO to Seva Tirth, and from Secretariat to Kartavya Bhavan marks a decisive break from the colonial mindset. It signals that power must yield to duty, and governance must return to purpose. These are structural signals, not symbolic gestures. They communicate that the journey to Viksit Bharat will be carried not by slogans but by seriousness.

As India moves through this pivotal phase of nation-building, such steps help create the mental architecture for long-term transformation. A developed Bharat cannot be built on the language of rule. It must be built on the language of service. This shift defines the moment.

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AAP's Raghav demands ban on 10-minute delivery services

HANS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

AAM Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Raghav Chadha on Friday demanded the termination of 10-minute delivery services offered by quick commerce players, terming the practice as "cruelty" towards gig workers who risk their lives to meet deadlines under extreme pressure.

Raising the issue during the Zero Hour in the Rajya Sabha, Chadha said delivery person-

"I want to tell you that these people are not robots. They are also someone's father, husband, brother, or son. The House should think about them. And the cruelty of this 10-minute delivery should end"

nel are not robots, but individuals who are someone's father, husband, brother or son. "I want to tell you that these people are not robots. They



are also someone's father, husband, brother, or son. The House should think about them. And the cruelty of this 10-minute delivery should end," he said.

The AAP leader said while consumers hope their food reaches them in 10 minutes, the House should also think about the welfare of gig workers. Chadha described delivery personnel working for platforms like Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, Zepto, ride-hailing services such as Ola and Uber,

and home service providers as the "invisible wheels of the Indian economy".

"Every day we press a button on our mobile phone app and get a notification that your order is on its way, order delivered, your ride has arrived. But behind this notification, there is often a person whom we do not acknowledge," he said. He noted that while quick commerce and instant delivery have helped companies achieve billion-dollar valuations and become

unicorns, the condition of gig workers remains worse than that of daily wage labourers.

Chadha highlighted three major challenges faced by gig workers: pressure of speed and delivery time, customer harassment, and hazardous working conditions.

On the dangerous trend of 10-minute delivery, he said workers are forced to over-speed and jump red lights, fearing rating drops, incentive cuts, app logouts and ID blocks. "A delivery boy stand-

ing on the red light keeps thinking that if he is late, the rating will fall, the incentive will be cut, the app will log out, and the ID will be blocked. That's why he over-speeds for a 10-minute delivery, jumps the red light and puts his life at stake," Chadha said. He said workers face constant fear of customer complaints, with even 5-7 minute delays resulting in scolding, threats and 1-star ratings that impact their entire monthly performance and earnings.

DTC reports Rs 658cr income between April and October

PURNA SINGH
NEW DELHI

THE Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) has reported a significant financial upturn in the current fiscal year, marking a steady recovery from earlier losses and reinforcing its role as a key pillar of Delhi's public transport network. Officials said the corporation has accelerated revenue generation while improving operational efficiency, reflecting the Delhi government's focus on strengthening public transport and ensuring responsible use of public funds. From April to October 2025, DTC recorded an average monthly income of Rs93.96 crore, a sharp increase from Rs68.54 crore during the same period in the previous financial year.

The growth, officials noted, underscores the government's renewed emphasis on improving services and last-mile connectivity.

Ticket income contributed Rs220.33 crore between April and October. Under the subsidy category for Pink Tickets, DTC received Rs235.56 crore, indicating the continued popularity of the free bus travel scheme for women, which aims to improve safety, mobility, and access to education and employment.

In the Special Hire segment, DTC generated Rs63.40 crore, while Rs36.38 crore came from the sale of passes. Miscellaneous income—including sale of scrap, interest earnings, advertisement fees, rental receipts, and penalties—added another Rs102.04 crore. Overall, DTC's total income for the seven-month period stood at Rs658 crore, reflecting steady financial progress. Transport Minister Pankaj Kumar Singh said the improved figures highlight the positive impact of ongoing efforts to strengthen public transport. He said the corporation's rising income and transparent operations demonstrate the administration's commitment to ensuring safe, affordable, and reliable mobility for all commuters. He added that the government will continue to support DTC's modernization initiatives.

Red Fort blast

COURT EXTENDS NIA CUSTODY OF SOYAB BY 10 DAYS

THE PROBE AGENCY PRODUCED SOYAB AT THE PATIALA HOUSE COURT AMID TIGHT SECURITY ON FRIDAY UPON THE EXPIRY OF HIS PREVIOUS 10-DAY CUSTODY

HANS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

A Delhi court on Friday extended the NIA custody of Soyab, a Faridabad resident accused of harbouring Red Fort bomber Umar-un-Nabi, for 10 more days.

The probe agency produced Soyab at the Patiala House Court amid tight security on Friday upon the expiry of his previous 10-day custody, which was granted on November 26.

Media persons were barred from covering the proceedings.

The accused was produced before Principal and Sessions Judge Anju Bajaj Chandra



who allowed the probe agency to interrogate Soyab for 10 more days.

Court sources said that the federal agency sought 10 more days of custodial inter-

rogation of the accused.

An official spokesperson for the National Investigation Agency (NIA) had said the agency arrested Soyab, a resident of Dhauj in Hary-

ana's Faridabad, for allegedly providing logistical support to "terrorist Umar-un-Nabi" before the Delhi terror bomb blast.

Soyab is the seventh accused arrested by the NIA in the case, which is linked to a "white-collar" terror module busted by the Jammu and Kashmir Police.

"The agency continues to pursue various leads in connection with the suicide bombing, and has been conducting searches across states in coordination with the respective police forces in a bid to identify and track others involved in the gruesome attack," the NIA previously said in a statement.

Car driver killed by drunk youth over urinating tiff

HANS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

A 27-year-old car driver was allegedly stabbed to death by a group of youths, who were inebriated, after a heated altercation over urinating near a public lavatory in southeast Delhi's Bhogal, police said on Friday.

The blind murder, reported under the Barapala flyover on Wednesday morning, was solved with the arrest of the prime accused, identified as 19-year-old Imran alias Panwadi, and the apprehension of three minors, they said.

Police said a PCR call was received early on December 3 after the body of an unidentified man was found near Hazrat Nizamuddin Railway Station. The deceased was later identified as Kuldeep alias Ram Singh, a resident of Ayodhya district in Uttar Pradesh.

A case under Section 103(1) (Murder) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita



was registered. Investigators scoured over 500 CCTV cameras in the vicinity. A crucial footage from a camera installed near a lavatory close to Jain Mandir, Bhogal, provided the first breakthrough. Using this, along with technical surveillance and human intelligence, police identified the suspects.

Imran, who is involved in three previous snatchings and their cases, was arrested along with three minors connected to the incident, police said.

During interrogation, they

allegedly revealed that they had been celebrating Imran's birthday and were heading towards India Gate for a night out when they encountered the victim. An argument broke out over urinating in the area, which quickly escalated. In an inebriated state, the group allegedly attacked the man with a knife, killing him on the spot, an officer said.

The accused fled with the victim's car, which has since been recovered along with blood-stained clothes and the weapon of offence.

Rahul not allowed to meet visiting foreign leaders: Cong

HANS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

A fresh political confrontation erupted on Friday, a day after Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi said the Modi government does not allow him to meet visiting foreign leaders. His remarks on Thursday led the Ministry of External Affairs to issue a detailed list of his past interactions with foreign dignitaries in an attempt to counter his claim.

Soon after the MEA's response, Congress levelled a new allegation against the Centre. According to party sources, Rahul Gandhi was not invited to a recent dinner organised at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Congress leaders said this was not the first time such a slight had occurred, and accused the government of repeatedly sidelining the Leader of the Opposition in official events. They said he had also been excluded from the banquet hosted during the visit of the President of Chile.

Congress claimed the government's approach



goes beyond protocol lapses. Party sources alleged that while nearly 37 heads of state have visited India so far, Rahul Gandhi has been able to meet only four of them, despite his constitutional position. The party said the Centre's actions undermine democratic norms and amount to an insult to both the Opposition and the public.

On Thursday, Rahul Gandhi had stated that the government deliberately prevents foreign leaders from meeting him, adding that such restrictions weaken India's democratic traditions. The MEA's publication of his previous meetings prompted Congress to respond strongly, accusing the government of withholding invitations to official events hosted by the President.

DGCA CHIEF SEEKS COOPERATION OF PILOTS TO ENSURE SMOOTH FLIGHT OPS

HANS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI

Aviation regulator DGCA's chief Faiz Ahmed Kidwai on Friday requested the cooperation of all pilots to ensure smooth flight operations amid massive IndiGo flight disruptions.

In an appeal, the Director General said that in light of the current IndiGo flight disruptions due to operational constraints, unpredictable weather patterns and rising seasonal demand, the aviation sector is experiencing significant strain.

He noted that these dis-



ruptions have led to delays, passenger inconvenience, and increased pressure on airline operations.

"As we now approach the fog season, the peak holiday period, and the marriage travel season, it is crucial that the industry prepares for even greater operational

challenges. "Passenger volumes are expected to rise sharply, and weather-related impacts may further complicate scheduling and flight safety," Kidwai said.

Given this situation, he has requested the full cooperation of all pilot bodies, associations, and pilots

across India to maintain stable, smooth flight operations during this busy, weather-sensitive period and to reduce avoidable delays and cancellations.

He also emphasised the need to strengthen coordination between pilots and airlines to proactively and safely manage the situation.

Amid concerns in certain quarters about relaxing Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) norms, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) said it is "committed for safety and implementation of FDTL CAR in letter and spirit".

Bansuri immerses father's ashes

HANS NEWS SERVICE
HAPUR

A day after the cremation of former Mizoram governor and senior advocate Bansuri Kaushal, his daughter and BJP MP Bansuri Swaraj immersed his ashes in the Ganga at Brighat here on Friday morning, with family members and well-wishers joining the solemn ceremony. Bansuri Swaraj arrived at Brighat in Uttar Pradesh's Hapur

with close relatives to perform the 'asthi visarjan' (immersion of ashes) as per Hindu rituals. With moist eyes, the BJP MP carried out the rites for her father as priests conducted the traditional prayers. Local public representatives, along with police and administrative officials, also reached the ghat and paid their respects.

Administration officials said the ceremony remained peaceful and was completed with full religious observance.



TN police bus, car gutted in fire after collision

HANS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

A Tamil Nadu Police bus and a car were completely gutted after the vehicles caught fire following a collision near Delhi Haat in Jalandhri on Friday morning, police said. No casualty was reported in the incident, they said.

A PCR call was received around 11.38 am, reporting that a bus had caught fire near the popular marketplace. Police personnel reached the spot and found a Tamil Nadu Police bus and a car in a charred condition, an officer said. Preliminary inquiry revealed that the car had rammed the police bus from behind, following which both vehicles caught fire. However, the cause of the blaze is yet to be determined, the officer said. According to the officials, all occupants managed to escape safely but fire had fully engulfed both vehicles by the time responders arrived.

COVER DEPICTS HER SMOKING

SC rejects plea for prohibiting sale of Arundhati Roy's book

HANS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI

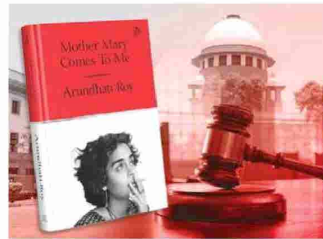
THE Supreme Court on Friday dismissed a plea seeking to prohibit the sale, circulation, and display of Arundhati Roy's book, 'Mother Mary Comes to Me', as its cover depicted her smoking a 'bidhi' or a cigarette, which is in contravention of the law.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joydham Bagchi dis-

"She is a renowned author. She has not promoted such a thing. There is a warning in the book, and she is a prominent person as well. Why do such a thing for publicity? There is no hoarding in the city with the picture of the book. It is for someone who will take the book and read it. Her picture with it does not portray any such thing"

missed the appeal filed by one Rajasimhan against the Kerala High Court order dismissing a PIL on the issue. "She is a renowned author. She has not promoted such a thing. There is a warning in the book, and she is a promi-

nent person as well. Why do such a thing for publicity? There is no hoarding in the city with the picture of the book. It is for someone who will take the book and read it. Her picture with it does not portray any such thing,"



the CJ said. The bench said that the author and the publisher Penguin Hamish Hamilton have not violated Section 5 of the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003.

This provision prohibits the advertisement, promotion, and sponsorship of cigarettes and other tobacco products, "banning direct

ads, surrogate ads, promoting through media, displays, leaflets, and any activity suggesting tobacco use, with strict penalties."

It, however, allows health warnings on packages and some specific retail point displays. "We see no reason to interfere with the impugned High Court order," the CJ said.

The counsel for the petitioner said, "We don't know it's a 'ganja beedi' or a 'normal beedi'. She is herself

shown smoking it."

He added that the book has a very small disclaimer and does not contain a prominent warning as provided under the law.

"Book, publisher or author has nothing to do with advertising for cigarettes etc. This is not an advertisement. You may disagree with the views of the author... but that does not mean such a case can lie," the CJ said. The book is a memoir authored by Roy.

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Mid-tier IT firms adapt well as adoption of AI increases

MID-TIER IT companies are mopping the ante as the technology world moves towards the AI era. When the generative AI era began with the public launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT, commentators were sceptical about its disruptive impact on the Indian IT industry. Negative commentary emerged regarding mid-tier IT firms' ability to withstand such disruption. Many opined that this era would favour bigger players because of its magnitude. And mid-tier and small companies would see a significant portion of their business vanishing in the coming years. As we are on the verge of entering 2026, all those doomsday predictions seem to have been thrown asunder. Mid-tier IT firms have not only survived

the ongoing AI-led developments, but many are also thriving. Some even are giving stiff challenges to their larger contemporaries by bagging massive deals. No wonder, the growth rate of many of them have outpaced the larger ones, all over again. In the second quarter of the current financial year, companies like Persistent Systems and Coforge have emerged as the fastest growing players with an average growth rate that is twice that of the industry. Coforge recorded a revenue growth rate of 26.6 per cent year-on-year, while Persistent Systems posted a growth rate of 17.6 per cent during Q2 of the current financial year. Similarly, Mphasis' revenue grew 10.34 per cent during the second quarter. Many others have achieved

revenue growth rate that is higher than their larger counterparts.

These figures indicate that mid-tier IT firms are adopting the new AI world quite well. A deep dive into the strategies of these companies show that they have some distinct focus areas in the AI space, which is serving them well. Firstly, mid-tier IT firms have been building their capabilities in certain specific areas. Unlike large companies, the approach of mid-tier IT firms is to be strong in some technology areas belonging to a sector. Such specialisation is prompting them to develop AI-powered solutions in that domain. Clients are preferring players, who have depth in areas that are relevant to their operations. In this way, mid-tier IT firms can com-

pete with their larger counterparts. Secondly, they are providing better manpower to clients, ensuring superior project delivery and faster turnaround. Large IT firms usually follow the pyramid approach as far as staffing for IT projects is concerned. It implies that there are several juniors at the bottom, mid-level staffers in the middle and some seniors on the top. In this way, big IT firms can get a sound margin. However, such a pyramid structure is generally not followed by mid-tier IT firms. They employ more mid-level or experienced staffers for project delivery as freshers' intake by mid-level companies is not much compared to big IT services companies. When more experienced hands are deployed in a project,

the delivery quality is generally higher. This difference in quality of staffers is attracting enterprises to work with mid-tier IT firms than big ones. Last but not the least, Indian mid-level IT services companies have been aggressive in the M&A space since last year. Many are aggressively acquiring companies to build capabilities. Such capacity building through acquisition is helping them to develop their platforms and solutions in a customised manner for clients. During the second quarter, the deal pipeline of mid-tier IT companies has been robust, reflecting that these strategies are working well. As AI makes deep inroads, there should be no doubt about growth prospects of mid-tier IT companies in coming quarters.

LETTERS

Oppn must play constructive role

THIS is further to your Dec 5 editorial 'The Sanchar Saathi episode, which hurt govt and nation, was avoidable. When government and opposition are at loggerheads over every genuine issue, the former rushing to ask manufacturers of mobile handsets to pre-install the App 'Sanchar Saathi' on smartphones drawing opposition's outrage cannot be faulted. Despite it being a citizen protection tool against frauds, the opposition has exaggerated the issue by accusing the government of trying to plant surveillance tools in each house. It is time they shed the shallow theatrics and instead demand transparency and accountability in any digital initiative at a time when digital fraud has become an overwhelmingly painful threat to the gullible people.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad-3

The tool to trap saga of mobile phones

THIS refers to 'The Sanchar Saathi episode which hurt the Government and the nation, was avoidable' (THI Dec 5). Mobile phones were once used only for calls and SMS. Today, they are wallets, cameras, TVs, and tools for almost every activity. Because of this change, people have become more sensitive about what is inside their phones. Any mandatory preloaded app raises doubts about privacy, surveillance, and cyber fraud. The Sanchar Saathi episode showed this clearly. The government wanted to preload the app to help block stolen phones and report fraud. Technically useful, it was politically misunderstood as forced surveillance. Opposition parties resisted, manufacturers objected, and finally the order was rolled back. But the episode deepened fears that mobile phones could be preloaded with apps that might trap users through digital arrests or financial frauds. Since mobiles are now widely used for financial transactions, identity, and private data, people see forced apps as a threat to safe use. The lesson is clear: transparency, user choice, and privacy protection matter more than technical efficiency.

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Humans or AI?

THIS has reference to the article 'AI and existential threat to humans'. Human intelligence has been in use all through human evolution. Today, AI is in an experimental stage in India. However, the propaganda and publicity bombardment is confusing the people. Our country has a maximum number of illiterates, who can neither read nor write; many villages have no schools, while many institutions that exist are devoid of basic facilities like libraries, laboratories, toilets, and playgrounds. On their part, parents pay full attention to their children's education, irrespective of their incomes and positions. With smartphone craze catching up among school-going children, creativity is vanishing when there is a need for innovation with solution-based ideas. One hopes that India continues to prosper with the aid of human intelligence and not depend on AI, which is a costly affair.

G Murali Mohana Rao, Secunderabad-11

Put AI in its place

A PROPOS 'AI & existential threat to humans' (THI Dec 5). The accelerating development of artificial intelligence comes at the cost of a loss in humanity, this is not just done through ill-effects, but 'misused' artists' crafted through complex code, and 'romantic partners' designed to respond in just the right way. Following the trend of a dangerous decline in standards for what we allow as consumers must not just be fought with regaining our humanity but by also actively denouncing AI as an in one must reshape the next decade.

Krystel Rodrigues, Bengaluru-1

Build the kind of society we wish for

A PROPOS the article, 'AI & existential threat to humans' (DEC 5), the article rightly highlights how rapidly artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping not just work but the texture of human relationships and behaviour. As machines become more capable, we seem to be drifting towards a narrower, efficiency-driven way of living that sidelines empathy, reflection, and shared responsibility. The worry is not merely technological disruption but a gradual erosion of qualities that make social life meaningful. Yet this transition need not be bleak. If governments, institutions, and industry place equal value on emotional competence, ethical design, and humane leadership—rather than only on speed and output—we can integrate AI without weakening our social fabric. Safeguarding humanity's core strengths is not an anti-technology stance but a long-term investment in the kind of society we want to build.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

IndiGo flight cancellation leaves newlyweds stranded

HUBBALLI: In a rare and unexpected turn of events, a wedding reception in Hubballi took place without the bride and groom, forcing the bride's parents to sit on the couple's chairs and receive blessings from guests. The bizarre incident unfolded at Gujarat Bhavan on Wednesday and was triggered by the nationwide disruption of IndiGo flight operations. The reception was organised for newlyweds Medha Kshirsagar and Sangam Das, who were married on November 23 in Bhubaneswar. The couple had planned to reach Hubballi via Bengaluru on December 2, for their grand reception scheduled at Gujarat Bhavan. Relatives travelling from Bhubaneswar had booked tickets on two different routes Bhubaneswar-Bengaluru-Hubballi and Bhubaneswar-Mumbai-Hubballi. However, trouble began early on December 2 when IndiGo flights across the country experienced massive delays and cancellations. By 9 am on December 2, several IndiGo flights were disrupted. The flight the couple was supposed to take from Bhubaneswar was initially delayed to the early hours of December 3—between 4 am and 5 am. Believing they would still be able to make it, the couple decided not to look for alternative travel arrangements.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

When IndiGo crashed, the government didn't even try to take-off



between the country's largest airline and its regulator.

A national failure, and national silence

For four days straight, India's civil aviation sector has witnessed one of the worst breakdowns in its history. Passengers travelling on IndiGo flights have endured what can only be described as a nightmare—abandoned at airports, stranded and left without food, water, information, or even basic human courtesy.

What unfolded was not merely a technical snag or operational glitch; it was a colossal human rights failure in full public view. Yet the airline responsible for the chaos continued with its templated apologies, the government remained a mute spectator, and the very institutions meant to protect citizens from corporate high-handedness simply looked the other way.

The crisis has all the signs of a match-fixing deal between IndiGo and the government, culminating in the hasty withdrawal of the new FDTL norms—after passengers suffered for nearly 96 hours. If the rules were so wrong, why did the government wait until thousands of Indians spent 15–20 hours in airports, lost money, missed events, starved, and endured severe anxiety? If the rules were necessary, why withdraw them under pressure? Either way, the collapse of both governance and airline accountability is complete.

This is a fit case where the Union Civil Aviation Minister must resign. He failed to ensure a smooth transition to the new regulations, buckled under corporate pressure, and allowed the public to become collateral damage in a power tussle between

The most shameful part of this ordeal is not just IndiGo's incompetence or government's paralysis; it is also the utter silence of those who otherwise posture as guardians of civil liberties. Human rights activists who rush to the Supreme Court at midnight over selective causes had nothing to say when thousands of ordinary Indians—senior citizens, women, and children—were suffering in airports. The opposition that claims to represent people's voices did not demand accountability, compensation, or even a basic inquiry. Not one of them demanded that IndiGo pay at least ₹4 lakh compensation to each affected passenger, despite the scale of trauma that was inflicted on them. Because air travellers, unlike many other groups, are not an organised voting bloc—their suffering is politically irrelevant.

Corporate arrogance without consequence

What makes this worse is the sheer hypocrisy of these large corporates. Airlines and corporates that routinely file civil and criminal defamation suits worth ₹50 crore against media houses for minor discomforts to their 'reputation' suddenly see no obligation to compensate passengers whose lives they upended. A casual 'sorry for the inconvenience' is apparently deemed sufficient atonement for forcing families to spend 20 hours on airport floors, making senior citizens stand for 40 minutes, and leaving travellers hungry in airports where even a dust costs ₹30.

If these corporates thrive because of the passengers who fill their seats, then they owe those passengers accountability—not excuses.



The Union government cannot distance itself from this disaster. It should immediately take up the matter through an adjournment motion in

Parliament, place all facts before the public without sugar-coating, and issue an unqualified apology and pay compensation. More importantly, the Civil Aviation Minister should resign—not because resignation is a punishment, but because it is the only way to restore credibility. His stepping down after explaining the sequence of lapses in Parliament would elevate his dignity, not diminish it.

Govt failure is even bigger

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Monopoly, duopoly and a manufactured crisis

This entire episode reeks of IndiGo-manufactured pressure tactics. The airline failed spectacularly in preparing new FDTL rules or deliberately created chaos to strong-arm the government into reversing them. Either way, it proves the dangers of monopoly and

duopoly in Indian aviation. All other smaller players implemented the new rules, and they did not face any disruptions.

When one airline operates 2,300 flights a day—a scale no competitor comes close to—it becomes powerful enough to bend rules, influence decisions, and hold the entire nation hostage.

My own experience of IndiGo's callousness

I speak not merely as an observer but as a victim. I personally waited 10 hours at Mumbai airport—without water, without information, without a single IndiGo staffer offering basic assistance. Several others were stranded for 15–20 hours, many of them unable to afford overpriced airport food.

Not everyone can spend ₹250 on coffee and ₹350 on a snack every few hours.

IndiGo's behaviour bordered on cruelty. Flight 6E 5213 (Hyderabad): Delayed by 7 hours. Flight 6E 6712 (Ahmedabad):

Mumbai): Passengers made to stand 40 minutes in the boarding line; delayed 2+ hours; not even a free meal served. Flight 5189 (Mumbai-Ahmedabad): Ordered only after passengers staged a drama and blocked boarding for a Bengaluru flight that was being prioritised. At 3:45 am, passengers were served a tasteless biryani, as if that solved anything. On the actual flight, not even coffee was provided.

Is this customer service or mockery?

Profiteering on people's misery

While IndiGo imploded, other airlines and hotels smelled opportunity. Instead of helping stranded citizens, they looted them. The ticket rates were hiked showing absolute love only for money not humanity. The fare for Mumbai-Kolkata was ₹70,000. Delhi-Chennai (Air India): ₹58,000. Delhi-Bengaluru: ₹51,000. Hyderabad-Delhi (Air India): ₹47,000. Mumbai-Kolkata (SpiceJet): ₹75,000. Akasa, Delhi-Bengaluru: ₹40,000.

For this kind of money, one can book an international flight to the US. There was a case where the bridegroom and the bride were over 100 passengers suffered as their flight was cancelled. Hotels near the airport—normally charging ₹8,000–₹15,000—hiked rates to ₹25,000–₹30,000. Five-star hotels charged ₹30,000–₹45,000. All while many Indians were already suffering due to government failure and airline mismanagement.

The DGCA, aviation ministry, and airport authorities showed no urgency. Parking bays got choked because IndiGo's grounded aircraft clogged the system, affecting even unaffected airlines. National skiing teams got stranded in Chennai. Mumbai-Chennai flights were cancelled in bulk.

Centre must walk the talk

The Prime Minister often says people wearing hawai chappals should also fly. Yet when those very people were humiliated, starved, stranded, and financially exploited, the government looked the other way. This is not walking the talk; this is abandoning the talk altogether. If the government truly wants to protect passengers, it must: Enforce strict penalties for operational negligence; break the monopoly-duopoly structure in aviation; prioritise passengers—not corporates—in its regulations and ensure transparent communication before, during, and after crises.

A crisis that exposed everything

This was not weather-related. Not an act of God. Not an unavoidable glitch. This was IndiGo-made chaos, enabled by a compliant government and silent regulators.

If IndiGo and the Ministry of Civil Aviation do not act with transparency, accountability, and a defined roadmap for recovery, the airline may still run its 2,300 flights a day—but the trust of Indian passengers, once broken, will take far longer to take off again.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

Wings of change: India's airport boom from 74 to 157 in a decade

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

In the vast expanse of India's skies, a quiet revolution has taken flight. Just a decade ago, in 2014, the country operated a modest network of 74 airports, many of them relics from the pre liberalization era, serving only a fraction of its burgeoning population. Fast forward to 2024, and that figure has more than doubled to 157 operational airports—a remarkable 128% increase that has stitched together remote hamlets with bustling metros, democratized air travel, and propelled India into the ranks of the world's largest aviation markets. This transformation isn't mere infrastructure expansion; it is a testament to visionary policymaking, beginning with the National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP) of 2016, spearheaded by then Union Civil Aviation Minister Shri Ashok Gajapati Raju, now the Governor of Goa. Coupled with the flagship UDAN (Ude Desh Ka Aam Naaik) initiative and its Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS), these reforms have not only revived dormant airstrips but also ignited economic engines across the nation.

A policy poised for takeoff

When Narendra Modi assumed office as Prime Minister in 2014—marking the first of his three terms—the aviation sector was in urgent need of reform. High operational costs, limited connectivity, and skewed market structures were holding back growth. Shri Ashok Gajapati Raju, appointed Civil Aviation Minister in May 2014, brought a pragmatic and grounded approach to a ministry often characterized by turbulence.

On June 15, 2016, Raju unveiled the National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP) 2016, calling it a "game changer" that would position India among the world's top aviation markets. The policy introduced several transformative reforms: easing

foreign direct investment (FDI) norms to 100% in greenfield airports and 74% in brownfield airports; relaxing the long debated 5/20 rule that had restricted new airlines from international operations; and mandating that airlines allocate a portion of their seats for regional connectivity. Most importantly, NCAP 2016 created the RCS UDAN framework, aimed at connecting underserved regions by providing viability gap funding (VGF) and capping airfares at affordable levels.

Raju's tenure, which continued until 2018, laid the runway for India's aviation surge. Under his leadership, the policy shifted attention from elite metropolitan hubs to inclusive regional networks, approving new airports and modernizing many underutilized airstrips. "The sector is poised to become one of the largest in the world," he said during the launch—an aspiration that has since become reality.

UDAN—bridging the skies for the people

The crown jewel of NCAP 2016, UDAN, launched in October 2017, operationalized regional connectivity with unprecedented vigor. At its inception, a large majority of India's 400 plus airstrips were either dormant or severely underused. Since then, UDAN has activated hundreds of routes, connecting dozens of unserved and underserved airports and ferrying millions of passengers to destinations previously considered inaccessible.

UDAN is not just about connectivity—it is about equity. Remote regions such as Imphal in Arunachal Pradesh, Palyong in Sikkim, or Dibrugarh in Assam, once isolated, now enjoy regular commercial flights. By subsidizing losses on regional routes, the scheme has encouraged airlines to expand beyond metros and cater to Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. As a result, passenger traffic at regional airports has surged dramatically, and



domestic flyers have crossed historic records. Under the government's continued push, projections indicate India may have 350–400 airports by 2047, including multiple mega hubs. India, now the world's third largest domestic aviation market, handled hundreds of millions of passengers in FY2024—reflecting both rising aspirations and improved accessibility.

Cargo skies: Freight on the rise

The airport boom has also transformed cargo operations, which serve as a vital artery for India's export-driven economy. Air cargo throughput has grown consistently over the past decade, supported by expanded freight terminals in major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai. The ripple effects of UDAN have extended to cold chain logistics, enabling farmers and small industries in remote regions to reach global markets more efficiently.

This growth aligns with NCAP's emphasis on integrated cargo hubs and streamlined operations. Perishables, pharmaceuticals, and high-value goods now reach destinations faster, enhancing India's competitiveness in global trade.

Economic tailwinds: A multiplier effect

The true impact of this aviation expansion lies

in its economic multiplier. Each new airport sparks a cascade of economic activity—direct employment in aviation, along with indirect growth in tourism, hospitality, retail, and real estate. Tourism heavy destinations such as Ladakh have witnessed significant increases in footfall after improved air access, while property values near new airports have been appreciated substantially.

Aviation contributes significantly to India's GDP, and with continued investment, the sector is projected to support millions of jobs by 2047. Regional disparities are narrowing as connectivity boosts local economies, fosters MSMEs, and integrates remote regions into national markets.

While challenges remain—such as airline financial stress and environmental considerations—the adaptive nature of policy making, including greener aviation initiatives, offers pathways for sustainable growth.

Horizon bound: A legacy in flight

Ashok Gajapati Raju's 2016 policy, strengthened by UDAN and sustained by the government's continued commitment, has rewritten India's aviation story—from 74 isolated airstrips to a thriving network of 157 and growing. With passenger numbers rising and cargo operations expanding, the economic dividends are profound. As Governor of Goa, Raju can look upon developments like the Mopa Airport with pride, knowing that his blueprint continues to fuel India's aviation ascent.

In the years ahead, India's skies beckon even bolder ambitions: 220 plus airports by 2035 and a future where connectivity becomes a defining pillar of a developed, Viksit Bharat.

(The writer served as OSD to the former Civil Aviation Minister)

comment

THOUGHT
FOR THE DAY

Cleanliness is the Hallmark of perfect standards and the best quality inspector is the conscience — JRD Tata, industrialist, philanthropist, aviator

Every exam centre must pass the cleanliness test

In the week following the 2025 bar exam, the Bombay City Lawyer Group raised concerns regarding the examination centres, calling them unfit, inaccessible, and unhygienic, according to a mid-day report. The All India Bar Examination took place on November 30, with students appearing for the annual exam across centres located in Nalasopara, Vasai, Thane, Mumbai, and Navi Mumbai.

According to the lawyers' group,

the examination centres were overcrowded and poorly ventilated, and had broken benches. No drinking water and non-functional, broken washrooms compounded problems. There were uncomfortable benches and one student said that their class had no fans or lights. The washrooms were unhygienic, and the space where students were supposed to keep their bags had garbage, one examinee said.

Every exam centre must be in-

spected prior to be selected as a centre by relevant authorities. Such venues must tick certain boxes. Sufficient lighting is a must, and fans are necessary. The structure cannot be dilapidated.

Good, clean washrooms and drinking water facilities should be a given. We cannot have students using unclean washrooms and suffering health consequences. Every classroom must be clean, so that examinees enter a sanitary environ-

ment. The place must be accessible, so that those taking the exam and invigilators are able to reach the venue without hardship. The commute may take a while but it must be as smooth as possible. Seating has to be adequate. One cannot have adult examinees told to squeeze into little children's benches. The feasibility and viability of centres must be checked before they earn exam centre status. Pass the test first before examinees sit for their tests.

LETTERS

Govt needs to end IndiGo crisis at the earliest

This refers to 'Indi-No-Go!'. The aviation sector is in a mess, and passengers paying high fares suffer due to no accountability. DGCA SOPs exist, but stay on paper because travellers don't know their rights. The government must step in and bring more players so Air India and IndiGo face real competition.

SUDHAKAR SHENOY

Politics shouldn't come in the way of progress

This refers to 'Commuters vs slum dwellers!'. Jitendra Awhad should be barred from politics and jailed for delaying an infrastructure project that could save lives. You cannot stop work and risk people's safety to protect a votebank.

SHRIKANTH DASARI

Looking down while walking will keep one safe

This refers to 'Mind that gap... still'. Dina Desai's injury from a broken gutter lid shows civic neglect. Her advice to "look down while walking" is important. Citizens must stay cautious, report hazards, and authorities must barricade danger spots and act promptly.

AMIT BANERJEE

Paparazzi must respect celebrities' boundaries

This refers to 'Not okay for privileged to insult us'. Paparazzi and film stars depend on each other; intrusion isn't ideal, but coexistence is necessary.

BAL GOVIND

A Maha fall from grace

INSIDE
ANGLE

Sanjeev Shivadekar

Like it or not, local body elections in Maharashtra make one feel like the state is drifting toward some kind of "Jungle Raj". The warning signs are too loud to ignore, even if some political parties or leaders might pretend otherwise.

A state once held up as a model in governance is now being compared to Bihar and not in a good way. The cash, chaos, and controversy in the recent local body polls have earned Maharashtra a dubious distinction.

Things are so bad that a woman candidate needed police protection just to file her nomination papers. She walked in with nearly half-a-dozen armed guards to complete the basic nomination filing procedures. Another candidate required a security squad to simply submit a form for a process that ideally should have been a routine one. This scene looked less like Maharashtra and reminded many of Bihar.

In some interior areas of Maharashtra, polling booths resembled battlefields with scenes like armed guards flanking candidates and shouting party workers blocking entrances.

At times it felt less like an election about "Roti, kapda, makaan and basic civic needs" and more like a scene from "Gangs of Wasseypur" — chaos everywhere and everyone fighting to prove they are the one in charge.

This contrast hurts because for years, Maharashtra was seen as a progressive and forward-looking state known for cooperative movements, industry and stable government. The state was always referred to as No. 1 and a role model for others.

Elections here were usually smooth and predictable. But, many people feel the situation has slipped badly. The comparison with Bihar is stark. Last month, polling in that state was relatively peaceful with no deaths, re-polling, or reports of major violence. Meanwhile, Maharashtra's local body elections kept making

For years, Maharashtra had been held up as a model in governance, but the recent chaos during local polls and displays of defiance by Mahayuti constituents has seen it rapidly devolve into 'Jungle Raj'



Screengrab of the viral video of MLA Nilesh Rane pointing to the bag of cash that he alleges BJP used to sway voters in Malvan



headlines for all the wrong reasons.

And the chaos did not stop after voting. After EVMs were shifted to the strong room, political party workers in some areas were seen creating a ruckus near the storage facilities meant to secure the machine until December 21, the vote counting day.

There were even complaints about attempts at bogus voting, though it was foiled in time. Likewise, allegations of cash being found before and even on the polling day, fights near booths and even one furious voter smashing an EVM were reported from ground zero.

The situation worsened with a last-minute decision to defer polling in some areas from December 2 to December 20, with counting for all local elections to be postponed to December 21.

Adding to the chaos was the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, a key ally in the so-called "Triple Engine Sarkar". As per media reports, one Shinde camp MLA was accused of violating the election code of conduct. Another Shinde Sena MLA openly accused BJP of using money power. So was the case with the BJP and Ajit Pawar-

led NCP workers. In many areas Mahayuti leaders and workers were seen blaming each other.

On their own, each incident might look like a minor Election Day problem. Taken together, these incidents meant to deeper problems in the system and society. Clearly it is telling a much more worrying story.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, too, acknowledged that these incidents reflected a failure of the system, a rare and serious admission of how badly things have slipped.

The mood on the ground and the outcome of the latest elections has only strengthened the feeling that when it comes to peaceful elections, nowadays Bihar is a better place than Maharashtra.

Local body elections are often seen as mini assembly polls. The entire unfolding of events reveals the state's underlying political currents and hints at where governance is actually progressing.

The ongoing situation also brings back memories of a time when the officers and ministers prioritised discipline and reputation over short-term gains. Personalities like Julio Riberio

in the police department, TN Seshan in the Election Commission and ministers (former chief minister) like Yeshwantrao Chavan stood out for their uncompromising commitment to rules and integrity. Unfortunately, today, society lacks such officials and politicians.

But, for this deteriorating situation one party alone cannot be blamed. Both ruling and Opposition share responsibility. Over the years, weak alliances, coalition with parties of contrast ideology and lack of accountability has contributed to the current unhealthy situation in the state.

In fact, instead of fierce battle and rebuttals, the Opposition lowering the guard was the primary reason that infighting was seen within the allies, Shinde-led Shiv Sena, BJP and Ajit Pawar's NCP.

Before we talk about building smart cities, the first priority should be to set our own house in order. Clean up local governance, ensure transparency and strengthen civic systems.

Smart cities are not just about technology, infrastructure, they require free and fair democratic process and more importantly accountable leadership. Only then can dreams of smart cities move beyond slogans to real progress.

Democracy needs ballots and rules, not muscle and mayhem

And, Maharashtra can no longer afford to treat these warning signs lightly. The state's democracy and institutions deserve urgent attention before the next election cycle. After all, the worry is not just about one election or few incidents of law and order issues, it's about the future of democracy and more of Maharashtra regaining its tag of peaceful, forward looking role model state.

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OUTOFLINE

ON ARTISTIC TRANSGRESSION AND URBAN CHAOS



Anish Gawande

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Finding a place in the middle

On the 33rd anniversary of Babri, Mumbai must remember the courage of the years that followed, especially when the volume of hatred around us feels deafening

I went to St George's Cathedral in Cape Town on Thursday — where Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached, organised, resisted, prayed — and, for the first time in many months, I cried.

It was unexpected. Nothing dramatic had happened that morning. But perhaps it was the symbolic weight of that cathedral, its history rooting itself in a struggle that would transform South Africa. Perhaps it was the residue of a week spent in difficult conversations about leadership in a polarised world at the Global Fellowships Forum at the Mandela Rhodes Foundation. Perhaps it was simply exhaustion, the kind that accumulates quietly until it finds the softest spot in the heart and breaks it open.

I found myself in a room where the archbishop's voice still lingers, reminding visitors of the slow, stubborn work of repairing a broken society. Tutu had been deeply shaped by Gandhi; he believed that justice could be fierce without being vengeful, that dignity could be protected without demanding retribution. His philosophy echoed across the cathedral: "When we oppress others, we end up oppressing ourselves. All our humanity is dependent upon recognising the humanity in others."

I had always admired Tutu as a global moral compass. But standing there, after yet another year of crises — global, national, personal — the clarity of his compassion struck with new force. This was not naïveté. It was moral courage.

As this column reaches your home, we wake up to the 33rd anniversary of the demolition of the

Babri Masjid. Every year, the date arrives like an ache. It reminds us of a wound carved not only into the walls of a mosque, but into the soul of a nation. In the months that followed, Mumbai burned. Over 900 people were killed. Neighbourhoods were gutted. Trust, the quiet glue that holds a city together, was shattered. It would have been easy for Mumbai to retreat into bitterness, to harden into communal suspicion. But the city chose something else. Just as the walls of apartheid were crumbling thousands of kilometres away in South Africa, Mumbai chose precisely the moral courage that had joined our two countries together in an invisible thread for decades.

Out of the grief arose the Mohalla Committees. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, Sikhs, Jains — neighbours who had once crossed the street to avoid one another — began to sit in the same rooms, share the same anxieties, rebuild the same fragile threads of community. Sushobha Barve helped imagine these spaces. Julio Ribeiro supported them, stalwarts like Bhau Korde and Waqar Khan brought them alive in Dharavi, and countless residents across neighbourhoods worked to keep them functioning. Even the art world played a role — people like Kekoo Gandhi lent their support, recognising that culture must be part of any project of repair.

And the committees worked. When Dawood Ibrahim orchestrated the bomb blasts that followed, the



The Babri demolition: A wound carved into the soul of the nation

city did not descend into retaliatory violence. Mumbai held its breath and then held its ground. There has not been a communal riot in this city since.

It is worth remembering this today, when the volume of hatred around us feels deafening. When

television panels and political speeches insist on dividing us. When the digital world rewards outrage and erases nuance. When the temptation to believe that we are entirely right and they are entirely wrong feels stronger with every passing week.

During my time in South Africa, I found two prayers that have stayed with me, not because I am particularly religious, but because they speak to the fragility and possibility of being human. Because they remind me of the importance, and the power, of holding space for that moral courage. The first, by Cape Town-based singer Boskasele:

*"You please your ego and sanity
By controlling and hurting me
But it's you that's losing control."*

The second, from Archbishop Tutu:

*"Is there a place where we can meet?
You and me.
The place in the middle,
The no man's land,
Where we straddle the lines,
Where you are right
And I am right too,
And both of us are wrong and
wronged?"*

Those lines feel like a map — not to utopia, but to the hard, necessary work of living together in a city as complex and beautiful as ours.

On this anniversary of Babri, I hope Mumbai remembers not only the violence of that winter, but the courage of the years that followed. The tenderness with which ordinary people built trust again. The refusal to give up on coexistence. The stubborn insistence that love — civic, communal, human — is more powerful than hate.

I hope we can find that "place in the middle" again. I hope we can meet there, bruised but willing, and choose, once more, to heal.

Anish Gawande is a writer and translator

THE PARENTPLAYBOOK

STRATEGIES FOR GROWING UP, TOGETHER



Piya Marker

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Out of control

As your child's brain develops, creating a semblance of predictability around their lives is key

Tantrums and meltdowns are not an indicator of bad parents or bad children. These are just ways in which parent and child grow. It is in these moments of utter frustration, total embarrassment and despair that we learn who we are as parents. How we respond determines our child's growth too. Whether it's a toddler kicking and screaming or a teenager yelling and banging doors, tantrums and meltdowns are not about defiance. They are about distress and dysregulation. Tantrums are simply large emotional outbursts that are caused by immature nervous systems having to handle

overwhelming feelings.

An undeveloped prefrontal cortex is the culprit. This part of brain development is responsible for emotional regulation, decision making and impulse control. It helps us pause before reacting, think through consequences, manage strong emotions, plan to make good choices and understand other people's perspectives. This is the last part of the brain to fully mature, completing its development in the mid-20s.

This means that young children and teenagers genuinely cannot think like adults when they are upset. So, do we simply understand

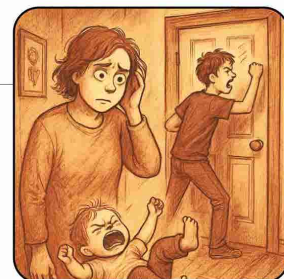
this and allow them to act in any way that they please? Definitely not.

Here's what we need to do. The first, most important step is to create predictability for your child. Predictability comes from routines, from consistency in rules and boundaries, but mostly from the way in which you respond to them, they need to know what to expect from you.

Always help them label their feelings. Teach them that no feelings are bad. Anger, disappointment, frustration, boredom, fear, jealousy are all OK. We need to learn how to express ourselves appropriately while we are having all these

feelings. Whether it's your teenager or a younger child, they both struggle to choose the appropriate response to these big feelings. Teach your teen that it's OK to be angry but not rude or disrespectful, it's OK to be jealous but not mean or nasty.

And for the little ones, it's OK to be angry but not snatch, scratch or hit. We must always remember to validate the feelings while we guide the behaviour. As soon as we do this, the child feels understood and safe to feel all those uncomfortable feelings. Every behaviour is triggered by a feeling. As parents, we need to be observant and intuitive to know that the storm is about to hit. When



we are prepared, we always respond better. So, work on developing the understanding of what your child's triggers are and plan to help them manage those triggers with healthy coping skills.

"Remember when a person is drowning, they don't need a swimming lesson, at that time all they need is a lifeguard!" —

Piya Marker is a parent coach and special educator

New rules to prevent hypertension deaths

Updated cardiovascular guidelines from leading US medical bodies call for stricter blood pressure control, routine kidney testing, home monitoring and personalised treatment



Leana S. Wen
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Nearly 120 million adults in the United States have hypertension, yet despite effective and accessible treatments, only a quarter have their blood pressure under control. This carries significant consequences: The condition, one of the leading causes of preventable death, is associated with heart attack, stroke, kidney disease and dementia.

In response to this stubborn problem, the American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology have updated their guidelines for diagnosing and managing high blood pressure, the first major revision since 2017. It's noteworthy because it represents broad consensus across the field, with endorsements from a dozen medical organisations including the American Medical Association.

Five changes stand out:

1 The definition of high blood pressure has stayed the same, but the treatment goal has changed.

The updated guidelines keep the same four categories that the 2017 recommendations used to classify people's blood pressure: normal, elevated, Stage 1 hypertension and Stage 2 hypertension. Those are based on two measurements — systolic pressure (the force produced by the heart when it pumps blood out to the body) and diastolic pressure (which measures the same force when the heart is at rest).

Normal blood pressure (measured by mercury-based barometers) is under 120 systolic and 80 diastolic (written 120/80). Elevated pressure is anywhere between 120–129/80–89. Stage 1 is anywhere between 130–139/80–89, and Stage 2

is anything higher than 140/90.

What's new is the treatment target. The guideline reaffirms the goal of lowering blood pressure to below 130/80, first introduced in 2017, but places stronger emphasis on achieving tighter control.

Clinicians are encouraged to help patients move towards a systolic level closer to 120, reflecting evidence that more intensive control can further reduce long-term cardiovascular risk.

2 Newly diagnosed patients should receive urine tests to assess their kidney health.

The guidelines now recommend that everyone newly diagnosed with hypertension should have a specific urine test measuring the protein albumin and a waste product called creatinine, which together can indicate kidney injury and greater long-term risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease.

This is the only test added to the initial evaluation. It can detect signs of kidney disease sooner than traditional blood measurements. The test is also widely available, low-cost and straightforward to perform, making it practical to incorporate into primary care visits.

3 Treatment should be individualised based on blood pressure and overall health risks.

For adults with Stage 2 hypertension, or with Stage 1 hypertension plus significant risk factors such as diabetes or kidney disease, the updated guidelines continue to recommend lifestyle changes and medication at the outset of treatment. What is new is clearer guidance to start most of these patients on a single pill containing two first-line medications. Using one pill rather than two separate medications

improves adherence and helps patients reach their target blood pressure sooner.

For adults with Stage 1 hypertension and a lower overall health risk, the recommendation also shifts slightly.

The guideline now more clearly supports starting with lifestyle changes alone and reassessing blood pressure over three to six months. If levels remain above the treatment goal of 130/80 after that period, medication should be added. This staging formalises an approach that had previously been left to clinician judgement and is now more explicitly outlined.

4 At-home monitoring needs to be part of standard care.

The revised guidelines affirm that people with hypertension should regularly measure their blood pressure and document it for their providers. To obtain the most consistent and accurate reading, blood pressure should be taken at the same time each day, ideally in the

morning before meals or exercise. People should sit with their back supported, feet flat on the floor and their arm extended at heart level.

Patients can use this list pulled together by the AMA to choose a home monitor, which are available at different price ranges. Until more evidence is available, cuffless devices such as smartwatches are not reliable for precise blood pressure readings.

5 Lifestyle changes remain a cornerstone of treatment.

The recommendations emphasise that behavioural measures can meaningfully lower blood pressure and should accompany medical therapy. Lowering dietary sodium remains a crucial step. Most adults in the U.S. consume far too much sodium, and reducing intake to less than 2,300 milligrams per day can help lower blood pressure.

Weight management, regular physical activity and a heart-healthy eating pattern are also strongly recommended.

A diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds and with less added sodium, saturated fat and ultra-processed foods has been shown to help lower blood pressure. Limiting alcohol intake and addressing contributing conditions such as sleep apnoea can further support blood pressure control.

Hypertension is often called a silent killer because many people have no symptoms even when their blood pressure is dangerously high. But complications of this common condition are not inevitable. The key is timely diagnosis, ongoing monitoring and appropriate treatment to protect people's hearts, brains and overall health.

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06th December 2025
3.00 PM

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Mr. Prakash Abitkar
Minister of Public Health & Family Welfare and Guardian Minister Kolhapur

Mr. Satej Patil
Congress Legislative Party Leader, M.L.C., Former Home Minister, Maharashtra

Mr. Vinay Kore
Member of Legislative Assembly of Maharashtra

Mr. Chandradeep Narake
Member of Legislative Assembly of Maharashtra

Mr. Navid Mushrif
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KOLHAPUR ZILLA SAHAKARI DUDH UTPADAK SANGH LTD., KOLHAPUR

[Date - 06th Dec, 2025] [Time - 3.00 PM] [Venue - Gokul Dairy, Vashi (Navi Mumbai)]

Markets Inc set to invest big in techies

Trading companies, investment platforms line up at IITs with largest pay cheques

| Sreeratha Basu & Prachi Verma
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BENGALURU | NEW DELHI

Algorithmic and proprietary trading firms as well as investment platforms are set to offer the biggest pay packages to the Class of 2026 at legacy Indian Institutes of Technology, where final placements begin Monday.

Da Vinci Derivatives (Rs2.5 crore-plus), NK Securities (about Rs1.65 crore), Rubrik (Rs1.49 crore), Glean, IMC Trading, Databricks, APT Portfolio (Rscore-plus), Atlas Research, Quadeye, Quantbox and Graviton (Rs90 lakh to Rs1 crore) are likely to be among the top paymasters based on the pre-placement offers (PPOs) made and those expected during the final placements. These include both inter-

national and domestic offers, according to placement cells at these institutes.

Legacy or earlier-generation IITs are Delhi, Bombay, Madras, Kanpur, Kharagpur, Roorkee, Guwahati and BHU (Varanasi).

The packages may vary across campuses and include base pay, fixed and variable bonus, joining bonus, relocation allowance and other perks.

Big trading firms are ready to pay handsomely to hire top engineering talent to work on core infrastructure.

In an automated machine-trading environment, a small improvement in the systems can bring a big difference in execution efficiency.

Last year, global trading firm Jane Street offered a PPO of about Rs4.3 crore, the highest package across IITs, to an IIT-Madras student for a Hong Kong role, as ET first reported in December 2024. This year, Jane Street inducted interns from the Class of 2026, but it could not be ascertained till the time of going to press on Sunday if it offered any PPOs. The company did not respond to an email seeking comment.

While the bumper offers in the first few days do not reflect the num-

Top Dollar at IITs

Algorithmic & proprietary traders, investment platforms, data security cos are paying most

BIG PAYMASTERS FOR CLASS OF 2026

Da Vinci Derivatives, NK Securities, Rubrik, Glean, IMC Trading, Databricks, APT Portfolio, Atlas Research, Quadeye, Quantbox, Graviton

Packages upwards of **₹90 lakh**

This is including domestic roles

Offered only to a handful of students

Placement outlook more positive this year

ber of total students who will get placed, placement cells are more optimistic this time around than the last couple of years. Across IITs, the number of PPOs has gone up and more recruiters, including first timers, are set to visit the campuses this season, said placement cell members.

"Recruiter performance has been strong, and the overall environment feels very promising. We are optimistic," said SK Shrivastava, coordinator for training and placement cell at IIT-BHU, Varanasi.

The top package at IIT-BHU, from high-frequency algorithmic trading firm NK Securities for a software development engineer role, is Rs1.65

crore. Rubrik has made a PPO of Rs1.49 crore to a student who interned with the data security platform. The number of PPOs at the institute has gone up 7 per cent from last year, said Shrivastava.

"We had better internships and better PPO conversions," said a placement cell member at another top IIT. "Though salaries for several companies have remained more or less the same, we are hopeful of a better season this time around."

Salary packages on average are also likely to go up this year compared to last, a placement representative at another legacy IIT said.

Top companies such as Google,

Microsoft, ITC, Hindustan Unilever, Flipkart, Ola, Amazon and DEShaw—including sectors ranging from technology, FMCG and ecommerce to consulting—will be vying for IIT talent on the first day of placements.

According to people in the know, salaries start at about Rs30 lakh and go up to Rs50 lakh and more for these companies.

While companies are likely to be cautious on hiring, artificial intelligence, digital tech and product talents are likely to be in high demand as they invest in building AI-led solutions and services, said Sangeeta Gupta, senior vice president of IT industry body Nasscom.

PPOs have become an increasingly popular route for hiring, especially among high-frequency trading firms, some of which are hiring only those who have interned with them.

Sudept Sinha, founder at quantitative high-frequency trading firm Atlas Research, told ET that the company is hiring through PPOs and off-campus. "We intend to hire about 10-15 IITians from the Class of 2026 from streams such as computer science, engineering and maths and computing," he said.

Fitting climax to blockbuster 2025

No time to chill: ₹30k cr IPOs to fire up Dalal St in December

Around 25 listings in pipeline compared with 9 that took place in November

| Himadri Buch
 @timesofindia.com

MUMBAI

December is set to be another busy month for India's red-hot initial public offering (IPO) market, with public issues worth nearly Rs30,000 crore scheduled to hit the street, a fitting crescendo to mark the end of what has already been a record-breaking year.

The IPO market is set to accelerate in December with around 25 launches, compared with 10 in October (raising Rs45,188 crore) and nine in November (Rs23,613 crore).

Leading the pack are five mega issues—ICICI Prudential Asset Management Co (Rs 10,000 crore), e-commerce unicorn Meesho (Rs5,400 crore), renewable energy platform Clean Max Enviro Energy Solutions (Rs5,200 crore), AI-driven Fractal Analytics (Rs4,900 crore) and Juniper Green Energy (Rs3,000 crore). The companies didn't respond to queries.

These share sales will mark a strong finish to the year, said Neha Agarwal, MD and head of equity capital markets, JM Financial Institutional Securities Ltd.

"The IPO rush is driven not by indiscriminate issuance but by a mea-

ningful confluence of entrepreneurial energy and discerning investor appetite," she said.

"What's encouraging is the quality-first filtration investors are applying—strong management, governance and credible business models are being rewarded, while anything with uncertainty rightly faces push-back."

A strong mid-cap pipeline follows, including Wakefit Innovations (Rs1,500 crore), edtech-turned-exams player Innovatiview (Rs1,500 crore), healthcare player Park Medi World (Rs1,200 crore), Nephroplus (Rs1,000 crore) and precision manufacturing company Aegus Ltd (Rs1,000 crore), among others.

Companies such as Meesho and Aegus have already announced IPO dates—December 3-5—while others are yet to announce their timetable.

This is validation of a structural bull market, said Gaurav Sood, managing director and head of equity capital markets at Aventus Capital.

"We believe this is not just a year-end rush but the culmination of a record year for India's primary markets," he said.

Investment bankers said the street is getting comfort from the structural liquidity underpinning this supply of issuances.

Systematic investment pro-

gramme (SIP) inflows trending at around Rs30,000 crore a month continue to provide steady local demand as global flows remain choppy, while domestic institutional investor (DII) participation has been consistently strong over the past two years.

Nearly two-thirds of recent IPO fundraising has come via offer for sale (OFS) led transactions, demonstrating that the market has repeatedly absorbed large shareholder exits without destabilising secondary market liquidity, Sood said.

"When you combine this domestic flow strength with the proven ability to execute large and diverse deals across sectors, it's clear why the market is comfortable running a heavy December calendar and why promoter confidence, filing volumes and broader IPO momentum are likely to stay elevated into 2026," he said.

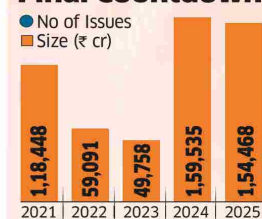
Main-board equity issuances this year have already surpassed 2024's Rs1.5 lakh crore, Agarwal said.

With over 200 draft documents already filed, she expects the next 12 months to potentially see Rs2.5-3 lakh crore of equity raising, supported by balanced sectoral participation across new-age tech, renewables and precision-led manufacturing.

Not everyone is convinced the party will continue uninterrupted.

"These are not high-growth disruptors listing at 30-40 times forward earnings. These are slow-to-mid-teens growers being priced at 50-80 times because 'there is no alterna-

Final Countdown



Oct-Dec



December



tive," said Dev Chandrasekhar, partner at Mumbai-based valuations and branding advisory Transcendium. "When two-thirds of the money raised is OFS in a seasonally thin month, it isn't proof of liquidity strength, it's proof that private equity and early investors have timed the absolute top of the valuation cycle."

While most sell-side desks expect the December issues to sail through, Chandrasekhar's caution serves as a reminder that record supply, record valuations and record OFS rarely coexist at market bottoms.

Italy's luxury brands shaken by sweatshop probes

A series of investigations into exploitative work conditions within fashion subcontractors has roiled Italy's luxury industry, with the government decrying attacks on "Made in Italy".

Five fashion brands have been put under court administration since 2024 following probes by Milan prosecutors that uncovered worker abuses and a lack of oversight into the supply chains of some of Italy's most respected brands.

On Wednesday, lawyers for luxury leather company Tod's appeared before a Milan court as prosecutors seek to impose a temporary advertising ban and outside administrators in light of what they have called "malicious" actions by the company.

Judge Domenico Santoro granted defendants a postponement of the hearing to February 23 after lawyers asked for time to complete the "evaluation and strengthening of the system of controls" related to its supply chain, according to a court document viewed by AFP.

Tod's lawyers also said the company had terminated its contracts with the subcontractors in question.

The investigations led by prosecutor Paolo Storari have cast a spotlight on the dark underside of the luxury industry.

At issue is the near-ubiquitous practice of brands subcontracting work to suppliers, who in turn contract to others, amid ever-tighter margins and scant oversight of labour conditions.

To date, investigations have targeted Loro Piana, Dior's Italian subsidiary Manufactures Dior, Giorgio Armani Operations and Alviero Martini—and prosecutors have suggested more probes could come.

AFP